

Barrett's Privateers

Anderson Gentry

Barrett's Privateers

Anderson Gentry

Barrett's Privateers Copyright © 2008 Anderson Gentry All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in Canada by Double Dragon eBooks, a division of Double Dragon Publishing Inc. of Markham Ontario, Canada. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from Double Dragon Publishing Inc. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. **Double Dragon eBooks** PO Box 54016 1-5762 Highway 7 East Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada <http://double-dragon-ebooks.com> <http://double-dragon-publishing.com> Layout and Cover Illustration by Deron Douglas www.derondouglas.com ISBN-10: 1-55404-531-2 ISBN-13: 978-1-55404-531-0 First Edition January 11, 2008 **Also Available as a Large Type Paperback**

Now Available as paperback and hard cover *A Celebration of Cover Art: 2001 to 2006* Five Years of Cover Art [*Companion calendars also available*] www.double-dragon-ebooks.com www.derondouglas.com

Part One

Plague Ship

Prologue

The post-war years

While the end of the First Galactic War ushered in a boom of exploration and trade, it also marked the beginning of an economic slump for the Confederacy. The loss of defense contracts and the sharp drop in spending by the Confederate government caused many corporate executives, shipbuilders and small business owners to find new markets for their products.

At war's end, twelve privateer ships were serving under letters of commission from the Confederate Navy department. The end of hostilities also meant the end of the employment of these privately owned ships. While most of the ships disarmed and disbanded, some did not. While the libertarian laws of the Confederacy did not prohibit privately owned ships carrying armament, the few privateers that retained their wartime arms were regarded with considerable and increasing suspicion by the Navy and the

Confederate government as time went on. This suspicion was reciprocated by the privateers, aware as they were of the increased and, from their perspective, undeserved scrutiny.

It was also during this period of enhanced exploration that many new sources of mineral resources were uncovered, including some in systems lacking habitable planets. Exploitation of these resources frequently fell to a new class of independent, "wildcat" miners, who were accustomed to operating at the very edges of settled space - and sometimes beyond the reach of established legal authorities.

- Morris/Handel, "A History of the First Galactic Confederacy," University Publications, 2804CE

One

2255CE: A wildcat mining station

Around an unnamed star, in an unnamed system, with no habitable planets, there was an asteroid belt between the star's two small rocky planets and the three Saturn-sized gas giants.

The asteroids were unaccountably rich in power metals, iron, tin, and even diamonds - especially diamonds. This, and the possibility of getting to them without the trouble of hauling the metals back up a planetary gravity well, made the system a hot spot for wildcat miners.

Over the last two years since the end of the Grugell War, a small city had grown on one of the larger asteroids, one large enough to have almost one-sixth gee, although much of the city now walked firmly under a one-gee artificial gravity generator.

Six thousand people lived under the transparent domes of the city that sat perched on the edge of nowhere. Four thousand of them were miners; the balance was composed of storekeepers, support staff, processing machinery technicians, cooks, medical staff, and management - even a few family members. Under the city's four domes, the city's activities and housing was housed in nineteen great towers, called kraals, with small plots of truck gardens and artificially lit forest in between to help with the oxygen budget. Power was readily available from collector panels outside the domes aimed at the nearby red giant star, but oxygen, water, and other volatiles were in short supply. The city had two good sources of volatiles; a Confederate world, New Albion, lay six parsecs away, and a Grugell world, Gorazant, lay two parsecs in the opposite direction. This led to some interesting exercises in logistics.

Adam Bolin was the prospector who found the belt, now known as Adam's Belt; he was the prospector who founded the mining city, now called Adamstown. Five years had passed since Bolin had stumbled across the mineral-rich belt in his tiny, one-man scout ship. He sat now in an expansive office in the highest level of the central kraal under the largest pressure dome of Adamstown, watching idly as the shuttles moved back and forth during shift change.

A freighter loomed overhead. Bolin looked up; it was the freighter *Cape Fortune*, back on its regular run. Any kind of small industrial operation requires supplies; besides volatiles, the city needed food, medical supplies, repair parts, equipment, and even liquor to keep the miners happy on off days - almost everything had to be brought in, and only the mineral wealth of this belt made the effort worthwhile.

"Boss," a voice came from behind him, from the elevator door.

"Yeah." Bolin stood up, turned to face his assistant, Remy Brichot. "What is it?"

"Another order from Mr. K," Brichot said.

"All right."

"He wants twenty percent more this run," Brichot added.

Bolin yawned. "We're going to need more miners at this rate."

"Probably so, Boss."

"Mister K, my ass," Bolin muttered. He knew the identity of 'Mr. K' as well as he knew his own face - 'Mister K' was Group Commander Kestakrickell IV, of the Grugell Imperial Navy. "He thinks he's so damn smart."

"Better he go on thinking that, Boss."

"I suppose. Not like it's so hard to figure out - guy insists on never meeting face to face, and here we are only a parsec from the border, with the Grugell out there on the outside of the arm with no metal-heavy planets. I'm not sure I'd risk it, but we're getting volatiles from that big moon of the gas giant in the Gorazant system; as long as I keep selling them diamonds, they'll keep renewing our license to harvest volatiles." Bolin owned the three small ships that were employed in moving huge rafts of water ice and massive tanks of other volatiles from the ice moon to Adamstown.

"He's paying in gold," Brichot pointed out.

"Yeah. Wonder where he's getting that. They aren't exactly heavy on metals out there - that's why they want the diamonds." Fueled by the belt's mineral wealth, Adamstown had a state-of-the-art Signals station, operated by a former Confederate Navy Signals Officer - an expert at back-tracing and decrypting signal traffic.

"I suppose it doesn't make any difference," Bolin said. "Long as he keeps paying half again the going rate for diamonds and power metals - and as long as the Confeds don't find out."

"I hear rumors, Boss," Brichot began.

"Tell me some other time. Last shipment went out all right?"

"As usual. We should try to tie the *Orlando* down to a regular run."

"I'll talk to them about it, next time they're around. Their Captain's an enterprising sort; he might not want to tie down to a regular run."

"He's also an ex-Navy type, too, Boss. He's not too comfortable with our setup here. He's been talking about it when he's been ashore here."

"So I've heard," Bolin said. "Nothing more dangerous than an idealist, Remy."

"Could be trouble if he ever gets any more pangs of conscience, Boss," Brichot observed. "He knows our whole operation."

"Trouble for him, but only if he says no to a regular run."

"What if he does?"

"Well, then," Bolin picked up a tiny ceramic vial from his desk top, "something bad might happen to his crew. You know how it is, when something gets into a starship's air system, some little bug or something - goes right through the crew like wildfire. 'Mr. K' won't mind boarding to get one shipment off the *Orlando*, and stuff that makes us sick won't scratch *his* crew."

Brichot laughed. "You're always on top of it, Boss."

"Something you need to learn, Remy, if you ever want to boss a station like this of your own."

Remy smiled and nodded. He entertained just such thoughts himself.

The privateer starship Shade Tree - somewhere near the Grugell frontier

The Bridge was well and truly wrecked. One major panel had exploded, and the compartment was strewn with shards and splinters of metal and plastic, splashes of blood, and worse. The Bridge crew was cut to pieces.

Just then, a low moan came from the floor behind a fallen ceiling panel. Barrett stepped over the panel to find a burned, blasted figure in the remnants of a Navy uniform; the one side of his collar that remained bore the silver leaf of a Commander.

She knelt beside the man as his eyes fluttered open. "Can you hear me?"

He looked at her, squinting. "Who are you? Not Navy..."

"No. I'm Captain Jean Barrett of the privateer starship Shade Tree . I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner."

"Nothing... you could have done," he gasped. "There must have been a dozen ships... I'm Commander James McAllister, commanding the Giles D ."

"What were a dozen Grugell ships doing at Fortune? We thought they'd given up on this system."

"It looked like a rally point." McAllister spoke with great difficulty and his face was growing paler by the moment. Beneath him, a pool of sticky red was growing, puddling on the deck.

"Doc," Barrett barked into her mike, "Get up here to the Bridge."

"Give me two minutes," the reply came back.

"No time," McAllister breathed. "We caught a frigate scouting the rally point yesterday before their main body showed up, boarded it, took eight prisoners, and hacked their main computer before blowing it up." He reached into a pocket, produced a tiny object, and held it out. "This is a Phoebe," Captain McAllister explained. "It's got thirty terabytes of data encoded in it."

"Thirty terabytes? In this?" Barrett took the tiny device and examined it; it was a three-centimeter chip of plastic with a tiny metal plug on one end for a standard data port.

"It will hold fifty," McAllister breathed. His life was hemorrhaging away along with the blood that puddled on the deck beneath him, and the knowledge of the impending death showed in his eyes. "But this one has the plans for the Grugell Fleet's plan to move on Earth. Co-ordinates, subspace jump points, rally points, everything. Lots more, besides. We destroyed the frigate before the main body showed up; they don't know we have this information. Get it to Admiral Gauss..."

"You bet I will," Barrett agreed. With this kind of info, we could hit the Grugell unawares at a rally point. It's the perfect chance to hammer their fleet hard, maybe finish this thing for keeps... After almost three years, what if we could actually finish this war? It would be worth anything.

Captain Barrett looked away from the tiny plastic Phoebe to where Commander McAllister lay bleeding on the deck of his shattered ship, but his eyes stared back lifelessly.

Captain Jean Barrett woke suddenly, her bedclothes awash in sweat. *Third time in a week.* Two years since the end of the Grugell War, and still, the nightmare came.

Her ship, her command, had fought as a privateer in that war under a letter of commission from the Confederate Navy Department. The *Shade Tree* was small for a combat ship, but she was fast - and with a state-of-the-art charcoal gray polymer hull, six ship-to-ship missile bays, particle beam emitters above and below the bow and on the outlet end of the Gellar star drive, she was admirably equipped to stand in harm's way. Viewed from the outside, the necessity of building the ship around the huge mass tunnel of the Gellar drive made it look unwieldy, with the round cylinder of the drive surmounted by a large superstructure that housed everything from the Bridge to cargo storage to crew's quarters. But the *Shade Tree* was her ship, and she loved it - and the wandering life it made possible.

Most of Barrett's wartime crew had moved on to greener pastures. Only three had stayed; the balance of the *Shade Tree* 's complement of five officers and twenty-five crew were new hires.

Through the haze of awakening, she finally heard the paging tone. Shaking her head, she hit the contact on the panel over her head.

"What is it?"

The voice of her Executive Officer, Indira Krishnavarna, came tinnily through the speaker. A long way from her Earthside home of New Delhi, Krishnavarna had served as Barrett's chief Scanning tech during the war. She had turned down several lucrative offers from shipbuilding and design firms to stay on the *Shade Tree* as second-in-command.

"We have a beacon signal coming in, Captain," the Exec said. "Looks like our rendezvous is here."

"I'll be up in a minute."

Barrett dragged herself off of her bunk. She looked wryly at the chronometer on the wall. *I guess six hours of sleep will do.*

Seeing her face in the mirror brought a grimace. Her short red hair was tousled as usual when aboard ship; she didn't bother with excessive grooming while space-side. A petite, trim woman with a dancer's muscles, she knew that even now, at forty-three, she could hold her own gussied up and on the floor at any planet-side nightclub - but on ship, it just wasn't worth the trouble.

She yawned, stretched, yawned again. *Getting old*, she mused. She picked up her toothbrush, stuck it in her mouth, bit down, and closed her eyes against the buzzing as it scrubbed her mouth ruthlessly clean. After a quick look at her static-jet shower, she shrugged and splashed half her tiny morning water ration on her face before swallowing the rest. Her black fatigue pants lay on the deck where she had dropped them before going to bed; she pulled them on, pulled her nightshirt off over her head and tossed it in the bunk before pulling on a black t-shirt. It was only two steps across her stateroom to the entrance, where she kicked her bare feet into her sandals before heading to the Bridge.

The second watch was alert when she walked into the *Shade Tree* 's claustrophobic Bridge. Indira Krishnavarna got out of the command chair as Barrett came in.

"It's got to be our contact, Captain," she said. "The *Cape Fortune*. We should have visual contact in a few minutes."

"Good. Scanning, get them on the main screen as soon as you can." Barrett sat down in the leather bridge chair. "Signals, no contact until they hail us. Keep it on low power - short range radio comms only."

"Roger that, Cap'n."

"We'll see if they still have a job for us," Barrett muttered.

"Captain," the Exec leaned over the back of the command chair, keeping her voice low. "You know they'll be calling us pirates if we do this."

"It's only piracy when you're stealing from honest folks," Barrett smiled. "It's not like they can report us to anyone without explaining where they got the stuff, or who they were going to sell it to. Don't worry, Indira. We do have to eat, you know."

"It would be nice to be able to eat in a nice restaurant on Tarbos without worrying about a CBI agent recognizing us from an arrest warrant," Krishnavarna said.

"There are always the Rim worlds," Barrett answered.

"No thanks."

"You worry too much."

The crewman at Scanning, a new hire from their last planetfall on Halifax, called out suddenly. "Visual, Cap'n. On the main screen now."

Barrett looked up as the image of an old *Narwhal* -class freighter swam into view. The old ship's kilometer-wide cargo disk was dented and chipped; the undersized Gellar drive glowed a faint, dull blue as the ship reversed to a stop a hundred kilometers off the *Shade Tree* 's bow.

"Signal from the *Cape Fortune*, " Signals tech Vada Newman called.

"Very well. I'll take it here." Barrett picked up a headset from the arm of her Bridge chair, put it on, and tapped a contact. "Barrett," she said into the wand mike. "Who's this?"

There was a faint hiss of static before a disembodied voice rang through the earpiece. "Captain Amyl Bond of the *Cape Fortune*, " it said. "I hear it's raining a lot on Halifax these days."

Barrett grinned. "I have an umbrella."

"Windy, too."

"I have waterproof boots."

"So," Bond said into Barrett's ear, "You're the ones that Baxter sent?"

"That would be us."

"You can get in and out of that asteroid belt without attracting a lot of attention?"

"We got in and out of the Grugell system undetected in the war," Barrett snapped. "We took out an Occupation ship without attracting any attention until the nuke went off."

Bond's disembodied voice chuckled. "Grugell, eh? The asteroid strike. That was you?"

"That was us."

"You'll do," Bond said. "That was a hell of a job."

"Thanks. Baxter said you'll have the ship's departure, course and speed."

"Sending now - Guard channel nine-zero, encrypted. If you came here from Baxter, you should have the encryption key."

Barrett looked over at the Scanning station, her eyebrows raised in an unspoken question. The tech there looked back, nodded.

"We've got it."

"All right. Baxter told you the terms of the deal, right?"

"Yes. Three-way split, between you, Baxter and us."

"Good. See you at Halifax in a couple of weeks."

"You bet. *Shade Tree* out."

Barrett removed the headset. "Helm, new course, one-eighty by zero. Ahead two-thirds." Response was quick; the ship began to turn on its internal gyros even as the main drive rumbled to life. "Signals, as soon as you decrypt that message, give the coordinates to the navigation computer."

"Ten seconds, Captain."

"Helm, make best speed to the coordinates indicated as soon as they come through. We want to get to them before they clear Adam's Belt, or they'll be ten times as hard to track."

"Sure thing, Cap'n. Recommend we drop out of subspace, sort of entering the belt - we'll have to go in slowly," Helm replied, "but it looks like we can drop in and lay an ambush - according to this flight plan, we'll have plenty of time to get in and lay in wait."

"That will be fine. Set it up."

"Programming now."

"We've got a job, people," Barrett announced. "Let's get our game faces on."

Two

The mining station

"*Orlando* get off on time?"

"You bet, Boss," Remy Brichot answered.

"Special job done?"

"Just as you ordered."

"Good. Send a message to 'Mr. K.' Tell him where to find them."

"You bet, Boss." Brichot left to send the message - and to send another, one his boss didn't know about, to the space dock at Halifax.

The Shade Tree

"There we are," Barrett said, "that's perfect. We're right on his six. Damn, but Baxter's coordinates were right on the money. Paolo, bring us up close behind him. Maneuvering thrusters only. We've got plenty of overtake speed, and I don't want them picking up a drive signature from us."

"Roger that, Cap'n. Moving in now. He sure isn't in any hurry - just motoring along at about one-third drive."

"He'll want to move slowly - navigation is tricky in here, and he can't run for subspace until he's clear of the Belt," the XO pointed out.

"Gillian," Barrett called to the Weapons station, "arm particle beams. I want the upper forward on their drive tunnel outlet, the lower forward to engage their aft shield emitter. Can you do that?"

"Piece of cake, Captain." Weapons tech Gillian Bates began tapping contacts. "Pee-beam emitters charged and ready, target solutions checked and valid. Ready to fire on command."

"Good. Stand by."

On the main viewer, the converted light cruiser crawled closer, as the display slowly ticked off the decreasing range.

"Five kilometers," Ophelia Watts called out from Scanning.

Barrett stood up. " *Fire!* "

Two lines of shimmering force shot out from the *Shade Tree* , shattering the freight-hauler's aft shield emitter and lancing through the port side of the ship's Gellar tunnel.

"Ahead one-third," Barrett ordered. "Bring us alongside. Gillian, if they try to fire thrusters, knock 'em out."

"I'm on it," Crewman Bates replied. Once, only once, the *Orlando* tried to fire maneuvering thrusters before pee-beam hits from the *Shade Tree* knocked them out.

"Alongside," helmsman Paolo Guerra sang out. "I've got us a hundred meters off to their port side."

Barrett tapped the contact on the arm of her bridge chair. "Away boarders - say again, away boarders. Gomp, make sure you send that lander back as soon as you've secured the airlock."

"On our way, Captain," Hector Gomp called back from the ship's starboard docking port.

Gomp was one of Barrett's veterans. A former Sergeant in the Confederate Marine Corps, he had served on the *Shade Tree* through the entire Grugell War. He and the other five former Marines of the ship's impromptu boarding party would secure the *Orlando* 's docking port.

The clamshell clampon lander shot away from the *Shade Tree* and crossed the gap quickly, opening and sealing against the *Orlando* 's docking hatch.

"Indira, take the conn. I'm going to the docking port - I want to see this cargo myself." Barrett stood up.

"Careful, Captain," the Exec warned.

"I'm always careful," Barrett grinned at her. "Besides, Gomp will have it under control. He always does; Gomp hasn't yet met the ass he couldn't kick. Call down to the port, tell Peters that I'm stopping by my cabin for my pistol, then I'll be down."

At the docking port, the lander was already approaching when Barrett entered the docking compartment. "Heard from Gomp?"

"You bet, Captain," Louis Peters answered. "Signals just called down, said to tell you he's got things under control over there. Hardly any fight at all."

"Good. I like it when things go smooth." She pulled her pistol out of the leather holster she wore low on one hip and examined it carefully; it was a true antique, an ancient Springfield Armory 1911A1 Tactical Combat in .45 caliber. The pistol was old, but Barrett knew the arm, knew how to shoot it, and ammo was still readily available. She racked the slide to chamber a round, set the thumb safety and holstered the weapon.

The lander docked with a loud *clunk*, and the hatch swung open to reveal a smiling Hector Gomp.

"You want to come over and have a look, Captain? I got a couple of the boys looking for the stuff now."

"Yeah," Barrett agreed. Gomp moved aside to make room for Barrett to climb into the shuttle - not easy, given the former Marine's considerable bulk. Hector Gomp was a bit over two meters tall, 118 kilograms of solid muscle, with fists the size of new born infants; his bulk was surmounted by a ruddy, good-natured face. His nose was crooked from repeated breaks and his left ear had been partly removed in a knife fight years before, and Gomp refused to have it regenerated; he thought the scar lent him a dashing air. His reddish hair was cropped close in the traditional Marine Corps jarhead style. "Sergeant" Gomp was utterly reliable in any sort of scrap, and Captain Barrett trusted him as she did few people.

"OK. Get us over there." The captain relaxed in a bucket-seat as Gomp manipulated the lander's controls.

One of Barrett's men met them at the *Orlando*'s docking port. There was a faint smell of ozone and smoke; three of the *Orlando*'s crewman sat on the deck, their backs against the bulkhead, held there by a splatter of catch-web fired from a Tangler.

"Any more of them around?"

"These three were at the port, Captain," Gomp said, "but Tim nailed them before they could get a shot off. We had a bit of fun getting the corridors secured, but we did her - got the rest of the crew and the officers sealed in one of the cargo bays forward."

"Good work."

"Funny, though," Gomp said.

"What's that?"

"Seems like they gave up awfully easy. I wonder..." A sudden buzz sounded from Gomp's combat harness. He tapped his earpiece. "Gomp. What?" He listened intently for a moment. "Good. Captain, we got it."

Gomp led the way through the dirty, poorly lit corridors of the converted cruiser to what was obviously a converted missile bay. Several black shipping containers were strapped to the deck at the far end, with Tim McNeal and Yvette Langstrom standing over them.

"And there we are," Gomp whooped. "Payday!"

Barrett held out her hand. A grinning Gomp placed a large combat knife in it. Captain Barrett dropped to

one knee and popped the polymer seals off the cargo container, flipping open the lid.

"That's the stuff, all right," she breathed.

Diamonds. A coffin-sized cargo container full of them.

"Open the others."

The Marines quickly opened the other three containers. "Diamonds here, too, Cap'n," Gomp called out. He quickly popped open another container. "And in this one."

"Looks like germanium here, Captain." Tim McNeal was standing over another, a spectral analyzer in his hand. "Some gallium, too."

"Leave it - it's not worth our trouble. McNeal, Crowe, Davis, Langstrom, get the diamonds back over to the lander; get them to the *Shade Tree*, and head back here, quick as you can. Gomp, you and Wilson come with me - since we're stealing *anyway*, let's see if these smugglers have anything else worth taking."

Gomp chuckled. "Roger that, Captain."

"Sickbay first," Barrett ordered.

"Need water, Captain," Gomp observed. "Food would be nice, too - getting tired of drycake."

"All right - Wilson, you go to the galley, get what you can."

"By herself?" Gomp wanted to know. "Won't be able to carry much."

"We'll be at Halifax in six days," Barrett said, "and food and water are cheaper than medicines. Let's have a look."

"Yes'm." They walked swiftly through the ship's ill-kept corridors, up two ladders, Gomp leading. "Here we are."

The hatch swung open at a touch.

Inside were two bodies, each laid on a separate treatment pallet. Blood pooled on the floor under each one.

"Thought you said they didn't put up a fight," Barrett said, grimacing. She felt her stomach lurch suddenly at the smell of decay.

"They didn't," Gomp breathed. "These have been dead a while."

He took a step closer - just one - and craned his neck to look at the nearest body's face, which glistened strangely in the dim light. There were marks, like bruises, around the eyes...

"Oh, shit," Gomp said. "Oh, *shit*, oh shit!" He slapped his earpiece. "Wilson, drop what you're doing, get to the docking port now!"

Barrett took a step back. The smell was worse close up; she was perilously close to losing the drycake she had chewed for lunch. "What is it?"

Gomp grabbed the Captain's arm, dragged her from the sickbay. "Forget the medicines, Captain - we've

got to get out of here. Shit!"

"Gomp!" Barrett yanked her arm free. "What's wrong? What's got into you?"

Gomp was already sprinting down the corridor. Barrett hurried after him. "Gomp! What?"

"Fever," he called back as he dropped down the first ladder.

"Fever?" A sudden chill gripped Captain Barrett. She plunged down the ladder after Gomp.

"Avalonian hemorrhagic fever," Gomp called over his shoulder as he ran for the docking port. "Bayer's Plague. Seen it once before."

"Isn't it..."

"Contagious as hell - and almost always fatal," Gomp said. He skidded to a stop at the dock, looked out the tiny viewing port. "Shit, they're still over at the *Shade Tree*. "

Corporal Annette Wilson came pounding down the corridor, a large bag in one hand. "Got some frozen stuff - meat, would you believe it?"

"Leave it, Annette," Gomp ordered. "Leave everything."

"Why?"

"Plague," Gomp told her.

Captain Barrett was already on her radio. " *Shade Tree*, this is Barrett."

She heard a voice in her earpiece in a second. "XO here, Captain."

"Indira," Barrett barked, "This ship is infected - Bayer's Plague. Notify Doctor Dodd. Isolate the Marines that just came back on the lander. Strip them, their clothes and everything goes out the airlock. Full decontamination."

"And the cargo?"

"Boil it. Give it the works. Full UV and e-beam sterilization protocol. Repackage the valuables, boil them again, the containers go out the shitport. If we live, we'll need that cargo - even if it's just to pay for decon of the ship. "

"On it, Captain." A moment's silence. "The lander is on the way back now."

"Strip down," Barrett ordered. "Right here. To the buff. Nothing goes back but warm bodies and weapons." She pulled her pistol out of the holster, laid it on the floor. "What are you both looking at me for? Strip!"

Gomp, surprisingly, turned a dark red, but pulled his shirt over his head. Barrett pulled off her t-shirt, threw it down the corridor, kicked off her sandals and dropped her fatigue pants, kicking them after the t-shirt. She looked up at an embarrassed Hector Gomp, clad only in a blush that extended from the top of his stubbled head to his navel, his carbine in his hands. Behind him, Annette Wilson stood calmly, birthday-naked, one arm across her breasts, the other cradling her Tangler.

"Good." Barrett picked up her pistol just as the lander arrived with a *thump*. "Get in. Move!"

The ride back passed in silence.

Decontamination protocols on starships were practiced regularly, and the *Shade Tree* was no exception. A chemical shower, UV bombardment, another chemical shower and an antibiotic cocktail later, Captain Barrett finally left the ship's docking port and made her way to the Bridge, clad only in a towel.

Eyebrows were raised at the Captain's state of undress, but her barked orders got the watch's minds back on their jobs. "All back one-third. Back us away from that abomination. Gillian, target two Shrikes on the *Orlando*. "

"Captain?"

"You heard me."

"Captain, there are still thirty or forty people on that ship," Indira Krishnavarna said softly. "More, if they've got passengers."

"They're already dead, Indira. Hell, the Navy has standing orders - I think it's General Order Twelve - to destroy plague ships. You think they wouldn't blow it up? Gillian, get those Shrikes ready!"

"Two weapons armed and ready, Captain," the reply came quickly. "Firing solution set."

Barrett looked up at the main screen, where the converted cruiser wallowed in space, growing slowly smaller as the *Shade Tree* backed away. The readout showed twenty kilometers distance - plenty. "Fire - now-now-now."

Two Shrike missiles leaped from the privateer's port stub wing, crossing the gap quickly and blasting the cruiser into flying parts.

The Bridge was silent. They stared at the expanding debris field of the plague ship, nobody moving, nobody talking, until Captain Barrett started snapping out orders.

"Helm, get us on course for Halifax. Best possible speed. Weapons, fast work on those Shrikes."

"Damn," the XO breathed.

"Yeah, at least." Barrett looked down, suddenly remembering her lack of attire. "Um. I'm going to my cabin to change. I'll be right back - Indira, take over. Keep us on course."

"Yes, Captain," Indira Krishnavarna breathed.

Three

Five days later - on the Halifax space dock

The sign on the compartment door read "Philemon Baxter - Contract Security and Investigations." Baxter enjoyed the title. His years in Navy Intelligence had left him with plenty of contacts - many of them in low places - to conduct such a business.

Baxter enjoyed his spacious office on the prestigious D ring of the Halifax space dock, two levels down from the offices and piers of the Confederate Navy, on the highest of the station's privately owned levels. He enjoyed his state-of-the-art equipment and communications accounts, which included access to the station's hyperphone transmitter. He was even authorized to send and receive code-key encrypted transmissions, like the one that flashed a prompt on his computer screen late one afternoon, just as he

was thinking about an after-work martini at the Seven Gables lounge a level down.

His assistant, Edward Fox, looked up from his smaller desk across the office as the chime sounded.
"That the message?"

"Yeah," Baxter said. "From that modified proxy we had following the *Orlando*. "

He quickly decrypted the message, and watched the video stream for a few moments, fast-forwarding to the scene he wanted.

"Yeah," Baxter grinned. "They boarded it - damn stupid pirates, anyway. Fox, call the Navy - tell them we have information on a plague ship, and that it's probably bound here for Halifax. Give them the *Shade Tree* 's description and nav-beacon code."

"Boss, they're supposed to rendezvous here with the *Cape Fortune* to turn over two-thirds of the shipment."

"They won't make it into the dock. As soon as they drop out of subspace, the Navy will be all over them. Send that message."

"Right away, Boss," Fox said.

"If the *Shade Tree* gets here, they'll slap a seal on it, and lock down the crew in quarantine. You got the enviro-suits, right?"

"You bet, Boss. Level IV enviro-suits - we could wade through a hip-deep culture of Bayer's Plague and not catch as much as a sniffle."

"Good. Half of a load of diamonds is sure better than a three-way split, eh?"

"Roger that, Boss. What about the *Cape Fortune*? "

"They'll be here in port today or tomorrow. When they get in, brief their captain in on what's going on; tell him to stay put."

The Shade Tree

Jean Barrett woke up coughing.

Not just an ordinary, morning, clearing the throat cough, but a racking, agonizing cough that left spots of blood on the napkin she grabbed to hold over her mouth.

"Shit." Reaching up from her bunk, she tapped a code on her cabin's comm panel. "Gomp," she called.

"Here, Cap'n."

"How you feeling?"

"Like shit," Gomp replied. "Coughing like hell. McNeal, too. Nobody else so far."

"Great. Just great." Barrett lapsed into another spate of coughing. "Less than a day out of Halifax, too."

"Cap'n," Gomp's voice came back, "McNeal's here with me. He's got an idea."

"Anything's better than nothing," Barrett said. "If we head on to Halifax, the Navy will quarantine us and burn the ship out. That's the good news; they may just blow us out of space at first sight."

"Captain," the young voice of Tim McNeal came over the speaker, "I know that Caliban is in the other direction from Halifax, but my cousin, she runs a research lab there, on an island called Homer in the Capital Archipelago. She's been working on viral diseases - judging from the last message I got from my Mom, she's working on something that might help us."

"Bayer's Plague is aerosol transmitted," Gomp pointed out. "It's already too late to quarantine the three of us with symptoms; we'll have to decon the whole ship."

"It's not the ship I'm worried about," Barrett snapped. "We can decon the ship, but we have to be alive to do it."

"Only chance we've got," Gomp repeated.

"Very well. You two, stay where you are." She stabbed the contact, and punched the code for the Bridge.

"Bridge, Exec speaking."

"Indira," Barrett said, "Gomp, McNeal and I, we're all symptomatic."

"Oh. Oh, no."

"You should see it from my side. I'm staying in my cabin; might as well keep it as contained as possible. Pass orders to Helm, make course for Caliban, all ahead emergency. Haul ass, Indira."

"Right away, Captain." On the Bridge, Indira Krishnavarna shuddered in barely suppressed terror as she passed the Captain's orders on. "Four days," she informed the Captain, "Unless we burn our drive out first. Four days at emergency drive, that's pushing it, Captain."

"If we don't get there in six days or less," Barrett said, "We're all dead anyway. Count your blessings, Indira - not all that long ago, it would have taken six months. Hell, when I first had this ship built, it would have taken three weeks. Be glad I had the drive upgraded."

Under the deck, the rumble of the Gellar drive swelled to a dull roar. "On our way, Captain," Krishnavarna confirmed, "Ahead emergency full, on course for Caliban."

"Good work," Barrett replied. "You're in charge, Indira. We're looking for a research lab on an island called Homer in the Capital Archipelago. McNeal's cousin works there. You get us there, Indira. No matter what happens to me, you get this ship to Caliban."

"I will, Captain."

"We'll have to sneak in. Assume the Navy will be looking for us. You know what to do."

Jean Barrett switched off the comm panel and collapsed on her bunk. She felt her forehead; hot, sweating. *The plague or the stress? Does it matter?*

I'll know in six days. Or less.

She looked up, painfully, at a knock on her cabin door. "Who is it?" she called. "What do you want?"

"It's Doctor Dodd," the voice of the ship's physician came back. "I've been down and looked at Gomp and McNeal - I need to check you too, Captain."

"You shouldn't."

"I have to. I have to keep you alive until we get where we're going," the doctor called back.

"All right." The Captain tapped the contact that unlocked her cabin door, allowing the doctor in.

Janice Dodd had only been with the *Shade Tree* six months. The ship's medical bay was her first job following her internship and residency at St. Elysium Hospital in the port city of San Diego, Earth. She was young, tall, thin, and almost angular, with close-cropped blonde hair and piercing green eyes.

Today, she wore a white lab coat over her gray coveralls - usual for her - and a white polymer dust mask over her face, which was not.

"Coughing, are you?" Barrett nodded; the doctor was looking pointedly at the bloodstained napkin.

Dodd bent over the Captain, examining her eyes carefully. "Headache?" she asked.

"You have no idea."

"Typical." Dodd took a small whirling device from her lab coat pocket, placed it on Barrett's forehead. "Heartbeat's strong. Blood pressure a tad high, but that's understandable. Temp 39.2 - that's a nasty fever."

"And therefore what?"

"Therefore, Captain," Dodd said as she straightened, "You've got the classic early presentation of Avalonian hemorrhagic fever, better known as Bayer's Plague." She picked the whirling, blinking diagnostic reader off the Captain's head, looked at it. "Your white cell count is off the chart, too. Just like Gomp and McNeal."

"Anyone else yet?"

"Nothing definite so far," the doctor replied, her eyes downcast. "But you may as well figure there will be. I've had some people complaining of headaches - Summer Harding from third watch was in earlier complaining about a cough."

Barrett closed her eyes. "Did McNeal tell you about his cousin?"

"He did. I've actually read a bit about her work - she's working on a way to develop a hunter-killer antivirus, one that will specifically destroy an invading organism." She hesitated, and then went on: "Captain, I've got to be honest with you - I wouldn't hold out too much hope. From what I've read, Katrin McNeal's work is just in the exploratory stage."

"Have you a better idea, Doctor? We're all dead unless this researcher can pull something out - any hope is better than none."

"I understand, Captain. I just want you to know the odds."

Barrett smiled a ghastly, pale, fevered smile. "Long odds," she said. "That's nothing new for this ship. Get back to Medical, Doc - bound to be people looking for you."

The Grugell frigate K-110

It was not a glorious posting, but glory was in short supply in these post-war years for the Grugell - along with everything else. It happened that diamonds figured strongly in the fabrication of the Grugell's standard star drive, and it also happened that the small, low-gravity worlds on the outside of the Galactic arm that the Grugell found comfortable were also low in mineral resources. That had been one of the

reasons that the Grugell had gone to war those several years ago, and that was why Group Commander Kestakrickell IV was here now, at a designated coordinate-set in deep space on one of the frigates of his command group, waiting for a contact from the Confederate renegade who had been surreptitiously selling them power metals and diamonds for the last half of a Grugell year.

He looked up from his high, polished desk in the cabin he had commandeered as an office as the frigate's commander, Chiksteskatitk II, walked in and saluted.

"Group Commander," he said, "We have a most interesting message from a Confederate contact on Halifax."

"Not the mining camp renegade? Who is this?" The Group Commander took the message pad, studied it. "Baxter? Who is he?"

"Intelligence has a dossier on him, Group Commander. He served in the war as an Intelligence operative in the Confederate Navy; now he runs a private information-gathering agency on their fleet dock at the Confederate planet Halifax."

"This is an interesting proposition," Kestakrickell said as he read through the message. "A shipment of diamonds at one-half price, in gold. No doubt the same routine shipment the renegade Bolin told us how to find."

"The one that failed to arrive where we were told to expect it."

"The same, sir. It is reasonable to expect that Baxter somehow intercepted the *Orlando* and seized the shipment. Now, he offers it to us at half the normal price."

"The Emperor will be pleased," Chiksteskatitk pointed out. The gold was, after all, the Emperor's. So were the ships; so were the officers and crew of those ships.

"I wonder how this Baxter got control of that diamond shipment."

"I can not see how that matters to us, Group Commander."

"It always matters, Chiksteskatitk," Kestakrickell chided his junior officer. "It always matters. Anything that could possibly affect our routine flow of diamonds and metals from the renegade mining station matters. He has obviously seized one of our shipments from that renegade Bolin. Where else do you suppose this Baxter would find a diamond shipment? He even knows the usual quantity and delivery locations," he said, pointing at the message pad.

"You suspect a trap, Group Commander?"

"I suspect something," Kestakrickell agreed. "I always suspect, Commander. I always suspect." He sat silently for a moment, thinking.

"Make signal to Baxter," he said at last. "Tell him we agree."

"By your command."

"Let us see," Kestakrickell said, "what this Baxter is up to."

Halifax

"What do you mean, overdue?" Philemon Baxter barked the words at his aide.

"I mean, they're overdue, Boss," Edward Fox said. "Navy thinks they may have gone somewhere else."

"Where? Do they have any idea?"

"No. The *Shade Tree* 's Captain, Barrett, she's got some ties on Forest and Tarbos. But nobody's got a track on her."

"And no time to get a hyperphone message anywhere," Baxter complained. "Damn it all, they've got my diamonds on board, and they're heading who knows where. What happens if they all die with the ship bound someplace, and we never find out what happened?"

"That reminds me, Boss," Fox went on, piling worse on top of bad, "we did get an encrypted signal from that Grugell Group Commander. He agreed to the transfer on that moon out along the frontier, just as you asked."

"Complications. I should have waited to contact them until I had the diamonds."

"Too late to worry about that now, Boss."

Baxter sat thinking for a moment. "All right," he said at last. "Get on the hyperphone to our contact in Adamstown, tell him what happened; he'll have to cover it with his boss somehow. Ships do disappear from time to time, after all. Next, send messages to our people on Tarbos and Forest. Tell them to watch for the *Shade Tree*."

"Right away, Boss."

"One more thing - send a message to the *Cape Fortune* . Tell her Captain to be ready to jump to wherever the *Shade Tree* has gone, at short notice. If we do find those pirates, we may have to send him after them."

"They're on Pier Nine on F ring," Fox said. "I'll go down there now."

"You still got that contact in Navy intel, up on A ring?"

"Always."

"Get going up there after you talk to Bond. See if the Navy has any idea. You'd think they would be tracking a suspected plague ship; find out."

Fox nodded and left the office in a hurry.

Four

Four days later - Caliban

Caliban's system consisted of five planets - one tiny cinder near the sun, the inhabited ocean world itself, and three Jupiter-sized gas giants. The twisted, distorted gravitational fields of the three giant planets interacting with the star made navigation tricky for anyone coming in across the plane of the system's ecliptic, as the *Shade Tree* was, but they couldn't afford to maneuver for a better orbital path - time was too short.

"Past the innermost giant's gravity well now," Paolo Guerra reported. "Ready to shut the drive down."

"Stand by." Indira Krishnavarna had a crushing headache - one of the early signs of Bayer's Plague. Well over half the crew was showing some symptoms now.

"Speed down to two hundred thousand kph,"

Krishnavarna tapped a contact. "All ready down there in the shuttle?"

"Ready here," second watch helmsman Sean Weaver called back; he had drawn the straw to pilot the shuttle to the surface. "Captain, Gomp, McNeal and Doc Dodd are strapped down in back."

"All right."

"One hundred eighty thousand kph."

"Shut down the drive," the XO ordered. Paolo Guerra tapped several contacts. Below the deck, the mass tunnel of the Gellar drive fell silent. The ship was coasting, with no drive signature to alert Caliban Ground Control or the Skyhook that there was a ship in the area.

"Sixteen minutes to optimal launch point," Giorg Constantine called from the navigation station.

The minutes ticked by like hours. Finally, Constantine spoke up again: "Launch point!"

Indira Krishnavarna hit the contact on the command chair again. "Sean," she called, "Launch now-now-now."

"On our way." There was a slight shudder as the shuttle's ion drive lit up, kicking it free of the ship.

The XO breathed a sigh of relief. "Are we still on course?"

"As before. We'll arc into a decent high orbit, assuming nothing hits us, without using the main drive. We can adjust as necessary with maneuvering thrusters."

"Very well."

Beneath and behind the *Shade Tree*, the ship's small landing shuttle dropped into Caliban's atmosphere, extended its wings, and began the hammering drop to the surface.

"Hang on," Weaver called back into the passenger compartment, "I'm going down fast, but that's gonna be rough."

In the back of the shuttle, Jean Barrett was preoccupied with being sicker than she'd ever known possible. Her face was mottled with bruises, her lungs clogged with thick phlegm, her throat raw from a racking cough. The fever wracked her entire body with pain, making her feel as though she'd been beaten with an iron bar. Across from her, Hector Gomp huddled in his bucket seat, the burly ex-Marine almost doubled over in pain. Tim McNeal was even worse; slumped in his seat, semi-conscious. Only the doctor seemed alert, but she was coughing too; her constant care for the three worst cases had taken their toll.

"Ten minutes," Weaver called out. His head hurt and he had fought a nagging cough for a day now. It was night over the Capital Archipelago; they had passed over Caliban's one city, Capital, a few minutes earlier. He flipped on the shuttle's navigation and landing lights, and picked up the radio mike, dialing the set into the frequency McNeal had given him.

"ViraTech Research," he called the lab directly, since they controlled the island and its tiny landing field, "This is the *Shade Tree* shuttle, we are nine minutes out with the ship's doctor, captain and two crew, all symptomatic. Request emergency landing procedures."

A cool, calm voice came back immediately. "Roger that, *Shade Tree* shuttle. You are cleared for

emergency approach on Landing Pad Three. Pad is the only one lit up. An emergency medical isolation team is waiting for you on the pad."

Several kilometers ahead, Weaver saw a tiny square of light. The landing field.

"I have visual contact," he called back. "We are now seven minutes out."

Six minutes and forty-eight seconds later, the shuttle settled to the tarmac in front of a brightly lit hangar. Sean Weaver popped the hatch open to see several figures in environmental suits.

One of the figures pointed at the others. "Get the patients over to Isolation Two stat," its voice boomed out over an amplification circuit. "Someone get this shuttle out of sight - get a tractor, get it in the hangar and close the door. Full decontamination on the shuttle - scrub it clean, UV and chemical. Move, people!"

In the shuttle, Doctor Janice Dodd listened, and smiled. They were still alive - and there was a doctor out there, one who sounded like he knew what she was about.

Maybe, she thought, just maybe we'll live through this after all.

Hector Gomp and Tim McNeal had lost consciousness on the rough descent. Two medics loaded them on gurneys, and floated them away towards the laboratory. Jean Barrett, Doctor Dodd and Sean Weaver were led away by another enviro-suited figure.

In the laboratory, Doctor Katrin McNeal waited, all of her staff on alert, all computers, gene-sequencers and protein replicators running.

"Gene," she told one of the techs, "I want blood drawn from each of them the moment we get them in isolation. Di, Jules, start isolating the virus immediately for analysis."

"Doctor McNeal," someone said, "we haven't tested any of this, not even on mice."

"I know that. Just do what I say," the doctor snapped. "We're just going to have to move our first clinical trials up a little bit."

Out of the frying pan, she told herself, and into the fire. Needs must when there are lives to save - and if we can reverse Bayer's Plague... The implications, the possibility that they may be able to cure viral diseases, were staggering to think of.

I sure hope this works.

The next day

Jean Barrett woke slowly. Her head ached cruelly, and her body still hurt, but she didn't feel feverish any more.

A face hovered over her. She squinted, trying to make her eyes work. Reluctantly, they focused on a face that was somehow strangely familiar.

The face wasn't masked. The half-seen form beneath the face wore only a white lab coat, no enviro-suit.

"Captain Barrett?" the face asked.

Jean finally recognized her; the woman looked like Tim McNeal, her Security troop. "Mmm," she mumbled. "Doctor McNeal, I presume?" A weak smile.

"That's me," the face smiled back.

"What happened? Where is my crew?"

"Look to your right."

Barrett turned her head slowly, painfully, and strained her eyes to focus. Hector Gomp lay in the next bed, grinning broadly at his Captain.

"Morning, Cap'n," he said, and lapsed into a bout of coughing. "Great day to be alive, eh?"

"Yeah," Barrett answered. "Where's Tim?"

"Over here to my right," Gomp said, "Sleeping like a baby."

"I take it we're going to live?"

"You're going to live," Doctor McNeal said. "Your Doctor Dodd is up and on her feet already - she wasn't as sick as you and the other two. She's helping administer our HKAV to the rest of your crew."

"Aitch-kav?" Barrett asked.

"Hunter-Killer Anti-Virus," Doctor McNeal answered. "A neat trick we only just figured out. A nano-machine, a bit of RNA with a protein sheath, like a virus, but programmed to find a specific virus and bind to it, effectively killing it. We were able to develop an HKAV specific to the plague virus from samples of your blood; you and the others got a massive dose. You're clean, Captain; you just need to rest for a few days while your body recovers from the damage the virus did."

"My ship?"

"Your XO and your Chief of Engineering are supervising decontamination as we speak, Captain. You had the worst case; well, you and Gomp. Any idea why? Were you more directly exposed?"

"We actually saw two of the bodies. Nobody else was near them, just near us."

"So, you two were the index cases for your ship, and probably spread it from there - everyone else was secondary. If you hadn't been directly exposed, the disease may have taken another two or three days to show up."

And we would have been at or near Halifax by then. The thought was enough to make Barrett's headache worse. *Baxter was planning on that.*

Barrett relaxed. She was still very tired. There was still one more thing...

"Gomp," she called out.

"Cap'n?"

"Philemon Baxter. He tried to fuck us over, didn't he? He had to know that the *Orlando* was infected. That's why he sent us out after it, instead of his own people."

"Can't see any other way 'round it, Cap'n."

"When we're up and around again..."

"Yeah, Cap'n?"

"It's going to be payback time."

Gomp grinned. "You betcher ass, Cap'n."

"Thought you'd like that," Barrett murmured, even as she faded off to sleep.

The Grugell frigate K-110

Six days -Grugell Standard Days, rather than the one-third longer Confederate Standard Days - had passed while the - *K-110* carefully backtracked from the assigned rendezvous point towards the mining colony at Adamstown. Finally, Group Commander Kestakrickell IV had found what he was looking for. Following a page from the frigate's commander, he swept onto the ship's bridge and demanded an update.

"You were right to order a backtrack towards the mining colony, Group Commander. It's definitely a debris field," Commander Chiksteskatitk II reported from the frigate's Scanning station, where he stood looking over the technician's shoulder. "Evaluate as wreckage from a Confederate cruiser, probably surplus from the war as there are no traces of any weapons in the wreckage. There are bodies in the debris field - the ship's crew was destroyed as well."

"What destroyed it?"

"Either an internal explosion - unlikely, that; the Confederates build multiple redundant safeguards against such a thing - or an anti-ship missile."

"This is the *Orlando*," Kestakrickell announced. "The ship that has been delivering our diamonds. That was a converted cruiser."

"That seems more than likely," Chiksteskatitk agreed.

"Who would have destroyed an unarmed ship in the middle of this belt?"

"The Confederacy has a growing problem with piracy," Chiksteskatitk said. "But given that message we received from the Confederate Baxter..."

"He ordered this done," Kestakrickell concluded.

"It seems the only logical conclusion, Group Commander."

"It is as I said it would be," Kestakrickell mused. "It is a plot almost worthy of a Grugell, isn't it? Baxter obviously had some intelligence of a diamond shipment coming across the border, and dispatched a ship to steal it - and he proposes to sell it to us at a discount, knowing that even so he will reap a greater profit than in the mineral-rich worlds of the Confederacy, and that he will have to explain to no one where the diamonds came from. Brilliant man, this Baxter; I would enjoy meeting him in person."

"Perhaps that chance will come one day, Group Commander."

"Perhaps." The Group Commander stood silently for a moment, thinking. "We would seem to have the luxury of time; take us to the mining station. I believe I will harass Bolin over the loss of this shipment and demand a second at a considerable discount. That will take some time, during which we can go to the rendezvous and pick up the first shipment."

"Brilliant," Chiksteskatitk fawned.

"Have your helmsman plot out the course to the mining station and from there to the designated

rendezvous point. Baxter will no doubt contact us soon to explain what the delay in shipment is all about - and, while we wait, we will do some scheming of our own. Since Baxter has obviously stolen this shipment, what better price for his crime than to have the shipment stolen from him in turn, is it not so?"

Chiksteskatitk laughed. "It is indeed so, Group Commander."

"This Baxter," Kestakrickell smiled cruelly, "will have to learn to scheme some better schemes."

Five

Halifax

"Caliban?" Philemon Baxter was surprised, and angry. "What the hell are they doing at Caliban? What the hell are they doing *alive*?"

"Can't tell you, Boss," Edward Fox answered his employer. "Chances are they'll have left by the time we could get a message back there - our guy on Caliban says they were buying supplies like they intended to leave orbit any time."

"Agh," Baxter groaned. "They don't have the rendezvous points, do they?"

"Can't see how they could, Boss."

Baxter thought intently for a moment, staring at the top of his polished desk as he did so. "All right - here's what we do. Call over to the *Cape Fortune*; tell them to let us know immediately if the *Shade Tree* contacts them. Send another encrypted message to that Grugell Group Commander, tell him there will be another short delay due to a drive failure, or something - make something up."

"Gotcha, Boss."

"They're not dead, and they've got our diamonds. We can't report the diamonds as stolen - we'd have to explain where they came from in the first place. Son of a bitch," Baxter complained. "This deal just gets worse and worse."

The Adamstown mining colony

"No word from the *Orlando*, Boss," Remy Brichot informed his employer. "It's like they just vanished."

"Vanished," Adam Bolin repeated the word.

"Yeah, Boss."

"With sixty million in diamonds on board."

"Afraid so."

"What the hell am I going to tell 'Mr. K?'?"

"We'll think of something, Boss." Brichot adopted a serious expression, but inside, he was filled with vicious glee. *I've already thought of something, Boss. Something that will see you gone and me running this station.*

The Shade Tree

Jean Barrett walked onto her Bridge, feeling like herself for the first time in days. Only a slight residual

aching in her joints betrayed the remnants of the virus.

"Report," she ordered.

"Secured for space, Captain," Indira Krishnavarna smiled from her station.

"Main drive is online, Captain," Paolo Guerra reported. "Maneuvering thrusters at your command. We're ready to leave orbit."

"Secure for space," Giorg Constantine reported from Astrogation. "Orbital departure vectors plotted."

"Traffic lanes clear," Ophelia Watts reported from Scanning.

"Caliban Ground has cleared us to leave orbit," Vada Newman called from the Signals panel.

"Very well." Barrett sat down in her Bridge chair. "Giorg, plot us a course for Tarbos."

"Tarbos, Captain?"

"Tarbos. Direct course, no shenanigans, I want us at Tarbos as fast as possible."

"Right away, Captain," Helmsman Giorg Constantine answered, and bent over his panel.

Barrett looked over to meet the XO's questioning look. "Need to talk to someone there, Indira," she said, smiling. "You'll see."

"Course plotted, Captain," Constantine reported after a moment.

"Helm, lay it in. Maneuvering thrusters ahead two-thirds, new course zero by fifteen, move us into the departure lane."

"Zero by fifteen, aye," Guerra responded. On the main viewscreen, the blue globe of Caliban rotated slowly away. "Maneuvering thrusters ahead two-thirds. Sixteen minutes to the space buoy."

"Very well."

The minutes ticked by slowly. Indira Krishnavarna got up, walked slowly over to stand behind the Captain's chair.

"Tarbos, Captain?" she asked again, her voice low.

Barrett leaned back in the chair. "We're in over our heads, Indira," she breathed. "They're supposed to be turning this stuff over to the Grugell - that's treason, by any standard. Well, I'm not about to commit treason - but I'm not going to just hand these diamonds over to the Navy or the Confederate government, either, not without us getting something out of the deal. And I'm sure as hell not taking them back to that mining station."

"What do you propose to do at Tarbos?"

"Remember the *Giles Davies* incident, during the war?"

The XO nodded. In the last year of the war, the *Shade Tree* had happened upon the wreck of that Confederate ship following an ambush by a Grugell task group, and conveyed vital information on Grugell movements from her dying Captain to the Confederate Navy.

"We made a pretty good impression on Fleet Admiral Gauss back then. I intend to see if he still does

have that good impression, and maybe ask him for a favor."

"There's no guarantee that he'll be in port," Indira said. "As I hear it, he doesn't like hanging around the Fleet dock - prefers to be out on a ship."

"That's as may be," Barrett replied. "I have a few other markers to call in there if he isn't around."

"We've passed the space buoy," Guerra reported. "Free to maneuver."

"Secure maneuvering thrusters," Barrett ordered. "Engage main drive, ahead full. Bring us on course for Tarbos."

"Ahead full, on course for Tarbos," Guerra acknowledged. Under their feet, the ship's Gellar drive began to rumble. Moments later, the main viewscreen display blinked into the twisting, multicolored hash of subspace. "On course, Captain."

"Very well. I'm going down to get something to eat. Vada," Barrett said to the Signals tech, "would you page Gomp and McNeal; have them meet me in the dining area?"

"Right away, Captain."

Holding a crew in peacetime when prize money was scarce meant adding some amenities to the *Shade Tree*. One of those amenities included replacing the bulk dry storage of dehydrated ration packs with a real kitchen, operated by a husband-and-wife team; Solomon Chang and his wife Cordelia had come aboard during a stop at Zed three months previously, and now the crew enjoyed two hot meals a day.

Captain Barrett was already seated, sipping a cup of coffee, when Hector Gomp and Tim McNeal burst into the compartment.

"Hey, Solomon, what's there to eat?" Gomp called across the room to where Solomon Chang was feeding vegetables into a processor.

"Too early for dinner," Chang snapped. "You get mid-rats, Gomp. On the table."

Gomp frowned at the table in the middle of the compartment, which held a loaf of wheat bread and a platter of sliced meats and cheeses - the "mid-watch" ration.

"So what *is* for dinner?"

"You come back in two hours," Chang said. "Then you'll find out."

Gomp waved a hand at the irritable cook. "Cap'n," he asked, "Mind if I eat while we talk? Almost dyin' makes a man powerful hungry."

"Go ahead," Barrett gestured at the mid-rats.

McNeal grinned and sat down at the Captain's table, watching as Gomp piled salami and cheese on bread, slapped mayonnaise on a second slice of bread, laid it on top of the unsteady pile. He was chewing as he stepped to the other table and sat down.

"So, Cap'n," he said, spewing bread crumbs on the table, "Wha's up?"

"Wipe off your chin." Gomp plied a napkin as Barrett went on. "We've got those diamonds in the hold, still, right?"

"Yeah," Gomp answered. "I double-checked right after we left orbit. We can't sell 'em just anywhere - if we try, we'll be technically guilty of holding stolen property, 'least if whatever miner owns 'em complains."

"Even if he doesn't, we'd still have to explain where we got them," McNeal pointed out. "We're sure not a mining ship."

"We don't necessarily have to explain them," Barrett said. "But that's not my main concern. My main concern is what Baxter was up to."

"Wait a minute," Gomp said. "Baxter told you that the miners were selling diamonds to the Grugell, right? That's why he thought we could snatch the shipment without any real trouble. Stands to reason, then, that he already has some way to dispose of them - probably for a fat wad of cash."

"Of which we were supposed to get one-third," Barrett agreed, "with the other third going to the *Cape Fortune*. I think you're right, Gomp; and I also think that Baxter knew about the plague on the *Orlando*, and planned to sell us out for a two-way split instead of three."

Gomp took another massive bite of his sandwich and chewed reflectively for a few moments. "Makes sense," he said through a mouthful of masticated bread and salami. "He prob'ly figured we'd run like hell for Halifax to make the meet, if we even knew about the plague - we wouldn't have, Cap'n, if you and I hadn't gone to the med bay. He probably turned us in to the Navy as a suspected plague ship, so that when we got to Halifax..."

"... The ship would have been quarantined, and no doubt Baxter had a way to get on board and get the diamonds off with nobody the wiser - and since he figured we'd all be dead or dying, nobody would be talking."

"But we're not dead," McNeal said. "And the ship's clean. So are we. So what are we going to do with the diamonds?"

"First, we're going to find out where the miners were making the sale to the Grugell," Barrett said. Then we're going to pull a bait-and-switch on them. After that, I think we'll have a little chat with Baxter."

Gomp chuckled. "Works for me, Cap'n."

"First, though, we're headed for Tarbos."

"Tarbos?" Gomp's eyebrows shot upward. "What for?"

"First, to get the Navy off our necks. We can show the ship and crew are clean now, which should put off any alert Baxter had put out for us at Halifax. Also, Baxter may be a security and intel expert, but he doesn't know about space law; he doesn't know about right of salvage for abandoned ships in open space. So, he doesn't know that those diamonds are legally ours, since the *Orlando*'s crew was dead when we boarded - right?" Both men nodded, grinning. "I've done a little checking; the *Orlando* was privately held, no corporate ownership. The Captain held the ship in partnership with his XO, and they're both dead. That ship was legal to salvage; in open space, not even their insurance company can squawk. That's the law."

"Nice fat prize money, then," Gomp said. "Industrial diamonds are selling at a pretty good price right now."

"I know," Barrett continued, "They're at a twelve-month high right now, in fact. Second, I want to pick up a little information before we head back to Halifax. Gomp, you remember why Kaelee Adams signed on to handle Signals on second watch?"

"In trouble with the law, wasn't she? On Corinthia?"

"She hacked the main communications center of the Royal Palace," Barrett grinned, "And released the details of Prince Harold's broken engagement - remember that little scandal about the Prince and a male schoolmate?"

Gomp chuckled, spraying bread crumbs on the table as he did so. "I remember that the young Prince was packed off to a private military academy on Hecate in a big hurry."

"Exactly," Barrett said. "Apparently the King isn't very open-minded about such things. So, anyway, Kaelee shipped with us to avoid being tossed in a Corinthian jail. Free speech on Corinthia has a lot to do with what the King thinks it is."

"Yeah. I remember the deal now. So?" Gomp tucked the last of his sandwich in his mouth.

"So, I figure she can do the same to Baxter's comms on the Halifax Fleet dock. In for a penny, in for a pound, my Daddy used to say."

Gomp and McNeal traded a look, and both grinned. "I like it, Cap'n," Gomp chuckled. "So, what do you want us to do?"

"We have to find out how to do it, first, and I want to set up a nasty little surprise for the clowns running that mining station that the *Orlando* was hauling out of. When we get to the station, I'll go in the front door - I'm going to march right in to see Fleet Admiral Gauss. Gomp, you and Kaelee head for the library; use a terminal there to see if Kaelee can worm into the Navy's files and find any schematics on the Halifax space dock."

"I like this plan," Gomp chuckled.

"I thought you would. Once that's done - and hopefully we'll put an end to that mining station's little illegal cross-border trading deal in the process- then we'll head for Halifax. While I have a little chat with that bastard Baxter, I want you two to find a way to get Kaelee into the main signals apparatus. If we can get into Baxter's communications, maybe we can dig up something we can use; say, something like what he had planned to do with those diamonds. He's not running any ships himself, so he sure as hell can't say he took them as legal salvage."

"We can sure get Kaelee in. All Fleet spacedocks have panels in their maintenance spaces; they use them to troubleshoot problems in the datanet. All we have to do is find a way in, preferably from outside."

"Easy," McNeal agreed.

"Good," Barrett said as she stood up, "Because you've got about eight days until we get to Tarbos. Get your gear ready and get planning."

"Sounds like a hoot," Gomp said. "We'll be ready."

"This reminds me of something," McNeal added as the three left the dining compartment. "When I was a kid, three friends and I got into the back of the company Mercantile once, and got into their main processing center; almost screwed up the whole sales record for the month. Kaelee could do something like that to Baxter, couldn't she? While she's in, leave an Easter egg in the system or something. It sure had a big effect when we tried it."

Gomp chuckled. "When was this?"

"When I was a kid, back on Forest..."

Captain Barrett cut him off. "You're from Forest? We picked you up on Tarbos."

"Yes, Captain," McNeal answered, his face a study in confusion. "I left Forest when I was nineteen. Nothing much goes on there..." His voice trailed off as he saw the Captain's face darken.

Barrett stared at him for a moment, then spun on her heel and walked quickly away down the corridor towards her cabin.

"What'd I do?" McNeal asked plaintively. "Is there something wrong with Forest?"

"No, kid." Hector Gomp clapped McNeal on the back. "You're just from the same place as someone else, that's all. Cap'n won't hold it against you."

"Same place as who?"

"You know how Mike Crider is, right?"

"Yeah, sure - the hero of the invasion. One of the Founders. Hell, *everybody* on Forest knows who old Mike Crider is."

"That's him, but it's also his son, the Senator. Cap'n and the Senator had a thing going during the war. Mike Junior even shipped with us for about a year after he left the Senate."

"What happened?"

"He left the ship, went back to Forest. Doesn't work out so good for the Captain to have a relationship with one of the crew, for one thing; made things kind of tense. And, well..."

"Well, what?"

Gomp looked up the corridor where the Captain had disappeared. He smiled. "Cap'n ain't ever loved anything or anybody as much as she loves this ship. The Senator never could understand that. He wanted a stable life, and the Cap'n never will. She won't ever settle down anywhere. She'll keep moving until she dies. Some folks are just like that."

"What about you, Sarge? You like it too, don't you?"

"I get paid, I get fed, and I even see a little action once in a while. Can't ask for much more than that." He grinned at the boy. "Come on, kid, I picked up a case of light ale back there on Caliban - let's go have a couple of cold ones. I don't know about you, but I think better with a cold brew in front of me."

McNeal grinned. "Right behind you, Sarge."

Six

Adamstown mining station

Adam Bolin sat silently, staring at the blinking red light on the comm panel on his desk.

"That will be 'Mr. K,' Remy Brichot observed.

"No shit."

"He's wanting to know where his shipment is, Boss," Brichot said. "We'll have to tell him something."

"Tell him what? That the *Orlando* just disappeared?"

"There's nothing like the truth, Boss."

"I can't tell him that," Bolin snapped. "All right. All right."

There was nothing else to be done. Bolin picked up the handset and said, "All right, put him through."

A moment later, the high-pitched rattle of 'Mr. K' came through the handset. "My diamonds, Mr. Bolin, are almost nine days overdue."

Bolin translated quickly in his head; nine Grugell days was about seven Earth days. "I'm aware of that fact, Mr. K. We've heard from the freighter; she's having some drive problems here in the Belt."

There was a pensive silence from the other end. *Damn*, Bolin thought, *but they've got to be close, to send a real-time radio signal like this. Where the hell are they? With a cloaked ship, they could be looking at me now.*

"If you can give me the ship's location," the voice finally came back, "we could render assistance and conduct our business at the same time."

"Ordinarily, Mr. K, I'd be happy to take you up on that," Bolin evaded, "but we don't have a good fix on their location, and navigating here in the Belt is tricky. If you can call me back in another few days, I should have more information for you."

"I will not wait forever, Mr. Bolin," the voice said.

"I do not intend for you to do so," Bolin replied. "My miners are working double shifts now, to make up another shipment - if we can't get this ship moving, we'll get another load headed your way within ten Standard Days."

"Far from ideal." Mr. K said, "Let us see what you can do to get that ship moving, shall we?"

"I'm working on that," Bolin assured him.

"See that you do." There was the sharp hiss of static as the signal was cut off at the source.

"Oh, shit," Bolin groaned. "He's not happy at all - and he's probably sitting out there looking down the barrel of a blaster at us. How did I get into this mess?"

"Can't even call the Navy for support," Brichot said. "Since we're in violation of the Treaty of Honshu by selling them the stuff in the first place."

"Thanks for reminding me."

The K-110

Group Commander Kestakrickell IV looked up from the frigate's Signals panel at Commander Chiksteskatitk II and grinned. "I told you he would dodge," the Group Commander gloated.

"You were right, Group Commander, as always, of course. The question, of course, is what are we going to do now?"

"That debris field we found - that is surely the remains of the freighter. Now we have confirmed that this renegade Bolin is lying to us. Therefore he has lost control of his shipment, and this other Confederate, Baxter, has somehow seized it."

"So we will deal with Baxter?"

"Of course! At the time and place appointed. And then we will accept the second shipment from Bolin."

"I will give orders," Chiksteskatitk said, bowing to his superior, "to take us to the rendezvous as planned."

The Fleet space dock at Tarbos

"Starship *Shade Tree*, " the voice boomed out from the Bridge main speaker, "This is the Confederate Navy frigate *Reuben James*. Cut your engine and hold your position. Do not approach the dock, say again, do not approach the dock or you will be fired on."

"All stop," Jean Barrett ordered. "Hold position here. Patch me through to the frigate."

"Ready," Elliot Frye called from Signals.

"*Reuben James*, this is Captain Barrett of the *Shade Tree*. What's going on?"

"*Shade Tree*, " the voice came back, "Hold this position and prepare to be boarded. You are a reported plague ship, and can not be allowed to dock until we verify your status."

"Very well," Barrett replied, grinning. "We can receive a shuttle at our main docking port. You'll find we're all quite well here."

"We have a medical team boarding the shuttle now, *Shade Tree*; they'll have to be the judge of that."

"Fine. *Shade Tree* out."

Eight minutes later, the *Shade Tree* shuddered slightly as a gray Navy shuttle clunked against the docking port. Jean Barrett and Indira Krishnavarna were at the port to meet the two space-suited figures that emerged from the shuttle into the docking ring.

"My," Barrett said, "Aren't we cautious. Exactly what kind of plague do you think we're carrying?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Captain," the taller of the two figures said through his suit intercom. "I'm Lieutenant Finley, Confederate Navy Medical Corps. This is Chief Pharmacist's Mate Simpson. Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted."

Finley, then Simpson stepped out of the docking ring into the ship. "Ma'am, I'll have to scan your ship and take blood samples from your crew."

"Very well."

Finley looked around, awkwardly; the suit helmet restricted his movement. "How many crew do you have?"

"Thirty officers and crew."

"Anyone ill at the moment?"

"My Security Chief has a bit of a hangover, but that's not anything unusual."

"Chief Simpson will do the scanning, Captain, if that's all right. I'd like you to detail someone to escort him; he'll have to scan every compartment. I'll draw blood samples. Is there a compartment we can cycle the crew through for that?"

"I'll show you to our infirmary; Doctor Dodd can provide anything you might need. Indira, will you show the Chief around?"

"My pleasure, Captain."

"Good. Lieutenant, this way."

Six hours later

"*Shade Tree*, " the call came without preamble, "This is *Reuben James*. You are cleared to proceed."

"Thank you, *Reuben James*, " Barrett said into the mike. " *Shade Tree* out."

She turned to her Exec. "Don't you just love the Navy? Not a word of explanation, never an apology for holding us out here in the middle of nowhere, just "go ahead," and an implied "if you hadn't been clean, we'd have blown you out of space."

"Nice to get a confirmation that we're clean, anyway."

"Yeah. Helm, ahead one-third, steady on last course. Signals, call ahead to the Fleet dock, get us a berth."

"Already on it, Captain. Ahead one-third, on course as before. We're about ten minutes out."

"Berthing assignment, Pier Five, level C," Signals called.

"Good enough. Indira, will you handle docking? I'm going to get ready to see some people."

"I've got it," the Exec agreed.

Barrett headed for her cabin, where she exchanged shipboard fatigues for a respectable-looking white silk blouse and black slacks. She was sitting on her bunk pulling on polished black heeled boots when she felt the slight jolt of docking.

Reaching up, she tapped her cabin's signals panel. "Bridge, Exec speaking," the panel replied.

"Indira, I'm going to see the Fleet Admiral, if I can. Tell Gomp and Adams that they're 'go.' I expect I'll be back in an hour or two. Nobody else leaves the ship. I want to be underway again inside of two hours."

"As you wish, Captain. We're refilling water and oxygen now; tanks will be topped off in forty minutes or less. We've already emptied our carbon tanks for recyc credit. B.J. Smith wants to go to the station to look for a replacement for a number three drive ring anti-matter injector that's going south on us."

"Can it wait until Halifax? Four days, tops?"

Murmuring noises came from the speaker for a moment. "He says no, unless you want to end up dead in

space twenty parsecs from nowhere."

"Fine, tell him to go ahead; he's got two hours. Nobody else goes off the ship for any reason. I'm on my way."

"We'll be here."

Barrett left her cabin and walked quickly to the docking port, ignoring a covert stare or two from crew members used to seeing their Captain in shipboard gear. She strode through the docking umbilical, let the Marine at the station side scan her ident chip, and asked directions to the main Flag offices. Ten minutes later, she was standing in front of a bored-looking Master Chief Petty Officer.

The Chief had the glazed look of someone who had been stuck in a desk job for too long. When she looked up at Barrett, she moved her arm, and Barrett realized why; the faint whine of servos gave away the presence of a prosthetic arm. Under the Chief's uniform collar, Barrett could see the faint tracing of scars. The woman was fifty at best, a little on the heavy side, with dark blonde hair beginning to gray. Barrett smiled at the veteran.

The Chief smiled faintly in return. "What can I do for you?"

Barrett handed over her ident chip. "I'm here to see the Fleet Admiral. Will you tell him it's Captain Jean Barrett of the *Shade Tree*?"

"Your lucky day, Captain; the Admiral is actually in port. He's not here very often, you know. One moment." The Chief stood up; more whining revealed prosthetic legs to go with the arm. She disappeared through the door behind her desk.

Ten seconds later, Fleet Admiral Isaac Gauss himself burst through the door, grinning widely. "Captain Barrett!" he exploded. "Now *this* is one hell of a way to brighten up a boring Goddamn day in port. It's good to see you, Captain!"

The Admiral was a little grayer and a little thinner than Barrett remembered. "It's good to see you, Admiral," she smiled, responding to the Admiral's enthusiasm.

"Isaac, please, Isaac," he corrected her. "You're not Navy, and I'm about to retire. Please, come in. Chief Wilken, will you call down to the galley for coffee, please?"

"Right away, Admiral."

Fleet Admiral Gauss shepherded Jean into his somewhat Spartan office. Unlike most of the private offices Barrett had seen on this and other stations, the Fleet Admiral's walls showed only the aluminum cladding of the bulkheads, with few decorations: an old, faded United States flag, a newer Confederate flag, a case of rank insignia and awards from the U.S. Air Force and the Confederate Navy, and a framed picture of a smiling, gray-haired woman that Jean assumed was the Admiral's wife.

A young Crewman-First brought in a tray of dark, aromatic coffee. Admiral Gauss seated Jean in a thick leather chair and insisted on serving her coffee before pouring his own and seating himself at his old gray government-issue desk.

"I hadn't heard you were planning to retire," Jean said.

"Only just decided. My wife," the Admiral gestured towards the picture, confirming Barrett's guess, "She's giving up her House seat at the end of this term. We'll be going back to Earth; our daughter lives there, and we have three grandkids now. It's time." He sipped at his coffee. "In the meantime, I'm still

fighting the damned Congress for a few pennies here and there for training, beans, bullets, and maybe a new ship now and then. 'Peace dividend' and all that, they keep saying. Damned few of them read any history; they don't seem to understand that there won't be any peace for long if we don't keep our Navy up."

"I know," Barrett agreed, "how expensive it is to keep just one ship going. We've had a decent year; even managed to upgrade our drive to the new Mark XI workings."

"It's been tough times for a former privateer," Gauss observed. "Most of your colleagues have gone into some other line of work. That old pirate Johann Hess, he sold his ship at Earth, bought a two-man yacht and vanished - where, nobody knows. Mysterious old fart, he was. How have you been getting along?"

"Hauling a little cargo," Barrett evaded with a smile, "mostly small, high-value stuff people want moved fast. Electronics, pharms, the odd passenger - things like that."

"Found you a niche, then," Gauss said. "That's good." He took another sip of coffee and carefully examined the cup. "I haven't heard that you had your ship's armament dismounted."

"I haven't," Jean said.

"Interesting," Gauss replied, his face carefully neutral. "Legal, of course; it's your ship."

"It is. We operate close to the frontier, Admiral. The Grugell are still out there."

"That's what I keep telling Congress. Well, forget all that. You don't want to listen to an old man complain about politicians. What can I do for you today, Jean?"

"I have some information that may interest you, Admiral. There's a mining station out along the frontier we stumbled across a while back; I have reason to believe they're selling material across the border."

"To the Grugell, you mean."

"Exactly."

The Admiral's eyes turned to polished flint. He leaned across his desk. "Tell me."

Three levels down

Every Fleet dock boasted an impressive library with ample computer terminals tied into the stations intranet. The main Fleet base at Tarbos was no exception, and the intranet on the Tarbos base was massive, with the main database updated regularly from the capital and from Earth, where over half of the Confederacy's human population still lived.

The main database contained a wealth of information accessible to anyone. It also contained most of the Navy's operational data, plans, schematics, and operations details, from mission orders to menus. These were on a secure server on the penultimate level of the station, far from the privately operated lower levels where the *Shade Tree* was docked, and from the library.

To an experienced hacker like Kaelee Adams, the *Shade Tree*'s Second Watch Signals Tech, the Navy may as well have left the door standing open.

"Here," she said as she and Hector Gomp walked through the library. "Here's a good terminal - a bit out of the way." She sat down, extracted a Phoebe datachip from her pocket, plugged it into a port on the terminal, and started tapping the screen.

Behind her, Hector Gomp fidgeted in an excess of nervousness. Knock-down fights were well within Gomp's expertise; sneaking into a Navy base to hack the Navy's computer files was not. "How long is this going to take?"

"Couple minutes." She tapped the screen again; graphics spun on the screen, random numbers flashing. "This is my own program; I'm fairly sure that the Royal Palace on Corinthia has at least as good security protocols as the Navy, and I got through them like a warm knife through butter. Relax."

"I hope you're right. What if they detect you?"

"I'm already in," Adams replied. "We're at a randomly selected terminal in the public library. This program doesn't have any traceable ident tags. We'll be back on the ship before the Navy could get anyone down here, even if they do pick me up."

"I hope you're right."

"There," Adams breathed, "Fleet base plans. Here's Tarbos; here's Halifax. Earth, and even the new base at New Wichita; they haven't even started building that one yet. Should I download them all?"

"Sure," Gomp agreed. "Never know when it might come in handy."

More tapping. "All right," Adams said. "Got them." She reached up, pulled the Phoebe out of the terminal. "Let's go."

"After you."

They meandered towards the exit casually, stopping to look at framed artworks and shelves of electronic book disks along the way. When they finally left the quiet confines of the Library, the colorful bustle of the station's privately operated Commercial levels swallowed the pair.

Four levels above - The Confederate Star Ship Toronto

Captain Angela Ramirez was just getting used to her assignment as commander of the Navy's newest escort carrier; she hadn't expected to end up with a larger command just yet, and so regarded the message pad with some disbelief.

"Captain?" her Executive Officer asked.

"It's true enough, orders from the Fleet Admiral's office. Himself wants us to leave port immediately, along with the frigates *Kidd* and *Charles Buford*, and to head immediately out to some dead system out along the Grugell frontier."

"Why?"

Ramirez handed the pad to her Exec, who scanned it quickly.

"A treaty violation? Is that our job?"

"Technically, it is," Ramirez said, "as long as it involves material crossing the frontier. Smuggling inside the Confederacy is a law enforcement issue. Out there, it's our problem."

"All right. When do you want to leave port?"

"This says 'expedite.' If I know Fleet Admiral Gauss, that means 'haul ass.' Wake up the crew and recall anyone who's ashore; we leave the pier in one hour."

"Aye aye, Captain."

The Shade Tree

Hector Gomp and Kaelee Adams found Captain Barrett waiting for them when they entered the ship's docking umbilical, wide grins on their faces.

"Get what we needed?" Barrett demanded.

"All that and then some," Gomp agreed.

"Good. Get to your stations; we're leaving as soon as I can get clearance."

"Fine with me, Captain," Gomp grinned. "I always liked Halifax."

Seven

Halifax - the Cape Fortune

Captain Amyl Bond was not a patient man. Waiting in port for weeks at a time was galling, much as his crew liked the liberty to spend evenings in the various pubs and clubs of the Fleet dock's private levels rather than in their quarters on the cramped old freighter.

Work was, however, scarce, and the retainer Philemon Baxter was paying him added nicely to his expected half-share of the stolen diamond shipment.

Bond wasn't even sure why he was on his own Bridge this lazy Tuesday afternoon, watching a skeleton crew perform a few minor maintenance chores. The only station on the Bridge that was operational was the Signals panel, and it was the Signals tech that spoke up now.

"Captain, message intercepted from Port Control; the *Shade Tree* was just given permission to dock. Pier Nine, two spaces over from us."

"Nice to have neighbors," Bond noted. "I'm sure Baxter already knows they're here, but send him a heads-up anyway and..."

"Captain," Signals interrupted him, "The *Shade Tree* is signaling us."

"No shit?"

"No shit, Captain. They're requesting a private channel from their Captain to you."

Bond picked up an old Pratt-Siemens headset and put it on. "Send them through to here."

"Transferring."

A moment later, the headset buzzed. There was a hiss of static from a low-powered, short-range radio set, and a voice came through that Bond recognized. " *Cape Fortune*, this is the *Shade Tree*. "

" *Cape Fortune*, " Bond replied.

"Having a nice quiet time in port, are we, Captain Bond?"

"A bit dull. What can I do for you, Captain Barrett?"

"We're approaching our pier now, should be docked inside of ten minutes. How is your medical staff,

Captain? Up to date on communicable diseases?" It was a rhetorical question; a starship medic was useless if they didn't stay current on the diseases one could expect to find on the many Confederate worlds.

"Our Doc is competent," Bond answered. "Why?"

"As soon as we dock," Barrett answered him, "I'll be sending my Security Chief over to your pier. He has a blood sample with him, and he will have orders to place that sample personally in your hands. I'd like you to have your docs analyze it - very carefully, full Class IV biohazard protocol - and tell you what's in it. Then, call me back, and I'll explain it."

"I don't see the point," Bond said, "but I'll do as you ask."

"You'll understand it all in good time, Captain, believe you me. *Shade Tree* out."

"Well," Bond said as he removed the headset. "Isn't this interesting. I'll be going to the docking port," he announced to Signals tech. "Page me if she calls again."

Baxter's office - two hours later

"Boss," Fox informed his employer, "Message from the *Cape Fortune*. " He held out a small message pad.

Baxter raised his eyebrows; Fox normally just read the messages out loud. He took the pad, looked at the screen:

Baxter:

Sorry, but biohazards aren't really our cup of tea. By the time you get this message, we'll have left port. I will expect our retainer through today deposited in our ship company's Tarbos account by six weeks from this date.

Good luck hiring another ship for anything once word of this gets out.

- *Starship Cape Fortune, Amyl Bond, Captain*

"Shit."

"How do you suppose he found out about that?"

"Barrett," Baxter growled. "It had to be that bitch Barrett. She dodged the plague somehow, and got word out."

"This looks bad," Fox observed.

"It's worse than bad," Baxter said. "The *Shade Tree* arrived this afternoon - we heard anything from them yet?"

"Nothing, Mr. Baxter."

"She's up to something," Baxter said. "She's got to be up to something."

Eight

The Shade Tree

"Three suits, prepped and ready," Tim McNeal said.

"Good deal. Heard from the Captain yet?"

"Nothing, Sarge," McNeal answered. "And I just called up to the Bridge and talked to Frye a minute ago. Not a peep."

"Then we're on," Gomp said. "Adams, you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Adams replied with a frown. "I've never been in a suit before, you know."

"You'll be fine," Gomp assured her. "What about you, Mickie?"

Engineering Tech Michiyo "Mickie" Watanabe just grinned and shot Gomp a thumbs-up. She turned to her suit and began climbing in.

"Good deal. All we have to do," Gomp reminded them, "is to get to the third-lower access port, get in, and attach that terminal to the main data feed cable for D Ring. Then, Kaelee, you do your thing. All clear?"

"Oh, jolly clear," Adams said. She looked at the open lower half of the suit, grabbed the hanging rings above the free-standing, armored trousers, and hoisted herself in. "Bloody hell - this thing's two sizes too large for me."

"You'll be fine. Suits are expensive - can't custom fit everyone."

Five minutes later, the docking port's airlock hatch swung outward, and the three space-suited figures climbed out.

Relieved of the *Shade Tree*'s artificial gravity, the suits automatically activated magnetic pads in the boots, allowing the trio to cling to the upper hull of the privateer ship and look upward, upward, at the sleek, gleaming mass of the Halifax space-dock.

"OK, girls, hang onto the grab rings on my belt," Gomp ordered through his short-range suit radio. "and release your mag-pads. We're going for a little ride."

After exchanging an uncertain look, Adams and Watanabe grabbed the polymer rings that dangled from Gomp's space-suit belt and tapped the contacts to override their suit's mag-pads. Their feet floated free of the hull.

"Hold on now." Gomp released his own mag pads, sighted on the hull of the station above Pier Four, and fired his suit thrusters. He twisted and rolled in mid-flight, and arrived neatly at the station hull feet-first, tapping his mag-pads active just as his feet hit the metal.

"See?" he grinned inside his helmet. "Piece of cake."

"Mother of God," Kaelee Adams mumbled.

"*Tsuppattenjya ne-yo*" Mickie Watanabe agreed.

"Never mind that. Access port is," Gomp glanced at the schematic display he'd taped to his suit's left forearm, "about four hundred meters that-a-way. Activate your mag-pads; let's get to walking." He glanced away from the hull, looking "up" at the stars. "Don't want to stay out here too long - these suits' shielding is only good for an hour or two. No need to get a big radiation dose if we can help it."

"Oh, lovely."

"Shut up, Kaelee, and get moving."

Baxter's office

Philemon Baxter looked up from his desk in shock. "What did you say?"

Fox looked at his boss. "Captain Jean Barrett, Mr. Baxter. She's waiting in the outer office."

"Well," Baxter mused, "This is a bit awkward. How's she look?"

"Healthy as a horse."

"Great." Baxter rubbed his eyes and grimaced. "Show her in."

It was to Baxter's credit that he managed a smile as Captain Barrett, still in her shipboard fatigues, walked in. There was hardly a person in the galaxy he less wanted to see, with the possible exception of his ex-wife's mother. Still, he grinned broadly and extended his hand as though he was greeting a valued old friend. "Captain Barrett! So good to see you."

"Baxter," Barrett smiled nastily as she shook his hand.

"Captain. I didn't expect to see you here; I thought the deal was for you to contact the *Cape Fortune* to arrange the transfer."

"The *Cape Fortune* was *here*," Jean Barrett pointed out, "at least until an hour ago, making it a tad difficult to contact from way out on the frontier." She helped herself to a chair across from Baxter's desk. "Besides - we had a little complication."

"You did?"

Don't give me that wide-eyed innocent look, you son of a bitch, Barrett thought, but she kept that to herself. "Yes, just a little one. We got it cleared up, but we've had some problems with our Signals suite that made it necessary to come here for repairs. So, I figured, why not come see you in person?"

Baxter looked uncomfortable. "I wouldn't have thought you'd be too comfortable, this close to a Navy base and all."

"Oh," Barrett smiled, "The Navy and I go way back. Fleet Admiral Gauss is an old friend of mine."

"I see."

"So," Jean continued, her smile growing dark, "All I need from you, Philemon, is one thing."

"What's that?"

Outside

It took some searching to find the access port, faired as it was into the hull of the station. Mickie Watanabe finally noticed the hair-thin seam of the panel after ten minutes of walking back and forth.

"All right," Gomp told her, "go ahead, try your gadget."

Watanabe looked at the hatch, and then tapped several contacts on a small black panel taped to the arm of her pressure suit.

"No luck," she grunted.

"Try another code."

More tapping. " *Chikusho* !"

"Got any more?"

"Let me try one more thing," Watanabe answered. "I hope don't trip any security monitors with this." Her final option was a program that sent the panels' controller a spinning list of codes, using a random-number generator to spin through a billion possible combinations in the space of about a minute. Forty-eight seconds later, the hatch slid open.

"Well," Mickie Watanabe smiled down at the opening. "No alarms. No flashing lights. Looks like we're golden."

"Let's get in. Data cables should be about ten meters in to the right."

The three climbed carefully in, and made an unpleasant discovery; the station's artificial gravity functioned, but there was no airlock; the access panel had released no blast of air. The maintenance spaces were not pressurized.

"Can you work in your suit, Kaelee?" Gomp wanted to know.

"I'll have to, won't I then?"

"Here's the cable," Watanabe called out. "And here's a panel. You can plug your terminal in here."

"Good." Kaelee Adams came forward, pulling a miniature data terminal out of the cargo pocket of her suit. "This is it. Give me ten minutes, and I should have everything we need."

Gomp stood, tapping his boot impatiently against the aluminum deck plate, watching the minutes tick by on the heads-up display inside his suit helmet. After eight and a half minutes:

"All right," Kaelee said. "I've got what we wanted. The Easter egg is in."

"Good. Let's get back to the ship. Time for Part Two."

Baxter's Office

"Someone reported you to the Navy as a plague ship?"

"Damn right," Barrett replied. "And I'm damned mad about it, I can tell you. They boarded us at Tarbos, went through the whole ship."

"But they didn't find your cargo?"

"We didn't have it laying out on the deck. I've been doing this sort of thing for a while, you know."

Baxter frowned. "Well, where was it that a Navy scanning crew couldn't find it?"

"That," Captain Barrett smiled, "would be telling. Besides, they were medics - they were looking for pathogens, not contraband."

"I see." Baxter drummed his fingers on his desk. "What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me where that cargo came from."

"I can't do that," Baxter protested. "As you put it, Captain, that would be telling. I can't reveal my sources any more than you can reveal your methods of smuggling."

"I don't much care for the term 'smuggling,' but I take your point." Barrett grinned, nastily this time, and stood up. "In that case, I have something else for you."

It wasn't apparent from her slim build, especially not when she was wearing her baggy shipboard fatigues, but Jean Barrett was a woman of considerable strength. Throwing herself on the desk, she grabbed Baxter's shirt and pulled him close, kissing him hard on the mouth. Baxter struggled for a moment, feeling Barrett's tongue against his clenched teeth, before she let him go.

"See?" Barrett smiled at him, still laying across his desk. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"What the *hell* is wrong with you?"

"Maybe I just find you irresistible, Philemon," she told him. Her face changed, from a smile to a mask of anger. "Or, maybe it's just a little pre-emptive payback; if I've got anything, you bastard, now you do too."

"You're insane!"

"I'm a pirate," Barrett agreed, "thanks to you. I'm *supposed* to be insane. Best of luck, Baxter; I'll see you around." She spun on her heel and stalked from the office.

"Wait a minute! What about the goddamn cargo?"

Barrett stopped in the doorway, turned and smiled at Baxter. "What cargo?" she asked. "Are you implying that I have something that belongs to you? Do you have a copy of a bill of lading, or any other documentation of that cargo? I don't recall having any cargo consignment from you or anyone else, Philemon," she said as Baxter fumed. "I do have some odds and ends of materials from an abandoned ship we found out near the frontier, legally taken according to existing laws governing legitimate salvage. But I don't have any cargo," she smiled.

"You bitch," was all Baxter could manage.

"A bit of advice, Philemon," Barrett said, "deal straight with people, and people will deal straight with you. Although, I suspect you'll have a hard time finding any ship captains that are willing to deal with you at all after this."

With that, she spun on her heel and left.

The Shade Tree

Gomp pulled off his helmet, and then turned to help Kaelee Adams and Mickie Watanabe out of theirs. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Nothing like a bit of fresh air," Mickie said.

"And that was nothing like a bit of fresh air," Kaelee added.

Gomp looked at his wristband. "Almost fourteen; Captain should be back any minute."

"The Captain is already back," Jean Barrett announced as she walked into the narrow docking port

compartment. "How did it go?"

"Just as we planned, Captain," Gomp said. "Maintenance spaces aren't pressurized, but we managed. Kaelee's good at this stuff; only took her ten minutes. Mickie got us in with no trouble, too; all I had to do was stand around."

"Good. Get that data on our system; I want to know where, when, how and to whom Baxter had that transfer set up. Most of all, I want to know how much whoever it is, is paying. We may just all get a bonus this trip. I want to leave port in two hours - get moving."

"Aye aye, Captain," the three crew members repeated as one, grinning widely at the prospect of money.

Barrett looked at Kaelee Adams. "You got the Easter egg in, did you?"

"I did, Captain," Adams smirked. "Next time Baxter tries to make a hyperphone call, all of his confidential records, including all of his cross-border dealings, will be forwarded to the Confederate Bureau of Investigation office on the station. I expect he'll be getting a visit from a couple of CBI agents about ten minutes after that."

"And a nice long stay behind a force field in the detention facility down on the surface," Gomp chuckled.

"I expect he'll be on his hyperphone line trying to reach the *Cape Fortune* at any moment, too. Let that be a lesson to you all," Barrett said. "Do unto others..."

"Before they can do unto you," Gomp finished the sentence.

They all laughed.

Nine

The Grugell frigate K-110

With nothing to do, Group Commander Kestakrickell IV was relaxing in his command suite when the door chime sounded.

"Come," he called, and looked up to see the frigate's commanding officer walk in, a grin on his narrow face.

"Our long and boring wait has finally come to an end," Commander Chiksteskattitk II informed his Group Commander. "We have a short-range signal from a Confederate ship. They have the shipment that Baxter offered, and will meet us at the arranged rendezvous in one day."

"I presume they had the location and the security codes, as arranged?"

"Indeed they did, Captain. All codes match. They are on their way here now."

Kestakrickell stood up. "Very well. Find two good officers to make the 'transfer;' arm them well. Move us into the moon, and prepare a landing shuttle. We will conclude our business here, and then return to accept a second shipment from Bolin."

"As you command," the Commander agreed.

The unnamed Type II moon of an unnamed gas giant

The system had two planets, both gas giants, both within the 'green zone' of their large blue-white star.

The closer of the two giants had two planet-sized moons; one was tropical, the other a desiccated pill of a world, farther out in its orbit and therefore more geologically stable than the other.

It was on this world that Baxter had arranged to swap contraband diamonds for Grugell gold.

On the *Shade Tree*'s Bridge, Jean Barrett and Indira Krishnavarna looked at the main screen, where the image of a gleaming silver orb with two trailing yellow drive pods swam into view above the rust-brown shape of the desert moon.

"That's a Type 11 Grugell frigate," Krishnavarna said.

"Yup," Barrett agreed. "What did you expect?" She fought back the urge to order shields and weapons; it had not been *that* long since the war.

"Touchy situation, Cap'n," Hector Gomp muttered.

Barrett looked over at her Security Chief where he stood just inside the main Bridge hatchway. "Get your stuff ready, Gomp. You and I will go down and do the meet."

"Cap'n," the ex-Marine warned, "I don't like it. I don't trust them. They'll double-cross us."

"I know."

"You're not worried about it?"

"Gomp," Barrett smiled, "I'm *counting* on it."

Gomp didn't understand, but he grinned, shrugged, and headed towards his cabin to pick up his gun belt.

"Indira," Barrett called.

The Exec walked across the Bridge. "Captain?"

"Keep the main drive warmed up. We may have to leave in a hurry. Channel some reserve power, quietly, to the weapons systems. Keep a good targeting solution on that frigate with both forward pee-beam emitters; if it starts to power weapons or shields, or tries to cloak, cut it in half."

"All right, Captain. I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I."

"You're taking a big risk," the Exec pointed out. "You should send Gomp and McNeal down to make the swap."

"And miss all the excitement? Not a chance."

The K-110

The bridge on a Type 11 Grugell frigate was narrow and cramped by human standards, but the Grugell found it capacious, with room enough for an expansive view screen at the front. Group Commander Kestakrickell IV looked at the screen now, where the image showed the charcoal-gray hull of the Confederate ship holding position off the *K-110*'s bow.

"Be ready, but no power to weapons," the Group Commander ordered. "Not yet. Let us make the exchange first. Commander, is your landing party ready?"

"They are at the landing shuttle even now, Group Commander," Chiksteskatitk replied. "They have the gold, and they have hand weapons."

"That," Kestakrickell said, "should be sufficient."

The Shade Tree

Jean Barrett had 'liberated' her landing shuttle from the wreck of a Confederate Navy destroyer during the war. Thus far, the Navy had not bothered asking for it back, and every time Barrett was compelled to take it to the surface of some undeveloped world, she was sure she knew why. The teardrop-shaped ship had only room for the pilot, three passengers, and was able to carry only a thousand kilos or so of cargo; insufficient to do much good in resupply, but enough to move high-value material - or contraband.

The shuttle's main weakness lay in its means of moving down a planet's gravity well. Described in the manual as a "lifting body" hull, the shuttle depended on an old-fashioned, un-powered descent, protected from friction by a ceramic surface on its flat belly. This made for a rough ride, especially given that the pilot could not see where he was going until the last few moments, when (one hoped) the shuttle's maneuvering thrusters kicked in.

Since the *Shade Tree* was too small for a hangar, the shuttle was attached to a hard point on the ship's belly, which made access a matter of climbing through a manhole-sized port in the deck and dropping into the shuttle's control compartment. Barrett dropped into the shuttle first. Gomp squeezed his bulk through a moment later and moved to the controls.

"Strap in, Captain," he said, seating himself and fastening the heavy four-point webbing harness. "Detaching now."

The shuttle left the ship with a loud *clang*. Gomp tapped a contact, and thrusters fired to aim the shuttle at the moon below.

"Gravity about two-thirds gee, Captain," he said. "Should be a decent ride."

"I hope so. At least McNeal isn't aboard this time. Funny about him and shuttle rides, after as much as he's bummed around on starships."

"Yeah," Gomp chuckled. "Took me a good two hours to clean the puke off the control panel last time I took him down a gravity well."

The K-110

"The landing shuttle is away, Group Commander," Chiksteskatitk reported.

"Very well. Hold your position. Everything proceeds according to plan."

On the surface

Captain Barrett found breathing a little hard; the dry, dusty world was a little short on oxygen. Only the gravity of about two-thirds gee made it tolerable.

"Incoming, Cap'n," Hector Gomp pointed at the gleaming silver shape of a Grugell shuttle, flashing down through the atmosphere towards them. Barrett loosened her pistol in its holster. Gomp drew his holstered revolver, checked the load of eight 10mm hollow points. They were ready.

Barrett squinted at the gleaming silver shuttle. "Punctual bastards, aren't they?"

Gomp shrugged. The Grugell shuttle passed overhead once, then turned, idled slowly back, and settled to the ground about fifty meters away. The hatch popped open, and two tall, spare figures emerged.

"Captain Barrett," the taller of the two Grugell smiled amiably.

"That's me. And you are?"

"Tiskatrattik III, Subcommander under Chiksteskatitk II. My inferior here is Gorbatamik V."

"This is Sergeant Gomp," Barrett said. "You have the gold?"

Tiskatrattik pulled a small silver pad from his pocket and tapped it twice. A polished black cargo container floated from the Grugell shuttle's hatch.

"You won't mind if we verify," Barrett said.

"By all means, Captain," Tiskatrattik said with a grin.

Gomp walked forward and popped the seals on the cargo container. He extracted a portable scanner from a pocket, passed it over the container.

"It's real, Cap'n," he called back. "Five hundred kilograms of gold, one thousand fine."

"Bring it over," Barrett ordered.

Gomp put one hand on the floating cargo container, guided it back towards his Captain.

"Our diamonds?"

"See that ridge?" Barrett pointed over the Grugell's shoulder. "The diamonds are in the original cargo containers, just on the other side, under a couple of camouflage cloths. Here," she tossed Tiskatrattik a small portable scanner, "this will lead you right to them."

Tiskatrattik turned the scanner on, examined it for a moment. "Very well."

"Pleasure doing business with you, Subcommander," Barrett said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have places to go and people to see. Gomp, let's get that container back to the shuttle." She turned as if to walk away, but the high-pitched voice of the Grugell officer stopped her.

"I'm afraid not," Tiskatrattik called out, "Captain, you know we can't allow you to just walk away."

"Why did I have a feeling you were going to say that?" Barrett stopped, turned, faced the two grinning Grugell.

Tiskatrattik and his sidekick both had blasters drawn and leveled. "Orders are orders, you know, Captain. Gold is very valuable to the Emperor - far too valuable to trade away to some Confederate pirate. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, I understand, all right. Gomp, you understand?"

"Yeah. Fifty dollars, Cap'n?" Gomp said in a low voice.

"You're on," Barrett agreed.

Gomp smiled a slow, lazy smile. Barrett looked at the smirking Grugell - and dove for the dusty ground, drawing her .45 and firing at Tiskatrattik even as Gomp rolled and fired his revolver at the second

Grugell.

"Mine hit the ground first," Gomp claimed as he got back on his feet.

"Mine was taller."

Gomp stood looking at his Captain, grinning like an ape. "All right," Barrett conceded. "You win. Fifty dollars." She dug in her trouser pocket, found a roll of bills, pulled one off and tossed it to Gomp, who pocketed it with a grin as Barrett withdrew a small but high-powered transmitter from her pocket.

"*Shade Tree*, " she said into the device. "This is Lander One."

"*Shade Tree* here," came the reply.

"Case Alpha," Barrett said.

"Case Alpha, confirmed. *Shade Tree* out."

"Now," Barrett said, "let's load this stuff in the shuttle and get back to the ship. Not a bad day's work, Gomp."

"Should feed us for a good spell," Gomp agreed. "Along with those diamonds." The diamonds were still on the *Shade Tree* ; Third Watch scanning tech Miguel Sanchez had carefully set up the hand scanner with a ghost reading.

"We're not done yet," Barrett pointed out. "We still have to sell the cargo. I think I know the best place to do that."

The Shade Tree

"Double-crossing bastards," Indira Krishnavarna breathed. "Weapons, fire pee-beams on prearranged targets. Target two Shrikes. Blow those treacherous bastards out of space."

Two faintly visible lines of force lanced from the *Shade Tree* 's forward emitters, smashing the Grugell frigate's shield projectors seconds before two anti-ship missiles arrived to shatter the gleaming silver shape. The *Shade Tree* 's bridge crew watched dispassionately as the remnants of the ship spun slowly towards the moon below.

"First time I've ever fired on a Grugell ship," Weapons tech Gillian Bates breathed. "But we're not at war now."

"Too bad for them," the Exec pointed out. "Better they had stayed on their own side of the border."

"I've got the landing shuttle on radar," Ophelia Watts called from the Scanning console. "ETA twenty-two minutes."

"Very well," the Exec said. She stood up, stretching, and watched the main screen for a moment as the last silver shards of the wrecked Grugell frigate toppled away into the moon's thin atmosphere, ignited, disappeared. "Hope nobody is waiting on them back at Grugell. I'm going down to the sally port to meet the Captain; hold our current orbit. Newman, page all decks, tell everyone to make ready to leave orbit. I expect we'll be saying goodbye to this little rock presently."

Ten

Six weeks later - Denver, Colorado, Earth

"And you say these came off an abandoned ship?"

"All but abandoned," Jean Barrett told the Off-World Mining & Exploration buyer. "There were two bodies in the sick bay. Looked like plague."

"Plague? What happened to the ship?"

"Blown up," Barrett said evenly. "It's the law."

"Sure enough."

Barrett looked at the buyer closely, but he didn't seem particularly interested in the fate of the *Orlando*. Not with the cargo he had opened before him.

"These are good quality," the buyer said, running a scanner over one of the two cargo containers of diamonds. "First-rate Type IV and V industrial diamonds. Some boron content. Good for electronics and half a dozen other applications." He snapped his scanner shut, pulled a data pad from his pocket, tapped away for a moment. "Looks like, wholesale rate, six point two five million Confederate dollars. Not a bad bit of salvage, Captain."

"Should keep my ship operating for a while."

"Here," the buyer handed Barrett a mini-terminal with a retinal scanner. "Put in your bank's code and your account code, look into the scanner, and we're done."

Jean Barrett tapped at the keys on the scanner, looked into the eye port for a moment, and handed the device back when it beeped.

"Money will be in your account in two to three weeks, depending on hyperphone traffic to Tarbos," the OWME buyer informed her.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Barrett said. She shook the man's hand and left.

Halifax

Judge Olivia Worsham was known as a 'hanging judge' on Halifax, an archaic term that once applied to judges with a predilection for sending convicts to the gallows, but now applied to pitiless jurists with a liking for harsh punishment. It was the final piece of Philemon Baxter's bad luck to have his case come before Judge Worsham.

"You have been found guilty of thirty-five counts of attempted murder by biological agent; one count of attempt to solicit piracy; and one count of conspiracy to violate interstellar treaties. Do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?"

Baxter looked helplessly at his impassive trio of lawyers - none of the three had been optimistic after reviewing Baxter's comm records that had somehow found their way into the hands of the Confederate Bureau of Investigation. He looked back at the judge and shrugged. "No, Your Honor."

"You are sentenced to forty years in maximum security confinement in the Halifax penal facility," Worsham said. "Sentence to begin immediately."

She banged her polymer gavel down with a sharp note of finality.

Adamstown

Adam Bolin reclined in his office chair, his hands dangling and his jaw slack. Overhead, a few kilometers from the station in a very obvious low orbit, was the unmistakable gunmetal-gray shape of a Confederate navy escort carrier.

The comm panel on his desk buzzed. He looked at it for a moment, and then tapped a contact with a resigned look on his face. "Bolin," he said.

"This is the Confederate Navy carrier *Toronto*, " the panel replied. "Are you the chief executive of this station?"

"I am," Bolin admitted.

"This is Captain Angela Ramirez, Confederate Navy, commanding Task Group 103.1," the voice went on. "One of my ships, the frigate *Kidd*, has intercepted two freighters registered to this facility returning from Grugell space with an illegal load of volatiles. You are ordered to prepare to receive an investigation and data retrieval team, and to make all records available for inspection."

It had been a while since Bolin had felt claustrophobic in the huge pressure dome of Adamstown's central kraal, but it was plain now that he had nowhere to run to. "Very well," he replied, "Stand by for landing clearance."

The Shade Tree

Jean Barrett strode onto her ship's Bridge with an expansive smile on her face. The main screen still showed the inside of Pier Nineteen of Earth's massive spacedock, but Barrett was ready to see stars on the screen again.

She looked to see Indira Krishnavarna grinning at her from the Exec's station. "Gomp and McNeal back yet?"

"They got back an hour ago," the Exec said. "No issues converting Grugell gold to cash - they scattered it out through several jewelry wholesalers and a couple of industrial buyers. Total take was about four and a half million."

"Not a bad day's work," Barrett said. "A bit over ten million dollars out of this debacle; that pays off the lien I took out to get the drive upgraded, pays and feeds everyone for a good six months, and should even spring us all a nice bonus."

"I like the sound of that," Hector Gomp said as he walked onto the Bridge. "Crew's all on board, Cap'n."

The Captain tapped a contact on the arm of her bridge chair that paged the Engineering compartment. "BJ? How are we looking?"

"Star drive is healthy and happy," the Chief Engineer replied through the comm panel. "Water and O2 tanks are full. Reserve batteries at full charge. Converters primed and ready. Ship is ready for space, Captain."

"Signals?" Barrett said.

"We have clearance to leave port, Captain," Helmsman Paolo Guerra said.

"Cast off the docking umbilical. Clear all moorings. Maneuvering thrusters all back one-third." On the screen, the spacedock started to back away.

"Where we going now, Cap'n?" Gomp wanted to know.

"Away from here," Barrett said. "How about Avalon? I've never been to Avalon, but I hear they've had a bumper crop of inspirationweed there this year. Let's go see if we can pick up a load on speculation."

"Good market for that stuff on some of the developed planets," Gomp noted.

"That's what I hear."

"Clear of spacedock," Helm reported. "Free to maneuver."

"Come about to new course one-eighty by ten. Navigation, plot trajectory for Avalon."

"Plotted and marked, Captain. Plot sent to Helm."

"Ahead full," Barrett ordered. She smiled again.

"Let's go see what else is out there."

Part Two

Unrepentant Sinner

Prologue

Slavers

During the wave of expansion that followed the First Galactic War, exploration quickly exceeded the ability of the Confederate government to monitor events. This led to several kinds of lawlessness. Slavery was one of those issues; between 2254 and 2265 C.E., the Confederate Bureau of Investigation investigated no fewer than sixteen abductions and attempted abductions by slavers, resulting in nineteen convictions.

One of the more egregious slaver rings was conducted by an organized group operating in the Avalon system. The ring specialized in supplying young women to the miners and gas distillers that operated in the rings of the systems' gas giant as well as in the systems' Kuiper belt.

Only two convictions resulted from the CBI investigation, however, as an unexplained nuclear detonation destroyed the colony that supported the slaver's primary base of operations. The source of the nuclear device was never discovered, although an armed privateer ship was known to be in the area just prior to the detonation. Following the explosion, several young women that had been reported missing from the Mountain View area of Tarbos were returned home safely; none of them would name the ship that transported them from the Avalon system to Tarbos.

The actions of these slavers, smugglers, pirates and other lawbreakers would eventually lead to the Confederate government's tightening of control over traffic to and from outlying regions, and eventually over the outlying planets themselves.

- Morris/Handel, "A History of the First Galactic Confederacy," University Publications, 2804CE

One

Tarbos

The old man woke suddenly, like a cat, almost as though he had never been asleep. As was his habit, he lay still, letting his eyes and ears take in the surroundings - the never-changing surroundings of his spacious Mountain View studio penthouse.

The sun was up, barely visible through the nighttime polarization of the big windows that faced the ocean. The old man moved only his eyes, scanning the room. Nothing was out of place.

Satisfied that his surroundings were secure, he finally moved. He sat on the edge of the bed, stretched, rubbed the ache in the small of his back and ignored the more insistent pain in his belly.

Colonel Augustus G. Feller, Confederate Marine Corps (Retired) knew what the pain was. He knew that rubbing wouldn't make it go away. The best doctors, the best treatments in the Confederacy had not been able to reduce the cancer that chewed through his insides.

Since there was nothing he could do about it, Gus Feller had long since decided not to bother worrying about the cancer. "I suppose it will kill me one day," he told his few surviving old friends, "but what the hell doesn't?" And then he proceeded to enjoy life as he always had.

At eighty-two, Feller was a robust, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, ruddy-faced, bandy-legged man. Despite his age, his arms and legs were as tight as spring steel. A thin fringe of close-cropped white hair circled his high-templed, broad skull; he looked out at the world through steel-gray eyes under brows of shaggy white. His nose was misshapen from multiple breaks; a thin knife scar ran from his left eye to just short of his upper lip.

Feller tapped a contact on his universal remote, depolarizing the windows to let in the brilliant sunshine of a beautiful Mountain View spring morning. He wandered into the bathroom, went through his morning routine, and emerged minutes later in an ancient United States Navy Academy bathrobe. He walked across the flat and out onto the balcony, where he sat in a lounge chair and lit a mammoth Forestian cigar. He blew a smoke ring at the rising sun and frowned.

Gus Feller was cruelly bored.

Feller was a man used to adventure. Thirty-two years in the United States Marine Corps on Earth, followed by ten more in the Confederate Marines, all had left him with a taste for travel and excitement. Even under fire, fear never entered into Feller's thinking. Retirement sat on him like a ton of rock.

He had found some short-term excitement, to keep retirement from becoming too tedious. A series of astute investments had left him with considerable financial means, and so Feller had launched on a round of trips, hunting rocs on Forest, African buffalo on Earth, paragliding in the canyons of Avalon, deep-sea fishing on Caliban, and sightseeing and entertaining on Corinthia.

After a while, even the prospect of a charging roc had palled; and while his resources were considerable, they weren't unlimited; planet-hopping was expensive. The Colonel needed to find something else to do; the cancer limited his time, but Feller was determined not to die alone in his bed, or in the Mountain View Veteran's Hospice.

He didn't yet know it, but even as he enjoyed his first morning cigar, the answer to his boredom was just arriving in geosynchronous orbit over Mountain View.

The Shade Tree

"In our assigned orbit, Captain. Autocontrol engaged," Paolo Guerra announced from the ship's helm. On the bridge's main viewscreen, the blue-green-white orb of Tarbos turned slowly. "Damn, ain't she pretty,"

Guerra breathed.

"Good. We got a shuttle berth assigned yet?"

"Just came in - we're assigned to berth Sixteen-D."

"Good." Jean Barrett tapped the arm of her bridge chair and picked up her wand mike. "All hands," she announced over the ship-wide address system, "We're in Tarbos orbit. One week's shore leave for everyone. Third watch gets first shot at the shuttle to the Skyhook, then first, then second. Let's be orderly, people. Have a good time, and try not to end up in jail. That is all." She laid the mike back in its cradle, leaned back in her bridge chair and stretched like a cat.

"Too bad we couldn't get a berth on the Fleet spacedock's commercial level," Indira Krishnavarna observed from her Executive Officer's station.

"Tarbos is getting pretty crowded these days," Barrett said. "More and more traffic all the time. I hear tell they may be building a second orbital station, this one all commercial. Besides," she continued, "The Confederate Bureau of Investigation just opened new offices on the Fleet dock - smart people in our line of work steer clear of the CBI as a matter of principle."

"I suppose so," the Exec snickered, "especially after this last job."

"Prostitution is legal," Barrett said, an expression of mock severity on her face, "Even if those tight-ass Corinthian lords didn't take too well to us transporting a dozen pros to set up a Service House in their capital."

"Asking payment in advance was a good move. Especially since the Corinthians nearly opened fire on us before we jumped out of orbit."

"Right, and by the way, remind me never to make a jump to subspace that close in to a gravity well again. I think we shook a few things loose - I'll look into repairs while we're here, no point in screwing up Engineering's shore leave."

The speaker on the arm of her Bridge chair buzzed; Barrett stabbed a contact. "Bridge, Captain speaking."

"Cap'n," Security Chief Hector Gomp's voice came from the tiny speaker, "Are you going to be needing any of my troops for anything, or can I cut 'em loose?"

"Let them go," Barrett replied, "I don't think we'll have to fight off any boarding parties in geosynchronous orbit over Tarbos - not with the Navy hanging up there looking down at us. You going down too?"

"You bet," Gomp's voice chuckled. "Got some plans, got to unwind a little."

"Don't unwind yourself into the Mountain View city jail," Barrett warned. "Remember last time we were here - I don't want to have to come sign you out of the pokey again."

"Nothing to worry about. Just a little friendly recreation. Out here," Gomp replied.

"Captain, autocontrol is functioning normally, security protocols are in place," Helmsman Paolo Guerra reported. Barrett looked up; the entire Bridge crew was looking at her expectantly.

"You want permission to clear the Bridge, don't you?"

"Well sure, Captain," Guerra grinned.

"All right," Barrett said, "Go on, then - you're all dismissed. Clear the Bridge."

With a communal whoop of glee, the duty crew leaped at once for the passageway.

Only Indira Krishnavarna lagged behind, pausing in the doorway to ask, "What about you, Captain? Got anything planned? The autocontrol and security protocols can look after the ship for a few days."

"I haven't lost anything in Mountain View," Barrett evaded.

"Well, no, but just because it..." The Exec stopped suddenly; mentioning Barrett's short-lived romance with Confederate Senator Michael Crider Jr., which began in Mountain View, was a good way to invoke the Captain's Irish temper.

"Not anything," Barrett said firmly. "I might go down for a day or so, but after I get a good, long sleep in my own rack; six-hour nights are fine when we're in space, but it's nice to be able to just sleep as long as I want, and I can't ever seem to do that with this noisy crew banging around this little ship. A little peace and quiet will be nice."

"All right," Krishnavarna said. "I'm going to visit my cousin in Rangely; the comm code is in the computer. If you need me. I'll take the last shuttle to the Skyhook."

"Have fun," Barrett said as her Exec left the Bridge.

Barrett stood up, stretched again and looked around the Bridge, strangely empty and quiet with no duty watch. "Peace and quiet," she repeated to no one.

A hundred kilometers away

The ship was old and space worn, but functional. Early in its career, it had worked the Earth - Caliban - Zed run as a light cargo hauler of the *Rorqual* class, but now the ship - renamed the *Brookes* - carried cargoes less legitimate than mining equipment, settlers and supplies.

"In assigned orbit, Boss," the ship's Helmsman reported.

"When's local nightfall?"

"About nine hours," the Navigation tech answered.

"Good. Unlimber the cargo shuttle. Get us a landing clearance at the usual field."

"Already on it, Boss."

Several levels below in a cavernous hangar bay, figures began moving around a large cargo shuttle, preparing it for a descent to the surface of Tarbos.

"How many this time?"

"At least a half-dozen," the ship's commander answered, "and younger this time. Prices are going down some, our buyers are getting paranoid. Find 'em young and pretty."

"Sure thing, Boss. We'll be careful."

The Shade Tree

Hector Gomp was waiting impatiently for the last shuttle for the Skyhook to dock when Indira

Krishnavarna found him.

"What's up, Exec?" the former Marine asked.

"Your troops get off all right?"

"Yeah - McNeal's off to visit some girl he met last time we were here, the girls are headed down the coast to the Tide Pool, and Mickey Crowe - well, who the hell knows where *he* goes when he gets leave? He never says much of anything to anyone at best of times."

Krishnavarna chuckled. "Yes, he's the strong, silent type. What about you?"

"You know me, Exec," Gomp leered. "Just off to find me some quality time with one or two of the locals."

"Female locals, I presume."

"None other. Cap'n is staying on the ship again, isn't she?"

"Yes," the Exec replied. "I wish she'd unwind a little bit, just once in a while. She's determined to work herself to death, I think."

"Cap'n ain't got good memories of Mountain View, you know," Gomp pointed out. "Well, that is, she does, but that was then - you know?"

"I know. But life goes on."

"Yeah." Gomp looked out the port. "Finally - here comes the damn shuttle. I'm outta here. Exec, you have fun with your cousin, hear?"

"Have a good time," Krishnavarna said. "Try not to get thrown in jail again."

Gomp scowled. "Geez. A guy screws up once around here and no one ever lets him forget it."

Two

Mountain View

Like any city, Mountain View had good areas and bad, safe neighborhoods and unsafe neighborhoods. Hector Gomp could move safely through some of these areas, but other members of the *Shade Tree* crew were required to be more cautious.

Engineering technicians Saskia Miroslava and Michiyo Watanabe were very cautious, but even caution has its limits. The afternoon spent on Mountain View's expansive beach had long since passed into evening; Tarbos' 21-hour days made for startlingly short evenings. It was fully dark by the time the girls, walking to save cab fare, turned onto the narrow street where they had booked rooms in a clean but inexpensive hotel.

They had vastly enjoyed their day on the beach. Together, the two girls made a striking contrast - Sassy was tall, blonde, blue-eyed, with finely sculpted Slavic features, while Mickie was petite, black-haired and black-eyed, with the delicate features common to young girls of her native Japan. Add abbreviated bathing suits, suntan oil, and the exuberance of wind, sand and sun after eight weeks cramped aboard ship, and both girls had drawn a lot of attention from young men sharing the stretch of beach.

They didn't yet know it, but they had drawn some less welcome attention as well.

Several of the street's municipal area lights were out. The girls were still in their bathing suits, beach towels wrapped around their hips, and the night was growing cool; they were hurrying through the quiet neighborhood, without paying close attention to their surroundings.

"Sassy," Watanabe asked for the fifth time, "are you sure this is the way to the hotel?"

"Sure. It's right up this street."

"I don't recognize this building," Mickie complained.

"Mickie," Sassy said, "relax. See?" She pointed to a dimly lighted sign hanging from a building ahead.
"There's the sign."

"All right, finally. I'm cold. Let's get inside."

The two girls wrapped their beach towels tightly around themselves and hurried up the dark, empty street.

On a rooftop above, two dark-suited figures peered over the flat-topped building's edge. One whispered into a throat mike. "They're almost there. Two, tall blonde, little brunette. Catch them when they pass the alley."

A voice crackled back into the dark figure's ear piece. "I hear them. Just have the skimmer ready."

"Don't worry - these two and the others will be enough for this trip. We'll be leaving orbit in two hours, so just shut up and do your job."

"I'm on it."

In the alley below, another dark-suited figure cradled a specially modified Tangler. An ordinary Tangler fired a web of sticky liquid that hardened into a dense, rubbery substance on impact, effectively trapping its target in a heavy web and fastening to any surface, wall, floor or ground, which it touched. Local police and Marines favored the Tangler for capturing antagonists without a fight; not even the strongest man could break a Tangler web.

The man in the alley cradled a large, bulky weapon that had been built around a Tangler, but had three features the standard Tangler lacked: its web was not sticky except to itself; the launching device was modified to retract the web at the touch of a contact, effectively reeling the quarry in to the weapon's handler; finally, a large capacitor array delivered a considerable high-voltage, low amperage stun charge through the web on impact.

This modified Tangler could catch a target, stun it, and quickly withdraw it from the target area, at ranges up to fifteen meters. It was a weapon admirably suited for covert abductions.

The slapping sound of the two girl's beach shoes was growing louder. The man in the alley raised his weapon, braced himself, and waited.

"You know," Mickie Watanabe was saying, "I'm going to have a hot shower, and a drink, and then we could..." She stopped at the *PLUNK* of the Tangler firing, but before either girl could react, they were slammed together, encased in the heavy webbing. The stun charge fired, knocking both girls instantly unconscious, a half-second before the retractor reeled their limp forms into the alley.

Only one fallen beach towel lay on the sidewalk.

"I got 'em both," the man in the alley reported over this throat mike. "Get that skimmer down here."

Less than a minute later, a heavy cargo skimmer backed down the alley. The unconscious girls were unceremoniously tossed inside, where another figure quickly administered an air-hypo drug that would keep them asleep for several hours. The skimmer floated onto the street, bound for a small landing field west of the city.

Elsewhere

The Buena Vista was not one of Mountain View's more reputable establishments. Hector Gomp liked the place, not in spite of that, but because of it. "It's a good place to blow off steam," he often said, "after a few months on ship."

By the time Gomp got off the Skyhook bus and found a droid cab to the Buena Vista, a typical Friday night was already in progress; the metro police were dragging two brawlers out of the front door as Gomp got out of the cab.

"My kind of place," he said to himself. He swiped his Inter-Visa in the slot on the cab's door and headed for the bar's entrance.

Inside, the bar was dark and smoky. A scattering of Navy and Marine uniforms were visible among the crowd of locals; most belonged to a large group of Marines celebrating loudly in a side room. In the back of the bar, in front of a small wooden dance floor, a local band thumped away at something that sounded like a group of maniacs skinning a pack of live wildcats.

Gomp took a seat at the bar.

A middle-aged, scowling bartender in a server's shirt that had once been white walked down the bar. "What's yours?"

"Beer," Gomp replied.

"Wanna run a tab?"

"Yeah." Gomp scanned his Inter-Visa card in the reader at his elbow.

The bartender yanked a glass mug off the overhead rack, held it under the tap while it dispensed, slid the cold beer across the bar to Gomp.

Beer tastes so much better ashore, Gomp thought, taking a long pull at the frosted mug. He took a critical look around the bar. All the female patrons seemed to be accompanied. He wasn't worried; the night was young.

Three hours and four games of holo-pool later, Gomp's luck in seeking feminine companionship had not improved. After breaking even on his fourth game, he handed his cue to another player and headed back to the bar.

The band was still caterwauling in the back of the room. The bar had filled up some, mostly with couples and groups, one of the few exceptions being an old man seated at the bar two spaces down from Gomp. The old man sat with a beer mug in front of him, a morose expression on his face, and a huge cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth; he was watching the crowd in the large mirror behind the bar.

Gomp called for a beer and sat, sipping thoughtfully. *Maybe I should try over at the Anchor. More singles there. Younger crowd.*

Moments later, someone walked up to stand beside him.

She was young, blonde, and shapely. Gomp's interest was piqued, but only for a moment before he recognized her as the girlfriend of one of the locals at the pool tables.

"Hi," the girl said. "Having fun?"

"Yeah." Gomp smiled politely, and went back to his contemplating his beer. The girl called for a pitcher of beer, and with this left in the direction of the tables.

I'll finish this beer, he thought, then head on out. Got to be someplace with more action.

A moment later, there was a tap on Gomp's shoulder. "Hey," a voice said.

Gomp turned on his barstool to look into a red, sweating, jowly face. The face was frowning. It belonged to one of the locals at the pool tables; one whom Gomp had relieved of fifty dollars in a game only an hour earlier.

"What," Gomp asked him, "you want a rematch?"

"What are you thinking, bum, hitting on my girl?"

"What?" Gomp's jaw dropped in surprise. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You heard me."

Recognition snapped in Gomp's brain. The blonde girl who had just been at the bar had been with the sweating, frowning local in front of him now.

"Buddy, I wasn't hitting on your girl. Go back to your game."

The local reached out and shoved Gomp's shoulder. "You were hitting on her," he slurred; he evidently had drunk quite a bit since the pool game. "I saw you."

"Ask her," Gomp said. He stood up to face the local. In his peripheral vision, he saw the old man down the bar stand up slowly - no doubt getting ready to clear the area. Several other locals were sidling slowly away, expressions of alarm on their faces; apparently this big, red-faced, sweating man had a reputation.

"Don't have to." The local pushed Gomp again. "I can see, can't I?"

"Don't push me again," Gomp warned.

"Fucking Marines," the local said. "Think you're all so badass. Well, I'm going to tell you something, jarhead - you're going to get your ass kicked." He reached to push Gomp again - and found his hand enclosed in Gomp's massive fist. The world rotated rapidly around the local as Gomp spun him about and cracked him, chest-first, across the brass railing of the bar. The air shot out of the local's lungs in a sharp *whuff*, and he slid to the floor, gasping.

"Morrie!" somebody shouted. Before Gomp could turn around, a beer glass hit him in the back of the head, stunning him. "Grab him," somebody shouted. Through a haze, Gomp saw a hand bearing a heavy glass mug - saw it rise, and smash down again. The glass hit him on the left eyebrow, splitting it; blood ran into Gomp's eyes.

He lashed out with one fist, caught the figure that had swung the mug, hammered him to the floor. A fist

hit him in the left kidney; agony exploded through his midsection as another blow stuck his head. Gomp could hold and had held his own against four like the first local, but double that number crowded in now to pummel him.

He struck sideways with a kick and was rewarded with a grunt of pain from someone; he lashed out again and again with fists, feet, making best use of the one advantage he had, that being that he could hit anyone he wanted, while the locals had to look out for their friends and try to hit him. But there were too many of them and his head was spinning from the blow with the beer mug; he was taking more hits than he delivered. He dropped to one knee, trying to shield his head, unaware that help was only seconds away.

"MARINES!" a voice shouted from down the bar. As Gomp slumped into unconsciousness, he was dimly aware of several Marine uniforms diving into the brawl, scattering the gang of locals like marbles on a glass table.

He awoke slowly some moments later. A strong arm was supporting him, moving him towards the exit. Red flashing lights showed through the door: the police. The yowling of the band had been replaced by shouts and curses.

"Hold on, son," a voice told him. "I'm getting you out of here."

"Stop there, sir," a voice called out. Gomp's forward motion stopped. He looked up through a haze of blood; his supporter was digging for an ident card. Gomp smelled cigar smoke.

"Here," his supporter said. "I'll take care of this one - he's hurt."

The policeman: "I can't just let you take him out. . ."

"Look at the card."

A moment's silence from the policeman. Then: "I'm sorry, Colonel," the former Marine turned policeman said, "I didn't recognize you. Right through that door, sir. You'll be taking him for medical treatment?"

"That's right."

"Very good, sir."

The cool outside air revived Gomp. He managed to stand up, wiping blood from his eyes, and finally saw his rescuer.

"Hey," he said. "You're the old guy at the bar."

The old man laughed. "Yeah, that's me."

"I owe you one, then," Gomp said. "That one guy sucker-punched me. Just too damn many of them."

"The Corps takes care of its own," the old man agreed. He handed Gomp a handkerchief. "You saw the other Marines in the bar - you should have called out."

"Kind of used to handling these things on my own," Gomp said, "But, yeah, I suppose I should have."

"How's your head?"

"Hurts, but I'll be all right. I've taken worse than this."

The old man looked at Gomp closely. "I'll bet you have. What's your name, son?"

Gomp wiped blood from his face. "Gomp. Hector Gomp. But I'm not a Marine - well, not any more."

"There are no ex-Marines, boy," the old man laughed. "There are only Marines who are no longer on active duty."

"Can't argue with that," Gomp said.

The old man extended his hand. "Colonel Augustus G. Feller, Confederate Marine Corps, retired. My friends call me Gus. Pleased to meet you, Gomp."

Gomp shook Feller's hand, his eyes wide. "Colonel... Feller? Colonel Feller? Of Earth? The Niicene Rebellion, *that* Colonel Feller?"

"That's me."

"Damn."

"Come on," Feller said. "Let's get off the streets, before those cops change their minds and toss us in the pokey along with everyone else. I pulled a fast one there," he explained, "that young officer at the door was in the Corps, went through the Combat Leadership course while I was a contract instructor there a couple years ago. We can't count on being that lucky with the next cop that stops us." He turned and marched down the walkway away from the bar at a fast clip; Gomp had to hurry to keep up.

"Where to, sir?"

Feller stopped and regarded the younger man for a moment. "Where are you staying, son?"

"Well," Gomp smiled sheepishly, "I don't really have a room or anything. I suppose I could go back to the ship if I had to, but I don't really want to pay for a shuttle. See, I was kind of hoping, well, sir..." Gomp's voice trailed off in some embarrassment.

Feller looked severe for a moment, and then barked out a laugh. "You were hoping to find some pretty young lady willing to ask you to spend the night, isn't that right?"

"Well," Gomp admitted, "Yeah. Something like that."

"I was a young man once myself, you know," Feller slapped Gomp on the back. "How often do you end up going back to your ship, anyway?"

Gomp grinned. "Not too often."

"I bet." The Colonel looked thoughtful for a moment. "What is your ship, son? What do you do?"

"The *Shade Tree*, sir, armed privateer. I'm her Chief of Security."

"The *Shade Tree*, eh? Captain... Barrett, is that right?"

"That's her, sir."

"I've heard of her. The ship and the Captain, as it happens. You folks did some great work during the war."

"It was exciting at times, but yeah - there were asses that needed kicking, and we kicked them."

"You sure did. That bit with the Occupation ship will be written into Navy tactics books, I think." The Colonel stopped at a corner and held up a hand. One of Mountain View's roaming robotic cabs stopped, the gull-wing door opening at the curb.

"Hop in," Feller said. Gomp shrugged and climbed into the cab.

"Ephesian Towers," the Colonel said as he climbed in.

"VERY WELL, SIR," the cab's robotic voice replied. "PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SAFETY HARNESS."

"Shaddup," Feller answered the cab. "Get moving."

There was a faint whine as the cab's mag-levs lifted the yellow boxlike droid off the street, and started it towards its destination.

At Colonel Feller's urging, Gomp spent the ride to the towering condominium complex telling of some of the *Shade Tree*'s recent adventures and misadventures - charting three new habitable planets on the border with the Grugell, stealing a cargo of smuggled minerals, transporting a team of prospectors to the Kuiper Belt of the Fortune system. The Colonel listened attentively, thinking as the cab settled to a stop in front of his building, *this could be just what I'm looking for.*

"Where is your Captain staying, Gomp?" Feller asked as Gomp stood on the sidewalk, eyes wide, looking up, up and up at the gleaming silver façade of the Ephesian Towers.

"The Captain?" Gomp shook himself. "Oh hell, sir, she stays on the ship. She might come down for a night or two, but no more than that. She can't bear leaving the ship for too long - it's like she's worried it won't be there when she gets back."

"That's what I felt like when I was a commander," Feller agreed. He slapped Gomp on the back. "Son," he said, "You aren't going to meet any friendly young ladies with blood all over your face. You're welcome to pass the night here, clean yourself up, have a cigar or two and a couple of shots of Scotch, swap some war stories - if you'll do me one favor."

"You name it, sir," Gomp grinned. One didn't get to hear war stories from a man of Colonel Feller's reputation very often.

"I'd like to meet your Captain in the morning. I'll pay for a shuttle from the Skyhook to your ship."

"Sure, sir, I mean, I'd be glad to - but why?"

"Let's just say I'm looking for a little excitement. If your Captain isn't averse to taking a paying passenger, I might just ride around with you folks for a while."

The mention of money made Gomp grin in spite of his aching head. "I'm pretty sure she'll agree," he said. "We don't get all that many passengers - not paying ones, anyway."

"Good. Come on up, then." With that, the Colonel ushered Gomp in the main door, beginning as they went, "Let me tell you about this time when I was stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Brazil on Earth, back then we..."

The door swung slowly shut behind them.

A small private landing field

Sassy Miroslava and Mickie Watanabe were still knocked out when the cargo shuttle eased into the cargo bay of a big commercial shuttle. The dark-suited figure from the rooftop jumped out, shouting at the men in the bay. "Stow everything and make it fast. We lift for the ship in ten minutes."

"You got it, Boss," several called back.

Two men - one tall, bearded, with a pockmarked face, the other short, squat, with bulging eyes - dragged the inert forms of Mickie and Sassy out of the skimmer.

The short man leered down at Sassy's bathing suit. Squatting down, he reached inside her suit to fondle her left breast.

"Damn you, Hester," the leader said. He walked across the bay to the short man and backhanded him, hard; the little man fell backwards with a yelp.

"But Mister Dotsero," he protested, "I was just..."

"I know what you were 'just' doing, Hester," Dotsero sneered. "And I told you, no touching. The price is better for unused goods. Get these two to the holding cell, and get to your stations."

"Right away, Boss." The two men hurried to carry out their orders.

Twelve minutes later, the big cargo shuttle lifted off of the landing pad and angled for orbit.

Three

The Shade Tree

When Gus Feller made up his mind to act, he acted quickly; by eleven local the next morning, he and Hector Gomp arrived by leased shuttle at the *Shade Tree*, where Gomp was not at all surprised to find his Captain still in residence.

Captain Barrett, on the other hand, was surprised at the Colonel's request. "You want to book passage? Where to?"

Colonel Feller smiled at the *Shade Tree*'s Captain. "Where are you going next?"

Barrett laughed. "Well, Colonel, I haven't really decided yet. We need to finish up a few repairs, most of my crew's down in Mountain View on shore leave. I don't figure on putting to space again for another five days."

"Suits me fine," Feller said. "That gives me some time to make arrangements to be gone a spell."

"You really don't care where we're going? We get into some shady places; it gets dangerous some of the..." Her voice trailed off as Colonel Feller grinned widely.

"I think I can handle it, Captain."

"All right then," Barrett smiled and shook the Colonels' hand. "Welcome aboard. We clear Tarbos orbit on Tuesday morning; if you can be here Monday by twenty local, my Exec will set you up with a berth."

"I'll be here," Feller agreed. He extended his heavy, callused hand and shook Barrett's slim one.

"Captain, thank you. I best be getting on back down to the surface. Gomp, you want a ride back to the city?"

"Sure thing, sir," Gomp grinned. "Still got four more days of shore leave."

"And no room booked, I suppose?" Feller asked.

"SOP, sir," Gomp agreed.

"Gomp," Barrett began.

"I know, Cap'n, I know - don't get tossed in jail. Geez, Cap'n - I'd a never took a swing at him if I'd have known he was a cop."

The Brookes

Saskia Miroslava woke up slowly, her head pounding from a drug hangover. She opened her eyes, squinting against the glare of a single overhead light.

"Sassy," she heard a familiar voice. She turned her head; Mickie Watanabe was sitting against the smooth grey wall two feet away, still in her bathing suit. Sassy looked down; she was still in her suit as well.

"Where are we?"

"Listen," Mickie replied, pointing down at the deck. From the deck below where Sassy lay came the distinctive, low-pitched rumble of a Gellar star drive. "We're on a ship."

"What? What ship?"

"I don't know, Sassy. I think we're in trouble."

Sassy sat up, rubbing her head, and noticed for the first time that there were four others in the room. All four were young women, under twenty-five or so; all four huddled miserably on the deck. There was no furniture.

The room was more like a cell, maybe ten meters by four, curved slightly - following the contour of a ship's hull, Sassy was sure. There were no ports, no terminals, no wall hangings, just four plain unmarked gray bulkheads and only one door. Sassy stood up, laid a finger on the panel to feel the slight buzzing of a security field that would give her a considerable jolt if she tried to force the door.

"We're in trouble," Sassy agreed.

Mickie drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them as she sat against the bulkhead, sobbing quietly. Sassy sat on the deck next to her and wrapped her arms around the smaller girl. "Don't worry, Mickie. The Captain will come after us. We'll be fine." She stroked Mickie's hair, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded.

"We don't know where they're taking us," Mickie cried. "We could be going over the frontier, we could be going anywhere. How can the Captain find us? How can anyone find us?"

"We listed the ship on the hotel check-in," Sassy assured her. "When we don't turn up to pay the tab, they'll call the ship - and remember, Mickie, the Exec invented the protocols that the Navy uses to track ships in subspace. Nobody's better at it than she is. They'll find us," she repeated. "They'll find us."

"Are you in the Navy?" one of the other girls asked. Sassy looked up; the girl was about her age, black-haired, petite, wearing a dress suited for an evening on the town, but torn and soiled by rough handling.

"No," Sassy answered. "We're from the *Shade Tree*. It's a privateer ship."

"You really think they'll come after you?"

"I *know* they will," Sassy said.

The girl moved over to sit next to the two from the *Shade Tree*. "I'm Mira Toler," she said.

"I'm Sassy Miroslava. This is Mickie Watanabe. We work in Engineering on the *Shade Tree*."

Toler leaned closer, her voice lowered. "They thought I was asleep when they tossed me in here," she confided, "but I heard them talking. They're talking about selling us."

"Slavers?" Sassy gasped.

"Yeah," Toler agreed. "There have been rumors; every once in a while someone just disappears, usually girls about our age but some men, too. Anyway - they mentioned where they were heading."

"Where?"

"Someplace called Titan's Belt," Toler whispered, "Out past Avalon, on the south side of the Confederacy."

"I was afraid we'd be headed to the Grugell frontier, but that's away off in the opposite direction."

"Yeah," Toler agreed, "I know. I'm studying astrogation at the University at Mountain View."

"Think you could figure out where we are once we get to wherever this Titan's Belt is?"

"Not without a bearing on the night sky, spectrograph readings on a dozen stars or so and a navigation console," Toler said. "It's not that easy."

Sassy raised her voice. "Do any of you have any technical skills?"

Two of the other shook their heads sadly; the third looked up, revealing a tear-streaked face. "I do, sort of," she said. "My Dad was a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, he developed signals systems for starships with Space Systems Command; he taught me a lot."

"What's your name?"

"Gillian Marquez."

"Where did they get you, honey?"

"Right out of my own flat in Rangely," she said, indicating her tan pajama pants and top. Sassy noticed her feet were bare and dirty. "They won't even give us clean clothes."

"All right," Sassy said, "We're on a ship, headed somewhere called Titan's Belt. We know it's near Avalon. We know these people are slavers. Now, Mickie and I are engineers; Mickie can hack computers and I know Gellar drives as well as anyone. Gillian, you know signals systems, and Mira knows a little astrogation. Let's put our heads together; we have to find some way to let someone know where we are."

Four

The Shade Tree - two days later

Jean Barrett had been enjoying a late morning with nothing to do, and so was still in her narrow bunk when the comm panel in her cabin buzzed in the two-tone note that indicated a call coming from off-ship.

"Damn," she muttered as she rolled over and stood up, stretching. "If that's Gomp in the slammer again, I swear..." She stabbed the panel's contact. "*Shade Tree*," she snapped. "Who's calling?"

"*Shade Tree*," a voice came back, distorted by the range; it obviously came from Tarbos' surface. "This is the Open Arms Hotel in Mountain View. I need to speak to your commander."

"Open Arms? I'm Captain Barrett," she replied. "I'm the commander of the *Shade Tree*. Why are you calling?"

"Captain," the voice rasped, "Do you have two crew members, Saskia Miroslava and Michiyo Watanabe?"

"I do," Barrett replied. "They're not on the ship at the moment; they're down on the surface on shore leave."

"They seem to have skipped on their bill, Captain. We haven't seen them in two days, their room has not been entered, and they don't answer their personal comm-codes that they listed on check-in."

"What? Are you sure? That's not at all like either of them."

"Sure as can be, Captain."

"Give me your address," Barrett said. "I'll be down this afternoon. I want to talk to you."

The voice rattled off an address in Mountain View, within a kilometer of the seashore; Barrett recognized the neighborhood. "Very well. I'll see you inside of four hours."

She snapped the contact, ending the conversation, and sat thinking very hard for a few moments. Then she reached for the comm panel again, tapping in Hector Gomp's personal comm code.

"Gomp," she snapped as soon as the call went through. "Where are you?"

"Mountain View, near the beach, north side," Gomp's sleepy voice came back. "Why?"

"We've got a problem. Can you meet me at the bottom of the Skyhook in, say, two hours?"

"Just a sec, Cap'n." Faintly, Barrett heard a rustling of cloth, a female voice raised in inquiry, Gomp's deeper voice murmuring a reply. Despite herself, Barrett smiled.

After a moment, Gomp's voice came back. "Yeah, I can be there. What's going on?"

"We've got a problem," Barrett said. "Sassy and Mickie from Engineering are down there somewhere - their hotel called, claimed they've skipped on their bill."

"Sassy and Mickie? No way," Gomp said in surprise.

"That's what I told the hotel. But they've gone somewhere, and I want to know where."

"All right," Gomp said, "I'll be there. Two hours."

"See you then."

The Brookes

None of the girls in the featureless compartment had any idea of how long they had been held there; from the intervals at which food and water were shoved through the door, she judged it to be about three days. One of the girls had discovered a panel on the wall that rotated out to reveal a small toilet, which was fortunate since none of them had been allowed clean clothing.

As near as Sassy could figure, it was close to time for another meal, so she wasn't surprised to hear faint sounds outside the room's single door; she was surprised when the door crashed open. A tall, pale man with straw-colored hair looked in at them.

"Stand up," he snapped. "All of you."

The six girls stood up, slowly, cautiously.

"Relax," the man said. "Nobody is going to hurt you, as long as you behave and do as you're told."

"Who are you?" Sassy asked.

The tall man shrugged. "You can call me Mister D," he answered.

"Where are you taking us?"

"That, you'll have to wait and see. All right, in single file, follow me. No funny stuff." He stepped back from the doorway.

"Come on," Sassy said to the other girls. She walked into the corridor and turned to follow 'Mister D' where he walked away down the dingy, poorly lit passageway. A small, squat, pockmarked man cradled a carbine in his arms beside the door, presumably to guard the rear of the little progression; he leered openly at the upper curves of Sassy's breasts, revealed by her dirty bathing suit. She shivered at the look.

"In here," the tall man indicated another doorway. The six girls filed in to find a fat, bored-looking woman behind a counter; shelves and cabinets lined the compartment behind her.

"Give Jane here your sizes," Mister D ordered, "Undergarments, coveralls, and shoe sizes. Then, go through that door back there - there are static-jet showers and teeth cleaners. Get yourselves cleaned up and dressed, then form back up out here. Got me?"

All six girls nodded.

"Good. Don't stand there staring at me. Get moving."

Sassy had always disliked the static-jet showers aboard the small, chronically water-short *Shade Tree*, but today, the buzzing, tingling feel of the shower was one of the most welcome sensations she had ever known. She emerged from the shower feeling better than she had in days.

The package of clothing she had been handed was disappointing.

Beside her, Mira Toler echoed her sentiments. "These coveralls," she said, holding up a dull gray garment, "they feel like paper."

"How about these shoes? I guess you'd call them slippers." Sassy examined the footwear carefully; they were flexible plastic, designed to fit either left or right foot.

"At least there's clean underwear, and it feels like cloth."

The bra and panties provided were cheap but clean and comfortable. All six girls dressed quickly and filed back into the outer compartment.

"There," Mister D said. "I bet you all feel better." He sniffed the air like a large dog. "You do all smell better."

"Thanks," one of the girls muttered.

"You'll be taken back here for clean coveralls and a shower every other day until we get to where we're going."

"Are we going back to that cell now?"

"Yes," Mister D said evenly, meeting Sassy's gaze with eyes as gray as gunmetal. "What else?"

"Could we have something to read, at least?"

"Something to read?"

"Yeah, something to read. What could it hurt?"

Mister D looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well," he said, "I suppose so. Why not?" He turned to the squat man, who still stood in the doorway cradling his carbine. "See to it. Find them a reader and some book chips."

"Yessir, Boss," the squat man said slowly.

"All right. Back to your place, girls. Supper will be in a few minutes. Hester, take them back."

Dotsero watched as the girls filed out under the steady gaze of the guard.

"Not a bad looking bunch," he commented after the last of them had filed out.

"Better than usual," Jane commented from behind the counter.

"Tarbos is always good for pretty young girls."

Five

The Shade Tree

"You want to know how many ships have left Tarbos in the last two days?"

Captain Barrett looked down at Indira Krishnavarna where she sat at the Scanning console. Dismay spread across the Captain's face. "How many?"

"At least fifty. Transit Control won't release the exact number, but I've got transit tracks on at least that many ships. The tracks fade with time, but I'm pretty sure I can read back forty-eight hours, maybe a tad more."

"Anything unusual?"

"No, just the usual destinations - Avalon, Zed, Earth, Forest," the Exec read off destinations as she pointed out tracks on the scanner panel.

"Where's Gomp?"

"On his way to the Skyhook - he's going to nose around, see if there was any unusual shuttle traffic or anything out of the ordinary going up and down the 'Hook."

"Good idea. What about our passenger?"

The Exec made a wry face. "The Colonel? He went with Gomp. He insisted on it, in fact; said he knew some people that might be in a position to tell us something."

"I hope he's right."

The Tarbos Skyhook

The lower three levels of the Navy's section of the Tarbos Skyhook were taken up by a myriad of small offices, supply rooms, and cubbyholes, but Augustus Feller seemed to know exactly where he was going as he led Hector Gomp through the rabbit-warren maze of passages and elevators.

"Where are we going, sir?"

"Port Controller's Office," Colonel Feller replied.

"Port Controller? The Captain called them - they said they can't release any info on any filed flight plans, just on arrivals and departures. Doesn't help much."

"Trust me," Feller said over his shoulder. "Ah - here we are."

Feller tapped on the door marked PORT CONTROLLER and walked in, with Gomp close on his heels. Just inside the somewhat claustrophobic compartment, a gray-haired Master Chief Petty Officer sat behind a desk, frowning at his terminal screen.

"Jack!" Feller burst out. "How the hell are you?"

The Master Chief looked up, his frown changing to a grin. "Gus Feller! Well, I'll be damned. I'm doing fine, Gus, you old bastard. How're you?" He jumped to his feet, grabbed Feller's outstretched hand and shook it. Gomp noticed the tattoo of a laughing seal on the man's forearm.

"Never better," Feller said. "Jack Ganns, my sidekick here is Hector Gomp. Hector's a good boy - did five years in the Corps. Confederate type."

Gomp reached to shake hands. "Pleased to meet you, Master Chief."

"Same. If Gus Feller vouches for you, you must be a good fella. Sit down, boys," Ganns waved at two chairs in front of his desk. "What's going on, Gus? Why the sudden visit?"

"I need a favor, Jack," Feller said.

"Name it. I still owe you for that Delta Amacuro business."

Feller waved his hand. "Jack, I told you before, I was just doing my job."

"Yeah, maybe - but it was one hell of a job."

"Just routine; Marines are always bailing you SEALs out of trouble; you know that." Both men laughed.

"Where's Delta Amacuro?" Gomp wanted to know.

Ganns and Feller looked at each other and grinned. "Well," Feller said, " *where* it is, is in Venezuela, back on Earth. *What* it was that we did there neither of us can talk about. That deal will still be classified when your grandkids are old folks, Gomp."

"That's right. Those were the days, though," Ganns agreed. "So, Gus - what's the favor?"

Feller leaned forward. "Jack, you can bring up a list of ship departures from Tarbos for the last two-three days, right?"

Ganns glanced at his terminal. "Yeah. That's easy. Why?"

"Gomp here, his ship is missing two crewmen. Young girls, Jack. We think someone picked them up."

"And that they're on a ship heading out somewhere? Hell, Gus, have you talked to the CBI? They handle missing persons if you suspect they've been taken off-planet."

Feller let out an explosive snort. "Shit, Jack, you know how that works. People jump ship all the time - ain't a week goes by that some ship captain doesn't drop in claiming someone is 'missing,' and nine times out of ten they just got a better offer. The Captain filed a report, but it will stop right there; you know it, and I know it."

"But you know these two girls better than that," Ganns said.

"You bet, Master Chief," Gomp said. "Mickie and Sassy have been with us for over a year. Both of them like the life and they like the ship. I'd bet a year's pay against them being jumpers. The clincher, though, is that they just disappeared from the hotel they had booked - no forward, no message, skipped on the bill and all. I know these two gals - they just ain't like that."

"I'm not really supposed to do this, you know. But two young girls missing from a good crew, and what with the rumors we're hearing around here; hell, yeah, I'll help. Let me have a look at the departures," Ganns said. He turned to his terminal, tapped away for a few moments.

"Well," he said at last, "this is interesting. You said you thought someone picked these girls up, right?"

"That's right," Gomp agreed.

"Gus, look here." Ganns turned his terminal screen half-way around and pointed at one line.

"The *Brookes*? " Feller frowned at the screen. "They wouldn't be that stupid, would they?"

"It gets better," Ganns said. "Remember Chuck Dotsero?"

"That son of a bitch. I remember relieving him of duty for falsifying pay records."

"Yeah, well, that's his ship."

Feller leaned forward again and inspected the record. "Sure as hell. Charles Francis Adams Dotsero. Can't be two of those."

"And with a ship named the *Brookes*, want to guess what he's up to now? It all fits, Gus."

"It does at that."

"One of you want to clue me in?" Gomp asked.

"Bit of old Earth history, Gomp. The original *Brookes* was a slave ship, ran in the old Africa - North America slave trade in the late seventeen hundreds. Slavers," Feller snapped, "you'd think we had outgrown that by now."

"I've heard rumors," Ganns said. "People do turn up missing now and then - and not all of them are ship-jumpers. We're talking civilians, groundhogs from Mountain View and some of the towns around."

"Probably ending up on some mining station on a moon or asteroid somewhere," Feller agreed. "You have any idea how many little mining stations and gas distilleries there are out there? Every settled system that has an asteroid belt or a ringed gas giant must have hundreds of little pressure domes and stations floating around out there. Half of them are supplying ships off the books, too. Sooner or later the government's going to have to do something about them."

"Maybe," Ganns said. "But I'd give long odds against even the Navy being able to find them all, Gus, much less regulate them."

"True. Back to the *Brookes*, then. Where are they headed, Jack?"

"Flight plan says Avalon. Could be anywhere, Gus."

"Avalon's a start. If they're worried about anyone coming after them, they'll want to pick a filed destination not too far off from where they're really going, just so their transit track isn't too far off. Chuck Dotsero's a crook, but he's not stupid - he'll assume that sooner or later, someone will try to track him down."

"We have to let the Captain know about this," Gomp said.

"Yeah." The Colonel stood up. "Jack, it's been a pleasure. When I get back from this trip, let's go have a steak and a few beers - talk about the old days some."

"I'll look forward to that, Gus." They shook hands. "See you around, old man."

"Take care of yourself, Jack. Gomp, let's get back to the ship."

"Right with you, sir."

Six

The Shade Tree

Gomp and the Colonel found the Captain in the ship's mess room, where she was listlessly picking at a sandwich and fretting. On hearing the news the two brought from the Skyhook, it only took her a fraction of a second to reach her decision.

Barrett stood up, walked to the mess room's comm panel, and called the Bridge. "Indira," she snapped when the Exec answered. "I need crew status. Is everyone back on board?"

"As of half an hour ago, yes," Indira Krishnavarna replied.

Barrett began barking orders. "Call the Bridge watch to duty. I'll be on the Bridge myself in a few minutes. If there's anyone at Navigation now, tell them to plot the best possible trajectory for Avalon."

Call Port Control, get us a departure clearance."

"On it," the Exec replied.

"Avalon," Colonel Feller said. He snapped his fingers. "Captain, I just remembered something; I was on Avalon two years ago. The colony itself isn't much, mostly tourism, canyon gliding, parasailing and the like. No industry, very little farming or anything labor-intensive. But there's something else there."

"What?" Barrett demanded.

Feller sat down at a mess table, grunting slightly at a pang of pain from his belly. He reached into his jacket pocket, extracted a cigar, held it up at eye level and examined it carefully. "We were talking about all the little roughneck mining stations around when we were down on the Dock and it got me to thinking. See, Avalon, the planet itself, wouldn't have too much appeal for a slaver; too much traffic, it's a pretty place and lots of folks vacation there. That bothered me when we found out Dotsero was headed that way. But Avalon's the second planet in that system; the fourth is a gas giant they call Titan. Most passenger ships take a sub-light swing within visual range of it on the way in to Avalon, it's a pretty spectacular sight. Big damn gas giant, it would make three or four Jupiters - its gravity well has swept up most of the garbage in the system into a series of rings around its equator. Now, those rings are mostly ice and rock, but the ice is full of hydrocarbons and complex carbohydrates; there are a dozen or more little hydrocarbon and volatiles farming operations out there harvesting the ice blocks for water, oxygen, hydrogen, carbohydrates and hydrocarbons. The place is practically custom-made to re-supply ships, especially ships that want to keep a low profile. They call that ring system Titan's Belt."

"Avalon's sort of out there on the southern periphery," Gomp observed. "Lots of traffic to the colony, but I bet nobody much pays any attention to those hydrocarbon farms."

"It's a labor-intensive operation," Feller pointed out. He removed the wrapper from his cigar, trimmed it and lit it. He leaned back, propped his boots on the table, took a thoughtful pull on the cheroot and blew a cloud of blue smoke into the air. "Rough living conditions, too, I expect; lots of men that have been out there for a long time, isolated, nobody much paying attention to what they're doing - and they're making plenty of money from their operations."

"And Dotsero is picking up attractive young girls," Barrett snarled, "to sell to those carbon farmers and ice wranglers. Perfect."

"Makes sense, doesn't it? And the thing is this; there's got to be someone organizing this slaver ring. Find that guy, and you find your missing crew."

Captain Barrett looked the old Marine in the eyes. "Colonel, your pleasure cruise just turned into a rescue mission. Are you sure you still want to ride along?"

"Captain," Feller grinned, "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"It might get rough."

"I've got an M9 carbine in one of those footlockers I brought aboard," Feller said, "and a Parks 12-gauge riot shotgun. I've even got my old battle armor. I'm always prepared for a scrap, Captain; it's a hard habit to break."

"Fair enough. Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

The Brookes

Mickie Watanabe woke up suddenly; something had changed.

"Sassy," she said, shaking the other girl's shoulder. "Sassy, wake up."

"What?"

"Listen," Mickie said. "The star drive has stopped."

Sassy placed a hand on the deck, closed her eyes. The characteristic faint rumble of the Gellar drive was no longer there. "You're right," she said.

"Where ever they're taking us, we're there."

"Wake up the others."

While the other girls were getting up, rubbing sleep from their eyes, and pulling on their cheap paper coveralls, Sassy recovered the book reader she'd been surreptitiously modifying and tucked it inside her coverall just as the door suddenly swung open.

"All right," the short, squat guard called out. "Get it together. We're moving out."

"Where are we going?"

"Never you mind that. You'll find out soon enough."

The six girls filed out of the compartment into the corridor. "Follow me," the short guard said; Sassy noticed another guard, this one tall and cadaverous, took up the rear guard position. His carbine dangled from one hand, and he yawned hugely as he fell into place behind them.

Two ladders and one hatch later, the procession filed into a docking umbilical connecting the ship to a station. Sassy managed a look out one of the umbilical's tiny ports; the station was not a Skyhook, nor was it an orbital dock over a settled world. Instead, an enormous gas giant swirled slowly, dominating the view, while closer, a wide belt of ice chunks and boulders stretched away into the distance. Looking forward, Sassy could see part of a large station seemingly built into a large asteroid, one of the larger fragments of what had to be Titan's Belt.

'Mister D' was waiting for them just inside the station.

"Take them to B deck, compartment B-24," he told the squat guard. "We'll be here a few days until everyone involved gets in from the other stations. Then we'll be moving down to Brickstown to do the sale." Sassy saw Mickie's face pale suddenly at the word *sale*.

"Yessir, Boss. This way, girls," the short man motioned.

One by one, the girls filed into the mining station. Sassy Miroslava was the last into the port, wondering as she stepped across if she'd ever breathe free air again.

Seven

The Shade Tree

"Coming in on the Avalon system now, Captain - normal space in five, four, three, two, one, mark."

With a slight shudder, the *Shade Tree* dropped out of subspace. The blue-white globe of Avalon shone steadily in the near distance.

"Shall I call for a parking orbit assignment?" Kaelee Adams asked from the Signals panel.

"No. We're tactical as of now, people. Total EMCON; I don't want anyone to know we're here. Navigation, get us a fix on that gas giant."

"Scanning, Captain - got it. Recommend course one oh six by three."

"New course, one oh six by three. Ahead full. Plot your jump to put us north of the planet, just out of easy visual range of anything in that ring system or in high orbit around the giant."

"Plotted and engaged. We'll be there in six minutes."

Barrett stabbed a contact on the arm of her Bridge chair. "Gomp, get your people ready."

"We're cocked and locked, Cap'n," the reply came back from the ship's shuttle port.

"All right, as soon as we drop out of subspace, I want a global scan of the area. Look for any large stations, any habitable moons. I want a good map of what's going on out here."

The *Shade Tree*'s six-member boarding party was waiting at the port to the shuttle, making a last-minute check of weapons and armor, when Colonel Feller walked into the narrow compartment.

Gomp's eyes opened wide. The Colonel was wearing battered old polymer armor, the ancient Mark VI armor used before the war, and carrying a carbine. It was not the armor and carbine but rather the Colonel's face that drew Gomp's attention; Feller wore his normal stern expression, and the inevitable cigar was clamped in a corner of his mouth, but his skin was pale, and sweat glistened on his forehead.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"Fine," Feller snapped. "Haven't worn this armor in a while. Heavy damn stuff."

"Are you sure you want to do this? We may be boarding under fire."

"How the hell do you think I earned a living for forty years?" Feller barked. "You want to try to take me hand-to-hand, Gomp? I'm an old man, but I'm still a *man*."

Gomp raised his hands. "No argument, sir. It's just that the Captain will skin me if anything happens to a passenger."

"Relax. I can handle myself as well as any of these juvenile delinquents on your boarding party."

Gomp looked at his crew; most of them wore sternly repressed grins. "All right, sir," he relented. "Glad to have you."

Feller scowled around his cigar. "Goddamn slavers, anyway. Hope the Captain isn't too hopeful about any prisoners."

On the Bridge, the six-minute subspace run to the Belt was ticking down its last seconds:

"Four, three, two, one, normal space." On the main screen, the rubble and boulders of Titan's Belt sprang into view.

"All stop," Barrett ordered. "Hold our position here. Scanning, get busy."

"On it, Captain," Scanning tech Anita Knapp replied. "I've got what looks like two big stations; one's a

pressure dome on that big asteroid at one-oh-one by six, and the other's a free-floater at oh-six by fifteen south. Dozens and dozens of tiny operations, some airless, some domed, but those two are the only ones of any size. I've got a shuttle moving from the big pressure dome station towards a big solid moon at oh-six-five by three. That moon has an atmosphere, Captain; thin but breathable."

"There may be a settlement there, then," Barrett said. "Get me data on that shuttle."

"Standard intersystem shuttle, no Gellar drive, just ion drive; probably a small cargo and personnel hauler working in the Belt. He's just motoring along towards that moon; isn't in any hurry, probably being careful with his maneuvering in all those rocks. Funny..."

"What? What's funny?" Barrett demanded.

"Some kind of digital signal coming from the shuttle. Very faint. It's just one-zero, one-zero, one-zero, repeated over and over."

"Not a navigation beacon?"

"No, they're already running a standard nav beacon."

Barrett's space-tested instincts kicked into overdrive. "It's them. The girls are on that shuttle. Plot intercept course, ahead two thirds. Arm particle beams."

The Brookes

Jane Polston, the *Brookes* ' Executive Officer, was on the ship's Bridge when her Scanning technician called out a contact report. "Miz Polston, I got a ship just popped out of subspace, about sixty thousand kilometers north of the station. They're reversing hard, slowing to a stop."

"What are they doing?"

"They've stopped. Best guess is they're scanning."

"What kind of ship is it?"

The tech bent over the slave ship's tiny scanning console. "I'm not getting much. No navigation or ID beacons. It's a small ship, hard to pick up visually, almost no radar return." He looked up. "Armed privateer ship, Miz Polston, I'd bet on it. I saw enough of them during the war."

"Cast loose all moorings. Maneuvering thrusters back one-third."

"She just goosed her drive," the Scanning tech called. "Heading this way. She's after the shuttle. She's after Mister Dotsero."

"Warm up the main drive and get a Weapons tech up here. Signal the shuttle, tell them they're being followed."

"If that's a privateer ship," the helmsman pointed out, "we won't stand much of a chance. A converted freighter against a warship?"

"We'll just have to hit first," Polston said.

"Hit first? How? We've got two old war surplus missiles. They'll detect them the moment we launch."

"Shut up and do what I told you!" Polston barked.

"Yes'm," the helmsman replied.

"We're between them and the shuttle," Polston explained. "They'll run right past us; we can drop in behind them and launch before they know we're here."

The Shade Tree

Captain Barrett felt a moment's *déjà vu* as the ship's Gellar drive rumbled under her feet; for a moment, she flashed back to the war as she felt her ship diving once more to the attack.

"Target particle beams," she ordered, "When we close to ten klicks, put a shot across their bow."

"Targeting," crewman Stanley Thomas replied from the Weapons station. "Forty-eight seconds to firing point."

"Kaelee, get ready with a hailing call. As soon as we fire, call them. Tell them to heave to and prepare to be boarded."

"Ready with hailing call."

Barrett's wartime instincts were kicking in; another lesson learned from hard experience came to the fore. "Knapp," she said, "Watch our six. I don't want anyone dropping in behind us in this rock yard."

The shuttle

"Mister Dotsero," Avery Hopp called from where he sat at the tiny control station, piloting the shuttle. "Got a call from the *Brookes* - we got company."

Dotsero came forward. "Where?"

"Scanning now - there they are, on our six, about twenty-two klicks out, gaining on us fast. The *Brookes* is moving to intercept."

"Who is it?" Dotsero leaned in and looked at the shuttle's tiny scanner display. "That's a privateer ship. Full power, Hopp, get us into some cover."

"We can't outrun them," Hopp pointed out.

"Don't have to - just get us lost in that inner ring. Once we get in all those rocks and icebergs, they won't be able to track us very easily. Polston has the ship fired up, she is going to try to launch on them as they pass the station."

"On the way," Hopp said, his voice doubtful.

The Brookes

"Come about to one oh six by nine. Ahead two-thirds. As soon as they pass the station, bring us up behind them."

The old converted freighter handled like a pig, but the Helmsman managed to swing the bulky, underpowered ship onto the ordered course.

Jane Polston looked up when the hatch to the cramped Bridge crashed open and the ship's only qualified weapons tech rushed in. "Get to your station, get those missiles warmed up."

"They just passed the station, accelerating after the shuttle - bearing to target is now one-oh-one by nine."

"Adjust course to follow. Ahead full. Weapons?"

"Firing solution set and checked, weapons are active and ready."

"Match programmed solution and launch."

A moment later, the freighter shuddered as two antique Hawk missiles leaped from converted docking ports on the underside of the cargo section and streaked after the accelerating privateer.

The Shade Tree

"*Missile launch astern!*" Anita Knapp's shout brought Barrett to her feet. "Captain, I'm tracking two missiles, launched from only about twenty kilometers astern, tracking us."

"Ahead full," Barrett ordered. The sense of *déjà vu* was almost overwhelming now. "Keep a lock on that shuttle if you can. Get me data on those missiles."

"Mark II ion drives," Knapp said. "Old Navy Hawks, best guess."

Barrett thought rapidly: *Mark II Hawk, best speed about .65 C; we're accelerating straight away from launch point, twenty clicks - they can't catch us.*

"Come to new course zero-one-zero by ninety. Anita, where did those missiles launch from? The station?"

"Don't think so, Captain; there's a ship just cast off from there, looks like an old *Rorqual*-class freighter. They turned in after us, but we're accelerating away from them."

Barrett looked at Sean Weaver at the Helm. "Take us north thirty clicks, then cut over and run back on a reverse course. We're faster and can turn tighter than they can - get us in behind them."

"You bet, Captain," Weaver said. "Three minutes, tops."

"Warm up the pee-beam emitters." Barrett stabbed the contact on her chair's arm again. "Gomp, change of plan - we're going to be coming up on a *Rorqual* class freighter. Stand by to board."

"We'll be ready, Cap'n," Gomp's surprised voice came back.

The Brookes

"They jinked on us," the slaver ship's Weapons tech reported. "Missiles have lost lock. Hope Mister Dotsero didn't pay too much for those damn old things."

"What are those pirates doing?" Polston demanded.

"Pulling hard north," the helmsman said. "I've seen it before. They'll pull north, then reverse course quick and drop in behind us."

"Can you shake them off?"

"Are you kidding? In this big hog? Not a chance. That's an armed privateer out there, probably combat veterans from the war. We're screwed, Miz Polston, there ain't know way we can lose them."

"We've got to try to draw them away from the shuttle. Ahead full, come to new course oh-two-two by

south ninety."

The Shade Tree

"Oh, bad move," Anita Knapp said. "Captain, they've turned south, accelerating hard. They turned right away from us."

"Pursuit course," Barrett said. "Bring us up behind them." She walked across the Bridge to the Weapons station. "When we get five clicks from their stern, target the upper forward pee-beam emitter on the last conversion ring in their drive tunnel. Shut their drive down."

"You got it, Captain."

"Continuing their turn," Knapp called. "They're coming up a bit, turning to port."

"Stay on them," Barrett said.

The Brookes

"How long to C barrier?"

"At least four minutes, Miz Polston."

Polston looked at the main scanner tank. "They're going to catch us."

"Sure as hell," the helmsman agreed.

"We need to buy some more time for the shuttle. All stop."

"All stop," the surprised helmsman agreed.

"Make signal to the privateer; tell them we give up."

"They'll board us," someone said.

"Either we let them board us, or we let them shoot holes in us," Polston snapped. "Take your pick."

The Shade Tree

"They said *what*? "

"The *Brookes*, Captain, they're signaling their surrender."

"They've reversed their drive," Anita Knapp agreed. "Coming to a stop."

"Bring us up alongside. Keep the upper forward pee-beam on their drive, and lock lower forward on anything that looks like a missile bay."

"Pee-beams targeted," Stanley Thomas said.

Barrett tapped her comm panel again. "Gomp, are your people ready?"

"Ready here, Captain - I hear the drive slowing, I take it we're stopping?"

"Yes, stand by, we'll be alongside in a few minutes."

"Standing by here," Gomp answered.

"Where has that shuttle gone?"

"They pulled north into the thickest part of the Belt, but they practically advertised their course; they were headed for that big moon, the one with some atmosphere," Knapp said. "That moon's damn near the size of Mars, some plant life and a few small rivers and lakes; dry but habitable. Smart money says there's a station there, maybe even a colony."

"You got a fix on the shuttle's drive signature?"

"Yes, Captain - got it recorded."

Beneath the deck, the familiar rumble of the Gellar drive faded and stopped. "We're alongside," Weaver reported from the helm.

Barrett stabbed the comm panel again. " *Away boarders* !"

The shuttle

Charles Dotsero had spent the last few minutes watching the brief, uneven contest between his ship and the armed privateer.

"Smart move, Jane," he said at last.

"Mister D?" Dotsero looked at the voice; the shuttle pilot was staring.

"She drew them off of us, and managed to keep them from shooting up the ship. They'll probably board, but we've already got the 'cargo' with us."

"They saw where we were headed," Hopp said. "No great trick to figure where we were going, not with that big moon shining away out there."

Dotsero grinned a humorless, skull-like grin. "Let them. If they want to come down to the surface and pick a fight, they're in for one hell of a surprise."

The shuttle pilot wasn't convinced, but one didn't voice such doubts to Mister Dotsero; instead, he held his tongue and concentrated on getting the shuttle through the rings to the moon that grew slowly on the main view screen.

Eight

The Brookes

Jean Barrett stepped out of the shuttle into the slave ship's docking port, spun on her heel and strode down the passage like a conquistador. She was greeted at the first side passage by one of her Security troops, Tim McNeal.

"This way, Captain," McNeal said. "We've got the crew held in the aft cargo hold. Everyone's accounted for."

"Good. Let's go."

The aft hold was only a few meters away, down one level. "Gomp," Barrett said as she stepped through a door into the hold. She felt her eyebrows rise as she noted the stocky, grinning figure in battered old battle armor standing next to Gomp. "Colonel," she greeted the old man, "I must say, I wasn't expecting to see you over here."

"When there's a scrap going on, Captain," Feller chuckled, "don't expect me to stay out of it."

"I'll keep that in mind." She turned to the crew of the converted freighter where they sat on the floor, sullenly staring at the leveled carbines of Barrett's boarding party. "Who's in charge here?" she demanded.

A fiftyish woman, heavy-set, with short black hair stood up. "I'm Jane Polston," she said, "I'm the *Brookes* ' Executive Officer."

"Where's your Captain?"

Polston set her mouth in a thin line and said nothing.

"Never mind," Barrett said, "He's on that shuttle we were after. Where were they going?"

Polston looked at the ceiling.

"Fine," Barrett said. "Have it your way. Gomp, what did you find?"

"Two decks up and about halfway forward, there are four modified compartments that look a lot like security cells," Gomp said. "I found this in one of them." He stepped forward and handed a small gray scrap of some cheap material to the Captain.

"Feels like paper."

"Look close," Gomp said, "You can see where something was scratched on it - looks like it was done with a thumbnail."

Barrett scrutinized the scrap more closely. Angling the material against the overhead lights, she could barely make out the letters scratched into the paperlike material:

S - M

SHADE TREE

"Sassy and Mickie," she breathed.

"That's how I read it," Gomp agreed. "But they aren't on the ship now - they've got to be on that shuttle."

Barrett stepped close to Polston, a snarl on her reddening face. Gomp and Colonel Feller trained their carbines on Polston's head as Barrett growled, "All right. All right. You're going to tell me exactly where that shuttle is going, who they're going to meet, and what's going to happen when they get there."

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because I'm not the kind of person you want to piss off," Barrett snapped. "And to be honest with you, I'm pretty damn pissed off already."

Polston met Barrett's gaze, a defiant expression on her face, and said nothing.

Barrett pulled her personal comm out of her jacket pocket and tapped a contact. " *Shade Tree*, this is Barrett."

" *Shade Tree* here," a voice answered, plainly audible to everyone in the compartment as Barrett turned up the gain.

"Orders to Weapons," Barrett said. "Target two Shrikes on the *Brookes*. Stand by to fire as soon as the lander is clear."

"Targeting," the comm replied. "Weapons reports two Shrikes armed and ready."

"Stand by," Barrett said. She dropped the comm back in her pocket. "Now," she said to Polston in a conversational tone, "Would you like to tell me where they're going? Or would you rather just be incinerated along with your ship?"

"You wouldn't dare," Polston mumbled.

"Try me."

The two women's eyes locked. Polston had known many ruthless men and women in a career lived mostly on the wrong side of the law; she knew when she was beaten. "There's a small colony on that moon," she admitted. "It's called Brickstown. Mostly trading in goods for the mining stations in the Belt. The Captain is taking the cargo there."

"Why?"

"Do I have to draw you a goddamned map? Population ratio out here is six to one, male to female. The miners are desperate for women. The girls will be auctioned off at zero-nine tomorrow morning, local - that's about ten hours from now."

"Who's in charge down there?"

"Man named Lee," Polston said. "That's all I know about him, except that he's not alone. He's got at least a hundred armed men, mostly veterans, hired on to protect his operation."

"A hundred men," Barrett repeated.

"At least." Polston smirked. "Combat veterans. Heavily armed. There isn't any way you're going to get in there and out again - not alive."

"Don't bet on it," Barrett snarled. "Sit down; I'm done with you." She spun on her heel and faced Gomp. "Seal the bay, put a guard on the door; nobody gets out until we're gone. Strip the ship. Take food, pharms, electronics, anything useful."

Gomp grinned. "You got it, Cap'n!"

"I'm going back to the ship. Call me on the Bridge when you're done." Barrett pulled her comm out of her jacket as she strode out of the cargo bay. "Barrett here," she said. "Fire lower forward pee-beam on target. Knock this spacegoing abomination's drive out."

With no star drive, it will take them six or eight years to get to Avalon, she thought. They'll be stuck here in the Belt. That should keep them out of the slaver business for a while.

But Barrett knew that recovering her two missing crew members was another matter.

Nine

Brickstown

Gerald Lee was a hard, ruthless man. He ran Brickstown - named for the rough-textured, easily quarried red rock of which most of the town's buildings were constructed - like a personal fiefdom, which for all

intents and purposes, it was.

Standing well over two meters tall, with broad shoulders, a lantern jaw, and a close-cropped goatee that matched his stubbled red hair, Lee was an imposing figure. His habit of recruiting other large, broad shouldered men, generally ones experienced in bearing arms, had resulted in Brickstown having a fairly effective private army of about one hundred and twenty effectives. Another habit, trading in illicit military hardware, had left his army remarkably well-equipped.

Lee reclined now in an old, cracked leather chair behind his office desk, a massive affair chiseled out of the same red stone that made up the town. The desk was massive, imposing - and bulletproof.

Lee looked up at the ceiling of his office, then back at Charles Dotsero where he fidgeted in a smaller chair on the other side of the desk.

"So," Lee said at last, "Charlie, you screwed this up pretty good."

"I wouldn't go so far as that," Dotsero protested.

Lee cut him off with a level stare. "You were *tracked*, Charlie. Your ship was boarded, and now it's a wreck, hanging out there in the belt with no food, no water and no drive. You'll be damned lucky if you get your people off."

"I'll get them off."

"But that's not your real *problem*, Charlie," Lee grated. "The ship ain't going anywhere. You can always get new people. You can get a new crew. Your *problem* is that goddamn privateer that's hanging out there a few hundred thousand clicks away from *my* colony. They're here after one of the girls you brought in this run, aren't they?"

"They haven't sent any messages yet?" Dotsero evaded.

"Not yet," Lee said, "but you know they will."

"So," Dotsero grinned, "what if they do? What are they going to do, come down here with a half-dozen people? That might work for boarding an unarmed freighter, but it won't work here, will it?"

"No, but that's an armed ship, Charlie. A warship. There's nothing stopping them from sitting up there in orbit and tossing pee-beam fire down on us until we give their people back. Also, there's nothing to stop them going straight to the Feds once that's done. You and I both have an interest in keeping the Feds out of the Belt."

"Yeah," Dotsero agreed.

"So, what are you going to do about this?"

"Me?"

"You," Lee said companionably. "You led them here, Charlie. You get rid of them."

"What about the girls I brought in?"

"Get rid of that ship," Lee said, "Then we'll talk."

Charles Dotsero sat silently for a few moments, thinking very rapidly. Finally he looked up at Lee.

"I've got an idea," he said. "But I need one thing."

"What's that?"

"I need to borrow your cadre of troops for a day, maybe two."

"What for?"

Dotsero explained briefly. "So, they won't even be going off this moon," he concluded. "Just out in the hills north of town a ways. If I'm going to do anything about that ship up there," he pointed at the ceiling, "I've got to get some of their crew down here. I think I can make them nervous enough to send several people down. They'll have to come down in a shuttle. Once we've got them and the shuttle..."

Lee slapped a hand down on the top of his desk. "Done! Just make sure that nobody from that ship gets out of the Belt - got me?"

"I got you, Gerry, I got you."

The Shade Tree

Jean Barrett was watching the feed from long-range scans of the Brickstown moon when the call came up to the Bridge.

"Captain, could you come down the cargo bay?" Barrett was mildly surprised to hear Gus Feller's voice on the panel, but only mildly; the retired Colonel had already shown great capacity for getting involved in almost anything.

"What is it?"

"I'd rather show you. We pulled something off that freighter that might be... well, let's call it useful."

"All right. Give me five minutes."

Four and a half minutes later, Barrett walked into the *Shade Tree*'s cramped cargo hold to see Hector Gomp and Gus Feller standing over a polysteel crate.

"What is it?"

Gomp looked up and grinned. "Come have a look, Cap'n. Ain't seen one of these since the war."

Barrett looked down into the open top of the crate. Inside, held by a clear poly cradle, lay a bullet-shaped object crafted of polished titanium.

"Is that..."

"A Mark Nine fusion warhead," Feller said. "The kind they used on the old Mark 2 Lancer. In good shape, too. Two settings, five hundred and six-fifty kilotons. Old technology, but it still works."

"Designed to take out Grugell Occupation ships," Gomp agreed. "In open space, they make a hell of a bang. On a planetary surface, near a small town, say one the size of Brickstown - well, this baby will flatten buildings two-three clicks around, and a ground burst will make a mess of most of the surrounding area - ground zero will be uninhabitable for a century or two."

"I suppose you two have an idea of how to use this to get our people back."

"Funny you should mention that," Feller chuckled, "but, in fact, we do."

"Tell me."

Brickstown

Charles Dotsero couldn't help grinning as he read the formally receipted message on the signals station screen for the third time:

TO: BRICKSTOWN AUTHORITIES

YOU ARE HOLDING TWO MEMBERS OF SS SHADE TREE CREW.

YOU HAVE FOUR HOURS TO ARRANGE RETURN OF SHADE TREE CREW MEMBERS.
YOU WILL ALSO TURN OVER ANY OTHER PERSONS YOU ARE HOLDING AGAINST
THEIR WILL.

REFUSAL WILL RESULT IN SEVERE CONSEQUENCES SAY AGAIN SEVERE
CONSEQUENCES.

YOUR FOUR HOURS BEGINS NOW.

BARRETT, CAPTAIN, SS SHADE TREE

"I admit, I'm a bit surprised they didn't run for the Feds. Have they sent any other messages?" Dotsero asked the frightened-looking signals tech.

"Not that we've been able to detect. If they had sent a hyperphone signal, we should have picked up some sidebands or some scatter from all the junk out here."

"Good. Give me a message pad."

Dotsero took the pad and tapped a message out with the tiny keyboard:

TO: BARRETT, CAPTAIN, SS SHADE TREE

YOUR TERMS ACCEPTABLE. SIX PERSONNEL TO BE TURNED OVER TO
REPRESENTATIVES OF YOUR CREW AT LOCATION SIX KILOMETERS NORTH OF
BRICKSTOWN. EXCHANGE TO BE MADE AT 0900 TOMORROW MORNING LOCAL
TIME. COORDINATES OF TRANSFER LOCATION TO FOLLOW IN SEPARATE MESSAGE.

C.D., BRICKSTOWN

"Send that," he said as he handed the pad over.

Moments later, another formal message flashed on the screen:

TO: C.D., BRICKSTOWN

AGREED. SS SHADE TREE IS MOVING TO GEOSYNCHRONOUS ORBIT OVER
BRICKSTOWN. SHIP WILL REMAIN IN MONITORING ORBIT OVER THE CITY UNTIL
TRANSFER OF PERSONNEL IS COMPLETE.

BARRETT, CAPTAIN, SS SHADE TREE

"Perfect," Dotsero said. "Just perfect."

Ten

North of Brickstown - 0500 Local

The column of men moved quickly and quietly, but carefully. In the red stone buildings of the city, modified floors modeled on the deck plates of starships kept most buildings and even some of the streets at a comfortable one gee, but outside of the city, the one-fourth gee of the moon's natural gravity applied. The thin air made breathing difficult, but most of the armed thugs making up what passed for Brickstown's "army" were used to it.

Charles Dotsero led the group up a small valley toward the rendezvous coordinates. At least the low gravity made walking easy, even for the men lugging heavy crew-served weapons. He planned to cover the six kilometers well before the rise of the gas giant; one hour before sunrise, the bright cloud layers of the gas giant would reflect enough light to trigger the color recognition of the human eye, and make covert movement more difficult. Dotsero planned to have most of the hundred men under cover by then.

A faint whine drew eyes skyward, where a faint glowing trail from an ion drive revealed a shuttle descending for a landing.

Overhead

"Three clicks to the rendezvous," Hector Gomp said. At the controls, Paolo Guerra adjusted the controls slightly to flatten out the glide path.

"Is everything ready back there?"

Indira Krishnavarna looked up at Captain Barrett. She was bent over the polysteel container holding the nuclear weapon. "Everything looks good. Timer is functional, radio link is green. I've got the skimmer warmed up, all we have to do is take off and plant it on the other side of the town. We'll be back here before first light."

"We're all ready for a double-cross, then," Barrett said.

"You know they'll try one," Colonel Feller observed. He was seated in one of the shuttle's fold-down drop seats, clad again in his old armor and holding his carbine.

"Not much doubt of that, is there?"

Feller shook his head. "Not if I know Chuck Dotsero."

"Good thing we've got some insurance, then."

"Thirty seconds," Paolo Guerra called out.

"You OK, Doc?" Barrett asked.

The *Shade Tree*'s Doctor Janice Dodd looked up from her seat and nodded, her face pale; she had insisted on coming along, but wasn't used to shuttle descents. "I'll be fine," she said, clutching her emergency aid pack to her chest.

"You should have stayed on the ship."

"You might need me," Dodd said.

"I sure hope not."

There were clicks and snaps as Barrett and her landing team checked weapons and armor before the shuttle settled at last to the surface of the moon, and the crew door popped open. The rendezvous point was a clearing in a small, rock-littered valley to the east; Barrett's party had only to walk about a kilometer down a steep, narrow canyon to the designated spot. Barrett paused by the pilots' station as the team filed out.

"Keep the engine warmed up, be ready to take off at a moment's notice - if anybody spots you here, take off, keep out of weapons range, but stay close enough to come in fast if we need you," Barrett said.

"Will do," Guerra answered.

At the shuttles' rear, the cargo hatch opened. A small, battered skimmer floated out with the Exec at the controls, the nuke strapped to a small pad on the rear.

The rendezvous

Charles Dotsero spread his men out in a loose horseshoe formation around the slight rise overlooking the piece of flat ground chosen as a rendezvous. The formation, known for centuries as a 'fire sack,' allowed maximum fire into the target zone.

One of this senior 'soldiers' approached, holding a small hand scanner. "Mister D," he said, "I read six people at the rendezvous point, four of them with armor and weapons, fanned out some around the area, two others in plain clothes with side arms, in the center by that big rock."

"Couldn't be better," Dotsero grinned. "Where's their shuttle?"

"About a klick away, up at the top of the canyon they came down," the man replied.

"Good - he's not going anywhere without the ship. We'll take care of that once we have their Captain." Dotsero looked at his watch. "Time. Are the girls ready?"

"Yessir, have them roped together over by that rock. I'll lead them down myself."

"Let's go."

On the flat ground below, Jean Barrett looked up at Hector Gomp's barked warning. "I see people coming in, Captain," he called. "At least ten, with small arms."

Barrett looked up to the slope where Gomp was pointing. Sure enough, several figures were picking their way down the rocky, dusty slope; six of them were uncomfortably close, in a line, as though tied together. *Has to be the girls*, Barrett told herself. *Six of them - our two and four others. Those bastards.*

"Here comes the skimmer back," Colonel Feller said.

On the slope above, the procession stopped briefly. "What's that?" Charles Dotsero wanted to know.

"Sounds like a skimmer - there it is, Boss, coming through that saddle to the southwest. They're heading back to the main group down there." The 'soldier' lifted his viewglasses. "Only one pilot, nobody else on board. They must have been out doing a recon."

"Probably. Let's keep moving."

Ten minutes later, they finally reached the valley floor and walked carefully across to where the *Shade Tree* party stood waiting.

Eleven

At the rendezvous

"Who's in charge here," Charles Dotsero called out.

Jean Barrett stepped forward, her mouth set in a grim line. "I'm Captain Barrett. Where are my crew members?"

Dotsero motioned to someone behind him. An armed man led the six girls out from behind a large boulder.

"Cut them loose," Barrett ordered.

Dotsero looked at his man and nodded. The guard produced a large knife and cut the ropes from each girl's wrists.

"Guards," Barrett said. Gomp and Colonel Feller led the *Shade Tree* security force forward, their helmet visors down and locked. "Girls, walk straight over here."

"Hold on just a moment," Dotsero said.

"What?"

The slaver grinned. "Captain," he said, "I have a hundred armed men on that ridgeline behind me, armed with heavy weapons."

"And?"

Dotsero held up a small personal communicator. "And, Captain, I'm going to ask you all to lay down your arms. I'm afraid the girls won't be going with you. In fact, I'm afraid you are all going to be my... guests... for a time."

"Oh, I don't think so," Barrett said. "You're outgunned."

"What?"

Barrett held up a small black anodized aluminum wand with a gleaming red contact point. "Know what this is?"

"A radio remote," Dotsero said. "What is this? Do you take me for a fool, Captain?"

"Events prove you one," Barrett snapped. "I don't need to bring a company of infantry to cover my exit, Colonel Dotsero" - Dotsero's eyes shot open wide at the mention of his name - "although you may find tangling with my Security crew a bit more than you can handle. But I have better ways of doing things. In fact, you provided my safe-conduct yourself."

Hector Gomp strolled forward to stand beside his Captain, raising his visor as he did so. "Funny stuff you carry around on your ship," he said. "Sure like to know where you're finding old fusion warheads."

Dotsero's face paled. "You wouldn't *dare*. "

"Try me," Barrett almost snarled the words at him.

"How the hell do you know my name?"

"We know more than your name," another armored figure said. Dotsero stared as the second figure, this one wearing old, battered pre-war battle armor, stepped up and raised his visor.

"Hello, Chuck," Colonel Augustus Feller said in an amiable tone.

"Gus Feller, you old son of a bitch," the slaver breathed.

"Now," Barrett said, "girls, walk straight to me. McNeal, Timmons, load them in the skimmer, and take off up that canyon we just came down. Dotsero, stand right where you are."

The six girls hurried to comply. As they passed Barrett, Tim McNeal and Yvette Langstrom led them towards the canyon mouth.

"Don't get any ideas about trying anything, either," Barrett warned Dotsero, who was glancing at the ridgelines bordering the canyon. "This thing is a deadman rig. I drop it or let go of the contact, the nuke goes off in thirty minutes. Don't worry about trying to find it - you can't. But it will sure as hell flatten Brickstown if it goes off, and in this thin atmosphere the heat flash and blast will probably get you here, too."

Dotsero's face paled. "Thirty minutes?"

"You heard me."

"I've had a jamming field over this valley for at least fifteen. Dammit, Captain, you may have killed us all!"

Not if we can get to the shuttle on time, Barrett thought. She spun to face her crewmembers.

"Everyone run! Get out of here now!"

Charles Dotsero and his bodyguard were already running for a nearby clump of boulders, Dotsero yelling as he ran, "Open fire! Open fire! Kill them!"

Colonel Feller grabbed Captain Barrett by one arm and yanked her into the lee of a large boulder as a hail of projectile weapon fire raked the valley floor. Fifty meters to the right, Barrett saw Hector Gomp dive behind another boulder.

Feller looked over his shoulder. "Skimmer's long gone. Looks like the rest of them made it to the valley mouth. They should be out of trouble."

"We're not," Barrett said. Feller turned to see the Captain glaring at her own comm. "He wasn't lying; all our transmissions are completely jammed. I can't even call the ship."

Feller tapped the side of his helmet. "Gomp?" he asked. He looked at Barrett. "Sure as hell, Captain, even our encrypted helmet comms are out."

"Great."

"Captain," Feller said, "you're bleeding."

Barrett looked down. Her right calf had been punctured by a projectile, her lower pant leg soaked with blood. She felt no pain, only a burning sensation.

"It doesn't hurt," she said slowly.

"Can you stand up?"

Barrett tried rising to a crouch. " *Now* it hurts," she said. "I don't think I can run. Not even in this gravity."

"We've got to get you out of here," Feller belabored the obvious. "You're losing blood fast." He bent, tore away the Captain's lower pant leg, knotted it into a makeshift tourniquet. "That should help, for a while."

"As long as I don't get shot again."

A few meters away

"At least three of them are pinned down," Dotsero's bodyguard informed his boss. Both men were hidden in a small depression in the stony ground.

"They're behind those big rocks. Two to the left, one to the right," the bodyguard agreed.

"Listen," Dotsero said. "You get up to the ridgeline, find Andre, tell him to fan the men out along the ridge until they can see those people, and to fire on sight. I'll keep them pinned down."

"You say so, Boss," the man said, and quickly wriggled away, pressed close to the dusty ground. Dotsero drew a hand weapon, raised up slightly, and snapped a shot off at Gomp's rock.

At the rocks

"I've got an idea."

"Hope it's a good one," Barrett said. She was growing dizzy. "We're running out of time - if Dotsero was right, we've got maybe ten minutes."

Feller picked up a small rock and tossed it at Gomp, who turned to look. Feller made a series of hand signals. Gomp nodded.

"Stay down, Captain," Feller said. He placed his carbine on auto and let loose a burst at the ridgeline. Fire was returned but slowly and off the mark, almost as though...

"They're moving around up there," Feller said. "Flanking us."

"Hey, Cap'n," Gomp said as he crashed to earth after his sprint from the other boulder. He looked at Barrett's leg. "You OK?"

"I'll be fine once we're all out of here," she said. "Eight minutes, maybe less. Let's hear that plan, Colonel."

"All right. Figure we need five minutes to get up that little canyon, one to get loaded in the shuttle, that leaves two minutes to clear the blast radius of that nuke."

"Plenty of time, with Guerra piloting," Barrett said.

"Gomp, was that an ArcLight I saw in your grenade pouch?"

Gomp grinned. "Sure enough, sir."

"Give it to me." As Gomp extracted the canister-shaped device from his left grenade pouch and handed it over, Feller explained, "An ArcLight, Captain, is basically a massive non-lethal area suppression device. Once I toss it, it will generate a high-intensity flash that will temporarily blind everyone within about a five-hundred meter radius. Gomp and I will be protected by our visors, but..."

"But I won't," Barrett finished for him.

"The effect is only temporary," Feller said, "And if you duck down behind this rock and shield your eyes, you should only be dazzled for a few moments. Those guys up there, though, they'll all be looking down at us."

"All right, let's do it."

"Visors down and polarized, Gomp." Feller looked at the ArcLight, pressed a contact, silently counted to five as the device let out a growing, high-pitched whine.

"*Fire in the hole!*" He threw the grenade into the center of the small open area.

On the ridgeline

"What's that?" one of the thugs raised his head, pointed down into the valley.

An older man stole a look. His eyes snapped open wide. "*Down! Everybody down!*"

The ArcLight went off with a blinding, searing flash of white light.

The valley floor

"Run!"

Feller bent and picked up Captain Barrett. "Glad the gravity's low here," he muttered as he trotted towards the canyon. Behind him Hector Gomp ran backwards, carbine at the ready, scanning the valley walls. A shot rang out, the projectile splatting into the dust a meter away.

"I'm not that heavy," Barrett protested. She blinked her eyes; she could make out shapes, dark and light spots, but no more.

"You're just a slip of a girl, Captain." Feller's visor shot up, and he grinned. "It's just that I'm an old man."

Something hit Feller from the left, sending him and Barrett sprawling into the dust. He rolled, came up spitting red dirt, to see Charles Dotsero leaping at him again.

"Gomp! Get the Captain out of here!"

Gomp ran past, scooping up the Captain and heading for the canyon - only a few meters now - even as Dotsero floated in a fast, low-gravity arc to hit Feller in the chest.

"Mother..." Feller growled, rolled, caught Dotsero with a fist to the jaw, knocked him down. Dotsero jumped back up, launching himself almost a meter in the air in the low gravity. Feller had lost his carbine - he looked around quickly, saw it in the dust two meters away.

"Don't bother, Colonel," Dotsero said in a cold voice. Feller turned; the slaver was on his feet, pointing a hand weapon at Feller's open visor. "Anyone still moving, get into that canyon! Get those people before they get to the shuttle!" At least forty men were on the valley floor now, headed their way. Feller saw two men carrying a light anti-air rocket, one easily capable of knocking down the shuttle. The ArcLight hadn't worked as he'd hoped.

Dotsero was grinning now. "I've been waiting *years* for this, old man. You got me busted, demoted, and cashiered. I owe you." He raised his weapon, aimed between Feller's eyes.

"Yeah, I suppose you think you do." Oddly, Feller was smiling, too. "One thing, Colonel, before you shoot."

"Yes?"

"I taught you everything you know, boy," Feller growled, "but I didn't teach you everything *I* know." He held up his hand, where his Academy ring gleamed against the flat black of the polymer gloves. The ring was smeared with a bit of blood from Dotsero's jaw. "See this?"

"An Academy ring," Dotsero scoffed.

"A neurotoxin injector," Feller corrected. "You should be feeling the effects, oh, right about now." He grinned as Dotsero dropped his pistol, slumped to the dusty ground. Dotsero looked up at Feller, his eyes rolling helplessly as the toxin paralyzed all of his voluntary muscles.

Colonel Feller bent down, grunting a bit with the pain of his cancerous belly, and picked up Dotsero's gun. "You know," he said companionably, "You never could take me, Charlie."

With a jaunty wave and a nasty smile, Feller turned jogged for the canyon mouth ahead of a crowd of screaming thugs, leaving Charles Dotsero in a helpless pile on the ground.

Feller broke into a run as he entered the canyon mouth. Behind him, a dozen or more Brickstown 'soldiers' spilled into view.

"This way," Gomp called. "Sir, behind you!" He snapped off a shot, and two thugs hit the dirt. Shots whined up the canyon, one ping-ponging off Gomp's armor.

"They're right behind you," Gomp shouted. He pulled another grenade from his cargo vest, armed it, and tossed it down the canyon. He was rewarded with an explosion and a thin screech of pain.

"That will keep their heads down for a second or two, but only until they get their weapons teams up."

"I know. There are thirty-four of them heading into the canyon, at least. I saw two crew-served weapons teams, they'll be here in a minute. Where's the Captain?"

"She went on ahead. She's moving slow, but moving."

"Get going." Both men fired several shots down the canyon to keep heads down, turned and started climbing. A rocket slammed into a boulder only meters behind them and exploded, sending rock chips flying.

"Well, that didn't take them long."

"We ain't gonna make it," Gomp said. "They're gaining on us, and we can't even call the shuttle to leave without us."

"Will the Captain get there in time without help?"

Gomp shook his head. "I don't know. Wouldn't count on it."

"All right," Feller growled. He stopped at a large rock outcrop that partially blocked a bend in the canyon. "Go on ahead. Get the Captain, sling her over your shoulder if you have to, but get to that shuttle and take off. I'll hold them here."

"What?"

"No time to argue, son," Feller said. "Get going."

"Sir, let me, you're a passenger, I can't allow..."

"Allow? You can't stop me." Feller raised his visor, looked at Gomp. "Son, I'm an old man. Get going. Take care of your Captain. That's an order, Marine."

Gomp turned to go, but stopped at the Colonel's voice.

"Here," Feller called out. "Hold up." Gomp stopped, turned back to the Colonel.

Feller shifted his carbine to his left hand, popped open his armor's chest piece, reached into the neck of his shirt, and pulled out something on a silver chain. A sharp tug snapped the chain. He tossed the jangling item and Gomp caught it; Gomp looked down to see a badly worn pair of Marine dog tags and a datachip on the broken chain.

"My last will," Feller explained, "And I suppose, once that nuke goes off, my last remaining vestiges. Follow the instructions on the chip, boy, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Gomp whispered. Another shot whined past overhead.

Feller scowled and roared at Gomp in his best parade-ground bellow. "Speak up, Marine! Promise me!"

Gomp came instinctively to attention. "Yes, *sir* !"

"All right," Feller growled. "Now, get your friends and your Captain back to the shuttle and get the hell out of here. Nobody's getting past me in this damn canyon. Hurry!"

Gomp hurried up the canyon, his vision blurring as he ran. Behind him, he heard the old Colonel's roar:

"Come on, you sons of bitches! You want a fight, I'll show you a fight! I'm waiting *right here*! "

More shots rang out, echoing up the narrow rock of the passageway as Gomp ran out of the canyon to see the shuttle only meters away. Captain Barrett was already in the shuttle's hatch, urging him on. Gomp ran for the hatch, threw himself in, shouting "Go go go!" The shuttle lifted off with a whine of thrusters, the hatch closing as it gained altitude.

"Where's the Colonel?" Barrett demanded.

"Isn't coming," Gomp said, picking himself up off the deck.

"What do you mean he isn't coming?"

"He isn't coming," Gomp repeated. "Cap'n, there were almost fifty of them pounding up that canyon after us with heavy weapons - no way we'd have made it back unless someone held them off. They'd have popped out of that canyon and wasted the shuttle."

Barrett was livid. "Damn it, Gomp, he was our *passenger*, we have to look out for passengers."

"He was also dying," Doctor Dodd added.

"Excuse me?"

Janice Dodd turned in her seat. "Why do you think I insisted on coming along? I got his medical records by hyperphone from the Navy, right before we left the ship. Colonel Feller had an inoperable pancreatic

cancer, metastasized to his liver, kidneys, hell, half his internal organs. He only had a matter of months. He had to have been in agony, Captain. Frankly, I don't know how he stayed on his feet."

"So you're saying," Barrett began.

"He may have finally found what he was looking for," Dodd concluded.

Gomp said nothing, just buckled himself into a bucket seat and slumped miserably as the shuttle pounded up the gravity well to the ship. Behind them, a new sun blossomed briefly on the surface, rocking the shuttle slightly in the shock wave as it sped away from the former location of the slaver's base.

Twenty silent minutes later, the shuttle docked at its port on the underside of the *Shade Tree*. Crew and refugees climbed out of the hatch.

Captain Barrett emerged last from the shuttle, breaking an ancient protocol that said a Captain was last in and first out of a shuttle. She looked around to see the Exec standing in the small sally bay.

"Indira," Barrett waved the Exec over and gestured to the young girls huddled together by the hatch.

"We'll need to find a berth for those four girls; Doctor Dodd is taking them, Sassy and Mickie to Medical first to check 'em out, then I want them all resting. They've been through a lot."

"You all have."

"Yeah, but we're home now - close as we get these days. We still have to get these girls back to Tarbos before our job is done. I suppose we'll have to talk to the Feds, too - they were selling those girls to someone. There are other girls out there that need to get home."

"I'll send a hyperphone message," Krishnavarna said, "Fill them in, let them know we're coming."

"Good idea."

"What shall I tell them about the nuke?"

Barrett looked at her Executive Officer, her expression carefully blank. "What nuke?"

Krishnavarna returned her Captains' gaze for a moment, nodded, and walked away down the corridor.

Hector Gomp walked up, his carbine in one meaty hand, a shiny dangling object in the other. "Cap'n," he said, "the Colonel gave me this right before... Well, you know."

"A datachip?"

"And his dog tags. I think it's his will, Cap'n. He made me promise to look at it, follow the instructions on the chip."

"You want to look at it alone?"

"I'd just as soon you were there, Cap'n."

"All right - let's use the terminal in the mess room."

Barrett took a moment to once more reassure the girls that they were safe and on their way home, then motioned to Gomp to follow her up the two ladders to the crew's mess room.

Hector Gomp sat down at the small table bearing the room's small communal terminal. He looked at the

chip in his hand and sighed.

"Well, let's see what's on this." He plugged the datachip into the mess room's terminal. A second later, the grizzled image of Colonel Feller appeared on the terminal's screen.

"Gomp, if you're seeing this," the image said, "then it's because I've finally gone tits-up for good, and you're now my executor. It also means that I found what I was looking for when I signed on with your Captain, so don't feel bad about it. I'm not the sort to die in bed. So, let's move on to closing out my personal business."

"Executor? Me?" Gomp breathed.

"On this chip, you'll find a complete listing of all of my assets and properties, on Earth, Tarbos and Halifax. My attorney, Mark Reynolds of Reynolds, Fujikawa and Riss in Mountain View, will handle disposing of those properties. As I have no surviving family, I want the proceeds to go to the Marine Orphans' Education Fund. They have offices on Earth, Tarbos, Caliban, Halifax and Zed."

"My memoirs, such as they are, are also on this chip. Give them to the Marine Corps Museum on the Tarbos Fleet Dock. Let those keyboard jockeys decide if they're worth publishing or not."

"Finally, whatever remains of me, I want cremated and scattered to the winds over Cook Inlet at Kenai, Alaska, Earth. Kenai was a great place when I was a boy, and I suppose it's as good a place as any for my last remaining vestiges." On the screen, the Colonel smiled. "I haven't seen the place since I was twenty years old. I imagine it's changed some, but you should still be able to find the beach all right."

"That's all I have to say. You're a good man, Gomp, and a good Marine. It was a pleasure serving alongside you. Take care of your ship and your Captain. Semper Fi."

The screen went blank.

"Well," Gomp muttered. He looked up. "Cap'n?"

"We'll head for Earth," Barrett agreed. "Right after we drop those girls off at Tarbos."

"Captain," Gomp said, "Thank you."

"Thank *him*," Barrett said, pointing at the blank terminal screen. "Without him, none of us would be here."

Twelve

Tarbos

"Smart people in our line of work stay away from the Feds, you know," Jean Barrett complained. She, Indira Krishnavanrna, Sassy Miroslava and Mickie Watanabe were standing in a corridor on the Fleet spacedock, staring at the big double doors leading to the Confederate Bureau of Investigation offices.

"No disagreement," the Exec said. "But you have to admit, this is an exception."

"Sure enough," the two younger girls agreed at once.

"Well," Barrett muttered, "Might as well go in."

The doors slid silently open as they walked through. Inside the doors was a desk, and behind the desk was a slight, dark man in a dark gray suit.

"Well," the CBI agent said, "what can I do for you folks?"

"Who do we talk to about reporting a slave-running operation?" Barrett asked.

"A *what* ? Did you say slavers? Are you serious?"

"Serious as a heart attack. I'm Jean Barrett, Captain of the *SS Shade Tree*. This is my Executive Officer, and my two crew members here were prisoners of the slavers."

"How'd they get away?"

"We went in and *took* them back," Barrett growled.

"The hell you say. I don't suppose you'd want to tell me how?"

"We asked nicely."

"I bet you did." The dark man stood up. "Come back and talk to Special Agent Griffith - he's the Missing Persons Liaison, I think he'll be real interested to talk to you."

"Lead on," Barrett encouraged him. "We've got a lot to tell him and not much time. There are four girls down planetside that can tell you a lot more. They've all agreed to testify, and I've got their names and comm codes for you."

"Follow me," the Fed said, and led the way into the CBI offices.

Mountain View

Gomp took Tim McNeal with him to the surface, to escort the four girls home. Both Security men wore normal street clothes, with only a small concealed sidearm each; they didn't expect any trouble.

"OK, three of you live here in Mountain View, one in Rangely, right?" Gomp said as they stepped off the Skyhook bus.

The girls all nodded.

"McNeal, go call in a hack. We'll see you to your doors, girls. Captain's already notified your families that you're all home and safe, so I expect you'll have people waiting on you."

Mira Toler laid her hand on Gomp's arm. "I don't know how to thank you enough," she said. "Without you and your Captain, who knows where we'd have ended up? Slaves to some miner on an asteroid with no name, probably."

"Well, that didn't happen." Gomp looked at the girl. "Listen, there will always be people like that Dotsero out there. That doesn't mean that people in general aren't pretty decent. You girls will probably never be able to forget these last few weeks, but don't let it affect you. Don't let it hang over your heads. You've got lives to live; go live them. Look ahead, not back."

Tim McNeal stared at his boss; Gomp normally wasn't much given to philosophizing.

"You're right," Toler agreed. "We should look ahead." The other girls nodded agreement. "But you'll forgive us if we're grateful to you anyway. You all risked your lives for us, and we'll never forget that." She stood on tiptoe and kissed Gomp on a stubbled cheek.

"Well." Gomp spluttered, coughed and turned red. "Let's get you girls home. McNeal, what are you

grinning at? Get your ass out there and get us a hack, already!"

Tim McNeal, smiling broadly, turned and went out into the sunshine of a bright Mountain View morning.

Titan's Belt

"Engineering reports the star drive repaired and operational, Captain Polston."

Jane Polston spun her Bridge chair around to face the *Brookes* ' Navigation station. She was thinking rapidly. "Get me a course for Halifax," she ordered. "Best possible trajectory."

"Halifax, aye," the Navigation tech answered. "Plotting now."

Good thing those damned pirates missed that cache of parts, Polston reflected. We'll meet them again, and next time, the shoe's going to be on the other foot.

Nobody had objected to her assuming command and ownership of the antiquated *Brookes* on receiving word of the nuclear explosion at Brickstown. She hadn't expected anyone would; nobody would probably object to her newly-appointed second-in-command taking things over is she got herself killed, either. Things were like that, living life on the rim as the crew of the *Brookes* did.

"Clearance to leave the station, Captain," Helm reported.

"Thrusters back one-third. Get us out of here. Exec, how are we on supplies?"

"Not good," her newly-appointed Executive officer replied. "I did the best I could with what money we had, but we'll hit Halifax broke, low on water and damned hungry. You want to go any farther than that, we'll make port eating each other."

"That's fine. I propose to sell this hog at Halifax. We'll be in the market for something a little lighter, a little faster, and a little better armed."

"And then?"

"And then, we find a new operating base. Somewhere outside the Confederacy. We rebuild, refit, and eventually... Eventually, we'll see the *Shade Tree* again. And next time, it's going to be different."

Thirteen

Earth

Hector Gomp surprised his Captain and the Exec by showing up at the shuttle in impeccable Marine blues. A white service cap gleamed on his close-cropped head. He looked at the small view screen on the bulkhead next to the shuttle port, to see Earth turning slowly.

"Ready," he said at last.

"Let's go."

The three of them boarded the shuttle. Gomp took the controls, setting their destination for Kenai, Alaska - for Colonel Augustus Feller's childhood home. As they descended, the glittering Pacific Ocean and the green expanse of Alaska gradually spread out below them. The town itself lay under a bank of clouds; Barrett and Krishnavarna watched silently as Gomp guided the shuttle through the gray mists. After a few minutes of blind flight, they dropped through the clouds to see the coast before them.

Kenai had never been a large town, and the exodus of many of Earth's younger generation for the new horizons of the Confederacy had left it a tiny Alaskan coastal village with no more than a thousand residents. The town rarely saw traffic from orbit, so I was a surprise for the landing field's personnel when a call for landing clearance came in from an orbital shuttle: "Kenai Ground, this is *SS Shade Tree* landing shuttle, requesting grounding clearance."

"*Shade Tree* shuttle," a startled controller replied. "Clearance granted; you are cleared to land on Pad Four. Current temperature is eight degrees, winds sixteen kph north by northwest. Approach path vector forty-five."

"Roger that, Kenai Ground. Beginning our approach."

Both controllers working in the Kenai Field tower stood up to watch the dull gray shape of an old Navy surplus shuttle float down, through the overcast, to settle to earth - the Earth - on Pad Four. The hatch opened, and three figures stepped out into the damp, chill air and walked to the terminal.

"We need to get to Cook Inlet," Captain Barrett said to the clerk who cleared them through what passed for entry control at Kenai.

"Easy," the clerk said. "It's about half a kilometer southwest of here - when you leave the field, just follow South Spruce street to Kenai Avenue, and you'll see the inlet right there at the foot of the bluff."

"Thank you," Barrett said.

A short time later, the three walked across the final street and down a steep set of stairs to see the sea before them. Under a leaden gray sky, the waters of Cook Inlet lapped at the sands of the narrow beach. A tern flew overhead, riding the chilly offshore wind.

Hector Gomp walked to the water's edge, followed closely by Captain Barrett and Indira Krishnavarna. Gomp reached into a pocket, pulled out the Colonel's dog tags and the datachip, still on the silver chain.

"He was a hero," Gomp said after a moment. "I don't think there's a Marine alive that would disagree."

"He was that," Krishnavarna agreed with real feeling.

"Yes," Captain Barrett said, "and he went out a hero."

"He wouldn't have wanted to die in a hospital," Gomp said. His voice was hoarse now. "He wouldn't have wanted to die in a bed. He wasn't that kind of man. Colonel Feller would have wanted to go out fighting." He looked up at the gray, scudding clouds. "And he did. He went out like a Marine."

The three stood silently for a moment, looking at the water. Far out, a whale blew a spout of mist into the chilly air.

"We brought you home, Colonel," Gomp said to the tumbling sky. "I kept my promise. We brought you home."

Gomp drew back his arm and, with a snap, threw the dog tags and datachip out into the dark waters of the inlet.

"We brought you home," he said softly, one last time.

The Shade Tree

"Cleared to leave orbit, Captain."

"Good. New course zero -forty, maneuvering thrusters ahead full."

"Zero-forty, thrusters ahead full," Helm repeated. "Sixteen minutes to space buoy."

"Very well. Say goodbye to Earth, people." Captain Barrett looked up to see Gomp walk onto the Bridge, dressed again in his old black workout suit.

"Feeling better?" Barrett asked her Security Chief.

"Yeah," Gomp said. He smiled. "Yeah, Cap'n, I am."

"Well," Barrett said, "that's good."

"Feeling pretty good, I fact," Gomp continued. "I think I've learned something important."

"You're not thinking of going back in the Corps, are you?" Barrett asked with some alarm.

Gomp laughed. "No, Cap'n, I like it here. No, what I learned was something else. See," his face grew serious, "too many folks worry about dying. They worry too much about how they're going to die. Is this food bad for you, is this planet dangerous, is this ship safe? You've heard that kind of talk."

"Sure."

"Well," Gomp said, "As I see it - and as I think the Colonel saw it - is that it doesn't really matter. Dying doesn't matter. Everybody dies. Hopefully not too soon, but everybody does. *How* you die doesn't matter."

He looked at the stars showing on the main screen. "It's how you *live* that's important."

"You know," Barrett smiled, "I think you're right."

"So," Gomp said, "where we off to, Cap'n?"

"The Rim," Barrett said. "New colony, outside the Confederacy; they're calling it Wilson. There should be some kind of work for us there."

"Private corporation?"

"No - no corporation, no planetary government, just a few settlers looking to live outside the border. Folks who want to escape Confederate notice for one reason or another."

"Sounds like a shady kind of place," Indira Krishnavarna observed. "Unaffiliated world, outside the Confederacy - probably every wanted criminal in the galaxy is either hiding there or heading there."

"Exactly," Barrett grinned. "I figure it's just our kind of planet." She looked up at the screen as the stars gave way to the unfathomable pattern of subspace.

"Sounds like fun," Gomp said.

"I think so," Barrett agreed. "Let's go live a little."

Do You Need Cover Art?

If you like our cover art, you can commission our artist to create beautiful and one of a kind art for your title! Contact information and portfolio can be found at <http://www.derondouglas.com>