***JULY 1922 POST DIASPORA***

**Unicorn Belt**

**Manticore B**

**Star Empire of Manticore**

The shuttle drifted through starlight and emptiness, a minnow threading through a pod of dead leviathans.

If there was a sadder sight in the entire universe, Captain Philip Clayton couldn’t imagine what it might be. He sat in the pilot’s couch, his copilot silent beside him, gazing out through the cockpit’s armorplast at a Sargasso Sea of starships, and wondered yet again what he truly felt.

It shouldn’t be that hard to figure out, really. He’d fought hard enough to create this mass of murdered ships, after all. Yet it *had* been an act of murder, not war. Not really. Not when the Solarian League Navy had been so utterly outclassed.

And not when it had been offered the opportunity to survive . . . and rejected it.

“I never get tired of seeing it, Sir,” Lieutenant Kalet said. Clayton looked at his copilot, and the tall, broad shouldered Manticoran shrugged. “It’s . . . it’s like nothing else in the galaxy,” he murmured, looking back out from his own side of the cockpit. “I mean, *look* at it.”

“I know,” Clayton said quietly.

Two hundred and eleven warships – or what had been warships a T-month ago — floated in their lonely parking orbit, keeping deathwatch station on Manticore-B’s Unicorn Belt. A hundred and thirty-one superdreadnoughts — sixty-nine *Scientist*-class ships and sixty-two of the newer, marginally more powerful *Vegas* — lay like vanquished titans at the heart of that huddle of beaten ships. Sixty of them were completely undamaged; the others ranged from near-total wrecks to ships which might actually have been repairable . . . if there’d been any reason *to* repair them. They were accompanied by twenty-nine battlecruisers, twenty-three light cruisers, and twenty-eight destroyers, which actually represented a higher percentage of Eleventh Fleet’s original roster of lighter units. Probably because there’d been no reason to waste missiles on such insignificant foes.

The superdreadnoughts alone massed over 900 million tons. Compared to that, the battlecruisers and lighter units were a mere nothing, barely thirty-two million tons. And here they lay, abandoned — aside from caretaker crews on half a dozen of the undamaged SDs — waiting.

Waiting, as it happened, for Phil Clayton, and he wondered again how he’d drawn the duty. Oh, he had the engineering background for it, but so did a lot of other officers, and he hated his new assignment. Maybe they had been enemy vessels, but they’d been *ships*, and he’d loved the inner magic of ships for as long as he could recall.

His earliest memories were of standing with his nose pressed to the window on the south side of his parents’ modest house, watching the atmospheric counter-grav freighters drive across the heavens, splashed in sunlight and cloud shadow, gleaming like the Tester’s own promise of beauty. Pygmies compared to the doomed ships outside his shuttle at the moment, but enormous for pre-Alliance Grayson.

And even more so for the imagination of a little boy who’d realized even then that ships had souls. That anything that lovely, that graceful — anything that many men had given so much of themselves to — *had* to be alive itself. He’d watched them summer and winter, in sunlight, in driving rain, in snow. He’d watched them at night, roaring low overhead in a bellow of turbines, flanks gleaming with their own private constellations of running lights. By the time he was ten, he’d been able to identify every major class by sight. And when he’d climbed up into the attic (which he’d been able to do only when all of his moms assumed one of the others had him in sight), he could actually get an angle down onto Burdette Port’s docks, where those massive constructs landed.

Oh, the cargoes he’d summoned from dreams of other steadings! The pallets and boxes, the containerized cargo, the nets of fruit and vegetables. He’d watched stevedores unload the cavernous holds — there’d been far more muscle power and far less automation at the time — and wished he was one of them. And he’d devoured everything he could find in print and on vid about not just the atmospheric ships, but about the freighters that called on Grayson, however rarely, from far beyond his own horizons. He’d ingested anything and everything, from the ballad of the *Wreck of the Steadholder Fitzgerald* to the mystery of the colony ship *Agnes Celeste* and her vanished crew, and he’d known what he wanted.

Not that there’d ever be much chance he could have it.

His parents had been relatively well-off, by Grayson standards, but certainly not wealthy, and like all too many Grayson families, he’d been the only boy. Besides, Grayson was the backside of nowhere. The atmospheric freighters that fascinated him so spent their time hauling purely Grayson products and produce, because there was none from anywhere else. What chance did a boy from Burdette Steading have of ever seeing another star, smelling the air of a planet that didn’t try to poison him every day of his life?

That had been his father’s opinion, at any rate, and all of his mothers had loyally shared it, although Mom Joan had seemed just a little less convinced than the others. She always had appreciated that stubborn streak of his.

He never had gotten aboard one of the atmo-freighters. For that matter, he’d never gotten aboard a space freighter. But he’d gotten into space, anyway, and now, as he gazed at that endless vista of captive warships, looked at the torn and shredded armor — at the ink-black holes punched deep into core hulls and the blown out scabs of armor where life pods had erupted into space — he remembered another ship, in other battles. He remembered GMS *Covington* and the Battle of Yeltsin, the Battle of Blackbird. He remembered the stench of smoke and burning flesh through the ventilators, the scream of damage alarms, the incoming missiles and the indescribable shockwave of hits lashing through her hull.

He remembered a young lieutenant, who’d known he was about to die defending his planet.

But that lieutenant had lived, instead, because a foreign-born woman, already wounded from the battle which had saved his Protector’s life, had flung her ship and her crew between someone else’s world and those who would have killed every human being on it without her. Which was how a considerably older captain of the Grayson Space Navy, serving in the Protector’s Own, found himself here, playing sorter of the slain to the Solarian League Navy.

“What’s the latest from Seven, David?” he asked Lieutenant Kalet.

“They’re about ready for the first tranche,” Kalet replied, keying up the report on his uni-link, and grimaced. “They’re due to finish the last of the Yawata Strike wreckage by Tuesday.”

“I don’t know which is worse — that, or *this*.” Clayton waved at the silently waiting starships.

“Believe me, Sir, it’s the Yawata wreckage.” Kalet’s expression was grim. “These people,” he twitched his head at the same starships, “got hammered because they frigging well deserved it. We didn’t go looking for them; *they* came looking for *us*. I’m sorry it got so many of them killed, but that’s what happens when you attack somebody without bothering to declare war first. And at least every damned one of those ships was at battle stations, with everybody aboard in skinsuits. Not so much for the Yawata Strike.”

The lieutenant turned to stare out at the barely visible cluster of working lights that marked the enormous Unicorn Seven asteroid complex. The Hauptman Cartel’s Uicorn Salvage Yard and the Unicorn Seven refineries had been repurposed as one of the Manticore-B reclamation centers, processing the wreckage from the orbital infrastructure which had been torn to pieces in the Yawata Strike less than five T-months ago.

“The reclamation crews are still finding bodies Search and Rescue missed,” he said. “Last week, one of the Seven crews found their own forewoman’s cousin.” His nostrils flared. “I’m sure we’ll find a few bodies when we start scrapping these, too, but at least they won’t be our damned *relatives!*”

Clayton nodded. He was grateful he’d been spared from the cleanup after the Blackbird Strike, but he knew enough men — and women, now — in the GSN who hadn’t been.

“There was a curse back on Old Earth,” he said. “I don’t know if you Manties have it, but we still have it back on Grayson. It goes ‘May you live in interesting times.’”

“‘Interesting times,’ is it?” Kalet snorted. “Well, that’s one way to put it, Sir. More ‘interesting’ for some than for others, though.”

“Look at it this way,” Clayton turned back to the flight controls, “one day we’ll all be in the history books and some idiot child — just like the idiot children you and I were, once upon a time — will dream about how exciting and glorious it all must have been. Maybe they’ll be luckier than we are and not find out how wrong they are.”

**HMS *Imperator***

**Manticore A**

**Star Empire of Manticore**

Fleet Admiral Lady Dame Honor Alexander-Harrington, Duchess and Steadholder Harrington, commanding officer, Grand Fleet, finished tucking in her white, turtleneck uniform blouse and reached up to pull the pins which had confined her hair on top of her head while she showered. The long braid fell almost to her waist, and she allowed herself to luxuriate in the sensual silkiness of it as she un-braided it, then brushed it into a shimmering tide. She usually kept it braided when in uniform, but there was no sense pretending she hadn't grown to love the way it felt loose. Besides, she was scheduled for a state dinner groundside later that evening, and she'd be attending in her persona as a Grayson steadholder, not an officer of the Queen.

She finished brushing, slid the brush into its storage slot, and gathered the hair at the back of her head with a hairband of Harrington green. She cocked her head to assess the effect, then frowned slightly and leaned closer to the mirror while the fingers of her right hand explored the tenderness of the skin under one almond-shaped eye.

"Darn," she muttered as she realized it was going to bruise after all.

The long, sinuous, cream-and-gray treecat stretched along the bulkhead perch behind her bleeked a laugh, and she turned to glower at him.

"*Not* funny, Stinker!" Her tone was admirably stern despite the slight twitch of her lips. "You know how much grief Hamish is going to give me across the canapés if I turn up sporting a shiner!"

Nimitz only laughed harder, and the fingers of his true hands flickered.

"It was *not* my own fault!" she told him. "Spencer's still getting better, and I can't block *all* his hits."

More finger-flicker, and she snorted.

"The way my schedule's packed, I have to schedule sparring bouts whenever I can, and you know it. It's not my fault Elizabeth decided to throw this shindig tonight!"

Nimitz considered that for a second or two, then nodded grudgingly, and she laughed and scooped him off the perch. She cradled him in her arms, pressing her face into his silky, clean-smelling coat for a long moment, then carried him out of her palatial quarters' head into her day cabin. She crossed to the desk, let him flow out of her arms onto the perch above it, and settled into the body-conforming chair.

She touched the darkening bruise under her right eye again and shrugged. She'd just have to take a little extra care with her cosmetics, she decided. With luck, Hamish wouldn't even notice . . . which would spare her the unmerciful ribbing he'd administer if he did. She'd have been less worried if Emily had been going to be present to help divert his fire, but their wife was staying home at White Haven with the kids. That probably said something positive about her sanity.

She thought about that for a moment, then sighed and brought her terminal online for the first item on today's installment of her unending paper chase.

*I really hate to think of the number of photons we slaughter every day on personnel reports*, she thought glumly. *Talk about* genocide!

Her lips twitched in amusement, but then she shook her head and began skimming rapidly through the report before her.

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“Excuse me, My Lady, but that report you asked for is here.”

“Don’t you mean that *other* report I asked for?” Honor asked wryly, looking up from the readiness report on her desk display.

“Well, yes,” Commander Angela Clayton acknowledged. She wore the blue-on-blue of the Grayson Space Navy with the salamander flash of the Protector’s Own, but her accent was Manticoran. In fact, it was pure Gryphon Highlands. “You *did* ask for it, though,” she pointed out with something close to a twinkle.

Commander Clayton was a new addition to Honor’s staff, serving both as a liaison with High Admiral Judah Yanakov and as Grand Fleet’s logistics officer. A sturdy, no-nonsense sort, Commander Clayton. Although she’d been born in Rearson, the same barony as Anton Zilwiki, she’d become a citizen of Harrington Steading following five years of “loaner” service with the GSN, which explained why she habitually addressed Honor with the “My Lady” of a steadholder rather than the “Your Grace” of a Manticoran duchess.

It could get . . . confusing, sometimes.

“And what does Phil have to report?” Honor asked now.

“His survey crews are finished with the first half-dozen superdreadnoughts, My Lady,” the commander replied. The almost-twinkle in her eye had faded and she sighed. “He purely hates the assignment. Says it makes him feel like a swamp grubber.”

Honor grimaced at the simile. She knew Captain Clayton, just as she’d made it her business to know all of the Protector’s Own captains, so she understood what Angela was saying, but he was being grossly unfair to himself. The Grayson swamp grubber was one of the more loathsome carrion eaters in the explored galaxy, and it was none too picky about how its meal turned *into* carrion.

“That aside, his report’s about what we expected, except that his techs are a bit more impressed by the Sollies’ current graser mount than anyone anticipated.” Clayton shook her head. “I glanced at the specs, and he’s right; that *is* an impressive piece of hardware, My Lady.”

“Nobody ever said the Solarian League doesn’t have good tech,” Honor pointed out. “Their problem is they don’t always have the *right* tech when they need it.”

“Coupled with the fact that they think they *do*,” Clayton agreed.

“Point,” Honor conceded. She tipped back in her chair. “So, Phil’s impressed by it?”

“Yes, My Lady. He did point out that he can’t imagine what we’ll do with all of them, though.”

Honor nodded. No doubt quite a few people were wondering the same sorts of things, but they had to do *something* with the wreckage of Massimo Filareta’s Eleventh Fleet. That was why its surviving units had been moved to Manticore-B after the Second Battle of Manticore. The *Massacre* of Manticore, really, she thought, eyes darkening in memory.

Under normal circumstances, they might have been parked somewhere as a potential bargaining chip to be returned to the other side following successful peace negotiations. Nobody seemed likely to be doing any negotiating anytime soon, however, and even if they’d been inclined to, no one would want Filareta’s orphans back. In an era of pod-launched missiles, they were deathtraps, hopelessly obsolete both tactically and conceptually, however good the technology with which they’d been built.

Failing the possibility of repatriation, they’d normally have been sent to the ship breakers to be sawn up into chunks and run through the smelters and refineries for reclamation and separation. No one would have worried too much about the *technology*; all they would have wanted were the raw materials from which Manticore’s voracious orbital industry would have built the newer and far more useful technology the Star Empire needed.

But that orbital industry had been hammered into ruin by the Yawata Strike in February. Five months later, it remained less than a shadow of a memory of what it once had been. The fabricating plants to *use* the raw materials were only beginning to be rebuilt, and even with every gram of assistance Beowulf and the Star Empire’s new Havenite allies could provide, it would be at least six months before the fabricators and nano farms were back online once again. Even then, they’d possess only a fraction of their pre-Yawata capacity for a long time to come. Which was why Phil Clayton and his combined Manticoran-Grayson-Havenite salvage crews were crawling all over the captured Solarian ships. Their internal systems might be of Solarian manufacture, with all the compatibility headaches that promised, but they already existed. Under the circumstances, it made sense to see what could be removed for reuse — from fusion plants to reconfigurable mollycircs to point defense lasers — before the gutted hulks were consigned to the reclamation platforms.

For that matter, Sandra Crandall’s surviving units were Manticore-bound with minimal passage crews to share exactly the same fate. Hopefully they could find someone besides Captain Clayton to deal with them when they arrived.

“Well,” she said now, “if nothing else, we could probably use the grasers for hellacious wormhole ‘minefields.’ Have you seen the design Admiral Foraker came up with for that?”

“No, I haven’t, My Lady. I’ll bet it was . . . interesting, though.”

“Admiral Foraker does have a tendency to think outside the box,” Honor acknowledged with a smile. “In this case, though, what she’s suggested is basically an array of remotely deployed energy weapons. *Capital ship*-sized weapons, as a matter of fact. She’s thinking something like Moriarty, not Mycroft. In fact, she’s already worked out the quickest way to run up a remote platform tied into the central fire control system of a standard terminus fort.”

“I thought that was what the minefields we already have were for, My Lady.”

“Oh, they are! But those are basically one-shot — either bomb-pumped platforms or IDEWs that get one shot, then have to recharge between engagements. She’s talking about feeding these things with broadcast power for the plasma capacitors. If her numbers hold up, they’d be good for at least five or six full-power shots each before the platforms had to shut down until the maintenance crews could recharge the capacitor reservoirs. So if these Solly grasers are as good as Phil seems to be suggesting, and given the fact that a *Scientist*-class SD mounts — what? sixty-four? sixty-five? — grasers, stripping a couple of hundred of them could let us build a really nasty defensive array, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I think you could call it that,” Commander Clayton said, her expression suddenly very thoughtful indeed. The thought of what nine or ten *thousand* ship-of-the-wall-sized grasers could do to any target emerging from a wormhole terminus — when it could have neither wedge nor sidewalls for protection — was . . . sobering.

“I’m not sure how well it’ll work out in the end,” Honor said, “but I’ve observed that Admiral Foraker tends to get what she goes after. And now that Admiral Hemphill’s finally taken the *Weyland* R&D staff out to Bolthole . . . .”

Clayton nodded. The notion of sharing the Star Empire’s latest technology and research projects with a star nation with which it had been at war — cold or hot — for the better part of a T-century had . . . sat poorly with quite a lot of the RMN. In fact, there’d been enough passive resistance and foot-dragging to provoke a display of the famous Winton temper. Clayton hadn’t been present for the meeting at which Empress Elizabeth had made her feelings on the subject abundantly, one might almost have said *super*-abundantly, clear, but Duchess Harrington had. And it was remarkable how quickly things had begun moving after that little interview.

On the other hand, the commander thought with a mental smile, it would appear there’d been just as much foot-dragging on the Havenite side when it came to telling their erstwhile enemies and present allies exactly where Bolthole itself lay. Not surprisingly, since it was so much closer to the Manticore System than to the Haven System. In fact, it was the next best thing to six hundred light-years from Nouveau Paris . . . and less than three hundred and fifty from Landing City.

*No wonder ONI never found it,* she thought. *We were busy looking for something in the Republic. It never even occurred to us to look on the far side of* Manticore *for it. And even if it had, a "lost colony" would’ve been the last thing we looked for!*

Still, Bolthole’s location did explain why the Legislaturalists had selected it as a site for their secret naval base once the system more or less fell into the People’s Republic’s lap. And as a Gryphon Highlander — not to mention someone who’d married a Grayson — Angela Clayton had a better idea than most of what it had taken for the people of the planet Sanctuary to survive until Haven’s survey crew rediscovered their existence at the end of the J-156-18(L)-KCR-126-06 warp bridge.

*And how they found the place is a lot less important than what they’ve done with it since,* she reminded herself. After the Yawata Strike’s devastation here in Manticore, Bolthole had become easily the largest single shipbuilding facility of the entire Grand Alliance, not to mention the site of the redoubtable Shannon Foraker’s R&D command.

*So if there’s one place in the galaxy* none *of us want the people behind the Yawata Strike to find, it’s damned well Bolthole*!

“Do we know how Bolthole’s coming on Mycroft, My Lady?” she asked, and Honor smiled as she followed the commander’s obvious chain of thought.

“It’s going to be a while before they get the system fully up and running,” she said, “but Admiral Hemphill’s taking along an entire squadron of *Invictuses* to provide Apollo and Keyhole-Two coverage in the meantime. And I understand Admiral Foraker’s already rung in some new variations on her sensor platforms. Once she and Hemphill sit down and put their heads together, the rest of the galaxy better hang onto its socks!”

“A thought that doesn’t break my heart at all, My Lady,” Clayton said. “Not one little bit.”

**SLNS *Québec***

**Dzung System**

**Solarian League**

“Well, Sir, all I can say is that it’s about frigging time,” Captain Gabriella Timberlake growled, standing at Admiral Vincent Capriotti’s shoulder as they gazed at the latest dispatch on Capriotti’s display. The fact that the Dzung System was just under seventy light-years from Sol meant Task Force 783 had gotten the new general order sooner than most of the rest of the Solarian League Navy, and Capriotti wondered how the Navy’s other flag officers were going to react to them.

For that matter, he wasn’t entirely certain how *he* felt about them.

“I can’t say I disagree, Gabby,” he said finally. “On the other hand, if the stories about what happened to Eleventh Fleet and Admiral Crandall are anything to go by, this could get . . . interesting.”

“One way to put it, Sir,” Timberlake agreed. “On the other hand, I think I like the thinking behind this. The bastards can’t have those killer missile pods and their damned superdreadnoughts *everywhere*!”

“They don’t need to have them ‘everywhere’ to ruin our whole day,” Capriotti pointed out. “They only have to have them wherever *we* turn up.”

“I know, Sir.” The admiral’s flag captain shrugged. “Sooner or later, though, we’ve got to take it to them. And given what they did to Admiral Filareta, it looks like fleet engagements are going to be a really bad idea until our tech people can figure out how to match their damned missiles.”

Capriotti nodded soberly. The Solarian League *did* need to “take it to” the Manties after the series of massive black eyes the Star Empire and its allies had handed the SLN. Despite any misgivings he might feel, he agreed with the captain about that. He just wished to hell he was more confident those in charge of the taking in question had at least a vague notion of what they were doing.

He wasn’t prepared to wholeheartedly accept the Solarian news reports’ version of what had happened to Massimo Filareta. According to the Manties, Eleventh Fleet had opened fire after being summoned to surrender. According to the “usually reliable sources” talking to the newsies “speaking off the record” because they weren’t “authorized to disclose classified information,” Filareta had *accepted* their surrender terms, then been blown out of space in an act of cold-blooded mass murder. And according to any official ONI analyses, no one in Old Chicago could find his arse with both hands and approach radar well enough to give one Vincent Capriotti a single damned clue which of those diametrically opposed analyses the Navy shared.

*Not a good sign,* he thought again. *Of course, Intelligence has been caught with its trousers around its ankles every step of the way* this *far. Maybe the* real *bad sign would be for the idiots to actually think they* did *know what happened!*

Vincent Capriotti was Battle Fleet from the ground up, and he’d known dozens – scores — of men and women in the ships Crandall and Filareta had lost. Like Timberlake, he wanted payback, and not just out of bloody-minded vengeance, although he was honest enough to admit that was a great deal of his motivation. In addition to that, however, he had a rather better idea than many of his Battle Fleet compatriots of just how critical the Office of Frontier Security’s unofficial empire of “client star systems” truly was. And along with that, he recognized that OFS’s arrangements were far more fragile than they might appear. The Solarian League literally couldn’t afford what would happen to the federal government’s cash flow if Frontier Security started shedding clients, and unless they demonstrated that they could stand up to the Manties, that was precisely what was going to happen.

On the other hand, the one thing of which Capriotti was certain was that if the Battle — or massacre, or whatever — of Manticore had been as short as both sets of reports suggested, he did *not* want to tangle with the sort of defenses Manties seemed to think were appropriate for major star systems.

Fortunately, judging from the synopsis of “Operation Buccaneer,” that wasn’t what Admiral Kingsford had in mind. So maybe someone in Old Chicago *did* have a clue what he was doing.

Maybe.

“All right,” he said finally, turning away from the dispatch to gaze at SLNS *Québec*’s main astrogation plot. “I need to get Admiral Helland and Admiral Rutgers up to speed on this. I’m sure they’ll both have useful input. Once Rutgers stops warning us not to be overly optimistic, of course.”

His lips twitched and Timberlake actually chuckled. Rear Admiral Lyang-tau Rutgers, Task Force 783’s operations officer, had started out in Frontier Fleet and transferred to Battle Fleet barely twenty years ago. That hadn’t been long enough to completely free him of the basic Frontier Fleet attitude that Battle Fleet would have made an excellent paperweight, especially if that got it out of the way of the people doing the Navy’s *real* work. Along the way, he’d been known to offer pithy analyses of just how out of date Battle Fleet’s strategic and tactical thinking might have become and he’d argued strenuously that training simulations and fleet problems should be restructured to match the Navy against true peer competitors, despite the fact that “everyone knew” there were none in real life. When confronted with that fact, he’d suggested that it might be better to train against an opponent *better* than anyone one might actually have to fight. At least *that* error was unlikely to get anyone killed. Not, as his attitude had made evident, that he’d expected anyone in Battle Fleet to give much thought to that possibility.

The flag captain was pretty sure that attitude explained why an officer of Rutgers’s obvious competence and with the Rutgers family’s military and political connections was still only a *rear* admiral. But it was rather refreshing in a lot of ways, recent events had sure as hell validated his warnings, and she knew Capriotti both respected and genuinely appreciated his contrarian viewpoint.

Vice Admiral Angelica Helland, TF 783’s chief of staff, on the other hand, reminded a lot of people of a smarter Sandra Crandall. Of course, she could hardly have been a *stupider* Sandra Crandall, now that Timberlake thought about it. The contrast between her aggressive near-arrogance and Rutgers’s voice of caution made for occasionally fractious staff meetings, but it also offered Capriotti a robust debate between differing viewpoints. That was something he’d valued even before anyone started shooting at the SLN, which had been rare, to say the least, among Battle Fleet four-star admirals.

At the moment, Helland and Rutgers were in transit back to *Québec* from observing a training simulation aboard the battlecruiser *Bavaria*, the flagship of TG 783.12. Thanks to the classification level of the dispatch, they had no idea why they’d been summoned home so abruptly.

*Be interesting to watch their reactions*, the flag captain thought.

“Just between you and me, I’m all in favor of our not being ‘overly optimistic,’ Sir,” she said aloud, and Capriotti nodded.

“You and me both,” he agreed. “Please have me informed as soon as they come back aboard. In the meantime, I’m going to the flag briefing room. I want to go through this ammunition manifest. And I especially want to review ONI’s most recent estimate of Manty missile capabilities.”

He shook his head, his expression turning grimmer, and Tumberlake raised an eyebrow at him..

“I’ve only skimmed it so far," he said, "but I’m inclined to think it’s still . . . overoptimistic, let’s say.”

The flag captain's raised eyebrow segued into a slight frown. She, too, had skimmed the new estimate. There’d been no time to go through the analysis itself, but the conclusions section had been depressing. Intelligence’s current metric gave the Manties and their allies a three-to-one advantage in throw weight, a thirty percent advantage in penetration aids, and a maximum powered envelope of thirty million kilometers. That was more than enough to be going on with, in her opinion.

“I’m not saying Manties are ten meters tall, Gabby,” Capriotti said wryly. “And the new Cataphracts can match any range they’ve got . . . if we incorporate a ballistic phase. But you and I both know Lyang-tau is right on the money when he says we totally underestimated what the Manties could do to us. Shouldn’t have taken a genius — or so damned long — for ONI to realize that, either, which says some pretty unfortunate things about our prewar analysts. Since the shooting started, though, the Manties’ve made Lyang-tau’s point for him painfully enough not even our brilliant masters can miss it. I’m delighted they’ve sent us these new missiles, and I understand that Technodyne’s tweaked their performance again. But until I’ve got something just a little more solid than ‘our best guess’ about enemy capabilities from the same idiots who brought us Sandra Crandall and Eleventh Fleet, I’m not going to make any rash assumptions about miraculously level playing fields.”

“Works for me, Sir.” Timberlake shook her head. “Better we overestimate them than *under*estimate them!”

“Fortunately it sounds like someone back in Old Chicago’s figured that out, too.” Capriotti twitched his head at the dispatch they’d just finished viewing. “I can’t say I’m delighted at the notion of blowing up anyone’s star systems. That’s not what I joined the Navy to do, and I have friends living in Cachalot, for that mattter. But whoever came up with this idea, whether it was Admiral Bernard or Admiral Kingsford himself, I think it’s the best one available to us at the moment. If we can cause enough pain to their peripheral star systems or the independent star nations trading with them, they’ll have to disperse at least some of their forces to commerce and infrastructure protection. And the more we can keep them dispersed, the more likely we are to encourage a certain . . . circumspection on their part until Technodyne finally figures out how to build a genuine multidrive missile of our own.”

Timberlake nodded, although both of them understood the additional point Capriotti had chosen not to make. Operation Buccaneer wasn’t just about forcing the Manties and their allies to spread themselves thinner. In fact, that wasn’t even what it was primarily about. Its *real* purpose was to warn anyone who might even think about signing up with the Manties, whether as ally or simple trading partner, that the decision would be . . . unwise. That the SLN would consider that anyone who sided with Manticore had just sided *against* the Solarian League, and that the consequences would be dire enough to discourage anyone else from following her example.

In fact, it was a terror campaign, directed against those unable to defend themselves. And if anyone might have missed that little point, TF 783’s assigned target would make it abundantly clear.

The Cachalot System, 50.6 LY from Dzung and only 49.6 LY from Beowulf, was an independent system which had opted against joining the Solarian League when it was initially founded. It was also a prosperous, heavily populated system which had been a Beowulf trading partner for the better part of a thousand years . . . and depended on the Beowulf System Defense Force to provide its rapid response security force. Its organic “military forces” consisted of no more than a couple of dozen frigates and LACs, because no one would be insane enough to attack someone so closely associated with one of the League’s founding and most powerful star systems.

Until now, at least.

She wondered just how explicitly Kingsford or Brenner, the CO of Strategy and Planning, had admitted Buccaneer’s true objectives in the detailed operational orders. And, while she was wondering, she wondered how many of those independent and nominally independent star systems would recognize that the League was choosing to target *them* because it dared not attack the members of the “Grand Alliance” directly.

*Bit of a potential downside, there, Gabby my girl*, she reflected, then shrugged mentally. *Maybe that’s another reason to pick Cachalot. It’s close enough to Beowulf that systems farther out in the Fringe may not realize how lightly defended it is. Even if they do, we’ve got to do* something*, though, and thank God* *no one* is *planning on sending us after one of the Manties’ primary star systems! Given how quick they smashed up Filareta* . . . .

Her thought trailed off, and she nodded again, more firmly.

“I just hope Technodyne – or somebody — gets its thumb out and moves right along with that multidrive missile of yours, Sir!”

**GSNS *Protector Oliver I***

**Manticore Binary System**

**Star Empire of Mantiocre**

“Honor!”

Michael Mayhew turned with a smile as Honor and Mercedes Brigham followed the earnest-faced young ensign who’d been their escort from *Protector Oliver I*’s boat bay. Soft music played in the background, stewards circulated with trays of finger food and wine glasses, and conversation hummed in the background as he held out his hand. Honor gripped it firmly, smiling back at him, and Nimitz chittered a greeting of his own from her shoulder. Mayhew laughed and extended his hand to the treecat, in turn, and Honor chuckled.

Even as she did, though, she couldn’t avoid the reflection that Mayhew, who was twenty years her junior, looked at least ten years her *senior*. That was the difference between the third-generation prolong she’d received as a child and the *first*-generation prolong he’d received when he was already adult. And even so, he looked far younger than his older brother, Benjamin.

“It’s good to see you,” Mayhew continued, then grimaced. “I know — I know! We see each other a lot, either on the com or in person, but that’s always official business. I suppose this is, too, in a way, but at least the two of *us* don’t have to talk shop tonight!”

“That will be something of a relief,” she acknowledged. “There are times I find myself forgetting I’m an honest spacer, given all the time I spend in conferences, discussions, planning sessions, *worry* sessions . . . .”

She shrugged and Mayhew nodded.

“I know. And it’ll get even worse after the Beowulf referendum is certified. Getting them integrated into the Alliance is going to take some doing.”

“With all due respect, My Lord, not as much as you might be thinking,” another voice said, and Honor turned with a smile as a blue-eyed man in the uniform of a Grayson rear admiral joined the conversation.

“Michal!” she said. “I was wondering where you were.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to say anything about the heirs of a planetary ruler short-circuiting proper military etiquette or anything like that,” Rear Admiral Michal Lukáč, commanding officer of First Battle Division, Sixth Battle Squadron, GSN, said. “But as I’m sure you and Commodore Brigham understand perfectly, the correct procedure is for you to be greeted by Captain White first.”

Honor looked around quickly, then back at Lukáč.

“At least you waited until that poor ensign wasn’t around to hear you,” she said severely. “It wasn’t his fault Michael here shortstopped me!”

“Excuse me,” Mayhew said with a smile, “but unless I’m mistaken, I’m the brother of a planetary despot. That means I get to jump the queue when I feel like it.”

“The fact that you’re in a position to abuse your authority doesn’t make it right,” Honor told him. “And Michal is completely correct.” She craned her neck, looking for Captain Zachary White, *Protector Oliver*’s commanding officer and Lukáč’s flag captain. Since White was easily six centimeters taller than she was, he was seldom hard to spot. This time, though —

“Where *is* Zach?”

“Actually,” Lukáč said, “at this particular moment, he’s helping Misty deal with a slight emergency. Edward and a tray of canapés were in a head-on collision.”

“Oh, my!” Honor shook her head. “I am *so* not looking forward to Raoul turning eight!”

“Young Edward is actually very well behaved, especially by the standards of Grayson males,” Michael Mayhew told her.

“Yes, and this wasn’t his fault,” Lukáč said. “Despite Zach’s centimeters, Edward’s still not very tall, you know. The steward just didn’t see him. In fact, the real reason Zach’s helping deal with it is that Edward’s upset. He thinks he ruined his dad’s party, so I told Zach to nip off to reassure him and that I’d hold the fort until he got back. I think I remember reading somewhere that a good flag officer always has his flag captain’s back.”

“That’s what I’d heard, at any rate,” Honor said. “But what was this about ‘not as much as you might be thinking’? From where I sit, getting Beowulf fully integrated’s going to be something like Hercules and the stables.”

“I don’t think so,” Lukáč disagreed respectfully. “Oh, it’s going to take a lot of work, and a lot of details will need hammering out, but the truth is that Beowulf’s already effectively part of the Alliance. I mean, whose ships do you think are out there helping rebuild after Yawata? And unless I’m mistaken, Beowulf’s also who’s building the Mark 23s in our magazines. So what we’ll really be doing is regularizing something that’s been going on on a de facto basis for months now.”

“That’s actually true, in a way,” Michael Mayhew acknowledged. “It’s the regularizing and the hammering out I’m not looking forward to.”

“No reason you should, My Lord,” Lukáč told him. “And, in fairness, it’ll be a lot easier for us ‘honest spacers’ who only have to worry about shooting at the enemy. Besides —”

“Is Michal already bending your ear, My Lady?” another voice asked, and Honor turned as Captain Lenka Lukáčová joined the conversation. Lukáčová was about four centimeters shorter than her husband. She wore GSN uniform with the four golden cuff bands of a captain, but she also wore the Chaplains Corps’ crosses on her collar, not the sword insignia of a line officer.

“He promised he wouldn’t do that,” she continued, gold-flecked green eyes dancing.

“And he isn’t, Lenka, as you know perfectly well!” Honor told her. “In fact, he’s hardly started making his points forcefully at *all* yet.”

“Give him time,” Lukáčová suggested.

“I’m sure. And how are *you*? Any problems adjusting?”

She’d tried to stay in the loop as Task Force Three, the Grayson component of Grand Fleet, settled into place. It helped that Manticorans and Graysons had been serving — and dying — together for two T-decades. But there were still differences between them and a much larger percentage of the entire Grayson Space Navy had been permanently stationed here in Manticore following the Yawata Strike and the emergence of the Grand Alliance. Despite the enormous strides Honor’s adoptive homeworld had made, Grayson remained a highly religious, theocratic society. The Manticore Binary System as a whole had less experience than the RMN’s officer corps with Graysons, and quite a few thousand Grayson civilians and dependents had arrived in Manticore to help support TF 3. Sliding them comfortably into a society whose basic constraints were sharply at odds with those of the society which had produced them was a nontrivial challenge. Lukáčová, as the senior officer of the Chaplains Corps assigned to TF 3 had a ringside seat for that sliding.

“Quite well, actually,” the captain said now. “Archbishop Telmachi couldn’t have been more helpful, although I think most of your fellow Manties are still a little . . . bemused by the entire notion of official shipboard chaplains. Fair’s fair, though. Most of our people still have problems with the notion that the Archbishop is only the senior prelate in a society which specifically *rejects* the notion of a state church. Some of my chaplains seem to have a little trouble understanding he can’t simply wave his crucifix and make all of our stumbling blocks go away. You really *are* a deplorably secular bunch, aren’t you?”

“We stagger along as best we can,” Honor said. “And let’s not forget that it was the example of our ‘deplorably secular bunch’ that got Father Church to reconsider his position on priests who didn’t have Y chromosomes.”

Michal Lukáč flung up his hand in the gesture of a Grayson judge at a fencing match, and his wife laughed.

“I’ve *missed* you, My Lady,” she said. “But you’re right, of course.” She rolled her eyes. “I can still remember all the apoplexy when Reverend Sullivan ordained me. I thought at least three of the Elders would be carried off to glory that afternoon.” She smiled in fond memory. “And the way they waffled about titles!” She shook her head. “Do you know how close I came to being *Brother* Lenka? The Sacristy had actually written a learned dissertation about the ‘sanctity’ of the title. Thank the Tester the Reverend cut them off at the ankles!”

“For some reason,” Michael Mayhew said to no one in particular, “for the last twenty years or so Grayson seems to have been producing an unconscionable number of uppity females. Can’t imagine how that happened.”

“Well, it’s certainly not *my* fault,” Honor said austerely. “In fact, it’s probably more Mercedes’ fault. Or hers and —” Honor looked over Lukáč’s shoulder as two more officers approached “— Captain Davis’s.”

“Whatever it was, I didn’t do it,” the dark-haired captain — one of the *two* dark-haired captains — approaching the small conversational group said.

“Her Grace was just explaining that it’s not *her* fault Grayson females are getting out of hand,” Brigham said dryly, holding out her hand.

“Oh, no!” Captain Elizabeth Davis, Lukáč’s operations officer said. “How could anyone *possibly* think *that*?!”

“Not enough we have to produce them in a homegrown variety, but we go around *importing* them,” Mayhew observed, still to no one in particular, and Davis laughed.

Her own accent marked her as a native of the Star Kingdom’s capital planet, but like quite a few of the officers who’d been “loaned” to the modern Grayson Space Navy in its infancy, she’d decided she liked Grayson. In fact, she’d become a Grayson citizen almost ten T-years ago. Lord Mayhew rolled his eyes at her laugh, but he also held out his hand.

“And we’ve been damned lucky to get them — *all* of them,” he said in a quieter tone. “Homegrown or imported.”

“I have to agree,” Honor said. “But you know, the really remarkable thing to me, even after all these years, is how well Grayson’s grappled with all the changes.”

“Part of that’s the example we’ve been given,” Lukáčová said. “And Reverend Hanks’s input at the very beginning was huge.” Her eyes darkened, and so did Honor’s as she recalled how the gentle Reverend had given his life for hers. “And Reverend Sullivan’s been just as strong in his own way. But the bottom line is that unlike those lunatics on Masada, we haven’t forgotten the Book is never closed. They not only refused to stop *listening* to God, they started lecturing Him on the way things were *supposed* to be.” She shook her head. “We’ve had our own iterations of the Faithful to deal with, but by and large, they did us a huge favor. All we had to do was look at them to see exactly what God *didn’t* want us doing.” She shrugged. “With that example, how could we not get it right . . . mostly, anyway.”

“I think you’re probably right,” the officer who’d accompanied Davis said. He was a good twenty centimeters taller, stocky and very squarely built, with a ship’s prow of a nose and a ponytail that reminded Honor of Paul Tankersley’s. Unlike Davis, he spoke with a pronounced Grayson accent.

“It’s good to see you, James,” Honor said.

“And you, My Lady.” Captain James Sena, BatDiv 1’s chief of staff said. “Actually, though, I’m even happier to see Commodore Brigham. I was wondering if —”

“Stop *right* there,” Rear Admiral Lukáč said, raising an index finger.

“But, Sir, after that exercise yesterday, we’ve got to figure out —”

“You’re on dangerous ground, James,” Lukáč said solemnly.

“Sir?” Captain Sena regarded his superior with a suspicious eye, and Honor’s lips twitched.

James Sena was one of the GSN’s outstanding administrators. Although he was an excellent combat officer — one of the best — he was far more valuable in his current position. He didn’t *like* it, because he would far rather have been on a battlecruiser’s command deck somewhere, but he wasn’t the sort who complained. He was a no-nonsense, focused, very much to the point individual, however, and there were times when he found his admiral’s puckish sense of humor more than a little trying.

“Lord Mayhew just informed us, immediately before your arrival, that we are *not* to talk shop tonight,” Lukáč said firmly, blue eyes twinkling. “And as obedient subjects, it behooves us to obey him.”

“It’s a good thing it’s my *brother* who’s the despot — and owns all the headsmen — and not me,” Mayhew observed.

“Oh, I’m sure!” Honor said.

In fact, everyone in the GSN knew Michael Mayhew had been “navy mad” since childhood. Only the fact that it had taken his older brother so long to produce the male heir the Grayson constitution required had kept him out of uniform before Grayson had joined the Manticoran Alliance. And only the fact that Benjamin had needed him so desperately as his personal envoy had prevented him from seeking a naval career afterward. That was the real reason officers like Lukáč and Sena were prepared to be so informal with him. He was one of their own, and he’d always had a very special, very personal relationship with the GSN and its personnel. They knew how deeply he loved the Navy, and they loved him right back.

“Ah!” Mayhew said now as an extraordinarily tall officer approached them. “Captain White!”

“My Lord.” Zachary White bowed to Mayhew, and then to Honor. “My Lady.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you, Lady Harrington. My son —”

“Admiral Lukáč told us about it, Zach,” Honor said, shaking her head as she held out her hand to the much shorter woman who’d accompanied White across the crowded compartment. She was one of the relatively few civilians present, and on her, the traditional Grayson gown looked good. Although her particular version of it wasn’t quite as “traditional” as many. Honor doubted she was wearing more than three petticoats.

“Is he all right, Misty?” she asked, and Madam White smiled.

“I think he’s pretty much indestructible,” she said. “He was just *so* upset over ‘messing up Dad’s party.’”

“He really was,” Captain White agreed, and looked at Lukáč. “I really appreciate your taking over the host’s duties, Sir. His mom could *tell* him I wasn’t mad at him, but he was upset enough with himself that I think he needed the paternal reassurance.”

“Lenka and I may not have any of our own, Captain, but I’ve got five siblings,” Lukáč said dryly. “And thanks to Skydomes and our little population explosion, the last time I looked, I’ve got somewhere around — the number is subject to change without warning, you understand — thirty-seven nieces and nephews, at least four of whom have started producing children of their own!”

White chuckled, and nodded greetings to the other officers clustered around Mayhew.

“How’s he doing overall — here in Manticore, I mean?” Honor asked Misty, and she shrugged.

“He misses his friends and his classmates, My Lady,” she said, “but it’s not like he’s not making new ones, and he’s actually ahead of his age-mates academically.” Her smile might have held a slight edge. “I don’t think those new classmates of his expected that. And the experience of actually *living* somewhere besides Grayson is going to be really, really good for him.” She shrugged. “Besides, the truth is that everyone here in Manticore is bending over backward to make all of us Graysons welcome. It shows, believe me.”

Honored nodded. As a steadholder — and, aside from Mayhew, the *only* steadholder in the Manticore Binary System — she’d felt a personal responsibility to represent the Grayson dependents who’d accompanied the GSN. Unfortunately, she couldn’t. There simply weren’t enough hours in the day, and so she was enormously relieved by how well things seemed to be going. And one reason they were going so well was the smiling woman standing beside her towering husband.

In many ways, Misty White was Lenka Lukáčová’s civilian counterpart. While Lukáčová dealt with the Chaplains Corps’s issues, Madame White was attached to the Grayson Family Support Command. Technically, that was a military organization, headed by Captain Leonard Fitzhugh and she was only a “civilian advisor.” Fortunately, Fitzhugh was smart enough to stay out of the way when Misty White rolled up her sleeves and went to work.

“I’m glad it’s going well,” Honor said now. “I’d heard reports that it was, but I’m behind the curve on a lot of things.”

“I can’t imagine how that could possibly be the case, My Lady,” Misty said.

“I’m sure you can’t,” Honor said warmly, slipping her left arm through Misty’s right. “But unless my eyes deceive me, it looks like Michal’s flag lieutenant is headed this way to tell us that now that the two of you have rejoined us, it’s time for dinner. And as you may have heard, I’m from Sphinx.” She smiled at the others. “Which is to say, I’m hungry . . . again.”

“My Lady,” Lukáčová said frankly, “I would *kill* for your metabolism. I really would.”

“Oh?” Honor gave Misty a conspiratorial smile. “Well, if you think three o’clock feedings are bad for most children, you should think about trying to keep somebody with the Meyerdahl mods fed! My mom’s made a few . . . pithy comments on that task over the years. They include references to somebody named Sisyphus.”

“Oh, my!” Misty laughed. “I hadn’t even *thought* of that, My Lady!”

“Trust me, Raoul’s going to be repaying my karmic debt to my parents for the next — oh, seventeen or eighteen T-years. There are some aspects of parenting I look forward to less than others.”

“Maybe, My Lady,” Misty said, smiling as a petty officer came forging through the press of senior officers, towing a small, spotlessly clad boy child towards them. “But trust me, when the dust settles, it will have been worth every minute of it. Every single minute.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Honor said softly as she and Misty moved to greet young Master Edward White. “I believe you.”

**Hillary Indrakashi Enkateshwara Tower**

**City of Old Chicago**

**Sol System**

**Solarian League**

“Either there are an awful lot of these moles, or our search algorithms need some serious tweaking.”

Lieutenant Colonel Weng Zhing-hwan sat back from the terminal, rubbing tired eyes with her left hand, and her tone was as sour as her expression. Then she inhaled deeply and reached for her cup of tea. She sipped, grimaced at the way it had cooled, and refreshed it from the pot at her elbow.

That pot had come from her own apartment. The dingy little office buried in the bowels of a building the Commerce Department used primarily for storage had been sealed and unused for over thirty T-years before Major Bryce Tarkovsky discovered it a couple of years ago. At the time, he’d planned to put it to use as a spot for friendly interservice games of chance at which he and his fellow spooks could talk shop without any inconvenient superiors catching them at it. Under the circumstances, he’d decided she and her co-conspirators needed it rather more badly, and she supposed she was grateful. It would have been nice if it had come with at least *some* amenities, though.

And the dust had been pretty bad, too.

“The interesting thing,” Captain Daud al-Fanudahi replied in a more philosophical voice, tipping back in his chair and resting his heels on one end of the desk between them, “is how long how many of our potential moles have been in position. Or working their way into it, at any rate.”

“Assuming they really are bad guys,” Weng pointed out. “Even if they are, getting into some of these slots —” she waved her teacup at the neat columns of names on her display “— was bound to take a while. And if they *aren’t* — bad guys, I mean — then what looks like ‘working their way into position’ is simply the normal pursuit of an open and aboveboard career.”

“Which is exactly how any defense counsel would present it.” It was al-Fanudahi’s turn to look sour.

“It has occurred to you, I trust, that we may all be suffering from paranoia?” Weng asked.

“Upon occasion.” He snorted. “On the other hand, I’m not in favor of finding out whether or not we’re paranoid by going public. What about you?”

“Not just yet, thank you,” she said dryly.

“Pretty much what I thought.” He shrugged. “And apropos of that point, and bearing in mind your comment about search algorithms, I’m a little nervous about our potential exposure. I really appreciate Brigadier Gaddis’s support, but if anybody happens to look over his shoulder at the computer runs involved in all this . . . .”

He let his voice trail away, and Weng nodded. Her expression seemed rather less concerned than his, though.

“He’s been playing this game — well, this *sort* of game — for a long time, Daud,” she said. “He got the Criminal Investigation Division because he’s damned good at his job and because he’s interested in really catching bad guys, and no one gives him any crap because he knows where way too many bodies are buried. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

“Oh, of course!” al-Fanudahi agreed.

“Well, I thought it was an important distinction.”

She sipped more tea while he chuckled, then lowered the cup once again.

“My point is that people — especially people with something to hide — tend to stay far, far away from anything that might draw his attention. Given the . . . summary fashion in which he’s dealt with anyone poking into one of his investigations in the past, snooping around in one of his data searches is what I believe you military types call ‘contraindicated.’”

“Under normal circumstances, I’d feel reassured by that,” al-Fanudahi said soberly. “But if we’re anywhere close to right about what’s going on, the people we’re looking for this time around are the sort who’ve never seen a problem they weren’t willing to kill. I don’t see any reason they wouldn’t be willing to apply the same prescription to him. In fact, I’m pretty sure they’d be perfectly happy to kill him and however many other people it took if they got even a hint of what he’s looking for.”

“CID is the last place anyone would expect to find a counterintelligence op. That’s Noritoshi Väinöla’s bailiwick . . . and exactly the reason neither Lupe Blanton nor I went anywhere near him with this. And it’s a pain in the arse, too, because I’m pretty damn sure Väinöla’s as straight as they come in the Gendarmerie.” She grimaced in obvious frustration. “The problem is —”

“That if he *is* straight, and if this is the kind of operation he’d normally be in charge of, then he’s the one our bad guys are going to keep the closest eye on,” al-Fanudahi finished for her, and she nodded.

“Exactly. Simeon, on the other hand, always has at least a dozen sensitive investigations underway at any given moment. Adding one more’s a lot less likely to trigger any alarms than sudden activity on Väinöla’s part would.”

“I can see that.” Al-Fanudahi nodded, and he sounded a bit less worried, although his expression still wasn’t what anyone would have called happy.

“The other thing he’s got going for him,” Weng continued, setting her cup back on the saucer and paging ahead through the file on her display, “is that he’s spent the last twenty or thirty years assembling a team whose primary loyalty is to *him*. He calls them his Outcasts because the only thing they give a solitary damn about is catching the bad guys, *whoever* they are and whatever the consequences to their careers might be.”

“Like Okiku?”

“Not so much, really.” Weng frowned for a moment, obviously looking for exactly the right way to explain. “Okiku’s got exactly the same attitude, but he’s kept her outside the Outcasts. Pissed her off a time or two, too.”

“Why?” Al-Fanudahi’s eyebrows arched. “I’d think she’d be a perfect fit!”

“Oh, in so many ways, she would,” Weng agreed, and smiled. She’d come to know Lieutenant Colonel Natsuko Okiku rather better in the past few weeks, and in the process, she’d come to appreciate exactly why Simeon Gaddis had kept her away from his ‘Outcasts.’ In fact —

“Why did you tell Irene to keep her mouth shut and let *you* take the heat for being right about the Manties’ capabilities?” she asked.

Al-Fanudahi looked at her, then nodded.

“Point taken,” he said. “He thinks she’s too valuable down the road for him to burn her career at this point.”

“Which makes it sort of ironic that she was so busy sneaking around behind his back when Bryce brought her into your little conspiracy.” Weng chuckled. “She didn’t want to risk any of it splashing on her boss, and now her boss is keeping her outside his circle of analysts to keep anyone from linking her with them.”

“I don’t have any problem with that,” al-Fanudahi told her. “Especially if anyone’s noticed that she’s been talking to me and Irene — or you and Lupe, for that matter. The last thing we’d need would be for someone to connect her to us and then connect her to some supersecret research project over at CID.”

“Exactly.” Weng said again. “But my point is that unless one of his Outcasts is working for the bad guys, nobody’s going to get a look inside his data searches. If someone’s keeping a really close eye on him, they may be able to figure out what kind of information the Outcasts are looking at, but none of it’s really all that unusual for a CID investigation, and there’s a complete air break between their computers and the rest of the universe. That’s pretty much standard, too.”

It was al-Fanudahi’s turn to nod again. The computer upon which he and Weng worked in their sessions here in their dingy little office was a portable unit completely isolated from Commerce’s — or anyone else’s — central core and processors. Nor was any of their data stored on it. All actual work was done on external memory chips, and he, Weng, Lupe Blanton, and Natsuko Okiku each had custody of a single chip biometrically coded to their personal DNA. That meant at least one of them was usually out of date, but it also meant no one could compromise their data without their knowing about it.

*Of course, it also means that if it* does *get compromised, it’ll probably be because at least one of us is dead*, he reflected. *Still, if it was easy, anyone could play!*

“Well, like I say, either there are more of these people than we’d hoped there were, or else these Outcasts of his are pretty bad shots,” he observed.

“One way to look at it.” Weng tipped back her own chair and rotated it to face al-Fanudahi fully. “But let’s not get too carried away just yet. What the Outcasts are telling us is that the names on this list all appear to be *associated* with at least one of the people we’ve already concluded is *probably* working for the bad guys. It’s still way too early for us to conclude any of them are working directly for the bad guys. Or, for that matter, that they even realize the bad guys are out there!”

“Maybe it is, but we’ve got to get off the centicredit, Zhing-hwan. After what happened to Eleventh Fleet, I don’t even want to think about what these people’s next production’s going to be like!” Al-Fanudahi shook his head, his dark brown eyes haunted by the thought of the hundreds of thousands of Solarian League Navy spacers who’d already died.

“Agreed. But until we have at least some idea of just what the hell is going on, nobody’s going to take us seriously, and especially not if somebody they trust is telling them we’re a bunch of lunatics.”

“I know. That’s why we’ve got to really drill into this. We think we know *what* they’re doing, but until we’ve got that idea about *why* they’re doing it we can’t expect to convince anyone else we *aren’t* lunatics. I’m beginning to think Bryce may have a point!”

“Major Tarkovsky is a very fine Marine,” Weng said with a crooked smile, “and a superior analyst. He is, unfortunately, still a *Marine*. And there are occasions — difficult though I know he finds that to accept — when something moderately more subtle than a pulser dart or a KEW is called for. Especially since Simeon’s probably right about just how bright our pool of suspects actually is. Like our friend Rajmund, for example. I know it pained Lupe when Simeon suggested Rajmund might not really be the unimaginative, corruptible clod she — and I, to be fair — always figured he was. For that matter, I’m still not thoroughly convinced he *isn’t*. But it’s a lot smarter for us to assume he isn’t stupid than it is for us to assume he is. Because as successfully as these people seem to have set up their networks, the one thing they aren’t is *dumb*. So while the notion of grabbing one of them and sweating her in a quiet little room somewhere possesses a certain appeal, I suggest we hold off on it at least a little longer.”

“I know,” al-Fanudahi repeated, then puffed his cheeks and exhaled noisily. “I know! But we’re not going to get any official warrants on the basis of any ‘probable cause’ we can share with anyone higher up the food chain. That means the time’s likely to come when we have to do it Bryce’s way.”

“Of course we are. I’m not looking forward to it, for a lot of reasons, but you’re probably right about where we’re going to end up. But if we’ve got to go entirely off the reservation and grab someone without benefit of due process, then I want to make sure we grab the *right* someone. Someone who really is the link we need between people like Rajmund and whoever the hell he’s working for. Which is exactly what *this* —” she jabbed a finger at the columns of names “— is going to give us. Somewhere in all these names, Daoud, there’s a handler. Somebody has to be managing their communications and coordinating their operations, and that probably means that whoever’s doing it is in contact with more than one of their agents in place. That’s who Simeon’s Outcasts and their numbercrunching is going to find for us. And once we’ve found her, I’m likely to be just a little more inclined to give Bryce his head."

**Office of Frontier Security HQ**

**Interior Department Tower**

**City of Old Chicago**

**Sol System**

**Solarian League**

“Yes, Marianne?” Adão Ukhtomskoy tried not to sound impatient as Marianne Haavikko’s image appeared in a window in the notes he’d been reviewing before his scheduled meeting with Nathan MacArtney, the Permanent Senior Undersecretary of the Interior.

Haavikko had been his secretary for a long, long time, and he knew she wouldn’t have interrupted him on a whim. At the same time, she knew his schedule better than anyone else in the universe . . . including him. That meant she knew how important his review and preparation for this meeting was. As the CO of Frontier Security Intelligence Branch, Ukhtomskoy was MacArtney’s senior “spook,” and as the confrontation with the Star Empire of Manticore and its allies went further and further into the crapper, his meetings with his superior had become less than pleasant affairs. The permanent senior undersecretary had always had a tendency to take out his frustrations on his subordinates. He was also a micromanager, the sort who demanded detailed reports. Worse, he knew what he wanted — and expected — to hear before the reports were ever written. He could be counted upon to break the kneecaps of any subordinate who gave him the “wrong” details, but was equally vindictive with people who told him what he expected to hear . . . and were wrong about it. That made working for him challenging at the best of times, and with so many wheels coming off in the Fringe and Verge, there was no way to get reports *right* no matter how hard someone tried.

“I’m very sorry to disturb you, Sir,” Haavikko said, and he realized she wasn’t speaking into her hush phone. “I’m afraid Mister Nyhus is here. I told him you’re reviewing for an important meeting, but he insists on speaking to you.”

*He must really have pissed Marianne off for her to be making certain he can hear her*. That was Ukhtomskoy’s first thought. The second was: *And he’d better have a damn good* reason *for pissing her off, too. The bastard knows I’m meeting with MacArtney in less than an hour!*

“Did he say what he needs to speak to me about?”

“No, Sir. Just that it was urgent.”

“I see.” Ukhtomskoy frowned. Then he shrugged. If Nyhus was wasting his time, he was just likely to get his head ripped off this time. But if he *wasn’t* . . . .

“Send him in,” he said.

“Yes, Sir.”

His office door opened, and Rajmund Nyhus came through it. He was tall, with very fair hair and a dark complexion, and his expression was far from cheerful.

“I apologize for barging in this way,” he said quickly, before Ukhtomskoy could speak. “I wouldn’t have, except that I know you’re supposed to be talking to MacArtney this afternoon. Under the circumstances, I thought I’d better bring you this immediately. And, frankly, it’s sensitive enough I wanted to brief you on it personally.”

Ukhtomskoy’s eyebrows rose, despite himself. As the head of OFS Intelligence Branch’s Section Two, Nyhus was responsible for analysis of internal threats to Frontier Security’s operations. He was also deeply in bed with several of the Solarian League’s more corrupt transstellars, and in most star nations, that would have been considered a conflict of interests. The Solarian League wasn’t “most star nations,” however.

“Brief me about what?” he said, waving the other man into one of the comfortable chairs in front of his desk.

“I got a pair of very disturbing reports this morning.” Nyhus sank into the indicated chair. “One’s about a problem we’ve been keeping an eye on for some time, but it’s not really our responsibility, thank God. In fact, it was copied to me ‘for information’ from the Gendarmerie, not because anyone expects us to take any sort of action about it. According to the Gendarmes’ sources, though, all indications are that the Hypatia referendum’s going to come out with a clear majority for secession and political association with Beowulf. That’s going to have some nasty implications for us — for the entire League — down the road, I think. But scary as it is, it’s not nearly so worrisome, from our perspective, as the one I’ve received from the Maya Sector.”

Ukhtomskoy frowned. He didn’t like the sound of that at all, especially not if Nyhus thought whatever was happening in Maya was worse than the notion of a member system of the League deciding to follow Beowulf’s example, kick the League to the curb, and sign on with the Manties. True, Hypatia was only modestly prosperous by Core World standards, but like its interstellar neighbor Beowulf, it had been a member of the League since the day it was founded. Its defection would have *major* implications for the League’s cohesion, and Nyhus thought the Maya report was *worse?*

The Maya Sector had been one of Frontier Security’s success stories for well over a T-century. In fact, in most ways, Maya was the crown jewel of the Protectorates: a highly prosperous, nine-star system sector, which had actually petitioned for Solarian “protection” a hundred and fifty T-years earlier. That was . . . unusual, to say the least, but the Mayans had seen Frontier Security coming for some time. Recognizing that OFS clienthood was clearly in their future, they’d begun preparing well ahead of time to make clienthood as tolerable as they could.

They’d understood they needed bargaining chips, so they’d actively courted investment by Solarian transstellars. But they’d simultaneously put local protections and controls into place — the sort of protections and controls Frontier Security clients were seldom in a position to hold out for. They’d wanted their investors to make a healthy profit, and they’d been willing to cooperate to make that happen, but they’d also wanted to be sure they retained a powerful voice in *how* those profits got made.

Their object had been to make the sector even more attractive to the League but in a way which would give them a certain leverage when the moment came. They’d made themselves into a golden goose, with such valuable pre-existing relationships with so many transstellars that no one really wanted to destabilize them. In fact, they’d succeeded in turning the transtellars in question into their champions, ready and able to protect their existing relationships against interlopers when OFS started looking their way. At the same time, they’d made quiet contact with many of the bureaucrats who really ran the Solarian League. They’d understood discreet gifts could buy a lot of friendship, and they’d been careful to get on the career bureaucrats’ good side.

And then they’d offered OFS a deal. They would accept Frontier Security protectorate status and an OFS-appointed sector governor, but they would retain local self-government *and* the appointee would have to be confirmed by a majority of the sector’s voters. If he was rejected, OFS could always select another one, until a mutually acceptable candidate was reached, but whoever it was would have to be *mutually* acceptable. They would cough up the usual OFS “administrative fees,” their transstellar “friends” would restrain the slash-and-burn rapaciousness which had devastated so many Fringe economies, and in return, they’d continue to manage their local affairs without infusions of Solarian Gendarmes or intervention battalions.

The arrangement had worked well for the last T-century and a half, although signs of increasing restiveness had begun to emerge among younger Mayans. For that matter, the Mayan business community was none too pleased by the way OFS had increased its fee schedules steadily for the last sixty or so T-years. Maya might not have been bitten as badly as many of the other Protectorates, but those “administrative fees” were taking a steadily bigger chunk of its revenues. Besides, whatever else they might be, Mayans were Fringers. They didn’t much care for OFS’s progressively uglier exploitation of other Fringe star systems.

Fortunately, Governor Oravil Barregos had proved capable of gentling a restive mount. He’d barely squeaked through the Mayan Assembly when he was first appointed as governor in 1912, probably because of the mounting local unhappiness with OFS’s fee demands. But five years later, he’d been reconfirmed for a second term with sixty-eight percent of the vote. And in 1920, he’d won yet a third term — this time with a seventy-six-percent majority. In an era in which OFS governors considered themselves popular if no one was actively trying to blow up their air cars, Barregos genuinely *was* popular. Not only that, he seemed to be in the process of wooing Erewhon — and its wormhole — back into the Solarian fold from its alliances with first Manticore and then Haven.

At a time when the entire galaxy seemed to be catching fire, Maya represented a welcome corner of tranquility.

For the moment, at least.

“What sort of report are we talking about?” Ukhtomskoy asked unhappily. If he had to tell MacArtney Barregos’s popularity was starting to wane and the days of Maya’s tranquility might be numbered . . . .

“I have two separate sources who each tell me Barregos has met directly with representatives of Manticore,” Nyhus said flatly.

For a moment, Ukhtomskoy was certain he’d misunderstood. Then he straightened in his chair.

“What did you say?”

“I said I have two separate reports that Barregos is meeting with the Manties.” Nyhus shook his head, blue eyes worried. “*Separate* reports from two different sources, Adão. And neither one of the sources knows about the other.”

Ukhtomskoy’s jaw tightened at the implication.

“I wouldn’t have been in such a rush to tell you about it if it was only one report,” Nyhus continued. “But when I’ve got two separate channels confirming each other, I’ve got to take it seriously.”

“Are you suggesting *Oravil Barregos* is contemplating *treason?*”

“I don’t *know* what he’s contemplating,” Nyhus shot back with an unusual note of frustration. “All I know is that I have usually reliable sources telling me he’s talking to Manties. And, frankly, it worries me a lot more than it might have otherwise because of all the *other* reports I’ve been getting — and sharing with you — about Manticoran involvement in stirring up the Fringe.”

Ukhtomskoy glared at him, but Nyhus looked back steadily. And, Ukhtomskoy was forced to admit, he had a point. Almost a year ago, Brigadier Noritoshi Väinöla, Ukhtomskoy’s counterpart with the Gendarmerie, had kicked across a report of what appeared to be orchestrated restiveness across wide stretches of the Fringe. Ukhtomskoy had been inclined to write it off as a case of too much imagination, until Nyhus had come to him six or seven months ago with a report of his own. One that suggested not only that Väinöla’s analysts might be onto something but that the Star Empire of Manticore might be behind it.

To date, any corroborating evidence had been thin, to say the least, and entirely too much of Nyhus’s information came from “confidential sources.” At Ukhtomskoy’s insistence, he’d sent urgent queries back to his agents in place, demanding IDs on those sources in hopes of gaining some insight into their reliability. Field agents were always reluctant to reveal sources’ names to higher authority, for a lot of reasons, however, and sheer distance complicated the situation because of the built-in data transmission delays. So far, only a tiny handful of those sources had been positively identified and the process of evaluating their trustworthiness was only beginning.

“And would it happen that this time we at least know who those ‘reliable sources’ are?” he asked tartly.

“As a matter of fact, I do know who *one* of them is,” Nyhus said. “I know both agents — one of them personally, and one only by reputation — pretty well. Keiran MacQuilkin, the senior agent in our Landing office in Sprague, is the one I know personally. I sent her out to keep an eye on things when the Havenites and Manties started shooting at each other again. One of her stringers on Smoking Frog is a security guard on Barregos’s staff in Shuttlesport. And he got this.”

Nyhus tapped his uni-link, and a holo of a dark-skinned, strong jawed face appeared in Ukhtomskoy’s display. He glanced at it, then looked back at Nyhus.

“And ‘this’ is who, exactly?” he asked.

“We’re not entirely positive,” Nyhus conceded. “Whoever he is, though, he’s met very privately with Barregos in his office well after normal hours. That struck me as ominous, given all the recent . . . agitation in the Fringe, so I had that —” he twitched his head in the direction of the holo “— put through a full facial recognition pass.”

Ukhtomskoy arched an eyebrow. Given the sheer, staggering quantity of imagery, a “full facial recognition pass” could take weeks, sometimes months, even at modern data processing speeds.

“I got a hit . . . sort of.” Nyhus tapped his uni-link again and a second holo appeared beside the first one. This one was much poorer quality, although it was obvious it had been digitally enhanced. “I’m sorry it’s no sharper,” he said, “but it’s only a part of the original imagery. The newsy who took it was using a concealed camera and trying to get pictures of Baron High Ridge.”

“The Manty prime minister?” Ukhtomskoy looked up sharply, and Nyhus nodded.

“The newsy was doing an undercover piece on High Ridge’s meetings with some of his more camera-shy donors. He shot this outside the Manties’ Parliament and just caught the fellow we’re interested in in one corner of the frame.”

A flashing cursor appeared in the image, above the head of a tall, broad shouldered, deep chested individual. The camera had caught him in three quarters profile, his head turned as he spoke to a much shorter uniformed man beside him.

“We’re not sure who the shorter guy is,” Nyhus said. “Whoever he is, he’s wearing a Manty commodore’s uniform, though. And the computers call it a ninety-three percent probability that the taller one is the man in MacQuilkin’s holo of Barregos’s midnight visitor.”

**SLNS *Québec***

**Dzung System**

**Solarian League**

Admiral Capriotti tipped back his chair, holding his coffee cup in both hands, and looked around the briefing room table aboard SLNS *Québec* at the senior members of his staff.

“All right,” he said. “Now that we’ve covered the bare essentials, does anyone have any immediate brilliant observations?”

The expected chuckle ran around the table, and he smiled. Then he sipped coffee, lowered the cup, and allowed his expression to sober.

“Seriously,” he said, “this whole thing is coming at us pretty damned fast. I know all of you have a lot of i’s to dot and t’s to cross — and, if I haven’t mentioned this, I’m very happy with all of you for the way you’ve already dug in on that — but we all know perfectly well that the people who planned this must’ve missed something. Hopefully, it’s something minor, but it might not be. So I want each of you to spend the next twelve hours or so going over your individual parts of the ops plans. If there’s anything — anything at all — you think could, should, or might be tweaked to our advantage, I want to hear about it before we leave Dzung. The one thing we know for certain about what happened to Eleventh Fleet is that it got the holy living hell kicked out of it. I have no intention of allowing that to happen to *my* task force. Is that understood?”

He let his eyes circle the table again in a brief bubble of silence, and then Vice Admiral Helland replied.

“Yes, Sir,” she said. “I think I can speak for all of us when I say we have no more intention than you do to put on a repeat performance of that disaster. I believe you can safely conclude we’ll be thinking very hard about ways to make sure we don’t.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Angelica.” Capriotti smiled. Then he nodded at the briefing room hatch. “So that’s about it for now, people. Go see about finding some supper. Angelica, I’d like you, Lyang-tau, and Jason to stay behind for a moment.”

“Of course, Sir,” Helland replied as the remainder of the staff stood, came respectfully to attention, and saluted. Capriotti, with his customary deplorable lack of formality, waved his coffee cup in general acknowledgment and the staffers filed out of the compartment. The hatch slid shut behind them, and he let his chair come back upright and set the coffee cup back down on it saucer.

“The truth is,” he said, “I’m not entirely happy about this entire operation. I don’t expect that to go beyond the four of us and Gabby, but I want to be sure we’re all on the same page.”

“May I ask in what way you’re unhappy, Sir?” Helland asked in a careful tone.

“From a purely military perspective, I have two concerns, only one of which our orders explicitly approach. The first is that Cachalot is only fifty-seven light-years from Beowulf. Strategy and Planning are busy assuming, on the basis of intelligence data they haven’t seen fit to share with us, that neither Beowulf nor the Manties have seen any reason to station a naval picket there, and I’m a little less confident on that head than Admiral Bernard. As nearly as I can follow the logic, Cachalot is seen as safely in their column, so there’s no need for the ‘imperialists’ to coerce the system, on the one hand. On the other hand, especially with the Beowulf plebiscite still up in the air, they don’t want to look like they’re strong-arming Cachalot. I’m inclined to think Strategy and Planning’s probably right about the absence of a major Manty picket, for whatever combination of reasons, but I’m a long way from *certain* of it.”

“Sir,” Commodore Jason Schlegel said, “you know I’m not a big fan of the analyses we’ve seen coming out of Old Chicago. Having said that, I think the odds are good S&P is right about this one.” He shrugged. “There aren’t many things I’d put past Beowulf at the moment, but they do seem to be bending over backward to present themselves in the most favorable light. And the Manties are generating enough bad press in the League by this wormhole offensive of theirs that they’re unlikely to up the ante by effectively occupying a neutral system as populous and wealthy as Cachalot.”

Capriotti considered the younger man thoughtfully. Schlegel was TF 783’s intelligence officer. He was also an extremely bright officer and, at only fifty-six T-years old, young for his rank, even in the gold braid-heavy SLN. Unlike altogether too many of his ilk, he brought a skeptic’s eye to any intelligence report that crossed his desk, and Capriotti normally valued his input. He did in this case, as well, actually, but he also remembered that Schlegel considered Beowulf guilty of treason. The commodore fully accepted the argument that Imogene Tsang’s prong of Eleventh Fleet’s disastrous attack would have suffered an even worse slaughter than Massimo Filareta if Beowulf hadn’t stopped her ships from transiting the Beowulf Terminus. However, he also believed — probably with reason, in Capriotti’s opinion — that Beowulf was the source of Manticore’s original intelligence about Operation Raging Justice. And he also believed Beowulf’s “complicity” in Manticore’s obvious swing to a rawly imperialist foreign policy and its evident intention of seceding posed an existential threat to the Solarian League.

“I said I was inclined to think Bernard’s people are right, Jason,” he pointed out mildly. “Since we don’t have any actual pre-attack reconnaissance to confirm that, however, I’m certainly not going to operate on the assumption that they *have* to be.”

“Of course not, Sir.”

“However, the possibility that they aren’t brings me to my second military concern— the one where we have clear direction: what we do if it turns out there *is* a Manty picket.”

His tone was considerably grimmer, and his three staffers glanced at one another.

“Sir, I know you won’t like what I’m about to say,” Admiral Helland said after a moment, “but Strategy and Planning have a point. We can’t afford to look . . . ineffectual, especially after what happened at Spindle and Manticore.” She did not, Capriotti noticed, mention other events at places with names like Zunker and Saltash. “Under the circumstances, pulling back at what we all know the newsies would label ‘the first sign of resistance’ would undercut Buccaneer’s entire strategic premise.”

Lyang-tau Rutgers stirred but said nothing.

“I’m fully aware of that, Angelica.” Capriotti’s voice was a bit frostier than the one in which he normally spoke to his chief of staff. “I’m also aware of the reported loss of life in that mysterious attack on the Manties’ home system. I know there are some who believe their officially released casualty numbers are inflated. Given what obviously happened to their industrial base, though, I doubt they were. And if it hadn’t been for Spindle, how do you think League public opinion would have reacted to them?”

Helland started to reply, then paused. After a moment, she nodded slightly. One thing about her, Capriotti thought. She’d subscribed fully to Battle Fleet hubris — at least before the Battle of Spindle — and she still considered both Manticore and the Republic of Haven “uppity neobarbs” who needed to be taught their manners. Despite that, her brain actually worked.

“Point taken, Sir,” she said. “If it hadn’t come so close on Spindle’s heels, the ‘Yawata Strike’ would’ve gotten an enormous amount of sympathetic play on the boards.”

“And with damned good cause.” Capriotti leaned forward, planting his forearms on the briefing room table. “That was a sheer, wanton slaughter, with no attempt at all to minimize civilian loss of life. Leave the kinetic impact damage on Sphinx completely out of the equation, and it was still unconscionable.”

“Sir,” Rutgers said cautiously, “should we gather from where you’re going with this that you’re . . . not in favor of Parthian?”

“I believe that would be a safe assumption on your part, Lyang-tau.” Capriotti smiled thinly. “I always was a transparent, easily read sort.”

“Sir, I understand your concerns — and your repugnance. I really do,” Helland said. “But as I just said, if Parthian’s taken off the table, then Buccaneer’s fundamental strategic premise is compromised.”

“It *may* be compromised,” Capriotti corrected her. “A lot would depend on *how* it was taken off the table. If there is a Manty — or Beowulfan — naval presence in Cachalot, and if I choose to avoid Parthian on the basis that it would result in unnecessary and *avoidable* civilian deaths and make it clear that that’s the *only* reason I’m not executing Parthian, we come off looking restrained, not ineffectual. Especially in the aftermath of all the contradictory stories about what happened to Eleventh Fleet.”

Helland looked less than convinced, but she clearly recognized that this wasn’t a good place to push. Capriotti gave what he’d just said a few seconds to sink in, then sat back once more.

“I don’t see any need to discuss this particular concern with the rest of the staff,” he said. “If S&P’s right and there’s no picket to get in our way, it will never arise. If there is, then the final decision on Parthian will be mine, anyway. I want all three of you, though, to be thinking about the possibility that S&P *isn’t* right and considering what I suppose you might call a partial Parthian. The outer system’s infrastructure, especially in the Snapper Belt, has a much lower population, and the people in it are much more lavishly equipped with life pods and small craft. Given even a few hours’ warning, they should be able to evacuate almost totally. Going after Snapper would make Buccaneer’s point, I think, and if I emphasized to the system government that we were deliberately avoiding heavier casualties, we should get credit for showing restraint, as well.”

Helland nodded with what might have been a bit more enthusiasm.

“All right,” Capriotti stood. “I think we could all use some supper of our own. Why don’t the three of you join me in my dining cabin?”

“Of course, Sir. Thank you,” Helland said, and the three staffers followed him from the briefing room.

*Angelica has a point about Buccaneer’s premises*, Capriotti thought, as they headed for the lift shaft. *She’s not the only person who’s going to make it, either. For that matter, it’s a virtual certainty that sooner or later somebody* is *going to execute Parthian, whatever* I *do*.

He hid a mental grimace. Parthian was the one part of the detailed ops plan with which he’d totally disagreed from the instant he read it.

The new, improved Cataphracts in the pods which had been delivered along with TF 783’s instructions, had effectively unlimited range. Well, *all* missiles had effectively unlimited range, really, but the Cataphract’s second stage meant it was capable of terminal maneuvers at the end of its run as opposed to a purely ballistic weapon coasting helplessly through space after its impellers burned out. That meant, in theory, that missiles launched from well outside the 15.84 LM hyper-limit of the Cachalot System’s K4 primary were fully capable of hitting targets in the vicinity of Orca, the system’s inhabited planet, despite the fact that Orca’s orbital radius was less than three light-minutes. For that matter, Orca’s orbital infrastructure wasn’t what one might call an elusive target. Capriotti had no doubt that Lyang-tau Rutgers and his tactical officers would be capable of taking out every bit of it without ever crossing the limit inbound.

But there were two things no tac officer could possibly guarantee if Capriotti ordered them to do that. First, they couldn’t guarantee Orca wouldn’t suffer exactly the same sort of collateral catastrophe which had destroyed the Manticoran city of Yawata Crossing. And, second, and even worse, if he executed Parthian — essentially a hit-and-run strike from extreme range to avoid entering the Manties’ missile envelope — there would be no time for an orderly evacuation. They’d probably save more lives than the Manties had managed to save in the Yawata Strike, but almost a billion of the Cachalot System’s 6.9 billion citizens lived and worked in that infrastructure.

In the course of his career, Vincent Capriotti had done more things he hadn’t liked than he cared to contemplate. Committing mass murder wasn’t going to be one of them, *whatever* Operation Buccaneer called for.

*But sooner or later, someone* will, *Vincent*, he thought. *It’s the next best damned thing to an Eridani violation, but someone will. And what the* hell *do we do when the* Solarian League *starts violating the Edict?*

He didn’t like that thought.

He didn’t like it at all.

**SLNS *Leonhard Euler***

**Unicorn Belt**

**Manticore B**

**Star Empire of Manticore**

“Sir, I think I’ve got something here you need to look at,” Midshipman Dimas said.

“That would make a nice change.”

Commander Bill Knight sounded more than a little sour, although that was scarcely Dimas’s fault. In fact, Knight liked Dimas quite a bit more than an evaluating officer was supposed to admit to a midshipman on his snotty cruise. Dimas was smart and competent . . . and so bouncy he reminded Knight irresistibly of a labradour retriever he’d had when he was a kid himself. That dog had been smart, too . . . and despite what some people might think was possible, he’d *definitely* had a sense of humor. One that had gotten both him and his youthful master into what his mom had always referred to as “a heap of trouble” more than once. Dimas’s humor never got him into trouble — or not, at least, with his superiors; his fellow snotties might have disputed that value judgment — but he loved practical jokes and he was an accomplished amateur ventriloquist. His ability to mimic sounds and throw his voice into unlikely places had kept Midshipman Styles running around the compartment looking for his “lost” unilink for almost fifteen minutes a couple of days ago.

Young Dimas had also won the Lester Allen Kovalenko Prize as the top math graduate in his senior class, however. He’d been the starting goalie on the Saganami lacrosse team during his junior and senior forms, as well, and he took the team’s motto — “Live life fearlessly!” — to heart. In short, he was an outstanding young man who was going to be an outstanding officer.

None of which made Bill Knight any happier about their current duty.

There were a lot of things he’d rather be doing than sitting on the command deck of yet another hulked Solly superdreadnought. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t be doing any of them for the immediately foreseeable future.

He grimaced at the thought and shoved up out of the captain’s chair at the center of *Leonhard Euler*’s bridge. He wasn’t certain who Euler had been — a mathematician, he thought — but his namesake had seen better days. Less damaged than a lot of her consorts, she’d still suffered over four hundred casualties, and lucky it hadn’t been worse. Not that anyone looking around her pristine bridge and smelling its cool, fresh air, would have imagined how severely damaged she was.

He crossed to the communications officer’s station, where Dimas was ensconced. Knight had been forced to concede that young Dimas had a better touch with Solly computers than he did. He hoped that didn’t say anything about unfortunate, hidden character flaws on the young man’s part. But what had started with Dimas “riding shotgun,” shadowing the older and more experienced Knight while he learned his way around, had segued into something a lot more like a partnership, and the boy had more than held up his end. Along the way, they’d discovered that the com system actually had the best reach into the ship’s computer net, although no one was quite certain why the com officer had needed more access than, say, the tactical officer or the astrogator.

*Probably because there’s a right way, a wrong way, and the* Solly *way to do just about anything*, he reflected as he came to a halt at Dimas’s shoulder. *Although, come to think of it, “wrong way” and “Solly way” is probably redundant*.

“So, what’ve you got, Elijah?” he asked.

“I’ve got the standalones running the deep core analysis, Sir,” the middy said, looking back and up at him, and Knight nodded.

The reason he and Dimas were currently parked aboard *Leonhard Euler* was that — for their sins — they were among the better of the Royal Manticoran Navy’s cyberneticists. In fact, both of them had been assigned to HMSS *Weyland* prior to the Yawata Strike. Knight had been aboard the spacestation for almost two T-years before the strike, assigned to the R&D side of its complement because of his expertise. Dimas had been sent aboard for his snotty cruise deployment to give him the hands-on, real world experience his Academy instructors had been unable to provide, and he’d ended up under Knight’s mentorship. They were alive today only because Vice Admiral Faraday, *Weyland*’s CO, had called an emergency evacuation drill which had left the entire R&D staff planet-side when the deadly sneak attack tore the spacestation apart.

Technically, Dimas’s snotty cruise had ended five days ago, but things were still badly unsettled following what had been dubbed the Second Battle of Manticore. The lad had been left where he was, assigned to Knight’s team, for the forensic examination of the wreckage. The commander hadn’t told him he’d specifically asked to be allowed to keep “his” midshipman a little longer because he was so good at his job. Nor did young Elijah know about the glowing efficiency report Knight had already composed. But the same gift for computers and — especially — for deep-diving into the cyber depths which had made Dimas so useful aboard *Weyland* made him even more valuable aboard a hulk like *Euler*.

One of the conditions upon which Massimo Filareta’s survivors had been allowed to surrender had been the preservation of their computer cores. Several commanding officers had scrubbed their computers anyway, which was why those particular COs were spending their current confinement in somewhat less than palatial conditions. Most, however, had honored their promise. A lot of them had figured — quite reasonably, in Knight’s opinion — that after what the RMN had done to Sandra Crandall it already had plenty of classified computer banks to play with. There were unlikely to be any shattering new intelligence landfalls in Eleventh Fleet’s memory.

At the moment, Knight and Dimas were busy probing the memory of their twelfth superdreadnought, and they weren’t the only team involved in the effort. And, so far, no shattering new intelligence *had* come to light, which tended to suggest those captains had had a point.

Dimas’s “standalones” were designed to carry out a point by point comparison between *Leonhard Euler*’s memory and the computers they’d already stripped. There was far too much data for any mere human to sort through, and — in theory, at least — the standalones would make sure anything that wasn’t already in the database would be added.

The communications logs were another matter, however. Even there there was far too much information for organic brains to keep track of, but it also tended to be more chaotic than the other data. Computers did a wonderful job of searching for things they were told to look for, and they were doing just that with all of the com traffic. But in something that tended to be as . . . free-form as inter-human communication, telling them where to look could sometimes be a nontrivial challenge. That was why he and Dimas had made it a point to at least skim the traffic for the last couple of hours before the Solarian surrender. The computers were looking at the same timeframe, but it was entirely possible they’d miss something.

“Should I take it the standalones have found something earthshattering?” Knight asked now, with a smile.

“Actually, Sir,” the middy said seriously, “I think I really *may* have found something.”

“Like what?”

“A fragment of a com conversation between *Leonhard Euler* and *Philip Oppenheimer* from about the time the Sollies opened fire. From her flag bridge.” Knight’s eyebrows rose, and Dimas nodded.

“You’re kidding,” the commander said.

“No, Sir.” Dimas shook his head, and Knight’s eyes widened.

They’d been searching for some window into whatever insanity had led Filareta to open fire in an absolutely hopeless situation. Unfortunately, none of Eleventh Fleet’s surviving units had been in direct communication with Admiral Filareta or his staff at the critical moment, and *Philip Oppenheimer* herself was not among the survivors. They’d found a few megs of recorded com traffic between *Oppenheimer*’s CO and other units of the fleet from that time window, but nothing that came from her *flag bridge* . . . or that shed any light on his decisions. So if his middy —

“Somebody on this ship was actually in communication with Filareta when everything went to hell?” he demanded.

“Not quite, Sir.” Dimas shrugged. “What I’ve got here is part of a conversation between *Leonhard Euler*’s com officer and one of her cousins, Captain Sedgewick.”

Knight’s eyes narrowed. Captain Reuben Sedgewick had been Filareta’s staff com officer.

“It’s from the com officer’s private files, not part of the official logs,” Dimas continued. “Maybe that’s because there wasn’t time to worry about anything like that before everything hit the fan. Or it might be because they were violating regs tying up bandwidth on personal matters at a moment like that.”

“I could see that.” Knight nodded, trying to imagine what would have happened to a Manticoran communications officer who’d been gabbing away with her cousin at “a moment like that.”

“It’s not quite as bad as you may be thinking, Sir,” Dimas said. “They weren’t on any of the active command net channels; they were talking on one of the redundancy sidebands.”

“Marginally better, I suppose,” Knight allowed grudgingly. “But if this wasn’t part of the official fleet traffic, why do you think anyone’s going to want to see it?”

“Well, I sort of doubt that Captain Clarence — she was *Leonhard Euler*’s com officer — has any idea there was anything significant in what she had here, Sir. For that matter, I’m not even certain she realized she’d recorded it in the first place. If she did, though, I can see why she’s kept her mouth shut since we started beating the bushes trying to figure out why Filareta opened fire.”

“What are you talking about?” Knight demanded a bit more impatiently, and Dimas gave him a crooked smile.

“Let me show you, Sir,” he said, and hit the playback button.

**HMS *Imperator***

**Manticore A**

**Star Empire of Manticore**

“— and after that, Your Grace, you’re scheduled for the state dinner at Mount Royal,” Lieutenant Luca Tomei said. “Under the circumstances, I think it might be better if you attended as Steadholder Harrington rather than Duchess Harrington.”

Honor Alexander-Harrington tried very hard — and almost successfully — not to roll her eyes. It wasn’t Tomei’s fault, but she’d managed her entire career without a dedicated public information officer. Partly, she acknowledged, that was because she’d avoided the limelight as much as possible. More of it was that she’d held primarily combat commands, where providing public information had not been high on her list of priorities. And still more of it was the fact that, unlike some officers she could have named, she vastly preferred to get on with whatever the current job in hand might be and let other people worry about who got public credit for it.

*And not just because I’m such a naturally modest and self-effacing type, either,* she thought, remembering the bitter political infighting after the Battle of Hancock and following Paul Tankersley’s death and her own duel with Pavel Young. Then there’d been all the vicious innuendo about her and Hamish during the High Ridge premiership. And that didn’t even count the Meuller dome collapse back on Grayson!

If there was anyone in the entire Star Empire of Manticore who wanted the spotlight less than she did, she’d never met her.

Unfortunately, she’d had to accept years ago that she couldn’t avoid it, and she had to admit Tomei made it a less excruciating experience. A year and a half younger than Waldemar Tümmel, he was far more comfortable than the flag lieutenant when it came to social events, like tonight’s state dinner to bid Benjamin Mayhew an official farewell. He was less adroit than Tümmel on the purely military side, but between the two of them — with prodigious assistance from James MacGuiness — they got her most everywhere she needed to be *almost* on schedule.

*And in between dinners, meetings, interviews, baby-kissings, ribbon cuttings, and photo sessions, I actually get to spend a little time thinking about how to fight the Solarian League!* she thought wryly.

“I think you’re probably right about that, Luca,” she said now. “Of course,” she gave him an amused look, “there’s still the question of whether I go in uniform or civilian dress, isn’t there?”

“I suppose there is, Your Grace, but —”

A soft chime interrupted him, and Honor touched the stud on her desk.

“Yes?” she said.

“I hate to interrupt you when I know you’re so deeply involved in something you enjoy so much, My Lady,” Major Spencer Hawke, Honor’s senior armsman, said over the intercom, “but Captain Reynolds would appreciate a moment of your time.”

“Gosh,” she said, giving Tomei a wicked look, “I really hate to break this off, but if Captain Reynolds needs to talk to me, by all means send him in!”

“You do realize I’ll be back as soon as the Captain leaves, Your Grace?”

“But if I’m quick enough, I can sneak out the back way before you get here!” she said, and Nimitz bleeked a laugh from his bulkhead perch.

“There *isn’t* a back way, Your Grace.” Tomei’s lips twitched, but his tone was admirably grave.

“You just *think* there isn’t,” she told him, then looked up as the cabin door opened and George Reynolds, her staff intelligence officer, stepped through it.

“George! *Just* the man I wanted to see!” she said enthusiastically.

Reynolds smiled, but it was a brief and fleeting expression, and her own eyes narrowed.

“What is it?” she asked in a rather different tone.

“Your Grace, I’ve got something you need to hear.”

**Office of the Second Space Lord**

**Admiralty House**

**City of Landing**

**Manticore**

**Star Empire of Manticore**

“Sorry it took me so long, Pat,” Hamish Alexander-Harrington, Earl White Haven and First Lord of Admiralty, said, as he followed Commander Terry Lassaline Admiral Patricia Givens's new chief of staff, through Givens’s office door. Tobias Stimson, his personal armsman peeled off outside the door. “We were in transit when your message came in. So what’s this all about? I assume there’s a reason I’m here instead of talking to the Select Committee, where I’m *supposed* to be?”

“Actually, Hamish,” a familiar soprano said from the office’s smart wall, “I’m the one who’s messed up your schedule. Sorry about that. I’m sure you’re looking forward to talking to the Committee *almost* as enthusiastically as I’m looking forward to that state dinner tonight.”

“Honor!” White Haven’s incipient frown disappeared as he turned to face the smart wall. “If you needed to talk to me, there are simpler ways to do it.”

“I’m aware.” His wife shook her head with a certain resignation as Lassaline touched White Haven’s elbow and pointed at one of the armchairs facing the smart wall. “Unfortunately, this call isn’t a social occasion. There’s something you need to see.”

“Me as in First Space Lord, I presume?” he asked, settling into the indicated chair with a nod of thanks to the commander. Lassaline smiled, then raised an eyebrow at Givens.

“We’re good, Terry,” the second space lord said. “But grab a seat. You should hear this, too.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Lassaline took a seat of her own, and White Haven turned his attention back to the smart wall.

Honor stood at one end of her desk aboard *Imperator*, and he recognized Mercedes Brigham, her chief of staff; Andrea Jaruwalski, her ops officer; and George Reynolds, her intelligence officer, behind her. Captain Rafe Cardones, *Imperator*’s CO stood with them, and White Haven’s eyebrows twitched slightly. That quartet represented the most trusted core of Honor’s staff, and their expressions were a strange mix of eagerness and . . . trepidation? No, that wasn’t quite the right word, but it was headed in the right direction.

“Absolutely. One of our forensic teams pulled something very interesting out of a Solly superdreadnought’s com records. It may shed a little light on Filareta’s actions. Of course,” she grimaced, “I think it probably poses as many new questions as it answers.”

“Wonderful.” He shook his head, then glanced at Givens. “Seems to work that way more often than not in intelligence matters, doesn’t it?”

Givens, who commanded the Office of Naval Intelligence in addition to her other duties, snorted, and he looked back at Honor.

“Show me,” he said simply, and Honor looked at Reynolds.

“George?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The newly promoted captain faced White Haven from the smart wall. “My Lord, what you’re about to see was pulled out of a personal com exchange between Admiral Filareta’s communications officer and the com officer aboard *Leonhard Euler*. We’ve abstracted the relevant material, stripped away the rest of the message, and enhanced what we kept. I’d like to recommend Midshipman — I’m sorry, it’s *Ensign* now; Her Grace’s authority — Elijah Dimas for some well-deserved recognition for spotting it, too. I’m not sure it would have popped the filters before we scrubbed and enhanced it.”

White Haven nodded his understanding.

“We don’t have any visual of the critical speakers,” Reynolds continued. “They were outside the pickup’s field of view, but the voice recognition software is ninety-nine-point-nine percent confident in its IDs.”

“That could be a problem down the road, Hamish,” Givens put in, then shrugged when he looked at her. “If we go public with this, there are going to be plenty of Sollies ready to point out how ‘convenient’ for us it is that all we have are disembodied voices.”

“Maybe yes, and maybe no, Pat.” Honor’s voice drew Givens and White Haven’s eyes back to her. “We’ve got all the rest of the message with this embedded in it. Anybody who wants to can do her own forensics on it. Not,” she grimaced, “that anyone in Old Chicago’s likely to be interested in determining whether or not it’s genuine.”

“You’re probably right,” White Haven said. “So why don’t you go ahead and show it to me?”

“George?” Honor said again, and Reynolds nodded. Then he pressed a button, and another voice spoke against a background the admiral in Hamish Alexander-Harrington recognized only too well: the clipped, disciplined voices of a flag bridge at battle stations.

“Very well,” it said. It sounded flat, wooden, and a caption on the smart wall identified it as Fleet Admiral Massimo Filareta. “Strike our wedges and send the pod self-destruct command, Bill.”

White Haven’s eyebrows shot up and he turned to dart an astonished glance at Givens. The admiral only shook her head and held up an index finger.

“Yes, Sir,” another voice said, and the caption identified this one as that of Admiral William Daniels, Eleventh Fleet’s operations officer.

“I suppose you should go ahead and get Harrington back, Reuben,” Filareta’s voice continued. “She’ll want —”

There was another sound, one White Haven couldn’t quite make out. It sounded almost like a muffled cry of protest. Then —

“What the *fuck* d’you think you’re do —?!” Filareta’s voice shouted.

It cut off in mid-syllable, and White Haven’s gaze moved from Givens back to Honor.

“That’s all we’ve got,” she said softly, “but the time chop’s a perfect match. Filareta’s last words synchronize exactly with Eleventh Fleet’s pod launch. We’ve always known the launch order came from Filareta’s flag bridge —the launch codes and sequence confirmed that — but nobody on his staff said a word to anyone outside *Oppenheimer* afterward. *Oppenheimer* was destroyed in our first-wave launch, of course, but time of flight was a hundred and sixty seconds, so there was ample time for them to have talked to *somebody* outside the flagship. And I’m particularly struck by how it breaks off so suddenly. *Leonhard Euler*’s com officer is the only person we know of who was in contact with Filareta’s flag bridge at that moment, and she tried for almost three minutes to reestablish contact while her captain tried to find out what the heck was going on when those missiles launched. She couldn’t, and that matches with everything we’ve heard from all of Eleventh Fleet’s survivors. *No one* could raise Filareta’s flag bridge. I’m inclined to wonder if that’s because something happened to it right after they launched.”

“But, if that’s really Filareta, it sounds like he *did* decide to surrender!” White Haven said.

“I think that’s exactly what he did,” Honor said, and her voice was grim, her dark brown eyes cold. “I think he understood precisely what we wanted him to understand: that his only option was to surrender. And I think the bastards on the other side of this took precautions to prevent him from doing anything of the sort.”

“You’re saying this was another example of that killer nanotech of theirs?” It was technically a question, but it didn’t sound like one.

“I’m saying that’s exactly what it was, and that the people who planted it on him used me and my people to kill another quarter million Solarian spacers,” his wife said harshly. “Nobody on Old Terra who wasn’t already prepared to believe us will believe a word of it, but *we* know now, and these people — whoever they are — are running up quite a bill with me.”

She smiled a hexapuma smile.

“I’m looking forward to presenting it.”

***Forge One***

**Refuge System**

“I’m impressed, Admiral,” Sonja Hemphill said as she and Admiral Shannon Foraker stepped out of the lift car and walked down a short passageway. Foraker’s yeoman popped to attention as they entered the admiral’s outer office. She waved a casual hand at him, but he held the position and cut his eyes briefly sideways to his superior’s guest.

The pause in Foraker’s stride was barely perceptible, but then she cleared her throat.

“At ease, Jean-Louis,” she said.

He dropped into something rather more like parade rest, and Hemphill stifled an inappropriate urge to giggle.

Her own career was checkered with . . . occasional lapses in military punctilio. In her own case, she acknowledged, they usually had something to do with losing her temper with someone who seemed to have become part of the problem instead of the solution. She’d been forced to admit — indeed, she’d recognized at the time — that tantrums were often counterproductive, and she’d worked on her temper for decades. Really she had! And it helped that so many — not all, but many — of the causes she’d championed since King Roger had instituted Project Gram had paid off handsomely in the war against the People’s Republic. Partly, that was because people tended to argue with her less, which she’d discovered wasn’t always a good thing. More of it, though, she’d come to realize, was because she no longer had to prove herself *to* herself. The truth, she’d discovered, was that quite a lot of her more youthful anger had been directed at the fact that she hadn’t been certain she was on the right track, herself. She’d known *exactly* how badly the Star Kingdom needed some sort of technological equalizer against the stupendous People’s Republic. It had been her job to find one, and her anger had been directed as much at her own never-admitted uncertainty as it had been at the obstinacy of those arguing with her.

The treecat on her shoulder made a soft sound and patted her right cheek with a gentle true-hand, and her eyes softened.

Hunts Silently had assigned himself as her bodyguard when Sphinx’s treecat population decided it was time to provide the “two-legs” fighting to protect Sphinx and all the rest of the Star Empire’s planets against the enemies behind the Yawata Strike. That attack had massacred an entire treecat clan, and as the ’cats themselves had put it, they knew how to deal with “evildoers.” The telempathic treecats also knew about the way in which humans had been turned into programmed assassins, and their ability to sense the unwilling killers’ horror and panic when the programming took control made them the only defense against them anyone had yet discovered.

Quite a lot of the Grand Alliance’s leadership, Sonja Hemphill among them, had acquired furry, adorable, highly intelligent, and very, very deadly protectors as a consequence of the ’cats decision. What she hadn’t fully appreciated was the speed with which Hunts Silently would become perhaps the closest friend she’d ever had. And she was pretty sure he’d had more than a little to do with her ability to understand the roots of the anger which had been so much a part of her for so long, too.

Shannon Foraker’s lapses in military formality, on the other hand, stemmed from very different causes. In certain key aspects of her life, Admiral Foraker was the most focused, intense individual Hemphill had ever met, herself included. Outside those key aspects, however, she often seemed to inhabit a different universe. Despite that — or because *of* it, perhaps — her staff and subordinates were utterly devoted to her. It was rather touching to see the determination of people like Senior Chief Jean-Louis Jackson to protect her against the sort of lapses in formality which might embarrass her in front of her no doubt supercilious, judgmental Manticoran guests.

Hemphill’s thoughts carried her through the hatch into Foraker’s inner office aboard *Forge One*, the oldest — and largest — of the four major spacestations orbiting the planet of Sanctuary. They’d just completed a guided tour of the enormous platform, and she’d been deeply impressed by what the Republic of Haven and the Sanctuarians had accomplished. Individually, *Forge One* and its three consorts were little more than a quarter as large as Manticore’s *Hephaestus* or *Vulcan* had once been, but the four of them together exceeded even *Hephaestus’s* solo output. In many ways, that was what Hemphill found most impressive about Project Bolthole, because Haven had managed to build that capacity — from scratch — with a substantially less capable tech base . . . and in only four decades.

Of course, the woman whose office they’d just entered had spent the last several T-years working to make that tech base one hell of a lot more capable than she’d found it.

Foraker waved at the comfortable conversational area in one corner of the spacious compartment. The chairs, coffee table, and couch were arranged in a semicircle, facing a waterfall that poured down across a cascade of natural stone into an oval 3.5-meter pool. A flash of color caught Hemphill’s eye as a spectacularly striped and banded fish with long, feather-like fins — she wondered if the species was native to Haven or to Sanctuary — leapt briefly above the pool’s rippling surface.

“Sit down, please . . . Baroness,” Foraker almost managed to conceal her grimace at having almost forgotten to add Hemphill’s aristocratic title, and the Manticoran chuckled. Foraker looked at her as they sat, and she shook her head.

“Don’t worry about any ‘Baronesses’ or ‘Miladies,’ Admiral Foraker,” she said as Hunts Silently flowed down to curl in her lap. “They’re not necessary, and I don’t usually use my title back home, anyway.”

“You don’t?” Foraker sounded a bit relieved, and Hemphill chuckled again.

“I suppose I really should, but I’ve been plain old ‘Sonja Hemphill’ for a lot of years. I don’t have time for much of a social life and I’m not that interested in politics, so I’ve never taken my seat in the Lords. I let one of my cousins sit there with my proxy.” She shrugged. “Besides, Low Delhi’s basically just a one percent arc of the Gorgon Belt in Manticore-B. That comes to about three-point-one quadrillion cubic kilometers, but those kilometers contain an awful lot of empty space. Mind you, some of the rocks floating around in it are pretty valuable, but I think its total population was nine hundred and twenty — or maybe it was twenty-*one* — the last time I looked. And most of my ‘subjects’ are asteroid miners who could give treecats stubborn lessons.” She gave another shrug, then smiled. “Besides, I think the two of us will be working closely enough it should probably be ‘Sonja’ and ‘Shannon,’ at least in private.”

“Oh, good!” Foraker sighed, then looked contrite. “Sorry! That didn’t come out just the way I wanted. I suppose they warned you I’m not real good about the social stuff?”

“I think you can assume the odd word or two of . . . caution was dropped into my ear,” Hemphill said wryly. “Should I assume the same sort of words were dropped into your ear about *me*?”

“Actually, the word Admiral Lewis used in your case was ‘touchy,’ I think.” Foraker’s tone was even drier than Hemphill’s had been, and Hunts Silently laughed as the two of them sat back and smiled broadly at one another.

“To quote a line from one of Duchess Harrington’s favorite ancient entertainment holovids, Shannon, ‘I think this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,’” the Manticoran said.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“— so from our analysts’ perspective, it looks to me like we’re in pretty good shape right now,” Sonja Hemphill said much later that night, sitting across the supper table from Foraker with an after-dinner glass of brandy in hand. “I doubt the Sollies fully appreciate the powered ranges our MDMs can reach — we’ve tried hard enough to keep them from figuring it out, at any rate — and I’m almost positive they can’t really appreciate the accuracy Apollo makes possible at those ranges. That doesn’t mean they don’t feel a desperate need to increase their own ranges, but until they can figure out how to build multiple impeller rings into the same missile body, they won’t be able to match our performance. And as far as we can tell — and we’ve had a *really* good look inside their current tech, thanks to Filareta — they’re only a little ahead of where we were twenty years ago, at First Yeltsin, on the grav-pulse coms.”

Foraker sipped from the cup of coffee in her own hand and nodded slowly. The two of them had spent the last several hours bringing one another up to speed — in general terms, at least — on Bolthole’s actual capacity and their separate R&D programs’ current projects.

“That’s probably true,” she said now. “And given how long it took us to reverse-engineer the splitter technology even after we ‘acquired’ a few specimens to work from, I doubt they’ll figure it out next week. But I think everyone needs to remember the Solarian League has plenty of really capable scientists and engineers. And the fact that they already know *we* can do it will give their researchers an enormous leg up.”

“Agreed. Agreed!” Hemphill nodded back, much more vigorously. “Our current estimate is that it ought to take them at least a couple of years — more probably three or four, bearing in mind that we’re pretty sure *they* haven’t ‘acquired’ any samples — but we’re well aware that it’s only a guesstimate. And that it might be overly optimistic. I think it’s going to take them a lot longer to match Apollo, though.”

“Probably,” Foraker said again. “But I hope you won’t take this wrong way, but it’s always seemed to me that you Manticorans have a tendency to build in what one of my staffers calls ‘all the bells and whistles.’” She smiled wryly. “Mind you, if I had as many whistles and bells as you people do, I’d damned well build them in myself! But that hasn’t been the case for us, which is why Five gave me that a couple of years ago.”

She waved her cup at an old-fashioned frame on the bulkhead. It contained a quotation from “Anonymous,” and Hemphill had smiled as she read it earlier.

“Perfect is the mortal enemy of good enough,” it said.

“That’s what we had to bear in mind for *years* after the head start you people got on us,” Foraker said very seriously. “If we’d waited until we’d figured out how to duplicate *everything* you were doing to us, we’d never have gotten anything done. Not in time to do us any good, anyway.”

“We haven’t exactly waited until we were convinced everything was ‘perfect’ before we committed it to action ourselves,” Hemphill pointed out.

“No, I’m sure you haven’t. But my point is really looking from the perspective of the . . . technological underdog, let’s say. We couldn’t do the things you were doing the *way* you did them, so we had to figure out how to do what was ‘good enough’ to let us at least stay in shouting range. And I’d like to think that, every so often, we handed you a surprise or two of our own.”

“Oh, you certainly did *that!*” Hemphill shook her head. “There were quite a few surprises along the way, like Moriarty and those ‘donkey’ missile pods of yours!”

“Exactly.” Foraker set her cup down, folded her hands on the edge of the table, and leaned forward over them, her expression intent. “Exactly,” she repeated. “You had the technological edge, both in weapons already in the pipeline and in terms of your basic infrastructure. *We* had the edge in sheer numbers and *size* of infrastructure, but we were well behind you in terms of deployed technology and even further in terms of the educational system which might have let us recoup our disadvantage.

“But the Solarian League is *huge*, even bigger in relative terms compared to the entire Grand Alliance than the People’s Republic was compared to the original Star Kingdom. It’s got the biggest, most broadly dispersed manufacturing infrastructure in the entire galaxy. Despite the situation on many of the Fringe and Verge planets — and a couple of the Core Worlds; let’s be honest here — it has a first-rate educational system. And outside its warfighting hardware, its applied tech is about as good as it gets. I think you people clearly have the edge in several critical areas, but outside FTL bandwidth, that edge is pretty damned thin, and I’m willing to bet there are areas in which *they* have the edge, if they just sit down, take a deep breath, and think about it. And when they do that, if they decide to settle for ‘good enough’ instead of holding out for ‘perfect’ . . . .”

“If they do, God only knows what *they’ll* come up with as an equalizer,” Hemphill finished for her when she allowed her voice to trail away. The Manticoran admiral’s expression was grim as she recalled the Janacek Admiralty’s hubris . . . and what that had cost the Royal Manticoran Navy in dead ships and personnel.

“That’s *exactly* what I’m worried about,” Shannon Foraker said quietly. “Given their performance to date, it’s tempting to think every Solly’s an idiot. But they aren’t, and if some of those not-idiots convince the Mandarins to *listen* to them, our current technological edge could disappear a lot sooner than anyone wants to think it could."

**The Golden Olive Restaurant**

**City of Old Chicago**

**Sol System**

**Solarian League**

“So what do *you* think of Rajmund’s latest revelation?” Lupe Blanton asked as she and Weng Zhing-hwan finished punching their orders into the privacy-screened booth’s terminal. “From where I sit, if there’s really anything to it, we may need to rethink our position on who the Other Guys really are. Or if they exist at all, for that matter!”

“First, let’s remember we’re talking about *Rajmund*,” Weng observed, pouring tea into her cup from the self-warming pot which had been waiting in their booth when they arrived. “That automatically means there’s an agenda behind it. You know that even better than I do, since you, unfortunately, have to work with him — or around him — on an ongoing basis. Second, we know damned well that all of his patrons — or the ones we’ve been able to identify, at least — have strong vested interests in ‘proving’ the Manties are behind *anything* that goes south in the Fringe. And, third, I don’t believe for one second that Oravil Barregos would be careless or stupid enough to be caught talking to the Manties — or anyone else — if he seriously contemplates anything of which your esteemed superiors might disapprove.”

“A masterly summation.” Blanton smiled thinly. She sat back on her side of the table, playing with a fork, and, despite the smile, her eyes were dark. “What really worries me is that Adão doesn’t have any option but to take his reports seriously. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t trust the . . . disinterested impartiality of what Rajmund’s reporting any farther than I do, but there’s so *much* of it.”

“And he’s upping the ante if he’s handing over genuine photos of Manticoran naval officers,” Weng agreed. “Especially if they turn out to be *genuine* Manticoran officers. And I’m assuming from Ukhtomskoy’s reaction that they did?”

“Of course they did,” Blanton said. “Frankly, though, that worries me less than some other aspects of it. Imagery — especially *bad* imagery that has to be digitally enhanced as much as this did — is easy enough to fake. And there’s no telling who may have slipped file imagery of completely nonexistent Manticorans into Frontier Security’s databases for it to be compared to. I doubt Rajmund did it, because there’d be too much risk of that blowing up in his face if anyone starts fact-checking his reports. He’s been around the block way too many times to leave a trail of breadcrumbs that might lead back to him. But do either of us really think he’s the only mole someone like the Other Guys have in place? Assuming they exist, that is,” she added piously.

“Of course not. Doesn’t make me any happier contemplating what we’re up against, though. Assuming they exist.”

Weng’s smile was even thinner than Blanton’s had been.

“Actually, I’m more intrigued by your third point,” Blanton said after a moment. “The bit about Barregos not being careless or stupid if he does ‘seriously contemplate’ anything that might piss off MacArtney. Or Kolokoltsov and the rest of the Mandarins, for that matter. Do you think he really *could* be contemplating something?”

Weng gazed down into her teacup for several seconds, lips pursed while she considered her response. Then she looked back up to meet Blanton’s gaze.

“Last year,” she began, “Noritoshi had me send one of my most trusted people — Jerzy Scarlatti; he’s a major, I don’t think you know him — out to Maya.”

She arched an eyebrow at Blanton, who nodded. Brigadier Noritoshi Väinöla, CO of the Solarian Gendarmerie Intelligence Command, was Weng’s immediate superior, Adão Ukhtomskoy’s Gendarmerie counterpart.

“Officially, Jerzy was there to conduct an inspection of the local Gendarmerie Intelligence operations because he’d heard reports that the . . . complex relationship between Erewhon, Haven, and Manticore was spilling over onto Maya. Actually, we’d had reports that Barregos and/or Roszak were skimming — skimming more than usual, I mean — off all the contracts they’d been placing with Erewhon. And the reason I chose him was that he and Philip Allfrey, Barregos senior Gendarme, go back a long way. I figured Allfrey would be more likely to cooperate with a friend. And if he *didn’t* —if there *was* something going on and Allfrey was part of it —Jerzy knew him well enough he’d probably pick up on it.”

Blanton nodded again. It was a given that *any* sector governor, and the vast majority of Frontier Fleet sector commanders, would find . . . extracurricular ways to line their pockets. In fact, that had been going on for so long the systematic graft was factored into their salaries. There were, however, limits to how blatant their superiors could permit them to be.

“Anyway, Allfrey assured Jerzy there was no significant peculation going on. In fact, there was less than usual, and he showed Jerzy his own internal documentation to prove it. I’m pretty sure from what Jerzy said in his off-the-record report to me that he thinks Allfrey has a very comfortable relationship with Barregos, but his documentation checked out after the best analysis we could give it.

“On the other hand, he was there during the Congo Incident.”

“He was?” Blanton’s fingers stopped turning her fork over and over and her eyes narrowed.

The Congo Incident was the label the newsies had pinned on Admiral Luis Rozsak defense of the planet of Verdant Vista.

The League was officially ambivalent about Verdant Vista, known to its current occupants as Torch. The Congo System had never been claimed by the League, nor had it been an OFS protectorate system, so its original Mesan claimants had possessed no official League recourse to reclaim it when its population, backed by an astonishing united Manticoran-Havenite front, rebelled against their ownership in August 1919. Even if they’d tried to call on their many friendly Solarian bribe-takers, the fact that ninety-plus percent of the Verdant Vistans had been genetic slaves would have . . . complicated Solarian public opinion. Genetic slavery was something of which all “right-thinking” Solarians disapproved, even if only a tiny percentage were willing to get off their comfortable posteriors and do anything about it, so even Solarian bureaucrats had to be careful about anything that smacked of collusion with Manpower, Inc. On the other side of the ledger, the strong ties between the rebels, the new Torch government, and the Audubon Ballroom had allowed its detractors to suggest it would inevitably become a haven for terrorists. But that had been offset in turn by the Antislavery League’s vociferous agitation in favor of officially recognizing Torch as a haven and homeworld for any liberated genetic slave.

Overall, it had seemed a situation tailor-made for the Solarian League to stay well clear of. Which had made Oravil Barregos’s decision, as the Maya Sector’s governor, to enter into a defensive agreement with Torch the cherry on top for some of Frontier Security’s policymakers here in Old Chicago.

But Barregos had strenuously, plausibly — and successfully — argued in favor of the agreement as a way to minimize Manticoran and Havenite influence in the system. Nothing could completely freeze them out, he’d acknowledged, especially since the Queen of Torch was the adopted daughter of the infamous Anton Zilwicki and even more infamous Catherine Montaigne. But given the fundamental tension between Manticore and Haven, the united front they’d presented at the time of the rebellion couldn’t last, and drawing the newly independent star system into the relationship he was currently cultivating with Erewhon would position the Maya Sector to step into the gap when it inevitably occurred. His prediction about the Manty-Havenite relationship’s stability had been proven correct barely two T-months later, when Haven resumed hostilities against Manticore, and judging by the Torches’ scrupulous official disavowal of the Ballroom’s terrorist tactics, his accompanying argument that he’d be better able to moderate Torch’s behavior through a policy of constructive engagement had seemed to make a lot of sense.

But then, the preceding October, after less than two T-years, Frontier Fleet had been forced to make good on that defensive agreement. Luis Roszak and his men and women had paid a heavy price to protect Torch against what certainly looked like an intended Eridani Edict violation financed by “parties unknown.” The actual culprits had been renegade members of the People’s Republic of Haven’s State Security, although no one had been prepared to explain exactly what their motives might have been and it was obvious that only a very well heeled patron could have provided the logistical support the attack had required. Their survivors had been handed over to Eloise Pritchart’s Republic for trial, so the League’s courts had taken no official cognizance of exactly who might have backed their effort, but there wasn’t much question in anyone’s mind, and public opinion had shed very few tears over anything that happened to Mesan proxies.

“I wondered about the official accounts,” Blanton said now, her voice ending on a questioning note, and Weng snorted.

“You’re not alone in that,” she said, “and I’ve actually discussed that a little bit with Daud in light of Jerzy’s reports. He — Daud, I mean, not Jerzy — was pretty bitter about the fact that no one higher up the chain of command had paid any attention to the reports he and Irene put together after it on the basis of Roszak’s after-action report.

“He says Roszak’s been telling people for *years* that the Manties and Havenites were outstripping the Navy in terms of both weapons and technique, and nobody’s paid any damned attention. In fact, it turns out that for at least three T-years, Roszak’s reports were being suppressed before they ever got to *Daud*, much less went farther up the tree, and it looks like, in the absence of any direction from Old Chicago, the people on the ground have been trying to do something about it.

“Officially, Barregos has been buying locally produced warships from Erewhon as a way to inveigle the Erewhonese back into our sphere of influence, and that seems to have been working. But it’s painfully evident that another reason Barregos’s done it is to get some kind of window into the new technologies. Erewhon’s only a minor power compared to Manticore or Haven, and its navy is outside the loop on these latest, god-awful weapons the Manties are deploying against us. But it’s pretty clear the investment in new hardware is the only reason Roszak was able to defend Torch, although his losses were still pretty damned brutal. More brutal, I think, then was ever officially announced, although Jerzy didn’t have any confirmation of that at the time and Daud hasn’t found any since. But what pisses Daud off is that he worked up an analysis that strongly recommended Vice Admiral Hoover and the Office of Technical Analysis go through Roszak’s reports with a fine-toothed comb. If they had, even they would probably have figured out the Haven Sector was producing exactly the sort of innovations Hoover’s analysts had systematically dismissed for *decades*. Nothing in them hinted at the missiles they used against Crandall and Filareta, but at least we might not have gone into this with such *total* complacency.”

Blanton made a harsh sound of agreement, and Weng shrugged.

“At any rate,” she went on, “Jerzy’s report officially cleared Barregos of any financial wrongdoing. After reading it and discussing it with him, I think it raised some fresh questions about just how tight he’s gotten with Erewhon, but not *financially*.”

“Are you suggesting you're worried Maya might be . . . fertile ground for someone to plant seeds of disunity, whether it’s the Manties or the Other Guys?” Blanton asked in a careful tone, and Weng shrugged again.

“I wouldn’t say I’ve been worrying about *that*,” she said. “Obviously, with the entire galaxy hell-bent on coming unglued, I’m not prepared to categorically rule it out, but Jerzy didn’t come home with anything that set off any alarms in that respect. My impression of Barregos — and I hasten to add that this is only *my* impression; he’s one of your people, not ours, and I don’t think anyone else in the Gendarmerie’s really thought about it that much — is that he’s the sort of fellow who considers all possibilities. He’s living in a dangerous neck of the woods, on the periphery of the longest lasting, most destructive war in galactic history — so far, at least — and I think he’s a historian. I think he saw the possibility of something like our confrontation with Manticore coming a long time ago, and I think his relationship with Erewhon’s designed to provide as close to a pocket of stability as he can create if all the rest of the galaxy goes to hell in a hand basket. How far he’s prepared to go to make that happen is an entirely different question, and I don’t have anything like enough information to offer an informed opinion on that.”

“But it’s the sort of situation, assuming you’re right, that could make someone else regard him as either potentially susceptible to seduction or as someone who could be credibly *passed off* as being susceptible to seduction.”

“Exactly. But if I *am* right, then he’s been doing this tap dance of his for a long time without anyone figuring it out. I admit Maya’s a long way from Sol, but that’s still an impressive accomplishment. From everything Jerzy had to say, he has a genuine knack for attracting personal loyalty, too. So does Admiral Roszak, apparently, and that can be a dangerous capability. Leaving that aside, though, someone able to keep so many balls in the air without anyone back home noticing would never be clumsy enough to let *anyone*, far less one of Rajmund’s people’s paid stringers, discover that he was meeting secretly with Manty representatives.”

“You’re right about that,” Blanton said thoughtfully, beginning to play with her fork again. “Especially since he’d take particular precautions against anyone in *Frontier Security* finding out about it. I imagine he’d be a lot more worried about in-house leaks than about your people.”

“You probably have a point.”

Weng sipped tea. They sat in silence for twenty or thirty seconds, then she set the cup down and sat back.

“I think we’d better find out about this,” she said. “And I can only think of one way to do that.”

“Assuming there’s time,” Blanton pointed out, and Weng nodded. The travel time to Maya was fifty-one days, one way.

“I know,” she said. “But I don’t see another option.”

“Neither do I. Can’t be one of my people, though. Even at the best of times, I’d be poaching in Rajmund’s preserve. And these are hardly ‘the best of times.’ If we’re right about him, the last thing we need is to warn him anyone — especially *me* — might be looking in his direction. Send your Scarlatti back again?”

“I don’t know,” Weng replied, answering Blanton’s professionally thoughtful tone. “On the one hand, I trust him and he was the one who first suggested Barregos’s relationship with Erewhon was closer than most people here in Old Chicago thought it was. He wouldn’t have done that if he’d been in Barregos’s pocket. On the other, he *is* Allfrey’s friend, and if Barregos *is* up to something, Jerzy didn’t get a clear sniff of it — or report it, anyway — the last time he was there. And,” she added, “coming up with a plausible reason to send him back again so soon without making someone as smooth as Barregos suspicious could be a nontrivial exercise.”

Blanton’s expression showed her agreement with Weng’s thought train.

“I’ve got at least a half-dozen other people I could send if I don’t send Jerzy back,” the colonel said with a shrug. “And if I need to, I’ll go to Noritoshi and get him to let me pick one of Simeon’s people from CID. Either way, I can get someone off to Smoking Frog within a couple of days, outside.”

“The sooner the better,” Blanton said. “Even if she leaves tomorrow, it’s going to be mid-September by the time she gets there.”

“And the soonest she could get back would be the end of November,” Weng agreed. “And that’s assuming someone’s stupid enough to leave that ‘smoking gun’ lying around for her to stumble over the instant she steps off the landing shuttle! Not going to happen.”

“So we’re probably really looking at not hearing back before the new year.” Blanton’s expression was sour, and Weng snorted.

“Any dinosaur’s nervous system has a certain amount of built-in delay,” she pointed out, and Blanton grimaced.

“Under the circumstances, I wish you’d picked a different metaphor,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because the dinosaurs are extinct,” Blanton replied grimly.

***AUGUST 1922 POST DIASPORA***

**SLNS *Québec***

**Cachalot System**

“You can’t be serious!”

The woman on Vincent Capriotti’s com display was platinum-haired and dark-skinned. It was a striking combination, and she was so photogenic he suspected she’d been the recipient of quite a lot of biosculpt. Politicians, as a rule, found physical attractiveness a valuable asset — far more valuable, in fact, in Capriotti’s opinion, than simple competence. On the other hand, Cachalot System President Miriam Jahnke had amply demonstrated her own competence over a forty-T-year political career.

And, at the moment, the fury blazing in her brown eyes honed her attractiveness in much the same way lightning honed a thunderstorm’s.

Or a hurricane’s, perhaps.

“I’m afraid I’m quite serious, Madame President,” he said in reply, then sat back to wait out the six-minute communications lag.

At the moment, TF 783 was almost 56,000,000 kilometers from the planet Orca, just over ten light-minutes inside the Cachalot System hyper-limit, closing with the planet at 18,119 KPS and decelerating at a steady 300 G. Given that geometry, they would reach Orca orbit in another hour and forty minutes, and their recon platforms had been swarming around the inner system for the last couple of hours. ONI had grudgingly admitted that stealth systems were another area in which the Manties had somehow acquired a commanding lead, but *nobody’s* stealth was good enough to hide warships — even completely shut down warships — from the horde of drones he’d sent speeding ahead of his ships.

*Which means there’s absolutely no reason I can’t carry out Buccaneer . . . damn it*, he thought grimly. *The odds are we’ll be the first task force to execute it, too, which means* I’m *the one going down in the frigging history books. I don’t think I’m going to like that*.

At least it also meant there’d be no need — or any possible excuse — for Parthian. There’d be ample time for an orderly evacuation, and thank God for it!

He’d waited until he was positive that would be the case — and until the com lag was at least semi-manageable — before contacting Jahnke’s office and telling her why he was here. Her response had been pretty much what he’d anticipated.

“You have no conceivable justification for this!” she snapped now from his display. “It’s a blatantly illegal action against an independent and neutral star system! It violates at least a half dozen interstellar treaties — treaties the Solarian League both negotiated and *guaranteed* — and every conceivable canon of interstellar law!”

All of which was absolutely true . . . and had nothing at all to do with his orders, Capriotti thought.

“I’m very sorry you feel that way, Madame President,” he said. “And, speaking as an individual and not as an officer of the Solarian League Navy, I understand why you do. I deeply regret the orders I’ve been given, but I have no option but to carry them out, and I intend to do so. At the same time, my orders emphasize the vital importance of minimizing any possible avoidable loss of life.” Which was also true, as long as Parthian wasn’t on the table. “That’s why I’m speaking to you now to inform you that you have seventy-two hours to complete your evacuation of the infrastructure in question.”

He waited for his words to reach her, and saw her expression when they did. If she could have reached him in that moment, she would have ripped out his throat with her bare hands, he thought.

“This system has maintained cordial and cooperative relations with the Solarian League since the year the League was created,” she told him flatly. “We have never, in all those centuries, been anything but your star nation’s friendly neighbor. And we certainly aren’t participants in any aggression against the League! We’re not Solarians, we aren’t Manticorans, and we’ve been scrupulously neutral. We don’t even have a navy, only a system *police force*! What you propose is not only blatantly illegal but an atrocity carried out against the life’s blood of my star system!”

She had an excellent point, he reflected. Not that he intended to admit that Cachalot’s *lack* of a navy was one of the main reasons he’d been sent here.

“Madame President, I’m prepared to grant that you haven’t been military participants in the so-called Grand Alliance’s aggression against the Solarian League,” he said.

He knew he was speaking for the record, that this entire com exchange was probably going to wind up on the public boards throughout the League, and he forced himself to sound calm, measured, and — above all — reasonable. It was hard when what he actually felt was bitter shame. But he was a senior officer of the SLN and he had his orders.

“Even though you may not have aided the Manticorans and their allies *militarily*, however,” he continued, “you’ve certainly aided and abetted them in other ways. As your government is well aware, Manticore began its campaign against the Solarian League by way of its blatantly illegal interference with freedom of astrogation and the Solarian economy. In effect, Manticore has weaponized interstellar commerce and directed it against the Solarian League because of my government’s refusal to simply stand aside and enable its raw, unbridled imperialism through our passivity. And, Madame President, your star system has transferred virtually the entirety of its own trade to Manticore and the other star nations who, by their own declaration, are now actively at war with the League. That’s hardly the action of an even-handed neutral, and my government has no option but to consider active collaboration with outlaw regimes which have killed hundreds of thousands of Solarian military personnel and citizens an act of aggression.”

He met Jahnke’s eyes steadily, even though both of them knew just how tenuous the connection between reality and what he’d just said truly was.

“The Solarian League takes no pleasure in the destruction of property, and my government is well aware of the economic hardship this will create for the people of your star nation,” he went on in a tone of implacable regret, filling the transmission lag with the rest of the “talking points” with which the Navy and Foreign Affairs had seen fit to provide him. If he gave her the opportunity to respond, she’d probably point out that Manticore’s version of commerce warfare meant the Star Empire and its allies were the only people with whom Cachalot *could* trade at the moment, and his lords and masters could never have *that* as part of the official record, now could they?

“However, it’s clear Manticore has embraced an imperialism which is as much economic as territorial. Not content with the commanding position it already enjoyed, it’s now set out to secure dictatorial control of the entire inhabited galaxy’s economic life. The Solarian League cannot — and *will* not — allow any star nation to acquire that sort of power, of control and coercion, over its star systems and their citizens. And, since it’s evident that raw aggression and economic domination are the only languages the ‘Star Empire’ understands, the League has no option but to respond to it in its own terms. Much as I may regret the mission which has brought me to your star system, your complicity in Manticore’s assault upon the Solarian League has left my government with no other alternative.

“Again, I inform you that you have seventy-two hours in which to organize an evacuation of your orbital infrastructure. Obviously, I must also insist on the surrender of the armed units of your System Patrol. Vice Admiral Angelica Helland, my chief of staff, will be in contact with the System Patrol’s commanding officer to arrange that surrender in as peaceful and orderly a fashion as possible. I’m sure I’ve presented you with a great many unpleasant decisions and actions. Again, I regret the necessity of doing so, but I will leave you to deal with them. I will contact you again when my flagship enters Orca orbit. Capriotti, clear.”

He pressed the stud to kill his com and swiveled his chair to face Commodore Anthony, his staff communications officer.

“Until I contact her again, I’m unavailable, Roger,” he said. Anthony’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly and it was obvious from his expression that he didn’t look forward to fending off Jahnke’s inevitable fiery demands to speak to Capriotti. But the commodore only nodded.

Capriotti returned the nod, then turned back to the master plot as *Québec* and the rest of the task force decelerated toward Orca. He watched the moving icons and wondered how much of his unavailability stemmed from the PR requirements and psychological warfare aspects of Buccaneer . . . and how much of it stemmed from shame. He remembered his words to Captain Timberlake in their first discussion of the ops order, and they were bitter on his tongue. This *wasn’t* the reason he’d joined the Navy, but if he had it to do, then he’d damned well do it.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“We’re ready, Sir,” Lyang-tau Rutgers said quietly.

Capriotti nodded without speaking. He stood with his hands clasped behind him, gazing into the flag bridge plot. It had been reconfigured for visual display, showing him a needle sharp vista of the planet Orca and the massive orbital infrastructure about it.

Cachalot had been settled for a long time, but it wasn’t the best real estate in the known galaxy. Despite the relative dimness of the system primary, whose luminosity was less than fourteen percent that of Sol, Orca’s close orbit — the planetary year was less than three T-months long — produced a mean temperature significantly higher than Old Terra’s. Its tropical zone was virtually uninhabited, and its axial inclination was only nine degrees, which meant it had minimal seasonal variation even outside the all but unendurable tropics. There were, however, almost five billion human beings in its temperate zones . . . and another *three* billion in its orbital habitats.

That was a lot of people to turn into implacable haters, he thought.

At least the Cachalotians had opted for a sharper segregation between their industrial platforms and their habitats than happened in most star systems. That had probably started, initially, because so many of them had opted for the habitats’ controlled climates in preference to the planet’s from the very beginning. That meant the inhabited neighborhood had grown up even before its industrial base really developed, and separating them had protected their orbital population from the sorts of industrial accidents that could have unfortunate consequences. It had to create commuting problems for a lot of their labor force, but they clearly thought it was worth it, and their building codes had officially enshrined the separation for several centuries now.

Of course, they’d never seen an “industrial accident" like Buccaneer coming.

They were still going to lose one orbital habitat — and the homes of over five million of their citizens — anyway. There simply wasn’t any way to demolish the Siesta Three platform’s industrial capability without taking out the entire habitat. Three more major habitats were going to take significant damage, but Rutgers’s demolition crews were confident the housing sections would survive unhurt.

*Not so confident that Jahnke — or me — was going to leave those people aboard when the charges go off*. Capriotti snorted mentally. *It’s a lot easier to be “confident” about somebody else’s homes*, he thought harshly.

Even without minor considerations like that, destroying the platforms in Orca orbit without creating catastrophic debris strikes on both the planet and the remaining habitats was a nontrivial exercise in its own right. The Snapper Belt platforms, better than fifty light-minutes from the primary, were a much simpler proposition. Snapper’s 644,000 inhabitants had simply been moved en masse to Orca’s surface and a dozen of Capriotti’s destroyers would take out the belt’s entire infrastructure with targeted missile launches. Closer to the planet, that was a nonstarter, however, and he considered the battlecruisers positioned around the first of Rutgers’s targets.

“Very well, Lyang-tau,” he sighed finally. “Proceed.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Capriotti stayed where he was, watching the visual, as the battlecruisers brought up their impeller wedges. The three major platforms — two fabrication centers and one of Orca’s six primary freight platforms — remained clearly visible from *Québec*’s more distant orbit. The activated wedges completely enclosed them on three sides, however, cutting off direct visual observation from the planetary surface or any of Orca’s other near-planet habitats or spacestations.

“Detonation in fifteen seconds . . . mark,” Rutgers said clearly behind him. “Fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one —”

The nuclear charges detonated simultaneously, in bursts of brilliance which hurt the eye. That had to be purely psychosomatic, Capriotti thought, even as he blinked against the brightness. The display automatically filtered their intensity more rapidly than mere organic nerves could respond to it, after all. Maybe it was just that he *knew* what they must have looked like to the unshielded eye.

Not even a nuclear blast could completely vaporize several billion tons of spacestation. That was why he’d placed his battlecruisers’ impeller wedges to intercept any debris. They’d hold their stations until he was positive nothing could get through to Orca or any of the other platforms. Then they’d move on to the next targets on their list.

He stood for another fifteen seconds, gazing at the spot where the next best thing to two millennia of investment — and the livelihoods of 1.7 million people — had just been wiped from the cosmos. Then he drew a deep breath and looked over his shoulder at his staff.

“Keep me informed, especially about any debris fields,” he said. “I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Of course, Sir,” Vice Admiral Helland responded for the entire staff.

He nodded to them and walked from the flag bridge in silence.

**Hillary Indrakashi Enkateshwara Tower**

**City of Old Chicago**

**Sol System**

**Solarian League**

“This is the reason Irene and I needed someone like you, Natsuko,” Daud al-Fanudahi said in a tone of profound satisfaction. “We wouldn’t have had a clue how to find something like this!”

“Well, don’t go assuming we’ve really found what we all *think* we’ve found,” Lieutenant Colonel Okiku replied. Al-Fanudahi stood looking over her shoulder as she sat at one of the desks in the office which had become their private HQ. Now she waved one hand at the display in front of her. “We’ve got plenty of evidence of corruption on all these people, but God knows there’s *always* corruption — tons of it — here in Sol. So it’s still entirely possible we’re seeing connections that don’t exist. Or connections that do exist but aren’t the ones we *think* they are, at any rate.”

“Understood. “Al-Fanudahi nodded. “Same thing happens on our side of the shop. One of the things that’s hardest to avoid — and one of the things that’s biting the Navy on the butt right now, for that matter – is mirror-imaging. Interpreting what the other fellow’s doing through the lens of how *you’d* do it. If their operating assumptions are different, their decisions and actions are going to be different, too, and it’s hard to check your own fundamental concepts at the door.”

“There *are* some similarities with that,” Okiku acknowledged. “It’s a little bit different, from a cop’s perspective, though. It’s not so much our fundamental ‘operational concepts’ as it is our effort to assess someone else’s motivations when we can’t just open a window and peek inside their heads. We know a lot about *what* these people are doing now; what we have to be careful about is assuming we know *why* they’re doing it.”

“And who they’re doing it *for*,” Bryce Tarkovsky put in sourly. Al-Fanudahi looked at him, and the tall Marine, another charter member of the group Okiku had dubbed the Ghost Hunters, shrugged. “Like Natsuko says, there’s so much normal garden-variety corruption that demonstrating exactly who’s paying off whom and for what is the kind of challenge that would make Sisyphus weep.”

Al-Fanudahi grinned and shook his head. Tarkovsky delighted in dredging up obscure references to ancient Old Earth legends. Partly that was because he genuinely loved them and had spent years studying them. But al-Fanudahi suspected his interest had begun as a deliberate response to the stereotypical view of Marines.

Personally, al-Fanudahi had never believed the stereotype. He knew at least a dozen Marines who could so read. Why, some of them could even *write!*

“Bryce is right,” Okiku said. “That’s why this is like chasing ghosts. And don’t forget we have to be able to demonstrate whatever we finally do find well enough to convince *someone else*, not just to our own satisfaction. Someone who won’t *want* to be convinced the way we do.”

“And someone who’ll quite possibly have his own reasons to not want any rocks turned over even if he thinks we may be onto something. Or *especially* because he thinks we may,” al-Fanudahi agreed. He sat back in his own chair and puffed his cheeks, less cheerful than he’d been a moment before, but that didn’t mean they haven’t made a lot of progress.

Simeon Gaddis’s “Outcasts” had crunched their way through exabytes of reports, contacts, security camera video, social media, travel patterns, bank accounts, cash transactions, and intercepted and decrypted personal conversations and correspondence. They still didn’t know exactly what he had them looking for, although there was no way to keep his personal cybernauts from speculating — probably with a high degree of accuracy — about what he was after.

As the correlations began to pile up, Gaddis had opened an official investigation into corruption within the Gendarmerie and wherever it might lead in the federal government generally. It wasn’t the first time he’d gone a round or two with that Goliath, so no one was especially surprised by it. Cynically amused by its *futility*, perhaps, but not surprised.

Under cover of that investigation, however, he’d directed a small army of Gendarmes into the investigation without giving them the slightest hint of what they were really looking for, and the Outcasts had tapped into the flood of information that army had turned up. Armed with all that data, their accomplishments dwarfed anything al-Fanudahi and Irene Teague might have conceivably achieved on their own.

To date, the Ghost Hunters had identified almost a dozen individuals — exclusive of Rajmund Nyhus — who they strongly suspected were tools of what Lupe Blanton had christened “the Other Guys.” They were certain Nyhus belonged on the list, but so far, they’d been unable to tie him to anyone else. Which had led both Blanton and Weng Zhing-hwan to fundamentally reassess their estimate of Nyhus’s intelligence. Or, more specifically, their estimate of his lack thereof.

They’d had better luck in a few other cases, however, and he reached over Okiku’s shoulder to indicate one of the names on her list.

“I think we need to be taking an even closer look at this one,” he said, and she tapped the name to open the database associated with it.

“Ms. Bolton,” she murmured. “I can see why you’re interested in her, Daud. What did you have in mind?”

“Well,” he said, “we’ve linked her to two of the other people on our list. If there’s anything to the Outcasts’ suggestion that she’s also linked to Laughton, we need to nail that down. For more than one reason.”

Tarkovsky had straightened in his chair at the sound of Bolton’s name. Now he stood and walked around to join al-Fanudahi, and his expression was unhappy.

“I don’t disagree with you,” he said. “I wish I could, but I don’t.”

Al-Fanudahi rested one hand lightly on the Marine’s shoulder, but Okiku only shook her head. Probably because she was a cop at heart, the captain thought. She drew a sharp line between good guys and bad guys, and anyone who found himself on the wrong side of that line was a target to be taken down as expeditiously and completely as possible. The way she saw it, if someone she’d thought was a friend turned out to be a bad guy, then he’d never been quite as much a friend as the colonel had thought he was.

Intellectually, al-Fanudahi agreed with her, and he knew Tarkovsky did, too, but Colonel Timothy Laughton had been Bryce Tarkovsky’s colleague and personal friend for over fifteen T-years. In fact, he’d been on Tarkovsky’s short list of potential recruits to the cause . . . until the Outcasts turned up his connection — his *possible* connection — to Shafiqa Bolton. There was no doubt that Laughton was “in a relationship” with Bolton, although the precise nature of that relationship had yet to be defined. It appeared to be purely social and not terribly close, but the number of peripheral and “coincidental” contacts between them was . . . statistically improbable.

And the Outcasts’ algorithms insisted that Shafiqa Bolton was definitely linked to two other individuals — a Navy captain and a diplomat — they were almost certain were working for the Other Guys.

“I have to say she’s got the classic earmarks of a handler,” Okiku said after a moment as she scrolled through the database. “I might be less suspicious if her contacts with both Nye and Salazar hadn’t spiked the way they have. There’s no social or business reason for her to be 'running into’ the two of them as much as she has, and the frequency of contacts is still trending upward.”

“That’s a little thin, Natsuko.” Tarkovsky wasn’t arguing so much as playing devil’s advocate, al-Fanudahi thought.

“That’s how these things work, Bryce,” she said. “You pick at it until you find a thread you can unravel, and it’s usually something small that starts the process. But look at this.” She highlighted a section of the data. “Over the last two T-years, the frequency of her contacts with Nye’s gone up almost eighteen percent, and most of that increase’s occurred since Byng got himself blown away at New Tuscany last October. In fact, over half of it’s occurred in the last six months. But his transactions are actually *down* seven percent over that same time period.”

Tarkovsky nodded. Bolton, one of the senior partners of Nuñez, Poldak, Bolton, and Hwang, was a financial advisor, and a very good one, judging by her client list and their success rates. Stephanos Nye, a senior policy analyst in Innokentiy Kolokoltsov’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was one of those clients, but he’d never been a heavy investor. He had lucrative arrangements with several well-heeled lobbyists, and his bank balance was more than comfortable, but he’d always tended to splash around in the shallows of the waters Bolton routinely navigated. Statistically, she spent a disproportionate amount of her time with such a relatively modest player. She always had, actually, although the disproportion had been far smaller up until about the time Haven resumed hostilities with Manticore. If there’d been some sort of personal relationship between them, the uptick probably wouldn’t have been noticeable at all, but outside their meetings to discuss possible financial opportunities, they *had* no relationship the Outcasts could discover.

Only the closest scrutiny could have picked that discrepancy out of the hundreds of clients with whom Bolton met on a regular or semiregular basis, but it was definitely there. Whether it was truly *significant* was another matter, but the fact that Nye’s policy positions had steadily hardened against Manticore almost in tandem with Rajmund Nyhus’s reports to Ukhtomskoy suggested that it was.

Then there was Captain Mardyola Salazar, one of Fleet Admiral Evangeline Bernard’s staffers in the Office of Strategy and Planning. She had no business relationship with Bolton at all and her work schedule at S&P had become steeply more demanding as the confrontation with Manticore progressed from simply adversarial to disastrous. Despite the way that cut into her personal free time, however, she and Bolton kept ‘running into’ one another in social settings. The uptick there was almost twenty-three percent in just the past two months, and al-Fanudahi’s sources indicated Salazar had been one of the lead planners for Operation Buccaneer. Of course, he wasn’t supposed to know Buccaneer even existed, far less who’d been tasked with putting it together, but he *was* in intelligence, and recent events had pretty thoroughly validated warnings he’d issued over the years about events in the Haven Sector. As a result, the people at Strategy and Planning were actually talking to him these days. How much *attention* they paid him was debatable, but at least they were asking questions. The nature of those questions had enabled him to piece together a depressingly good picture of the thinking — such as it was — behind Buccaneer, and it was evident Salazar’s contributions had strongly shaped the operations plan. In fact, she’d been an early — if not simply *the* earliest — proponent of the Parthian Option.

And then there was Timothy Laughton, the question mark of the moment.

Like Bryce Tarkovsky, he worked for Brigadier Meindert Osterhaut, the CO of Marine Intelligence under Admiral Karl-Heinz Thimár’s nominal command as part of the Office of Naval Intelligence. He’d spent twelve T-years seconded to Frontier Security, during which he’d acquired a deep familiarity with the complexities of the Protectorates and the Fringe in general, and Osterhaut had come to rely on that familiarity. He was smart, hard-working, and insightful. He also played one hell of a poker game, as Tarkovsky had learned the hard way. Aside from an occasional — and profitable — foray at the poker table, however, he’d always been a bit . . . standoffish. He and Tarkovsky liked one another and had considered each other friends for a long time, but they’d never built the sort of close relationship Tarkovsky and al-Fanudahi enjoyed.

Which might turn out to have been fortunate, under the circumstances. Because, like Salazar, Laughton had been “bumping into” Bolton quite a bit recently. And *unlike* Salazar, he’d had no contact at all with her prior to about ten T-months ago . . . which was about the time his analysis of events in the Fringe — not simply in the Talbott Quadrant but much more broadly — had begun suggesting an increasingly militant and expansionist attitude on Manticore’s part.

Under the circumstances, inviting him to become another Ghost Hunter might have had negative consequences for all concerned.

“The Outcasts can’t get a lot closer to Bolton, Daud,” Okiku said now. “They’re still digging into her financials, and they’re bird dogging all of her electronic communications to us. Anybody as smart as these people isn’t going to do a lot electronically, though. If she’s what we think she is, that’s the reason she’s meeting with people personally. So unless we want to go hands-on, we’re not likely to get beyond the suggestive stage. Mind you, Simeon and I would both be confident enough to ask for warrants on the basis of what we’ve already got, except that we *can’t* ask for warrants without going public with what we suspect.”

“What do you mean by ‘hands-on’?” Al-Fanudahi asked.

“One possibility’s to feed at least one of these people something we figure the Other Guys are going to want or that they think they could use. Then we see if they go running to Bolton. If they do, and if the Other Guys act on whatever we gave them, then I think we’ve proved there’s a direct link.”

“If we’re talking about some kind of vast interstellar conspiracy, that’d take a lot of time we may not have,” al-Fanudahi pointed out. “Our suspect would have to get the information to Bolton, and then Bolton would have to get it to her superiors — through whatever chain of communications they use — and her superiors would have to act on it and then send their new orders back down the same chain. I don’t think we’ve got that kind of time. And even if we did, God only knows how many more people would get killed while we waited!”

“Okiku said that was ‘one possibility,’ Daud,” Tarkovsky pointed out. “I’m not sure it’s the one she actually had in mind, though.”

Something about his tone made al-Fanudahi look at him sharply, and the Marine gave him a crooked smile. Then he looked down as Okiku looked up over her shoulder.

“You were thinking about something a little more . . . proactive, weren’t you?” he asked.

“Well,” she replied, “you’re right about how badly time constraints would work against the planted information approach, Daud. If the Navy’s really going ahead with Buccaneer, it’s the kind of escalation that’s likely to provoke a painful response from the Manties. The kind of response that gets a lot of people killed. And even if that weren’t the case, just think about how much damage Buccaneer’s going to do — physical damage, I mean, much less the way it’s likely to poison public opinion in the Verge and Fringe against the League for decades to come.

“If we’re going to accomplish anything inside that time loop, it may be time for some of that proactiveness Bryce is talking about.”

“How?”

“One possibility is to take his original suggestion, grab one of these people — like Bolton, maybe — and sweat them. It has the drawback that without a warrant, it’s strictly illegal and morally questionable. And if it turns out we’re wrong about whoever we grab, we end up facing what you might call a quandary. Do we assume we’re wrong about everything and turn her loose with apologies, or do we assume we were wrong about *her* — not about the Other Guys in general — in which case we *can’t* turn her loose. Which means we have to do . . . something else with her.”

Al-Fanudahi’s jaw tightened, but he had to respect her willingness to face the implications, and he nodded in unhappy understanding.

“And another possibility is for us to present a threat they have to honor. Something to make them react in a short timeframe. Something we can see and track.”

Al-Fanudahi’s nostrils flared.

“You mean present them with *someone* they’d see as a threat,” he said, his tone flat.

“That may be our only option, Daud,” Tarkovsky said. “There’s only so far we can go without either directly questioning a suspect or trying to manipulate one of them into giving himself away. If you can think of another way to do that, I’m all ears. But if you can’t . . . .”

His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

**Harrington House**

**City of Landing**

**Planet of Manticore**

**Manticore Binary System System**

“Honor!”

Doctor Allison Harrington’s smile was huge as Duchess and Steadholder Harrington entered the Harrington House foyer with Spencer Hawke and Clifford McGraw at her heels. Corporal Anastasia Yanakov, Allison’s personal armswoman, nodded respectfully to Major Hawke and then smiled as she watched Allison throw her arms about her daughter. Honor Alexander-Harrington hugged her back, fighting the reflex urge to bend at the knees so she didn’t tower over her diminutive mother quite so badly. She’d managed to break that habit about the time she turned sixteen, but the reflex still asserted itself from time to time.

Especially when her mother was pregnant.

“Mother,” she replied a bit more sedately, then stood back with her hands on Allison’s shoulders. “There have been some changes I see,” she added, looking down at her mother’s abdomen. “You could have mentioned something about this, oh, a month or so ago.”

“I suppose I could have.” Allison smiled up at her. “On the other hand, dear, while I wouldn’t want to call you *unobservant*, or anything of the sort, it did seem to me that giving you the opportunity to . . . improve the acuity with which you view the universe might not be out of order.”

“I see.” Honor shook her head as Corporal Yanakov smiled and Major Hawke and Sargent McGraw found somewhere else to look. “We do seem to have these little moments without proper warning, though, don’t we?”

“At least in my case I knew I *could* get pregnant,” Allison observed with a devilish smile, watching Hawke and McGraw from the corner of one eye. Then her expression sobered. “Although, to be honest, I had to think long and hard about deactivating my implant.” Her lips trembled ever so slightly. “It was hard for your father. For me, too, I guess. But losing that many people we loved . . . .” She shook her head, the eyes which matched Honor’s dark. “It was almost like we couldn’t decide whether we were reaffirming that life went on, creating the additional child we’d discovered we wanted — especially after Faith and James were born — or trying to replace the ones we loved. It was that last bit that made it hard. It felt almost *disloyal* somehow. In the end, though, we just said the hell with any philosophical questions.”

“And I’m glad you did.” Honor hugged her close again. “To be honest, if I had the time, I think Hamish, Emily, and I would be doing exactly the same thing. For all the reasons you just listed, really. And why shouldn’t we?” Her embrace tightened for a moment. “Life does go on, we do want more kids, and we are creating more people to put into the holes in our hearts. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to see an uptick in births all across the system, but especially on Sphinx.” She released her mother and smiled sadly. “It’s one of the things that happen in wars.”

“Well, on that topic,” Allison said in a brighter tone, “I happen to think it’s time you provided me with additional grandchildren. Not that Raoul and Katherine aren’t perfectly satisfactory, you understand. There’s a certain security in numbers, though. And while I realize *you’re* busy at the moment, Emily’s available.”

“Mother, you’re incorrigible!” Honor laughed and shook her head. “And, to be honest, I think Emily may be thinking in that direction, too.” Her smile turned warm. “Hamish and I will never be able to thank you enough for getting her past that particular block.”

“Even if I was pushy, insufferable, and meddlesome?”

“No! Were you really?” Honor gazed at her in astonishment. “I didn’t realize. I thought you were just being your normal self.” She paused a beat. “Oh! That’s what you *meant*, wasn’t it?”

“It’s really a pity I never believed in corporal punishment,” Allison observed, then grinned as her daughter giggled.

“Mother, I wouldn’t change you even if I could,” Honor said then. “Which, thank God, nobody in the universe would be capable of, in the first place.”

Nimitz bleeked in amusement and nodded his head in emphatic agreement with that statement.

“Well, I certainly hope not,” Allison said serenely, tucking her daughter’s hand into her elbow and leading the way towards the private family section of Harrington House. Their bodyguards fell in astern, like escorting destroyers.

“And thank you for letting us use the house tonight,” Allison continued as they started up the magnificent winding staircase. “We really appreciate it.”

“Mother, this is your and Dad’s house now, a lot more than it’s mine. I believe I’ve told you that no more than, oh, five or six *thousand* times. It’s got more rooms than most hotels, and as long as Hamish, Emily, and I have a modest little six or seven-room suite in which to hang our berets, I think we can consider our housing needs adequately met whenever two or three of us happen to be in Landing at the same time. Which, unfortunately, isn’t happening all that often just now.”

“I understand that. No, really — I do!” Allison waved her free hand as Honor bent a skeptical eye upon her. “But it’s also Steadholder Harrington’s official residence and Harrington Steading’s embassy in the Star Empire. Under the circumstances, I don’t think we should be throwing any drunken orgies without clearing it with you first.”

“Your very own drunken orgy? How exciting! Are Hamish and I invited?”

Something very like a smothered chuckle escaped one of the Graysons behind her.

“No, dear.” Allison patted her hand. “The drunken orgy is *private*, after the party. I was only using it as an example.”

“Darn. And I was so looking forward to it.”

“I see Hamish and Emily have been good for the Beowulf side of you,” Allison said, and Nimitz laughed again, then raised his right hand — fingers closed to spell the letter “S” — and nodded it up and down in agreement.

“I’ll admit they’ve helped me face my inner Beowulf,” Honor acknowledged. “It’s even possible the rest of the universe will forgive them for that . . . someday.”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Music drifted from the quintet of live musicians in the corner of the ballroom. The night was warm and clear, so the crystoplast wall had been retracted, extending the ballroom out across the terrace and increasing its normal six hundred square meters of floor space by a third. For the present, that additional floorspace was unavailable for dancing, however. Instead, spotless white table cloths fluttered on the land breeze blowing outward across Jason Bay while the Harrington House staff, augmented for the evening, prepared to serve supper.

Nor was anyone dancing in the ballroom itself, despite its size, the splendor of its brilliantly polished marble floor, and the invitation of the music. Possibly because the music in question was a bit odd by Manticoran standards. Allison and Alfred Harrington had fallen in love with classical Grayson music during their time on Grayson, but the planet’s ancient dancing traditions, which centered on something called the “square dance,” weren’t familiar to most Manticorans. The lack of dancers was subject to change, however, and Honor suspected that it would after dinner.

At the moment, she stood between Hamish and Emily Alexander-Harrington’s life support chair, gazing out across the bay.

“Honor, I’d like you to meet someone,” a voice said, and she turned as her father — one of the few people present who was actually taller than she was — walked up behind her.

Since Harrington House was technically Grayson soil, and Honor tended to dress in her persona as Steadholder Harrington whenever she was officially “home,” she wasn’t in uniform tonight. But her father, for the first time since her childhood, was. Rather than the four golden pips of his pre-retirement rank, however, his collar bore two gold planets. A single broad gold band had been added to the three bands of a commander, and the unit patch on his left shoulder showed the Rod of Asclepius under the word “Bassingford.” In the newly reactivated Commodore Harrington’s case, both the staff itself and the single serpent were embroidered in gold rather than the silver of other Bassingford Medical Center shoulder flashes.

Which was rather the point of this evening’s festivities, she reflected. Her father hadn’t simply gone back onto active duty. Effective tomorrow, he was Bassingford’s one hundred and third commanding officer. Officially, that was because he’d been recalled by the Navy, and that was fair enough, because the Navy had wanted him back at Bassingford virtually from the day he retired and resigned his post as Head of Neurosurgery. In reality, though, it was the Yawata Strike which had returned him to active duty. He’d needed a few months to make up his mind. The process had begun shortly after the strike, but it had taken the Battle of Spindle and — especially — “Operation Raging Justice” to complete it. One thing was sadly obvious; if the Mandarins persisted in their current policies, Bassingford would need far more beds . . . most of which would be filled by Solarians. Alfred Harrington needed to be part of dealing with all those broken bodies and lives. That was what had finally pushed him back into uniform.

That and the need to do something *healing* rather than succumb to the part of him which had once been Sergeant Harrington, Royal Manticoran Marine Corps.

Now he smiled at his daughter, indicating the much shorter woman —no more than fifteen or sixteen centimeters taller than Allison Harrington — at his side. She had dark hair, ten or twelve centimeters longer than Honor had once worn her own, dark eyes, and a lively, mobile face. She, too, was in uniform with the Bassingford shoulder flash, although in her case, only the staff of the rod was in gold.

“Honor, this is Captain Sara Kate Lessem,” Alfred said. “Sara Kate, my daughter, Duchess Harrington. She’s —”

“*Sara Kate!*” Honor smiled broadly and enveloped the shorter woman in a hug.

“Ah, should I assume my introduction was a bit . . . superfluous?” her father asked after a moment while Hamish and Emily chuckled.

“Daddy, I’ve known Sara Kate for — what? Thirty T-years, Sara Kate?”

“I’m afraid it really has been about that long,” Captain Lessem replied with a smile. “It’s good to see you again, though. It’s been too long!”

“I’m sorry I missed the wedding,” Honor said, shaking her head. “I was . . . occupied at the time.”

“You mean you were off blowing things up again,” Captain Lessem observed.

“Well, yes, I suppose.” Honor smiled. “And how do you like being a respectable married woman?”

“Honor, it’s been three T-years now. How do you expect me to remember what it was like before? And speaking of respectable married women —?” Captain Lessem raised her eyebrows in Hamish and Emily’s direction, and Honor chuckled.

“Mom and Dad really did teach me better manners than that,” she said. “Sara Kate, this is my husband, Hamish Alexander-Harrington, and this is my wife, Emily Alexander-Harrington. Both of them have long, tiresome lists of titles we’ll leave to one side right now. Hamish, Emily, this is Sara Kate Lessem. I first met her when she was Sara Kate Tillman.”

“*They* have long tiresome lists of titles?” Captain Lessem shook her head, then shook hands with both of Honor’s spouses.

“At least half of which come from our association with *her*,” Emily told her with a smile. “May I ask how you and Honor come to know one another?”

“Uncle Jacques introduced us,” Honor replied before Lessem could, and it was her father’s eyebrows turn to rise.

“*Jacques* introduced you?” he said. “Wait a minute. Would this have anything to do with those anachronisms of his?”

“Of course it does. Sara Kate’s another member of the Society. Her particular interest is in what they called ballroom dancing from the last couple of centuries Ante Diaspora. It’s not what most people do today. Actually, I like it a lot better. So, Sara Kate, you’re at Bassingford these days?”

“I am,” Lessem confirmed.

“She means she’s the Assistant Director *and* Head of Nursing and Physical Therapy,” Commodore Harrington put in.

“And I’ve had a lot more patients than I’d like since that business with Filareta.” Lessem’s expression was much less cheerful than it had been. “They may all be Sollies, but a broken body’s still a broken body.”

“I know,” Honor sighed. “And I hate it. If I could’ve avoided it —”

“If you could have avoided it, we’d be calling you God and lighting candles to you,” Lessem interrupted. “And if it had occurred to me that you were going to go off on a guilt trip, I never would’ve opened my mouth about it, either.”

“Oh, I *like* you, Captain Lessem!” Emily said enthusiastically. “Please! Kick her again!”

Lessem gave her a startled glance, then snorted in sudden understanding.

“Been brooding about it, has she?”

“Only sometimes,” Emily replied in the judicious tone of someone trying to be scrupulously fair. “Not more than every other time I see her.”

“Then consider her kicked,” Lessem promised.

“Oh, thank you both *so* much.” Honor rolled her eyes while Hamish and her father chuckled. “And you two aren’t helping this, you know,” she told the male component of the conversation severely.

“Not my responsibility to help when Captain Lessem and Emily are doing such a splendid job,” Hamish informed her. “Not that either of them’s likely to tell you anything I haven’t.”

“Acknowledged.” Honor nodded. “And I’ll try.”

“Good.” Lessem reached out to squeeze her upper arm gently. “That’s good, Honor.”

“I see Mistress Thorn’s minions are about ready to serve,” Hamish observed, looking back towards the ballroom. “Will you join us, Captain?”

“I’d be honored, My Lord.”

“On social occasions, it’s ‘Hamish,’ Captain.”

“Only if it’s also Sara Kate, *My Lord*,” Lessem replied a bit pointedly.

“Then would you join us . . . Sara Kate?”

“Thank you . . . Hamish.”

He smiled and offered her his arm while Honor took Emily’s hand and the four of them headed for the head table. Alfred looked around until he located Allison. As usual, she was at the center of a cluster of admirers — most of them male — and he headed across to rescue her and escort her to the same table.

She smiled happily as he swooped down upon her, ruthlessly exploiting his position as both husband and guest of honor, since the evening was the official announcement of his return to duty, and she tucked her hand into his elbow and squeezed gratefully as he led her away.

“I don’t know what you were thinking to leave me exposed that way.” Her tone was teasing, but there was an edge of seriousness to it. “My God, Alfred! You didn’t tell me we were inviting George Brockman!” She shuddered. “That man doesn’t have the faintest concept of what ‘monogamy’ means.”

“And if I’d thought for a moment that you weren’t perfectly capable of cutting him off at the knees — or at any other appropriate point on his anatomy —I’d have been there in an instant,” her husband assured her, and looked down at her with a faint twinkle. “Tell me with a straight face that you didn’t enjoy doing exactly that when — as I’m sure happened — he gave you the chance?”

“You may be able to throw me heartlessly to the wolves, but you can’t make me lie!” She lifted her nose with an audible sniff, then smiled wickedly. “I’m pretty sure the bleeding will stop in another hour or so.”

“Good for you!” Alfred laughed. “And while we’re talking about social lapses, were you aware Honor and Sara Kate Lessem — and Jacques, now that I think about it — all know one another?”

“Of course I was.” She looked up at him again with a devilish smile. “Dear me. Did I forget to mention that to you?”

“Out of consideration for your delicate condition, I will defer the proper response to that.”

“Oh, no, you won’t!” she told him pertly. “I’ve already had the peach preserves sent to our room.”

“You’re incorrigible,” he said, smothering a laugh.

“I don’t know why you and Honor keep *saying* that. I’m the most *en*couragable person I know!”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“It’s good to see him laughing again,” Emily Alexander-Harrington said quietly as her mother and father-in-law headed towards the table.

“Agreed,” Honor said, equally quietly. “And I think —“

She paused for a moment, then shook her head.

“You think what?” Emily pressed.

“Oh, it was just a passing thought.” Honor shook her head again, her expression sobering. “We’re all having a few of those at the moment, I think.”

“Yes, we are,” Emily agreed, but she gazed at Honor speculatively, and Honor made herself look back with tranquil eyes as she tasted the curiosity in Emily’s mind-glow. She also didn’t mention what had spawned that “passing thought.”

“Tell me, have you given any more thought to a brother or sister for Katherine and Raoul?” she asked instead.

“I have.” Emily nodded, although the question seemed to have sharpened the focus of that speculation Honor had tasted. “In fact, I have an appointment to discuss it with Dr. Illescue at Briarwood tomorrow afternoon, before I go back to White Haven.”

“Oh, good!” Honor beamed at her, bending over her chair to envelop her in a gentle hug. “I’m thinking about doing the same thing. Maybe this time we can time it even closer!”

“There’s only a month or so between the two we have, dear,” Emily pointed out drily. “What? You want to synchronise the deliveries to the same *minute?*”

“Well, if neither one of us is going to be in a position to do it the old fashioned way, we might as well take advantage of the opportunities we do have. Besides —” she straightened with a devilish smile “— twins *do* run in Mom’s family, you know!”

Emily laughed, and Honor’s smile turned more gentle. But then she straightened and looked at Hamish across Emily’s head. She swivelled her eyes to one side, to where Sandra Thurston, Emily’s nurse and constant companion, stood chatting with James MacGuiness while he kept an eagle eye on the evening’s festivities. Her gaze came back to Hamish, and he shrugged ever so slightly, letting an edge of worry show in his own blue eyes.

Her mouth tightened as she put that together with the undertone she’d tasted in Emily’s mind-glow, but then she drew a deep breath. She wasn’t going to borrow any trouble, she told herself firmly. Not tonight. And not when all three of them had so much to be grateful for, including —

“You’re right about how good it is to see Daddy laughing again,” she said, looking back down at Emily and squeezing her good hand gently, then looked at Captain Lessem. “I think it’s going to be good for him to get back to work, too.”

“Well, I can tell you the entire staff’s damned glad we’ve *gotten* him back to work,” Lessem said frankly. “Lord knows we need him as a surgeon, but we need him even more on the administrative side.” She shook her head. “I wasn’t joking about how many patients we’re going to have, Honor. It’s bad already, and if those idiots in Old Chicago don’t get their heads out of —” She paused, then grimaced. “Out of the *sand*, it’s going to get a lot worse.”

“I know. And we’re trying to hold it to a minimum,” Honor said, easing Nimitz off her shoulder to join Samantha in the double highchair between her and Hamish. “And speaking of trying to keep things to minimums, where’s Martin right now?”

“I suppose, given your august connections I can tell you,” Lessem said, smiling crookedly at Hamish. “At the moment, he’s got a task group with Vice Admiral Correia. I don’t know exactly where they were headed, but I know it’s part of Lacoön Two.”

“If he’s with Correia, he’s probably in Ajay or Prime about now,” Hamish said.

“And just between you and me, I’m a lot happier with the thought of his facing off with Sollies instead of Havenites,” the captain observed.

“So am I, for now, at least,” Honor. “I just wish we had a clue about some way to convince the Mandarins to at least pretend they have a single functional brain amongst them.”

“I seem to sense just a little acerbity?” Lessem teased.

“Just a bit, perhaps,” Honor admitted.

“Tell me, Doctor — Sara Kate, I mean,” Emily said. “Honor mentioned something about ‘ancient’ ballroom dancing. How did you ever get involved with that?”

“Blame it on my misspent youth,” Lessem replied with a chuckle. “That and the fact that my mother knew Honor’s Uncle Jacques when they were college students. He got her involved with the Society for Creative Anachronisms, and she’s a physical therapist, too. Dance is sort of a natural connection for therapists. Or it can be, anyway.”

“Fascinating.” Emily shook her head. “I’ve had quite a bit of experience with therapists myself, over the years, but for fairly obvious reasons, no one ever suggested dance to me. I can see its applicability, though, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

“Oh, I do it much more for pleasure than professionally,” Lessem said. “I even got Martin to take it up, and he’s remarkably good at it. To be honest, I’m looking for a new challenge for him.”

“You are, are you?” Honor smiled. “Well, in that case, you’ve come to the right place.”

“I have?” Lessem’s eyebrows arched, and Honor’s smile grew broader.

“Oh, yes. Tell me, are you familiar with the phrase ‘dosey doe’?”

**George Benton Tower**

**City of Old Chicago**

**Old Earth**

**Sol System**

“Sorry I’m late,” Permanent Senior Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Innokentiy Kolokoltsov told his colleagues as he stepped through the conference room’s doors and they slid silently shut behind him. “I was ready to walk out of my office when one of my analysts — Stephanos Nye, I think I’ve mentioned him to you before — asked for an urgent appointment. He was right about the urgency, and one thing led to another. I had to make some immediate decisions, and it took a little while to get all the technical information I needed. ”

“You could’ve screened to let us know you’d be delayed.” There was an unpleasant edge in Nathan MacArtney’s reply. Then again, they’d expected him almost an hour earlier.

“It’s not like we don’t all have plenty of ‘urgent appointments’ of our own we could be using our time on instead of sitting twiddling our thumbs,” MacArtney added.

Kolokoltsov frowned at him, his eyes cold. Of all the people in this room, MacArtney, as Permanent Senior Undersecretary of the Interior, bore the most direct responsibility for the unholy mess they faced. Kolokoltsov was prepared to admit he’d contributed his own fair share to the making of that mess, but none of the others could rival the string of disasters MacArtney and his ally, the late, unlamented Fleet Admiral Rajampet, had brewed up before Rajampet’s overdue suicide.

“I decided it wasn’t a very good idea to discuss highly sensitive matters over the com, Nathan,” he said after a moment. “We’ve got enough alligators biting us on the arse without letting anything . . . unfortunate get leaked.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Innokentiy!” Malachai Abruzzi, the Permanent Senior Undersecretary of Information, shook his head. “Our coms are the most secure in the entire galaxy!”

“Really?” Kolokoltsov crossed to the table, settled into the chair at its head, and turned it to face the others. “You’re confident of that, are you?”

“Of course I am!”

“Then perhaps you’d care to explain how the conversation you and Nathan had last month about how to handle the Hypatian situation happened to hit the public boards in Hypatia last week?”

The silence in the deeply buried, heavily shielded conference room was as total as it was sudden, and he looked around his colleagues’ faces.

“What conversation was that?” Omosupe Quartermain asked after a long, still moment. MacArtney, in particular, had been on the Permanent Senior Undersecretary of Commerce’s personal shit list ever since the situation in the Fringe began deteriorating, since she and her colleague Agatha Wodoslawski, the Permanent Senior Undersecretary of the Treasury, were the ones trying desperately — and unsuccessfully — to cope with the catastrophic fiscal consequences.

“The one in which they considered how much simpler things would get if we dropped an intervention battalion or two into Hypatia to ‘encourage’ President Vangelis to call off the referendum. Something about shooting every tenth senator until they got it right, I believe.” Kolokoltsov’s voice was even colder than his eyes, and Wodoslawski joined him and Quartermain in glowering at Abruzzi and MacArtney.

“Oh, come on, Innokentiy!” Abruzzi protested. “That was never a *serious* policy suggestion!” He shook his head, expression disgusted. “For God’s sake, there are over two billion people on Hypatia, and another million-point-two in the Alexandria Belt! Someone really thinks a couple of intervention battalions are going to turn something like *that* around?! Give me a break!”

“Of course *I* don’t think that. That doesn’t mean someone else might not. And let’s be honest here, it wouldn’t be all that different from quite a few interventions OFS has pulled off out in the Protectorates, now would it? Did it ever occur to either of you that with feelings running as high as they are — and enough people on the other side primed to jump on any opening we give them — finding out that two of the ‘Mandarins’ are even *talking* about what would amount to a coup against a legally elected system president would play right into the hysteria mongers’ hands?”

“First, we were on a secure government com. Who the hell was going to hear about it?” Abruzzi demanded. “And, secondly, it should’ve been totally clear from the context of our entire conversation that we were venting our frustration, not recommending some kind of serious policy!”

“Malachai, you’re the Permanent Undersecretary of information! You know, better than anyone else in this room, how easy it is to strip something *out* of its context and turn it into a soundbite that says exactly the opposite of what whoever said it actually meant. And that’s just what some bastard in Hypatia’s done with your and Nathan’s little conversational . . . faux pas.”

Abruzzi had opened his mouth to respond. Now he shut it again, his expression thunderous, because Kolokoltsov was right. The Ministry of Information spent far more of its resources on “shaping the narrative” — what an earlier and more honest age might have called “producing propaganda” — than it ever did on straight news releases.

“How the hell did anybody get their hands on it in the first place?” MacArtney demanded, glaring at Abruzzi with a certain self-righteousness. *He* wasn’t the one who’d just proclaimed the inviolability of their communications channels, after all.

“If I knew that, whoever’s responsible for it would be roasting on a slow spit,” Kolokoltsov replied grimly. “All I know is that the latest courier boat from Hypatia came in about three hours ago, and your conversation — shorn of anything that could conceivably suggest it *wasn’t* a serious policy suggestion, or at least a serious *consideration* — had been on the boards for two days before it left. In those two days, according to Stephanos, it logged over nine hundred and seventy-two million hits. I’ve done the math, by the way. That works out to forty-nine percent of the total population of the star system, including every babe in arms. And for your information, that’s *seventy-five* percent of the adult population. To say it isn’t playing well with the voters would be something of an understatement, Nathan.”

“Oh my God.” Quartermain’s tone couldn’t seem to decide between disgust, anger, and resignation. “So how bad *is* the damage, Innokentiy?” she sighed.

“Well it isn’t good.” Kolokoltsov popped a data chip into the terminal in front of him and the header of a report appeared on his colleagues’ displays. “This is Nye’s initial take on it. He’s doing a more deliberate analysis, and the numbers may get a little better, but I doubt it’ll make much difference in the end. And the conclusion he’s reached is that what was going to be a squeaker that would *probably* go against us is in the process of turning into something just a bit more . . . emphatic. The word he used was ‘tsunami,’ actually.”

“All over what couldn’t be more than three or four seconds of a com conversation?” Wodoslawski looked as if she would have liked to be incredulous.

“Oh, it’s more than three or four seconds.” Kolokoltsov spared MacArtney and Abruzzi a fulminating glare, then looked at Wodoslawski. “It would seem there was quite a bit of ‘frustration venting’ in the conversation, and whoever handed it over to the Hypatian newsies must have edited all the choicer bits together, because the actual soundbite runs almost six minutes. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying this is the only thing driving Hypatian public opinion. There were already a lot of negative factors in the mix, and we all know it. But it looks as if this could be the emotional trigger that turns a vote that already looked dicey into an outright disaster."

“Shit.” Omosupe Quartermain seldom used colorful language, but she’d clearly decided to make an exception, and Kolokoltsov didn’t blame her.

With less than a third of Beowulf System’s population, and perhaps a fifth of its gross system product, Hypatia was on the small size for what was technically a Core System of the League. For that matter, as a full member system, Hypatia’s contribution to the Solarian League’s federal budget was limited, aside from the relatively modest duties levied on its interstellar shipping. It was a useful bit of cash flow, but there were probably a dozen Protectorate systems which contributed at least as much. So from that perspective, Hypatia’s potential defection was unlikely to make an already grim situation much worse.

But Hypatia, like Beowulf, had been a founding member of the Solarian League when the League Constitution was proclaimed right here in Old Chicago seven hundred fifty-seven T-years ago last month. Not only that, the system was only forty-four light-years — less than six days, for a dispatch boat — from Beowulf and the Beowulf Terminus of the Manticoran Wormhole Junction. If Hypatia opted to secede and, even more disastrously, to throw in its lot with its longtime neighbors, trading partners, and friends, it would expand the “Grand Alliance’s” bridgehead at the very heart of the Solarian League dangerously. Worse, a successful secession — *another* successful secession, since Beowulf’s was a foregone conclusion as soon as the Beowulfers got around to holding their own vote — would go a disastrously long way toward validating the *right* to secede in the court of public opinion.

And that could not be allowed.

“Perhaps you can see now why I didn’t screen you about this,” Kolokoltsov observed. “In fact, I know it’s going to be an incredible pain, but in addition to assuming anything we say on our nice, secure com system is likely to be overheard and watching our tongues accordingly, I think any sensitive information will need to be couriered back and forth between us, at least for the next few days. For that matter, it’d probably be smart of us to handle *really* sensitive information that way for the foreseeable future.”

“That’d make it almost impossible to coordinate properly,” Wodoslawski objected.

“No, it won’t.” Kolokoltsov shook his head. “It’ll make it *difficult*, granted, but all of us — except you — have our offices here in George Benton. I don’t know how they got to Nathan and Malachai’s com conversation, but this conference room is only a lift shaft away from our private offices, and it’s shielded against every form of eavesdropping known to man. For that matter, so are our offices. I’ve already found you twenty-four thousand square meters of floor space here in the tower, and if you need it, we can free up twice that much in seventy-two hours. I know moving your entire staff over would be a pain in the arse, but I don’t really see an option if we’re going to keep you in the loop.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious,” he said flatly. “Look, maybe this is an exercise in paranoia on my part, but we’re about to get handed our heads in Hypatia, people. So far, most of the Core Worlds aren't especially worried about all this, which is a mixed blessing. They're not champing at the bit to throw their support behind us, but we don't have a couple of dozen Beowulf's bolting from the League . . . yet. But that's why we can’t — we just *can’t* — go on with this kind of crap hitting us in the face every other week. "

He looked around the conference room for a long, silent moment and saw it in their faces. So far, the majority of Core Worlders still regarded the conflict with Manticore as only one more "escapade" in the Fringe. They were used to that sort of thing — so used to it, that they took it for granted. True, this time the Manties' wormhole seizures were starting to pinch many of the inner member systems enough to hurt, but what was pneumonia for the federal government's revenue stream was little more than a minor cold for the various system economies, and that was especially true for those in the Core, who had plenty of domestic industry. And despite the enormous death tolls the SLN had suffered, there was little moral outrage, either. For one thing, the public at large didn't know how high those totals were. For another, the SLN was a professional military force which represented an incredibly tiny demograpghic of the League's total population. Those deaths simply weren't impacting any significant percentage of the civilian population — not yet, at least — and in many was, he and his colleagues were just as happy about that. There were a few talking heads trying to "view with alarm" where the navy's losses were concerned, but they were gaining remarkably little traction, especially with Abruzzi managing the news flow so carefully. All of which meant the Manties were managing to strangle the Mandarins to death without enraging Solarian public opinion — outside the Sol System, where the professional governing class live, at least.

That was both a good thing and a bad thing from the Mandarins' perspective, but so far, the good outweighed the bad. And if they went on shedding the member systems which *were* paying attention, some of those other fat-and-happy member systems were going to wake up and smell the coffee. And if *that* happened . . . .

"I’ve talked to my tech people," he went on. "That's one of the reasons I was so late. And they say that if we’re all here in the tower, they can run secure, shielded, *hardwired* com lines that could only be tapped with direct physical access to the cables. I know it sounds like Dark Ages technology, but if it’ll work, I don’t really give a damn how ‘antiquated’ it is. And if all the cable involved is here in the same tower, it’ll be a lot easier for us to make sure nobody’s getting that physical access to it.”

Wodoslawski sat back, shaking her head, and Kolokoltsov couldn’t blame her. In truth, he wasn’t certain himself how much of his proposal was rational and how much was the product of his own increasing desperation. The worst thing about it, he thought, was that he proposed to turn Benton Tower into a fortress, and people living inside fortresses developed fortress *mentalities*. If he and his colleagues retreated into a bunker, even one as splendidly equipped as this one, it might encourage them to retreat into a deeper and deeper disconnect with the galaxy about them, as well.

*But where’s the option?* he asked himself. *Whether we like it or not,* somebody *hacked our coms, and none of our techs have found any fingerprints pointing at who it might’ve been or how the hell they did it. And I don’t have to explain all the implications to the others. They know as well as I do that if someone can hack our coms, God only knows what* else *they can break into! And really, the only one who’d be physically moving would be Agatá. The rest of us’re already* in *George Bentoon! For that matter, most of the ministries have been here since the day it was built, so it’s not even like the rest of the League will realize we’re forting up in the first place!*

No, they wouldn’t. George Benton Tower was indelibly associated in the public’s mind with the might and majesty of the League’s Federal Government. Moving the other ministries *out* of George Benton would have generated far more speculation than moving Treasury *into* it. But he and his colleagues would know, and so would their most senior and trusted subordinates. And from there, the awareness would seep downward with the inevitability of a winter freeze in Tarko-Sale, his hometown in ancient Siberia.

He looked around the shielded, guarded conference room once more and wondered how often his fellows reflected upon the name of the two-kilometer tall tower which housed the Solarian League’s heart and brain. Thought about the fact that it had been named for one of the dozen or so most famous human beings in history, the man most responsible, in many ways, for the League’s creation. The co-leader of the medical teams — the teams from *Beowulf* — which had preserved human life on Old Earth itself after the Final War. The man who’d seen the need for a coordinating authority that could span hundreds of light-years, recognized its necessity in the wake of the catastrophic damage he’d done so much to repair, and spent the last thirty-five T-years of his life bringing that authority into existence.

The man whose distant descendent headed the Beowulf System government which was about to stab the Solarian League in the heart. Of course, he must have lirterally billions of “distant descendents” after the next best thing to eight hundred years, and it was only logical for them to be concentrated in Beowulf and its closest galactic neighbors. Yet it was bitterly ironic that even as Chyang Benton-Ramirez prepared to oversee the referendum which would supply the dagger, yet *another* of those descendents commanded the “Grand Fleet” which might well drive it home.

It was, perhaps, fortunate so few Solarians were sufficiently aware of their own history to ask why *that* man’s descendents had chosen to destroy all he’d built.

“All right,” Wodoslawski said at last. “My analysts and accountants need more space than we’ve got over at De Soto Tower, anyway. We’ve been looking at possible solutions for the last couple of years, really, in a desultory sort of way. For that matter, we’ve already considered moving into George Benton, and it looks like I can free up everything they need back in De Soto by moving my administrative personnel over here. That should at least keep it from looking like some kind of . . . panic reaction.”

“And how long is it going to take to install these ‘hardwired’ coms of yours?” MacArtney demanded. For someone whose loose lips had contributed so much to the need for those selfsame coms, he sounded remarkably belligerent, Kolokoltsov thought.

“They’ll be running the first lines to all the offices here in the tower within two or three hours,” he replied. “It’d be faster to just reprogram the wall molycircs, but a lot less secure, so they’re running actual cable through the air ducts and service shafts. According to my security chief and the building executive, they should complete the installation within eight days or so. After that, we can probably go back to electronic conferencing for everything but the most sensitive data.”

“‘*Probably*,’” Abruzzi repeated sourly, then shrugged. “All right. I think you may be jumping at shadows — or, at least, closing the barn door after the cow’s left — but I also didn’t think a frigging *joke* with Nathan would turn Hypatia into a damned disaster, either! So *I’m* not going to tell you you don’t have a point, Innokentiy!”

Kolokoltsov nodded and turned his gaze on MacArtney.

“All right. *All right!*” The permanent senior undersecretary of the interior raised both hands. “If everyone else’s ready to go along with this, who am I to argue? And,” he added grudgingly, “Malachai’s right. If something he and I tossed off in a casual conversation can have the kind of effect your analyst’s describing, it’s probably time we *all* got paranoid as hell!”

Not the most gracious assent in history, Kolokoltsov reflected, but he’d take it. Now if only he could figure out some way to toss MacArtney off the troika before he did something even more regrettable. Unfortunately, every single one of them knew where too many bodies were buried for the others to safely feed him — or her — to the wolves.

“In the meantime, though, and while we’re here,” MacArtney continued, “what the hell are we going to *do* about Hypatia?” He looked around the table, his expression grim. “It’s bad enough we’re about to lose Beowulf, but at least where Beowulf’s concerned we’ve built the case that they must’ve decided years ago to throw in with the Manties’ imperialist ambitions. We haven’t done that in Hypatia’s case.”

Personally, Kolokoltsov had distinct reservations about how well they’d “built the case” for Beowulf’s "long-planned treachery” against the League. God knew they’d given it their best shot, and the establishment newsies had embraced the narrative. But while the public opinion metrics (here in Sol, at least; trying to keep up with current public opinion in star systems hundreds of light-years distant was about as impossible as a task came) were favorable to the government’s actions *so far*, there was no guarantee they’d stay that way. Even here in Sol, a lot of that "favorable" attitude was probably as much lack of the interest that might have led to opposition, which meant it was subject to change without much notice. And Beowulf had a tremendous amount of well-earned prestige within the League. Given time, that prestige was only too likely to reassert itself in the public’s mind, and that could be . . . unfortunate.

Despite which, MacArtney had a point about Hypatia.

Hypatia hadn’t been on their radar when they first began looking at other star systems which might follow Beowulf’s lead. It should have been, but the Hypatians had adopted a calm wait-and-see attitude which — he admitted it — he and his colleagues had misread as fundamental acceptance of the League’s indissoluble nature. Unfortunately, that had changed when the Manties leaked news of Operation Raging Justice to the media long before Massimo Filareta ever reached Manticore. Hypatia's relations with Beowulf were closer than its relations with Manticore, but Hypatians had been marrying both Beowulfers and Manticorans for centuries. In a lot of ways, technical Core World status or not, their population's mindset was more closely attuned to the Fringers beyond the Manticoran Wormhole Junction than it was to Sol and Old terra, and they hadn’t reacted well to the dispatch of hundreds of superdreadnoughts to attack Manticore — and several million of their relatives — without so much as a formal declaration of war. And once the possibility of secession had been mentioned, they’d moved forward far more quickly than anyone could have imagined, aided by a system constitution which made it easy to call snap referendums to approve — or *dis*approve — proposed government policies. Kolokoltsov doubted the Hypatian Constitution’s drafters had ever envisioned that provision being used for something like this, but their handiwork had let System President Adam Vangelis and his Attorney General, Thanos Boyagis, put the machinery into motion with astonishing speed.

Hypatia would actually vote over a T-month before Beowulf, and there was little question that the outcome of the referendum would impact the Beowulf vote.

*It’s not going to* change *it, though*, he reflected. *There’s not a doubt in the universe which way Beowulf’s going to vote, and there hasn’t been from the beginning. What Hypatia* will *do, unfortunately, is to increase the margin in favor of secession, and probably by a lot. And it’ll also mean* Hypatia *will be the example all the hotheads in those Verge Systems cite when they start calling for* their *star systems to secede*. *Unless we can figure out a way to . . . defuse that particular threat, that is*.

He looked around the table again, thinking about the policy options Stephanos Nye had outlined in the conclusions section of his report. He’d provided half a dozen possible scenarios, but it was clear which one *he* favored, and Kolokoltsov wondered if the others would be as appalled by it as he was?

And whether or not *they’d* find themselves endorsing it anyway.

**HMS *Clas Fleming***

**Prime Terminus**

**Prime-Ajay Hyper Bridge**

“The really surprising difference is how much less . . . call it ‘cosmopolitan,’ I guess, than Manticorans they tend to be,” Sara Kate Lessem said from the display. “I have to say that’s not something I would’ve expected, and it took me a while to figure it out. But it finally came to me.” She shook her head. “They’re *Solarians*, and Solarians automatically know everything they need to know about the neobarbs inhabiting the outer dark beyond the League’s borders. So why bother to look for more data, far less open their minds to new opinions? And, to be fair, even some of them who’ve spent their entire careers in the Navy haven’t seen anywhere near as many foreign star systems as our Navy personnel, much less our merchant spacers! For that matter, we see a *lot* more visitors from other star systems right here in Manticore than most Solarians ever see. So I suppose I *can* understand— in a way — that they never get exposed to anyone from outside their ‘bubble.’ But that doesn’t make it one bit less scary. If the people in the Solarian *Navy* are . . . unsophisticated enough, let’s say, to never even question the nonsense the Mandarins are spewing, how’s the Solarian woman-in-the-street supposed to realize it’s all lies?”

*Now that*, Commodore Sir Martin Lessem reflected, pausing the letter for just a moment to refill his coffee cup, *is an excellent summation of the problem, sweetheart*. He smiled. *I always knew you were a sharp one, despite the fact that you decided to marry* me! *Too bad I don’t have any better clue about the answer to your question than anyone else seems to have at the moment*.

He sipped coffee, gazing wistfully at his wife’s frozen image. At the moment, he and Cruiser Squadron 912 were 387.7 light-years (and forty-five days’ hyper-travel) from the Manticore System, and it was going to be a while before he got the chance to hold her again. Fortunately, letters were another matter — for the moment, at least. Despite the Prime System’s distance from Manticore, it was “only” twenty-nine days’ hyper-travel from Beowulf. As interstellar travel times went, that wasn’t especially bad. It wasn’t anything he’d call *good*, but he’d had to put up with far worse.

Of course, that hadn’t been in the middle of a war against the largest star nation in human history. That put rather a different slant on things . . . and had quite a lot to do with how CruRon 912 came to be floating in interstellar dimness just over seven light-hours from the Prime System’s G0 primary.

His squadron’s only company was a single platform keeping station on the Prime Terminus of the Prime-Ajay hyper bridge. That platform, the home of Prime Traffic Control, was on the small side. Then again, the Prime-Ajay bridge wasn’t very impressive, compared to the massive Manticoran Wormhole Junction, and saw perhaps five percent of the Junction’s traffic. The Prime System, however, was also only 21.5 LY (and less than three days) from the Agueda System and the Agueda-Stine hyper-bridge. That made this unprepossessing, thoroughly depressing volume of nothingness far more valuable than first impressions — or simple economics — might have suggested, given Lacoön Two’s strategy of seizing control of as many wormholes as possible.

CruRon 912’s job was to see to it that the Prime Terminus stayed seized, particularly since Vice Admiral Correia had taken the rest of the task force off to Agueda en route to Stine. It would be . . . inconvenient if he returned to Prime and found he had to return to Manticore through hyper. That was a point worth keeping in mind, since eventually even the Solarian League Navy was bound to start trying to do something about Lacoön’s consequences.

Lessem grimaced at the thought and scolded himself for it. So far, the Sollies had stepped on their swords with almost unbelievable thoroughness, but they weren’t really all idiots. It was obvious the SLN’s peacetime ossification had gone deeper than anyone in ONI had been prepared to suggest in his wildest dreams, but there were plenty of perfectly good Solarian brains. The Darwinian consequences of the SLN’s obsolescent weapons and . . . less than ideal operational thinking were bound to push some of those good brains to the forefront far more rapidly than Lessem’s more optimistic — and, in his opinion, chauvinistic — colleagues thought possible. They damned well ought to know better than that, but it wasn’t really fair for him to fault them too severely for it. He found *himself* doing it too often for him to be casting any stones, witness the “even” of his own thoughts!

The good news, as his letter from Sara Kate reemphasized, was that those good brains had to start digging at the bottom of an awful deep hole. What had happened thirty-nine days ago made that painfully clear. He couldn’t imagine why Massimo Filareta had been *stupid* enough to open fire when Duchess Harrington had so conclusively demonstrated the hopelessness of Eleventh Fleet’s position, but what had happened to his ships was a clear example of that Darwinian process in action. And given her position at Bassingford, Sara Kate was better placed than most to see the human cost.

He sipped more coffee and touched the play button again.

“Another thing that’s pretty obvious,” she said, “is that an awful lot of them — even some of their senior officers — still outright refuse to acknowledge how outdated their hardware is. I know that’s got to be hard for them, but I don’t understand how they can stay in such deep denial after what happened to their fleet! Doctor Flint — I think I’ve told you about him before; he’s the new Head of Psychology here at Bassingford — tells me that’s exactly what’s happening, that they’re still in the ‘denial phase,’ and I suppose that makes sense. It’s not exactly what I’d call a survival trait, though!” She shook her head on the display, and her expression had turned grimmer. “If they can’t get past that pretty darn quickly, a lot more of their people are going to wind up under our care here at Bassingford . . . or dead. I’d like to think we’d be faster to ac—”

The display froze, Sara Kate’s voice sliced off in mid-word by the sudden, shrill, unmistakable stridency of the General Quarters alarm. Lessem was still jerking erect in his chair when a very different voice came over the speakers.

“Battle Stations! Battle Stations!” it barked. “All hands, man Battle Stations! This is no drill! Battle Stations! Battle Stations!”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Talk to me, Lester,” Commodore Lessem said crisply, two minutes later, as he strode out of the lift car and onto the flag bridge of HMS *Clas Fleming*, the *Saganami-*C-class flagship of both Cruiser Squadron 912 and Task Group 47.3.

“They came out of hyper just over three minutes ago, Sir,” Commander Lester Thúri, CruRon 912’s chief of staff replied, straightening and turning from the display over which he’d been bent. “The good news is, they’re right on top of the outer platforms, so we had eyes on them as soon as they arrived. The bad news is, there’s a hell of a lot of them.”

Lessem made a “keep talking” motion with the fingers of his right hand, and Thúri gestured to the master display’s rash of crimson icons.

“We’re still putting the numbers together, Sir, but it looks like at least a hundred Solly warships. We’ve got four really big-assed impeller wedges. They’re big enough to be superdreadnoughts, but they look commercial. CIC’s best guess is that we’re looking at somewhere around fifty battlecruisers, supported by another forty or fifty light cruisers and destroyers, and that the big signatures are transports or fleet support vessels.”

“Who was it back on Old Earth that said quantity has a quality all its own?” Lessem asked whimsically, and Thúri snorted harshly.

“Think they’re here because of us, Sir?”

“It’s possible.” Lessem rubbed his chin as he frowned at the master display. “It would be an awful fast reaction compared to anything we’ve seen out of them so far, but there’s been time for someone to reach Wincote. We didn’t *see* anyone leaving the system, but we all know how much *that* means. If that’s what happened, though, they must’ve had these people sitting there ready to translate out the instant they heard about us.”

Commander Thúri nodded, moving over to stand beside his tall, square-built commodore, and his expression was thoughtful. At the moment, Lessem had exactly ten heavy cruisers, only four of them *Saganami-Cs*, supported by six destroyers and HMS *David K. Brown*, one of the new *David Taylor*-class fast support vessels.

One might, the commander reflected, call that a *slight* force imbalance.

Lessem didn’t know what his chief of staff was thinking at that moment, but if he *had* known, he wouldn’t have disagreed. It was true that his *Saganami-Cs* and HMS *Ajax* and HMS *Honda Tadakatsu*, the pair of *Roland*-class destroyers attached to TG 47.3, had full loadouts of Mark 16 dual-drive missiles, but the *Rolands*’ Achilles’ heel was the class’s limited magazine space. Each of them carried only two hundred and forty of the big, powerful missiles, less than half the number a *Saganami-C* stowed. And none of the rest of his ships’ internal launchers could handle the Mark 16 at all.

Unfortunately, the Royal Manticoran Navy didn’t have an unlimited supply of Mark 16-capable warships, and a lot of those it did have had been retained for the Grand Fleet or dispatched to Admiral Gold Peak’s Tenth Fleet in the Talbott Sector. He did have six *Saganami-Bs* — *Shelly Ann Jensen, Margaret Mallory, William S. Patterson, Oliver Savander, Rich Rucholka*, and *Jennifer Woodard* — all of whom were armed with the extended range Mark 13, but that weapon’s powered envelope was far shorter than the Mark 16’s; it was a single-drive missile and couldn’t incorporate a ballistic phase into its flight profile; and its warhead was lighter, to boot.

*Which may be something of a moot point*, he reflected as the red icons of the Solarian task force began accelerating towards the wormhole at a sedate 375 G.

Battles outside the hyper-limit of a star system were virtually unheard of, for several very good reasons. The most salient was that there was seldom anything outside the hyper-limit worth fighting *for*. Wormholes like the one at TG 47.3’s back were the primary exception to that rule, and so was the occasional valuable resource or bit of system infrastructure, like a particularly rich asteroid belt, which lay closer to the primary but still beyond its hyper-limit.

But there was another excellent reason battles were seldom fought outside hyper-limits: any starship outside a limit could translate into hyper any time it chose to. And because no one ever willingly fought a battle he didn’t expect to win, the weaker side in any confrontation outside a hyper-limit always chose to translate into hyper before the stronger side could engage it.

Unless there was some reason it couldn’t, that was.

That was the true reason for the massive fortifications covering the Manticoran Wormhole Junction. They were designed to annihilate anyone foolish enough to attempt an attack through one of the Junction’s secondary termini, of course, but in addition, they were intended to provide sufficient concentrated combat power to stand up against almost any conceivable attack through hyper-space.

None of those fortifications were present on the Prime Terminus, however. Prime’s five billion citizens had never found it necessary to build or maintain deep-space forts or anything resembling an actual navy. Although the Prime System was nominally independent, it was “closely affiliated” with the Solarian League, which meant it could rely upon the largest navy in the galaxy for its defense and required only a handful of lightly armed units to police the system’s internal volume. And since everyone knew the Prime Terminus was under League protection, there’d never been a need to fortify it. Anyone stupid enough to seize it would soon have found the SLN knocking on his home star system’s front door.

Ajay, at the far end of the terminus, was *not* “closely affiliated” with the League. In fact, Ajay didn’t much care for the League. Although it maintained a civil relationship with Old Chicago, it had been an independent star nation for the better part of three hundred and fifty T-years. It had, in fact, been settled by colonists from other Verge systems who hadn’t cared for the way the League’s foreign policy was evolving, and their descendents had a not unreasonable suspicion that the Office of Frontier Security would really have liked control of the Ajay Terminus. As a counterweight to those OFS ambitions, the system had cultivated cordial relations and a long-standing, robust trade relationship with both the Star Kingdom of Manticore and Beowulf.

Despite that, System President Adelaide Tyson had protested in vociferous terms when Task Force 47 arrived on her doorstep and announced it was taking possession of her star system’s greatest natural resource as part of Lacoön Two. Lessem was pretty sure most of her protests had been in the nature of covering her star-nation’s posterior if things went badly for the Grand Alliance. They put her officially on record as strongly opposed to the Star Empire’s “patently illegal” seizure of every warp terminus in sight. Hopefully, that would be sufficient to protect Ajay from the League’s ire in the event of an eventual Solarian triumph. For that matter, win or lose, the League would still be there the day after the peace treaty was finally signed. Ajay would still have to live with it, and Sollies had long memories. Letting word get back to Old Chicago that she’d told the RMN she was delighted to see it in her star system was likely to put a certain strain on that future relationship.

Under the circumstances, Commodore Lessem found it difficult to fault President Tyson, especially since however strongly she might have protested, she and her modest Ajay System Navy had stayed out of Task Force 47’s way and the Ajay Astro Control services had cooperated smoothly — although only after protesting stingently — with the foreign navy which had illegally seized control of its wormhole.

System Director Gregor Cho had reacted rather differently here in Prime, however. He’d protested even more strongly than Tyson, and he’d ordered his Terminus Traffic Control Command to refuse any cooperation with the invaders. Vice Admiral Correia had expected that and brought along his own specialists, who now provided a skeleton crew for the Prime Traffic Control platform after the Primese crews had been evicted from it. The vice admiral had also taken it as a given that Cho would find a way to send word to the League as soon as possible, but neither he nor Lessem had anticipated this prompt a response.

Which brought Lessem back to the unpalatable odds headed his way.

“Should we call Captain Rice forward, Sir?” Commander Thomas Wozniak, his operations officer, asked quietly.

“No.” Lessem shook his head. Captain Jessica Rice commanded CruRon 912’s second division, the *Saganami-Cs*’ HMS *Peregrine S. Faye* and HMS *Lisa Holtz*, covering the Ajay Terminus . . . and the rest of TG 47.3’s back.

“She wouldn’t add that much to our firepower,” the commodore continued, “and we may need them — and *Echidna* — right where they are.” He rubbed his chin a moment longer, then inhaled sharply and turned from the display.

“George,” he said.

“Yes, Sir?” Lieutenant George Gordon, his com officer, replied.

“First, contact Commander Aamodt. I want *So-po* to stand by to transit the terminus with a complete tactical upload for Captain Rice on my command. The rest of his division is to lift our people off the Traffic Control platform and evacuate them to Ajay immediately.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Thúri made a sound of sour amusement, and Lessem cocked an eyebrow at him. The commander shrugged.

“Aamodt isn’t going to like that, Sir,” he said.

“Maybe not, but I doubt it’ll surprise him,” Lessem replied, and Thúri nodded.

Commander Tearlach Aamodt wore two hats as the CO of HMS *Obusier* and the commanding officer of Destroyer Division 94.2. Like HMS *So-po* — and all DesDiv 94.2’s other units — *Obusier* was a *Culverin*-class destroyer. The *Culverins* had been bleeding-edge technology when they were introduced in 1899 PD, but that had been twenty-three T-years ago, before anyone outside a few ultra-classified research programs had ever heard of anything called a multidrive missile. They remained capable platforms against anyone who didn’t have MDMs or DDMs of his own, but they were thoroughly obsolete against modern weapons. That meant Lessem could dispense with them more readily than with any of his newer units. They’d also been built for larger crews than the bigger, more modern *Rolands*, which gave them the redundant life-support to take the Manticoran traffic control specialists off the PTC platform.

“While George is talking to Aamodt, Tom,” Lessem continued, turning back to Wozniak, “tell Captain Amberline to begin deploying and enabling pods as per Pattern Able.”

“Yes, Sir.” The operations officer didn’t sound very surprised by the order.

Harriet Amberline commanded *David K. Brown*, most of whose capacious cargo pods were stuffed with Mark 16s. One of the FSV’s cargo modules was loaded with Mark 23 MDMs, which offered twice the Mark 16’s powered envelope, but Mark 23s were in short supply, not to be wasted where the smaller Mark 16 would do the job. More to the point, the Mark 23’s greater range would offer no real advantage in the sort of engagement Lessem saw coming. Pattern Able deployed only Mark 16 pods, and he considered sending *David K. Brown* (known as “*Brownie*” by her crew, despite the fact that that name officially belonged to a *Hydra*-class CLAC) back to Ajay after the *Culverins* as soon as Amberline completed the Able deployment. She was a valuable unit, although the Service Train units with Rice in Ajay carried many times the number of pods she did. Despite her size, however, she could easily out-accelerate anything in the Solarian inventory and she represented his missile pod piggy bank.

*And I may need to dip into that “piggy bank” pretty damned soon*, he thought grimly. *A lot’s going to depend on what these people decide to do*.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“CIC makes it ten or twelve cruisers, four destroyers, and what *could* be a dreadnought, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Barthilu Rosiak reported.

“A *dreadnought*?” Admiral Jane Isotalo, CO, Task Force 1027, Solarian League Navy, repeated with a raised eyebrow. No first-line navy had used dreadnoughts in twenty T-years. ONI said both the Manties and the Havenites had used them early in their wars, but they’d all been retired long since.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Lamizana, TF 1027’s intelligence officer, said before Rosiak could reply.

Isotalo transferred her raised eyebrow to Lamizana, and the intel officer shrugged.

“CIC isn’t saying that’s necessarily what it *is*, Ma’am,” she said. “But they’re calling its mass around three million tons, which is too big for even one of the Manties’ battlecruisers. It’s too big even for a battleship, for that matter, but way too small for an SD. It could be some kind of collier or supply vessel — in fact, it probably is — but it’s showing military-grade impellers. Until we know more, I think we have to assume it’s a warship.”

Isotalo considered that for a moment, then nodded. Unlike her, Lamizana was Frontier Fleet. Under normal conditions, that might have left Isotalo less impressed by her caveat. Little though the admiral cared to admit it, though, Frontier Fleet had demonstrated a better track record than Battle Fleet when it came to acknowledging the threat of Manticore’s technological advantages.

*Not that* any *of us have precisely covered ourselves with glory*, she thought.

Still, Lamizana was smart and she’d invested a lot of effort in acquiring the best insight into Manty capabilities she could even before TF 1027 had been tapped for Operation Buccaneer and sent off to burn Ajay’s orbital infrastructure to the ground.

“What to do you think they’re doing here, Maleen?” Isotalo asked now. “More of this wormhole seizure strategy of theirs?”

“Most likely, Ma’am.” Lamizana nodded. “I can’t think of another reason for them to be swanning around three or four hundred light-years from Manticore or Beowulf. They haven’t had time yet to learn about Buccaneer and start deploying interception forces, and if that’s what these people were doing, I’d expect them to be in greater strength than this.”

“Just our luck to run into them here,” Rear Admiral Kimmo Ramaalas, Isotalo’s chief of staff observed with a sour expression.

Like Lamizana, Ramaalas was Frontier Fleet, not Battle Fleet, and he’d been with Isotalo for less than three T-months. In fact, he’d been assigned over her protest when they took Rear Admiral Tirso Frederick away from her. Frederick had been her chief of staff for the better part of three T-years, but Winston Kingsford had made a point of breaking up established command relationships — and of cross-assigning Frontier Fleet and Battle Fleet officers — ever since he’d replaced Rajampet Rajani as Chief of Naval Operations. The new policy had infuriated Isotalo when it was initiated, and she’d scarcely been alone in that.

She’d told herself it wasn’t Ramaalas’s fault. And, given the sheer depth of the crap in which the SLN had found itself since Josef Byng’s New Tuscan stupidity, the last thing anyone could afford was for her to create any avoidable friction with her new chief of staff. None of which had made her happy to see him aboard SLNS *Foudroyant*, her battlecruiser flagship.

It had helped that, also like Lamizana, Ramaalas was smart and tactful. That wasn’t enough to endear him to his Battle Fleet fellows, but it helped, and he and Isotalo had established a firm mutual respect.

“It’s inconvenient, Kimmo,” she acknowledged now. “But I suggest we look upon it as an opportunity, not a liability.” Ramaalas cocked his head at her, and she showed her teeth briefly. “I still don’t know that I accept all the horror stories Maleen and Bart have been telling us about Manty missile ranges,” she went on, twitching her head at Lamizana and Rosiak, “but I’m not about to assume they’re wrong, either. The bastards’ve sure as hell been kicking the crap out of us with *something*! But however good *their* missiles are, we’ve got a hundred thousand pods worth of improved Cataphracts of our own just aboard the colliers. They can’t possibly match the depth of our magazines, and an engagement way out here won’t play to their strengths the way one inside the hyper-limit would. The question in my mind is whether they’re here on their own or if they’re here to hold the door open for someone else?”

“You’re thinking they may have staged through Prime en route to Agueda, Ma’am?” Ramaalas said.

“It would make sense, given this wormhole-seizure strategy of theirs,” Isotalo pointed out. “And if that’s what’s happening, kicking them off the terminus and keeping them off it could play hell with their logistics. It might even force whoever they sent to Agueda to fall back on Manticore the long way.” She smiled nastily. “That’d take their entire force out of action for almost two T-months without anyone even firing a shot.”

“Agreed, Ma’am.” Ramaalas nodded. “But whatever else happens, they’re bound to send a dispatch boat back through the wormhole to Ajay.”

“That’s true,” Isotalo conceded. “I don’t know how much good that will do them, though. I expect we’ll get a read on that shortly. If they’ve got enough firepower in Ajay to give us a fight, they’ll either call it forward to support their pickets here, or else they’ll fall back through the terminus to concentrate their forces if we come through after them.”

*Which*, she added silently, *I have no intention whatsoever of doing. The last thing I need is to send the task force through in a wormhole assault against a prepared defense!*

She thought about that as she contemplated the main plot. The range to the Manties was just over five light-minutes. At this distance, all *Foudroyant*’s onboard sensors could see were the enemy’s impeller signatures. The recon platforms speeding ahead of TF 1027 would begin providing better data in another twenty minutes or so, but she was unhappily certain the Manties already had that “better data” on her own command. ONI had been forced to accept that the Royal Manticoran Navy and its allies truly did have an FTL com capability — with sufficient bandwidth for recon drones — over at least intra-system ranges. It seemed unlikely any Manty commander would allow herself to be caught with her trousers down, so there was undoubtedly a shell of sensor platforms exactly like that spread out around the wormhole.

“Time to the terminus, Magumo?” she asked without looking away from the plot.

“We’re ninety-four million kilometers out, Ma’am,” Commodore Magumo Saintula, her astrogator, replied. “At current acceleration, we’d make turnover for a zero-zero intercept in eighty-four minutes. Velocity at turnover would be one-eight-point-six thousand KPS.”

“Thank you,” she said.

That was the geometry for an n-space approach, of course. They could have micro-jumped the three hundred-odd light-seconds through hyper in a fraction of the same time, and if the Manties chose to stand and fight on this side of the wormhole, she suspected there’d be quite a few micro-jumps in the not-too-distant future. Astrogation was more than a little dicey on short-range jumps, though, and she didn’t plan on making any of them she didn’t have to. Besides, a normal-space approach would give Rosiak, Lamizana, and their light-speed-limited drones more time to pry loose additional tactical data.

She studied the plot’s bland icons for another fifteen or twenty seconds, then shrugged.

“In that case, I imagine we’ll be finding out what they have in mind in a couple of hours,” she observed. She clasped her hands behind her, turned from the plot, and walked to her command chair. “In the meantime, Bart,” she continued, “let’s get the Huskies deployed and open the intervals between the task groups. Put Santini in the van, but I want at least three light-seconds between the groups.”

Rosiak looked at her and she smiled.

“If they decide to stand and fight, I’m more than willing to help them waste as much ammunition as possible,” she said. “So at the same time you’re passing the order to open the intervals, inform Tsukahara, Bonrepaux, and Santini that I want their best astrogators – I don’t care whether they’re on the flagships or somewhere else in the group — ready to compute the tightest micro-jumps they can give me if I ask for them.”

Rosiak’s eyes narrowed. Then he nodded with a smile of his own.

“Understood, Ma’am,” he said.

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“Sir, CIC is reporting something . . . odd,” Commander Wozniak said.

Commodore Lessem turned from his conversation with Commander Thúri, raising an index finger at the chief of staff in a “hold onto that thought” gesture.

“What sort of ‘odd,’ Tom?”

“It looks almost like four or five thousand recon drones, Sir.”

“Four or five *thousand* drones?” Lessem’s eyebrows rose, and Wozniak nodded.

“That’s what it looks like . . . almost, Sir, but I don’t think it’s what it is.”

Lessem crossed the flag bridge and looked over Wozniak’s shoulder at the ops officer’s display. Given the scale of the plot, the impeller signatures of the “drones” Wozniak had reported formed a sort of haze around the deploying Solarian battlecruisers rather than registering as distinct point sources. A digital sidebar spun upward as the sensors aboard the Ghost Rider platforms keeping an eye on the intruders — well, he supposed, the most *recently arrived* intruders, if he wanted to be fair about it — detected and plotted the blossoming signatures.

“You’re right,” he said. “They can’t be recon drones, not staying that tight in around their formation. I don’t know what *else* they could be, though.”

“You can’t really tell from the display, Sir, but CIC says they’re definitely forming constellations around the battlecruisers. Whatever they are, there are approximately a hundred of them associated with each battlecruiser. I guess they could be some kind of missile defense — maybe they’ve come up with new decoy platforms to replace or supplement Halo and they’re establishing as dense a pattern of them as they can around our priority targets — but that doesn’t feel right, either. Whatever else they are, though, they aren’t stealthy enough for reconnaissance platforms. We’re actually picking up a sniff of them on *Clas Fleming’*s shipboard sensors, even at this range. We’re not resolving individual signatures clearly – not the way Ghost Rider is — but we can *see* them, and we shouldn’t be seeing even Solarian drones at this range.”

“Which doesn’t even count the fact that there’s no sane reason to launch recon drones and then keep them tied in that tight to your ships,” Lessem said, nodding his head in agreement. He stood gazing at the display for ten or fifteen seconds, hands clasped behind him and lips pursed in thought, then shrugged.

“Well, I imagine we’ll find out what they’re up to in due time. And at least any discovering we have to do is going to happen outside anyone’s hyper-limit.”

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“Commodore Quigley’s on station, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Rosiak said.

“Thank you, Bart.”

Jane Isotalo nodded as she leaned back in her command chair and studied the master plot. Millicent Quigley’s TG 1027.4 was the real reason she was prepared to spend missiles like water against a Manty squadron outside a limit. Unless she somehow managed to close to a much shorter range than the opposing commander was likely to allow, she didn’t expect to kill very many of the Manties — not when they could duck into hyper to avoid her fire. No doubt the Manty CO would be willing to let her waste a lot of missiles *trying* for kills, and under normal circumstances, Isotalo would have been concerned about the sorts of ammunition expenditures involved. In this case, however, Quigley’s three 7,500,000-ton *Voyager*-class freighters gave her rather deeper magazines than usual.

Unfortunately, the *Voyagers* were part of the Navy’s TUFT fleet: civilian vessels designated to be “Taken Up From Trade” in an emergency. The Federal Government subsidized the construction of TUFT units, which gave it first call on them if the Navy decided to call in its markers, but they weren’t designed to military-grade specifications and the *Voyagers* were a civilian design. They were unarmed and carried no active defenses. They were also sluggish compared to warships their size, which was why she’d moved Quigley’s freighters, the *Atlas*-class fleet repair vessel *Hercules*, and their escorting light cruisers and destroyers, to a position a half million kilometers astern of Vice Admiral Tsukahara’s TG 1027.3, her trailing group of battlecruisers. That gave them more time to dodge if anything nasty came their way, but it left them close enough to deploy additional Huskies for Tsukahara’s battlecruisers if they were needed.

She glanced at the plot’s sidebar. TF 1027 had made turnover eight and a half minutes ago. The range had dropped to thirty-eight million kilometers, and the closing velocity toward the motionless Manties had fallen to 16,704 KPS.

*Seventy-five minutes to a zero-zero with the terminus*, she thought. *Wonder what’s going through their heads over there?*

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“Goodness me,” Sir Martin Lessem murmured. “I do believe those people want the wormhole.”

“Do you really, Sir?” Commander Thúri asked. Lessem glanced at him and nodded. “What was your first indication, Sir?”

Lessem snorted in amusement, although, truth to tell, watching that many battlecruisers advancing towards his command wasn’t the most amusing thing he’d ever done. Especially given their acceleration rate. The Ghost Rider platforms had confirmed class IDs on the Sollies, and even at standard peacetime safety margins, the *Indefatigable* and *Nevada*-class battlecruisers could have produced an acceleration of 3.83 KPS². They were showing only 3.68 KPS², however — fifteen gravities lower than their eighty-percent settings. That might not seem like a vast difference, but it had suggested — and the platforms had confirmed — just what those mystery “recon drone” impellers signatures were all about.

Each of the incoming battlecruisers was towing a chain of missile pods outside its wedge, and the pods in question appeared nowhere in Tom Wozniak’s databases on enemy capabilities.

It was tempting to assume they represented a jury rigged lash-up, improvised because of the Sollies’ technological inferiority. Come to that, that might actually be accurate. But those pods looked suspiciously like the “donkeys” Shannon Foraker had devised for the Republic of Haven Navy before the Republic’s attack on Manticore. There were far too many of them for the number of ships on his display to be towing on individual tractors, and the clustered deployment patterns strongly suggested something more like the donkey than Manticore’s tractor-equipped missile pods. More to the point, although the Solarians’ acceleration was on the low side, it wasn’t as low as it ought to be with that many pods on tow. And the reason it wasn’t was that unlike Manticoran or Havenite missile pods, these had impellers of their own.

From the modest strength of their wedges, it appeared the Sollies had probably grafted the impeller nodes of a standard recon drone onto them, which would explain CIC’s initial confusion over what they were. Packing in those nodes had to have cut deeply into the pods’ volume, and he doubted they could maintain their current acceleration level for an extended period out of onboard power. But if they were, indeed, the conceptual equivalent of Havenite “donkeys,” they were equipped only with tractors of their own and power and telemetry relays. The squeeze on their volume wouldn’t cost the Solly commander any missiles, since they’d never been intended to carry missiles in the first place, and their impellers would go quite some way towards reducing the SLN’s acceleration disadvantage vis-à-vis the Grand Alliance. *Clas Fleming*’s eighty-percent acceleration rate was 5.697 KPS², sixty gravities higher than a *Nevada* could turn out with no safety margin at all. If both ships went to maximum military acceleration, *Clas Fleming*’s advantage would be over two hundred and forty gravities. Nothing was going to let a *Nevada* overhaul a *Saganami-C* from a standing start, but towing that many unpowered pods would have drastically reduced the Sollies’ already sluggish acceleration rates. *With* the built-in drives, the battlecruisers’ acceleration curves were only grossly inferior to his own, not *hopelessly* so.

Jury rigged or carefully thought through, though, they had to be a response to what the Grand Alliance’s missiles had done to the Sollies ever since New Tuscany. The SLN’s system-defense pods — system defense was the only role in which the prewar Sollies had ever considered employing missile pods — had neither needed nor possessed impellers of their own. So these things had to have been designed and put into production since the shooting started. In some ways, that was a small thing, scarcely likely to affect the balance of combat power in any significant way. As a harbinger of possible Solarian activity, though, it was . . . worrisome to see it so soon.

And there were a *lot* of the whatever-the-hell-they-were out there.

He didn’t like the implications of that at all. What it said about the number of missiles which might shortly be fired in his command’s direction was bad enough, although the Sollies’ hit probabilities at extended range would still suck wind. The speed with which this new system had appeared was a lot worse, though. It would seem the Darwinian process he’d worried about had begun, and at least as bad, a single task force this far from home had deployed just under five thousand of them, and they were towing towing a total of what appeared to be 30,000 unpowered missile pods. Assuming six to ten cells per pod, that would represent between 180,000 and 300,000 missiles, and given the presence of what looked suspiciously like ammunition ships tagging along behind the battlecruisers, he suspected that was only the tip of the iceberg. So in addition to evidence of Solarian adaptiveness, he was looking at proof of the League industrial infrastructure’s capacity to put a brand new system into production in staggering numbers very, very quickly.

*Not good*, he thought. *Not good at all*.

But those implications were for the future — and for the attention of better paid, more highly placed brains than his — he reminded himself. Best he focus his attention on whatever the Solly CO had in mind for TG 47.3.

The Sollies had opened their formation as they closed, and the deployment they’d adopted wasn’t exactly standard. They’d split into three roughly equal-sized sub-formations — he suspected they represented the other side’s task group organization — advancing almost in a column formation, or perhaps like beads on a string, towards the terminus. CIC had designated them Alpha One through Alpha Three, and they were spaced almost nine hundred thousand kilometers apart which suggested the Solarian commander had something clever in mind. Lessem was pretty sure he’d figured out what the “something clever” was, but he had no intention of getting too tightly wedded to his own cleverness. It was entirely possible the Solly had come up with something completely different.

“Current range, Palko?” he asked.

“Thirty-six million klicks, Sir,” Commander Palko Nakada, TG 47.3’s astrogator replied. “Closing at one-six-two-seven-seven KPS.”

“Thank you.”

“They seem confident, Sir,” Thúri observed. “Of course, I expect Byng was pretty confident up until —”

“Missile launch,” Commander Wozniak announced suddenly. “Multiple launches from Alpha One. Estimate eight thousand — repeat, eight-zero-zero-zero — inbound.”

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“First launch away, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Rosiak announced.

“Thank you, Bart,” Jane Isotalo said as courteously as if she hadn’t already seen the outgoing missile tracks from Vice Admiral Elvis Tsukahara’s TG 1027.2. It was Rosiak’s job to tell her that, after all.

That familiar observation ran under the surface of her thoughts as she watched that first wave of improved Cataphracts streak towards the Manties.

Whatever the war might mean for the Solarian League in general, its timing had proved . . . fortuitous for Technodyne of Yildun. The huge transstellar had faced enough criminal charges to make survival doubtful, even for a mega corporation its size. Over thirty members of its senior management had been sentenced to actual prison terms in light of certain embarrassing revelations — like the minor fact that the Republic of Monica had come into possession of a number of fully functional SLN battlecruisers, with all classified tech systems intact and operational — which had been previously scrapped by Technodyne. In Isotalo’s opinion, that “minor fact” had been a principal contributor — probably *the* principal contributor, come to that — to the unholy mess in which the League currently found itself, but any additional penalties against Technodyne had evaporated in the face of the “Grand Alliance’s” demonstrably superior war-fighting technology.

They hadn’t evaporated because all was forgiven, but rather because Technodyne was one of the Navy’s more important suppliers — one might more accurately have said the *most* important supplier — and its R&D staff had hit the ground running in the face of the Manties’ superiority. Indeed, Isotalo suspected Technodyne had been paying closer attention than the Office of Naval Intelligence to reports out of the Haven Sector for quite some time, given how speedily the first Cataphract multi-stage missiles had emerged from its workshops. The Cataphract was both outsized and crude compared to current-generation Manty technology — it was effectively no more than a standard missile with a laserhead-armed “counter-missile” glued to its nose — but at least it provided the Navy with a weapon which could actually *reach* the enemy.

Obviously, Technodyne hadn’t managed to duplicate the Manties’ targeting and fire control systems, which meant long-range accuracy remained pathetic, but a sufficiently dense salvo would still generate hits. And in order to provide that density, Technodyne had come up with what it had dubbed the “Dispersed Weapons Module, Mod 2” (which, interestingly, suggested there’d been a previous “Mod 1” which it hadn’t mentioned to anyone), christened the “Husky” by the Navy’s tac officers.

Each Husky was a specialized towing drone equipped with a small impeller drive, a power receptor antenna, a telemetry relay, and eight tractor beams, each capable of towing one of Technodyne’s missile pods. The Husky’s onboard power was sufficient only for limited — *very* limited — independent maneuvering, but it could always be towed by a mothership’s tractors. As long as it could be hit by beamed power from that mothership, its endurance was effectively *un*limited, however. And it had been designed so that each Husky could “mother” eight *additional* Huskies. In theory, they could be daisy-chained four-deep, with the actual missile pods forming the fifth tier of an enormous stack. That meant— again, in theory — that a single tractor aboard a single warship could tow 1,024 missile pods. The latest, tweaked version of the Cataphract was somewhat bigger than the model Filareta had taken to Manticore, and the new pods were individually smaller, able to carry only six of Technodyne’s latest mark. So in theory — *in theory* — that single shipboard tractor could have put 6,144 missiles into space. The power requirement would have far exceeded that of anything short of a superdreadnought, however — in fact, Isotalo doubted even a superdreadnought could have handled that many pods — and the best her battlecruisers could manage was just under a hundred Huskies and “only” 768 pods apiece, which meant the battlecruisers of the lightest of her task groups had almost twelve thousand missiles in its deployed pods.

Without the Huskies’ impellers, their acceleration would have been that of an arthritic tortoise . . . at best. *With* the Huskies’ impellers, the effect of all that mass outside the battlecruisers’ impeller wedges was negligible. And, all told, that would let her bring over 36,000 missiles to the fight.

Which didn’t even count the reserve aboard her colliers. They were packed with an additional 90,000 pods, even after deploying the Huskies in her first salvo. It seemed . . . unlikely . . . that a dozen Manty cruisers could stand up to over half a million Cataphracts.

On the other hand, the Manties had demonstrated a perverse propensity for doing “unlikely” things to the Solarian League Navy.

In addition to producing the Husky, the arms maker had tweaked its original Cataphract, increasing its first-stage acceleration by twenty percent, which upped its maximum powered envelope from rest from 13,650,172 kilometers to 19,370,400. Technodyne hadn’t been able to do anything about light-speed fire control limitations, however, and the additional acceleration wasn’t a factor, at least for this launch. Rosiak had been forced to incorporate a ballistic phase into the attack, since even with the tweaks and her closing velocity at launch, her maximum powered envelope remained less than thirty-two million kilometers. Direct hits, especially against Manticoran missile defenses, would have been few and far between even at twenty million kilometers; at *thirty-six* million, they were unlikely as hell, but that wasn’t really what she was after.

*Show me what you’ve got*, she thought silently, leaning back in her command chair as the missiles tore towards their targets. *I don’t care* ho*w good your missile defense systems are; you can’t have a hell of a lot of them on that few platforms. So show me what they can do*.

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“Missile defense Reno,” Commodore Lessem said calmly as he, too, watched the tidal bore of missiles sweep towards him, then glanced at the plot’s vector analyses. Based on the performance of Massimo Filareta’s missiles, CIC was projecting a total flight time of 406 seconds, including a 151-second ballistic phase, and he pursed his lips as he watched the time display tick downward. There was time — if not a lot of it — to consider his options, and his brain whirred behind his thoughtful eyes.

“Missile defense Reno, aye, Sir,” Wozniak replied. “Missile Defense has good tracking data from the Ghost Riders, and bow walls are active . . . now.” He looked over his shoulder and smiled at the commodore. “I think these people are in for a surprise, Sir.”

“We can always hope.” Lessem glanced at CommanderThúri. “I wonder what percentage of their total birds that represents?”

“CIC makes it about twenty percent, Sir.” From the promptitude of his response, Thúri had been thinking the same sort of things his commodore had. “I’m inclined to think it was probably *exactly* twenty percent,” he continued, “but Brent’s not prepared to be quite that definite.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Lessem chuckled, never taking his eyes from the tactical plot.

Commander Brent Krösche, *Clas Fleming*’s tactical officer, was very good at his job. Joanne O’Reilly, *Clas Fleming*’s CO, thought the world of him, and Lessem was inclined to agree. But Krösche was a precise sort. If he wasn’t certain of his numbers to at least the tenth decimal point, the best he would give was a “probable.” And a very occasional “*highly* probable” if he was confident to the *ninth* decimal point.

“Well, if this many birds are only eight percent of what they could’ve thrown, they probably don’t expect —”

“Sir, there’s something strange about their launch profile,” Commander Wozniak said suddenly. Lessem turned from Thúri to looklat him, and the ops officer frowned unhappily. “Sir, they’re showing a *lot* more accel than they should. The missiles we analyzed from Eleventh Fleet maxed at seven-zero-one KPS squared; *these* birds are coming in at over eight hundred and forty.”

Lessem inhaled sharply, remembering his earlier thoughts about Solarian innovation and productivity.

“Assuming the drive endurance on both stages is the same as on Filareta's, that gives them a powered envelope of almost thirty-two million klicks,” Wozniak continued. “That drops their ballistic phase to barely four million klicks and roughly twenty-four seconds, which makes their *total* flight time only two-seven-niner seconds.”

“I see.” Lessem’s voice was level, but his brain raced. His decision loop had just become 134 seconds shorter than he’d assumed it was, and he’d already lost ten of them finding that out.

His ships’ hyper generators were at Readiness, which meant they could pop into the alpha bands on less than a minute’s notice. Well, all of them except *David K. Brown*, that was. The FSV had military-grade impellers, inertial compensator, and hyper generator, but she also massed over seven times as much as *Clas Fleming*, and size was a factor in hyper generator cycle times, as well as acceleration rates. A *Saganami-C* like *Clas Fleming* could translate into hyper from Readiness in 44.6 seconds whereas one of the larger Solarian *Nevada*-class battlecruisers would need 55.7. A three million-ton FSV, however, required 118.8, and would have needed better than three minutes, if she’d mounted a *civilian*-grade generator. Which posed at least one interesting question, since the three transports or freighters in company with the Solly battlecruisers massed more than twice that much and they appeared to have have civilian-grade impellers. If they mounted civilian generators, as well, their minimum cycle time would be almost three and half times as long as “*Brownie*’s.”

Hyper cycle times meant very little under normal battle conditions, since no one could enter or leave hyper inside a star’s hyper-limit, anyway. They meant quite a lot this far *outside* a limit, however, as Genevieve Chin had discovered when she encountered Duchess Harrington’s Apollo-armed superdreadnoughts outside Manticore-A’s limit.

The People’s Republic’s analysts had radically underestimated Apollo’s effective range, and all of Chin’s intelligence briefings had told her she was well outside it when Eighth Fleet launched against her. The 44,000,000-kilometer ballistic phase Duchess Harrington had been forced to incorporate into her launch just to reach Chin’s ships had confirmed that she was outside effective shipboard fire control range, and so she had been. But not very *far* outside it. Eighth Fleet had been close enough to update the Apollo control platforms in near real-time just before it released them to autonomous control, and that autonomous control had been enormously better than anyone in the PRH had believed it could be. Even with that update, the Mark 23s had been far less accurate than they would have been at three light-minutes, as opposed to the *four* light-minutes at which they’d been launched. They’d simply been far more accurate than the Peeps had anticipated.

To Chin’s credit, her own tactical instincts had overridden her ONI briefing when Duchess Harrington’s MDMs shut down and went ballistic. But it had taken a few seconds for the shutdown to be reported to her. Then it had taken fifteen or twenty more seconds for her instincts to overrule her briefing. That was really a remarkably quick response, all things considered, but the clock had been ticking, and it had taken several more seconds for her flagship to transmit the order to hyper out. Then it had taken several more seconds for her captains to receive it, and a handful more for their astrogators to respond and Engineering to begin the cycle.

She’d run out of seconds. The cycle time on her superdreadnoughts’ hyper generators, the minimum time required to translate even from full Readiness, had been over four and a half minutes, and total flight time for Eighth Fleet’s missiles from the moment their second stage drives shut down had been only *5.2* minutes.

A difference of less than forty seconds didn’t sound like all that much, but its consequences for her command had been catastrophic.

The cycle times for Lessem’s ships, even *David K. Brown*, were far shorter than that, and he’d thought he could wait over five minutes from the moment the Solarians launched and still get the FSV into hyper to avoid the incoming fire. For that matter, his lighter ships would have had over *six* minutes to play with.

Now, though . . . .

“No need to panic just yet, I think,” he said, crossing to stand behind Wozniak and rest one hand on his shoulder as he gazed past the ops officer to his displays. “Not until they’re willing to show us more missiles in a single launch. Makes you wonder what *other* surprises they may have for us, though, doesn’t it?”

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Task Group 47.3 sat motionless in space between the Prime Terminus and Jane Isotalo’s battlecruisers, and evasion maneuvers from a base velocity of zero would be limited. Even with a *Saganami-C*’s maximum acceleration of 726.2 gravities, *Clas Fleming* could have changed her position by no more than 587,000 kilometers and attained a velocity of only 2,890 KPS in the 6.8 minutes Lessem had expected Task Force 1027’s missiles to reach her. In the time he actually had, the best she could have managed was 277,000 kilometers and 1,980 KPS. That was less than one light-second, which was negligible against missiles coming in at eighty percent of light-speed. On the other hand, Lessem couldn’t have generated a much greater base velocity and stayed between Isotalo and the terminus.

Nor did he really need to.

Yet, at least.

The Cataphracts were much too far downrange for Rear Admiral Rosiak to control effectively. For over sixtyT-years, since the introduction of the laserhead, effective missile engagements had been managed via the missiles’ telemetry links. In theory, it ought to have been simple for any missile to find something as glaringly obvious as an impeller-drive starship under power. In practice, things were a bit more complicated. It wasn’t that missiles operating in autonomous mode couldn’t find targets; it was just that they had a great deal of trouble finding — and hitting — the *right* targets.

True, seeing the impeller signature of a target really *was* technological child’s play in many ways. Unfortunately, impeller-drive starships were extremely maneuverable, their wedges sharply limited the vulnerable aspects from which they could be successfully attacked, and they mounted both active and passive defenses designed to make the task of any attack missile’s seekers as *un-*simple as possible.

Given the way in which a missile’s own impeller wedge narrowed its onboard seekers’ field of view (one RMN training manual likened it to steering an air car while looking at the outside world through a soda straw), the small size of its effective target (the narrow gap between the impeller wedge’s roof and floor), the decoys and electronic warfare systems designed to defeat those seekers, and the target’s ability to rapidly roll ship in order to interpose its own impeller wedge, the probability of a hit by any single missile had always been low. Higher for laserheads than for *contact* weapons, but still low. And prior to the introduction of the modern missile pod, salvo *densities* had also been low, which had made it essential to find a way to increase that probability.

The solution had been to turn every salvo into a network of dispersed sensor platforms. Any given missile might not see the target very well — if at all — during an attack run, especially when coming in on a profile designed to make it as difficult as possible for that target’s active defenses to intercept it. But when all the seekers aboard every missile in the attack reported what they *could* see to the ship which had launched them, the data could be collated, combined, and analyzed. A far better tactical picture could be assembled; enemy electronic warfare tactics could be mapped and allowed for; probable decoys could be identified and excluded from the targeting queues; the other side’s evasion maneuvers could be plugged in, tracked, and projected; and refined instructions could be sent back not simply to the missiles which had supplied the data, but to every other missile in the salvo. Not only did that increase accuracy against assigned targets, but it permitted tactical officers to adjust targeting queues on the fly, redirecting missiles as their original targets were crippled or destroyed or as newer, higher-value targets were discovered. As the range increased, transmission lag set in and grew steadily worse until it reached the point at which new instructions from the firing ship were inevitably out of date and actually began degrading its missiles’ accuracy, at which point the links were cut and each missile reverted to onboard control.

And that was TF 1027’s problem.

Missiles attacking targets 36,000,000 kilometers from their launch platforms were far beyond the effective control range of light-speed systems. Admiral Isotalo had no choice but to rely on her birds’ internal seekers and targeting AI, and that AI had always been rudimentary because it was designed to work in tandem with shipboard direction. That was what truly made Apollo so lethal, although the SLN as yet had no clue of just how true that was. The Mark 23-E control missiles could accept shipboard telemetry at sixty-four times the range light-speed telemetry made possible, but the Echoes had also been designed specifically for use beyond even Apollo’s shipboard control range, with every control missile in the salvo talking to every other control missile and acting as an individual processing node for the data even when relay to —- and *through* — the mothership was unavailable. Its autonomous accuracy was no more than thirty percent or so of its accuracy under tight shipboard control, but that thirty percent was many times more accurate than any current-generation Solarian missile could achieve.

Sir Martin Lessem’s Mark 16s weren’t Apollo-capable, and neither were his cruisers. But the Ghost Rider platforms’ FTL links cut the telemetry loop in half. They could see better than any missile’s sensors, they could report what they saw at FTL speeds — just as they were doing now on the massive incoming Solarian salvo — and that meant TG 47.3’s telemetry lasers could continue to update far longer than its Solarian opponents.

Despite that, he chose not to waste any of his fire on Isotalo’s ships just yet. His opponent had a hell of a lot more missile pods than he did. In fact, he was pretty sure the Solly CO saw this salvo as a test, a way to get a better read on his defensive capabilities, rather than a full-blooded attempt to destroy his ships. Lessem couldn’t keep him from doing that, but he wasn’t prepared to waste any of his own ammunition on targets that could disappear into hyper before his fire ever reached them.

And under the circumstances, he had no objection to showing the Sollies that they’d have to get a lot closer before their fire posed any realistic threat to his command.

His cruisers and destroyers mounted a total of 520 counter-missile launchers and 672 point defense clusters, and range from rest for the Royal Manticoran Navy’s Mark 31 counter-missile was 3,585,556 kilometers. The first of Lessem’s CMs went out 205 seconds after Isotalo’s launch, one second after the Cataphracts’ second-stage impellers lit off. A second wave of Mark 31s launched ten seconds after that. A third launched ten seconds after that. Then a fourth. The fifth and final wave of counter-missiles launched forty seconds after the first — thirty-five seconds before the Cataphracts could reach attack range. And then, with 2,080 Mark 31s headed downrange, every one of TG 47.3’s units rolled ship, turning up on their sides relative to TF 1027 to present only the bellies of their impeller wedges to the enemy.

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Jane Isotalo’s jaw clenched as she saw the incredible waves of counter-missiles lashing outward from the Manties.

*Should’ve expected it,* she told herself harshly. *If the bastards routinely throw around missile salvos of their own this size, they’ve got to have been working on defensive measures, too. Damn it, you knew that going in!*

Indeed she had, and she and Ramaalas and Rosiak had done their damnedest to allow for it, but their worst-case estimates hadn’t visualized something like *this*. No Solarian ship mounted that many CM tubes per ton of displacement, and the bastards were actually launching counter-missiles from both broadsides simultaneously. No Solarian ship could have done *that*, either.

Nor were counter-missiles all those ships had launched.

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“Dazzlers in five seconds, Sir,” Commander Constanta Solis, CruRon 912’s electronic warfare officer, announced, and Lessem nodded.

The Dazzlers had been originally devised as a penetration aide, designed to knock down and blind the sensors feeding a target’s defensive fire control with massive spikes of electromagnetic and gravitic interference. They were especially effective against counter-missiles, which relied on their ability to home in on the impeller signatures of their targets, because counter-missiles were designed to be produced in the largest possible numbers, and the fact that they didn’t *need* sophisticated seekers helped hold the price down. Nothing in the galaxy was more glaringly obvious than the impeller signature of a missile accelerating at 98,000 gravities, after all. Spotting one of them was rather like trying to see a million-candlepower searchlight in a darkened room. Only a blind man could have missed it.

But that was what the Dazzler produced: blind men. The counter-missiles’ seekers couldn’t possibly cope with those enormous bubbles of jamming. That meant they lost lock on their targets, and if it was timed correctly, both they and their targets were moving too rapidly for them to reacquire after the Dazzler’s pulse. Even if they reacquired *something*, their onboard electronic brains were seldom up to the task of reacquiring the *proper* something without guidance from their human masters.

That was what the Dazzler had been *designed* to do, but as the Fleet’s missile officers played around with it, they’d quickly realized it had another function. After all, *attack missiles* and the ships controlling them relied on their onboard sensors, too.

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“Ma’am!” Rear Admiral Rosiak said sharply. “The Manties —”

He broke off, looking over his shoulder at Admiral Isotalo, and Isotalo gave him a choppy nod as the tactical plot went momentarily berserk.

“What the hell *is* that?” she demanded.

“Some kind of jamming,” Rosiak replied. “I don’t know how they’re doing it, though. We can’t see shi— That is, we can’t see *very much* through all the garbage, but CIC’s computers say it’s coming from at least a couple of dozen sources. That means it has to be some kind of independent platform. I don’t see how they could sustain emissions at this intensity for very long without burning out any emitter you could put into a drone, though, and —”

He paused again, pressing the fingers of his right hand against the earbug in his right ear and listening intently. His lips tightened, and he looked back at Isotalo.

“CIC doesn’t think they *are* sustaining emissions for more than ten to fifteen seconds per platform, Ma’am. But there are a lot of them, and they’re running them in a cascade pattern. That’s going to play hell with the attack birds’ seekers.”

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Task Force 1012’s upgraded Cataphract-Cs were far superior to the Cataphracts Commodore Adrian Luft and the ill-fated People’s Navy in Exile had taken to disaster at the Battle of Congo. They were longer-ranged, faster, equipped with heavier warheads, and fitted with seeking systems which relied upon both better sensors and more effective onboard software. They were far more capable of thinking for themselves, and their ability to differentiate between false targets and real ones and to penetrate enemy ECM was at least thirty percent better than Luft’s had been.

But they still had to *see* their targets . . . and thanks to the Dazzlers, they couldn’t for several long, long seconds. Their electronic brains knew where to look when the interference cleared, however, and eventually, it *had* to clear, since their targets had to be able to see *them* if they meant to intercept them. And so the Cataphracts’ computers waited with uncaring, incurious patience for the range to clear and let them find their targets once more.

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“Decoys coming up . . . now,” Commander Solis said calmly, and the fusion-powered Lorelei platforms keeping station on Sir Martin Lessem’s cruisers and destroyers suddenly switched on their emitters. Powered by the same micro-fusion reactors that made Ghost Rider possible, Lorelei had a far higher energy budget than anyone else’s ECM or EW platforms. With no need for beamed power from the ships they were protecting, however, the platforms could actually maneuver independently, mimicking moving starships almost perfectly. And even as the cruisers’ stealth systems knocked back their emission signatures; the Loreleis’ emitters deliberately *enhanced* theirs. They couldn’t match the full power of a *Saganami-C* or *Saganami-B*’s actual signature but they could — and did — duplicate the signature of a *Saganami-C* or *Saganami-B* hiding under stealth.

And there were dozens of them.

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The master plot aboard SLNS *Foudroyant* cleared as the jamming platforms went down at last, and Isotalo found herself leaning forward in her command chair, eyes narrowed as she watched the icons of the Manticoran ships reappear upon it. *There* they were, and —

“Ma’am, we’re picking up —”

“I see it, Bart.” She cut Rosiak off and shook her head. “Not quite the same thing as *believing* it, I’m afraid,” she added harshly.

The number of targets on her tactical plot had quintupled. From this range, not even her passive shipboard sensors could positively differentiate between the sudden rash of false targets and the real ones. Her shipboard sensors had lost lock thanks to the jamming, just as the Cataphracts had, and the Manties had used their temporary cloak of invisibility well. The energy budget on those decoys had to be much higher than the SLN’s Halo platforms, and they were clearly maneuvering independently, so they obviously weren’t using beamed power from their motherships. However the Manties were doing it, though, their decoys had come online when no one in TF 1021 could see a thing. There’d been no way to plot them and keep track of them as they came up, and once the jammers shut down, *Foudroyant* and her consorts found themselves trying — and failing — to tell which of the sixty “cruisers” on the plot were real and which were false.

Even as she watched, numbers flickered under each of the cruiser icons — percentage values, changing rapidly to reflect CIC’s confidence as its analysis winnowed through the input to find the Manty starships once more. They were unlikely to accomplish that before her missiles reached attack range, unfortunately, and there was no way no way the less capable sensors the missiles themselves mounted would be able to.

That was . . . disconcerting, and she glanced across at Maleen Lamizana.

The intelligence officer looked back steadily, and Isotalo made herself nod. Lamizana had warned her and Rosiak that all their data on Manty EW was sketchy. “Problematic,” was the way she’d delicately put it as they reviewed ONI’s current guesstimates. Isotalo and Rosiak had tried hard to bear that in mind, but her intel officer had made it tactfully clear that she’d believed they were still underestimating the problem.

Now it would appear that even *Lamizana* had underestimated it.

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Commodore Lessem watched the plot with an expression which was rather calmer than he actually felt. Intellectually, he knew the 6,000 missiles sweeping towards his command were far less capable than a similar launch by the RMN’s old Havenite opponents would have been. But 6,000 missiles were still 6,000 missiles, and it looked like all of them had been directed at his heavy cruisers.

*What’s to worry about, Martin?* he thought sardonically. *That’s only about four hundred birds per ship, isn’t it?*

Neither *Clas Fleming* nor any of his other ships mounted the Keyhole-Two platforms which were the secret of Apollo. Without those — and without the Mark 23-E control missiles — he couldn’t have taken full advantage of the Mark 23s aboard *David K. Brown*, which was why he’d decided against even trying to.

More to the point at the moment, however, Thomas Wozniak couldn’t manage the defensive engagement nearly as effectively as he might have with Keyhole-One or Keyhole-Two available. His ability to hand off his interceptors between different control platforms was much more limited, and he couldn’t establish direct telemetry links around the “dead spots” created by his own ships’ impeller wedges. What he *could* do, however, was to spread his Ghost Rider drones as broadly as possible and use their sensors to track the incoming fire. He could also — albeit with a certain degree of risk — roll ship to bring *Clas Fleming*’s or one of her consorts’ control links to bear on those dead zones and update the counter-missiles’ targeting solutions. At the current range, the risk was small; as the range closed, and time to roll back up disappeared, it could get risky indeed.

Ghost Rider couldn’t substitute for Keyhole’s telemetry links to the CMs, but it could feed the cruiser’s tactical section just fine, even in *Clas Fleming*’s current attitude, and the effect of the Loreleis was immediately obvious. At least a thousand of the incoming missile swarm peeled off, targeting one or another of the decoys. It was always possible some of them would require one of his cruisers, or even lock onto one of the destroyers in default of of its betters. That was unlikely, but unlikely things happened, and missiles which reacquired were often more dangerous than missiles which had never lost lock in the first place.

Missile defense was a game of probabilities, and one of the defender’s critical objectives was to assess those probabilities. Missile defense officers had only a limited number of counter-missiles and point defense clusters, and those limited numbers were allocated dependent on the threat hierarchy established by analyzing the incoming fire. Those missiles most likely to hit were targeted first, working from most likely to least likely in descending order until the defenders ran out of CMs or PD, and missiles which had clearly lost lock were at the very end of the targeting queue. So when one of those missiles suddenly reacquired a target at the very last instant, there was seldom a counter-missile or point defense cluster available to deal with it.

On the other hand . . . .

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Admiral Isotalo looked back at the plot just as the first wave of counter-missiles reached her oncoming attack. Then her jaw tightened in fresh consternation. Solarian interception probabilities on a first-launch, at maximum range, against the Cataphracts’ accompanying electronic warfare platforms and penetration aides, would have been on the order of ten percent.

The Manties did just a bit better than that.

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The first wave of CruDiv 912.1’s CMs ripped into the oncoming Cataphracts.

The improved Solarian missile drives were accompanied by better penetration aides than the RMN had anticipated based on BuShips’ analysis of the contents of Massimo Filareta’s magazines. The difference was slight, but quantifiable, and *Clas Fleming*’s CIC took due note of it for the squadron’s after-action report.

In terms of the Mark 31 counter-missile’s performance, however, it was a negligible factor.

Five hundred and twenty Manticoran CMs slammed into the oncoming Cataphracts. A first-wave counter-missile launch, intercepting at maximum range, was always the least accurate of a defensive engagement. That was true in this case, as well, and the 520 Mark 31s intercepted only 152 of TF 1027’s Cataphracts . . . just under three times the kill ratio Barthilu Rosiak had estimated.

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Jane Isotalo’s eyes narrowed and fury burned in their depths.

She’d thought the Manties’ decision to remain at rest relative to the terminus had indicated they intended to translate out as soon as a serious attack came their way. And, to be honest, she hadn’t intended her first salvo as a *serious* attack. She *had* expected them to either disappear into hyper or take some significant damage from it, however.

*Not going to happen, Jane*, she thought now, hands tightening on her command chair’s armrests as the second wave of CMs, with more time to acquire their targets, intercepted 260 attack missiles.

*They’re still feeding at least some telemetry to those damned things*, she thought grimly. They have to be. *But how in hell can they even* see *my birds through their frigging wedges?!*

The third wave intercepted 300 attack missiles. The fourth intercepted 393, and the fifth took down 471, a staggering 90.5% interception rate. All told, the Manticoran counter-missiles intercepted 1,183 Cataphracts, almost 20% of her total launch, and like all good missile defense officers, the Manties had concentrated on the fire most likely to find a target. They’d done a remarkably good job of ignoring the hundreds of Cataphracts which veered off to chase decoys or simply went off on a vector to God only knew where when they lost both sensor lock and telemetry.

Still, of the 6,000 missiles she’d launched, just over 3,800 got past both the counter-missiles and the electronic counter measures and came screaming in on the Manticoran starships.

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“Forty-three seconds,” Commander Wozniak said flatly. “Stand by Point Defense.”

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Task Force 1027’s missiles executed their programmed attack profiles, trying for “look down” shots through the Manticoran sidewalls as they passed “over” or “under” their targets, or seeking the even more deadly “down-the-throat” or “up-the-kilt” attack positions which were every tactician’s dream.

The attack birds were up to a closing velocity of 240,319 KPS — 0.802 cee — as they howled down on their targets, and Isotalo smiled grimly. The SLN had stopped tweaking the software for its point defense clusters to deal with the higher closing rates of multistage missiles and completely replaced it instead, and TF 1027 had trained hard with the new systems, in both sims and live fire exercises against inert laserheads. The improvement was enormous . . . it just still wasn’t anything Jane Isotalo would have called adequate against targets coming in at the sorts of velocities Cataphracts could produce. She didn’t much like that. On the other hand, physics played no favorites. At *those* velocities, an awful lot of *her* missiles were going to get through even the Manties’ defenses, she thought vengefully, and —

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“Point Defense engaging . . . *now!*” Wozniak snapped as the attack missiles swept through the squadron’s formation, and the laser clusters went to maximum-rate fire.

Rods of coherent energy stabbed out, matching the speed of cybernetic reflexes against the attackers’ incredible velocity as the Cataphracts’ cleared the shadow of their targets’ impeller wedges. Missiles, unlike starships, couldn’t generate sidewalls. That meant they could be taken down by laser fire even before they dropped their wedges, if the geometry was right.

The geometry was right for quite a few of the Solarian missiles, and the waiting lasers punched straight through them. Many of their fellows simply streaked across the vulnerable sides of the cruisers’ wedges without ever finding a target in the fleeting moments their preposterous velocity gave their sensors. Others were more fortunate in that regard, and missle wedges vanished and laserheads rolled on incredibly powerful thrusters as they fought to align their lasing rods with their targets.

But the point defense was waiting for them.

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Jane Isotalo watched the display. At thirty-six million kilometers, the light-speed lag was just over two minutes. Impeller signatures were FTL, so Tracking could plot her missiles’ inbound positions in near real-time — there was still a 1.89 second delay — but her sensors would need the full two minutes to detect anything else, including nuclear detonations. Because of that, she couldn’t really “see” a thing once the missiles’ impellers went down, and she waited impatiently, along with everyone else on *Foudroyant*’s flag deck, for the telltale flare of detonating laserheads.

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Manticore’s electronically steered laser clusters cycled much more rapidly than the SLN’s did. It was, Sir Martin Lessem reflected, a prime example of those Darwinian processes that worried him where the Sollies were concerned. The increasing deadliness of the missile environment in Manticore’s long war with the People’s Republic of Haven had given the Royal Manticoran Navy’s R&D people no choice but to improve cycle time. In fact, *Clas Fleming*’s cycle time was almost fifty percent more rapid than that of an earlier flight *Saganami-C*, and each of her clusters mounted not the eight emitters of an early flight ship but twelve, almost twice as many as a *Nevada*-class battlecruiser’s clusters.

Cycle time didn’t matter all that much this time. The window of engagement was so brief that not even a Manticoran emitter could have fired two shots in the available time. On the other hand, each of *Clas Fleming*’s broadsides mounted twenty-four point defense clusters with a dozen emitters each. That was 288 shots from each broadside — 576, in total — with the same from each of his other three *Saganami-Cs* and an additional 288 from each of his six *Saganami-Bs,* with fewer emitters per cluster but more total clusters per ship. In all, including his destroyers, his squadron mounted over three thousand emitters . . . already coached into waiting positions by the Ghost Rider tracking reports.

The tension on *Clas Fleming*’s bridge could have been chipped with a knife, because no one knew better than Manticorans that any ship could be killed, however good its defenses, however skilled its crew. But this was a deadly ballet the Royal Manticoran Navy had danced countless times in the last twenty T-years. Its officers and ratings knew its measures better than anyone else in the galaxy, and the space around Sir Martin Lessem’s squadron was suddenly a tornado of disintegrating Cataphracts as the defenses picked them off with viper speed and metronome precision. Shattered missile bodies tumbled onward into the endless dark, broken and inert. But even in the midst of their destruction, scores of surviving laserheads disappeared in bubbles of intolerable brilliance and bomb-pumped x-ray lasers stabbed out at CruRon 912.

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They must have had even better tracks on the incoming fire than she’d thought from their counter-missiles, Isotalo realized as impeller signatures began vanishing too early for end-of-run detonations. Thanks to the light-speed delay, she had ample time to contemplate the implications of those . . . premature disappearances, and she didn’t like them one bit. Her salvo hadn’t melted like a sand castle, because there hadn’t been enough *time* for that. One heartbeat it had been streaking towards its target . . . the next the Manty point defense had ripped it to shreds. She’d never seen anything like it, never imagined mere cruisers could produce that volume of defensive fire.

Yet not even that fire could have stopped all of them. There literally weren’t enough places on ships that size to put enough laser clusters to take out *that* many threats. Dozens — scores — of them must have gotten through unscathed. Unfortunately, she knew, the defenders had concentrated on the ones that could have *hurt* them, and most of those surviving dozens and scores would have wasted themselves against their targets’ wedges and sidewalls. But the missiles crossing ahead of the Manties would be another matter. A ship simply couldn’t pack as many laser clusters into her fore and aft hammerheads, and it was obvious from the timing that a higher percentage of missiles attacking the throats of the Manticoran wedges had shut down their impellers rather than being picked off on the way in. By rights, most of the birds who’d reached shutdown positions should have gotten their lasers off before they could be destroyed, and the throat of a starship’s impeller wedge was far deeper than its sidewalls. That made it a much, *much* bigger target.

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Seventy-three laserheads detonated directly ahead of HMS *Clas Fleming*, and seven hundred and thirty bomb-pumped lasers ripped down the throat of her wedge.

But unlike the Solarian Navy’s warships, the throats of current-generation Manticoran warships were no longer the traditional gaping chink in their armor. The bow-wall and its smaller cousin, the buckler, had finally provided the equivalent of a sidewall — and a very *powerful* sidewall — to cover that lethally vulnerable aspect of the wedge. That was one reason Sir Martin Lessem had waited motionless in space. He couldn’t accelerate with the full bow-wall up, and he didn’t trust the smaller buckler to provide sufficient cover. But he also hadn’t wanted to suddenly stop accelerating at the instant the wall went up lest the Sollies figure out that *something* was covering that aspect of Manticoran ships.

The laserheads detonating in front of *Clas Fleming* were never able to properly localize their target, because they simply couldn’t see it clearly enough through the bow-wall’s focused gravitic plane. All they could do was fire blindly, trying to saturate the entire volume in which the heavy cruiser *might* be located. That was an awfully wide volume for even seven hundred lasers to cover, and the bow-wall bent and degraded even those which had managed to find a target in the first place.

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Admiral Isotalo reminded herself to breathe as she waited for the laggard photons to tell her how many of her missiles had survived to attack . . . and how well they’d fared. The human eye was notoriously unreliable at moments like this, but CIC’s uncaring, hyper-efficient computers’ count had already confirmed that the Manties had picked off at least seventy-five percent of her total launch before the surviving missiles dropped their wedges to attack.

That was yet another conclusion she didn’t much like, and she made a mental note to grab those over-optimistic idiots in the Office of Technical Analysis by their throats and choke some sense into them as soon as she got back to Sol. They had to start coming closer to realistic assessments, or the Manties were going to go right on kicking the Navy’s arse. She had the numbers to punch out a force this small, despite the . . . flawed enemy capability estimates with which she’d been sent out, but somebody else was going to run into a proper Manty *task force*, and when they did —

The thought broke off and her lips drew back in a snarl of satisfaction as the light-speed sensors finally updated the plot and hundreds of laserheads erupted in bubbles of nuclear fusion. Even as she snarled, she knew her most pessimistic estimate of how many had gotten through had been overly optimistic, but her targets were only cruisers, and at least fifty or sixty laserheads detonated directly ahead of four of them.

They sent the deadly stilettos of their bomb-pumped lasers straight down the wide-open throats of their victims’ wedges . . . and absolutely nothing happened.

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“We took one hit forward, Sir,” Commander Wozniak told Lessem. “Graser One’s gone, and so is Point Defense Four. Seven casualties, nonfatal.” He looked back down at his display. “*Robert L. Gartner* reports one hit starboard, Frame Seven-Five. That one cost two counter-missile launchers, but Captain Reicher thinks he can get one of them back and reports no personnel casualties. *Michael Cucchiarelli* took two hits, but she was lucky. Captain Disall’s lost both of his secondary grav sensor arrays, but he reports no personnel casualties or weapon systems damage. *Edward Dravecky* took two hits; one down her throat and one portside, Frame Two Hundred. The hit forward knocked out a beta node and the power surge killed two ratings in her forward impeller room. The portside hit destroyed Graser Eight and Counter-missile Thirty-Seven. Nine casualties there, two fatal, I’m afraid.”

Lessem nodded heavily, his expression tight. Four hits and eighteen casualties, only four of them fatal, was a minuscule return for six thousand pod-launched missiles. He knew that, and knowing did absolutely nothing to make it hurt less, because those eighteen casualties were *his* people.

*On the other hand*, he thought grimly, *I have to wonder how the* other s*ide’s reacting to this?*

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Isotalo heard Barthilu Rosiak inhale sharply, swallowing what probably would have been a curse, as the same shock lashed through the operations officer.

There should have been *some* sign of damage, she thought almost numbly. They’d just fired over eight hundred Cataphracts right down the Manties’ throats, each with the warhead of a Trebuchet capital missile, and CIC confirmed that at least a quarter of them — more probably a third — of the crossing shots had detonated before interception. Call it two hundred and thirty to split the difference, and that was still *twenty-three* hundred lasers against perfect targets.

Hit probabilities at that insane crossing speed against a target which couldn’t even be seen clearly until the attack missiles’ sensors cleared that target’s wedge and could look down its throat had to be tiny, despite the ideal geometry of any “crossing-the-T” attack. She and Rosiak had estimated no more than a one-percent hit ratio in such circumstances, rather than the thirty-eight percent ratio they would have expected at a pre-Cataphract crossing rate, but that was still twenty-three hits. That might not inflict crippling damage, scattered across ten ships the size of the Manty cruisers, but it damned well should have inflicted *some*, and the Manties’ emissions hadn’t even flickered.

“I see we’re going to need heavier salvos,” Admiral Jane Isotalo said coldly.

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“What do you expect them to try next, Sir?” Commander Thúri asked quietly. Commodore Lessem glanced at him, then returned his gaze to the tactical plot. He stood that way for several moments, hands clasped behind him, whistling soundlessly.

“The one thing I *don’t* expect him to do is to try another long-range launch, unless he’s able to put a hell of a lot more missiles into it,” he said then. “We didn’t expect their new accelerations, and their projected accuracy was better than we expected at that range, too,” he acknowledged with a shrug. “But not enough better to offset our advantages in missile defense, and judging from their attack profile, they don’t know about the bow-wall, either. But unless they’re idiots — and, frankly, whoever this fellow is, he doesn’t strike me as another Crandall or Filareta — he’ll have figured out that something sure as hell knocked back the damage all those down-the-throat shots should’ve inflicted.”

He turned away from the plot, pacing slowly across the flag bridge to his command chair. He sank into the chair and turned it to face the astrogation plot while the chair’s displays deployed around him.

“He’ll want to get closer,” he said then, his eyes narrowing. “If we can take all those down-the-throat shots without showing more damage than we did, he needs every scrap of accuracy he can get. That means getting into effective telemetry range — *his* effective telemetry range. And out here, he just might pull that off.”

The chief of staff nodded, his expression thoughtful, then smiled.

“In that case, Sir, it’s probably a good thing that you’re — and I say this with the utmost respect — a sneaky bastard.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Commander,” Sir Martin Lessem replied with an answering smile.

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“— so Technodyne’s accuracy estimates at extended range were *almost* on the money,” Rear Admiral Rosiak said, using the hand unit to highlight a column of numbers on the briefing room’s bulkhead smart wall. “We can’t be positive, but the hot wash analysis suggests Technodyne’s estimate was accurate to within five or six percent. Which —” he looked around the unhappy faces of Admiral Isotalo’s staff “— was higher than the estimate Maleen and I plugged into our pre-battle planning. Unfortunately, ONI’s estimate of the Manty missile defense’s capabilities was nowhere near accurate, so even with the better-than-expected accuracy, the actual hit ratio still sucked vaccum.”

“In fairness to ONI, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Lamizana put in, “nobody who’s gone toe-to-toe with the Manties has gotten home again to tell us how good their defenses really are. The best anyone’s been able to do is extrapolate from the loss ratios, using our own capabilities as a baseline.” She shrugged ever so slightly. “It seems pretty clear that baseline was too optimistic, but it was the only one they had.”

Jane Isotalo’s jaw tightened at that unpalatable reminder, but it was exactly the sort of reminder Lamizana was supposed to give her, and she nodded in recognition.

“So your recommendation is what, Bart?” she asked after a second.

“We have two options, Ma’am, either of which has pros and cons,” Rosiak replied. “One is to simply fire the biggest damned missile salvo the galaxy’s ever seen. I don’t care *how* good their defenses are on a ship-for-ship basis. Hit them with enough birds to completely saturate their counter-missiles and point defense, and *something*’s getting through. Assuming we’re right about the blind fire hit probabilities, my people estimate that a thirty thousand-missile launch should produce a minimum of four hundred hits, despite their defensive capabilities.”

“Assuming they’ve actually shown us all of those capabilities yet,” Lamizana added in a carefully neutral tone.

“Assuming that,” Rosiak acknowledged, nodding at the intelligence officer. “I think Maleen’s right that we have to assume they may not have, although I also have to say I find it a little difficult to believe anyone could see *six thousand* missiles coming at him and not pull out all the stops against them, however good he thought his defenses were. Having said that, I don’t have any desire at all to get caught with our our arses hanging out the way certain other people have.”

Two or three people, Isotalo among them, surprised themselves with smiles at his last sentence. Although it wasn’t really funny, given how many of their fellows— officers and enlisted — those “other people” had gotten killed.

*And Bart can say that when Ramaalas or Maleen couldn’t*, she reflected, *because he’s Battle Fleet, just like Crandall and Filareta*.

*And he* does *have a point*.

“I realize we have deep pockets where missile pods are concerned,” she said then. “I’d really prefer not to use them up at the rate of five or six thousand per heavy cruiser, though,” she added in a desert-dry tone, “so let’s hear option two, Bart. Should I assume you’re thinking in terms of Two-Step?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I am.”

Rosiak waved at the smart wall without looking away from Isotalo.

“On top of their active defenses and EW, *Foudroyant’*s CIC agrees with my own people’s conclusion that the Manties have to have found some way to protect against down-the-throat shots. Nobody’s prepared to go out on a limb over exactly how they’re doing that, but my own feeling is that they have to’ve found some way to create a sidewall to cover the ahead and astern aspects of a wedge.”

“Not to dispute Bart’s conclusion, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Ramaalas said, “but if they’ve managed *that*, they have to be playing even faster and looser with physics than our worst-case assumptions.”

“Not . . . necessarily,” Captain Malati Raghavendra said.

*Foudroyant*’s captain sat at Isotalo’s left elbow, directly across from Ramaalas, both because it was her right as the task force’s flag captain and because Isotalo respected her levelheaded — one might almost have said phlegmatic — common sense. Like Isotalo and Rosiak, Raghavendra was Battle Fleet, but she’d started in Engineering, not Tactical, which helped explain why she had so far attained only captain’s rank in the admiral-heavy SLN.

“What do you mean, Malati?” the admiral asked.

“Well, Ma’am, speaking as an ex-snipe, there’s no real problem with generating a . . . call it a ‘bow-wall,’ for want of a better term. You’d need generators that were a lot bigger and more powerful to produce a wall with that much area, but that’s pretty straightforward. Just a matter of engineering, really. The *problem* —” she nodded at Ramalaas “— is that every time you put it up and closed the front of the wedge, your ship wouldn’t be able to accelerate. But these people *weren’t* accelerating. In fact, if they have something like that, it might be the reason they weren’t.”

“They *were* rolling ship, Captain,” Ramaalas pointed out, but his expression was thoughtful, not dismissive.

“Yes, and a lot faster than they could have on thrusters,” Raghavendra agreed. “They have to be using their wedges for that. But we don’t know how quickly they could put the thing up or down, and none of us were looking for any evidence of it at the time. One thing my tactical officer noticed, though, was that after they initially rolled up against our fire, none of their ships ever changed attitude twice in a row.”

“Twice in a row?” Isotalo repeated.

“What I mean, Ma’am, is that they were obviously clearing telemetry or sensor channels to take peeks downrange at our birds, but they did it in a staggered sequence, using a different ship each time. I’m wondering if that was because of the time it took to deactivate and activate the ‘bow-wall’ generators. The actual engagement time was too short for us to draw any kind of conclusions, but I think it’s worth bearing the possibility in mind.”

“Agreed.” Ramaalas nodded and returned his gaze to Isotalo. “And I think I see where Bart was going with this. For them to handle that much fire without any evidence of significant damage, whatever they’re using to protect the forward aspect of their wedges must be a hell of a lot tougher than anything ships that size ought to mount. I wouldn’t like to face that kind of beating with a *superdreadnought*’s sidewalls, to be honest, and as the Captain points out, the sheer area they’re covering means they must have given up a lot of volume and power supply to cram the suckers in. You have to wonder if they can mount sidewall generators equally heavy, don’t you?”

“That question did cross my mind, Sir,” Rosiak replied. “If so, we may be looking at a flipped situation, one in which we can expect better penetration and more hits going for the other fellow’s sidewalls rather than trying to cross his ‘T.’ And that’s a much narrower target, which means we need more accuracy to hit it. Again, a big enough deluge of missiles would *probably* give us the hits we need through blind chance, but Admiral Isotalo’s right about the number of birds we’d need on a per-ship basis. Expenditures like that would burn through even our ammo supply before we ever got to the primary missions, but to avoid them, we need to get close enough to maintain our control links right up to the terminal phase. Which,” he pointed out, turning back to Isotalo,“is one of the things Two-Step is designed to do.”

“Yes, it is,” she acknowledged. She thought about it for a moment, then sat forward in her chair and tapped her index finger on the surface of the briefing room table.

“Yes, it is,” she repeated more briskly. “To be honest, I still have reservations about the concept. God knows we’ve discussed it enough for all of you to know what they are. But I think Bart’s right. We’ve got to shorten the control loop if we’re going to hurt these bastards. In fact, I’d love to get close enough to be able to launch inside their hyper generator cycle loops, and only a drooling idiot would let us get that close with an n-space approach. So I’m afraid that only leaves Two-Step, Isadore.”

She turned to Captain Isadore Hampton, the task force’s staff astrogator. Hampton was a swarthy, dark-eyed fellow who normally radiated an impression of calm competence. He still looked competent, but calm would have been pushing it at the moment, she thought, and with good reason.

“I can’t see another approach,” she told him. “I realize it’ll be putting a lot of pressure on you, but if anybody can pull it off, you can. And before we start, let me say that I don’t see where the tactical situation’s likely to be a lot worse even if your numbers are off in the end. What I’m saying — and this is for the record — is that I fully realize the difficulty of what I’m asking you to do. I’ve made my decision to try it anyway based on all the information available to me, but I don’t expect or demand miracles. Having said that, I do expect you to do your damnedest to make it work anyway.”

“Ma’am, we can do it,” Hampton replied. “We’ll have to come in on the ‘far side’ to avoid the resonance zone, though.”

“Understood,” Isotalo said. Every wormhole created a resonance zone in the volume between it and the n-space star with which it was associated. Translations out of hyper and back into n-space in those areas weren’t merely risky; they were extremely dangerous. So TF 1027 would be forced to approach the terminus from the side farthest from Prime. That would extend the jump somewhat, but the Manties were also positioned “outside” the terminus. Probably because they knew she couldn’t micro-jump into the area between them and the primary even if she’d wanted to.

“We figured that when we first started looking at Two-Step,” she reminded him. “And at least the Manties seem to be cooperating.”

“So far, Ma’am,” Hampton acknowledged. “And I’m fairly confident of hitting the distance pretty close. Translation scatter’s likely to turn formation keeping into a god-awful mess, though, especially that close to the terminus.”

Several heads nodded, and she grimaced.

“I know,” she said. “But somebody way back in one of the ancient wet-navies on Old Terra said something one time that I’m afraid applies here. To paraphrase: some things have to be left to chance in a battle. I know that’s anathema to any good Battle Fleet CO, but in this case,” she smiled tightly at Ramaalas and Lamizana, “I think we’re going to have to try it the sloppy, make-it-up-as-you-go-along Frontier Fleet way.”

A chuckle ran around the briefing room, despite the tension, and she sat back again.

“Instead of sending in one of the task groups, Bart, I want Bonrepaux and Tsukahara to take the lead together. We’ll hold Santini back as the follow-through. And since we’re talking about shortening our command loops, we might as well go whole hog on it.”

This time, her smile could have been a shark’s.

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“That’s interesting, Sir,” Commander Wozniak said.

“What’s interesting, Tom?” Lessem asked, looking up from the tactical problem he’d been playing through on his command chair’s repeater plot.

“It looks like those ‘donkeys’ of theirs may have more internal endurance than we’d thought,” the ops officer replied. “With your permission — ?”

He raised his eyebrows, a finger hovering over one of the icons on his touchscreen, and Lessem nodded. Wozniak’s finger touched the icon and a time-compressed tracking recording appeared on Lessem’s display. The commodore gazed at it, then grunted.

“Wonderful,” he said sourly.

“Don’t know how useful it’d be under normal battle conditions,” Wozniak said, “but it does give them some interesting options, doesn’t it?”

“One way to put it,” Lessem acknowledged.

The Solarian task force had started decelerating hard after the dismal failure of its initial attack. In fact, they’d gone to 4.4 KPS², ninety-two percent power for a *Nevada*. He didn’t think for a moment that they’d given up, though. If they’d wanted to do that, all they had to do was translate out. No, they were only buying themselves more time to think. Assuming they maintained their increased deceleration, they would reach a zero velocity relative to the terminus twelve minutes sooner — and 824,935 kilometers farther from it. And from a resting launch, a range of 2.7 light-seconds would give missile flight times of almost exactly forty-two seconds for the SLN’s prewar standard missile.

Which was . . . interesting, given the *42.7*-second hyper generator cycle time of a *Saganami-C*.

In the meantime, however, a host of tiny impeller signatures sped towards the decelerating battlecruisers from the far larger freighters following well behind them. Apparently the Solarian version of the donkey could forward-deliver itself — and, presumably, its missile pods — to a designated end-user. As Wozniak said, not something that was likely to be critically important under most battle circumstances, but irritating as hell, nonetheless.

*And maybe more than just irritating, too*, he thought. *I wonder*. . . .

“Get me Captain Amberline, please, George,” he said.

“Aye, Sir,” the com officer replied, and three seconds later Captain Harriet Amberline appeared on Lessem’s com display. Behind her, he could see the bridge of HMS *David K. Brown* and the FSV’s tactical section.

“Yes, Sir?” she said.

“I don’t trust these people,” Lessem told her. “They’ve obviously picked their decel to get inside our hyper generator cycles in a normal-space approach. In fact, I think they’ve picked it a little bit too obviously. I really hope they don’t think I’m stupid enough to let them actually get to that point without translating the hell out of here, and if they don’t, that suggests they have something else in mind.”

“A micro-jump that short’s tricky as hell, Sir. At the very least they’re likely to get a *lot* of scatter,” she pointed out, and he nodded at the confirmation that she was thinking the same thing he was.

“Might not matter a lot,” he pointed out in turn. “They’ve got ten times the hulls we do, and the *Nevadas* actually have more broadside tubes than a *Saganami-C*. I know we can fire off-bore and they can’t, but that’s still a lot of missiles if they can ever get into their effective range of us. For that matter, the *Nevadas* have half again our energy broadside, too. If they could get *really* close . . . .”

He let his voice trail off, and Amberline nodded soberly. Just this once, she was delighted that his collar carried the twin planets of a commodore and hers carried only the four golden pips of a junior grade captain.

“Given how much slower your generator’s going to cycle, I think it’s time you went elsewhere,” he continued. “I promise we’ll look after your waifs, and I’m giving you *Minion* and *Lancaster* for escorts. They’ve got less of the astro control people on board than *Obusier*.”

She nodded again.

“Randy will have the rendezvous coordinates for you in a minute.” Lessem waved one hand at Lieutenant Commander Ranald Kivlochan, CruRon 912’s staff astrogator. “Somebody will be along, one way or the other, to let you know how things work out.”

“I’ll be expecting good news, Sir.”

“Then we’ll try our best to give it to you. And your going away present’s probably going to help in that regard. Lessem, clear.”

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“That freighter or whatever of theirs just translated out, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Rosiak reported. “Looks like a couple of their destroyers went with it.”

“Damn,” Admiral Isotalo said mildly. “Obviously, she *isn’t* a drooling idiot. Not a surprise, but one could always hope.”

“Nothing wrong with hoping, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Ramaalas observed. The chief of staff stood beside her command chair, watching the master plot with her. “Not as long as you don’t let yourself get wedded to building your plans *based* on what you hope will happen, and in this case, you haven’t done that.”

“Nice of you to say so, anyway.”

Isotalo swiveled her chair thoughtfully from side to side while she pondered the plot. The icon of what she’d become privately convinced had to be a purpose-built fast support ship had just vanished from it, accompanied by two more impeller signatures CIC had tagged as destroyers, which suggested the Manty CO had figured out what she was up to. On the other hand, she might not have, too. The task force had been decelerating at its current rate for twenty-three minutes and its approach velocity was down to 10,179 KPS. In just over nine and a half minutes, it would enter the 7.6 million-kilometer maximum powered range of a standard Javelin missile. The chance of a Javelin scoring a hit at 25.3 light-seconds against the defenses which had turned a six thousand-strong Cataphract launch into mincemeat was nonexistent, but the range was going to go on falling. She needed to get at least another ten or fifteen light-seconds closer if she hoped for a decent hit percentage, and the odds that the Manty CO would sit still for another fourteen minutes while she closed another 5.3 million kilometers struck her as . . . low. It was possible the Manty expected her to *try* it, but neither one of them expected Isotalo to get away with it.

On the other hand, Isotalo had already fired a six thousand-missile salvo at her, and she had to have seen the Huskies streaming forward from Isotalo’s own supply ships to replenish TG 1027.3. That meant she knew Isotalo could fire a much, *much* larger salvo of Cataphracts if she flushed all of her task groups’ pods at once. Nor would Isotalo need to incorporate a ballistic phase this time. The Manties were already inside her powered Cataphract envelope, with a total flight time of “only” 210 seconds. No doubt the Manty wished TF 1027 *would* fire a bazillion or so missiles in her direction. There’d be plenty of time for her damned cruisers to translate safely into hyper, laughing down their sleeves at the stupid Sollies as a couple of hundred thousand expensive Cataphracts saw their targets abruptly vanish and self-destructed at the end of their powered runs.

But the support ship’s cycle time had to be close to two minutes, so it was at least possible the Manty CO was simply getting it safely out of harm’s way before the Cataphracts got inside *her* cycle time. That didn’t necessarily mean she knew what Isotalo was actually planning.

Sure *it doesn’t, Jane*, she thought sardonically. *On the other hand, even if she does know what you’re thinking, you may still get away with it*.

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“Any time now, I think,” Commodore Lessem murmured, watching the range continue to fall.

“I beg your pardon, Sir?” Commander Thúri said, and the commodore shook himself and smiled crookedly.

“Just making a bet with myself about when this fellow’s going to pull the trigger,” he said.

“I’m wondering that myself, Sir,” the chief of staff admitted.

“And the other thing *I’m* wondering is how cautious this particular rat is when it comes to sniffing the cheese.” Lessem shoved back up out of his command chair and crossed the flag bridge to stand looking over Lieutenant Commander Kivlochan’s shoulder. “I’d hate to have them leave before the party begins.”

Thúri nodded, standing at Kivlochan’s other shoulder and watching the plot.

The Sollies had been decelerating for thirty-four minutes. The range was down to seven million kilometers, and their closing velocity had fallen to 7,293 KPS. They were actually in extreme Javelin range now, and they couldn’t expect CruRon 912 to let them close much further.

Under normal circumstances, at least.

Lessem considered the geometry a moment longer, then nodded decisively.

“Better to encourage them, I think,” he said, and looked over his shoulder at Commander Wozniak. “Execute Picador, Tom.”

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“Missile launch!” Rear Admiral Rosiak announced sharply. “Estimate eight hundred and twenty-four — repeat, eight-two-four — inbound at four-five-one KPS squared! Time-of-flight two-point-seven minutes.”

Jane Isotalo’s head snapped around from her conversation with Kimmo Ramaalas. She’d dreaded this moment — and, frankly, been astonished it hadn’t happened earlier. But —

“Confirm that missile count!”

“Tracking’s confidence is high, Ma’am,” Rosiak replied, looking up from the master plot to meet her gaze.

“That can’t be all they’ve got, Ma’am,” Ramaalas said quietly.

“Maybe not, but it’s damned well more than even those big-assed cruisers of theirs should be able to launch from internal tubes.”

Isotalo’s voice was equally low. She turned to the maneuvering plot, eyes focused and intense while her mind whirred. All the reports and analyses insisted that Manty capital ships routinely threw thousands of missiles at their opponents, and there was no way in hell these people weren’t operating with pre-deployed pods of their own. Not when missiles were the Manties’ Hammer of God! Admittedly, *these* Manties were only heavy cruisers, but that many missiles couldn’t have come from ten cruisers’ internal tubes. They *had* to have been pod-launched, yet the numbers seemed ridiculously low if they were coming from a huge stack of pods. Unless . . . .

“Maybe they don’t have enough control links,” she said. Ramaalas cocked his head at her, and she shrugged. “So far, we don’t have any hard evidence of how many birds a single one of their *cruisers* can manage, and all the really big launches we know about have been handled by capital ships. Except for Spindle, maybe, and that was a launch from planetary orbit. God only know how many platforms they had controlling *that* one.”

“That’s true, Ma’am, but don’t forget the reports that they can launch off-bore. We just got confirmation they can launch counter-missiles that way, and that argues pretty strongly that they can launch shipkillers the same way. And if you crunch the numbers, this sounds like it could be a double salvo from each broadside — hell, maybe even their chase tubes, too. I’m wondering if they might’ve designed the damned things to handle double broadsides.”

“Stack ’em, you mean?” Isotalo considered that, then nodded. “Could be. It’d be a logical steppingstone for heavier salvo density on something that can’t carry their frigging pods internally, at least. They’d have to stagger the light-off sequence a bit, but we’d never see them at this range till their impellers went live, so how could we know they had?” Her eyes narrowed. “But if you’re right, that might mean this *is* the biggest salvo they have the channels to manage, even launching from deployed pods.”

*And it would be nice if there was* some *limit on their damned salvo densities*, she added mentally.

“Could be, Ma’am,” the rear admiral agreed. “On the other hand, they might just not want to piss away any more birds than they have to out here.” It was his turn to shrug.

“And maybe it’s all they think they’re going to *need*, too,” she said more bitingly, then raised her voice and looked at Rosiak again. “Projected targeting?” she requested

“Hard to say this early, Ma’am. It *looks* like they’re coming in on Vice Admiral Bonrepaux, but that could be evasive routing.”

“Probably is, actually.” Her tone was almost absent this time, and she looked back at the maneuvering plot. Thirty seconds since the Manties’ launch.

“Execute Two-Step in seventy seconds from . . . mark,” she said. “All task groups will initiate translation, but if your projected targeting holds, Group Three will abort and hold position here in n-space.”

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“I hope you’re ready to punch that button, Randy,” Commodore Lessem said as the squadron’s missile launch slashed toward its target.

If he’d chosen to dip into the missile pods tractored to the hulls of his ships, the older cruisers could have added more than six hundred additional missiles to his attack, and he’d been tempted to do just that, on the theory that fifteen hundred Mark 16s would turn any Solarian battlecruiser squadron ever built into wreckage. Unfortunately, there was no way in hell he was going to hit anything under the current circumstances, unless the Solly commander guessed very wrong about his target selection, and Picador was specifically designed to help the other fellow guess *correctly*. Under the circumstances, he wasn’t about to waste any of the pods limpeted to his ships, so he’d elected to rely solely on his cruisers’ internal launchers.

The *Saganami-C* mounted twenty tubes in each broadside and its telemetry links were designed to “stack” forty-missile salvos of Mark 16s two deep, so ships like *Clas Fleming* routinely launched eighty missiles at a time. She’d also been designed with a sixty percent control link redundancy as a hedge against battle damage and to let her wring maximum utility out of the RMN’s missile pods.

A *Saganami-B*-class cruiser actually mounted two more tubes than a *Charlie*, counting its chase armament, and had also been designed to stack salvos, which gave it stacked salvos eighty-four missiles “deep,” although it had only about half the *Charlie*’s control link redundancy. The *Bravos* weren’t equipped to fire the Mark 16, with its internal fusion plant, either, but they *were* armed with the Mark 14 Extended Range missile with its enhanced endurance impeller nodes. The Mark 14 had only fifty-six percent of the Mark 16’s powered range, and its onboard power budget was much lower, which impacted things like ECM capability. But even with those limitations, it had eighty percent *more* powered range than the Cataphracts the RMN had discovered in Massimo Filareta’s magazines. Inferior to the Mark 16 and the Mark 23 they might be, but they were superior to anything the Sollies had, and more than enough for his present purposes.

*And it would be really nice if those people were clumsy enough to let us actually* hit *them, too*, he reflected. *Not going to happen, though*.

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“Bastards *were* trying to sneak one in on us, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Ramaalas observed as the entire Manty salvo swerved at the last possible moment, shifting target from Vice Admiral Bonrepaux’s TG 1027.1 to Vice Admiral Tsukahara’s TG 1027.2.

“And it’s going to bite them on the butt,” Isotalo agreed, studying the attack’s geometry with profound satisfaction. The Manty missiles’ course change had placed Helmut Santini’s TG 1027.3 well outside their envelope. Even at their acceleration, they couldn’t reorient to acquire his ships, given the separation she’d inserted between her task groups.

“Com, confirm Two-Step abort to Admiral Santini,” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Commodore ad Kadidu, her communications officer acknowledged.

“I’ll probably piss Helmut off by belaboring the obvious,” Isotalo said quietly to Ramaalas, “but it never hurts.”

“True, Ma’am,” the chief of staff replied. The Manticoran missiles were barely fifteen seconds from detonation, but Ramaalas seemed unperturbed by the looming destruction of a third of TF 1027’s battlecruisers.

With good reason, Isotalo thought with a glance at the digital time display. In just about —

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“Why am I not surprised?” Commodore Lessem observed as two thirds of the Solarian warships disappeared into hyper five seconds before CruRon 912’s missiles reached attack range. “George, send *So-po* and *Obusier* through to Ajay.”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” Lieutenant Gordon acknowledged, and Lessem turned to Commander Kivlochan.

“Start the clock, Randy.”

“Aye, aye, Sir. Executing in . . . two-eight-zero seconds.”

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Astrogators hate micro-jumps, which are defined by most of the galaxy’s merchant spacers as any hyper-space trip which covers less than four or five light-minutes in normal-space. Actually, anything short of half a light-hour could be reasonably considered a micro-jump, but 72,000,000 kilometers is generally considered to be absolutely the shortest hyper “voyage” any reasonable person wants to make.

A large part of that is due to the fact that although a ship’s maximum acceleration rate is identical in n-space and h-space — outside a grav wave, at least — its *apparent* acceleration rate to an observer in normal-space is much, much greater. In the Alpha bands, the differential is approximately 640%, which gives a Solarian *Nevada*-class battlecruiser an apparent maximum acceleration of 32,112 gravities — over 370 KPS². That acceleration doesn’t make an astrogator’s calculations any more difficult, but it does mean any small errors have much larger consequences when the ship returns to normal-space. And some error is inevitable. The hyper log which keeps track of a starship’s location in hyper, much the way ancient inertial navigation systems kept track of pre-space submarines’ submerged positions, have to calibrate after any translation into hyper-space, and that calibration depends on a series of complex comparisons between the vessel’s actual energy readings and those projected by a “perfect” model run over a period of time. There’s not enough time for the hyper log to complete its comparisons in a micro-jump. Depending upon the jump’s duration, the hyper log may be able to *refine* its accuracy; it can never achieve anything like *complete* accuracy.

And what creates problems for a single ship tends to create a lot more of them when multiple ships execute a micro-jump together. Even when a single ship runs the master clock for the jump and every ship initiates its downward translation simultaneously, there’s some variance when they actually hit the alpha wall between hyper and normal-space. Crossing the wall is akin to encountering atmospheric turbulence in an aircraft, and the wall fluctuates as the result of a complex interaction with any local n-space gravity wells or wormholes. The degree to which that fluctuation can be adjusted for depends upon how well the astrogation computers have analyzed it, and that, too, is a factor of how long they’ve had for the analysis.

Bearing all those factors in mind, merchant captains generally refuse to put wear on their alpha nodes and hyper generators for anything less than a half light-hour. Their schedules are seldom so time-critical as to make shorter micro-jumps worth the trouble, the effort, and the uncertainty. Naval astrogators, on the other hand, are specifically trained to make those shorter micro-jumps, although things can get tricky even for them if the total distance is much less than, say, *three* light-minutes.

Task Force 1027’s micro-jump was only twenty-three *light-seconds*, however, and Isadore Hampton had the disruptive influence of the terminus itself to contend with, as well.

Inevitably, there was going to be a certain . . . sloppiness about it.

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“Hyper footprints!” Thomas Wozniak announced 4.5 minutes after thirty Solarian battlecruisers, twelve light cruisers, and twenty destroyers had vanished from CruRon 912’s sensors. “Many footprints,” he continued, studying the data. “The nearest is . . . seven hundred thousand kilometers!”

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The terminus’s approaches were a storm of blue lightning, flashing against the Stygian dark as sixty-two starships returned to normal-space. Under the circumstances, it was a tight formation, Jane Isotalo thought as the hyper footprints flared upon SLNS *Foudroyant*’s master plot. “Tight,” however was a relative term, and her two task groups were still scattered over an enormous volume. One division of *Nevadas* from TG 1027.2’s BatCruRon 615 was over a million kilometers from the rest of its squadron. That was the worst dispersal, however, and she smiled fiercely as she saw how tight Isadore Hampton’s astrogation had actually been. He had, indeed, hit very close on the distance. If four of her battlecruisers were 1.6 million kilometers from the Manties, eight more were barely beyond energy weapon range. Flight time for a Javelin at 700,000 kilometers would be thirty-nine seconds, well within the cycle time on a heavy cruiser’s hyper generator, and the communications lag would be only 2.3 seconds. At that range, all the ECM in the universe wouldn’t save the Manties.

She would have preferred energy range, but she’d settle for what she had.

“Fire Plan Delta!” she snapped.

Delta relied solely on her ships’ internal launchers, because there wasn’t time to redeploy the extended chains of Huskies and missile pods which had been drawn in close enough for the battlecruisers’ hyper translation fields to extend around them. Still, the eight *Nevadas* — including *Foudroyant* — closest to the Manties belched 224 missiles two seconds after she’d given the order.

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“Not bad astrogation,” Commodore Lessem observed as the master plot stabilized. “Those bastards at zero-three-eight did especially well.”

He twitched his head at the closely grouped clump of hyper footprints off *Clas Fleming*’s starboard quarter. The Solarians weren’t moving relative to his command — a ship translating out of hyper shed over ninety percent of its velocity in transit energy bleed-off, and they hadn’t been moving especially fast through hyper even before they translated back down — but those eight ships had maintained an extremely tight formation. In fact, he doubted very many Manticoran squadrons could have matched their performance.

“Better than *I* expected, Sir,” Commander Thúri admitted.

“Nobody ever said the Sollies weren’t competent spacers,” Lessem pointed out. “We tend to forget that because —”

“Missile launch!” Wozniak said. “Two hundred-plus inbound from zero-three-eight, one-six-three at niner-three-five-point-three KPS squared. They look like Javelins, Sir. Time-of-flight . . . three-niner-point-two seconds.”

“Acknowledged,” Lessem replied, never looking away from the plot. “As I was saying,” he resumed calmly, “we tend to forget that because of how one-sided the actual fighting’s been so far. But they’re not going to keep their heads inserted into their anal orifices on that front forever, Lester. And when they get them extracted, they’re still going to be competent in all those other areas.”

“Point, Sir,” Thúri said.

Lessem turned his head to smile at him, then glanced at Lieutenant Commander Kivlochan. The astrogator’s expression was intense as he watched his console, but there was remarkably little concern on *Clas Fleming*’s bridge as the missiles accelerated towards her. And then —

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“Damn,” Admiral Isotalo said as the entire Manticoran squadron disappeared into hyper fourteen seconds after her missiles had launched.

“Aborting salvo,” Rear Admiral Rosiak said, and transmitted the destruct code to the Javelins which had been hurtling towards their foes. They self-destructed a second later, and Isotalo grimaced.

“I hate it when the other side has a brain,” she said.

“All due respect, Ma’am, it didn’t take a whole *lot* of brain to figure our options,” Ramaalas pointed out. “Like you said, Two-Step was really our only chance to get into effective range before they bugged out, anyway. And I believe you were also the one who said only ‘a drooling idiot’ would let us get away with it. It was worth trying, but they had to have had their generators ready to cycle the instant they saw us go into hyper.”

“I know. I know!” Isotalo snorted. “I guess I’m mostly pissed off at myself for letting them suck me into firing those missiles. Like you say, they had to’ve known when we’d be turning up and they could have hypered out four damn minutes before we translated back down. The only reason they didn’t was because they wanted to sit here long enough to let me fire at them. It was a little . . . cheeky of them, but given the timing, we’d’ve had to hit n-space less than ninety thousand kilometers out to catch them with a missile launch. And at that range, we’d have been ripping them apart with energy fire, and damn the missiles! But what were the chances even Isadore could put us that close?” She shook her head. “No, the Manties did that on purpose. And they did it to make the point that they *could* do it.”

“Beg your pardon, Ma’am?” Ramaalas’s eyebrows furrowed.

“We could’ve fired ten times that many birds without making a hole in our internal magazines, much less what Quigley’s got in the support ships. I think we can assume they’re smart enough to figure that out, too. So they damned well didn’t expect that convincing us to waste missiles chasing them into hyper was going to affect our combat readiness in any way. No, those people only waited because they were thumbing their noses at us before they ran away.”

“Maybe so,” Ramaalas acknowledged after a moment, “but that could end up costing them. Especially if they really can’t fire salvos bigger than the one they already threw at us, Ma’am. *We’re* on top of the terminus now, not them, and if they don’t have the firepower to blow us back off of it, they’re stuck on this side of it. At best — from their perspective — that would mean they’d have to go home the long way.”

“You could be right, but I’m not convinced someone as smart as this wouldn’t be a jump or two ahead of that logic. I’m thinking she probably *chose* to stay on the side of the terminus.”

“Because he’s expecting friends, Ma’am?”

“It’s certainly a possibility.” Isotalo turned and walked back to her command chair while the task groups’ scattered units began accelerating back toward *Foudroyant*. Given the separation, it would take at least fifteen minutes for them to coalesce around the flagship once more. The Manties would probably translate back out of hyper well before that.

“They didn’t have time to put that many ships through the terminus after we went into hyper,” she pointed out, settling into her chair. A beckoning index finger summoned Rosiak to join her and Ramaalas and she leaned back. “Not in a *sequenced* transit, anyway. The minimum time for that would’ve been — what? A hundred and sixty seconds? And that would’ve been with all of them lined up in a tight transit queue. But if they’d intended to fall back on Ajay, they could’ve done that any time they wanted to before we translated out. For that matter, if they’d been planning on falling back, they could’ve been positioned for a simultaneous transit of their entire force. This terminus isn’t as big as some, but it’s more than big enough to handle that many cruisers simultaneously. And if they’d made transit to Ajay, we’d know they were sitting right on the other side of the terminus ready to rip our arses off with energy fire when we came through after them.”

Her staffers nodded, expressions somber. A starship transited a wormhole under Warshawski sails, not impeller drive, and that meant it emerged with neither an impeller wedge nor sidewalls. It took several seconds — about eighty in the case of the Prime Terminus — to clear the wormhole sufficiently to reconfigure to wedge. During those eighty seconds, the ship in question was mother naked against defensive fire. That was one of the reasons Isotalo and her staff were quietly convinced that all the savage vituperation in the newsfaxes — and the Assembly — against Beowulf was completely unjustified in at least one respect. Colluding with the Manties or not, the Beowulfers had saved hundreds of thousands of SLN lives when they blocked the Beowulf Terminus of the Manticoran Wormhole Junction against Fleet Admiral Tsang. If Tsang *had* made transit into the teeth of the unshaken Manticoran defenses, her entire fleet would have been massacred even more completely than Filareta’s had been. The politicians and the talking heads could say whatever they liked, but after what had happened to Eleventh Fleet, any naval officer with two brain cells to rub together knew what would have happened to Tsang would have been even worse. *Far* worse.

“There has to be a reason they didn’t choose to do that,” Isotalo went on. “And the most likely one that springs to my mind is that they are, indeed, supposed to be picketing this terminus while another of their task forces takes out the Agueda-Stine bridge. If that’s the case, then they need to keep an eye on us to keep us from setting up an ambush to greet that other task force when it arrives.” She showed her teeth. “Wouldn’t it be sweet if *we* were the ones sitting on the terminus with a few thousand of *our* missile pods deployed in the area defense role when the Manties came back? They wouldn’t have any of those damned invisible recon platforms deployed, and even their shipboard sensors would be degraded until the transit energy bled fully away. By the time they picked us up through our stealth, they’d probably be in range for a mass launch, and I would cheerfully use up a half million or so missiles to kick the shit out of one of their point-of-the-spear task forces!”

“That *would* be nice, Ma’am.” Ramaalas sounded a bit wistful.

“And that’s what they’re primarily worried about, I think,” Isotalo continued. “They want to maintain a sufficient force on this side of the terminus to play watchdog for their friends. An incoming task force wouldn’t need recon platforms if there’s already an entire damned cruiser squadron sitting here to tell them about us.”

“What about protecting Ajay, though, Ma’am?” Rosiak asked. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged. “That has to be fairly high on their priority list, too, I’d think,” he pointed out.

“I think we have two main possibilities,” Isotalo said. “Either what we’ve been looking at here on the Prime side of the terminus is all they’ve got — or their primary force, at any rate — or it’s not. Given how many missiles they threw at us in that one salvo, and given what we’ve heard so far about the kind of salvos Manty capital ships can throw, I’m inclined to think there can’t be any wallers on the Ajay side. I don’t care what some of our less brilliant colleagues might do if they’d brought a couple of those ‘podnoughts’ of theirs along, but all *I’d* have done would have been to run the hell away, and they’d have to assume any SLN admiral with a brain would be thinking exactly that. No way are we going to cross swords with something that can do what those damned things did to Filareta!”

Both her subordinates nodded in agreement — and profound relief — at that.

“From their perspective, maintaining control of this side of the terminus has to be more attractive than simply defending it from the other side, especially if they’re operating against Agueda. So, again, if they’d had that kind of firepower available, I’m pretty sure they’d have brought it through to chase us off or at least make us keep our distance from the terminus. Given all that, I’m inclined to assume — provisionally, at least — that what we’ve seen is pretty much all they’ve got. It looks to me like they’ve decided it’s more important to hold this terminus — and probably slam the door shut behind us, if we go through it — than it is to defend from the Ajay side.”

“But that leaves everything in Ajay exposed, Ma’am,” Rosiak said.

“It does, but think about it.” Isotalo’s expression had turned to stone. “What’s it exposed *to*, as far as they know? Any of their shipping — or anyone else’s in Ajay, for that matter — should have plenty of time to run for it before we turn up. Manties are damned good at commerce protection, everybody knows that, and that’s what’s going to be on their minds, because they don’t know about Buccaneer. They can’t.”

Rosiak inhaled deeply, and Ramaalas’s expression turned almost as stone-like as Isotalo’s.

*Of course it did,* the admiral thought. *Kimmo doesn’t like Buccaneer one bit more than I do. We’ll* do *it, because those are our orders and because there’s no other way we can hurt the frigging Manties at the moment. But he doesn’t like it, and he and Bart both know as well as I do that no Manticoran naval officer would imagine for a moment that the* Solarian League, *of all star nations, would start systematically destroying entire star systems’ industrial and orbital infrastructures.* Stopping *that sort of thing was one of the main reasons the League was created in the first place!*

The very thought revolted her, but she’d had plenty of time to get over that. And the critical point was that the Manties didn’t know about — and would never expect — anything like Buccaneer. A commerce raid, yes. An attack on any Manty warships they encountered, the seizure of any merchant vessel they met — any and all of that, they would anticipate. And if anything in the galaxy was certain, it was that the Manty CO had sent one of her units back to Ajay to tell every single *legitimate* commerce-raiding target to get the hell out of the star system. That meant she’d cleared her responsibilities in Ajay, and *that* meant it would actually make strategic sense for her to let TF 1027 through the terminus into Ajay and then close it behind Isotalo, forcing *her* ships to take the long way home the way she’d anticipated forcing the Manties’ Agueda force to do.

“Either way,” she said, “we still have Buccaneer to carry out.”

She settled herself in her chair, contemplating the consolidating icons on the plot, then looked at Rosiak.

“I want Quigley here on the terminus.”

The operations officer looked startled, and she chuckled harshly.

“Not to *stay*, Bart,” she reassured him. “Trust me, I want her task group in and out as quickly as possible. By the time she gets here, you’re going to have put together a pod deployment plan that will let me detach Santini with enough firepower to give even a division of Manty superdreadnoughts something to worry about. Ideally, I want him to be able to hold the terminus against anything they throw at it long enough for us to withdraw from Ajay, hopefully with Buccaneer’s mission objectives completed.”

*And, please, God, without* Parthian *on my conscience*, she added silently.

“Everything we’ve heard about their operational stance suggests they’re seizing the wormholes primarily with battlecruisers and cruisers,” she continued serenely. “I think that’s most likely the case here and that we won’t be looking at superdreadnoughts whenever their Agueda force gets back. If we are, though, then Santini’s orders will be to punch as many missiles at them as he can from as short a range as possible, accepting that they’ll be blind fire, before he translates out and runs the hell back to Wincote. And before he does *that*, one of his tin cans will transit to Ajay and warn the rest of us what’s coming up our collective backside.

“Frankly, given the combat differential, they probably wouldn’t really need wallers to kick our butts,” she said frankly. “A half-dozen of those big battlecruisers of theirs could do the job without breaking a sweat, especially since that logistics vessel of theirs is sitting out there somewhere with a load of additional pods for them. And, Kimmo, I want Santini’s orders to be clear. I don’t care whether it’s superdreadnoughts, battlecruisers, or a horde of outraged gerbils, if the Manties turn up and start firing shit pots of missiles at him, then he had *better* get his arse into hyper and out of here before any of them get a chance to *hit* anything.”

“Understood, Ma’am.”

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“Well, so far, you seem to’ve read them pretty well, Sir,” Lester Thúri said quietly as he and Commodore Lessem stood watching the master plot and Lessem’s steward replenished their coffee mugs.

They’d been watching the Solarians through the Ghost Rider platforms they’d left behind for almost nine hours now. The wormhole and its approaches formed a zone three-quarters of a light-second across, defining a sphere with circumference of 2.36 light-seconds and a volume of over 5.9 *quadrillion* cubic kilometers. The Solarian warships were a handful of minute specks in that enormity, and it was impossible for the plot to show the individual missile pods they’d been busily deploying ever since they’d taken possession of it. The hidden recon platforms and the computers were keeping track, though, and according to them, the Solarian CO had placed approximately seventy thousand pods. Judging from the earlier firing pattern, each of thiose pods containined only six missiles, considerably fewer than Eleventh Fleet’s pods at Manticore, but that still came to roughly 420,000 missiles, which would be enough to give just about anyone pause.

They’d also sent a quartet of destroyers through to Ajay, clearly probing the terminus with light units before their battlecruisers made transit into the face of something unpleasant. One of those DD’s had returned five hours ago, so it would appear *So-po* and *Obusier* had executed Lessem’s orders and kept right on accelerating away from the far side of the terminus. No doubt the other three Sollies were making sure the approaches to the Ajay Terminus stayed as clear as they were just then.

“Maybe,” Lessem replied to the chief of staff’s comment, his voice as low as Thúri’s had been. “But I have to admit, there’s one thing — *at least* one thing — I can’t figure out, and that worries me.”

“And what’s that, Sir?”

“What the hell they’re after.” The commodore shook his head, eyes narrowed in thought. “I mean, there are only two reasons for them to be here. One is to take control of the terminus before we do, and they obviously didn’t manage that. I don’t care how many missile pods these people are deploying, they won’t have enough — not without Ghost Rider and Apollo — to keep Admiral Correia from kicking their asses all the way from here to Old Chicago when *Pierrier* catches him with our dispatch.”

He paused, quirking an eyebrow at the commander as if to invite a response, but Thúri only nodded. It was a given that the *Culverin*-class destroyer would bring back a quick response from the rest of the task force as soon as she reached it.

“Well, in that case, what we’re seeing is an exercise in futility. If they’d gotten here before we did — before the Admiral headed for Agueda — then all this activity of theirs might make sense as a way to fortify the terminus against anything coming through from Ajay. If they’re attacked from *this* side, though, not so much. So from that perspective, they should already have headed home. Or, if not that, I don’t see any reason for them to invest this many missile pods on *this* side of the terminus in an effort to prevent the inevitable. Transit to Ajay and fortify hell out of the *Ajay* Terminus, sure. Failing that, hang around, make us maneuver against them, make *us* use up missiles the way we made *them* use up missiles — all of that I could see . . . sort of. But any of that would come in a piss-poor second to forting up in Ajay, and even if they can churn the things out like cookies, seventy thousand of them — the next best thing to *eighty thousand* — is an awful lot of industrial effort to just toss out the airlock.”

He paused again, puffing his cheeks and frustration, then sipped coffee.

“But that brings us to the second reason for them to be here, and that’s because they intended to raid Ajay. What it looks to me like they’re doing is fortifying the terminus against *us* — our task group, not Admiral Correia — before they poke their noses into Ajay. They want to keep us from sneaking back in and re-taking the Prime Terminus to ambush them when they come home again while they move on Ajay. But they’ve got to know we’ve had plenty of time to evacuate all of our ships and personnel from the system, if that’s what we’ve decided to do. So why raid an empty cookie jar? I mean, I suppose it would be an exercise in showing the flag, turning up in Ajay after they’ve ‘chased the nasty Manties out of town,’ but that’d be a purely cosmetic accomplishment. Again, stacking half a million missiles out where they’re likely to lose them for little or no return, strikes me as a pretty stiff price tag for a symbolic ‘victory’!”

“That’s a valid point, Sir,” Thúri said after gazing down into his own coffee mug for several thoughtful seconds. “And I don’t have an answer.”

“Neither do I, and that’s why it worries me.” Lessem waved his mug at the icons of the Solarian ships. “We’re missing something. There’s got to be a reason they’re doing this, and I can’t shake the suspicion that whatever it is, it represents a significant shift in their strategy.”

“Well, maybe we can find out what it’s all about from the survivors, Sir,” Thúri said. “You’re right about what’s going to happen to them on this side when the Admiral comes back — assuming your own brainchild doesn’t send them on their way even sooner than that. But whatever they’ve got in mind for Ajay, I think they’re going to find it just a little more difficult to carry out than they think.”

“Maybe.” Lessem smiled briefly. It was remarkably cold, that smile. “We put enough effort into the cheese, anyway.”

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“The Task Force is ready to proceed, Ma’am,” Rear Admiral Ramaalas said formally, and Jane Isotalo nodded.

“I’m assuming that if we’d heard anything untoward from Captain Ogelsby’s division, you’d have brought that minor fact to my attention.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I believe you could safely assume that.”

“Very good,” she said. “In that case, Admiral, proceed.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am.” Ramaalas looked at Rear Admiral Rosiak. “Execute,” he said.

“Aye, aye, Sir. Executing now.”

Rosiak touched a macro, and the carefully orchestrated movement plan unfolded with metronome precision.

Isotalo sat back in her command chair, fingers of her right hand toying absently with the closure of her skinsuit while she did her primary job: radiating serene confidence as her subordinates executed her directives.

She still didn’t like the idea of Buccaneer one bit, but she felt a deep sense of satisfaction as her task force rumbled toward its objective. After the seemingly unending tide of Manticoran triumphs and Solarian debacles, TF 1027 was about to execute its orders flawlessly. According to Captain Hieronymus Oglesby and his three destroyers, the far side of the terminus was just as naked as she’d hoped it would be. The destroyers’ recon drones had confirmed — as she’d expected — that any Manticoran or neutral shipping in Ajay had cleared the limit and disappeared into hyper long since, and that was a pity. But Buccaneer’s true objective couldn’t escape into hyper, and there wasn’t a trace of a Manty warship to be found.

She reminded herself of how astoundingly good Manticoran electronic warfare had proved both against Eleventh Fleet and against her own missile salvo right here on the terminus. It was possible there were still Manty warships hiding under stealth somewhere in Ajay, but it would have required direct divine intervention to hide anything bigger than a frigate from her destroyers and their reconnaissance platforms within ten or twenty light-seconds of the terminus. The terminus itself was enough to interfere with sensors — enough to make it more difficult to detect gravitic and electronic emissions signatures in the first place, although not seriously enough to significantly degrade fire control once the target had been picked up in the first place — but it was also, for all its size, a limited volume. Any ship large enough to pose a threat to her battlecruisers that couldn’t be picked up by Warshawskis or radar would have a hard time — a *very* hard time — hiding from visual and thermal detection.

*No*, she thought. *The henhouse door really is wide open . . . damn it.*

SLNS *Hindustan*, leading Lamont Bonrepaux’s TG 1027.1 headed into the terminus and flickered into nonexistence on her way to join the destroyers in Ajay.

**Ajay Terminus**

**Prime-Ajay Hyper Bridge**

“So, you still liking the odds Giselle gave you, Andy?” Commander Arjun Menendez inquired, turning her command chair to face Andreas Bazignos, her executive officer.

Lieutenant Bazignos looked back without saying a word, and Sarah Chi, *Boomslang*’s tactical officer, chuckled without taking her attention from her own displays.

“Should’ve known better, Andy,” she told him. “First, because the Commodore . . . well, he’s the *Commodore*. When was the last time you saw him get it wrong? Whenever it was, I’m pretty sure it was the *first* time, too. But even leaving that aside, nobody in his right mind bets against Giselle. And even if they did, nobody’d be — I hate to say it, but ‘dumb’ is the only word that comes to mind — to do it when she offers *odds*. What were you *thinking*?”

Bazignos maintained his dignified silence, but his lips twitched. Chi had a point. At forty T-years, Lieutenant Giselle Parkkinen, *Fire Snake*’s executive officer, was the “old woman” of the group, seven T-months older than Commander Menendez. Her relatively ancient age for her rank had nothing to do with lack of competence; she’d just been busy doing other things until the People’s Republic of Haven’s Operation Thunderbolt brought her a direct commission from the merchant service. If she didn’t end up with an admiral’s stars, it would only be because somebody managed to kill her along the way.

And, as his good friend Chi had just so kindly pointed out, Parkkinen never had the wrong end of the odds in a friendly wager. She also had a nasty — and expensive — knack for filling inside straights. For that matter, she was one of the best TOs he’d ever met, and her analysis of Plan Estocada — and what the hell was an “estocada,” anyway? — had been spot-on so far. He didn’t see much chance that was going to change anytime soon, and he wondered what he’d been sniffing when he took her bet.

“Well, I’d have to say it’s not looking too good from your side,” Menendez said now, twitching her head at the red icons of the three Solarian destroyers on *Boomslang*’ssmallish master plot. “Those three seem to be doing exactly what she — and the Commodore; let’s not forget him — predicted.”

“I know,” Bazignos admitted finally. “And I knew it’d probably work out exactly that way from the beginning. But the odds were so *good*!”

“I only hope you’re luckier in love than you are at cards and betting,” Menendez told him.

“Oh, I am — I am!” he assured her with a broad smile.

“Funny,” Chi offered, still watching the quiescent destroyers. “That’s not what Sally Parkins down in Engineering said.”

“You don’t want to believe everything you hear from snipes,” Bazignos warned her. “Besides, I think she was uncomfortable in my presence because of my godlike good looks.” He shook his head sadly. “One of the crosses I bear. The women in my life realize they just can’t compete with my superhuman physical beauty.”

Both women guffawed, and lieutenant (JG) Josh Whitaker, *Boomslang*’s communications officer, looked across the cramped command deck at him with round, admiring eyes.

“Is *that* what you call it, Sir?” he asked in awed tones. “And here *I* thought your last name derived from the . . . lordly dimensions of your proboscis.”

Bazignos lifted the proboscis in question — which was indeed of “lordly dimensions” — with an equally lordly sniff.

“Alas, it’s ever my fate to be maligned by the little people,” he said. “But that’s okay! I’m used to it.” He heaved a deep sigh. “I’ve been dealing with it since high school, after all.”

“Yeah, sure,” Chi said. “Not the way *I* remember it,” she added, and it was Bazignos’s turn to chuckle. He and Chi had known each other since childhood, and she was probably his closest friend in the galaxy.

“That’s because your mind is starting to go and —”

“Hyper footprint!” Chi snapped, cutting him off in midsentence. “Somebody transiting the terminus, Ma’am!”

“Acknowledged.” Menendez’s voice had turned crisp and coldly professional as quickly as Chi’s had, and glanced at Whitaker. The com officer had been waiting.

“Hot mic, Ma’am!” he confirmed, and Menendez’s finger stabbed the transmit key on her command chair armrest before he finished speaking.

“Typhon,” she announced over the suddenly live network of short-range whisker communications lasers in that same cold, hard voice. “Typhon, Typhon.” Then she released the key and looked around her command deck. “Here we go, boys and girls,” she said. “Make it count.”

As battle cries went, it lacked a little something in drama, she reflected, but that was all right. There’d be plenty of drama to go around without her adding to it.

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“Hyper footprint,” Commander Patricia Richtmann, SLNS *Voltigeur*’s tactical officer, announced calmly. It wasn’t as if the arrival was a surprise. They’d been expecting it for at least the last three hours, but they were waiting for *battlecruisers*, after all. Every destroyer officer knew that the time required for any task expanded geometrically in proportion to the tonnage of the ship involved.

*Be fair, Pat*, she scolded herself. *It wasn’t just the standard transit prep this time. And unless you really want to walk home the long way, you should be happy they took the time to lay those pods. Because guess who’d be sent through to check for any Manty visitors if Admiral Santini* wasn’t *watching the back door?*

“Got the transponder code?” Captain Oglesby asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Richtmann replied. “It’s *Hindu* —”

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“Firing . . . *now*!” Sarah Chi announced, and pressed the key.

HMS *Echidna* was a *Hydra*-class LAC carrier. The *Hydras* were 33,000 tons smaller than the *Minotaurs* which had preceded them, but they managed to pack in an additional dozen LAC bays. All one hundred and eleven of her serviceable LACs — one of the brood was downchecked by the group engineering officer because its stealth systems had a stubbornly persistent glitch — had been launched and left behind, hiding in the midnight depths of the Ajay Terminus when *Echidna* and the rest of the Ajay picket took themselves elsewhere in obedience to HMS *So-po*’s relayed order from Commodore Lessem. They’d sat there, waiting, watching the Solarian destroyers checking for defenders, and now it was their turn.

It wasn’t Patricia Richtmann’s fault no one had noticed them. She and her fellow tactical officers aboard *Chamberlin* and *Timberlake*, *Voltigeur*’s division mates, had searched diligently for any sign of warships. The problem was that no one in the Solarian League Navy who’d ever encountered the RMN’s *Shrikes* and *Katanas* had gotten home to tell anyone else about it. As a consequence, no one in Task Force 1027 had ever imagined that something that small — a *Shrike* massed only twenty-one thousand tons and was barely seventy meters long — could possibly pose a threat to any genuine ship of war. *Voltigeur*, at 112,500 tons, had no business in a fleet engagement, and her officers and crew knew it. The thought that anyone should worry about something less than a fifth *their* size would have been absurd. There was a reason — in fact, there were a *lot* of reasons — no serious navy had built LACs for the past century or so, and even those which were in service were purely sublight system-defense or patrol vessels. Without Warshawski sails and hyper generators of their own, which no one could possibly fit into a hull that size — or the LAC *carriers* no Solarian knew a thing about— they couldn’t have been here in Ajay space anyway.

And even if they’d known about CLACs *and* the new generation LACs, nothing else in the galaxy was as stealthy as a *Shrike* or *Katana*. Even active radar's effectiveness against them was hugely degraded at anything above very short range. The only way to really spot one of them, with its impellers down and its stealth systems up was for it to occlude a star, and Commander Menendez, who was *Echidna*’s COAC as well as *Boomslang*’s CO, had made sure her deadly little ships were motionless relative to the terminus. The chance that something their size and holding that still might occlude a star (or anything else, for that matter) were . . . slight.

Had the Solarian destroyers looked hard enough and long enough, they might still have spotted them. Not even Manticoran EW could make them *invisible* to active radar with enough power behind it. But they were very *close* to invisible. Their radar return was far too tiny any represent any threat the SLN or its computers had ever heard of. People look for the threats they know about, and none of the men and women aboard those ships knew one damned thing about *Shrikes*.

For example, none of them were aware that in addition to the *Shrike-B*’s internal rotary missile launcher, it carried a single spinal-mounted graser as heavy as many a superdreadnought’s broadside armament.

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“I have the destroyers’ impeller signatures, Sir,” Captain Absolon Badrani’s plotting officer announced as SLNS *Hindustan* reemerged into everyone else’s universe.

“Very good,” Badrani acknowledged absently. His attention was on his helmswoman as the *Nevada*-class battlecruiser glided out of the terminus. *Hindustan*’s sister ship *Océan* was on her heels, and Captain Hackenbroch had an acid personality backed up by a scalpel-sharp sarcasm. She was bound to say something rude if *Hindustan* was clumsy about getting out of her way.

Not that *Océan* would be coming through *that* quickly. Admiral Isotalo had ordered a twenty-five second interval between transits. That was far longer than anyone would ever need. True, it would be another — he checked the display — fifty-three seconds before he could reconfigure from Warshawski sail to impellers, but those sails provided all the acceleration he’d need to keep *Hindustan* out of *Océan*’s way.

*Not that* Hackenbroch’ll *see it that way. If not for the fact that she’s just as competent as she is annoying, that mouth of hers would’ve* —

Twenty-four grasers, each designed to rip straight through a superdreadnought’s armor, slammed into SLNS *Hindustan* like the curse of God.

It was like hitting a puppy with a ground lorry, only worse.

*Far* worse.

Not one shot missed. There were no sidewalls to stop the fire coming from *Hindustan*’s flanks, and her side armor was woefully inadequate against graser fire that heavy delivered from such brutally short range. Even worse, half the fire came in from above, where there wasn’t *any* armor, because designers didn’t armor areas of the hull normally protected by the wedge that ought to have been there

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“*Jesus Christ!*” Patricia Richtmann blurted as nine hundred thousand tons of battlecruiser — and twenty-three hundred men and women — disappeared in the titanic fireball of failed fusion bottles. She stared at her plot in stark disbelief, then sucked in a shocked breath.

“*Impeller signatures!*” Her professional voice was frayed and harrowed as the impeller wedges of Menendez’s LACs sprang to malevolent life on her display. “*Many* impeller signatures! Estimate ninety-plus. Bearings —”

She broke off, slamming her heel on the button that locked her bridge chair’s shock frame.

“Missiles incoming,” she said flatly. “Estimate seventy-five — no, *eighty* — inbound. Time-of-flight, twenty seconds.”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Arja Menendez’s eyes glittered with fierce satisfaction as the first Solly battlecruiser blew apart. Her *Shrikes*’ heavy grasers could have blown through battlecruiser sidewalls at this range with contemptuous ease, but they didn’t even have to do that. And while two of her squadrons dealt with *Hindustan*, three more of them launched against the Solarian destroyers who’d never seen them coming.

The *Shrike-B* carried fourteen shipkillers, and the attacking LACs’ rotary launchers spat them out in a deadly stream. The range was so short they could easily have taken the Sollies down with graser fire, but the Achilles’ heel of the *Shrike*’s massive energy armament was that its fission reactor couldn’t recharge its plasma capacitors in battle. The energy budget simply wasn’t there. That meant her units’ energy fire was at least as limited as their magazine capacity, and she wanted all the graser shots she could bank against future need.

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“What the h—?” Captain Chayula Hackenbroch blurted, snapping upright in her command chair as *Océan* emerged on the Ajay side of the terminus. One moment the tactical display had shown only the calm, orderly line of battlecruisers queued up for transit. The next it was littered with missile traces, impeller signatures, and the homing beacons of a bare handful of life pods, speeding away from the fading fireball which must be all that remained of *Hindustan*.

“Impeller signatures! *Many impeller signatures!*” her tac officer screamed.

And then the holocaust which had hammered *Hindustan* came for *Océan*, as well.

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SLNS *Ohio*, *Neptune*, and *Minotaur* followed into the furnace one by one, emerging at neat twenty-five-second intervals into the devastating fire of LAC Group 117, and the fire in Commander Menendez’ eyes grew cold and bleak.

*They don’t have a chance – not a* chance. *My God! It’s not even shooting ducks; it’s clubbing* kittens*!* *These poor bastards don’t even know we’re here until they sail right into our sights and we blow them to hell!*

Her jaw tightened, and her nostrils flared. Whatever their high command and political masters might have done, surely the men and women aboard those dying ships were not so different from the men and women aboard *her* ships.

“Targeting change,” she heard her voice say. “Go for the hammerheads, Sarah. Take out the impeller rings and the poor bastards are toast if they don’t surrender as soon as we get back around to them.” She grimaced. “Let’s not make any more orphans today than we have to.”

**Prime Terminus**

**Prime-Ajay Hyper Bridge**

Vice Admiral Helmut Santini accepted the cup of tea from his steward with a nod of thanks, but his expression was unhappy. He sipped the hot brew and gazed at the blandly uninformative tactical plot on SLNS *Colossus’s* flag bridge for a handful of seconds. The comforting green icons of his task group floated in place, barring the Prime Terminus to all comers, and that was good. But then he flipped his eyes to the master astrogation plot and glared at the handful of *red* icons floating tauntingly twenty-seven light-minutes from the Terminus. He treated them to fifteen seconds of silent, fulminating bile, then turned to the tall, broad-shouldered rear admiral at his side.

“I don’t like it, Jansen,” he said — unnecessarily, he was sure. “I don’t like it one damned bit.”

“I don’t like it either, Sir,” Jansen Vasiliou, Task Group 1027.3’s chief of staff, replied. “And I wish we had some kind of explanation for it.”

“You and me both.”

Santini sipped more tea, brooding at that damnable plot — *both* those damnable plots — and checked the time display . . . again.

Admiral Isotalo’s scheduled update on Buccaneer’s status was far overdue.

The Ajay Terminus was 342 LM from the system primary. A trip that long through normal-space would have required over twenty-three hours, allowing for a zero-zero arrival at the hyper-limit. But 5.7 light-hours didn’t qualify as a “micro-jump” in anyone’s book, and in hyper, going only as high as the Gamma bands, TF 1027’s other task groups should have made the trip in just under thirty-seven minutes. By that calculation, Isotalo had crossed into the inner system over nine hours ago. Even assuming there’d been some reason she couldn’t send a destroyer back to the terminus with dispatches, a light-speed message announcing her arrival in orbit around Elm, the system’s only inhabited planet, should have reached the damned picket destroyers three and a half damned hours ago. At which point, one of them should damned well have returned to the Prime Terminus to give him some damned idea what was going on.

He wished — more than he could possibly have said — he could blame it on Isotalo’s sloppiness, but the one thing Jane Isotalo *wasn’t* was “sloppy.” There was a reason — a *compelling* reason — she hadn’t sent him that update, and he was unhappily certain he wouldn’t have liked Vasiliou’s explanation if they’d had it.

Not that *not* having it was inspiring any cartwheels of joy.

“Send one of the tin cans through to check with the picket, Sir?” Vasiliou asked, quietly enough no one else on Flag Bridge was likely to hear him.

“Tempting,” Santini acknowledged. “But Admiral Isotalo took over fifty starships through that terminus. If there’s something on the other side nasty enough to keep her from sending us even an update, what do you think it’s going to do to a destroyer?”

“I thought about that, Sir.” Vasiliou’s voice was even softer, and although his expression remained merely calm and attentive, there was something very dark at the backs of his eyes. But they were unflinching, those eyes, and they met Santini’s levelly. “The thing is, Sir, that that would be a message of its own, wouldn’t it?”

Santini’s jaw tightened and he clamped down on an urge to rip off his chief of staff’s head for even suggesting the cold-blooded sacrifice of a destroyer and its crew. Unfortunately, it was an eminently sound suggestion. There was no way he could justify taking his entire task group through, even in a simultaneous transit, without *some* idea of what had happened to the rest of the task force. The one thing he did know was that there were — or had been, he amended grimly — three Solarian destroyers directly atop the far side of the terminus. If something had gotten close enough to prevent even one of them from escaping back to Prime, it was probably nasty enough to deal with sixteen battlecruisers, all but two of them the older *Indefatigable*-class, and fourteen destroyers if he was obliging enough to deliver them without impeller wedges or sidewalls.

*So, yes, Jansen’s right,* he thought, *and he’s got the guts to say it. If we send a tin can through and it doesn’t come back, I’ll have no choice but to conclude that the Admiral’s been cut off from retreat through the terminus, at the very least. I can always* assume *that’s what’s happened without sacrificing a destroyer, but an assumption would be all it was. The truth is, I need some sort of confirmation, and paying the price of a destroyer would be a hell of a lot cheaper than losing the entire task group. But say I* do *send a tin can through and lose it, what do I do for my* next *trick?*

On the one hand, with the thousands upon thousands of missile pods deployed around the Prime Terminus and with his own battlecruisers’ energy batteries poised to eliminate any hostile unit emerging from it, his position was a powerful one. Indeed, against any threat from the Ajay side, it was unassailable. So he could stay right where he was indefinitely, waiting to see if Isotalo could work her way around whatever was blockading her — and God, he *hoped* she was only blockaded! — in Ajay and return to Prime. For that matter, staying put would continue to keep the terminus corked against the Manty task force which had probably already been summoned back to Prime from Agueda.

*At least until they turn up and deploy* their *damned pods to blow us all to dustbunnies*, he reflected harshly, glaring once more at the heavy cruisers maintaining their prudent distance from his battlecruisers and the Cataphracts.

On the other hand, he was a vice admiral in the Solarian League Navy. Vice admirals weren’t supposed to sit around with their thumbs up their arses hoping something would come along to save them from making the hard decisions. No matter what he chose, somebody far, far away in a nice, safe office was going to second-guess him. He knew that, and he didn’t like it, but he cared one hell of a lot less about that than he did about the rest of the task force. The thought of leaving them unsupported turned his stomach into a vacuum flask. Yet there was nothing he could do *to* support them, not when the far side of the terminus was a hundred and three light-years away through Einsteinian space.

He sipped more tea, thinking about that distance. He could make the trip to Ajay through n-space in a bit over twelve and a half days, although he doubted there was much his single task group could do to reverse Isotalo’s fortunes, even assuming she was still *in* Ajay the next best thing to two weeks from now. No, that was a non-option, for a whole host of reasons. But at the very least, he had to inform Old Terra about the rest of TF 1027’s disquieting silence. Only he didn’t really have anything to tell Admiral Kingsford, did he? “They went into the terminus and they didn’t come out again” wasn’t a hell of a lot of information.

*No, it’s not. But he does need to know about it, because if the Manties really did come up with some kind of mousetrap — a mousetrap so well hidden three destroyers posted specifically to watch for it never saw it coming — that could . . . prevent the Admiral from returning to Prime, , this may not be the only place they’ve done it. And*, his eyes grew grimmer, *she may not be the only one they’ve done it* to, *either*.

“We have to send a dispatch back to Wincote for the Admiralty,” he said quietly. “I know there’s damn-all we can tell them at this point, but if something *has* happened to Admiral Isotalo, they’ve got to know about it.”

“Agreed, Sir. But do we send dispatches now, or wait a while longer in hopes somebody *does* come back to tell us what’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Santini sipped more tea, then grimaced. “No, I do know,” he said. “We’ll wait twenty-four hours. If we send anyone back to Wincote before that, some idiot somewhere along the chain of command’ll decide we jumped the gun because we’ve had the shit scared out of us.” He grimaced again, more deeply. “The fact that I think I *have* had the shit scared out of me doesn’t make me any more eager to give the idiot in question any ammunition I don’t have to. If we wait a T-day, that’s a nice, solid interval. Long enough to show we thought it over carefully before we did what we already know we damned well need to do. And it’s not like anything’s going to sneak up on us here on this side of the terminus, is it?”

“No, Sir,” Vasiliou agreed.

“Then have Sheila and Franziska put together a complete file for us, all the tac data from Sheila and the entire communications chain from Franziska.”

Vasiliou nodded. Commodore Sheila O’Reilly was TG 1027.3’s operations officer, and Captain Franziska Ridolfi was Santini’s staff communications officer.

“I want the best analysis Sheila can give us, and I want to see it before I write my cover dispatch for it.” He shook his head, staring into the plot again. “Actually, I’m hoping like hell the Admiral will come back in one piece before I have to send the thing.

“The problem —” he turned his head to meet Vasiliou’s eyes once more “— is that I feel like I’m a kid back home in Faraday, whistling in a graveyard at midnight.”

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“I think it’s time,” Sir Martin Lessem said.

Commander Thúri glanced at him across the table in his dining cabin, and the commodore shrugged.

“The fact that nothing’s come back from Ajay suggests Commander Menendez and her people kicked their asses pretty conclusively.” He paused, one eyebrow arched, and Thúri nodded. “Well, I’d hoped whoever they left command on this side would be foolish enough — or impatient enough — to bash on through, trying to find out what happened. Clearly, he’s too smart to do that. So if he’s not going to oblige us by sticking his head into the noose, I suppose it’s time for Descabello.”

Thúri pursed his lips in thought, then nodded. He wondered if Lessem realized just how completely he’d revealed the revulsion underlying his professionalism when he named his ops plans. The *descabello* was the deathblow — the second, spine-cutting deathblow if the *first* one was clumsy and unsuccessful — in the ancient bullfighting tradition which had been revived on some of the more decadent Core Worlds. Lessem had been dragged to one of them before the war, when he’d been assigned as the military attaché in the Sebastopol System, and “deeply disgusted” was a pale shadow of his response to it.

Which didn’t mean “Descabello” wasn’t a perfectly apt word for the ops plan to which he’d appended it.

Not that there’d been anything clumsy or unsuccessful about his actions so far.

“All right,” the commodore said now. “Go ahead and tell Tom to execute in —” he checked his chrono “— twenty minutes.”

“Yes, Sir,” the commander said quietly, sliding his chair back from the table. “With your permission, Sir, I’ll do that in person.”

“Fine.” Lessem nodded and Thúri came briefly to attention, then turned and left the dining cabin.

Lessem watched the hatch slide shut behind him, then picked up his wineglass and sipped again. The rich port seemed vinegary on his tongue, and he set the glass back down with a disgusted air.

*I miss you, Sara Kate*, he thought, looking at the light portrait on his bulkhead. *I miss you for* somany *reasons, but right now, I need someone I can talk to who isn’t one of my officers. Somebody who lets me put my head in her lap and tell her I feel like a murderer*.

He closed his eyes, remembering his elation when he and his people danced rings around what was obviously a smart, competent adversary. Remembering how clever he’d felt when he realized Menendez and her LACs must have evaded detection by the destroyers the Solly CO had sent through. He’d predicted *exactly* what the Sollies would do, and they’d done it because it was what competent people who lacked critical knowledge did . . . and the fact that none of them had come back yet meant none of them ever would.

What must it have been like aboard those ships, in the fleeting seconds they had to realize what they’d just sailed into? They’d done everything right . . . and they were just as dead, in just as staggering numbers, as if they’d been commanded by Josef Byng or Sandra Crandall or Massimo Filareta.

And whoever might have commanded the LAC executioners, *he* was the one who’d killed them. That was almost the worst part of it, but not quite.

No, the worst part of it — the part he needed Sara Kate to save him from — was the fear that in the months and the years ahead, he’d learn to forget the horror . . . and remember the pride.

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The *Shrikes* and *Katanas* in Ajay weren’t the only LACs the SLN had failed to detect. Three of *David K. Brown*’s interchangeable modules had been configured as ammunition holds stuffed with pods of Mark 23s and Mark 16s, but the fourth had been configured to support three full squadrons of LACs, in addition to the eight LACs of her understrength organic squadron.

To be fair, there was an even better reason TG 1027.3 hadn’t spotted the deadly minnows here on the Prime side of the terminus. The FSV had dropped all forty-four of her brood over seventeen million kilometers from the terminus, on the side farthest away from Lessem’s heavy cruisers, on her way to the rendezvous point three light-days away in interstellar space. At that range, a *superdreadnought* would have been invisible with its wedge down, even without benefit of stealth, and *Shrikes* were far stealthier than any superdreadnought.

Now CruRon 912’s FTL com sent them the single codeword “Descabello.” It took over twenty-six minutes for even that message to reach them, but they knew what to do when it did.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Coming up on the mark, Sir,” Commander Wozniak said quietly, sixty-one minutes after the transmission had been sent, and Sir Martin Lessem turned from the master plot and crossed to his command chair. He seated himself and methodically deployed his repeater displays. Then he nodded to Wozniak, and the operations officer looked at Ranald Kivlochan.

“Execute on the mark,” he said.

“Aye, aye, Sir. Executing on the mark.”

Everyone on *Clas Fleming*’s flag bridge knew that *precise* timing wasn’t vital this time around, but they were the Royal Manticoran Navy, and that — by God — meant they would do this by the numbers.

“Standing by,” Kivlochan replied formally.

“In ten,” Wozniak said, reading the time display as the maneuver already locked into the ship’s computers counted down. “Nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *execute*.”

*Clas Fleming* and her consorts disappeared into hyper.

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“Status change!” a tracking rating sang out in SLNS *Colossus’s* CIC. He turned to the officer of the watch, his expression tight. “Ma’am, the Manties just translated out.”

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“After sitting there all this time, *now* he suddenly decides to move,” Helmut Santini snarled. He’d been just about to step into the shower when the message from CIC reached them. Now he stood in his bathrobe, glowering at Vasiliou’s image on his sleeping cabin’s com display.

“I’m afraid so, Sir.” Vasiliou looked at something outside his own visual pickup’s field of view. “They translated out roughly three minutes ago, Sir.”

“And at an n-space accel of six hundred gravities?” Santini demanded. He and his staff had decided to assume that base acceleration for their calculations.

“Another eighteen minutes, Sir.”

“All right. Spin the generators up for translation ten seconds after that.” Santini smiled thinly. “I don’t think he’s going to want to bring cruisers into energy range of *battle*cruisers even if he can manage to hit his alpha translation that close. So, he’s going to come back out somewhere in missile range, but if he can get missiles into space and hit us with them in ten frigging seconds, we better draw up the articles of surrender now!”

The chief of staff’s expression showed he wasn’t delighted by his admiral’s turn of phrase, but he nodded.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll see to it.”

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Sixteen minutes later, an immaculately skinsuited Vice Admiral Santini strode onto his flag bridge. Officers and ratings came to attention, but he waved them back to their consoles, crossed to his command chair, and seated himself.

“Status, Admiral Vasiliou?”

“Ready to hyper in . . . ninety-five seconds,” Vasiliou replied. “All ships closed up at Battle Stations.”

“Good.” Santini smiled thinly. “I’m looking forward to letting *them* waste some missiles this time!”

“Yes, Sir, and —”

“Hyper footprint!” Commodore O’Reilly called out from tactical. “Multiple hyper footprints at two-point-one million kilometers!”

“Already?” Santini looked down at the repeater deployed from his command chair and frowned. The Manties had botched their translation badly, if they’d been trying to get into range to hit him before he hypered out. In fact, they were well over a million kilometers short of his position. That was still deep inside their missiles’ range basket, but at that range, flight time would be over sixty-eight seconds, twelve seconds longer than his *Nevadas* required to translate out from Standby readiness.

“Abort translation, but stand by to reinitiate!” he said sharply.

“Aborting translation, yes, Sir,” O’Reilly acknowledged, and Santini gave Vasiliou a lopsided smile.

“It would appear even the vaunted Manties can screw up,” he observed. “Do you think they’ll go ahead and launch?”

“Don’t know, Sir,” the chief of staff replied with an answering smile. “Kind of embarrassing for them, I suppose.”

Santini chuckled, although neither of them really thought the situation was especially humorous. Yes, the Manties had screwed up, but that didn’t undo anything that had happened to Admiral Isotalo — *whatever* had happened to her. Still, at least it gave Santini’s task group an opportunity to get a little of their own back. It might be only a moral victory, but the proof to his own people that even Manties could make mistakes wasn’t anything to sneer at after what looked like being yet another debacle after all.

“Well, keep an eye on them,” Santini told O’Reilly. “The instant they launch a missile or translate out again, start the generator clock.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“In the meantime, I think —”

SLNS *Kilkis* blew up with all hands.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

*David K. Brown*’s LACs came out of the dark like demons.

They’d begun accelerating at a leisurely — for *Shrikes* — 317.75 gravities the moment they received the codeword. At that rate, less than half their maximum accel, and given their stealth systems, they’d been effectively undetectable at any range much above a million kilometers, but they’d shut their wedges back down after only forty-five minutes. By that time, they’d attained a velocity of 8,143 KPS and traveled 11,358,050 kilometers, to a point almost exactly six million kilometers from Santini’s battlecruisers. It had taken them twelve more minutes to enter attack range, and every bit of TG 1027.3’s attention had been riveted to the maneuvers of the Manticoran *heavy cruisers*. No one had been looking in exactly the opposite direction for ships they didn’t know existed and couldn’t have seen if they *had* been looking.

There were only forty-four of them, but they streaked in on the non-evading targets they’d tracked continuously from the moment *Brownie* deployed them, thanks to the Ghost Rider platforms still monitoring the terminus. They knew exactly where their targets were, and they went for the kill without a shred of mercy.

Sir Martin Lessem watched the FTL plot as his piranhas swarmed their far more massive foes in a feeding frenzy of destruction. The tonnage imbalance was preposterous: 891,000 tons of LACs against *17.3 million* tons of Solarian warships, not to mention another thirty million tons of support ships. But tonnage didn’t matter. What mattered was surprise, ferocity, and firepower, and the imbalance in those qualities did not favor the Solarian Navy this bloody day.

Eight thousand kilometers per second was not an enormous closing velocity by the standards of deep-space combat, but it was enough for the LACs to pass completely through their energy weapons envelope in under two minutes. They opened fire at five hundred thousand kilometers; sixty-one seconds later they passed directly through the heart of what had been Helmut Santini’s formation, and those sixty-one seconds were a minute of unmitigated butchery.

In the end, seven of TG 1027.3 and TG 127.4’s fifty starships — all destroyers — managed to cycle their hyper generators and escape before the LACs got around to such insignificant fare. A handful of their less fortunate consorts actually survived, albeit with brutal damage, but only because the LAC skippers had been tasked to immobilize rather than destroy as many Solarians as they could. They tried hard and did their job well, those skippers, but grasers with that kind of power were not precision weapons. Or, rather, they *were* precision weapons, but it was the precision of a chainsaw, not a scalpel, and their targets were only battlecruisers.

A certain amount of . . . breakage was unavoidable.

Commodore Lessem watched the carnage, watched the half-dozen Solarian escapees disappear into hyper-space, and heard his flag bridge’s cheers. They rang in his ears, and he made himself smile in acknowledgment, but it was hard.

“Descabello,” he’d called it, and he’d been right.

It was the perfect battle, from his perspective, actually. Not a single Manticoran loss — on this side of the terminus, at least — in return for total victory.

So why did he feel so much more like a butcher than a Queen’s officer?

Maybe Sara Kate could help him answer that question . . . someday. But someday wasn’t *this* day, and he raised his voice.

“All right, Randy. That was a beautiful micro-jump, but if it’s all the same to you, I think we’ll just mosey over to the terminus through n-space.” He showed his teeth and chuckled. “I believe we have a few POWs to collect.”

**Office of the Director of Research**

**Gregor Mendel Tower**

**City of Leonard**

**Darius System**

“Sir, Mister Chernyshev is here,” the office AI announced.

“Good, Socrates! Send him in,” Daniel Detweiler responded.

. Most of his brothers — Everett was the exception — preferred a human receptionist. Partly that was because a human staffer was a prestige symbol, even on Mesa, but Daniel was willing to admit it wasn’t just social snobbishness on their part. Like their father, Albrecht, they valued the intuitive and emotional feedback of a human interface while interacting with the other humans with whom they dealt on a day-to-day basis. Even the best AI wasn’t as good a . . . focusing lens as a highly intelligent, trained, experienced, genuinely self-aware human being. The “highly intelligent” bit was the most important, of course, and Daniel had to agree that it worked for them. But he strongly suspected that the real reason it did was that most of them *liked* people. They were comfortable dealing with them. In fact, they actually enjoyed it. But he and Everett were the technology wonks of the family team, and neither of them was as good with human interrelationships as their siblings.

Daniel often thought that was a bit odd, since he and his brothers — and Albrecht, for that matter —shared exactly the same genes. Despite that, they’d developed different character traits — often strikingly different — as a gift from their parents. Albrecht and Evelina had taken pains to differentiate them from one another as children, and while Daniel hadn’t exactly been groomed from the outset for his present duties, his interests in that direction had been encouraged from a very early age.

He’d personally designed the “brilliant software” which allowed Socrates, his office AI, to simulate self-awareness almost seamlessly. He might have been able to come even closer if he’d been a little better at inter-human interaction himself, but it was still an impressive accomplishment. It was that “almost” bit which dissuaded people like Collin and Benjamin, who had to work so intimately with their human colleagues, from ordering a Socrates of their own, however. Collin had toyed with the notion, since his role as the Mesan Alignment’s chief of intelligence meant he had even more secrets to keep than his other brothers. The notion of telling his “staff” to forget something and knowing it was actually erased from memory was attractive to Collin. By the same token, though, Collin was the Detweiler who most needed to be aware of the human frailties of his subordinates.

The office door opened., and he stood, banishing the familiar train of thought and holding out his hand as Rufino Chernyshev, who had inherited Isabella Bardasano’s duties as Collin’s director of operations walked through it.

“Good morning, Rufino,” he said.

“Good morning, Daniel,” Chernyshev replied. The higher echelons of the Mesan Alignment didn’t go in for a lot of formality. Not that there was any question of who stood where in the hierarchy. In fact, Daniel rather thought it was the clarity with which that was understood which allowed the informality to work so well. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“You indicated a certain urgency,” Daniel responded, pointing at the chairs in one corner of his spacious, high-ceilinged office.

Chernyshev obeyed the silent invitation, and the two of them settled into the almost sinfully comfortable chairs. The entire outer wall of Daniel’s suite was one-way crystoplast, and the view out over the city of Leonard and its ten million inhabitants was breathtaking on a brilliant spring morning.

“Coffee?”

“Please.” Chernyshev nodded. “Black, one sugar.”

“You heard, Socrates?”

“Yes, Sir. It will arrive in one hundred twenty-three seconds.”

“Thank you,” Daniel said. Then arched an eyebrow at Chernyshev as the agent chuckled. “What?”

“Just thinking that your cybernetic friend might have just a *bit* too much precisionist in his code.”

“Trust me, there’s no such thing as ‘too much precisionist’ in my line of work. I imagine that, like Collin, you need a bit more . . . looseness. A little more freedom to encourage the synergistic association of thought processes I suppose. Brainstorming’s important for R&D, too, but I think it’s even more essential on that side that information be communicated as precisely and with as little ambiguity as possible.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it exactly that way,” Chernyshev said. “Clarity’s important in my line of work, too, but you’re right in at least one sense. Too *much* clarity means the people I’m talking to or whose reports I’m reading are trying to force the data into a neat — or at least clearly and concisely explainable — model, even if they don’t consciously realize it themselves. And when that happens, the entire data set’s contaminated.”

“That’s because you’re dealing with human beings, and human beings are a naturally chaotic system,” Daniel pointed out. “If you try to control for the chaos, you’re automatically discarding data bits, and the ones you’re discarding may be the ones you most need in the end.”

“That’s what I was thinking, and —”

Chernyshev broke off as the office door opened again and a silent counter-grav tray floated over to the conversational nook with a carafe of coffee, two cups, and all the condiments any caffeine addict might require. It settled neatly at Daniel’s elbow, and he poured for both of them.

“Now,” he said, sitting back with his own cup as his visitor added sugar, “what was it you needed to see me about?”

“Actually, I probably should have gotten this to you sooner,” Chernyshev responded to his politely brisker tone. “With Isabella’s death, Operation Janus, the Green Pines nuke, and now Houdini, I’ve had a lot on my plate. I haven’t been reading all of those human-generated reports as promptly as I should have, I’m afraid, and this one just floated to the top of my stack.”

“No need to apologize for *that*.” Daniel shook his head, his expression momentarily bleak.

There were times he was even happier than usual to leave intelligence and covert operations to Collin, and this was definitely one of them. He couldn’t argue with the need to expedite the evacuation of the inner onion — the leadership elements of the Alignment who knew the truth about the covert organization hidden within the larger covert organization — from the Mesa System. The annoyingly persistent survival of Victor Cachat and Anton Zilwicki had gone from the status of Severe Irritant to Oh Shit the instant they got home to Manticore and Haven with even anecdotal evidence of the Alignment’s existence. With the military situation swinging in favor of Manticore and its allies so much more strongly, and sooner, than allowed for in their original projections, Cachat and Zilwicki’s report meant it was only a matter of time — and probably not a lot of it — before the “Grand Alliance” got around to invading Mesa to drag the Alignment out of the shadows. It was fortunate Albrecht, Collin, and Benjamin had planned for exactly that contingency for so long, but executing Operation Houdini in such a compressed timeframe meant the “collateral damage” was going to run to hundreds of thousands — possibly even millions — of additional deaths.

*Who was it back before the Diaspora who said “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic”? Intellectually, I can’t argue the point. But emotionally? No. Collin and Dad can carry that part of it. I’ll wimp out and just design the weapons to turn as many as possible of the* other *side into a statistic.*

“May be no need to apologize,” Chernyshev said, “but that doesn’t mean we can afford to go around dropping stitches, either. Which is what brings me to this.”

He extracted a data chip from the inside pocket of his tunic and handed it across.

“I could’ve emailed that to you, I know. I wanted to make sure it didn’t get stuck somewhere in in the bowels of *your* Deal With Me Immediately queue the way it did with me. And I figured if you had any questions off the top of your head I should be here to answer them.”

“And what’s on it?”

“That —” Chernyshev nodded in the direction of the chip on Daniel’s palm “— is a report from one of our agents in place in the Beowulf System Defense Force. He’s not senior enough to have access to the technical specifications of what he’s talking about, but his description of what it does is probably enough to go on with. And what he’s talking about is something called ‘Mycroft.’”

“Mycroft?” Daniel repeated.

“Yes.” Chernyshev’s expression turned deadly serious. “Mycroft is the reason the Manties and their friends will be able to pull their battle fleets entirely out of Manticore, Beowulf, Haven, and Grayson sometime very soon now.”

“Excuse me?”

Daniel sat upright, both eyebrows rising. The majority of the Grand Alliance’s formidable striking power was gathered in its Grand Fleet, currently stationed in Manticore with one powerful task force advanced into Beowulf. Or, rather, covering the Beowulf Terminus of the Manticoran Wormhole Junction and staying well clear of Beowulf orbit to avoid any appearance of coercion in the star system’s approaching plebiscite. Despite that, somewhere close to a third of the Allies’ total wall of battle was dispersed covering their home star systems against a repeat of the Alignment’s Oyster Bay attack or a more successful iteration of Massimo Filareta’s attempt on the Manticoran Binary System. If they could call in and concentrate all those additional ships-of-the-wall . . . .

“Essentially, Mycroft’s an updated version of the Havenites’ Moriarty system of pre-deployed missile pods and a dispersed constellation of control stations,” Chernyshev replied. “But it looks like they’ve mated that concept with the Manties’ Apollo and those damned Ghost Rider platforms of theirs. I’m sure you can figure out for yourself what that kind of fire control and, say, eighty or ninety thousand system-defense missile pods could do to any attacking force.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened. He could, indeed, figure that out. Words like “annihilation” came most readily to mind.

“Now, I know *we’re* not planning on poking our noses back into Manticore or Haven anytime soon, even with the spider drive ships, but the Sollies are going to have to do just that. Kingsford’s commerce-raiding notion was a good one, although I think our modest contributions to Buccaneer’s operational thinking will bite him on the ass before very much longer. Eventually, though, they’ll have to go into defended space again, and if they suffer another Eleventh Fleet debacle, the war may be over a lot sooner than we’d like. So when I mentioned this to Collin, he suggested I get on my two little feet and come over here and share it with you.”

“He’s thinking we need to combine what we know — and the Sollies don’t — about Manty technology with this new information and come up with some counter, then pass it on to Technodyne?”

“Exactly. And there’s also some information on that chip that I got Benjamin’s people to pull up for me — a fairly detailed description of something the Manties came up with against Moriarty. They called it ‘Mistletoe,’ and Benjamin thinks that might be a good starting point for some of that brainstorming you mentioned a few minutes ago.”

**Tarducci Tower**

**City of Approdo**

**Genovese System**

“So, Admiral,” Commissioner Hirokichi Floyd said as his butler poured the after-dinner wine, set the bottle at his elbow, and withdrew, “I assume you’re eager to depart and get on with it?”

“We’re certainly ready, anyway, Commissioner,” Vice Admiral Hajdu Gyôzô replied. He lifted his wineglass and sipped, then set it back down with a rather tight smile. “Shifting targets at such a late date offered a bit of a challenge, since all our planning had focused on Exapia. But the truth is that there’s not really much change in the *parameters* of the operation.” He shrugged. “More a matter of plugging in new names and addresses than confronting any new threats or logistics issues. We’ve completed all of our preparations and pre-op planning and we’ll translate out Thursday at zero-seven-thirty. After that?” He shrugged again.

“After *that*, Admiral,” Floyd’s piercing green eyes flashed, “Buccaneer will teach the frigging Manties and their arse-kissers that, as my Uncle Chojiro used to say, when you fuck with the bull, you get the horns.”

“Indeed.”

Admiral Hajdu produced another smile. It wasn’t easy, because what he wanted to do was to roll his eyes. Unlike Floyd, who was a product of one of Old Terra’s mega-urb towers, Hajdu had been born and raised on the planet Crişul Negru on a twelve thousand-hectare cattle ranch. He rather doubted “Uncle Chojiro” had possessed any personal experience with irate cattle of either sexual persuasion, and — having personally dealt with *very* irate, two-thousand-kilo, genetically-enhanced Chianina bulls upon more than one occasion — he’d always loathed that particular cliché and the people who seemed so fond of it.

Then again, there was a lot to loathe about Uncle Chojiro’s nephew, too.

“The arrogant bastards have it coming,” the commissioner continued. He drained his own wineglass in a single swallow and refilled it from the bottle without ever looking away from Hajdu. “God only knows how many people they’ve already gotten killed!”

“Indeed,” Hajdu repeated. He found that noncommittal response useful in dealing with people who could be relied upon to interpret it as agreeing with whatever the hell it was they’d just said.

“I’m looking forward to your after-action report, Admiral.” Floyd showed his teeth. “I don’t think anybody in *Manticore*’s going to enjoy reading it, though!”

“Indeed,” Hajdu said yet again, and shook his head mentally as the repetitions sailed right by Floyd. That was another thing the word was good for. The number of times in a row he could repeat it before it produced a reaction was a faithful barometer of his current audience’s stupidity. And despite the misleading impression of mental acuity produced by the commissioner’s piercing eyes, the admiral suspected he could set a new record with Floyd, if he really put his mind to it.

The commissioner only smiled broadly at him, but Hajdu reminded himself that just because Floyd was stupid didn’t mean he couldn’t be dangerous in the Byzantine infighting of the Solarian League’s entrenched bureaucracy. Someone of his towering incompetency wouldn’t hold a sector governorship, even of one as piss-poor as the Genovese Sector, unless he had the right gutter-fighter instincts and patrons at a high level. He was *not* the sort with whom a prudent flag officer engaged in pissing contests. Which was a pity, given his record to date.

*I agree with him that the Manties need to be taken down a peg or three*, Hajdu thought from behind his answering smile. *I’m not happy about the change in targets for* our *op — and neither were some of my staff people — but I’m not going to shed many tears for it at the end of the day. Any of the Manties’ buddies who get run over along the way only have to look in the mirror to see who pasted the target on their backs, and looking after* their *interests is nowhere in my job description. I’m no more eager to trash star systems than the next man, but I’m a Solarian officer. My loyalty’s to the League and* its *vital interests, not theirs, and anything that makes the Manties’ supporters —* any *of their supporters — rethink their positions can’t be all bad. And whatever I may think of Floyd, he’s got a point about* this *op.* Hajdu’s nostrils flared just a bit — a minute change of expression his staff would have recognized as his equivalent of a shouted profanity — at that thought. *Neobarb neutrals are one thing, but someone who chooses to stab the League in the back when it’s his responsibility to* represent *it, deserves whatever the hell he gets. In spades.*

*Still, even this cretin ought to realize it’s not just the Manties getting people killed. The Manties may be the ones pulling the trigger, but fair’s fair, Governor. It’s idiots like* you *— and certain* other *idiots in Old Chicago — who keep shoving* *our people in front of them before they do!*

In fairness, Floyd hadn’t gotten anyone killed . . . yet. Not for lack of trying, though. And while no actual blood had been shed, there’d been plenty of other consequences, including the sudden end of one of Hajdu’s personal friends’ career. Liam Pyun had made Floyd look bad five T-months ago by showing the moral courage to disobey the governor’s direct (and suicidal) orders in the Zunker System, and in the Solarian League, embarrassing a superior — especially one who deserved it — was the only truly unforgiveable sin.

*I’m sure he wishes we were headed back to Zunker to beat the hell out of the Manties who helped humiliate* him, *but maybe even he’s smart enough to realize the real basis for target selection has a hell of a lot more to do with hitting the Manties where they aren’t than going toe-to-toe with them*.

*Not* yet, *anyway*.

“I suppose I shouldn’t say this, Admiral,” the commissioner continued, like a man confiding in a lifetime friend, “but there’s a part of me that actually hopes they’ll be stupid enough to refuse your demands. I’d just as soon not see anyone killed, but —” he tapped an index finger heavily on the table for emphasis “— it’s about frigging time people figured out there are consequences for supporting rogue regimes like Manticore.”

“Indeed,” Vice Admiral Hajdu replied.

**HMS *Phantom***

**Task Group 110**

**Beowulf System**

“I just got off the com with Admiral Truman,” Rear Admiral Jan Kotouč told the men and women around the briefing room table aboard HMS *Phantom*.

A *Nike*-class battlecruiser, barely seven T-months old and built by Pardubice Shipbuilding in its *Hephaestus* module, *Phantom* was 2.5 million tons of lethality, the fastest and most deadly broadside-armed warship in the galaxy. The Royal Manticoran Navy needed about ten times as many of her as it actually had and, under other circumstances, it would have had most of them. Unfortunately, almost eighty of her sisters had died stillborn when the Yawata Strike tore *Hephaestus* and *Vulcan* apart.

Kotouč was even better aware than most of how sorely those dead ships were missed, since he’d been slated to command an entire squadron of them. That squadron had died with *Hephaestus*, however, along with entirely too many of the men and women he’d already come to know. Eighty-five percent of the squadron’s six thousand personnel had been aboard ship or elsewhere on *Hephaestus*, preparing to take over their new ships from the yard dogs.

None of them had survived.

*A charmed ship*, he thought, looking at the shrouded, ghostly figure on *Phantom*’s bulkhead-mounted crest. *That’s what they call her, anyway. And who knows? They may even be right*.

In the absence of the squadron’s other *Nikes*, the Admiralty was building him a replacement out of *Saganami-Cs* and *Saganami-Bs,* with emphasis on the latter. The *Charlies* were in almost as urgent demand as the *Nikes* themselves, and he’d been warned that he’d be lucky to see a single full-strength division of them. Unfortunately, it would be at least two more T-weeks before he even knew how many of them he’d be receiving. Although he’d been formally named as Commanding Officer (designate), Task Group 110.2, which would ultimately become a vest-pocket task force — and one cut for a generous-sized vest — all he had at the moment was *Phantom* and the *Saganami-B*-class cruisers *Cinqueda*, *Shikomizue*, and *Talwar*, supported by a single *Roland*-class destroyer, HMS *Arngrim*. He’d been supposed to receive the CLAC *Vukodlak* last week, but she’d suffered a major impeller room engineering casualty two weeks before that, and the Beowulf yards would need at least another ten days to put her back in service. In fact, ten days would be something of a miracle, given that they’d been required to replace no less than four of her after beta nodes.

So at the moment, he was a task group commander with all of five ships under his command.

“The Admiral,” he continued now, “had just finished a conversation with Director of State Longacre, and Director of State Longacre had just finished a conversation with Special Representative Lambrou and Special Representative Tsakabikou. Which is the reason Admiral Truman was talking to me and the reason that *I’m* talking to *you*.”

He smiled without very much humor.

“We have our movement orders, people,” he said, and several of his officers stiffened in obvious surprise.

“Movement orders, Sir?” Captain Jim Clarke repeated after the briefest of pauses, and Kotouč smiled a bit more broadly.

“Movement orders,” he confirmed. “It would appear President Vangelis has changed his mind about an Allied presence in his star system.”

Clarke sat back in his chair, eyebrows raised, and Kotouč shrugged.

“It’s not really hard to understand why his administration didn’t want us there to begin with, Jim,” he pointed out. “We’ve been careful to keep any fleet units out of *Beowulf* orbit during the debate over the referendum. The Hypatian government had even better reasons to avoid any appearance that their referendum vote was coerced by foreign warships.”

“Agreed, Sir.” Clarke nodded. “I’m just wondering what’s changed?”

“According to Lambrou and Tsakabikou, what’s changed is that the most probable outcome of the referendum’s become . . . abundantly clear.”

The rear admiral paused and looked around the briefing room until every head had nodded. Brad Lambrou and Sofronia Tsakabikou were the designated Hypatian “special representatives” to Beowulf. Technically, they were simply observers of the Beowulfan plebiscite. Actually, they were Adam Vangelis’s ambassadors to the star system with which he intended to seek formal political union as soon as his referendum validated his intent and Beowulf got its own, slower-paced plebiscite out of the way.

“Apparently,” Kotouč continued, “something new has been added to the mix in Hypatia.”

“That com conversation between MacArtney and Abruzzi, Sir?” Lieutenant Albamonte, Kotouč’s electronic warfare officer, asked. News of the leaked soundbite — and the first intimations of Hypatia’s fiery reaction to it — had reached Beowulf over a T-week ago.

“Sounds like it.” Kotouč shrugged. “Never underestimate the pure fury that kind of talk can generate, Paul, whether there’s any serious intent behind it or not. I really doubt even MacArtney or Abruzzi thought they could get away with any kind of decapitation of the Hypatian government. Mind you, they *are* Sollies – and Mandarins, for that matter — so anything’s *possible*. But I’m pretty sure that if that’s even really their voices, they never had any intention of pursuing that nonsense as an actual policy. Nobody in Hypatia seems inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, however, which — let’s face it — isn’t such a bad thing from our viewpoint. A very . . . clarifying thing, moral outrage. If I had a dollar for every time emotion’s trumped reason — or, for that matter, gotten behind reason and pushed like hell — I’d be Klaus Hauptman.”

Several people chuckled, and he grinned. Then his expression sobered.

“Whether it was the mention of intervention battalions or something else, Lambrou and Tsakabikou told Director Longacre that it’s no longer a question of whether or not the referendum’s going to pass. It’s not even a question of whether or not it’ll be a landslide. The only real question in Vangelis’s mind now is how *big* a landslide it’ll be.

“At any rate, he’s confident enough of the outcome — and, I think, that com conversation’s made him nervous enough about how the Mandarins are likely to respond when they hear the vote total — that he’s decided to go ahead and invite us now. The referendum’s scheduled for next Wednesday. If we leave within forty-eight hours, we’ll hit Hypatia sometime Thursday. That’ll keep us out of the system until after the vote’s counted — or until enough of it’s been counted to project the outcome with certainty, at any rate — but also close up the window in which the Sollies can just waltz into Hypatia unopposed.”

“Sir, I understand what you’re saying,” Commander Markéta Ilkova, TG 110.2’s operations officer (designate) was five centimeters shorter than her admiral. She was also attractive, with red-hair and sharp, intelligent blue-green eyes. Indeed, Kotouč had discovered she was rather more attractive than he might have wished, given the restrictions of Article 119. She was also at least as competent as she was attractive . . . and obviously less than delighted by the news of their impending departure. “But we’re still all the task group you’ve got.”

“And we’re more than enough to beat the holy living hell out of any light Solly squadron that comes our way,” Kotouč pointed out with just a bit more confidence than he actually felt. Then he sighed.

“Admiral Truman doesn’t expect us to hold off a fleet the size of Filareta’s or Crandall’s, Markéta, but Director Longacre’s made the point – and it’s a valid one, people — that if Hypatia’s willing to pin a big target on its chest by standing up beside the Alliance, the least we can do is provide President Vangelis’s citizens with visible, tangible proof the Alliance will be just as determined to look after them as we are to look after our own star systems. Nobody in Hypatia’s likely to mistake five ships — even *Queen’s* ships — for a system-defense fleet. But what they’ll see are the lead elements of the task group that *will* be capable of defending them when it’s fully assembled. And it won’t hurt a bit for us to be there, getting a feel for the system astrography and establishing a working relationship with Vangelis and his people, while we wait for the rest of the task group to join us.”

“Understood, Sir,” Ilkova said.

“Admiral Truman assures me she’ll send forward at least four more *Bravos* within the next seven or eight days. And *Vukodlak* should be out of the yard dogs’ hands a couple of days after that. As soon as she’s finished testing her repairs, she’ll be sent to join us along with a freighter load or two of system-defense pods. And by the time she gets to *Hypatia*, we’ll have worked out the best way to use her and be ready to start deploying the pods.”

**Harrington House**

**Jason Bay**

**City of Landing**

**Manticore Binary System**

Admiral Lady Dame Honor Alexander-Harrington, Steadholder and Duchess Harrington, kicked off her house shoes, folded her legs under her on the chaise lounge, and dropped a pair of marshmallows into her hot chocolate.

Manticore’s small moon, Thorson, was low on the western horizon, touching the banked clouds in that direction with dramatic bands of silver and ebony. Lightning flickered very occasionally — and very distantly — along that cloud wall, but the weather sats all insisted the bad weather wouldn’t reach Landing until sometime after dawn. In the meantime, there were no clouds over Jason Bay or the capital city, and the sky overhead glittered with a storm of stars. As always, there was a lot of orbital traffic, as well. In fact, it was much heavier than normal and the usual moving dots of the communication and solar collector satellites were accompanied by scores of other lights as near-Manticore space swarmed with repair ships, and temporary habitats for construction workers.

A *lot* of repair ships and construction workers.

The horrific damage and casualties of the Yawata Strike were barely six T-months in the past, but the replacement spacestations’ skeletons were already growing, far more quickly than they’d dared to hope for in their initial estimates of how long it would take to rebuild. Then again, their initial estimates hadn’t included the full-fledged support of the Beowulf System . . . or of the Republic of Haven. For that matter, they’d seriously underestimated the amount of civilian infrastructure that could be repurposed. And Lacoön had produced an unexpected side effect. An unexpected *good* side effect, that was, she thought with a mental grimace.

At least three quarters of the Star Kingdom’s civilian shipbuilding industry had been co-located with the Navy yards on the major spacestations. From the perspective of efficiency and cost, that had been a no-brainer, and no one had ever anticipated something like the Yawata Strike. Attacks, yes, but not attacks nobody saw coming in time to take a single defensive measure. Just over half of all the rest of the Manticore Binary System’s civilian industry had also been located aboard one of the stations or in close enough proximity to be destroyed when *Hephaestus* and *Vulcan* were taken out. So it wasn’t all that surprising the immediate post-attack estimates had been so bleak.

Haven’s return of the interned Grendelsbane construction force had been a huge help, as much from a morale perspective as from any other. The workers from the forty-seven percent of the civilian infrastructure which *hadn’t* been co-located with the spacestations had proved to be a far greater resource, however. And the fact that Lacoön had idled close to ninety percent of the massive Manticoran merchant marine had been another unexpected asset.

Lacoön’s consequences for the Star Empire’s economy had been less dire — a *little* less dire — than initially predicted because no one had expected the Republic of Haven’s markets to be opened to Manticore. For that matter, they hadn’t anticipated the addition of the Talbott Quadrant. That hadn’t kept the loss of their markets in the Solarian League and — especially – their *carrying* trade in the League from being catastrophic for what had been by far the largest single component of Manticore’s economy. Quite a few of the smaller cartels were unlikely to survive, and even the major cartels like Hauptman were looking at enormous losses. The “act of war” clause in standard insurance policies meant most of the commercial enterprises on *Hephaestus* or *Vulcan* would be unable to recover their losses, and the . . . uncertainty (to put it mildly) of the Star Empire’s future relations with the Solarian League cast a serious cloud over the smaller shipping lines’ futures. The last estimate she’d seen predicted at least a third and possibly as many as half of the independent lines were going to go under.

And then there were the enormous Manticoran investments in the Solarian League. No one knew where *that* was going, either, and she was frankly surprised the League hadn’t simply seized their assets. There was no guarantee Quartermain and Wodoslawski wouldn’t get around to it eventually, but unless the League won an unambiguous victory — which wasn’t going to happen — one of Manticore’s key peace demands was going to be the return of all sequestered assets, and Sir Anthony Langtry had made certain through “neutral sources” that the League was made aware of that.

Her own financial interests had taken a massive hit, although those had been centered far more in Grayson than here in Manticore. The Blackbird complex had represented a huge chunk of her portfolio there, but Blackbird had been almost exclusively a naval building complex. Ninety percent of the Grayson Space Navy’s suppliers and subcontractors had been located there, but virtually none of the system’s *civilian* industry had been affected. From Honor’s purely selfish perspective, that meant Skydomes of Grayson had been untouched, which put her in a strong position to recover, especially with her Skydomes labor force redirected to rebuilding Blackbird. From the Graysons’ perspective in general, it did nothing to lessen the brutal loss of human lives but provided a solid basis for reconstruction and recovery. And the Church of Humanity Unchained had thrown its stupendous resources into the recovery effort. There were entire star nations with less wealth than Reverend Sullivan commanded, and his instructions were clear. Where there was want, there also would be Father Church. Not one of the Tester’s children would be allowed to suffer alone and unaided. They would worry about the consequences to the Church’s investment portfolio later. And if they had to rebuild that portfolio from absolutely nothing, why they’d do that, too.

The good news — the *overwhelmingly* good news — from the Star Empire’s perspective was that no financier in the galaxy failed to grasp that whatever happened politically, *astrography* wasn’t going to change. The Manticoran Wormhole Junction wasn’t going anywhere, and neither were its implications for the interstellar movement of goods, people, services, and data. That meant no one doubted the imperial government’s ultimate solvency — as long as it survived its confrontation with the League — and Baroness Morncreek, at the Exchequer, and Bruce Wijenberg at the Ministry of Trade had capitalized on that fact.

The Exchequer had already instituted the largest program of low-interest government-guaranteed loans in Manticoran history, both to assist those whose losses hadn’t been covered by insurance and to help finance new and replacement ventures. A lot of Havenite money would be looking for a home postwar, as well, which didn’t even consider the opening of what had been closed Solarian markets in the Protectorates. For that matter, whatever the League might think about the Grand Alliance in military and diplomatic terms, *economically* it wouldn’t have much choice about doing business with the Star Empire, thanks to the Junction. It seemed unlikely to Honor that the Star Empire’s merchant marine would regain its totally dominant position within the League, but in absolute terms, it ought to recover fully to prewar levels.

Manticore’s traditional fiscal challenge had been to find places to invest the revenues streaming into the Star Kingdom in a way that prevented a financial glut and its resulting inflation. Over the T-centuries, the government and private investors had learned to adjust that cashflow through out-system investment, most of it in the League. Their presence in Solarian markets wasn’t an unqualified plus at the moment, but that pattern helped explain how the Cromarty Government had managed to avoid genuine deficit spending until only a very few T-years before the outbreak of open hostilities between the Manticoran Alliance and the People’s Republic of Haven.

Since then, for obvious reasons, that had changed, yet until the Yawata Strike, the Junction’s enormous revenue generation, coupled with the Star Kingdom’s huge investment portfolio, had held the national debt within easily manageable dimensions. For the next several years, that wouldn’t be true. Mourncreek’s analysts weren’t happy about that, and they projected that it would take twenty or thirty T-years — at least — to pay that debt down, assuming prewar revenue streams. Unlike almost any other star nation in the galaxy, however, the Star Empire could *do* it, which was why there was remarkably little panic here in the Manticore System.

Which wasn’t to say there wasn’t a lot of *pain* or thatthe Manticoran economic safety net wasn’t under unprecedented strain. On the other hand, the need to rebuild — and the number of skilled technicians who’d been killed in the attack— meant overall unemployment rates were astonishingly low, considering what had happened to the shipping industry. The government was pouring enormous sums into wages for the workers rebuilding *Hephaestus, Vulcan*, and *Weyland*, which was a not insignificant factor in its deficit spending. Those sums were being paid as *wages*, however, not direct transfer payments, which meant they didn’t affect their recipients’ eligibility to vote and that they represented taxable income, which allowed at least some recapture.

*We’ve never* — ever — *been hurt this badly before*, she thought. *But I suspect the people who did it to us overestimated* how *badly it would hurt us by at least as big a factor as* we *did, right after the strike. And in the end*, *that’s going to hurt* them *one hell of a lot worse than they ever hurt us*.

She smiled up at that beautiful sky and the lights swarming across it with grim satisfaction . . . and more than a bit of proprietary pride. There were quite a few warships, freighters, transports, and naval auxiliaries to keep the rebuilding effort company, and *all* that overhead activity was directly or indirectly her responsibility, one way and another. But for tonight, she’d left it in the hands of her staff, with Admiral Alfredo Yu, her deputy CO in the Protector’s Own, riding herd upon it.

*The one good thing about being stuck here instead of out actually* accomplishing *something is that I get to nip home for visits every so often*, she reflected, stirring the chocolate with an index finger and then licking it clean. Her mother had tried for years to break her of that particular habit before she’d finally thrown up her hands and admitted defeat. *And it* is *a gorgeous night for sitting on the deck drinking chocolate*. The land breeze, blowing out across Jason Bay’s cooling waters fluttered her kimono’s flowing sleeves and molded its silk against her and she inhaled deeply, gazing out over the bay’s gently moving surface. *Wish there was time to spend tomorrow down here, too. I’d love to take the boat out after the front passes through, and I’m overdue for some time with Faith and James. They’d love that! But not with that exercise scheduled for Tuesday, I guess*.

“Excuse me, My Lady.”

She turned her head as Major Hawke poked his head out onto the deck. That deck stood out from the seaward side of Harrington House, a good seventy meters above sea level, which made it totally inaccessible except through the house itself or from the air. Under the circumstances — given that Harrington House would have made an acceptable fortress on most planets and that Clifford McGraw and Joshua Atkins, the other members of her permanent detail, were undoubtedly parked in the shrubbery with shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles and the odd vest-pocket nuke or three — Major Hawke had graciously consented to allow her a modicum of privacy.

“Yes, Spencer?”

“The Earl just commed, My Lady. He asked me to tell you he’s about six minutes out. For some reason, he couldn’t seem to reach you.” Hawke raised an eyebrow. “Could it be you didn’t take your uni-link with you?”

“Guilty as charged,” she admitted while Nimitz bleeked in amusement from the chaise lounge beside hers. “After I got out of the pool and climbed out of the shower, I just threw on my kimono and came straight out here.”

“I see.”

Hawke gazed at her for a moment, and she looked back innocently. No respectable traditional Grayson lady would have suggested to anyone other than her equally respectable husband that all she had on was a thin, billowy silk kimono. Hawke had been with her long enough to know when she was pulling his chain, howver, and his notion of just what “respectable” meant had been . . . expanded by contact with Honor.

And, especially, with Honor’s mother.

“I’ll just send His Lordship right out when he gets here, then, My Lady,” the armsman said after a moment.

“Please do. And please ask Lucie to tell Mistress Thorn we’re going to need a pot of coffee for him. For that matter, I’ll bet he missed supper again, so ask Lucie to see about having some sandwiches sent up, too. After all,” she smiled wickedly, “he’ll need his strength.”

“Of course, My Lady,” Hawke replied just a bit repressively, and her smile grew broader as he withdrew. Then it faded again as she sat back, looking up at the stars, and thought about what she’d just requested. Or, rather, who she’d requested it of.

She hadn’t wanted to fill the gaping wound Miranda LaFollet’s death in the Yawata Strike had left in her household. It had seemed . . . disloyal. Worse, just thinking about it had reminded her how horribly she missed Miranda, Farragut, and — especially and always — Andrew. Yet she’d really had no choice. Not only did she need someone to assume the host of duties Miranda had fulfilled for her, but there were certain Grayson norms even her deplorably nontraditional Harringtons wanted observed, and having their Steadholder provided with a proper “personal maid” was one of them.

At only a hundred and fifty-seven centimeters and with brown hair and dark brown eyes, Lucie was very different physically from Miranda, for which Honor was grateful, but they were very much alike in other ways. Miranda had been far more than a “maid.” In fact, she’d been a female James MacGuiness, acting as the general manager of Honor’s affairs on Manticore whenever her Steadholder and MacGuiness were in space. Despite that, however, she’d always insisted on “looking after” Honor whenever Honor was home. Lucie, for all her social flexibility, was a chip off the same stubborn block of Grayson granite in that respect, and her feelings would have been hurt if Honor hadn’t asked her to see to it that Hamish was fed.

*And the chance to tease Spencer didn’t have a* thing *to do with it, either, did it?* she asked herself.

Herself chose not to answer, and she sipped her chocolate, enjoying the night, and waited for her husband.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Sorry I’m running so late,” the Earl of White Haven said contritely as he stepped out onto the deck.

The instant he opened the door, a dappled, tawny treecat launched from his shoulder, bounced off the deck flooring once, and landed with precision and style beside Nimitz. She wrapped both her upper sets of limbs — and her tail — around him, buzzing a delighted purr, and Honor laughed.

“Way to go, Sam!” she congratulated the female ’cat. “Spacers don’t make port often enough to let any opportunities go to waste.”

“Oh?” White Haven dropped onto the chaise lounge beside her and did a pretty fair job of hugging her, despite the handicap of having only four limbs. “Should I assume from that observation that I’m going to get lucky tonight?”

“You should assume from that observation that *I’d* better get lucky tonight,” Honor told him, pausing halfway through to kiss him thoroughly. “I don’t know which is worse, to be in totally different star systems for months on end or to be in the *same* star system, just an hour or two apart, and unable to take advantage of it.”

“The latter,” White Haven said promptly. “*Definitely* the latter.”

He smiled and kissed her again, choosing not to mention that he could think of quite a few flag officers who would have found ways to “take advantage of it” every other night or so. He’d never been one of them, and neither had Honor.

“Of course, when the opportunity *does* come along . . . .” she murmured wickedly, nestling deeper into his embrace.

“Well, when *that* happens,” he said with a pontifical air, “it’s clearly our responsibility to . . . to give Samantha and Nimitz the opportunity to spend quality time together while we find some way to occupy ourselves, as well.”

He elevated his nose, then “oofed” as an elbow jabbed him in the ribs.

“‘Occupy ourselves,’ is it?” She regarded him darkly. “If I hadn’t been stuck in space so long, somebody would be sleeping on the couch tonight for that one!”

“Then thank God for sensory deprivation,” White Haven said fervently, and kissed her again.

“Your Grace?” a voice said.

“Yes, Lucie,” Honor replied, sitting up a bit straighter. “Come on out, we’re both decent.” She smiled at White Haven. “Your timing’s just about perfect, as always. He hasn’t even had time to muss my hair properly.”

“I’m certain he’ll get around to it, My Lady,” Lucie Šárová said serenely.

She guided a counter-grav float with a large pot of coffee, a tray loaded with sandwiches — on seedless rye, White Haven’s favorite bread — and a platter with one of Sue Thorn’s hallmark pound cakes. Unlike Spencer, she simply looked at her Steadholder and Steadholder Consort with an eye of benign approval. In fact, she’d made it clear to Honor that, in her opinion and speaking for Harrington Steading in general, it was time Raoul Alfred Alastair Alexander-Harrington had a younger brother to keep him company. Despite her flexibility on other issues, Lucie was a Grayson, and there were never enough boy babies to go around on Grayson. Especially where a steadholding’s succession was concerned.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that her Steadholder’s parents had provided additional grist for her mill, but at least Allison wasn’t expecting *twins* this time.

Lucie parked the float between Honor’s chaise lounge and the one occupied by Nimitz and Samantha. Then she whipped the cover off a third platter, and the treecats buzzed with delight as she revealed the plate of stewed rabbit and a dozen sticks of celery.

“You are a wicked influence, spoiling everyone shamelessly,” Honor told her, and she smiled. Then she nodded respectfully to White Haven and withdrew.

“Your Grayson henchmen — and hench*women* — do take good care of us,” White Haven observed, sitting up to pour coffee. “And I hate to say this, given the delightfully salacious nature of our earlier conversation, but I’m starving.”

“I figured you would be.” Honor swung her own feet back on to the decking and reached for one of the sandwiches. She seldom passed up the opportunity to stoke her genetically modified metabolism. “You really do need to stop putting in hours that keep you from eating, though,” she said more severely. “The last thing anyone needs is for the First Lord of Admiralty to work himself into a state of collapse.”

“I’m a fair way short of that this far, love,” he replied with a twinkle. “Not that you don’t have a point, and I know it. For that matter, Emily’s been beating me about the head and ears over the same minor point.”

“Good!”

Honor’s voice showed her firm approval of their spouse’s attitude, but she also gave White Haven a thoughtful look. He was busy looking down to select a sandwich of his own and didn’t notice, but Samantha looked back at her with solemn eyes, and Honor’s lips tightened ever so slightly. Emily seldom visited Landing these days. She’d made an exception for the dinner party announcing Alfred’s return to active duty, but she always preferred to spend her time at White Haven, with the children. Besides, she said Landing always made her tired. That was true enough for all three of them, really, but she seemed to get tired even more rapidly than she’d used to, and —

“I wish there’d been time to run home to White Haven tonight,” White Haven went on a bit wistfully as he picked out his sandwich.

“So do I.” Honor agreed, and this time he heard the questioning note and looked back up quickly. She looked at him levelly, and, after a moment, he sighed.

“I don’t know what to tell you, sweetheart,” he said. “You know her health’s been up-and-down for the last two or three years. She tells me she’s fine — ‘all things considered’ — and Sandra’s not telling me anything different. I don’t like how tired she seems to be all the time, but she and I have been through patches a lot worse than this one, over the years.” He sighed again and shook his head. “The one thing I can tell you for sure is that if either one of us starts ‘hovering,’ she’ll kick us squarely in the ass, and you know it.”

“Yes, I do,” she said after a moment, and shook her own head with a smile. “In fact, she did just that the last time I seemed, um . . . overly solicitous.”

“An experience we share,” he said wryly, then shook himself, and she felt him deliberately shifting mental gears. “And if we *did* run home, she’d be perfectly right to read us both the riot act. By the time we flew up we’d be lucky to get three hours of sleep before we had to load up to fly *back* for Pat’s intelligence brief tomorrow.”

“Whereas *here*, we can get at least four or five hours of sleep . . . once I’ve had my way with you,” Honor agreed with a smile, accepting the change of mood.

“Precisely!” He beamed at her, then took a bite out of the sandwich and sighed. “Does anything ever come out of Mistress Thorn’s kitchen that *doesn’t* taste good?”

“Oh, yes. I remember once — seven years ago, I think, though it *might* have been eight — she actually scorched some rice.” Honor shuddered delicately. “Quite horrible, it was.”

“I’m sure.” White Haven’s tone was dry, and he sipped coffee. Then he sat back with sandwich in hand and gazed up at the midnight sky. The light pollution of Landing’s distant towers, on the far side of the house, was scarcely noticeable, and he inhaled deeply.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” he murmured, unaware he was voicing Honor’s earlier thought.

“Yes, it is. Of course, I have a slightly unfair advantage when it comes to enjoying it.”

“I know. I hope you’ll pardon me for saying I have somewhat ambivalent feelings over that particular advantage, though.”

“I’ve had a few ‘ambivalent’ feelings about it myself, over the years,” Honor acknowledged. She raised her left hand — her *artificial* left hand — to her equally artificial left eye. “On the other hand, I’ve been sitting here watching the work boats around *Hephaestus Alpha*. It’s pretty impressive.” She shook her head. “I’m astonished that they’ve accomplished so much so soon, really.”

White Haven nodded in agreement. Without her cybernetic eye’s telephoto feature, he couldn’t make out details from here, but he spent more than enough time actually in space touring the projects to know she was right. Current estimates were that the first shipyard modules would be ready to begin construction again in no more than another eight to ten T-months, *far* sooner than anyone had dared project immediately after the strike, and the new stations — two of them in orbit around each of the Manticore Binary System’s inhabited planets this time, not one — would boast ample active and passive defenses of their own.

*Nothing like a burned hand to teach you what you should have seen coming all along*, he thought grimly. And more than a little unfairly, he acknowledged. Without the “invisible” weapons someone — almost certainly the “Mesan Alignment” Victor Cachat and Anton Zilwicki had discovered — had used in the attack, *Hephaestus*, *Vulcan*, and *Weyland* would have been just fine.

“I wonder if Cachalot’s going to be as lucky as we have,” he said, then grimaced apologetically as he felt Honor stiffen beside him. “Sorry! Didn’t mean to bring any business up tonight. Just slipped out.”

“Nothing I wasn’t already thinking about.” She shook her head with a sigh. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to hearing all the gory details from Pat tomorrow. What we’ve already heard is bad enough.” She shook her head again. “You know, I realize we’re talking about the Mandarins, and God knows nobody in the galaxy’s better aware of how far the Solarian League’s fallen from what it was supposed to be, but the idea that the League officially *sanctioned* something like this ‘Buccaneer’ abortion is just . . . just more than I can process, I guess. Or more than I *want* to be able to process, maybe. I know it’s stupid of me, but I’d really rather this had been some rogue flag officer — another Byng or Crandall — acting entirely on her own.”

“I know. But the truth is, we probably should’ve seen it — or something like it —coming. After what happened to Filareta, even the real idiots in Battle Fleet have to realize they can’t face an Allied wall of battle. That takes any sort of fleet engagement out of their table of options, and you’re a naval historian. You know ‘guerre de course’ has always been the strategy of the weaker side. Hell, Honor! It’s the strategy *you* were using with Eighth Fleet after the Havenites hit us with Thunderbolt.”

“I know, and I hated it then, too,” she said, both eyes bleak as she gazed up at the distant lights. “There’s something obscene about destroying anything that’s taken that long to build. Especially when so many people who never did a single thing to you or yours depend on it for a living.”

“But we didn’t have a choice, because at that point we were the ones who couldn’t risk a decisive battle,” White Haven pointed out. “And be fair to yourself, sweetheart. You *never* did the sort of job this Admiral Capriotti apparently did on Cachalot. I don’t think the damage evaluation’s going to get any better after we listen to Pat tomorrow, and it’s pretty damned bad right now! I got a revised update just before Tom Caparelli and I decided to call it a night and head for home.” He shook his head. “It sounds like after he’d taken out every scrap of industrial infrastructure — and one major orbital habitat went with it; we’re not sure *that* was intentional, but the damage they inflicted on three others damned well was — he rounded up every ship and small craft in the system bigger than a runabout and either took them with him or destroyed them.”

“What?” Honor’s head snapped around, eyes narrowed, and he nodded.

“We got a follow-on report from Captain Crouch this afternoon.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her, and she nodded in recognition. She’d known John Crouch for years, ever since her time at the ATC, when he’d been a promising lieutenant commander on her staff. In fact, she’d recommended him for his current command, and his cruiser division had arrived in Cachalot on a routine port visit less than twenty-four hours after the Solarians had completed their work and departed once more. From the Cachalotians’ description of the Solly task force, it was just as well that Crouch’s four *Saganami-Bs* had missed it, but he’d immediately dug in to do what he could in the wake of such widespread devastation. He’d also sent HMS *Mortar*, one of his escorting destroyers, from Cachalot to Beowulf and straight on to Manticore. He clearly grasped how seriously the attack was likely to impact other neutral star nations’ public opinion, which hadn’t surprised her a bit. Nor did the fact that he’d sent another dispatch after the first one. Someone like Crouch was only too well aware of how the slow speed of interstellar communications could affect everything from tactical decisions by local commanders to the grand strategy of star nations.

“I haven’t seen the actual dispatch, but Pat dropped us a preliminary synopsis,” White Haven went on. “According to Crouch, they went after *everything*, Honor. When you were carrying out Cutworm, you were careful to avoid civilian collateral damage. Oh, it’s not always possible to make a clean separation between military infrastructure and civilian infrastructure. We both know that. But you at least *tried* to, and you never took out civilian power sats or orbiting agro habitats. And you *damned* well never collected up every tugboat, repair boat, ore collector, and rowboat in the system and trashed them. There’s no conceivable military justification for *that* kind of destruction. It’s so . . . so *petty*. It’s like a full grown adult punching out a twelve-year-old in a temper tantrum and then deciding to go through his pockets and steal his allowance, too!”

Honor nodded slowly, her expression tight. She *had* tried to minimize collateral destruction, and it hadn’t always been possible. But this —!

“Capriotti made it clear the Mandarins were sending a message,” she said after a moment, memory replaying the record of the com exchange between the Solarian and System President Jahnke, which Crouch had included with his initial dispatch. “From what you’re saying, it’s pretty obvious what the message *is*, too. Piss us off, and we’ll turn your entire star system into a junkyard.” Something dangerous crackled in the backs of her eyes. “And in answer to your earlier question, I don’t see how Cachalot can be as lucky as we’ve been. Oh, they were a lot luckier about the *body count*.” The fire behind her eyes turned cold and lethal with the memory of her own dead and how many millions of other Manticorans had joined them. “But they don’t begin to have the depth of resources we have, even without Beowulf and Haven, and at least nobody systematically destroyed anything we might’ve used to *start* rebuilding!” She shook her head. “I know we’ll do whatever we can to help, but I have to wonder how much we *can* do, given how much rebuilding we’ve got on our hands.”

“President Jahnke’s already recognized as much,” White Haven said grimly. “She’s asked for all the assistance we can provide — and she damned well should have, since we’re the ones the Sollies are really trying to get at with this shit — but she obviously understands how constrained our resources are right now.”

“And from Capriotti’s statement, Cachalot’s not the only system the bastards are going to do this to.” Honor’s voice was harsh, and White Haven could have counted the number of times he’d ever heard her call someone “bastard” on his fingers and toes without taking off both shoes.

“No, I’m sure it’s not,” he acknowledged. “That’s one of things we’ll be looking at with Pat tomorrow before you, Tom, and I have the ineffable joy of coming up with some kind of recommendation for Elizabeth. At the moment, I don’t have a clue what that recommendation’s going to be, either.”

“I don’t either.” Honor’s nostrils flared. “What I’d *like* to do is to announce a policy of reprisal. You come in and devastate one of our star systems, or somebody you accuse of tilting our way, and we devastate one of *yours*. Problem is, I’m pretty sure the Mandarins wouldn’t object if we did that.”

“That might depend on which system we chose for our reprisal,” White Haven countered.

“Would it?” Honor settled back, resting her head on his shoulder and shaking it as she looked up at those star-strewn heavens. “I don’t think it actually would, Hamish. This isn’t really a military strategy; it’s a *psychological* strategy. We're still well enough tapped in to Old Chicago's internal dynamic to know how desperate they're getting, so maybe we should have seen this coming."

White Haven nodded. Despite Lacoon, the Grand Alliance had scrupulously allowed passage for mail, courier ships, and unarmed passenger vessels, and Manticore had *very* good relations with some of the worlds with which it was technically at war at the moment. There were more than enough unofficial leaks to keep Landing abreast of what was happening in the Sol System . . . always allowing for the time lag inherent in any interstellar communications loop. Personally, he shared the conclusion of both Special intelligence and ONI that it was the fact that the Mandarins had to know that some of "their" planets — although, admittedly, not in the Core — were too well inclined towards Manticore to follow the party line which had prevented them from seeking a formal declaration of war.

On the other hand, they had to be getting desperate. Even accepting the analysts least optimistic estimates, they couldn't keep funding the war effort for more than another T-year or so. The more optimistic ones measured their time window in months. And desperate people did desperate things. That was why Tom Caparelli and his staff were constantly updating plans to embrace an all-out offensive strategy. No one *wanted* to do that, because of the revanchism it was bound to create in the post-war League. A war against a behemoth that size after it had time to acquire matching weaponry was not a survivable prospect, yet they all reaolized that the situation might change in a way which required them to roll the dice and hope the outcome was at least survivable.

Unfortunately, the *last* time someone had done that had been in a star system named Manticore, the dice had belonged to the Republic of Haven, and it . . . ended poorly for Lester Tourville and his fleet.

"They want to terrify people who might support us into backing away," Honor continued. "That’s obvious. And it does have military *implications*, because they want us to do what we forced Tom Theisman to do with Cutworm and dissipate our forces. Spread them over as many potential targets as we can to prevent them from doing this over and over again. If they’re willing to target Cachalot on the basis that it’s simply been trading with us, though, their criteria for target selection’s so broad there’s no way we could separate *probable* targets from the merely possible ones. And if we can’t identify or prioritize them, we couldn’t really cover them, either, even if we didn’t realize that was one of the things they wanted.

“But I have to say that, in some ways, I’m almost as worried about what they may be trying to tempt us into doing in response as I am about the actual attacks. If we start demolishing League star systems, we won’t be punishing the people who actually ordered this thing, and we *will* be alienating League public opinion. Not only that, we’ll be handing Abruzzi and the others a pretext they can use to go on whipping up a Solly war frenzy. Do you really think any of their pet newsies will suggest even for a moment that *our* attacks are a reprisal in response for *their* attacks? Especially when Capriotti’s already equated ‘Buccaneer’ with Lacoön? Under their version of reality, we ‘forced’ them to adopt ‘Buccaneer’ when we began waging such brutal warfare against their citizens’ ‘economic lifeblood.’ Nobody in the League’s going to parse Abruzzi’s news releases well enough to realize how absurd that comparison is.”

“You’re probably right,” White Haven sighed, tucking his arm around her and drawing her in more tightly against his side. “But we *are* at war with them, love. Sooner or later, that's going to trump the ‘public opinion’ issue in my thinking, I'm afraid.”

“I know. Mine too, really. But everything we’re seeing says the Solly woman-in-the-street — especially outside the Sol System itself — is still a long way from being onboard with any of this. Or would be, if she had full information on what’s going on. And as long as the League’s shedding systems like Beowulf and Hypatia, we really don’t want to give Abruzzi a bigger lever while he tries to push opinion the other way.”

“Granted.” He nodded. “But the flipside is that if we *don’t* do something about it, our potential friends in the Verge and the Fringe are likely to wonder if that’s because we can’t or because we simply *choose* not to. And *that* could . . . adversely affect the trajectory of public opinion, as Tony’s analysts so delicately put it.”

“Of course other systems will wonder,” she agreed in a disgusted tone. “Hard to blame them, too. Some of them will do the math and realize why we can’t protect every inhabited star system in the galaxy, but how many people truly realize how many inhabited star systems there *are?* They know about theirs and maybe a half dozen others they’ve personally visited or where they have friends or family. Beyond that, it’s all abstract . . . and the threat to their own star system is anything *but* abstract. It’s another version of this false-flag operation Mike’s turned up in Talbott. It doesn’t matter whether or not what happens to one of the Fringe systems is our fault, because it’s our job to keep it from happening *whoever’s* ‘fault’ it is! It’s illogical, it’s unreasonable, and in some ways it’s just plain silly, but it’s also human nature, and somebody in Old Chicago knows it.”

“Cogently reasoned,” he told her, brushing the tip of her nose with his index finger. “Would it happen that the brain behind that analysis has any suggestions to make? Besides the delightful one we’ve already ruled out about burning a few Solly star systems to the ground in retaliation, I mean?”

“Actually, I have had *one* thought,” she said, and his eyes narrowed at her serious tone. “Chien-lu was aboard *Imperator* for dinner the night John Crouch’s first dispatch came in, so I shared it with him.”

White Haven nodded. Chien-lu Anderman, Herzog von Rabenstrange, was Emperor Gustav’s first cousin and third in the succession for the Andermani throne. He was also Gustav’s representative to the Grand Alliance . . . and a personal friend of one Honor Alexander-Harrington. Theoretically, White Haven supposed, the information in Crouch’s dispatch had been classified, but it wouldn’t stay classified for long, and Honor and von Rabenstrange had a long history — one which had served both the Andermani and the Star Empire well, over the years — of working around formal restrictions.

“He was as furious about it as I was,” she continued, “and we discussed the implications as well as we could, in light of what we knew at the time. And in the course of our discussion, we came up with a thought that may have some merit.”

“What kind of thought?”

“Well, I don’t think Gustav is overjoyed by the way Mike’s been pushing the pace in Talbott, and I expect him to be even less overjoyed when he finds out we’ve sent Lester out to reinforce her and authorized operations against Madras. I think he figures our favorite loose-laserhead Winton’s likely to have Mesa in her sights, as well, and you know how badly he wants to take the ‘Alignment’ down himself.”

White Haven nodded. When Gustav Anderman learned of the Alignment’s existence — and that the murder of his nephew in the attempted assassination of his younger brother and immediate heir had almost certainly been carried out using the Alignment’s “killer nanotech” — there’d been no question about his idea of a proper response. At the same time, he had no desire to step into the Solarian League’s sights, if only because he was a coldly pragmatic practitioner of interstellar real politik who recognized the potential consequences for his own star nation after the shooting stopped and the League settled down to deciding how to even the score. That consideration wouldn’t have stopped him from invading the Mesa System anyway, if not for the way in which Manticoran and Havenite allegations about Mesa had been incorporated into the narrative of their confrontation with the League. It was impossible to extricate the Alignment from the Mandarins’ claims that Manticoran imperialism — compounded and driven, possibly, by paranoia about imaginary enemies — was the primary cause of the escalating conflict. Which meant any action Gustav might take against Mesa would be seen by both the Mandarins and by Solarian public opinion as a decision on his part to take Manticore’s side against the League.

“Chien-lu didn’t say so, but I think another factor in Gustav’s thinking is the way the Talbott Quadrant sort of boxes the Empire in,” Honor continued, and White Haven nodded again.

He’d spent quite a bit of time helping his brother, the Prime Minister, and Foreign Secretary Langtry worry about Gustav’s possible reaction to the Star Empire’s expansion. He doubted anyone in the Empire truly believed Manticore wanted to lock the Andermani up in their own little corner of the galaxy. For that matter, anyone who understood the realities of hyper travel knew they couldn’t lock anyone up even if they *had* wanted to. But it was undeniable that the newly annexed Talbott Quadrant lay squarely athwart the hyper-space route between the Andermani Empire and the Solarian League. Given that the Manticoran Wormhole Junction already controlled the hyper bridges between the Andermani and the rest of the galaxy, a dynast like Gustav Anderman had to be experiencing at least a mild spasm of paranoia.

“Anyway,” she said, “while we were bewailing the fact that Gustav can’t join our formal declaration of war — and that we don’t really *want* him to, in a lot of ways — we started looking for things the IAN might be able to do *short* of declaring war on the League. And that’s when Chien-lu suggested that he could propose to Gustav that the IAN consider establishing ‘neutrality patrols’ down on our Talbott flank.”

“‘Neutrality patrols’?” White Haven repeated, and she nodded against his shoulder.

“What he’s thinking is that not even the Mandarins are going to want to add the Empire to the Alliance. We’ve assumed from the beginning that they’ll want the Andermani to stay neutral. And we’ve encouraged Gustav to do just that because it gives him so much more leverage with them. We’ve been looking to that as a card in the end game, a chance for him to step in and play the ‘honest broker’ when the idiots finally realize shooting at us is a losing game and start looking for some sort of peace settlement. But he could use that leverage for other things, as well. For example, he could announce a list of star systems with whom the Andermani trade regularly and warn everyone, including the Alliance, that he intends to station a few cruisers in most of them — just to keep an eye on pirate activity, of course. And if he happened to call that a ‘neutrality patrol,’ the Mandarins would probably recognize it as a tripwire they’d better not stumble over. If *we* want to deter attack on a system, we’ll have to physically defend it, because we’re already at war with the League and nothing’s going to change that. But Chien-lu’s thinking is that Gustav wouldn’t have to come up with the strength to actually defend the systems, the way we would, because any attack on his ships would bring the Empire into the war as a full ally, and the Mandarins know it.”

“Probably something to that,” White Haven said thoughtfully. “Did von Rabenstrange suggest how many systems he thought Gustav might be able to get away with protecting that way?”

“No, and that’s going to be a more delicate calculation. The Mandarins will go a long way to avoid provoking Gustav into declaring war, but if he’s too obviously working with us, they may decide he’s already *effectively* declared war. In which case he gets added to their hit list and the ‘moral persuasion’ aspect of his neutrality patrol goes out the airlock.”

“Makes sense.”

“I thought so. And there’s another potential downside for us in the suggestion.”

“Ah?” White Haven turned his head, looking at her, then smiled, remembering a very youthful, intensely focused Commander Honor Alexander-Harrington who’d been something of a blunt object . . . and not especially interested in the finer implications of interstellar diplomacy.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You’re thinking that if Gustav is so helpful and accommodating, he’ll generate all kinds of goodwill in the systems he’s protecting. The kind of goodwill that leads to things like, oh, most favored star nation trading status, military alliances, that sort of thing.”

“Exactly.” Honor shrugged. “It’s a game the Andies have been playing for a long time, Hamish. It’s how they’ve expanded their frontiers over the years without having to actually conquer anyone. They make themselves useful enough that they get *invited* in, and let’s face it, as imperialist strategies go, that’s about as benign as it gets. They’ve had a lot of practice and they’ve gotten *very* good at it, though. And the very things which would limit the systems Gustav could legitimately cover this way means they’d all fall naturally into the Andermani sphere of influence to begin with.”

“Very true, unfortunately. On the other hand,” White Haven pointed out, “they seem to be having rather more trouble absorbing their share of Silesia than we are. They probably need a while to digest that python lump before they look around for their next meal.”

“Probably. But I can’t help thinking Chien-lu — and you know how much I genuinely like him — sees this as a potential way to set the table. And maybe bribe the maître d’ to make sure Gustav gets the best seat in the house.”

“And that bothers you enough to turn the notion down?”

“I didn’t say that.” Honor shook her head again. “First, because you and I both know the Andies are going to go fishing in those waters sooner or later anyway. Like the old nursery rhyme says, fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly . . . and Andies gotta expand. We couldn’t change that if we wanted to. But the real reason it doesn’t bother me enough to say no?” Her lips tightened. “I’m in favor of anything that stops the sort of thing that happened to Cachalot *anywhere*, Hamish. We’ve lived through that right here, and I can’t convince myself the Sollies will all be as careful about minimizing the loss of life as Capriotti apparently was. I’ve lost too many people I loved. Nobody else is living through another Yawata Strike on my watch. Not if there’s one damned thing I can do about it!”

He gazed at her, hearing the iron in that promise. And, better than most, he *understood* that iron, knew how utterly she meant every word of it . . . and that she would follow those responsible for the Yawata Strike to the ends of the universe. Someday, Honor Alexander-Harrington would catch up with them, and what would happen then would be as sure as entropy . . . and just as cold. But the Solarian League had never met the Salamander. Not the way he had. And he doubted the Mandarins had any concept of the Juggernaut they would unleash if another Admiral Capriotti wasn’t as careful about the careless butchery of someone else’s civilians.

“I believe you,” he said simply, and he did.

She’d told him once that a monster lived deep inside her, and he believed that, too. He’d seen it as she wept for Andrew LaFollet and her family after the Yawata Strike. He recognized it, known that for all his own outstanding military record, he wasn’t even in her league when it came to sheer, focused deadliness. But that monster was chained by compassion, by the moral code of someone who’d devoted her entire life to protecting others. Who’d found a *use* for her monster and embraced it in a way which, conversely, made her one of the two gentlest, most loving human beings he’d ever met.

*And I’m married to both of them*, he thought wonderingly. *How does a man get* that *lucky?*

“What?” Honor asked in a rather different tone, her eyebrows furrowing.

“What ‘what’ would that be?” he said.

“The ‘what’ that’s making you look at me the way Nimitz looks at celery,” she replied tartly, and he laughed at her expression. She had a pretty darned good idea what was making him look at her that way, he reminded himself. His wife literally *could* read him — or his emotions, at least — like the proverbial book.

“I promise you, I don’t think of you *remotely* the way Nimitz thinks about celery, Honor!” he told her in his most serious possible tone. “Or, let me rephrase. There is a certain . . . I don’t know, resonance, perhaps, between the way I think of you and the way he lusts after celery. The end objective is rather different in my case, however.”

“You’re an idiot,” she told him, shaking her head with a smile. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Maybe I am, but I’m *your* idiot.” He leaned closer, his kiss slow and lingering. “And you’re stuck with me,” he added in a whisper, nibbling the lobe of one ear.

“Oh, darn,” she replied, putting her arms around him.

“It’s a wonderful warm night,” he pointed out. “It’s even clear, with no rain in the forecast until midmorning, and this is a very large chaise lounge. Sturdy, too.”

“I’d noticed that.”

“Well, let me just go lock the door so we don’t inadvertently scandalize Spencer and Lucie.”

“I think that would be an excellent idea.”

He gave her another kiss, climbed off the chaise lounge, and crossed to lock the old-fashioned door. It wouldn’t stop Spencer Hawk or Tobias Stimson for a moment if a genuine emergency arose, but he smiled as he imagined their reaction if they happened to discover it was locked in a *non*-emergency situation. They’d snatch their hands away from the doorknob as if it were radioactive, he thought with a chuckle.

“You know,” he said, sharing the thought with Honor as he pressed the locking stud and turned back towards her, “if Tobias or Spencer come along and —”

His eyes widened. Honor stood before him, gilded in starlight and moonglow, her kimono puddled about her feet.

“About that chaise lounge . . . .” she said, and her eyes glowed as she opened her arms to him.

**Solarian Gendarmerie Headquarters**

**City of Vivliothḗkē**

**Hypatia System**

Major Ingrid Latimer, Solarian Gendarmerie, hid a quick frown as she stepped through the office door. Major Latimer was a little on the stocky side — a result of her homeworld’s 1.25 G gravity — but she had dark red hair, gray eyes, and a quick-moving grace that the planet Hypatia’s 0.93 G gravity only emphasized. In her impeccable uniform, she could have been used as a Gendarmerie recruiting poster any day. More than that, she was intelligent, dedicated, and just as good at her job as her appearance suggested.

She was also an unhappy woman, and the news accounts murmuring from the HD in one corner of Major Lawrence Kourniakis’s office had quite a lot to do with the source of that unhappiness.

“Oh, hi, Ingrid!” Kourniakis greeted her, looking up from the paperwork on his desk display. “What brings you to the troglodyte side?”

“Hi, Larry.”

Latimer smiled dutifully. She was the Gendarmerie’s in-system third-in-command, head of the Criminal Investigation Division in Hypatia, and she thought of herself as an old-fashioned cop, because she vastly preferred catching crooks to wading around in the cesspool of politics and surveillance. Kourniakis, on the other hand, commanded the Security Division, charged with both cyber security and counterintelligence in the star system. He was senior to her — in fact, in addition to his security responsibilities, he served Colonel Ganesh Naran, the senior Gendarme in Hypatia, as his second-in-command — and she’d always thought his cheerful, extroverted nature was a less-than-perfect fit for someone with his responsibilities. He certainly didn’t strike anyone as the sort of fellow who would hover in corners listening to private conversations. Which, she acknowledged, might be one reason he’d been so effective in what he liked to call his “troglodyte duties.”

Now Kourniakis touched his display, turning the HD volume completely down, and cocked his head at her.

“To what do I owe the honor?” he asked.

“One of my people turned up something you need to take a look at,” she replied.

“Shoot,” Kourniakis said, opening a notepad on his display, and pointing at the chair by his desk.

“We’ve been investigating some smuggling activities down at the port.” Latimer dropped into the indicated chair. “I wouldn’t’ve been too worried about it, with all the other crap going on right now, except that these particular smugglers were bringing in 7H.”

Kourniakis looked up from the note he’d been jotting with a quick, dark frown. “7H” was cop and street shorthand for “Seventh Heaven,” a particularly nasty psychedelic nanotech which had developed a hefty pool of addicts despite the psychoses it produced in long-term users. Just last week, a lorry driver down at the port had experienced a psychotic event while driving and rammed his vehicle through two warehouse bays and a crowded pedestrian walk. Six people had died on the scene, and another fourteen had been med-evaced. There was a reason *nobody* wanted 7H on his world.

“You have proof of that?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Plenty of proof, already bagged up and in Evidence Impound. Eleven perps in lockup to go with it . . . and three in the morgue because they didn’t want to come along when we knocked on their door.”

“Pity about that.” Kourniakis’s smile was thin, and she smiled back. But then her expression sobered.

“While we were surveilling them just before the bust, though, something else turned up,” she said. “We came across somebody else’s hack. Not on our perps, but piggybacked through their system to hit the planetary AG’s files.”

“Attorney General Boyagis’s office?” Kourniakis asked sharply, and she nodded.

“I think the perps were trying to keep tabs on any investigation by the VPD or the System Bureau of Investigation. Anyway, they’d managed to get into Boyagis’s files — we think we’ve IDed the hacker they hired, if you want her name — but then someone else jacked *their* files to get to Boyagis’s. I’m not sure who the ‘someone else’ was, but I know it wasn’t my people, so I thought I’d better come and make sure it wasn’t any of *your* people before we report it to Boyagis. Or, rather, before I report it to Colonel Naran and *you and he* report it to Boyagis.”

“No clue at all who it was?”

“None,” she confirmed. “And I assume from your question that it wasn’t you?”

“Of course it wasn’t me!” Kourniakis sat back in his chair. “Why the hell would I be hacking the Attorney General’s files?”

She considered several possible responses to that question. None of them seemed very constructive, however.

Unlike her, Kourniakis was a native Hypatian. That was scarcely unusual in the SG. In fact, the majority of the Gendarmes in Hypatia were Hypatians, given the Gendarmerie’s Core World staffing policies. Usually, Latimer thought that was an excellent idea. Core Systems weren’t Protectorates. They were full-fledged, self-governing members of the Solarian League, so there’d never been any reason for the Gendarmerie to transfer in people who had no local connections to seduce them from the straight and narrow, and there were strong arguments in favor of using as many locals as possible. Latimer’s own CID was living proof of that. Her best agents, most effective investigators, were all Hypatians, with the innate feel for their homeworld’s social patterns and interactions which could be produced only by total submersion in their environment. They also tended to get the best results whenever CID had to interface with local law enforcement agencies — which happened a lot — because they weren’t outsiders trying to cut in on someone else’s turf. And, even if all that hadn’t been true, assigning people light-years away from their friends and families when there were plenty of openings right in their hometowns had a powerful negative impact on personnel retention rates.

Right this moment, though, those personnel policies were contributing to something Latimer really didn’t like. And not just with Kourniakis, although he was certainly a case in point.

She’d known Lawrence Kourniakis for over eight T-years. They were friends. He and her husband Carl were hunting and fishing buddies, and his twin girls attended the same school as her son Peter. She wasn’t as close to Kourniakis’s wife Angelika as Kourniakis was to Carl, but both of them loved landscape photography, and Angie knew all the best vistas and exactly when the lighting would be most spectacular.

And despite all of that, Ingrid Latimer couldn’t say what she was thinking to Kourniakis. “Larry, you should be digging as deep as you can into the treasonous SOB’s files to find out just how badly the bastard and his bosses are planning on screwing the League,” wasn’t something Kourniakis wanted to hear.

*Of course it’s not*, she thought. *Larry’s a hell of a nice guy, and I’d trust him with my life. But he’s about as blind as any of these other Hypatians. And he doesn’t think they’re doing a single thing that’s illegal.*

In fairness, Latimer wasn’t certain the Hypatia System Unified Government’s actions *were* illegal. On the other hand, she wasn’t certain they *weren’t*, and it seemed to her that a few precautions were in order. Unfortunately, Colonel Naran had taken the position that the entire referendum was a local government issue. It might have federal *implications*, but absent a formal decision from the League Judiciary that the constitutional right of secession was no longer operative, he had no authority to interfere in the process while the Hypatians sorted it out.

*And by the time they finish "sorting it out," it’ll be too late. Unless something turns around pretty damned quick, these people aren’t going to just just cross the Rubicon. They're going to cross it, blow up their bridges behind them, and throw the splinters back into the river with a rock tied to their ankles! In fact, maybe the metaphor I want has more to do with the Red Sea than any rivers*.

“Well, if it’s not you, then maybe it’s one of the Liberty Committees,” she said out loud. “They’re making enough noise, and don’t forget the injunction Allerton’s asking for. The Committees could be looking for inside information about where Boyagis’s thinking is on that.”

“And it could also be some damned newsy wanting a scoop,” Kourniakis shot back just a bit quickly. “It doesn’t have to be one of the Committees, Ingrid. For that matter, it could be one of Allerton’s people looking for exactly the same kind of info.”

“It could,” she conceded, although she didn’t think for a minute that it was.

Senator Makiko Allerton had made her opposition to the referendum madness crystal clear. Her arguments against secession were just as emotional as the strident demands of the dozens of Liberty Committees which had sprung up to organize in favor of it and she was, in Latimer’s opinion, a far more eloquent spokeswoman. But she was also badly outnumbered. She was fighting a losing battle, and that battle had gotten a hell of a lot harder when that never-to-be-sufficiently-damned Abruzzi-MacArtney soundbite hit the public boards here in Vivliothḗkē. The vote trend had been clear almost from the beginning, but opposition to the referendum had plummeted and support among the previously undecided had skyrocketed in the wake of that stupid, obviously — and heavily — edited scrap of private conversation.

Allerton and her small cohort of doggedly loyal fellows in Hypatia’s unicameral legislature had fought hard against the referendum while it was still in the draft stage, and they hadn’t stopped fighting since. The political cost for Allerton, who almost every pundit agreed would have been the next System President if the referendum had never come along, had been steep, but she’d refused to yield. Now, though, after the disaster of the Abruzzi-MacArtney clip and with only three more days until the actual vote, it must be obvious even — or perhaps *especially* — to her that she was destined for defeat. Even Latimer had to admit that her probably-doomed request for an injunction, postponing the referendum until the legality of secession was ruled upon by the Federal courts, was no more than a last-ditch, forlorn hope effort to avoid the inevitable.

Whatever else Makiko Allerton might be, though, she was a woman who believed in due process and the rule of law. She’d dedicated her entire life to that. The possibility that *she* might have hacked the Attorney General’s office simply didn’t exist.

*Which*, the major acknowledged unhappily, *doesn’t mean one of her supporters couldn’t’ve done it without her knowledge or approval. I hate to say it, but Larry’s got a point about that. I just wish I felt more confident he’s still trying to keep the playing field level in his own mind. And I hate even having to wonder about that, damn it!*

“Anyway,” she said out loud, “I figured you needed to hear about it. Under the circumstances, I’m just as happy I don’t have to make the call about whether or not to tell Boyagis about it, but I thought it would be a good idea to give you a heads-up before the official report lands in your inbox.”

“I appreciate that.” Kourniakis smiled at her. “And as soon as that official report gets here, I’m sure Colonel Naran will pass it on to the AG.” He shrugged. “Until the referendum’s actually voted on, all of the rules about jurisdictions still apply, and this is clearly in Boyagis’s. Thanks for bringing it to me, Ingrid.”

“You’re welcome.” She pushed up out of the chair and extended her hand across the desk. “Take care, Larry.”

“You, too, Ingrid.” Kourniakis stood to shake her hand. “And don’t forget Friday night. Alethea and Alexia have informed me they intend to cook supper.” He shook his head. “God only knows what it’ll be, but I promise it won’t poison anybody.”

“That’s what you say *now*,” she replied with a smile, then nodded and headed back for her own office.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Lawrence Kourniakis watched the door close behind Ingrid, then settled back behind his desk and turned the HD volume back up. The talking heads weren’t saying anything he didn’t already know, but he let them natter in the background as he tipped back in his chair, gazing at the closed door with a pensive expression, and ran the conversation back through his mind.

Ingrid had a point about how badly the Liberty Committees might have wanted a peek inside Attorney General Boyagis’s files. And he didn’t think for a moment that Makiko Allerton would have condoned any illegalities on behalf of herself or her anti-referendum crusade. The truth was, he didn’t have a clue as to who it might have been, and he was just as happy it wasn’t a federal matter — which meant it wasn’t *his* — until and unless the system authorities requested the Gendarmerie’s assistance.

*Which they wouldn’t do now if the* *Spíti tēs Gerousías was burning down with the Senators inside it,* he thought sourly. *Never thought I’d see something like this, and I wish to hell I* wasn’t *seeing it. But, damn it, it’s time to fish or cut bait*.

Up until very recently, Lawrence Kourniakis had never wondered whether he saw himself first as a Hypatian or as a citizen of the Solarian League. Those identities had been identical, as far as he was concerned. But now, since this whole confrontation with first the Manties, then the Republic of Haven, and now even *Beowulf* . . . .

If not for Beowulf, he’d probably still be inclined to give the Ministry of Information and the anti-Manty newsies the benefit of the doubt. Certainly all this nonsense about centuries-long Mesan conspiracies sounded like either the ravings of a lunatic or pure fiction. But he knew too many Beowulfers. For that matter, his wife’s family was from Beowulf, and one of his uncles had married a Manticoran. He’d found it difficult to recognize any of his in-laws in the imperialistic, warmongering monsters the newsies were portraying. Of curse, he’d also been prepared to admit that he’d never made a close study of Manticore’s relations with the League or of any possible Mesan conspiracies. But he’d viewed Felicia Hadley’s fiery denunciations of the “Mandarins” from the floor of the Legislative Assembly itself, and the worm of doubt had crept into his heart as she hammered the League’s foreign policy.

Maybe it wouldn’t have if he hadn’t spent fifteen years seconded to Frontier Security before he returned to Hypatia, married Angela, and settled down. Most of those years had been out in the Protectorates, and he hadn’t liked what he’d seen there. He hadn’t liked the kind of deals he’d seen between corrupt Solarian transstellars and the local OFS commissioners. The sort of deals which lent a damning edge of plausibility to Manticore and Haven’s claims about Mesa. He hadn’t liked the façade democracies, or the way OFS propped up local despots and dictators, regardless of their human rights policies, as long as they kept the fee schedules moving. And he hadn’t liked the way the League had operated to suppress any local opposition to those despots and dictators.

He’d told himself those sorts of operations were Frontier Security’s business, not the Gendarmerie’s, and there’d been a lot of truth to that. But nobody could witness it without being touched by it, and he’d still felt . . . dirtied by some of the things *he’d* witnessed. Some of the things in which he’d been forced to participate, if only at second or third hand.

Things that had left a scar.

And that scar was what had tipped him from ambivalence over secession into full-bodied support for it. People could argue all they wanted to that that conversation between Malachai Abruzzi and Nathan MacArtney had had never been serious. That it had been no more than venting, driven by their intense frustration as the Manticore Crisis escalated. But the fact that they’d said the words at all had reminded Major Lawrence Kourniakis of the things the Solarian League — *his* Solarian League — routinely *did* do in the Protectorates. And when he added that to the way the Mandarins and their surrogates had torn into Beowulf — accused it of *treason*, for exercising its legal rights where the Beowulf Terminus was concerned and probably saving hundreds of thousands of Solarian lives into the bargain — he’d realized he didn’t really have to leave the League.

The League had already left him, long ago. *His* League had died somewhere out there in the Protectorates, and all the referendum represented, really, was the formalization of the death certificate.

He inhaled deeply, shook his head, and returned to his paperwork.

**Proedrikḗ Katoikía**

**City of Vivliothḗkē**

**Hypatia System**

“I have to say that while I’m very relieved to see you, your timing may be just a bit *too* expeditious, Admiral,” System President Adam Vangelis said as he stood and walked around the desk to shake Rear Admiral Kotouč’s hand. “We didn’t expect you for another full-day or so.”

“I’m pleased to be here, and I hope I can be of service, Mister President,” Kotouč replied a bit cautiously as he shook the proffered hand.

He felt awkward out of uniform, and he’d wondered why the President’s message had asked him to travel on a government-chartered, civil registry shuttle and wear civilian attire for his visit to the Proedrikḗ Katoikía. He’d wondered if Vangelis’s request was a bad sign when the message was delivered, and the last thing he wanted to discover was that it had been.

“As for our arrival time,” he continued, “my orders were to make the most expeditious passage I could. Is there some reason I shouldn’t have?” He shook his head. “My instructions are to assist you in any way I can, and I’m afraid I’m not sufficiently familiar with the local political scene to be aware of any . . . timing issues. Ms. Goode’s done her best to bring me up to speed on Hypatian politics, and I viewed her reports with great interest on our way here, but I’m sure you understand that I haven’t had time to develop any sort of inside perspective.”

“Of course you haven’t!” Vangelis shook his head and smiled at the silver haired woman who’d accompanied Kotouč into his office. “It’s remarkable that Kay’s developed such an excellent understanding of Hypatia in the short time she’s been here. I’ll allow her, oh, eighty hours, let’s say, to instill that same understanding in you.”

“As always, Mister President, your generosity awes me,” the Honorable Kay Goode responded in a pronounced Sphinxian accent, and the treecat on her shoulder bleeked a laugh.

“And that’s enough lese majeste out of *you*, too, Dizzy!” Vangelis said, shaking an index finger at the ’cat . . . who seemed mightily undismayed by the admonition. Goode reached up and stroked his ears gently, shaking her head, and Vangelis chuckled.

Kotouč didn’t know Goode personally, but he knew quite a bit about her, including the fact that she was distantly related to both Klaus Hauptman — the connection was *very* distant there — and also to Honor Alexander-Harrington, through the Zivoniks, one of the oldest families on Sphinx. He also knew she’d lost her husband and, although the Goodes as a family hadn’t been hit nearly so hard as the Harringtons, several other close family members in the Yawata Strike. He doubted anyone would have realized that, given her serene expression, but no one who’d viewed her situation reports from Hypatia would make that mistake. The lava behind those gray eyes burned hot in those reports, and he’d wondered, viewing some of them, if she saw the Solarian League more as an enemy in its own right or as no more than an obstacle between her star nation and the people who’d murdered so many of its citizens.

He suspected it was the latter . . . and that her priorities only added a finely distilled vitriol to her hate and loathing for the Mandarins.

Whatever her feelings, and however much of them she’d revealed in her reports to her Manticoran superiors, he was sure she’d kept them under control here in Hypatia. She was Sir Anthony Langtry’s special envoy to Hypatia, and everyone knew that as soon as the referendum’s outcome was announced she would take off her special envoy’s hat and replace it with that of the Star Empire of Manticore’s Ambassador and Minister Plenipotentiary to the System Republic of Hypatia. It probably wouldn’t change her personal relationship with Vangelis — which was obviously very good — a bit, but the legal implications of naming an ambassador to a newly independent star nation which had been a founding member of the Solarian League would not be lost on the galaxy at large.

“In the meantime, Admiral,” Vangelis continued, ushering both of his guests over to stand at the office’s floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out across the Proedrikḗ Katoikía’s beautifully landscaped grounds, “I didn’t mean to imply that your arrival is in the least unwelcome. I don’t believe I’m going to need your assistance to maintain order here in Hypatia.” He smiled just a bit crookedly. “I’m sure there’s going to be *some* ‘buyer’s remorse.’ There always is, even in decisions nowhere near as monumental as this one! And the minority who opposed secession — it looks like around twenty-one percent actually voted against it — may produce a certain . . . restiveness. Overall, though, I’m not anticipating any significant domestic unrest.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, Mister President.”

Kotouč gazed out at the lacy, feathery leaves of the native trees along the ancient stone wall separating the Proedrikḗ Katoikía — the President’s House; and the admiral hoped Vangelis wouldn’t be offended when he used the Standard English translation instead of mangling the Greek — from a broad, smooth avenue. Hypatia was old enough that Vivliothḗkē had been built without counter-grav, and the original architecture had been lovingly preserved. The Old Town was walled about with the monolithic towers of a later tech base, but building codes had pushed them far enough from the ancient heart of the city to prevent the kind of overshadowing effect he’d seen on too many other planets.

“I’m relieved to hear it,” he repeated, “and that assessment accords pretty well with what Representative Lambrou and Representative Tsakabikou predicted during the voyage from Beowulf. A little better than Mr. Lambrou predicted; not quite as rosy as Ms. Tsakabikou expected.”

“I’m sure it does,” Vangelis said a bit dryly. Kotouč raised an eyebrow, and the president chuckled. “Brad’s been more of a ‘wait-and-see-how-it-all-works-out’ type from the beginning, Admiral. Sofronia . . . not so much.”

“I’d have to say that fits my own observation of Ms. Tsakabikou,” Kotouč acknowledged.

“I’m sure it does.”

Vangelis stood between the two Manticorans — at 165 centimeters, he was shorter than either of them — looking out the window for several seconds. Then he drew a deep breath.

“I’m more concerned about the non-Hypatians here in the system, Admiral,” he said, turning to look at Kotouč. “In particular, Rupert Chernikov — he’s the Managing Director for Alexandria Belt Extraction Industries — fought the referendum tooth and nail. I’ve always gotten along well with Rupert, on a personal basis, but that doesn’t mean as much as it used to, after what happened to Sandra Crandall and Massimo Filareta. And not just for people from outside the system, either. Makiko Allerton and I have been friends since we were kids, and she’s scarcely speaking to me these days.”

Regret darkened his brown eyes, but he went on levelly.

“I don’t want to think Rupert would try any kind of actual sabotage, and it’s not like we’re one of the Protectorates. Alexandria Extraction’s majority-owned right here in Hypatia, with less than a quarter of the voting stock held by out-system interests, and even if he was inclined to try something like that, ninety-five percent of ABEI’s employees are Hypatian. I can’t completely rule it out, though, and the fact that his employees are Hypatian, doesn’t mean all of them supported the referendum.

“There are other assets and operations here in the system, however, that are owned primarily by one of the transstellars who’re likely to think secession doesn’t bode well for their long-term economic interests. My local law enforcement people are keeping an eye on all of the perspective problem children we’ve been able to identify, but it’s been my experience that it’s seldom the problems you see coming that do the damage. I assume it’s that way in military operations, as well?”

“Oh, I think you could safely say that, yes, Mister President,” Kotouč agreed. “Naval officers *hate* surprises, for a lot of reasons.”

“Well, I don’t really anticipate any armed resistance or major sabotage. What I’m more concerned about are people carrying tales to the League out of school, so to speak, and we’ve got a lot of privately owned hyper-capable ships here in Hypatia. There’s no way we could keep someone from running to Old Chicago with the outcome of the referendum, and I’m fairly sure someone already has. I know.” He waved one hand. “The results haven’t been officially announced yet, mainly because we’re still counting some of the absentee ballots from the belter habitats.” He shook his head. “That’s where our more anarchistic citizens hang out. The dinosaurs in some of those habitats still use *paper* ballots.”

Both of Kotouč’s eyebrows arched this time, and Vangelis snorted.

“The good news, from our perspective, is that they’re even more . . . irritated with Old Chicago than most, so the only question is how much they’ll inflate the margin of victory. But it’s been my administration’s policy from the beginning that we won’t certify the result of the referendum until every single voter’s been given ample opportunity to cast his or her ballot and have it counted.” The president’s expression sobered. “I very much doubt that early victory projections would actually have suppressed the vote against secession, but I didn’t intend to let that happen. Nothing is going to taint this referendum or its results, Admiral. This is the kind of decision where a decent respect for history requires that it be arrived at openly, honestly, and transparently.”

“I agree entirely, Mister President,” Kotouč said, and Goode nodded. Her reports had prepared Kotouč for a system chief executive who took his responsibilities seriously, and everything he’d seen since arriving in Hypatia only confirmed that impression.

“The bad news is that we’re still at least a day-half from actually certifying the count,” Vangelis continued, and Kotouč nodded. At just over forty hours, Hypatia’s planetary day was longer than the planetary days of most colonized planets, and its inhabitants had divided it into more manageable-sized “day-halves” and “full-days”— or, more commonly, simply “halves” and “fulls.”

“I’d just as soon keep your arrival under wraps until those last ballots come in and get counted,” Vangelis continued. “My official position — and my personal promise to Senator Allerton and her supporters — has been that no foreign warship will enter Hypatia orbit until the final vote’s been certified by the Department of State and the Supreme Court.”

“I wasn’t aware of that, Sir,” Kotouč said. “My orders were to proceed to Hypatia as quickly as possible to provide security here in the system after the referendum. And I’m afraid neither Mister Lambrou nor Ms. Tsakabikou warned me about your ‘dinosaurs’ and any delays in the vote tally. I can understand why it might not have occurred to them to mention it, but I’d assumed the result would have been announced no later than yesterday.”

“I realized that as soon as you turned up.” Vangelis nodded briskly. “And certainly no one’s faulting you or your people for how quickly you got here! For that matter, none of your ships *are* in Hypatia orbit, are they?”

“No, Mister President, they aren’t,” Kotouč acknowledged. *And now I understand why System Traffic Control sent us to the Alexandria Belt rather than to Hypatia, too*.

Fortunately, the Alexandria Belt was an inner-system belt, between Hypatia and its G4 primary but less than a full light-minute from the capital planet. The shuttle flight from *Phantom*’s current orbit to Vivliothḗkē Field had taken less than two hours.

“I know it’s inconvenient,” Vangelis said, “but I think it’s important that I keep my promises. The real reason I asked you to come visit me today — and to come in what I believe you Navy people call ‘mufti’ — was to explain why we’re keeping your arrival under wraps and won’t be having any formal dinners to welcome you to Hypatia for the next half-day or so.” He smiled. “I didn’t want you thinking it was because you were unwelcome!”

**SLNS *Camperdown*,**

**Task Force 1030**

**Solarian League Navy**

“Do you think they’ve announced the outcome yet, Admiral?” The Honorable Madhura Yang-O’Grady asked as the lift car slowed.

“I’m afraid your sources are probably better where that’s concerned than mine are, Ms. Yang-O’Grady,” Hajdu Gyôzô replied. Which self-evident fact, he reflected, she should already have possessed.

“I know.” Yang-O’Grady’s tone carried a hint of apology as the lift car doors opened on the passage outside SLNS *Camperdown*’s flag briefing room. She was almost eighteen centimeters shorter than Hajdu, with green eyes, a dark sandalwood complexion, and naturally crimson hair which was quite striking, and he suspected that under more usual circumstances, she had a lively sense of humor.

“I believe that question comes under the heading of making inane conversation as a way to distract myself and keep my brain from wearing any more holes in itself,” she added, as if to confirm his suspicion.

“I see.” Hajdu’s lips twitched. “In that case, Ms. Yang-O’Grady, I am enchanted to have been of service.”

“Thank you.”

Yang-O’Grady rewarded him with a smile, but there was a tautness — a darkness — behind her amusement. Given the nature of her assignment, a certain tension was not simply understandable but to be expected, Hajdu thought. In fact, only a moron — which Madhura Yang-O’Grady manifestly was not — wouldn’t have been worried as hell by the job she’d been handed. But this seemed to go farther, he thought, and wondered about its possible implications for their mission.

They reached the briefing room hatch, and Hajdu courteously waved her through it. The command structure for their current operation was . . . complex. As Innokentiy Kolokoltsov’s personal representative, it was Yang-O’Grady’s job to convince the Hypatia System Unified Government to renounce the results of its referendum if, as all reports indicated was inevitable, the decision to secede had been sustained. It was Hajdu’s job to float ominously in the background, lending weight to Yang-O’Grady’s arguments. Unless and until Yang-O’Grady failed in her own mission, that was all he was supposed to do.

At that point, however, Buccaneer came into play. From his staff’s analysis, there was no way that *wasn’t* going to happen in the end, and a part of the admiral wanted to simply get on with it. If Hypatia had chosen to betray its eight hundred-T-years of loyalty and mutual obligations to its fellow League member systems, then it was time Hypatians were shown the error of their ways. Hopefully, their experience would make other potential traitors wise, and if he had to do it, he wanted it over and done as quickly as possible. The sooner Hypatia’s experience became general knowledge, the less likely other traitors were to arise.

Besides, mixing politics and military policy was never a good idea. The result was usually an abortion, and the best one could normally hope for was that it wouldn’t be a *total* abortion. To this point, he was cautiously tempted to believe their current mission might prove an exception to the rule, but it was early days yet.

For now, however, Yang-O’Grady was senior to him, which was why he’d waved her into the briefing room in front of him. It was her responsibility to determine the moment at which their mission transitioned from political to military. Until that moment, he was at her orders. *After* that moment, she became a passenger.

“Attention on deck,” Commodore Fred Brigman, TF 1030’s chief of staff, said as Yang-O’Grady and his admiral arrived. Under more usual circumstances, the staff would simply have risen respectfully until Hajdu was seated. With “guests” present, Brigman was being a bit more formal, and Hajdu walked across to his chair, waited until Yang-O’Grady had seated herself, then sat down and nodded to the commodore.

“Carry on,” he said.

“Thank you, Sir.”

The rest of the staff resumed their seats, but Brigman remained standing and keyed up the elevated display in front of him.

“As the Admiral already knows, Ms. Yang-O’Grady,” he said courteously to the Foreign Ministry representative, “this is basically just a final readiness report. We completed our last scheduled exercise fifteen hours ago, and on the basis of that, Commodore Koopman —” he nodded to Daphne Koopman, TF 1030’s staff operations officer “— and I have added a few tiny tweaks. The main purpose of this briefing is to apprise both Admiral Hajdu and you of our readiness estimate, based on the exercises we’ve conducted, and to examine our mission orders one last time in light of that estimate. The Admiral’s made it clear to us that you need the most complete possible picture of our capabilities and the elements of Buccaneer and how they would play out in the unhappy eventuality of their becoming necessary. In addition, this briefing offers an opportunity for you — or the Admiral — to reconsider or more fully define any of those elements. From my own reading of the intelligence reports, unfortunately, I believe it’s likely the Hypatians will have voted in favor of secession by the time we get there. If that’s happened, the Task Force’s primary mission is to enable you to accomplish *your* mission without a shot being fired, and the Admiral feels that makes it essential that you be as hands-on as possible with our planning process and operational options.”

“I see,” Yang-O’Grady said, when he paused. She glanced at the admiral sitting beside her. “And I appreciate it, Admiral.” She grimaced. “Before I joined the Foreign Ministry, I spent quite some time with Interior and cut my teeth in Frontier Security. During those years, I had ample opportunity to watch what should have been coordinated military and diplomatic operations turn into fiascoes. I doubt you can fully imagine just what a relief it is to know that whatever happens in Hypatia, it won’t be because your people and my people weren’t on the same page going in.”

**HMS *Phantom***

**Alexandria Belt**

**Hypatia System**

“Talk to me, Jim!” Jan Kotouč said as he strode into flag bridge.

“Yes, Sir!” Captain Clarke turned from an intense discussion with Commander Ilkova. “We’re still getting the details, but it doesn’t look good. So far, CIC is reporting a minimum of a hundred and fifty hyper footprints.”

“And we don’t have a single Ghost Rider platform out there to keep an eye on them, do we?” Kotouč observed sourly.

“No, Sir. Sorry, Sir,” Ilkova said, and Kotouč waved a hand at her.

“That wasn’t a criticism, Markéta. Or, if it was, it was a *self*-criticism, not directed at you. I should have deployed a shell as soon as we made our hyper translation.”

“My job to remind you, Sir,” she said loyally, and Kotouč shook his head.

“If I recall my Academy classes correctly, the responsibility rests with the commanding officer.”

His tone was almost whimsical, but his staff knew him well enough to recognize the intense self-anger buried within it. And Ilkova was correct; it *was* her job to “remind” her admiral about such things. But Hypatia was a friendly system with its own sensor net already in place. Kotouč had allowed himself to forget how unexpectedly things could change, and with him as an example, it was hardly surprising even a staff as good as his had done the same thing.

*You told Vangelis Navy officers hate surprise*s, he thought acidly. *Maybe it would’ve been a good idea for you to do a little something to minimize* this *one?*

“All right,” he said. “We screwed up — I’ll grant you we both dropped the ball on this one, Markéta — so let’s do something about it. Get the recon shell deployed now. Complete stealth. That many footprints can only mean this is the Sollies, and I don’t want them to have even a sniff of our presence in-system.”

“Yes, Sir.” Ilkova turned to begin giving orders, and Kotouč moved his attention to Commander Jason Kindrick, his staff astrogator.

Kindrick was a bookish sort — his nose was usually buried in his reader or an old-fashioned hardcopy book whenever he was off duty — who rejoiced, for some reason Kotouč had never discovered, in the nickname of “Vulture.” It was hard for him to think of a name less suited to someone’s physical appearance, but Kindrick only smiled whenever he heard it. And wherever it had come from, or however fond of the printed page he might be, he was also one of the best astrogators Kotouč had ever served with.

“While Markéta’s seeing to that, Jason,” he said now, “I think we need to move — very cautiously — to a point farther from Hypatia. We’ve got a lot of room to hide in where we are, but we’re also under a light-minute from the capital. If I were these people, I’d be looking that volume over very carefully, so I want to be somewhere outside it by the time they’re close enough to start looking. Pick us a good spot to hide at least fifty or sixty million klicks from here.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kindrick replied, and Kotouč nodded and crossed to the master display, twitching his head to invite Clarke to join him there.

“You think this is some kind of armed attempt to suppress the referendum, Sir?” the captain asked quietly.

“Well, it’s not a convoy of ice cream tankers,” Kotouč replied tartly, then shook his head. “You know, the entire time we were rushing to get here, I never imagined anything this size coming over the hyper wall. This is a lot more escalation than I ever anticipated, especially in a Core System like Hypatia.”

“I suppose it’s at least theoretically possible they’re only staging through Hypatia en route to somewhere else,” Clarke said.

“No, you don’t suppose anything of the sort.” Kotouč shook his head. “You’re just trying to find a silver lining. Best case scenario, whatever genius in Old Chicago sent these people out here is hoping a force this size will overawe Hypatia into backing down on their referendum. In that case, they’re probably under orders just to be as visible and intimidating as possible, and I have to concede that a couple of hundred warships could do a pretty fair job of intimidating just about anybody. On the other hand, they’re only forty-four light-years from Beowulf, and they know what Admiral Truman has sitting on the Beowulf Terminus. So if they’re here to do any intimidating, they’re probably under orders to do it pretty damned fast.”

“And if that isn’t why they’re here, Sir?”

“About the only other reason they could be here is to . . . take steps if President Vangelis and his administration refuse to back down,” the admiral said, flat-voiced.

Clarke started to ask another question, then visibly changed his mind, and Kotouč smiled grimly. His chief of staff was as capable of doing the math as he was, and neither of them liked the answers they were coming up with.

*Nobody ever expected us to stand off a full-scale* invasion*, damn it*, he thought harshly. *Nobody ever expected it, and we didn’t come prepared to* do *it, either. No pods, no CLACs, no Mycroft. Just* Phantom*, three* Bravos*, and* Arngrim *and only what we have in the magazines*.

“Have Markéta make sure we have a Hermes buoy on the approach vector from Beowulf,” he said. Clarke looked at him, and he showed his teeth. “Give us another seventy-two hours, maybe even only forty-eight, and the force balance in Hypatia will change rather significantly,” he pointed out.

“Yes, Sir, it will,” Clarke agreed. He nodded respectfully to Kotouč and turned to speak to Ilkova. The admiral watched him go, then clasped his hands behind him, squared his shoulders, and looked down into the plot while he waited out the no-longer-accustomed-to light-speed delay from the Hypatian sensor net.

*Yes, the force balance will change*, he thought. *But unless* Vukodlak *and a couple of missile colliers turn up — at a minimum — it’s not going to change* enough, *and you and Jim both know it*.

He watched the plot, waiting, and prayed silently that whoever commanded those anonymous hyper footprints wasn’t one of the SLN’s hotheads.

**SLNs *Camperdown***

**and**

**Proedrikḗ Katoikía com center**

**Hypatia System**

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question, Ms. Yang-O’Grady,” the brown-haired man on Madhura Yang-O’Grady’s com display said. “I regret the fact that you came all this way only to have me refuse your . . . request, but the referendum’s results have been tallied and officially certified. As a consequence, I really have no choice in the matter.”

System President Vangelis didn’t sound very regretful to Yang-O’Grady, but she made herself smile at him. SLNS *Camperdown*’s parking orbit was low enough that there was no perceptible delay in com transmissions, and she leaned towards her com’s pickup ever so slightly.

“Mister President,” she said as calmly as she could, “I understand the Hypatian System Constitution mandates both the procedure for and the implementation of any referendum and its outcome. I also understand that under the letter of the law, you’re technically correct that you have ‘no choice’ but to abide by the results of your system’s most recent referendum. Obviously, the Federal Government and I differ with your system’s interpretation of the *Solarian* Constitution, however, and that’s what creates our present problem. The Interior Ministry believes Article Thirty-Nine, the so-called secession clause of the Constitution, is a legal archaism which has lapsed over the seven and a half *centuries* —” she emphasized the last word deliberately and allowed her eyes to harden just a bit “— since the original Constitution was ratified. I believe the relevant technical term is ‘desuetude.’ I can provide you with the legal definition if you need it.”

She bit her mental tongue the instant the last sentence escaped her. Her tone had been, even to her own ear, what her mother had always called “snippy,’ and what her husband, Jason, called “insufferably bitchy.” The fact that Vangelis was playing word games with her was no excuse for anything that might legitimately put up his back. And lecturing him on arcane legal terminology in which his own attorney general would have schooled him exhaustively before the language of the referendum was ever drafted was a wonderful way to do that.

“I’m familiar with the term, thank you,” Vangelis replied with false amiability. “As I understand it, however, it applies — in the established jurisprudence of the League — to statutes and regulations which have gone unenforced for a sufficiently long period for a new ‘customary usage’ to evolve — one clearly contrary to the original intent and purpose — which presents a bit of a problem for your argument.”

He smiled back at her, showing just an edge of incisor.

“First, a clause of the Constitution is neither a statute nor a regulation; it’s part of the fundamental law of the League, upon which all of those other statutes and regulations rest, and the Founders specifically stated in the preamble that it is alterable *only* by constitutional amendment.

“Second, Article Thirty-Nine’s never gone ‘unenforced’ because up until the current . . . unpleasantness, no one ever felt compelled to resort to it.”

His smile turned even thinner. If she’d been male, Yang-O’Grady could have shaved with it.

“And, finally, what the League is confronting today is, I’m afraid, the very reason Article Thirty-Nine was incorporated into the Constitution. And I also seem to recall that a majority — almost two thirds, incuding the Sol System, in fact — of the League’s original member systems refused to ratify the Constitution *without* Article Thirty-Nine. While I understand Interior’s position on this matter, Attorney General Boyagis and Chief Justice Varkas have concluded that, given the established history and current circumstances I’ve just described, ‘desuetude’ does not — and *cannot* — be legally applied to Article Thirty-Nine. And as the Hypatia System’s chief magistrate, I have no option but to enforce the laws of this star system as interpreted by the judiciary *unless* those laws contravene the Federal Constitution or an overriding federal *statute* — not a regulation, and not a legal theory which hasn’t been sustained by the League Judiciary.”

“Mister President, the Judiciary is considering this very issue on an expedited basis. Until the Court’s had time to rule, however, the Federal Government — and, in particular, the Interior Ministry — strongly dispute the interpretation of Article Thirty-Nine which you’ve just cited. And, as is the long-standing legal tradition of the League when constitutional ambiguity impacts on government policy, Interior Minister da Orta e Diadoro has sought and received an injunction against the exercise of Article Thirty-Nine until such time as the Court issues a definitive opinion in this matter.”

She delivered her statement in the measured tone she’d rehearsed many times on the voyage from the Genovese System to Hypatia. She’d debated against inserting Jacinta da Orta e Diadoro’s name into the conversation, despite her instructions from her superiors. Those instructions had been firm on that point, however. Vangelis knew as well as she did that da Orta e Diadoro had no more real authority than any of the League’s other official cabinet ministers, but Innokentiy Kolokoltsov and his senior advisers had determined that every legal fiction must be scrupulously adhered to in this case. No doubt that reflected the Manties’ — and the Beowulfers’, damn them! — fiery denunciations of the “corrupt, kleptocratic bureaucracy” which had “usurped all legitimate authority” in the League.

From the flicker in Vangelis’s expression, citing the Interior Ministry’s figurehead had not strengthened her argument.

“Again, with all due respect, Ms. Yang-O’Grady,” the System President said after a moment, “Article Thirty-Nine, by its nature, is exempt from any injunction. If that had not been the intention of the Framers, then the article would have become a dead letter, since any corrupt administration —” his eyes went very hard with the last two words “— could have prevented its ever being executed simply by seeking one spurious injunction after another from an equally corrupt and compliant Judiciary. Or seeking only a single injunction while the Judiciary ‘takes the matter under advisement’ . . . and keeps it there until a time more convenient for the administration in question.”

“Are you implying that that’s what’s happened here, Mister President?” Yang-O’Grady inquired sharply.

“By no means, Ms. Yang-O’Grady. I’m simply suggesting that that *could* have happened, and that the Framers provided Article Thirty-Nine precisely against circumstances in which it might. The exact nature of the concerns which impelled their decision aren’t really germane to the exercise of their clearly stated intent, however.”

Yang-O’Grady’s teeth pressed firmly together and she forced herself to pause, berating herself for rising to his bait in an exchange that was clearly being recorded by both parties.

*I wish to hell they’d sent Jason or someone else from Interior to deal with this*, she thought.

Jason Yang-O’Grady was a senior member of Nathan MacArtney’s ministry, a Regional Commissioner in the Office of Frontier Security, and she knew why sending someone like him had been a total nonstarter. Despite the fact that Interior had to take point in this situation, no one remotely connected with OFS could possibly be sent out as the government’s spokeswoman to a full member system of the League. That would have been true anywhere, but after the hacked conversation between Abruzzi and MacArtney, the logic had become even more pointed in Hypatia. Under the circumstances, *anyone* attached to Interior in any way would be tarred with the Frontier Security brush by the lunatic hotheads like Vangelis who were ripping the League apart. That was the entire reason this radioactive potato had landed in Foreign Affairs lap, despite all the potentially thorny aspects of sending an envoy from the ministry whose normal charge was dealing with the League’s *foreign* affairs, not internal issues.

She understood that. Understanding, however, wasn’t the same thing as liking it.

She kept her own expression serious and judicious, stepping down hard on the fury boiling up within her, and part of her wondered how much of that fury stemmed from the fact that she’d known from the outset how unlikely she was to succeed. Failing in a mission like this at a time like this was unlikely to be a career-enhancing accomplishment. That would have been more than enough to frustrate and anger any career Solarian bureaucrat for purely personal reasons. Watching the Solarian League swirl around the drain only made it infinitely worse.

*You smiling*, arrogant *bastard*, she thought at Vangelis. *Who the hell are you to be telling the* Solarian League *what it can and can’t do? And what possible justification can you come up with for* splitting *it in the face of the first really serious threat it’s faced in almost a thousand T-years?*

While she fully understood OFS’s mission and supported its objectives, Madhura Yang-O’Grady was more than smart enough to realize that the policies which *supported* those objectives had provided any number of completely rational — and justifiable, damn it — reasons for any Fringe System to prefer association with the Manties and their “Grand Alliance.” She didn’t like it, and she hated and loathed the uppity Star Empire for creating a situation in which the Solarian government literally could not continue to function in the fashion which had evolved over the last half-millennium. No doubt it was at least partly the bureaucracies’ own fault for having become so dependent on the cash flow from the Protectorates, but that couldn’t absolve the Manties. They must have known — they damned well *had* known — how attacking OFS’s ascendancy in the Protectorates would destabilize the entire Solarian League, the largest star nation in the history of humankind.

And now she had to deal with *this*. With the treachery of a full member system, a Core System which couldn’t possibly claim *its* rights or interests had been stepped on by Frontier Security or any other arm of the Federal Government. She could understand, even accept, that a Fringer might legitimately hate and despise the distant overlords who controlled his star system; she could neither understand nor accept the disloyalty of a system like Hypatia which, along with all the rest of the League, had profited from OFS’s thankless labors for so long.

“Mister President,” she said finally, “you’ve made your position abundantly clear. Now, unfortunately, I need to make mine — the Ministry of the Interior’s and that of the Federal Government as a whole — equally clear. The government’s first choice, obviously, would be for you and your star system to renounce the secession referendum — the almost certainly *illegal* referendum, when the Judiciary finally rules — and void the vote. Failing that, the government’s *second* choice would be for your government to voluntarily place the execution of the referendum on hold — as the injunction already granted against it requires — until the status of Article Thirty-Nine is fully determined by the courts. Since you refuse, for reasons I’m sure seem good from your perspective, to agree to either of those reasonable requests, I have no choice but to proceed to the government’s third and least desired option.”

She paused to look him square in the eye, then continued.

“No doubt you’ve observed the number of warships which have accompanied me to Hypatia, Mister President. These ships have been assigned to something called Operation Buccaneer, a commerce-raiding strategy directed against the Manticorans, their allies, and any star system complicit in lending the ‘Grand Alliance’ military, economic, or political support in their aggression against the Solarian League. Admiral Hajdu’s original destination was the Exapia System. He was diverted from Exapia to provide a suitable escort for my own mission. It gives me no pleasure to point this out, but if Hypatia follows through on its threat to secede from the Solarian League, and — even more — on the referendum’s express intention to seek political union with Beowulf, should Beowulf also secede and join its Manticoran friends in armed hostilities against the League — your star system will have placed itself in the category against which Buccaneer is directed.”

She paused again.

“Believe me, Mister President,” she said then, very softly, “Hypatia does *not* want to find itself in that category.”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Do you think he really intends to poll his Cabinet about asking for a reconsideration?” Hajdu Gyôzô asked as the stewards finished serving and withdrew. He and Madhura Yang-O’Grady sat in Hajdu’s favorite spot in any *Nevada*-class battlecruiser. Theoretically, the armorplast dome over their heads represented a chink in *Camperdown*’s armor, but that was true only in the narrowest, most technical sense. The spacious compartment — listed on the ship schematic as “Flag Officer’s Dining Cabin” — was located on the centerline of the big ship’s dorsal surface. In combat, it was completely protected by the *Camperdown*’s impeller wedge. Or, if it *wasn’t* protected by the wedge, the ship was already in so much trouble that lack of armor would be the least of her concerns.

The compartment was much too big for only two people. Had the larger tables been set up, it could easily have seated fifty, which meant a table for two seemed lost and tiny in its vastness, but Hajdu loved the view, and he’d discovered Yang-O’Grady shared his tastes in that respect. And while the limitless starscape would normally have made the compartment seem even vaster, that wasn’t the case tonight. *Camperdown* was inverted, relative to the planet, and that gave Hajdu and his guest a magnificent view of Hypatia’s white-and-blue-swirled sphere as it floated against the stars.

The view of Hypatia’s low-orbit infrastructure was equally spectacular. Especially when he thought about what might happen to that infrastructure so shortly.

“I don’t know,” Yang-O’Grady sighed. “I think he probably took it to them but the real question is whether or not he’ll abide by the result if they vote in favor of putting the referendum on hold.”.

She picked at the delicious *Fatányéros* on the traditional wooden platter in front of her. The grilled meats were surrounded by a frame of garlic mashed potatoes, rather than garnished with the traditional fried potato slices, and it smelled delicious. Unfortunately, she was in no fit mood to do justice to the admiral’s chef, and she laid her fork aside and reached for her wineglass.

“And do you think he will?”

“Honestly?” Her eyes were dark as she gazed at the beautiful blue planet “above” them, and she shook her head. “No. I don’t think he’s going to give a centimeter. He pretended to be neutral during the secession campaign because that was what was legally required of him, but everyone knows he was one of the referendum’s strongest supporters in private. I’m inclined to think he doesn’t really believe Buccaneer might apply to *his* star system, and in a lot of ways, I wish he was right. But he’s not, and in a lot of other ways, I’m perfectly all right with that if that’s the way these people want it.” Her lips tightened. “When you’re fighting for your life and someone’s announced she’s going to help the people trying to strangle you, she doesn’t have any kick coming when you break her arm before she can.”

“I see your point,” Hajdu murmured, and reached for his own wineglass. “So why do you think he took it to his Cabinet, then?”

“If he actually took it to his Cabinet at all — and I’m not sure he did; or, for that matter, that there’d be any *reason* for him to take it to them, since it seems pretty damned clear they all agreed with the referendum’s outcome — then it’s only to buy time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for the dispatch boat he sent off to Beowulf the instant we appeared to come back with an ‘Alliance’ fleet,” Yang-O’Grady said flatly. “I told him Buccaneer specifies a seventy-two-hour grace period to evacuate system infrastructure. The only thing he could possibly be hoping for is to stall me — us — until the Manties arrive or he knows they’re *going* to arrive in less than seventy-two hours.”

“Actually, Buccaneer doesn’t mandate any specific ‘grace period,’” Hajdu observed, looking across the table at her, and she nodded.

“I understand that. For that matter, I was listening when Commodore Brigman briefed me on Parthian Shot. But these people are so damn sanctimonious, so full of the legalisms they think protect them from the consequences of their own actions, that if I hadn’t told him your orders dictate a specific timeframe, they’d figure they could spin it out indefinitely by telling us they ‘haven’t yet had sufficient time’ to complete the evacuation.” She shrugged. “I had to give them a definite time window if I wanted to . . . focus their thinking properly.”

“I see.”

Hajdu considered what she’d just said and decided she was probably right. She was *definitely* right about the Hypatians’ desire to defer and delay Buccaneer as long as possible, and it was hard to blame them for that.

*No*, he told himself after a moment, *actually, it’s very easy to blame them for putting themselves in a position where they* need *to defer and delay anything. It’s their own damned fault, and any pressure she can bring to bear to get them to swallow their pride — and stupidity — and crawl back off the ledge is all to the good. Besides, a seventy-two-hour window won’t change things much from my perspective. It’s the next best thing to hundred and thirty hours one-way to Beowulf. If they sent a dispatch boat off the instant we arrived, we could wait six more T-days and still give them their frigging seventy-two hours and be gone by the time anyone got here from Beowulf*.

And if it happened that somebody turned up sooner than that, he had an ops plan to deal with that, too.

He considered that thoughtfully for several seconds, then sipped wine and set his glass back down.

“I believe it was Gustav Anderman who observed that when a man knows he’s going to be hanged in a week, it tends to concentrate his thinking.”

“Was it Anderman?” Yang-O’Grady tilted her head, eyebrows furrowed. “I always thought it was Thomas Svartkopff.” She considered it for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, whichever one of them said it, it’s certainly true, and if there was ever anyone who needs to do a little concentrated thinking, it’s those idiots down on Hypatia.” Her smile was cold. “I’d have preferred to accomplish my mission without you having to accomplish *yours*, Admiral. If they decline to give us that option, though, I’m sure you and your people will be able to amply demonstrate why they shouldn’t have.”

“Indeed,” Hajdu Gyôzô murmured.

**Gregatsoulis Park**

**City of Vivliothḗkē**

**Hypatia System**

“Mom?”

Ingrid Latimer twitched as the plaintive sixteen-year-old voice summoned her back from her inner thoughts.

“Sorry, Peter.” She managed a quick smile for her son, although he was old enough — and smart enough — for her to be pretty sure he’d noticed a certain artificiality to it. “What can I do for you?”

“I told you Alethea and Alexia’ve asked me if we can go to their soccer game Friday first-half. You said you’d let me know.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I?”

She gave him another smile, then looked down the length of the picnic table, across the hot dog buns, the potato salad, the chips and hummus, at her husband. Carl Latimer looked back with no expression at all, and she fought back an urge to scream at him. Why couldn’t he — he, of everyone in her entire universe — understand what was tearing her apart inside?!

*No, that’s not the real reason you’re so angry with him*, she told herself bleakly. *The reason you’re so pissed is that he* understands *you just fine. He just doesn’t* agree *with you*.

Even when she was most furious with him, she knew Carl would never try to dictate to her conscience. Nor would he deny her right to act in whatever way that conscience demanded. But he’d been on Hypatia too long. That was the only explanation she could think of. He’d been here too long, become too accustomed to a Hypatia-eye perspective on the galaxy. He wasn’t a Hypatian citizen, but he’d been a Hypatian *resident* long enough to recognize the justice of the referendum’s position.

Well, Ingrid recognized its justice, too; it was its *legality* she questioned. That and what she knew were going to be the nightmare consequences for Hypatia if her friends and neighbors pursued this madness to its ultimate conclusion. She remembered a conversation with Larry Kourniakis, one from years ago, when they’d talked about the need — the moral responsibility — to take a stand. About the fact that sometimes men and women simply had to stand up for what they knew was right, regardless of the consequences, or concede the fight to the forces of barbarism.

*But those were the forces of* barbarism, *not the* Solarian League*, damn it!* a voice wailed deep down inside her. *And if Larry, and Angie, and all their friends carry through with this, the League is going to* hammer *this star system. It won’t have any* choice*, not with the Manties already at its throat. Can’t they* understand *that?!*

Apparently, they couldn’t. Or, even worse, they understood perfectly . . . and they were stubborn enough they were going to do it anyway.

“Friday first-half?” she repeated looking at Peter.

“That’s what I said,” he replied impatiently.

“Well, I don’t see why not,” she said. “Assuming nothing comes up between then and now, of course.”

“Thanks, Mom!” Peter smiled so broadly that Ingrid wondered which of the Kourniakis twins — or which of their friends — had finally caught his eye.

The thought brought a little welcome and much-needed lightness to her day, but then she looked up at the cloudless afternoon sky, and any lightness disappeared.

Something, she suspected, was definitely going to “come up” between now and Friday first-half. That was the main reason she’d insisted on moving their scheduled picnic up. She’d wanted to get it in, put at least one last positive memory into the bank, before “something” came up. No one knew exactly what Madhura Yang-O’Grady had said to System President Vangelis, but the news that there was a deadline had leaked, and the existence of a deadline implied a threat of consequences if it wasn’t met. Worse, if the leaks were accurate, that deadline fell on Thursday.

Major Latimer was a Gendarme, not a naval officer, and she didn’t know exactly how much firepower had accompanied Yang-O’Grady to Hypatia. There was probably quite a lot of it, but she didn’t know *how much*, and that was what was truly torturing her. The thing she hadn’t so much as breathed to Carl. Because if she didn’t know that, she *did* know something else.

“How about a little more potato salad?” she asked her husband with a smile.

**SLNS *Camperdown***

**Hypatia Planetary Orbit**

**Hypatia System**

“How would you assess the reliability of this intelligence, Captain Adenauer?” Madhura Yang-O’Grady asked. She sat back in her chair, rubbing her eyes — it was the middle of *Camperdown*’s shipboard night, and she’d been in bed for less than an hour before she was dragged back out of it. “Obviously, we have to take it seriously, but do you believe it’s reliable or simply a product of the rumor mill?”

“Ma’am, that’s a question I can’t answer,” Hajdu Gyôzô’s intelligence officer replied. “It comes from a Gendarme who, according to the system datafiles they sent out with us, is both apolitical and a career investigator. On the face of it, that would incline me to believe she wouldn’t be reporting rumors unless she thought there was a lot of truth in them, and that she’s trained to recognize when there is. From the perspective of whether or not she’s telling us what she really thinks, I don’t think there’s much question about her reliability. I might add that she was obviously stressed and unhappy in the data packet she encrypted and fired out to us. This is a woman who didn’t like what she was doing but did it anyway, because that was her duty.”

“So you think it *is* reliable?”

“Ma’am, the distinction I’m trying to make is between *truthful* and *accurate*, and the two aren’t always the same. She’s definitely not lying to us. The question is whether or not what she thinks she knows is accurate, and that’s what I can’t assess.”

“We understand the line you’re drawing, Denton,” Hajdu said. “On the other hand, you have to have some sort of feel for whether or not it’s *likely* to be accurate.”

“Yes, Sir.” Adenauer recognized high impairment Hajdu’s fish-or-cut-bait tone. He didn’t *like* it, but he did recognize it, and he inhaled deeply.

“First,” he began, “it would make a lot of sense. If the Hypatians are going to secede from the League and ask for political union with Beowulf, it would be logical for them to take the next step and request a protective naval presence here in Hypatia. The system authorities would have to be careful about how they handled that, at least until the referendum vote was tabulated, because direct contact with the Manties or the ‘Grand Alliance’ would be treason, now that the Manties have declared war on us. Contact simply with *Beowulf* might not be construed that way by the Federal Government. Direct military talks with Manticore certainly would be, and the last thing they’d want would be to have the local Gendarmes arresting their System President, his cabinet, or members of the Yerousía — I mean their Senate — for treason on the eve of the referendum.

“So, from that perspective, an invitation to the Manties to send a substantial naval force *after* the referendum vote’s been certified would be a logical step. In fact, our operational planning assumed that was exactly what they *would* do.

“That brings me to my second point, though.” He looked around the briefing room table at faces showing different degrees of fatigue and hands clutching steaming mugs of coffee. “If they’ve been planning on inviting them in only after the referendum’s been certified, which is what we’d assumed based on our prior intelligence on Hypatia, then the invitation couldn’t have been sent more than about six hours before we made our alpha translation. So, in that case, we reasonably shouldn’t expect to see any Manties for at least another five T-days.

“For them to arrive sooner than that — which is what Major Latimer says her source in the Hypatian Customs Service let drop — they would’ve had to have been invited before the referendum vote was taken. Now, if I were the Manties and an entire League member system told me it wanted to leave the League and switch over to my side — which, let’s face it, is exactly what any union with Beowulf would mean, in the long run — then I’d damned well get my arse in gear and get my naval forces here in a hurry. I’m thinking that means they should already be here, *if* they were invited before polling began on the referendum. And we haven’t heard a word about that.”

“If Manty stealth systems are even half as good as the more pessimistic estimates suggest, finding them if they wanted to hide would be damned near impossible,” Commodore Koopman pointed out. Hajdu looked at his ops officer, and she shrugged. “Sir, a star system’s an awful deep pool for a single minnow. Shut down your impellers, go to emission-control, and maybe run your stealth field up to twenty or thirty percent, and somebody’d have to literally stumble across you to find you. We’ve got recon drones deployed to watch the entire hyper perimeter, so I’m pretty damn sure nobody’s going to sneak in past us. I can’t guarantee there’s not *already* somebody in-system, though.”

“Daphne has a point, Sir,” Brigman said, and Hajdu nodded. Not only did she have a point, but she had the intellectual courage to admit that Manty technology might actually be as good as it was reputed to be.

“Yes, Sir, she does,” Adenauer conceded, nodding respectfully across the table at the ops officer. “But when I said we ‘haven’t heard a word’ about them, that’s exactly what I meant. We been monitoring their news channels ever since we got here, and I pulled up the ’faxes and the board archives for the last solid T-month. I’m pretty sure we got clean copies, without any editing from the locals, and I plugged in a data search after Major Latimer’s message came in. There *are* some references to Senators and — rumors and ‘unidentified sources,’ only, for this one — at least one Cabinet Secretary *suggesting* the Manties or Beowulf might be called upon for naval support. In response to every single newsie question about that, though, Vangelis’s responded by reiterating his promise that ‘there will be no foreign warships in Hypatia orbit’ until *after* the referendum. It’s possible he was lying when he said that, but that doesn’t match his record. And there’s been exactly zero reference to any ‘foreign warships’ actually arriving. Having a squadron or two of wallers drop in on your star system’s the kind of thing it’s not real easy to hide, Sir.”

“Not easy, but not impossible, either,” Hajdu replied. It was clear he wasn’t rejecting the intelligence officer’s analysis. He was simply expanding upon it, and Adenauer nodded again.

“No, not impossible, Sir.”

“But it’s your sense that if the Manties haven’t arrived yet, they may not be delayed much longer?” Yang-O’Grady pressed, and there was something different about her tone. A harder, sharper edge, Hajdu thought. Something . . . hotter.

“If Major Latimer’s correct about the locals’ intentions — and I’m pretty sure she is — I can’t rule that out, Ma’am.” Adenauer shrugged. “The exact timing is another unanswerable question, though. If they asked for help as soon as Latimer’s suggesting they might have, it could’ve been here already. *Should’ve* been here, really. So, assuming she’s right about that, they could come over the hyper wall from Beowulf in the next fifteen minutes. Assuming they waited until after the vote was taken, as Vangelis’s promises suggest they did, we’ve got five T-days, until sometime Thursday ‘first-half.’ That’s absolutely the best assessment I can give you, Ms. Yang-O’Grady, Admiral.” He shook his head, his expression taut. “With all possible respect, and no intention of being humorous at all, this is one time I’m just as happy someone farther up the chain of command than me has to make the call.”

“Thank you for not waffling.” Yang-O’Grady managed a tight smile. “And, by the way, I’ve sat in on enough intelligence briefings to know the difference between waffling to cover your arse and making a clear distinction between what you know and what you can only speculate upon.”

Adenauer inclined his head at the compliment, and Yang-O’Grady sat silently for almost a full minute, gazing at the blank display in front of her. Then her nostrils flared, and she raised her eyes to Hajdu.

“Admiral,” she said in formal, measured tones, “on the basis of this intelligence, I am certifying that the diplomatic aspect of our mission to Hypatia has failed. I think it’s obvious we now know why Vangelis is playing for time. I think it’s also obvious from what Captain Adenauer’s just so capably laid out for us, that we don’t know how much time we have. I am therefore authorizing you to proceed with Buccaneer.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Hajdu replied. “May I ask if you have any suggestions about the timing of my actions?”

Her green eyes flickered just a bit when he asked for “suggestions” rather than “directives,” but he met her gaze steadily. From the instant she’d authorized him to proceed, he was the one in command and she was the one who’d just become an advisor.

“No, Admiral,” she replied. “None at all. Except,” she added, and he suddenly realized he’d misunderstood why those eyes had seemed to flicker, for her voice was suddenly much harder and harsher than it had been, “that the sooner you teach these people what happens to traitors, the better.”

**HMS *Phantom***

**Alexandria Belt**

**Hypatia System**

“I do hate surprises,” Rear Admiral Kotouč said, gazing around the faces in the windows in his day cabin’s smart wall.

“I think we all do, Sir,” Captain Ellis Rupp, commanding the Saganami-B-class heavy cruiser HMS *Cinqueda* agreed. Rupp was Kotouč’s senior ship commander, followed by Květa Tonová, *Phantom*’s captain, then Captain Jackson Ortega-Burns of HMS *Shikomizue* and Captain Ching-yan Lewis of HMS *Talwar*. Commander Megan Petersen, commanding the *Roland*-class destroyer *Arngrim*, was his junior CO, and he thought she looked surprisingly calm, given her youth and the circumstances.

“I think we all do,” Rupp repeated, “but Jayson and I —” he twitched his head at Commander Jayson Stob, his executive officer, sitting beside him “— have been trying to figure out what kind of bee this Hajdu’s gotten up his ass to do something like this. It *can’t* be because he figured out we’re here, or he’d be moving a lot faster even then this.”

“An excellent point,” Kotouč said and glanced at Lieutenant Commander Vyhnálek. “Any thoughts on that, Štěpán?”

“Aside from the fact that I wish whatever the hell it was had left him alone, Sir?” TG 110.2’s intelligence officer shook his head. “I’m guessing — and it’s only a guess — that somebody in-system finally got around to telling them the Hypatians had asked for a naval presence. Maybe somebody’s been counting on his fingers and toes and realized that since we obviously aren’t here yet, we may be getting here Sometime Real Soon Now, as they say on Grayson.”

“Until the smoke clears, that’s probably the best almost-answer we’re going to get, Sir,” Captain Clarke said, running the fingers of his right hand through his sandy hair.

*And what makes you think that when “the smoke clears” we’ll be around to* find *any answers, Jim?* Kotouč wondered.

But that wasn’t something he could say out loud.

“In the meantime, we have some decisions to make,” he said out loud, although everyone in his audience knew “we” didn’t have to decide a damned thing. *He* did.

He leaned back in his chair, and as he did, his mind ran back to another time and place — to Saganami Island, almost exactly two T-years earlier. He’d been there to celebrate his nephew Ondře’s snotty cruise at the traditional pre-deployment family dinner. But he’d gotten there a day early, and because he had, and because Vice Admiral Alb’s brother John was one of his close friends, the baroness had invited him to attend Ondře’s Last View.

And John had invited him to the family memorial after he became *Baron* of Alb when his big sister died in the Battle of Manticore, as well. That was an unpleasant reflection at the moment.

It had been thirty T-years since his own Last View, on the eve of his own snotty cruise, but he hadn’t forgotten what it was like. Hadn’t forgotten the chill down his spine, the ball of ice in his belly as he thought about what he was seeing, ingested what might be expected of *him* someday. But Ondře’s Last View had been different. It had been different because the youngsters about to depart on the training and evaluation cruise which completed their Academy education were sailing not in time of peace, as he had, but straight into a renewed war with the Republic of Haven. And different because Baroness Alb had invited a very special guest speaker. Someone who’d known the full, grim reality of what the Last View merely promised the graduating middies *might* come to them. Who’d met that challenge not once, but repeatedly. Someone who was already spoken of as Edward Saganami’s spiritual heir.

Lady Dame Honor Alexander-Harrington, the Salamander herself, had stood in that huge, darkened lecture hall, the treecat who’d shared and endured so much with her on her shoulder, and her soprano voice had rung out across the endless rows of midshipmen as she told them what they were about to see. And he remembered the lump in his throat, the bright, unshed — and unashamed — tears in his eyes, as the image of that very first Parliamentary Medal of Valor floated before him and that soprano sword of a voice had come out of the darkness, repeated the words, the oath — the *vow* — to which every graduating class for four hundred and ten T-years had dedicated itself.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the Salamander had said, “*the tradition lives!*”

And so, in the end, he already knew what his decision had to be, didn’t he?

**Proedrikḗ Katoikía**

**Hypatia System**

“And *I’m* telling *you*, Admiral, that we can’t possibly evacuate our entire orbital infrastructure in thirty-six hours!” Adam Vangelis snapped. “I’m not trying to *stall* you, damn it — it’s physically impossible!”

“That’s regrettable, Mister President,” Hajdu Gyôzô said from the com display above the conference table, his voice like interstellar space. “I advise you to evacuate as many people as possible, however, because I *will* execute my orders at the time I’ve given you.”

“You’d be killing hundreds of thousands — *millions* — of innocent civilians!”

“On the contrary, Mister President. I may be the one giving the order; *you* — and your government — are the ones who have forced my hand. I’m simply obeying the orders of my legally constituted chain of command. You and your star system are the people who committed treason against the Solarian League, leaving me no option but to execute my contingency orders in the time window available to me.”

“That’s an utterly meaningless and specious attempt to evade the blood guilt for anyone who dies in this star system thirty-six hours from now.” Vangelis’s voice had turned even colder than Hajdu’s. “Believe me in this, Admiral. This war — the war your ‘legally constituted chain of command’ began with an unprovoked attack on a sovereign star nation in time of peace — will end one day, and unless you’re a lot stupider than I think you are, you know as well as I do that the Star Empire of Manticore and the Republic of Haven are way too big a mouthful for your navy to chew. So, when the inevitable day comes that a peace treaty is signed between the Solarian League and the Grand Alliance, be certain that your name, and the demand that you be extradited to an Allied court to face trial for premeditated mass murder, *will* be part of those terms. Even if, by some unimaginable turn of luck, the current clique running the League should survive in office, don’t think they’ll hesitate for one single instant before throwing you under the air lorry to save their own contemptible arses.”

“My statement is neither meaningless nor specious, Mister President, and I’ve already told you where the ‘blood guilt’ resides in this instance. As for the conclusion of hostilities,” the admiral permitted himself a snort of contempt, “I’ll take my chances on your neobarb friends’ ability to force the Solarian League to do anything it chooses not to do. For the present, however, further discussion is pointless. I will be back in contact in twenty-four hours. I advise you to expedite your efforts in order to save as many lives as possible from the consequences of your star system’s actions. Hajdu, clear.”

The display went dark, and Vangelis turned to the men and women seated around the table in the Proedrikḗ Katoikía’s Situation Room. His gaze circled the table, his eyes fiery, but his desperation was as obvious as his fury.

“My God, Adam.” Kyrene Morris, the System Vice President was white-faced, her eyes shocked. “My God, he’s really going to . . . to *murder* all those people?!”

“That’s what he says, and I doubt he would’ve said it for the official record if he didn’t mean it,” Vangelis replied harshly.

“What if we were to renounce the referendum result?” Frederica Saraphis, the Senate Majority Leader sounded a bit hesitant. She raised her right hand, palm uppermost. “I know we don’t have the legal authority to set it *aside*, but we could certainly delay — even suspend — its execution, under the circumstances!”

As the chairwoman of the Liberal Centrists, with a thirty-seat majority, Saraphis had shepherded the referendum — formally sponsored by the LibCents and all but one of the other major Hypatian political parties — through the Senate. She’d been one of its staunchest supporters, and her expression showed how little she liked making that suggestion.

“We can’t, Freddie,” Makiko Allerton said, her voice flat and hard. She sat beside Saraphis. Her Independent Democrats had been the only major party to oppose secession, and she’d fought her old friends Saraphis and Vangelis tooth and nail the entire way. But now she shook her head, her violet eyes dark and bitter.

“You’re right that we can’t set the referendum aside,” she continued after a moment. “Even suspending its implementation would get us into all sorts of questionable waters, legally speaking.”

She glanced at Attorney General Boyagis, who jerked his head in a single, curt nod, then looked back at Saraphis, and now her expression held an edge of what could almost have been compassion.

“Completely aside from the legal aspects, though, there are the moral ones,” she said. “I opposed secession. I thought that was the right decision. But I lost, and I happen to believe in the legal and political systems of Hypatia. I lost,” she repeated, “. . . and if this man — this *monster* — is going to come into my star system and murder hundreds of thousands of my fellow citizens, of my *people*, and tell me his actions have been *approved* by the Solarian League, then thank God I did.”

She looked around the table again, her eyes like iron.

“I don’t know about this ‘Mesan Alignment’ the Manticorans and the Havenites are talking about. I don’t know about an awful lot of things, but I just discovered how horribly wrong I’ve been about one thing I thought I *did* know. I thought I knew the Solarian League was worth saving. “

“I’m sorry, Makiko,” Vangelis said softly. “I know how much saying that had to hurt.”

“So do I,” Saraphis said, reaching across to squeeze Allerton’s hand. “And I agree that Hajdu proves the Mandarins are even more corrupt than we’d thought they were. But think of all the lives we’re talking about! I’m willing to risk the legal consequences of anything that would save that many people, so if suspending the referendum’s execution — even indefinitely — will stop him, I say we have no choice but to do just that.”

“Won’t work, Freddie,” Vangelis sighed. She looked at him, and he shrugged. “I already suggested that to Hajdu.” Some of the others looked shocked, but he only shrugged again, harder. “Of course I did! Frederica’s right. My first responsibility, as a human being and not just to my oath of office, is to save as many lives as I can. The only way I could save anybody today would be to convince Hajdu not to pull the trigger, and I am by God prepared to do anything that might possibly accomplish that! His response was that it’s too late for that.”

“Too late?” Saraphis stared at him. “*Too late* to save all those lives? *That’s* what he said?!

“In almost exactly those words,” Vangelis told her. “The conversation was recorded, if you want to view it yourself, but the short version is that by expressing our intent to leave the League and — especially — by even suggesting the possibility of some sort of political union with Beowulf, we’ve demonstrated our fundamental treachery and willingness to trample all over his version of the Constitution. As such, he’s not prepared to delay the execution of his orders even if we promised we’d *never* secede, regardless of the referendum vote. After all, how could he possibly take the word of a bunch as traitorous as we’ve proved ourselves? No doubt we’d simply change our minds back again as soon as he left the system. Because of that, he has no choice but to carry out ‘Operation Buccaneer’ *before* he leaves.”

Saraphis sat back in her chair, her face ashen, and this time it was Allerton squeezing *her* hand comfortingly.

“But why is he so insistent on his time limit?” Mildred Roanoke, the Secretary of Industry asked. “If he’d give us just an additional forty hours — even *thirty* hours — we could get almost everybody out, even from the Belter habitats!”

“Somebody must’ve told the cowardly bastard we’re expecting Allied warships, Ma’am,” Commodore Franklin Nisyrios, the senior uniformed officer of the Hypatia System Patrol grated. The red-haired commodore’s gray eyes blazed and his lip twisted in contempt. “He may talk a good fight about how he thinks this war is going to end, but even if he believes that crap, he’s a long way from any peace treaty that might save his sorry arse. And right now, he knows damned well what a squadron or so of Allied wallers would do to his task force. So he’s shitting his skinsuit — pardon my language — to get the hell out of here before those wallers turn up!”

“I think Frank’s right,” Vangelis said. “I think someone must’ve told him — or given him enough information that he could extrapolate for himself – when we originally expected Admiral Kotouč to arrive. So he’s going to execute his orders and run for it before then. Obviously he doesn’t know the *exact* time we expected Kotouč, or he’d probably have given us the extra time we need. But that’s got to be what’s driving him right now.”

“Speaking of Admiral Kotouč —” Bernard Yale, the Minister of Infrastructure began, but Nisyrios interrupted him.

“Forget it, Mister Yale,” he said. “The Manties are good, and Kotouč’s ships are — well, the only way I can put it is that they’re *totally* out of the SLN’s class. I had time for a virtual tour of *Phantom*, and her capabilities . . . .”

He shook his head, gazing off into his memories, his expression almost awed, then pulled his eyes back to focus on Yale’s face again.

“That ship could take any Solarian superdreadnought one-on-one and kick its arse into next week without even working up a sweat,” he said simply. “But Kotouč only has *one* of her . . . and Hajdu has ninety-five battlecruisers. Worse, Kotouč told me he doesn’t have any of the missile pods that might help to even the odds. And even if he had them, according to my revenue cutters’ sensors, Hajdu’s deployed several thousand missile pods of his own.”

He shook his head again, this time heavily.

“All Kotouč and his people could do would be to die gallantly, Mister Yale. I don’t doubt they’d do that in a minute . . . if it could stop Hajdu. But it couldn’t. They might be able to hurt him badly first, but not badly enough to stop him from carrying out his orders in the end, and no military commander could justify throwing away his own people’s lives when the sacrifice couldn’t make any difference in the end.”

“So what do we do?” Vice President Morris said after a moment.

“We go on doing what we’re already doing,” Vangelis replied heavily. “We’ve got every orbit-capable shuttle, cutter, runabout, and garbage scow in the system moving everyone we possibly can in the time Hajdu’s so *graciously* given us. There’s already been some panic — you just can’t organize an evacuation on this kind of scale without telling people why you’re evacuating them — but so far, it’s manageable. Commodore Nisyrios’s people are providing armed parties for the major habitats’ boat bays to prevent — we hope — things from getting too out of hand, and we’re beginning with the major residential habitats. We should — *should*, probably — be able to get between eighty and eighty-five percent of the residents down to the planetary surface in thirty-six hours. That’s almost a hundred and nine million people.”

“And it still leaves eighteen-point-seven million people up there,” Morris said.

“And another one-point-two million in the Alexandria Belt,” Roanoke said. “My God. We’re talking about *twenty million* dead as our *best case* scenario!”

She looked around the conference room’s frozen-helium silence, and the clatter of a falling pin would have been deafening.

**SLNS *Camperdown***

**Hypatia System**

“Do you think the Admiral will really keep to his timetable?” Captain Adenauer asked very quietly as he and Commodore Koopman worked to update his best estimate of the number of Hypatians who’d been evacuated to the planetary surface so far.

“What do *you* think?” Koopman replied after a moment.

The sable-haired operations officer’s eyes were a very dark brown under normal circumstances. Now they could have frozen oxygen as she considered him, and the intelligence officer, reminded himself that Daphne Koopman was not a good person to get sideways of. She was smart, she was ambitious, she had lots of family connections, she’d made a habit of discovering the locations of as many buried bodies as possible, and rumor said she kept meticulous lists of those who’d helped her career, those who’d *harmed* her career, and those who’d simply really, really pissed her off.

“I don’t know what to think,” the captain said after considering his options. “I just know that all of this —” he gestured at the displays full of intelligence data his remotes were pulling him from the system datanet, side-by-side with the results of Koopman’s remote sensors “— says these people really are doing their dead level best to get their people evacuated. I mean, so far almost twenty of their System Patrol people have been killed in accidents because they’re cutting the margins so fine. I’m just wondering if he’s going to take that into consideration.”

“Worried about what might splash onto you if the opposition groups back home get hold of the casualty figures?” Koopman didn’t — quite — sneer, and Adenauer flushed.

“Maybe I *am*, some,” he acknowledged with a defiant jut of his chin. “Mostly, though? Mostly, Commodore, I don’t want to be a Solarian officer who’s remembered for his part in killing fifteen or twenty million Solarian citizens.”

Koopman started to say something sharp, then stopped herself, and what might have been a certain grudging respect showed in her eyes. It took more than a little courage for a member of a Solarian flag officer’s staff to voice anything which could be taken as a criticism of the flag officer in question. And that was especially true when Admiral Hajdu had to know that, orders or no orders, billions of people who weren’t here and hadn’t had to make the decision were going to bitterly criticize whatever he did. He had a reputation as a ruthless survivor of the Solarian League Navy’s Byzantine bureaucracies and turf wars, and he knew all about burying inconvenient witnesses. That meant the consequences for any officer he suspected of disloyalty, or whose opinions might help fuel the criticism, were likely to be . . . significant.

“It’s a little late to be developing cold feet, Adenauer,” she said, after a moment.

“I didn’t say I was developing cold feet. On the other hand, that might be one way to put it,” Adenauer admitted. “And it’s not exactly like you or I were asked to volunteer when the orders were handed out. For that matter, I know the Hypatians voted to secede, which, I guess, means they *aren’t* Solarian citizens anymore. It just . . . just bothers me, Ma’am.”

“Well,” Koopman returned her attention to the data on the display between them, “I guess if I’m going to be honest, it bothers me, too, and I’m the one who drew up the ops plan.” She shook her head. “But exactly what he plans on doing when the time limit runs out —?”

She shrugged.

**Prásino Phúllo Habitat**

**Hypatia Planetary Orbit**

**and**

**Hypatia System Patrol Shuttle *Asteria***

**Hypatia System**

“Come *on*, Petra!” Kassandra Tsoliao tried to keep the impatience — and fear — out of her voice. “We’ve *got* to go, Honey!

“But I can’t find *Mikhalis*!” five-year-old Petra protested tearfully. “We *can’t* go without Mikhalis!”

“He’ll be fine, Honey,” Kassandra promised her.

She *hated* lying to her daughter. It was one of the things she and Sebastianos *never* did. But today, she didn’t hesitate. Nor did she tell Petra that the reason she couldn’t find the cat was that Kassandra had locked him in his carrier in the storage closet down the passageway from their apartment.

God, she’d hated doing it — *hated* it! She loved that cat, too, but she’d had no choice. The evacuation orders were harsh, uncompromising, and draconian. No pets — not even a parakeet — on the evacuation boats. No carry-on luggage beyond a single bag small enough to fit into its carrier’s lap. No family treasures, no heirlooms, *nothing* that wouldn’t fit into that single bag.

But she could never have explained that to Petra, and so she’d rubbed Mikhalis under the chin, kissed him between the ears one last time, and then dashed the tears out of her eyes with both hands as she left him purring comfortably in the familiar confines of his carrier and went back to the daughter she could never have convinced to leave him behind.

*Forgive me, Mikey*, she thought now. I*’m* so *sorry. But I know you love Petra, too, and I* have *to get her out of here*.

“Are you *sure* he’ll be all right, Mommy?” Petra pressed, and Kassandra made herself smile.

“Of course I am, Honey. Tell you what, we’ve really got to run, but why don’t you dash out to the kitchen and make sure there’s water in his bowl?”

“Good idea, Mommy!” Petra beamed and scurried toward the kitchen while her mother covered her eyes with the palms of her hands and tried not to cry.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Prásino Phúllo Control, this is —”

Lieutenant Paulette Kilgore, Hypatia System Patrol, felt her exhausted mind blank completely. She jammed her thumb down on the mute button on her joystick and stared at the display, cursing herself as she realized she hadn’t entered the flight number into her onboard computer when she lifted for the current run. Then she shook herself and twisted around to look over her shoulder at her flight engineer — they were so desperately pressed for people that she didn’t have a copilot — Sergeant John Debnam.

“God, what number *are* we now, John? Don’t tell me *you* didn’t write it down either,” she begged.

“One-Seven-Niner-Papa-Papa-Echo-Six,” Debnam replied without looking up from his own panel.

“Thank you, *thank you*!”

The bearded sergeant only nodded, still without looking up, and Kilgore took her thumb off the mute button.

“Sorry about the com glitch, Prásino Phúllo Control,” she said. “Had to deal with something. This is One-Seven-Niner-Papa-Papa-Echo-Six. Requesting approach to Bay Nineteen Bravo.”

“One-Seven-Niner, Prásino Phúllo Control,” a voice even more exhausted than she felt replied. “Negative Bay Nineteen Bravo. I say again, negative Bay Nineteen Bravo. You are cleared approach Bay Eighteen Bravo. I say again, *Eighteen* – One-Eight — Bravo. Confirm copy.”

“Control, One-Seven-Niner confirms diversion to Bay Eighteen — I repeat, One-*Eight* — Bravo.”

“That is correct, One-Seven-Niner. The holding beacon is Niner-Niner-Zero-Alpha. You are . . . seventh in the approach queue.”

“Niner-Niner-Zero-Alpha and we are number seven,” Kilgore replied.

“Confirm, One-Seven-Niner. Godspeed.”

“Thank you, Prásino Phúllo Control.” Kilgore started to key off the com, then paused. Stacking shuttles seven deep under the current conditions suggested a major snafu of some sort at a time when no one could afford snafus.

“Control, can I ask why we’re being diverted?” she asked.

There was silence for several seconds. Then she heard someone sigh at the other end of the link.

“There was an . . . incident, One Seven Niner. I don’t have the details, but there was some sort of explosion. Took out two shuttles and at least three hundred civilians. We’re not getting Nineteen Bravo back today.”

This time Sergeant Debnam looked up from his displays, his dark eyes meeting his pilot’s blue gaze.

“Thank you, Control,” Kilgore said quietly. “And . . . Godspeed to you, too.”

“Appreciate it, One Seven Niner. Now get your arse over to Eighteen Bravo.”

“On our way. One-Seven-Niner, clear.”

Kilgore altered her heading, then leaned back in her couch, looking over her shoulder at Debnam again.

“An explosion,” she said. “Don’t like the sound of that, John. I don’t like it at all.”

“Don’t much care for it myself, Ma’am.”

They looked at one another for a handful of seconds, and then she turned back to her controls, thinking about that voice on the other end of the com. The voice which must have realized from the beginning that it wasn’t getting out, whatever happened to the civilians it was trying to save.

*Guts,* she thought. *God, that takes* guts*. Look after him, Jesus. Look after all of them*.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Sebastianos Tsolias watched the icon alter heading away from the atmosphere-spewing wound in Prásino Phúllo Habitat’s skin. He wondered if he’d ever met its pilot. The chances that he had were excellent; he’d worked with the HSP’s pilots for a lot of years now. But never like this, and he wondered if the pilot of that shuttle knew how fervently he wished her “Godspeed.”

He checked his displays. At least twenty seconds till the next incoming, he thought, maybe as much as a full minute, and he punched the button on his uni-link.

“Yes, Sebastianos!” his wife’s beloved contralto said even before he’d heard the first buzz from his end.

“How are you and the baby doing?” he asked, trying to drag a little of the exhaustion out of his voice, trying to infuse a bit of energy. Of hope.

“We’re fine.” He wondered if she realized her chipper tone sounded as false as his own. “Petra didn’t want to leave Mikhalis behind, but I told her he’d be fine until we get back and she checked his water bowl.”

“Little pitchers have big ears?” he asked softly.

“Yep.”

“Well, can you put me on speaker for just a few seconds? I don’t have much time before the next inbound flight.”

“You’re on . . . now,” she said, the sound of her voice shifting as she lowered the wrist unit so that Petra could hear him.

“How you doing, sweetheart?” he asked.

“*Fiiiiiine*, Daddy,” she said, and his heart twisted as he heard the anxiety — the little-girl bravery — in her drawn out reply.

“I’m glad to hear it!” he said cheerily. “You’re taking good care of Mommy?”

“Of course I am. *I’m* carrying both bags!”

“That’s my big girl. I knew I could count on you. You stay close to Mommy, now, hear me? And you go on looking after her until —” his voice wavered ever so slightly, and he yanked it ruthlessly back under control “— until I see you again, all right?”

“Of course I will, Daddy. Are you coming soon?”

“Just as soon as I can, sweetheart. You know Daddy has a job to do. Sometimes it’s more important than others, and this is one of those times. So it may be a little while. Just remember how much I love you and Mommy until I get there.”

“Yes, Daddy. And do you think you can bring Mikhalis when you come? I know he’ll be all right, but he’s really kind of a small cat without his people there to look after him.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him for you,” he promised. “Now Mommy and I need to do some grown-up talk for just a second, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. Love you!”

“Love you, too, baby girl.”

“We’re off speaker,” Kassandra told him a moment later, and he cleared his throat.

“What I wanted to say,” he said more briskly, “is that there was some kind of explosion at Nineteen Bravo. I don’t know exactly what it was, but it was pretty bad. So you’re going to have to use *Eighteen* Bravo, instead. You’ve got plenty of time! The tube cars are still running. Go up to Deck Seven and take the Number Twelve line. That’ll get you there without any problems, and I’ve already updated the passenger list. They’ll be holding places in line for you and Petra.”

“I understand.”

He heard the fresh flutter of fear behind the two words. She kept her voice light for Petra’s sake, but then she asked the question he’d dreaded. The question she *had* to ask, even with Petra listening.

“Will you be leaving through Eighteen Bravo, too?”

“No,” he said. “They’re pulling us out through Niner Charlie. You know it’s a lot closer to Flight Control.”

“I guess it is.” She sounded a tiny bit less anxious, as if the reminder that Bay 9C truly was much closer to his duty station had reassured her. After all, he could get there in a hurry, especially with the high-speed tube cars reserved for station personnel’s emergency use. “How much longer do you think?”

“Not much.” He closed his eyes as he lied to the woman he’d loved for twenty-seven years. “Third shift’s due to take over pretty soon. When they do, everybody on Second’ll get a chance for some rest, and those of us with families will be sent on to join them.”

“Thank God,” she whispered, and he heard the tears quavering in the words.

“Yeah, I think He’s working overtime for me today,” Sebastianos said with absolute sincerity. “You just look after the baby for me till I catch up with you.”

“We’ll be waiting for you.”

“I know you will, Honey. But I gotta run now. More shuttles incoming. Love you!”

“Love you, too,” she said, and he killed the link.

Then he sat there, looking down at the uni-link. He could count the number of times he’d told her even little white lies on the fingers of one hand. Now he’d lied to her three times in less than ten seconds, because he had at least another ten or fifteen seconds before his scopes needed him again. But he’d had to go, before his voice failed him completely and she realized the truth behind the *other* lies.

He stroked the uni-link, his fingertip just brushing the call button, and drew a deep, shuddery breath.

“Love you, Babe,” he whispered. “Look after the Moonbeam for me. I’ll be waiting for both of you . . . but not today. Not today.”

**SLNS *Camperdown***

**Hypatia System**

“Are you going to adhere to your deadline, Admiral?” Madhura Yang-O’Grady asked, and Hajdu Gyôzô looked up from the message board he’d been studying.

“If they can’t get everyone off in time, are you going to adhere to your deadline?” she repeated.

“That depends,” he said after a moment. “I meant every word I said to that traitor Vangelis. This is *their* fault, not ours, and I have zero interest in exposing my personnel to risk just to save the lives of a few thousand traitors and their families.”

“I’d just as soon not see anyone killed if we don’t have to kill them,” she said, and he regarded her thoughtfully. That decision was no longer hers, but he supposed he did owe her the courtesy of a fuller explanation.

“As nearly as I can tell,” he said, “they’re working as hard and as fast as they can to get as many people as possible out of the residential habitats, at least. That tells me that whatever the arrival schedule they’re predicting for the naval force they requested, they don’t expect it to get here until after my original time limit runs out. I’m sure they’d want to get everyone they could out as early as possible under any circumstances, but the rate at which they’re working right now — and, frankly, the number of accidents they’ve absorbed *because* of the rate at which they’re working — tells me they’re truly desperate.

“Because that indicates we have some time in hand, I’m more inclined to consider extending the deadline — possibly in five or six-hour increments — for as long as they *stay* desperate. I’m not about to give them more than another twenty-four hours or so, no matter what, given that there’s no way to *know* when the Manties are going to arrive, but I’m not especially eager to kill anyone we don’t have to, either. The instant it looks to me like they’re relaxing a bit, though, I’m going to assume that means they expect help momentarily. And at that point,” his voice was grim, “there won’t be any extensions.”

“But you will extend it at least once?”

Yang-O’Grady’s fervor for punishing the traitors seemed to have ebbed a bit, he thought. Pprobably because she was a civilian. She’d thought all along in terms of the nice, clean destruction of deserted installations. Explosions that might do terrible damage to a star system’s economy and standard of living, but wouldn’t *kill* anyone. Now it looked as if quite a few “anyones” were about to be killed, and she didn’t like it.

*I don’t like it, either*, he thought. *But I knew something like this could be in the cards from the instant I read the precis of Parthian Shot. It didn’t take a genius to read between the lines and know what* that *meant . . . and what’s likely to happen to anyone who fails to come through in the crunch. Besides, this is my responsibility. Making the point to Hypatia — and everyone else in the goddamned galaxy — just became* my *job. So I’ll do it, and these people had better by* God *believe I will. And so should the* next *system on the Buccaneer list. In fact, running up the death toll here just might help that “next system” see the error of its ways without having to kill anyone* there.

The truth was that every life lost here might well save dozens of lives later. He didn’t like thinking in those terms — and recognized the sophistry of any comfort they might give him — but that didn’t make them untrue. And what that meant for extended time limits . . . .

“Not necessarily, Ms. Yang-O’Grady,” he told her, his tone cold. “I’ll make that call when I get there. So I guess we’ll just have to see.”

**Prásino Phúllo Habitat**

**Hypatia Planetary Orbit**

**Hypatia System**

Corporal Helike Vasdekio was only twenty-nine T-years old, but she’d joined the Hypatia System Patrol when she was just seventeen, and she’d learned a lot in those twelve years. At 162.6 centimeters, and small-boned, she was no hulking giantess. Her mother had always insisted she was “no bigger than a minute” when she was a little girl, but she was a very muscular and solid “minute” these days. She was also a member of HSP’s Alpha Seven, its elite Search and Rescue team, as well as a highly skilled cargo inspector with no less than nine major smuggling busts to her credit. So there was ample reason for her to feel confident and competent to handle any duty that came her way.

But she’d never expected *this* one.

She stood almost in a position of parade rest, with her hands clasped behind her. A pulser nestled in a shoulder holster under her left armpit, a stun baton hung from her belt, and the visor of her skinsuit’s helmet was raised as her brown eyes watched the crowd. They were very still, those eyes, with something deep and dark lurking in their depths, yet she was unfailingly courteous. She smiled a lot, too. It wasn’t easy, but reassurance was something Alpha Seven’s teams learned to project early — people who needed rescuing were generally a little stressed, after all — and the last thing anyone needed was a panic in the evacuation queue.

Next month was her thirtieth birthday, and she wished she’d be there for the party her fiancé had planned. A lot of people weren’t going to be where they’d thought they would, though, and there were a lot worse things someone could be doing just now. A *lot* worse ways someone could —

“Look, Mommy! It’s Helike!”

Vasdekio’s head snapped around. It took her eyes a second or two to pick up the tiny, dark-haired girl child who’d just appeared out of the crowd. Then she went down on one knee and opened her arms wide.

“Petra!”

The girl flung herself into Vasdekio’s embrace, and the corporal hugged her back, careful of the way her lightly armored skinsuit could bruise. She looked up over Petra’s shoulder at her mother and saw the recognition — the happiness at seeing a familiar face — flicker through Kassandra’s expression. Then the relief disappeared, and Vasdekio sighed silently. Of course Kassandra was smart enough to realize why Vasdekio was here . . . and that she’d undoubtedly still be here, still be trying to save a few more lives, when the timer ran out.

“Kassie,” she said, standing and holding out her hand.

“I wish I were happier to see you, Helike.” Kassandra Tsoliao’s tone, even more than her words, confirmed that she’d guessed the truth.

Vasdekio smiled at her, briefly but with more genuine warmth than most of her other smiles had contained, and flicked an inquiry into her uni-link. Then she nodded.

“You and Petra are on the list, Priority Gamma,” she said. “That means you go to the head of the queue for the *next* shuttle, not this one.”

She twitched her head sideways at the line of passengers — many of them weeping, one or two on the edge of hysteria . . . or with the glassy, drugged smiles of someone who’d already been there — creeping down the boarding tube to the shuttle in Bay Eighteen Bravo’s Number Three docking buffers. It didn’t look as if all of them were going to get on board, but she pointed at a line on the deck to one side.

“Over there,” she said. “There are another couple of dozen Gamma Priority people already here. Go ahead and walk on over. We’re due to start forming the line in another couple of minutes, anyway; might as well get the two of you close to the head.”

“Thank you,” Kassandra said softly.

She gave the corporal’s hand one last squeeze, then twitched her head at Petra.

“You heard Helike, sweetheart. Let’s go get in line.”

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

“Man, I don’t like this,” Alexandros Karaxis said. “Don’t like it one bit, Apollo!”

“How about telling me something I don’t already know, Xander?” Apollo Dukakis shot back, rolling his eyes in exasperation. At twenty-seven, he was eight T-years older than Karaxis . . . and *twelve* T-years his senior in Prásino Phúllo Grúpes — the Green Leaf Griffins — one of the more vicious gangs which made some places in Prásino Phúllo Habitat’s bowels unsafe to visit.

“Man, they gonna put all these sheep onboard those shuttles and they ain’t gonna do *shit* for us. Hell, they probably be just as happy to get rid of us once and for all!”

Despite Alexandros’s less than stellar performance on the Hypatia Department of Education’s standardized tests, there were moments when he grasped the essence of a situation with commendable clarity, Apollo thought. This was one of them. No doubt burning a house to the ground was an expensive way to get rid of the cockroaches, but if the place was going to burn anyway, you might as well make sure as few roaches as possible made it out. And he had to admit that from the perspective of Hypatia’s law-abiding community, the Grúpes would make very nice cockroach briquettes. For that matter, he couldn’t even blame them.

That didn’t mean he had to go along with their plans in his own, personal case, however, and for his present purposes, Alexandros’s size — he stood 195.6 centimeters in his smelly sock feet and had massive, powerful shoulders — offset his sad lack of mental acuity.

“Just be frosty,” he said now, softly. “”There’s not enough time to get into position for this shuttle. But be ready when the sheep start boarding the *next* one. You know what to do, right?”

“Oh, *right!*” Alexandros smiled and slid his hands into his trouser pockets to touch the waiting knuckledusters. He did *so* like hurting people, and this time it would be for a much better cause than usual.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

The shuttle which had been loading when they arrived departed, and Kassandra watched the next one slide into the buffers and engage the umbilicals. The display lit with the flight number — 179-PPE-6 and the name *Asteria* — and the window between its arrival and the previous shuttle’s departure was far shorter than standard operating procedure would ever have permitted under normal circumstances. No one was likely to complain today, though, and she watched the light above the boarding tube turn green, signifying a good seal. The exhausted-looking young man in the same Traffic Control uniform Sebastianos wore on formal occasions — the sight of it sent a fresh pang of worry through her — held his uni-link to his ear, listening to it through the not-so-muted crowd-mutter of the packed concourse. Then he nodded.

“Ready to board!” he called. “Have your uni-links ready for the scanner, please! And remember, if you’re not scheduled for this flight, you won’t be allowed to board, but there are going to be plenty of additional flights!”

Kassandra checked her own uni-link, then gripped Petra firmly by the hand as the exhausted-looking young man stepped aside. He made a beckoning motion with his hand, and they started forward. It was going to —

“*Mommy!*”

She heard Petra scream at the same instant her daughter’s hand was snatched out of her own. She turned frantically, then cried out and went to both knees, holding a suddenly bloody face as the hulking tough’s knuckledusters smashed her to the deck with a brutal backhanded blow.

“All right!” the other ganger, the one who’d snatched Petra off the deck, shouted. He held the sobbing, terrified girl suspended by the neck of her coverall with one hand while the other closed upon the nape of her slender neck, and his face was hard. “We got no boarding passes,” he snarled, “but we ain’t staying on this fucking deathtrap, either! So you’re letting us on the shuttle. And if you don’t, this little girl? She’s gonna need a new neck, 'cause I swear to God, I’ll break it in a heartbeat.”

“You realize,” a single voice replied quietly into the sudden, ringing silence his threat had produced, “that if any of that happens the authorities will be waiting for you dirt-side? The instant you step off that shuttle, a dozen SWAT guys will bust your arse like a soft-boiled egg. And they’ll enjoy it, too.”

Dukakis, who was all of five centimeters shorter than Karaxis, turned toward the speaker, holding the sobbing little girl between them, and his lip curled. The HSP corporal was a good thirty centimeters shorter than he was and looked like she couldn’t have weighed a whole lot more, without the skinsuit and the equipment belt, than the little girl in his hands. She stood eight or nine meters away from him, and she hadn’t even drawn her stun baton. She simply stood there, arms folded across her chest, and cocked her head as she gazed up at him.

“Listen, mouní,” he sneered, “nothing worse they can do to me down there than what’s gonna happen if I don’t get my arse off this hab. Me and my bud here? We be just as happy to surrender all sweet and gentle the instant we hit the ground. Can’t hardly do anything like you’re talking about to us ’thout violating our civil rights, if we don’t resist arrest, now can they?”

Helike Vasdekio considered him with a calm, thoughtful expression that masked the fury raging inside her as she saw Kassandra kneeling on the deck, clutching her broken face while the second ganger twisted one fist in her hair and brandished the other one in promise of still more violence if anyone was stupid enough to approach him. Most of that fury was directed at the gangers, but a lot of it was directed at herself, as well. She should have spotted the tattoos on the younger thug’s forehead and right cheek. And she certainly should have recognized the sinuous green griffin that covered the entire right side of the older one’s face. She was exhausted, she was scared, and she knew she was going to die, but that was no damned excuse for not doing her job and sparing her friends at least this much of the nightmare.

“That’s your last word on the subject?” she asked. “You figure you’ll get your ride down, then get taken into custody, spend a little time in Eval, and then do — what? Five T-years? Ten? — for assault and kidnapping. Got it all worked out. Trade a few years in the slam for getting off the habitat before something nasty happens to it. Right?”

“For a mouní, you ain’t so stupid after all,” Dukakis told her. “Yep, that’s ’bout the way it’s gonna work. And if it don’t?” He shrugged. “Well, in that case, I guess my arse gets locked up up here, instead, and somebody else gets this little bitch’s seat, 'cause she won’t be needing it.” He shrugged. “Way I see it, I’m no worse off that way.”

“Well, if that’s the way you see it, then I guess the only thing for me to do is to spare you the cell time,” she said, and he grinned in triumph.

Then her right hand moved. It had been tucked into the bend of her left elbow as she stood with her arms crossed. No one had been able to see it until it moved, and even then its movement was so smooth, so casual, so manifestly unthreatening, that it took Dukakis a moment to realize what he was seeing. Indeed, it was unlikely he ever did realize, because he was too busy dying to work it out as the pulser whined and his head exploded.

Petra screamed in fresh terror as the hurtful hands relaxed instantly. She tumbled to the deck. An instant later, Dukakis’s corpse fell over her, crushing her with its weight. Somebody — a man — started to shout something. But then she heard the high, shrill whining sound a second time. He stopped shouting in mid-word, and she heard another voice, one she knew.

“*Petra!* Petra, it’s okay, honey!” that voice said urgently. “Some of you help me get this bastard off her!” it snapped to someone else, and the weight crushing her was suddenly lifted away. She wailed in panic, then sobbed in relief as Helike Vasdekio’s arms enveloped her.

“It’s okay,” Helike murmured in her ear again and again. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

“Mommy! Mommy-Mommy*-Mommy!*”

“Your Mom’s hurt, honey,” Helike told her. “But she’s going to be all right, I promise. And the man who hurt her, he’ll never hurt anyone again. I promise you that, too. Do you believe me, Petra?”

Petra pushed back from Helike, bracing her hands on the corporal’s shoulders and staring into her eyes through the curtain of her own tears. She stayed that way for several, eternal heartbeats. Then she nodded once, convulsively, and collapsed back against the side of her parents’ friend’s neck, sobbing.

“It’s okay, Petra,” Helike Vasdekio told the weeping child in her arms as she stepped across the bodies of the men she’d just killed. A couple of other evacuees and one of the habitat EMTs had helped Kassandra back to her feet. Now they steadied her, walking her down the boarding tube to the shuttle, and Helike paused at the entrance.

“You’ve got to go now, Honey,” she said, handing Petra off to one of the shuttle flight crew. The girl tried frantically to cling to her, but she shook her head and disengaged the clutching hands as gently as she could.

“I’ve got her, Helike,” a voice said gruffly, and she looked up in recognition.

“Take care of her for me, John,” she said, feeling her eyes burn. “Her dad’s a friend. And he’s running Flight Control for this entire station quadrant.”

Sergeant John Debnam met her gaze and nodded in understanding as he gathered the little girl who was about to lose her father into his arms.

“I’ve got her,” he promised again, his weary voice softer. “I’ll look after her and her mom. My word.”

“Thanks,” Vasdekio said even more softly, then looked down at Petra, frightened and tearful as she found herself in a stranger’s arms.

“You go on with John now, Petra,” she said. “He’s a good friend of mine. He’ll take good care of you and your mom. And you be brave, hear me?! Your mom needs you, and she’s going to need you even more in the next little bit. So you be there for her. Can you do that? Can you be brave for me?”

Petra sniffed, scrubbing her eyes with her fists, then nodded. Her lips trembled, but she actually managed a shaky smile.

“Good!” Vasdekio said. “I knew I could count on you! Now go on, because I’ve got to get back to work.”

**HMS *Angrim***

**and**

**HMS *Cinqueda***

**Hypatia System**

“I don’t like this, Jayson. I don’t like it at all,” Commander Megan Petersen said. “If they’re serious about something like this in Hypatia, what are they going to be willing to do somewhere *else?*” She shook her head, brown eyes worried. “I’ve got a really bad feeling about where this is going to end up.”

It wasn’t something she would have admitted to anyone under most circumstances. And as the captain of a Queen’s ship, it was something she *couldn’t* have admitted to any of her crew. A captain’s job was to project the confidence, or at least the determination, her people needed from her. It was *not* to let those same people see the inner frailties any human being possessed. They knew they were there, but just as the rules of the game required her to pretend they weren’t, those same rules required her crew to pretend she’d fooled them.

Her father had tried to warn her how lonely command was, and she’d believed him. She just hadn’t realized how deep that loneliness could cut. Especially when the man she loved was so close at hand . . . and so far away.

“Can’t say I’m too crazy about it, myself,” Commander Jayson Stob told her from his cabin aboard HMS *Cinqueda*. “I’d like to think the bastards were only running some kind of elaborate bluff — or that this Hajdu’s timetable was just designed to get the Hypatians to evacuate as quickly as humanly possible. The only problem is, I don’t.”

“It’s just . . . I’ve already seen this before. I don’t want to see it again. Not here, not anywhere,” Megan said, and Jayson nodded.

Megan’s previous ship, HMS *Nomad*, had made her hyper translation just outside the Manticore Binary System’s hyper-limit less than forty-five minutes before the Yawata Strike had turned her elation and eager anticipation into nightmare.

She’d been *Nomad*’s XO, completing her final deployment before assuming command of a brand, shiny new destroyer. HMS *Arngrim*’s originally designated CO had been reassigned to the command of a *Saganami-C* completing at *Hephaestus*, and *Nomad* had been ordered to expedite her return to Manticore so Megan could replace him.

That’s what she’d been looking forward to — seeing her new ship, meeting her new crew, assuming the hard-earned responsibilities of command. And instead, she’d spent the next ninety-six hours straight pulling scores of bodies and a tiny handful of survivors out of mangled wreckage. Jason had been out-system at the time, spared the first-hand horror she’d confronted, but he knew others who’d been there, and it had left a mark on all of them.

That and an iron determination that something like the Yawata Strike would never happen again. A determination which had to be making the situation here in Hypatia enormously worse for her, he thought, wishing, not for the first time, that they weren’t on separate ships.

*And just what would you do about it if you* were *on the same ship?* he asked himself. *You know what you’d* like *to do, but you also know what Article One Nineteen would have to say about it, don’t you? Of course, Megan’s probably smart enough to not transgress the sacred Articles of War —* one o*f you should be, anyway — so it’d probably actually be worse, in the end*.

At least they were assigned to the same task group. It might be a pretty thin silver lining, since they probably wouldn’t have been if he’d gotten his ship, but the Yawata Strike had changed that, too. He’d been designated to command the new *Roland*-class HMS *Laozi* almost five T-months before Megan had been ordered to *Arngrim*, and she’d twitted him mercilessly in the letters she’d recorded, crowing over the fact that she’d have her new ship a month and a half before he got his despite his “head start.”

Neither of them had seen the Yawata Strike coming.

*Arngrim* had been two T-months ahead of *Laozi* in the building queue. . . which meant she’d been away from HMSS *Vulcan*, where both of them had been built, on a builders’ trial of her impeller nodes when *Vulcan* was blown apart. And that was how Megan came to command her first destroyer while her fiancé remained an executive officer.

Jayson was scarcely the only Queen’s officer whose career had been scrambled by the Yawata Strike, and he tried to keep his disappointment in perspective. It was harder sometimes than others, but he supposed that was human nature. And he was enormously relieved Megan had been spared at least that much. There were times he envied her magnificent new ship, but the nightmares she’d experienced during the brief leave they’d snatched together before this deployment killed any sense of resentment stone cold.

He could see the ashes of those nightmares behind her eyes even now as they spoke over the low-powered whisker lasers connecting the squadron’s ships in a network no one could have detected from more than a very few thousand kilometers away.

“I know you’ve seen it, sweetheart,” he said now. “We all have, but you had a ringside seat. I’m just as glad *I* didn’t. That may be cowardly of me, but it’s true. And I wish to hell there were some way to tell you it’s not going to happen again here and make that be the truth, but I can’t. Nobody can.”

“I know. I know!” She shook her head, then kissed the fingers of her right hand and laid them gently against her display. His eyes brightened, and she smiled as he returned the long-distance caress.

“I know,” she repeated. “And I guess what I’m really doing is just talking to someone who can listen to me carry on without its being prejudicial to discipline!”

“You’re entitled, whenever I’m available,” he pointed out. “One of the things I’m here for, now that I think about it.” He lifted his nose. “Feel free to lay all of your concerns in my capable hands, my daughter.”

“What I’m going to feel free to do is kick you in the ass the next time I see you,” she replied with a chuckle, and he shook his head mournfully.

“Such a violent person,” he sighed. “I don’t really understand how I came to find myself in such an abusive relationship.”

“You’re an idiot,” she told him. “*My* idiot, but an idiot.”

“At your service.”

He grinned, delighted by her gurgle of laughter. He didn’t expect it to last, but for the moment, at least . . . .

“I think what you need,” she began, “is for someone to —”

She broke off as a chime sounded and the icon of an urgent message flashed beside the name “Thirunavu” in one corner of her display.

“Just a sec, Jayson,” she said. “Rolf’s pinging me.”

She put the ship-to-ship link on hold and hit the message icon. A blue-eyed, dark-haired, dark-skinned face with a hawk-like profile appeared in Jayson’s place.

“Yes, Rolf?”

“Skipper, we’ve got an update from *Phantom*,” her executive officer said without preamble. “President Vangelis just got formal notice from Hajdu.” Lieutenant Commander Thirunavu shook his head, his eyes grim. “There won’t be any more extensions. Anybody who can’t get off before he opens fire is just out of luck.”

Megan Petersen felt herself go cold. Until that very moment, she realized, some part of her had hoped Hajdu’s threat to destroy the Hypatian orbital infrastructure before it could be completely evacuated was only some sick bluff. Maybe she’d been able to do that because what he proposed to do instead violated so many laws of interstellar warfare. In fact, it was a violation of the fourth clause of the Eridani Edict, part of the League’s very Constitution.

*My God*, she thought. *That’s what this* is, *really, isn’t it? This “Operation Buccaneer” was conceived from the beginning specifically* as a*n Eridani violation. It’s a* terror campaign*, and all Hajdu’s really doing is coming out of the shadows to underline that for all its future victims!*

How had they gotten here? How had they reached a point where the Solarian League was willing to openly violate its own Eridani Edict? The edict specifically designed to prevent this sort of atrocity? Which required any military commander to take every possible precaution to limit collateral damage and preclude *any* avoidable civilian deaths? The League had executed more than one officer — military commander or brigand; it hadn’t mattered — over the last eight hundred T-years for violating the fourth clause, and now it was prepared to violate it itself.

*It has to go*. The realization went through her like an icicle. *The League has to go. It’s not enough to just negotiate peace with it again. Not anymore. Anything so corrupt it could embrace something like* this *has to* go.

“Understood, Rolf,” she said. “I’ll be on the bridge in ten.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Thirunavu said formally, and she nodded, then punched back to her link to *Cinqueda*.

“We just heard from *Phantom*, and —”

“I got the word while you were talking to Rolf,” Jayson interrupted her. “They need me in AuxCon.”

“Understood.” She stared at the display for a long, still moment, drinking up the sight of him, storing him away in her heart. Then she inhaled.

“Be safe, love,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

**SLNS *Troubadour***

**Hypatia System**

“How are we doing, Ellen?” Commander Madison Echols inquired as he stepped on to the ridiculously spacious bridge of SLNS *Troubadour*.

The commander knew an officer with as little seniority as he had was fortunate to have a command at all in the Solarian League Navy. Despite its huge size, the SLN was rank-heavy — to put it kindly — and the decision against mobilizing the Reserve had only emphasized that. An awful lot of officers who should have been commanding squadrons, or at least divisions, during any shoting war had been forced to settle for individual ship commands. For that matter, some of those officers were on the beach, which made Madison Echols profoundly grateful to be in space.

Despite that, and given the human ability to infallibly recognize how much greener the grass was somewhere else, Echols would have preferred to command a *warship*. That was not to be, however, and so he’d been assigned to the TUFT fleet and given the 7,000,000-ton *Troubadour*. His new command was old and long overdue for a general overhaul. She was also slow, unmaneuverable, and totally unarmed. She was, however, all his, which made up for a lot. Despite which, he had yet to grow accustomed to the sheer size — and the sparse instrumentation — of her civilian-designed command deck. He could have played basketball in here!

“Captain Abshire’s just finishing the pod deployment, Sir,” Lieutenant Commander Ellen Riba, *Troubadour’*s executive officer, replied.

Riba was seated in the rather worn captain’s chair at the center of the bridge, and she unwrapped herself from it and saluted — sort of — still cradling her cup of coffee in her off hand. Not very shipshape and Navy style, Echols admitted as he acknowledged the salute with a nod, but *Troubadour* had that effect on people. Besides, anyone who hadn’t made at least captain was a pretty junior tadpole by Solarian standards. They tended to adopt a sort of “what the hell, we’re all in this together” attitude.

“I’ll bet she’s delighted about *that*,” he said as he stepped past Riba and settled into the chair she’d just vacated.

Like himself, Florence Abshire was a mere commander, although both of them were entitled to the title of “captain” as starships’ commanding officers. He’d known her a long time, though, and he had a pretty fair notion of how she must feel about this entire “Buccaneer” crap. He knew how *he* felt, at any rate. The term “buccaneer” had all sorts of glamorous connotations, the notion of a swashbuckler with the audacity to back his wit against the entire galaxy, take his chances against any foe. The operation to which it had been appended was anything but glamorous, and they certainly weren’t taking any chances when they executed it.

He understood the logic behind it, and his sympathy for so-called neutral star nations who’d shown their hostility by embracing the Manties and their friends was limited. But he also knew the Solarian League Navy — *his* Navy — was deliberately picking victims specifically on the basis of who could — and couldn’t — fight back. That his Navy had embarked on a systematic campaign of vandalism because it dared not face its enemies in combat. And so, what *he* felt whenever he thought about Buccaneer was shame.

*And especially in this case*, he thought grimly, settling himself in the command chair. *This isn’t a hostile “neutral.” This is a star system — these are* people *— that were* *Solarian just two T-weeks ago*. That’s *whose infrastructure we’re about to blow to hell . . . and God only knows how many of them are still aboard it*.

His stomach churned, although he was careful about his expression. Had to maintain the Navy’s dignity, after all. And he supposed given the inclusion of an option like Parthian Shot, he shouldn’t be all that surprised by Vice Admiral Hajdu’s timetable.

*Have to get our arses out of here before those nasty Manties turn up. Wouldn’t want to have to face* them, *would we? So instead, we murder a few hundred thousand Solarians — excuse me,* ex-Solarians *— and get the hell out while the getting’s good*.

“I don’t think Captain Abshire was delighted, no, Sir,” Riba said in answer to his question. She shook her head. “For that matter, Sir, I probably shouldn’t say it, but I’m just as glad *Merchant Mart* drew the assignment. I know it’s got to be done, and I wouldn’t mind smashing up a few Manties, but this . . . .”

She shook her head, and Echols grunted in acknowledgment. He really shouldn’t let her get away with comments like that on duty, but it would have been hypocritical to hand her her head when all she’d done was to say out loud the very things he’d been thinking. Spoken words were probably more prejudicial to discipline than private thoughts, but neither one were something upon which the Regs and the Navy smiled.

“Any word from the Flag?” he asked instead, and Riba shook her head again.

“No, Sir,” and her tone — like his — said more than the simple words had.

“I see,” he replied as he tilted the command chair to a more comfortable angle. So Hajdu wasn’t going to grant any more extensions. Well, there’d never been much chance he would. He’d already given Hypatia an additional twelve hours, after all. How much more generous could an executioner be?

*Stop that!* he told himself sternly. *You’ve got your orders. He’s got his, and he’s your commanding officer. So shut the hell up and do your damned job, Madison!*

Easier said than done, he reflected. Easier said than done.

Still, he was guiltily aware that he agreed with Riba about where the actual duty had fallen. He supposed it didn’t really matter whose ship had transported the missile pods about to be employed in such ruthless abandon, but at least he could cling to the illusionary innocence of arguing that they hadn’t come from *his* cargo holds. And the truth was that Hajdu was being rather parsimonious in his ammunition expenditures. Not that they were going to *need* that many of them. The improved Cataphracts’ laserheads were designed to take out capital ships; what they’d do to unarmored industrial platforms — *and residential habitats; don’t forget* those, *Madison*, he heard his own voice say in the back of his brain — would be beyond devastating.

*And what’s going to happen to Hypatia when all that wreckage starts de-orbiting? He’s not even trying to prevent that. I guess that’s not his job when the only people down there are traitors. Bit hard on their kids, maybe, but who was it back on Old Earth said you couldn’t make omelettes without cracking a few eggs? And then there’s that other charming bit of wisdom about nits*.

He closed his eyes. He *had* to stop this shit. Either that, or he had to request relief and resign his commission, and despite everything, he wasn’t quite ready for that just yet. Not yet. But if this continued —

“Sir, I’m picking up something a little weird.”

Echols’s eyes popped open and he turned the chair gratefully towards Lieutenant Fedosei Castello, *Troubadour*’s electronics officer. “Electronics officer” was a bit of an ambiguous term, especially in *Troubadour*’s case. She wasn’t armed, so she didn’t have a *tactical* officer, nor was she equipped with even rudimentary ECM or passive defenses, so she didn’t have an *electronic warfare* officer, either. If she’d had either of those things, Lieutenant Castello would have been in charge of them. Since she didn’t, he doubled as communications officer and tracking officer, doing his best with *Troubadour*’s limited sensor suite.

It was a thankless task, but Castello was only twenty-three, young enough to retain a hefty dose of new-puppy enthusiasm for his duties.

“What do you mean, ‘weird,’ Fedosei?” Echols asked, glancing at the master plot.

*Merchant Mart* and SLNS *Stevedore*, Vice Admiral Hajdu’s third missile collier, floated in formation, spaced about five thousand kilometers apart, practically on top of one another in space-going terms. The icons of Task Force 1030’s actual warships were almost all between the freighters and the planet, and he saw absolutely nothing in the display that could have qualified for Castello’s chosen adjective.

“I’m not quite sure, Sir. It’s almost like — *Oh, my God!*”

Echols was still jerking upright in his chair when he discovered that he wouldn’t be working out his feelings about Operation Buccaneer after all. He had one instant to see *Merchant Mart*’s icon vanish abruptly from the display.

And then, SLNS *Troubadour*, and every man and woman aboard her, did the same thing.