

Escape From The Insectoids – Insectoids 02

Steve Gordon

Escape From The Insectoids

Forward

By Steve Gordon. All rights reserved. From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 3 months after Vitalics:

We were caught with our guard down, and humanity paid a terrible price for it. We had battled the Insectoids, a race of sentient seven foot tall insects, to a standstill in twenty years of terrible combat. We had taken losses, but our worlds were secure, and most of our people were safe. And then the politicians, lured by a gullible desire to believe the overtures of chief negotiator with the Insectoids, the traitor Mitterand, agreed to an armistice at Vitalics. There they ambushed and destroyed

almost all of our entire fleet.

Almost all. The small fleet under my command, combined with a task force from our juniorAlliancepartner, the June Directorate, survived, but was forced to flee vastly superior numbers of Insectoid battlecruisers and battleships. Nothing stopped the Insectoids from moving in, occupying all our worlds and enslaving our people, putting them to work producing material for their war machine.

But the Insectoids were smart enough to realize that as long as any of us were free that we were still a threat to them, that someday we would come back and reclaim what was rightfully ours. They sent many fleets to hunt us down, even as we've fledAlliancespace into the unknown. We've had two brief battles since we left Orotis, on the edge ofAlliancespace, and those two battles have cost us three warships (and a badly damaged fourth that had to be scuttled), as well as two of our precious merchantmen.

Our efforts to escape are not merely a mindless route; we are moving with a purpose, even if our crews do not fully understand or agree with it. For we are going to search out the technology of the Chent, the ancient civilization who may hold the key to helping us defeat the Insectoids. But the Insectoids are bent on making sure we don't survive long enough to make any discoveries, and our most immediate task right now is simple: escape from the Insectoids.

Chapter 1: The Insectoids Make A Dangerous Enemy

"David!" said a pleasing but insistent voice.

A serious looking dark haired man continued to hack away at the soil with a hoe, listening to the birds chirp on... what was the name of the planet?

Just beyond the edges of Alliancespace, it only had a numerical designation, but the man had been giving some thought to giving it a name.

All in good time; with Amy, there was always time.

"David!" came Amy's voice, from the house he had built.

The man dropped the hoe, sighing. He really didn't like leaving things undone. But he never had been able to resist that voice.

He made his way back to the house, admiring the trees as he listened to the birdsong. This planet was almost perfect, and probably, given its location just a dozen lightyears out from the frontier world of Orotis, would eventually start to attract settlers in 20 or 30 years. Well, 20 or 30 years was a long time, and even then it was a big planet; He and Amy would have it to themselves for a long, long time.

She leaned against one of the supports on the porch, squinting at him in the late afternoon light. He stared back at her, realizing he could never wish for a better sight.

"David, it's happened!" she said, pulling him by the arm and taking him inside to the interstellar radio. The man listened to the babble of reports. The Insectoids had destroyed the fleet. The Insectoids were taking over. The Insectoids were landing on habitable worlds.

The man said nothing. In another time, another place, his first impulse would be to hop into his fighter and blast off. But he had Amy, and Amy had him, and they were alone, together, and what else really mattered? He said as much.

She looked at him oddly. "Aren't you worried that they'll come here?"

"This is an empty world," he said. "And it's a big galaxy. I'm sure

they'll have much better things to do with their time."

"But David, what if they come?" she said, pressing against him.

"Don't worry," the man said, wrapping his arm around her. "Probably nothing will happen, not for years."

They came almost ten weeks later. The first inkling he had of it was when he heard the roar of the Insectoid scoutship touching down near the house. He was hunting in the forest when he saw it, and he started back to the house on a run, his blaster drawn.

He heard the screams just as he reached the clearing, and saw Amy lifted up by the neck by one of the Insectoid troopers. There were four of them, and the other three quickly pointed their weapons at the man.

"Wait!" said the man, approaching slowly. "There's no need for this!"

"Surrender," said one of the Insectoids through its harsh translation device. Amy struggled to breathe in its grasp

The man lowered but didn't drop his weapon. "We're not a threat to you."

"Drop your weapon," came the modulated voice. "Surrender."

Amy, screaming, continued to struggle, flailing her feet; and one of her random kicks caught the Insectoid holding by one of its legs. The

Insectoid, perhaps annoyed, but not really hurt, twisted its grip; and there was a crack, and then Amy's lifeless body was tossed to the ground.

"NO!" the man screamed, and he fired his blaster; and even though three of the four Insectoids had their weapons aimed at him, and his was lowered, he managed to kill all four of them with a single shot to each of their foreheads before any could fire back.

The man ran over to Amy, and felt a long moment for a pulse. Sobbing, he cradled her head in his hands and cried hysterically.

Later, much later, the man found himself standing over a freshly dug grave; the tombstone had been carved out of rock by a blaster, and the flowers on the grave were fresh, though the man had no memory of how either got there.

He stood at that spot a long time, and as the sun sank low, he muttered, "They took the only thing that ever meant anything to me...." Then he paused, for a long time, and said, every so softly, while staring after the setting sun, "This isn't over...."

War Admiral Norman North eyed the status reports. They had managed to save 64 active warships and 24 merchant/civilian vessels. The foremost and proudest of them was, of course, the Glory, his combined command carrier/battleship. Unfortunately, they didn't have any other battleships or dreadnaughts in the fleet; they had all been lost at Vitalics.

But he did have a number of smaller capital ships at his command. There was the Amory Til, a converted heavy cruiser/half carrier that was jammed packed with three squadrons (it was rated for two). There was the Blue Luna, a pocket battleship which didn't quite have the punch of a true battleship but was almost as heavily armored and shielded as one. There were eight battlecruisers in the fleet, four of them the newest Tiger-class ships.

But the bulk of the fleet were cruisers--12 light, 11 regular (7 of those being deep space cruisers), and 7 heavies. The rest of the fleet was a mix of destroyers (including seven of the newest fast attack destroyers) and frigates as well as one minesweeper/layer.

But of course, no discussion of the fleet's military assets could be complete without a discussion of starfighter support. They had a little over 250 starfighters, with eight squadrons packed on the Glory and three on the Directorate half-carrier, the Amory Til. The Blue Luna carried a full squadron, and the rest were scattered in three's and four's throughout the fleet. The Glory's squadrons were the most modern version of the Wildcats--the 145-D and 150-B's, while the Defenders were 78-J's. The rest of the fighters were of similar configuration, both from the Directorate fleet and the ones we had picked up at the Battle of Hunt's Moon, though some of the Wildcats were of the older variety, and they had also acquired a small collection of miscellaneous fighters--variants on the Lancer 4FF's, mostly. North had positioned the fleet in a classic symmetrical double V position, with the bulk of the heavy cruisers and battlecruisers taking point in the first formation, and most of the weaker ships in the rear "V", though supported by a sprinkling of heavies, such as the Blue Luna. The Glory was positioned in the center, between the two V's, providing close support to the merchant vessels, who were also in the middle. The formation was hardly original and had its weaknesses, but for now that was the way North left it.

He had bigger matters to attend to. The mess and maze of logistics he handed off to Captain Dulin and Commander Wren and the other ship captains as much as these tasks were delegable. The civilian ships had to be converted to growing food as soon as possible. Some of the larger ships, like the Glory and the Blue Luna, had a "full/full" complement of hydroponic labs--theoretically, they could grow enough (rationed) food to support their crews indefinitely. But the battlecruisers and the smaller

ships had much smaller hydroponic bays, and were on "half/full" status; they could supplement, but not fully replace food stocks. North hoped the merchant ships, once properly converted, could provide enough food to make them self-sufficient; now that they had left Alliancespace, he didn't think they'd be able to resupply for some time... if ever.

Fuel they would eventually run out of, but they had begun switching over to process hydrogen, which they could skim from any nearby star. The energy burned less efficiently, but was an acceptable substitute. The fleet had a fair supply of medicine, including the anti-aging vaccine, with enough supply in stock to give boosters to the entire crew for at least the next 50 years. Then they would start aging again.

Another important issue was unit cohesion. The fleet was a mixture of League forces, which North originally commanded, and allied Directorate forces, who only recently joined forces with them. Though the two had been allied all during the long war with the Insectoids, North knew that there was some resistance on the Directorate side to taking orders directly from him, especially from the top, from the highest ranking surviving Directorate officer, Fleet Captain Michael Bennett, now stationed on the half-carrier Amory Til. The Directorate had their own procedures, their own chain of command, even their own uniforms (Directorate white as opposed to League blue), none of which helped to integrate the two forces.

North had almost had a knock-down fight with the man last week when he ordered him to redeploy his ships. Bennett had wanted to keep the Directorate ships together, but North wanted to deploy some of his

battlecruisers to different parts of the "V" formation. It was bad enough that the man questioned his orders, but to do so in front of the other fleet Captains was inexcusable. Something would have to be done to improve unit cohesion.

Another thought on North's mind, but still not the foremost one, was the composition of the forces that pursued them. They had retreated out of Allianceescape quickly enough, which prevented the bulk of the Insectoid force from catching up to and destroying them; but over the past several weeks they had been harassed by small attack forces, indicating that there was still a pursuing fleet behind them.

But even the constant threat of enemy attack was not foremost in North's mind. Foremost in North's mind was the higher goal, of finding the technology that would defeat the enemy. That meant searching out the hidden technology of the Chent. North had risked capture and destruction of the fleet by stopping at Orotis to pick up several of the leading researchers on the Chent, notably Professor Stevenson, but it had been a risk worth taking. North had consulted with Stevenson frequently on where they should go to conduct their search. He had hoped that some of the artifacts that Stevenson had examined might contain clues that could help.

But Stevenson had given a bitter laugh and said to North, "War Admiral, I've been searching for Chent artifacts my entire life. There are, or were, a lot of them out there, but it's a big galaxy, and most of those that have been found have been plundered by other races." When pressed for a direction, Stevenson had been unable to provide specific guidance.

Nevertheless, he had given North one important piece of information: every

Chent artifact that had been found in Alliance space had been found on habitable worlds. And habitable worlds only orbited certain types of stars. That, at least, narrowed their field of search a little bit.

So North constantly studied Lieutenant Shishman's long range scans, looking for appropriate star types or even tentative scans of distant planets to find those which were more likely than not to be suitable. But he had to admit, even to himself, that it was like searching for a needle in a haystack, and it might takes years for them to find anything useful. Still, they had to try. And so North constantly ordered long range Wildcat patrols to head out in pairs in every direction ahead of them to look for signs of habitable planets.

"Well, this has been another swell patrol," said Command Captain Idaho Took. He checked the scanner to compute, once again, the range back to the Glory. Another routine patrol, a few planetless stars, and billions of gallons of empty space.

"Would you rather have run into an Insectoid patrol?" said his wingman, Lieutenant Kato Obe.

"A small one, maybe," said Took. "At least it would've given us something to do." Took certainly wasn't itching for a full-scale Insectoid attack, but Obe shared his frustration. It had been almost two weeks of quiet now, and it had been too quiet. Obe checked his scanner, saw three blips, heading in the same direction as they were, back to the Glory, but coming from different directions.

"Getting something on scanner," said Obe.

"Must be Marsten's patrol," said Took. He switched to general comm, "Mars,

is that you?"

"That must be Took," came the voice on the other end.

"Uh, Mars, this is Obe, how many ships do you have in your patrol?" Obe asked.

"Two," came Marsten's voice. "You know that."

"Then why do I have a vector on three ships coming in from your direction?"

Took checked the scanner, saw he was right. He did a focused scan: the three ships looked like Wildcats, but only two of them were 145-D's; the third ship resembled a Wildcat, but had a different design; definitely not one of theirs.

Took set an intercept vector. "Unidentified starfighter, this is War Captain Took of the Command Carrier Glory. Identify yourself."

They got silence for a response. Took checked the scanner. The fighter had already shot past Marsten and his wingman, and now only Took and Obe stood between it and the Glory.

"Do you suppose it could be one of those Directorate guys from the Amory Til? They could be on a different frequency?" said Obe.

"Different from general broadband?" said Took. "Not likely. And take a close scan of that ship. It looks like someone took it apart and put it together with a totally different set of pieces--the thing looks like an antique that's been mish-mashed together from ten different sets of fighter parts."

"If it's such an antique, why is it almost outflying us?" said Obe.

At full speed they caught up with the ship just short of the fleet. It was as old and battered as the scan had indicated; and it was heading straight

for the Glory.

Took activated his targeting scanner. "Unidentified ship, identify yourself!" He got no answer. Took let go a volley just short of the unknown fighter, who banked to the right immediately as the bolt launched, and turned around to arc towards Took. Took, tense, repeated, "This is your last warning! Identify yourself!" Suddenly there was a scratching sound on his comm, as if a long disused circuit had been activated or repaired. "Do not fire," said a flat voice. "I am an allied force."

"Who are you?" said Took. He noticed Obe and his wingman closing. Good. Reinforcements had arrived.

There was a silence for a moment, as if the pilot didn't want to identify himself. Then, the deadly cold voice spoke, "Ken Pilot, 04."

Took looked over at Marsten, who was flying parallel to him. "Ken Pilot? THE Ken Pilot?"

"That's impossible. The Ken Pilot, that Ken Pilot, he must be dead by now," said Marsten.

Took radioed the Glory. "Glory, we've got a problem here."

Colonel Darley, the Glory's starfighter command, had been monitoring communications on the bridge, and he quickly called over Captain Dulin and explained the situation.

"A Ken Pilot?" said Dulin. "The Ken Pilot, 04?" He shook his head.

"Extremely improbable."

"Should we get the War Admiral?" said Rey.

Dulin shook his head. "He's busy with Professor Stevenson. It could be a trap, or a kamikaze. Let's see what we have first." He toggled the comm.

"Unidentified vessel! This is Captain Dulin of the Glory; we will send a shuttle out to meet you. Cut drive and wait for rendezvous." "The Glory?" said the voice, as if the name meant something. "Glory, I'm coming in."

The fighter accelerated.

Dulin spoke to the fighters. "Took, Obe, stop him!"

"Stop him?" came Took's voice. "You mean, blow him up?"

"You heard me," said Dulin. "He could be a kamikaze!"

"All right," said Took, with great reluctance. What if this guy was who he said he was? Blowing up one of the greatest fighter pilots of all time wouldn't be a great way for Took to end his day. He looked at the fighter several dozen feet ahead of him, then looked down at his targeting scanners... odd, the ship didn't show up.

Took looked up again, and understood why; in the short time he had taken to check his scanners, the ship was had accelerated rapidly towards the Glory.

"Speedy little bug," Took grunted. Took and his wingmen accelerated to maximum speed. He lined up for a shot... even at this distance he should still be able to hit the fleeing fighter... he squeezed the fire button, and a ball of energy burst out... missing the aging ship.

By now Obe and Marsten and Marsten's wingman, Chang-Wha, were firing too, and they were all missing. It was very odd; just as they aimed and put the fleeing ship in their sites, it weaved, bob, or jittered to another vector. After a half minute of worthless firing, Took reported, "Sorry sir, he's out of effective range."

The fighter was by now about a full minute ahead of Took and almost at the Glory.

"Tell laser gun crews to target and open fire!" ordered Dulin.

"Sir?" said the ops officer.

"Do it!" A hail of small caliber laser fire opened up on the old fighter from the smaller caliber artillery on the Glory, designed specifically to take out hostile fighters. But the unknown fighter turned and twisted in every direction, avoiding several trails of laser fire, still heading unstoppably into Bay Two.

Dulin sounded the alarms. The fighter wasn't decelerating. He had visions of the fighter packed with explosives, ramming into the bay. "Clear the bay!" he yelled as the klaxons blared.

At that moment War Admiral Norman North came onto the bridge. "What's going on here?"

The fighter accelerated to ramming speed... and then, at the last moment, braked furiously, and came to a perfect three point landing less than ten feet from a supporting bulkhead inside the bay.

That part of the bay, being partially evacuated, was empty when the cockpit opened and the occupant emerged....

Took and his wingmen were only a few seconds behind the intruder, and they landed their ships in near picture perfect formation next to his and took off after the pilot, who they could see running down the main corridor just outside of the bay.

"Bridge, I have him in sight, seal off sections fourteen through seventeen on Deck 24," said Took, drawing his blaster as he took off in pursuit.

Thick bulkhead doors slid into place behind and in front of the intruder farther down the hallway. Took ran down the hallways, trailed by several

other pilots and security officers who had joined the fray. He waited for them to catch up. There was no need to rush any more now.

"We have him," said Took. "Ok, open bulkhead door 17-J."

He stood to one side, his weapon drawn, and the other officers positioned themselves in such a way to give themselves a clear aim from different angles. If the intruder tried to resist he would be dead very, very quickly. But this guy seemed to have very fast reflexes; could he take out Took and several others before getting shot himself?

Took tried not to think about that as the door slowly grinded open, revealing... an empty chamber.

After looking about carefully, Took entered the chamber, and then looked up, and saw the dark hole cut in the deckplate above. "Nimble fellow,"

Took commented. He spoke into his comm, "He got away."

"We know," came a new voice, the War Admiral's voice. "He's here with us now."

The Ken Pilot was unsurprised to see the weapons drawn and pointed at him as he entered the bridge. His own blaster, still warm, was in his hand but not raised. He looked about at all the unfamiliar faces, until he latched onto a very familiar one.

"War Admiral," he said.

North nodded slightly. "David. It's... surprising to see you here."

"Meaning what am I doing here, and now, in a very big galaxy when you're probably being hunted down by the Insectoids who are chasing you like mad and using every trick in the book to catch you," said the Ken Pilot.

"You're suspicious and want to make sure I'm really what I seem."

North nodded. "A reasonable precaution. After all, I haven't seen you

since the celebration on Eratta, after the battle of Karis."

The Ken Pilot pursed his lips. "You mean, of course, the celebration on Whenfor, after the Battle of the Doublestar."

North nodded to the Ken Pilot, and to one of his officers as well. She approached the Ken Pilot, and ran a scanner over him from a cautious distance. Without turning to face North she said, "I'm sensing a highly advanced nervous system, War Admiral. He's either a Graftonite, or something just like it."

North nodded. "Lower your weapons," and all blasters were simultaneously reholstered. At that moment Took and Marsten entered the bridge on the run. "What did I miss?" Took asked, nearly breathless.

"I stopped at one of the frontier colonies you passed by after Orotis," said the Ken Pilot, getting comfortable in North's ready room. "They said you were in the neighborhood."

"But what were you doing out here?" said North, handing him a drink.

"Seeking a life, alone."

"Alone?"

"On a frontier planet," said the Ken Pilot. "With Amy."

"Amy," said North. He started to piece things together--the Ken Pilot's tone of voice, the circumstances of his arrival. "They came for you, even there, out in the frontier."

The Ken Pilot nodded.

North didn't ask any further, but he said, "You have my condolences." He paused, considering. "You don't just want my condolences. You want to join our fight, don't you?"

The Ken Pilot nodded again.

"We're heading out of Alliance space. We're not seeking out fights."

"Fights will come to you," said the Ken Pilot.

The War Admiral arranged for the Ken Pilot to have a berth with the other starfighter pilots. He was wise enough not to assign him to a specific squadron; the Ken Pilot was about as rugged an individualist as one could get. Quite frankly, North wasn't sure how to fit him in with their forces. Solitary assignments would be best. Maybe to make him a long-range scout....?

Took and some of his buddies were getting lunch in the mess hall when they saw the Ken Pilot sitting alone, in a corner. Took motioned the others that they should join him.

"I don't know, Iday," said Marsten. "He's a stranger, and he looks like he wants to be alone."

"Nonsense," said Took, with one of his irritating smiles. "A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet."

He approached the Ken Pilot. "Mind if we join you?"

The Ken Pilot gave no answer for a moment, and then, seeing Took wasn't going to take silence for an answer, gave a small nod.

"Good," said Took, not overanalyzing the ambiguous body language. He sat down, joined by Marsten, Obe, and two of the other pilots.

"By the way, we never got the chance to introduce ourselves when we were shooting at you," said Took. "My name is Idaho Took. This is Robert Marsten, Kato Obe, Ben Hunter..." he introduced the others.

The Ken Pilot sipped his drink.

Took, giving a small smile, said, "I didn't catch your name."

The Ken Pilot paused, considering. "David Norman."

"Some people on the bridge were calling you the Ken Pilot," said Took.

The Ken Pilot continued to sip his drink. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Are you?"

The Ken Pilot nodded. "I was a pilot on the Ken."

"But were you Ken Pilot, Ken Pilot 04?" Took persisted.

The Ken Pilot paused, as if considering the question. Then he nodded.

"Can someone enlighten me?" said Marsten. "The Ken incident was a bit before my time."

"Were you sleeping through your military history class at the academy, Mars?" said Took. "The Ken was one of those old-styled modified "quarter carriers", cruisers carrying one full squadron. They tangled with an enemy fleet around Porstan-"

"Locutus," interrupted the Ken Pilot.

"Locutus," said Took, nodding, "and ran directly into an enemy carrier, with three or four full squadrons-"

"Four," said the Ken Pilot.

"Four," said Took, looking at the Ken Pilot as he were a legend out of the pages of history. "The Ken was swamped, of course, and her fighters were quickly overwhelmed. The ship was destroyed, as were all the fighters... except one. Ken Pilot number 04. The story goes that he was outnumbered 40 to one, but managed to destroy all their fighters. When a relief task force arrived, they found his ship just sitting there, dead in space, out of fuel, surrounded by the carcasses of all those enemy fighters."

"Really?" said Obe skeptically. "You destroyed 40 fighters on your own?"

"41," said the Ken Pilot.

"41," Obe repeated. "Uh-huh."

"You know, you did some pretty fancy moves out there in that hunk of junk of yours," said Took. "No offense, but it really looks like its on its last legs."

The Ken Pilot made no comment.

"If you're going to fly with us, you should fly one of our 145-D's or 150-B's."

The Ken Pilot shook his head.

"That bucket of bolts you're flying could come apart on you at any minute."

"I can handle anything that comes my way," said the Ken Pilot.

"Yeah, you've got that look about you," said Took. He noticed the other's confidence, took it for cockiness. "So, you think you're a better pilot than us?"

"Iday-" Marsten interrupted.

"I can handle myself," said the Ken Pilot quietly.

"Do you think you could take one of us in a mock dogfight?"

The Ken Pilot nodded.

"Would you like to test that theory out?"

The Ken Pilot shrugged, as if he didn't care.

"Afraid?" said Took.

The Ken Pilot gave Took a cold, long look for a moment. Then he said, "All right."

"Who do you want to fly against?" Took asked, hoping it would be him. "Me?"

Obe? Mars?-"

"All of you," said the Ken Pilot.

"All of us?" said Took. "All right, we'll do a series of one-on-one battles-"

"No," said the Ken Pilot. "All of you." He got up. "Meet me in landing bay in 20 minutes." He walked away.

"You think he's trying to prove something?" said Obe.

"You think those stories of him taking out 40 fighters singlehandedly are really true?" said Marsten.

"I think we're about to find out," said Took.

When they arrived at the landing bay they had their first chance to take a good look at the Ken Pilot's ship. It was old, that much was clear, and it was made of all different pieces, of all different sizes, shapes and colors. It was as if someone had gone to a ship wrecking yard and collected pieces from a dozen different ships and then glued them together. How the different pieces were made to be compatible with each other was a mystery; how it flew at all, much less so well, was an even greater puzzle. In addition to forward weaponry, it also had a small rear turret mounted into the high fin.

"That looks like something out of a museum," said Obe, none too tactfully.

"What is the hull based on?" He peered at it closely. "It's a Wildcat 50 hull, right?"

"A Wildcat 5 hull, actually," said the Ken Pilot, climbing into the cockpit. He eyed the arriving pilots who were streaming into the launch bay behind Took and Obe. "Standard simulation protocol 1.2?"

"We use 8.0 now," said Obe.

"But we're downwards compatible," said Took hastily. "It will be no problem." He eyed the other pilots. "Are you sure you want to take us ALL on at the same time?"

The Ken Pilot just looked at him for a second, giving a slight shrugging gesture, as he sealed his cockpit and started his preflight.

"This is going to be one for the history books," said Took.

Took dogged the seal on his cockpit. His entire squadron was getting ready to launch. Elements of Obe's and several other squadrons were going to their ships too, if not to fight, then at least to watch. Took wondered what Colonel Darley would think of this massive mobilization. Well, they could chalk it up to a training exercise.

"Remember," said Took over the comm, "No matter how cocky this guy is, there's only one of him but ten or fifteen of us. If we keep on him together, he might get one or two of us at best."

He thumbed the launch button and a fraction of a second later so did the rest of his squadron, as well as Obe and two of his wingmen.

Almost the instant his squadron launched and cleared the hull, Took noticed a flash of light to his right and some yells on the comm. He quickly glanced at the SSP indicator and saw that three of his ships had been hit and already taken out of action, slowing to a halt, dead in space.

"What's going on?" Took said, seeing a battered Wildcat 5 suddenly come roaring ahead of his squadron. The Ken Pilot must have been waiting for them, just outside the launchbay, and shot several of their ships right as they launched. "An ambush right outside of launch? That's not fair!"

The cold reply came immediately. "When the Insectoids start obeying rules of combat etiquette, let me know so I can too." And then, after a pause, "What's the matter, are only twelve of you insufficient to take on one fighter?"

"Let's get him," said Obe.

"He's on my tail!" cried one of Obe's wingmen.

"Good," said Obe, getting behind the Ken Pilot. "Keep him occupied for just a few seconds...."

He concentrated on his targeting scanner as the Ken Pilot's ship seemed to weave and bob all over the place. The old W-5 seemed twice as maneuverable as Obe's 150-B. Or was it just the pilot.

There was a flash of light ahead of him and then "He got me!" Obe heard his wingman cry as the SSP, sensing the low-power laser hit, shut down the ship's systems. But at that same moment Obe saw the Ken Pilot's ship line up in his sights. He moved to squeeze the trigger... and then there was a flash that blinded him, as the Ken Pilot's rear turret blasted his cockpit. The blast was only at .1% strength, but the power of the light was enough blind Obe for a few seconds. When his vision cleared, his ship was dead in space.

The Ken Pilot continued to zoom this way and that, effortlessly picking off squadron members while equally effortlessly avoiding the gunsights of his hunters. The Ken Pilot seemed to be able to vector right behind an enemy fighter and squeeze of a shot in a split second--without any need to adjust his heading or to aim more carefully. He seemed oblivious to fighters getting in behind him, only paying attention when opponents

almost had him lined up in their gunsights. How he knew when that moment occurred, and how he was able to pay attention both in front and in back of him at the same time, was a complete mystery.

Took kept trying to take aim at the bobbing and weaving ship, every few seconds punctuated by a flash of light and a cry over the comm. He was about to take aim again when the Ken Pilot flew out of view again, to line up against another target.

Took checked the SSP. There were only three pilots left, him and two wingmen. The Ken Pilot had demolished an entire squadron in seconds. "We need help," Took muttered.

"You got it," said Marsten's voice, taking it as an invitation.

Took had been so focused on the battle that he had paid scant attention to what was happening in the background. As word had spread of the battle, more and more pilots had come out to take a look.

Now Took's squadron was joined by more of Obe's pilots, and Marsten's, and Hunter's, and Sirra's, and several others, all of whom joined in the attack on the Ken Pilot.

This increased level of activity didn't escape notice on the Glory's bridge. "Sir, scanners show nearly five full squadrons have launched, and more fighters are joining them," said Lieutenant Shishman.

"What's going on here?" said Colonel Darley. Were they under attack? "Any enemy on the scopes?" Although he was under the command of Captain Dulin, and above him, War Admiral North, the starfighters were his direct responsibility. Captain Dulin wandered over and looked at the scanners over his shoulder, an expression of restrained curiosity on his face.

"No signs of enemy fighters," said Shishman. "Captain Took logged in a

routine training exercise a few minutes ago."

"With five squadrons? That's no exercise, that's full scale wargames," said Rey, checking the scanners himself. He toggled the comm. "Took! What's going on out there!" Darley heard laser fire in the background. "...I'm kind of busy right now, Colonel," said Took.

"Sir, I've analyzed the battle," said Shishman. "All the squadrons are fighting one fighter, one person."

"Five squadrons against one person?"

"Six now, sir."

Captain Dulin turned to Darley, "That's bound to burn up a great amount of fuel. Colonel, did you authorize-"

"No," said Darley. "Took, report!"

But Took was too busy trying to line up the Ken Pilot in his sights. The laser fire aimed at the Ken Pilot was so thick now that collectively it looked like large ship-board turret laser fire.

But still the Ken Pilot kept dodging this way and that; by the SSP's count, he had now disabled 27 ships. But the pilots, frustrated at being taken out of play, reset their SSP's and reactivated their ship, so they only stayed "shot" for a few seconds. By the time Darley reasserted control and ordered them back to the ship, the Ken Pilot had shot down 39 distinct ships, and seven pilots had the distinction of being destroyed twice by him. And his ship hadn't been shot even once.

Now no one doubted that the Ken Pilot had destroyed 41 enemy ships. There was a sullen and awed silence when they landed in the bay. They simply formed a circle around the Ken Pilot and stared at him as he got

out his ship.

It was Took who spoke first. "39 ships. Not bad," he said.

"I could have proven I could destroy 41 in a single outing if we had had a few more seconds," said the Ken Pilot. It was the wrong thing to say, rubbing salt into their wounded pride, but at that moment Colonel Darley appeared, looking enraged.

"You, you, you and you, to the commander's office."

Took was the second "you".

After Captain Dulin had finished chewing them out for wasting fuel and not following procedure, they were dismissed.

"I guess we took it a little too far," Obe muttered. "How did we let it get out of hand?"

"I was too busy going too far," said Took, shrugging. "If you ask me, pal, I wouldn't be worrying the most about this little incident, but about what it shows."

"What do you mean?"

"This guy just proved that he can outfly any of us," said Took. "Guess which one of us he's going to replace?"

"Not Colonel Darley," said Obe, considering.

"No, Colonel Darley doesn't fly Wildcats anymore. They wouldn't put him in a position that didn't utilize his primary skill. Guess again."

"Wildcat pilot," said Obe.

"Getting warmer," said Took.

"Wildcat squadron leader."

"Warmer," said Took.

"Leader of Wildcat 'A'?"

Took put his finger to his nose. As everyone knew, the squad leader of the "A" squadron, on any ship, was the most senior and experienced combat officer. And that position was currently held by Command Captain Took. The same Command Captain Took who, an hour ago, couldn't manage to destroy a single pilot with the assistance of 50 other pilots.

Things were quiet for the next several days; the other pilots kept a respectful distance from the Ken Pilot. But Took, whose job was most threatened by him, took a healthy interest in the silent fighter pilot. He tried to engage him in conversation, but the Ken Pilot was almost always noncommittal, or responded in single syllables.

Things came to a head a few days later when they were out on patrol. Although the Ken Pilot, or K, as they had taken to calling him, wasn't attached to any particular squadron, Colonel Darley had "suggested" that the Ken Pilot accompany Wildcat A on its missions. This had caused Took's blood to boil, but all he could do was nod and pretended like he didn't care. It was obvious, now, whose job this man was being groomed for. Regular starfighter patrols screened the fleet, both in front, behind, above, below, to port, and to starboard.

Took, Obe, and the K Pilot took the starboard patrol; elements of Marsten's Wildcat B's and Hunter's Wildcat C's took the rest. Took's patrol took them past the merchant ships in the center of their formation off to the side of the fleet guarded by the Directorate ships, mostly the battlecruisers.

"K, would you care to suggest an exit vector?" Took said.

There was no response.

"K?" said Took. "Obe, are you there?"

"I'm here," said Obe.

"Good," said Took, glancing at the Ken Pilot's starfighter to his right.

"Just wanted to be sure my comm was working."

About an hour into their patrol they detected blips on sensors. Fighters.

A dozen of them. Medium range sensors said they were Insectoid type "G" fighters.

"Heads up, everyone," said Took. He contacted the other patrol leaders on global flightcom. "There's too many of them. Let's regroup and form up on the edge of the fleet, where we'll have equivalent numbers--K, what are you doing?"

The Ken Pilot's ship had suddenly accelerated forwards, towards the enemy fighters.

"Fighting the enemy," came the Ken Pilot's flat response.

"K, there are a dozen of them, and only three of us," said Took.

"What's your point?" asked the Ken Pilot.

"Standard procedure dictates that unless they contain a bomber force, that we're to retreat and regroup to a point where we can confront them with more even numbers. It will take just a few minutes to regroup with the rest--"

"There's only twelve of them," said the Ken Pilot. "10, if you don't count the two bombers."

"What bombers?" said Took, checking the scanners again. He didn't see any bombers.

"Check the two fighters in the gamma part of their formation," said the Ken Pilot.

Took looked at them on the scanner. He didn't notice anything.

By now the Ken Pilot had streaked ahead of them.

"What's the call, Iday?" said Obe. "Do we go forward, or go back and rendezvous with the other fighters?"

Took muttered silently for a moment. Maybe the Ken Pilot could handle them as easily as he had the Glory's fighters in the battle game... and maybe he couldn't. This was for real, and they couldn't afford to take chances.

Took hit his thrusters, and Obe followed an instant later.

"Took, what's going on?" said Darley's voice over the comm. "Why aren't you linking up with the other fighters?"

"Our buddy the Ken Pilot decided he didn't want to wait," said Took. The Ken Pilot, about a minute ahead of him, was already thick in combat. The Insectoid G's were swirling around like angry gnats, trying to get a lock on him. But the Ken Pilot was seemingly oblivious to pursuit as he took out one, then two, then a third fighter. The third fighter, one of those in the gamma positions hadn't been attempting to engage the Ken Pilot, and the resulting fireball when it erupted was several times larger than that of the other ships.

Now at close range, Took chanced a short range scan of the other gamma positioned fighter. It was packed with high explosives.

The Ken Pilot took out two more fighters before Took and Obe arrived. Obe took out one immediately, but then got two fighters on his tail which he tried to shake loose. Took got into a dogfight with two other fighters, and the rest went after the Ken Pilot.

"I'm having trouble shaking them," said Obe, watching the explosions

around them.

"Hang on, I'll be there in a minute," said Took, lining up a shot. He fired the instant the target was in his crosshairs, and it exploded in a fireball. Ignoring for the moment the other fighter following him, he turned and vectored towards Obe.

"Hurry!" said Obe, trying to do a tight turn but only succeeding in showing more of his flank to his pursuers.

There was a blast from above and the Ken Pilot fired twice, destroying both pursuers. Even as the second bolt left his ship, the Ken Pilot launched another bolt from his rear turret, destroying a third enemy simultaneously.

Took destroyed another ship, and the Ken Pilot took out the last ship, the other gamma; it exploded in a brilliant fireball.

"Thanks," said Obe.

Elements of the forward and rear Wildcat patrol started to arrive.

"Where's all the action?" said Ben Hunter of Wildcat "C".

"Sorry guys, false alarm," said Took over fleet comm. He switched to ship to ship. "K, how did you know those ships contained high explosives? You weren't close enough for a close scan when you first gave chase."

"They were in the wrong position, moving in the wrong way," said the Ken Pilot. And that's as specific as he would get on the subject.

Word of the Ken Pilot's latest achievement spread quickly though the fighter pilot ranks. K seemed totally uninterested in discussing what had happened or taking credit for it, but would answer questions when asked.

Sitting in the recreation hall, Took muttered, "I wonder if I should just save time and offer him my ship now."

"I don't think he wants your ship," said Obe. "I think he likes his own."

"That battered old thing?"

"That battered old thing has a rear turret we don't," said Obe.

Took opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "Make that item number one hundred and fifty five that I don't understand about this guy.

How does he fire BEHIND him? Even if he had a targeting display for the rear quarter, we've seen him fire both forward and backwards simultaneously. No one can concentrate on two firing displays at the same time, I don't care how fast he is."

"He is fast," said Obe.

"Yeah," said Took. "Do you think I can find an opening to be a Defender "G" pilot?"

The Defenders were the most heavily armored fighters in the Glory's arsenal. But they were looked down upon because they were relatively slow and not very agile; they tended to be used for bomber duty.

"Maybe the War Admiral will give him a squadron on another ship," said Obe.

"Not a chance," said Took. "He's the best, and Wildcat "A" is the best in the fleet. Remember last week when I was the best pilot, Obe?"

"No," said Obe.

The attacks started to come more frequently, once every few days, then once every other day, and then, almost every day. Always it was a handful of fighters, or a scout vessel or two, but now they didn't usually stay long enough to engage in combat, or not for very long, quickly retreating the way they came. After each attack the fleet would reconfigure slightly,

to move more and move of its combat vessels to the rear, where the attacks were originating from.

The War Admiral convened a conference in his office with Captain Dulin, Commander Wren, Colonel Darley, Fleet Captain Michael Bennett, and several other fleet officers. All were present in person; the War Admiral had no objections to holomeetings, but didn't want to take any chance of having the transmission intercepted.

Captain Dulin led off. "You're all aware of the situation. We obviously have an Insectoid fleet following us."

"Of course," said Bennett, flicking his dark eyes towards the War Admiral, who sat silently at the head of the long table. Why wasn't he leading the meeting? "What I want to know is why we aren't taking the fight to them."

"We don't know their location," said Dulin.

"They're to our rear," said Bennett.

"We don't know their exact location," Dulin added.

"We can send out some scouts," said Bennett. "I think we should locate them and destroy them."

"And what if they have an overwhelming force?" Dulin said.

"Let's at least find out what they have," said Bennett.

"No."

Everyone turned their heads.

"We will not tip our hand," said War Admiral Norman North.

Tip our hand, Bennett wondered. "Sir, respectfully, how does sending out scouts to learn the enemy's strength tip our hand? If anything, haven't we been tipping our hand by letting the enemy make repeated contacts with us? I'm sure they've reported back the exact disposition and layout of our

fleet by now. I know you've been moving some ships around after every battle, but the next scouting force they send simply learns your new deployment."

"Precisely," said North. "And I won't have our hand tipped by sending a scouting force to find out the nature of the enemy following us. Any information we obtain on the size and nature of their fleet would not be of any use. "

"But sir..."

"Don't you think it's curious that they've launched all these probing attacks when they could have launched a real attack several times over?" said North. "One of their goals is to provoke us into attacking them, to provoke us into launching the faster part of our fleet to the rear to strike at them."

"And you think that's a trap," said Bennett.

"I know it is," said the War Admiral firmly. "But that's only one purpose of these scouting attacks. They already know the size and disposition of our fleet. Part of what they're doing, I'm convinced, is studying our reaction time and methods, and encouraging us to deploy stronger forces to the rear part of our fleet."

"Which you've been doing."

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Have a look at our current course." He touched a button, and a holographic display came to life in the center of the table. "Note this uncharted solar system we'll be cruising through tomorrow. Note the large gas giant, 40 million miles out from the sun."

"What about it?"

"That's where their fleet is; that's where it will be waiting for us," said North. "When the front and now lightly defended part of our fleet gets within striking distance, they'll strike. The bulk of their fleet, gentlemen, has circled around us over the past two weeks. They've tried to provoke us to attack their distraction force from behind, leaving our front flank open; when that failed, they decided to try and weaken our frontal defenses as much as possible for their surprise attack."

"An interesting theory," said Bennett. "Do you have any evidence to support any of this? Sensor logs from scouts?"

"No," said the War Admiral. "Sending out scouts too far, before we're ready to act, would tip our hand. Normally, I would be the first to gather intel, in a situation where I wasn't sure. But here, I'm certain."

"Assuming your analysis is correct, what do you propose, War Admiral?" said Dulin.

"I propose we send out a scouting force," said the War Admiral.

"I thought you just said you didn't want to do that," said Bennett.

"I said I didn't want to before we were ready," said the War Admiral. "If we simply sent a scouting force, and located them, they would subsequently retreat, or move to attack our main fleet. But if the scouting force is the attack force, then we don't give them the chance to retreat or move away." He touched a button. The image of four fighters and a small cargo transport appeared on the projection.

"You're going to attack with four fighters and a transport?" Bennett said.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Anything larger may provoke an immediate attack. My guess is that their fleet is hiding just in-atmosphere of the

gas giant, far enough in so that they're not detected, but close enough to the edge so at least some of their ships can detect incoming ships. If they see a large task force coming towards them, they may emerge and attack, or emerge and retreat. And we want them to stay exactly where they are." He pressed another button, and a chemical analysis of the gas giant appeared by the image of the planet. "Notice all the hydrogen? I propose to load the shuttle with enough of the right elements to make it a catalyst. When detonated, it will ignite a sizable chunk of the atmosphere."

"And it's crew?"

"The crew of the transport is no problem," said the War Admiral. "It can be piloted remotely by one of the fighters. The most dangerous job will be those of the Wildcat pilots. It will be their responsibility to locate the enemy fleet and maneuver the transport into position to detonate. If they detonate too far from the Insectoid fleet, the enemy will have time to escape. If they detonate in a portion of the atmosphere that doesn't have a high enough concentration of hydrogen, the detonation may not produce a sufficient chain reaction to destroy the enemy fleet."

"So our pilots have to move it into position and get out before they trigger the detonation," said Wren.

"Yes." The War Admiral paused. "It's also very possible that they will be spotted, and attacked by the Insectoids. If the transport is prematurely detonated, the reaction will be triggered instantly. The transport will have to be defended as well"

"Will our pilots be able to do that? Will they also be quick enough to get

in and get out safely?" This was from Captain Harkness, of the Blue Luna, the fleet's pocket battleship.

"If we use our best pilots," said the War Admiral softly.

"That's the mission, gentlemen," said War Admiral North, facing the Ken Pilot, Took, Captain Robert Marsten of Wildcat "B", and Captain Ben Hunter of Wildcat "C". "You're not only our best pilots but most of you are also squadron leaders. But this mission is vital to the survival of our fleet. You'll be risking your lives to save thousands in the fleet. Nevertheless, this is undoubtedly the most dangerous mission I've ever sent you on. Because of the unusual circumstances, if you want to refuse this mission, I will give you that opportunity."

Took felt an overwhelming urge to speak up, but he looked at the others and said nothing. The War Admiral hadn't asked for volunteers, he had picked them. He was offering a shameful way out, but in many ways, it was easier to just go on the mission. Which the War Admiral well knew.

"Uh, sir," said Marsten. "Who is in overall command of this mission?" It was unusual to have several squadron commanders involved in one discrete mission; usually, in such a situation, the commander of the most senior squadron took charge.

"David Norman will be in charge," said the War Admiral, referring to the Ken Pilot. His eyes flickered around at the other pilots, taking in their reaction, but stopping at Took longer than anywhere else. "He has more battle experience than all of us, and you have all seen his incredible reflexes in action. I realize this is unusual; David isn't even formally in our chain of command. But after this mission is over, all will become clear. Any other questions? Dismissed. Oh, David, would you please stay a

moment?"

Took felt an enormous weight on his shoulders as he left the briefing. Not only had he been pressed into risking his life on a suicide mission, but if he somehow managed to survive it, it was clear that he was going to face certain demotion.

The mission was rated top-secret, need-to-know only, so when Took left the briefing he immediately went and told Obe all about it.

"...so if I do really well, and somehow survive this one-way mission, I can return to a main corridor parade and a birth as a junior lieutenant in "G" squadron," said Took.

"You don't know that," said Obe. "Anything can happen. What happens if you come back but K doesn't?"

Took shook his head. "No one can touch him. He could go out for a cup of gauche and leave his ship on autopilot and no laser bolt would come near him. Ahhhh...." He sighed.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned about more immediate and permanent matters, like being vaporized by the Insectoids or blown up by our own transport, then your position in the squadron when you return?" Obe asked.

"At least dying is quick, buddy," said Took.

The appointed time came; they entered their cockpits and started the preflight. "Remember," came Dulin's voice in their ears. "You only have eight hours to get their and detonate. At that point they'll pick up the fleet on their scanners and attack."

"Understood," came the Ken Pilot's emotionless voice.

"Any last minute instructions?" Took asked their new mission leader.

"No," said the Ken Pilot mechanically.

"This is going to be one for the history holos," Took sighed.

"Cut unnecessary chatter," said the Ken Pilot. "Launching."

His battered Wildcat 5 launched, followed by Marsten, Hunter, and Took, and the transport. The Ken Pilot was controlling the transport by remote. Took didn't think about, or even care, how the Ken Pilot was controlling two ships at once.

They flew in silence towards the solar system, the Ken Pilot taking point, followed by the other fighters, who bracketed the transport in the middle.

"Switch to comm scrambler four. Stay alert," said the Ken Pilot, shortly after they launched.

Then they heard not a word from him for nearly seven hours. The gas giant was looming ahead in the sky, and Took's hand was tentatively drifting towards doing a close scan, when his comm came to life.

"No close scans. Get ready to follow me in," came the flat voice. Took, startled, looked to the right, and saw the Ken Pilot casting a glance over at him.

Their flight path carried them near the gravity well of the gas giant, as if they merely intended to cruise past it. But at their closest point the Ken Pilot and the transport suddenly veered off and headed into the atmosphere.

In seconds they were at the outer layer of the atmosphere.

"We must stay alive long enough to locate their fleet before detonating," the Ken Pilot reminded them.

"And maybe, if we plan it just right, we can live a few minutes after the explosion too," Took muttered.

The Ken Pilot ordered them to activate their short range scanners. The atmosphere obscured sensor efficiency beyond a certain distance, so long range sensors were useless....

The Command Carrier Glory and the rest of the fleet entered the solar system.

"Sir! I detect enemy squadrons to our rear!" said Lieutenant Shishman.

"How many?" said the War Admiral.

"At least four full squadrons," said Shishman. This was no scouting probe.

"Launch fighters to intercept," said the War Admiral curtly.

"More ships coming into sensor range," said Shishman. "Two... three heavy cruisers, four destroyers, one carrier...."

Dulin bit his lip, wondering, for once, if the War Admiral had made a mistake.

But the War Admiral got a gleam in his eye and said, very softly, "Only one carrier...."

"I don't see anything," said Took, trying to peer through the swirling mists around him. Sometimes it cleared up so he could see as much as a few hundred feet ahead of him; but much of the time, he had to rely on sensors. Which were currently showing nothing.

"Course reset," said the Ken Pilot. He had them change course several times, only instead of doing a standard expanding circular search pattern, what he was having them do was more of an elliptical pattern. Took

wondered if the Ken Pilot knew what he was doing.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. A series of blips showed up on his scanner. He tried to get a glimpse through the gas but the clouds were too thick. Then he got closer, and the gas temporarily cleared, and he saw them--Insectoid cruisers, frigates, destroyers, and more, as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly a furious squadron of Insectoid fighters streaked towards them.

"Uh, guys..." said Took.

"Guard the transport," said the Ken Pilot, racing out to engage the fighters

Thus began one of the wildest dogfights of Took's life; only half of it was fought visually; because of all the clouds, he had to fire, and fight, through his instrumentation rather than visual sightings much of the time.

Marsten, Hunter, and Took fought like madmen as they escorted the slower moving transport into the mass of Insectoid ships.

"We should get ready to detonate," said Took, taking out an Insectoid fighter a split second seconds before it lined up the transport in its sights.

"Closer," said the Ken Pilot.

Supporting fire was starting to lance out of one of the bigger Insectoid capital ships, nearly sheering the tip of Took's right wing.

"I think we are closer," said Took.

"We haven't located the carriers," said the Ken Pilot. He speeded ahead, into the body of the fleet, desperately searching out his goal.

Another squadron of Insectoid ships closed on them, and Took could see

more were coming. And the capital ships were slowly starting to rise out of the atmosphere. They were running out of time!

"We should detonate now!" said Took. "At least we'll take some capital ships with us!"

"Got it!" said the Ken Pilot, with a rare display of emotion, as he spotted the carriers. There were three in all, surrounded by a phalanx of battlecruisers and battleships. "They're all here. Get to a safe distance and I will-"

And then at that moment several things happened at once. A bunch of Insectoid fighters lined up for a targeting run on the transport. Took shouted a warning, and they were forced to break off their own dogfights to take out these new attackers. Took destroyed two of them in rapid succession; Hunter got one; and Marsten got another, but just as he fired, an Insectoid fighter he had been too distracted to notice got a clear shot at him, instantly destroying his fighter.

Took yelled but had no time to be distracted. There were fighters behind him firing laser volleys and there were still two more fighters bearing down on the transport. He got one, and was zooming in on the second when it opened fire, hitting the transport.

There was a spark, and a small flame, and part of the engine section went dark. At that same instant Took's ship was hit, he felt a jolt, and the ship went spinning.

The Insectoid who had attacked the transport realigned itself to make another pass. Took wasn't going to be able to regain control in time, and Hunter was caught in his own dogfight, and then-

The Ken Pilot came out of nowhere, and destroyed the Insectoid fighter!

Seconds later, he polished off Took's and Hunter's immediate attackers as well.

"Get out of here, now," said the Ken Pilot.

"Can you control the transport?"

The transport was starting to sink deeper into the atmosphere. Suddenly, part of its engine section ignited again, and its descent slowed.

"Get out if you want to live," said the Ken Pilot. They all knew the transport could blow at any minute, and a laser detonation would surely incinerate anyone in the area. In a split second Took noticed the fresh approaching squadrons, and the capital ships leaving the atmosphere, and knew there was no more time. He set a new vector and aimed at full speed, not even spending a split second to wonder whether his engines were still working or not; Hunter was already heading up into the atmosphere.

Uncharacteristically, Took didn't say a parting word.

The Ken Pilot took a full second to take in the situation himself; the rising capital ship, the sputtering transport, the new wave of approaching fighters, and the concentration of hydrogen in this part of the atmosphere. His hands gripped his laser controls tightly. It would be so easy... one small squeeze.

In that split second he made a decision, activated a weapon toggle, and hit the fire button. Then he turned and headed out-atmosphere.

Ten second later there was an enormous fireball astern.

The light was so blinding that it hurt Took's eyes even though he was faced away from it. He felt the sheer heat building up as he cleared the atmosphere. His rear sensors caught what was happening; the slow, floating

dark objects, now no longer obscured by the rapidly incinerating atmosphere, bursting into pieces as they were engulfed in flames. Those little objects were cruisers, and battleships, and carriers, containing thousands of hostiles.

Took formed up on Hunter's wing; he had some battle damage too.

"You look like a mess," he said, wrinkling his face.

"Better messy than dead," said Took. He checked the rear scanner. No sign of pursuit. Destruction had been total.

"He gave his life for us," said Hunter.

"They both did," said Took, thinking of Marsten.

"He really was a living legend," said Hunter.

"He really was," said Took. He grimaced as he remembered Obe joking with him about the possibility of his being more likely to survive than the Ken Pilot. Just what had War Admiral North said to the Ken Pilot, after the briefing?

Took extended comm range and tried to reach the Glory. He was surprised to get War Admiral North directly. "Mission accomplished, sir."

"So I surmised," said North.

Was there anything this guy didn't already know?

"The diversionary force which engaged us quickly turned to retreat when they saw that reinforcements weren't forthcoming," said North. "This time we weren't in such a charitable mood to let them retreat. We destroyed their entire force, and are just mopping up operations now. What is your status?"

"Ah, Took..." said Hunter softly.

"Just a moment, Ben," said Took. He cleared his throat. "We lost the Ken Pilot and Marsten. They both died to save the mission." A pause. "As far as I can tell, we wiped out several carriers, a couple of battleships and battlecruisers, and a lot of cruisers and destroyers," said Took.

"Actually, four battleships, seven battlecruisers, and 49 cruisers and support craft," said North.

"Took..." said Hunter.

"How can you possibly know that?" Took fairly shouted. The strain of the day had been too much.

"I received a burst transmission from Mr. Norman several minutes ago," said the War Admiral. He smiled. "I'm not omniscient. I just have very good people working for me."

Took managed to pry an eye off his screen to check his rear scanner. Sure enough, a battered W-5 was rapidly closing in on them.

There was a crowd cheering for them when they landed in the Glory. The flight crew, the other pilots who had already returned, the support staff, everyone seemed to know about it now. Even the normally emotionless Ken Pilot was startled to see complete strangers hugging him.

Shortly before the awards ceremony, held later that day, the War Admiral met with the pilots to congratulate them personally.

"...so I detonated the transport with a missile, giving me the seconds I needed to escape," said the Ken Pilot tonelessly. He told it matter of factly, as if he were describing how he got out of bed or refiltered his clothes.

"Good work," said the War Admiral, and he stared into the Ken Pilot's eyes, and something extra passed between them that Took didn't fully

catch. "You all did exceptional work. I confess that your chances for survival on this mission were slim. But you have individually destroyed more Insectoid ships than any officer or soldier in this fleet, and I'm very, very proud of you." He cleared his throat. "You probably want to go and get washed up now, before the awards ceremony and the service for Captain Marsten and the others we lost during the battle". Three other pilots and several crewmen had been lost in the battle with the Insectoid diversionary force.

Hunter, Took, and the Ken Pilot started to file out, but the War Admiral put a restraining hand on Took's arm. "Captain Took, would you stay a moment please?"

Here it comes, Took thought.

"I've been giving some thought to how the Ken Pilot is to fit in with our table of organization," said the War Admiral.

In an instant, like a thunderbolt, it was all clear. The Ken Pilot would get his squadron, Wildcat "A", and he would be put in charge of Wildcat "B", Marsten's squadron. A step down, but not quite the demotion that he had expected.

"As you know Wildcat "B" is going to be in need of a squadron leader," said the War Admiral, "and I was wondering how you would feel about a transfer from Wildcat "A"-"

"All right Admiral!" Took blurted out. "You can demote me. It's obvious he's a better pilot than I'll ever be."

War Admiral Norman North showed a quizzical look on his face. "You think..." He took it in an instance. "You think I was going to transfer

you to Wildcat "B"? No, Wildcat "A" is where you belong. I was going to shift Kelly from Wildcat "A" to deputy squadron leader of Wildcat "F" so Calate could take "F" and all the squadron leaders could move up one letter. Hunter would move from C to B and so on down the line," said the War Admiral. He gave Took a funny grin. "Did you really think we were about to demote you?"

Took ignored the question/jab. "What about the Ken Pilot?"

"David-" The War Admiral was funny about the familiar use of the first name "-is an excellent pilot. But he's not cut out to be a squadron leader. He's too much of an individualist. I'm keeping him active for special missions. In the meantime, with Kelly being taken out of "A", I was thinking of giving David his berth, permanently. Do you think you can handle him?"

Took was astounded at the turn of events. "Does he really want to serve under me?"

"He spoke quite highly of you," said the War Admiral.

"He did?"

"Yes," said North. "He said you were, let me get the exact phraseology he used, an "irritating but competent pilot." He stared North straight in the eye. "That's high praise, coming from the Ken Pilot."

"Which part is considered high praise, that I'm irritating or competent?" said Took.

The War Admiral escorted him to the door but gave no further answer.

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 6 months after Vitalics: Things have been very quiet since our victory over the Insectoid fleet, three months ago. I imagine the Insectoids would be too busy consolidating their hold on our homeworlds to send more than a single fleet against us. Additionally, by the time this fleet attacked us and the news of their failure reached the Insectoid leadership, we would be months outside of known space and many months away from their nearest fleet. And as we continue to move away from our homeworlds, and away from the Insectoid fleets, it would take them a long time to catch up with us.

Admittedly, we are not always moving at our top speed. We can't go faster than our slowest merchant ship. We also periodically stop to investigate planets and gather supplies, and the Insectoids may catch up to us at some point. But it would take months, maybe even a year, just to catch up to us at our current speed, if they even managed to find us. So the military threat is on the back burner, for now.

On the front burner is our primary mission, to find artifacts of the Chent which will help us defeat the Insectoids. It is a long shot--finding un plundered Chent artifacts will be difficult enough, but finding ones with direct military applications may be even more unlikely. Even if we do find new technology there's no guarantee that we'll be able to figure out how to harness it. After all the Chent were centuries, even millennia ahead of us technologically.

That's why we have Professor Stevenson and his staff aboard. They have been studying the known Chent monuments for decades and may be able to point us in the right direction. Right now I'm told we should look for a

binary system with four planets, one of them with an oxygen atmosphere.

Based on examination of ancient Chent maps, Stevenson believes they may have some sort of base on such a planet. Of course, with the enormous passage of time, even if there were such a base, it may be long gone now.

And such a base could be hidden, or boobytrapped, or worse.

We've checked out several binary systems in the area, but so far found nothing.

"I'm telling you Obe, this is a complete waste of time," said Took. He and Obe were on patrol ahead, heading towards a binary system on the edge of sensors. "Third binary system this week. I'm all binaried out."

"The War Admiral says we have to look for planets orbiting binary stars, so that's what we do."

"No," said Took. "Professor Stevenson says that. The War Admiral just repeats what he says."

"The difference being....?"

"We're not following one of the Admiral's hunches, we're following the whimsies of a scholarly greybeard who thinks nothing about spending 20 years studying an old piece of ceramic. We could be at this for decades."

"Got anything better to do?"

"Well, I ah..." Took was speechless, for a moment. "I was thinking of starting up a newsvid."

"A newsvid?"

"Sure! A fleetwide online newspaper."

"Iday, this isn't August."

"Ok, we're a fleet, but we're also a community, the last community of humans," said Took. "I was thinking of it as a morale thing, to keep our

spirits up-"

"Hold it!" said Obe. "I'm getting something on sensors. Planets.... two... three... four.... And one of them has an oxygen atmosphere. Just like the Professor said he was looking for."

"Let's go into orbit for a close scan," said Took.

They moved closer and spent the next few minutes searching the planet surface. "Plants... animals... but no civilization," said Obe.

"You spoke too soon, Obe! I'm picking up a power source on the surface, contained in a metallic structure."

"A city?"

Took shook his head, checking the reading. "No, unless this city is forty feet wide and twenty feet tall. Let's call a team in." He raised his comm range. "Glory, this is Captain Took-"

A shuttle transported the research team to the surface, followed closely by a transport with a platoon of Major Fortran's men. The War Admiral himself had given the order, saying that the safety of the research team was of the highest priority. Everyone else, the pilots and the marines, were expendable.

They touched down on a grassy plain near the object.

The marines disembarked first, securing a perimeter. Finally Major Fortran himself emerged, and gave the go-ahead for the shuttle crew to undog the hatch. Professor Stevenson and his researchers emerged, together with agricultural specialists who were seeing if there was anything of value they could take from the planet.

The power source was a monument, a tall black gleaming monument, of the

type that Took had seen in museums back on August. Took's presence wasn't strictly required, but he had invited himself and Obe along, for "additional support."

The monument had symbols that were embedded on the sides of the thing. They stuck out and could be felt by touch, much like braille. Stevenson eagerly pointed one of the symbol chains to a colleague, and they started muttering to themselves.

"Nice to get some fresh air," said Took, turning away and looking at the grassy plain around them. This was the first time he, or anyone else, had been in a breathable atmosphere outside the ship since that little colony they stumbled on a few months ago, just after their flight from Orotis.

"Looks kind of spooky, doesn't it?" said Took, looking at the tall monument as it gleamed in the binary sunlight.

"Yeah, it does," said Obe. "To think that this was built by a race millions of years older than us. What's it all about? What's it for?"

"No one knows," said Took. "But I heard that some of those monuments have strange powers, or are boobytrapped." He took a few steps back. "We'd best keep our distance, pal."

But if the monument had any special powers, it didn't seem to effect the research team.

They ended up staying at the location for two days; the agricultural team determined that there were edible fruits and seeds that could be gathered in sufficient quantities to make it worthwhile, and Stevenson didn't mind the additional time studying the monument. When they returned to the Glory, Stevenson made his report in private to the War Admiral. Only his closest aides, Captain Dulin and Commander Wren, were in attendance; the

rest of the fleet wasn't as optimistic about this "Chent hunt" as the War Admiral was.

"It's very similar to the monument we found on Whenfor," said Stevenson excitedly. "Do you realize that this is the only the third monument we've found that seems to use the exact same symbol language as other monuments we've discovered. Why-"

"Professor," said the War Admiral. "That's all very interesting. But what does it say?"

"Say? It's hundreds of symbols," said Stevenson. "We're not really sure. But one section we've decoded makes a clear reference to a planet just ten light years away in a neighboring system."

"What does it say about this planet?" the War Admiral asked.

"We're not sure," said Stevenson. "You have to understand, we've only deciphered a small part of its language. We've never had a large enough sample to-"

"And what about the power source you detected?"

"It's in the interior," said Stevenson. "We don't know what the power is for or what it does, we can't scan through-"

"Could we cut through it?" Dulin asked.

Stevenson looked horrified. "Blast a monument? Your puny laser guns wouldn't even scratch the alien metals. You'd have to use shipboard batteries-"

"We have shipboard batteries," said the War Admiral.

"Destroy such a priceless artifact? Never!" said Stevenson.

"Let me be clear, Professor," said the War Admiral. "This is not a dig, or

an expedition to recover museum pieces. This is about getting technology, and about survival. If blasting that thing open will get us what we want, we'll blast it. Do you understand?"

Stevenson opened his mouth, then closed it, then nodded slowly.

"Good. For now, we'll try a moderate course," said North. "Provide the location of this solar system to navigation. We'll start once we've retrieved the last recovery teams."

After Stevenson left, Dulin looked at the War Admiral, who merely shrugged.

"It probably wouldn't have worked, anyway" said North. "It would be like trying to cut a diamond with a hydrogen bomb. If our ship's turrets could blast into that thing, we'd probably destroy anything useful inside."

"Then why did you...."

"To make a point to our good professor where our priorities lay. Our people are getting restive, and it's only going to get worse over time," said the War Admiral.

Took was on patrol again. This time his fleet was on temporary deployment to the Blue Luna, the fleet's pocket battleship. The fleet's engineers had tinkered with the engines to raise their capacity almost to battlecruiser speeds. With equal firepower and more armor and shields than any battlecruiser in the fleet, even the new Tiger class ships, the Blue Luna made an ideal advance scout.

And besides, Took liked her Captain, the crusty Myster Harkness. The only reason that Harkness, and his ship, was alive was that he was one of those few captains who had refused to participate in the Vitalics armistice, where most of the League fleet was slaughtered. He had only been saved

from a court-martial when North had agreed to have his ship transferred to his fleet, which was stationed on Hunt's Moon. The reason Took admired Harkness was because Harkness had been very vocal about telling the admirals what he thought of the peace deal. He was a straight-talking blast from the hip kind of guy--just like Took.

Took, Obe, and Ken Pilot were on point, ahead of the Blue Luna, which itself was a day ahead of the rest of the fleet.

"...so the whole idea of scouting is that if there's anything dangerous out there, we get clobbered, because we're expendable," said Took.

"No, we're here to give the fleet advance warning," said Obe.

"If we manage to do so before we get clobbered. Face it, Obe, we're expendable; even the Blue Luna is expendable. It's like sending a pawn and a rook to check out what's on the other side of the board. The Luna's the rook, and we're a couple of pawns; if we get knocked off, the Queen will weep and then send one of her horses--"

"Do you ever stop talking?" said the Ken Pilot.

"Only when you start," said Took. "Is that what it takes to provoke you into a conversation?"

"Alert," said the Ken Pilot. "I'm picking up something on long range scanners, just on the edge."

They turned to their scanners. At the very extreme range they could see first a few ships, and then many more--a mass of ships. Even at this range, the identity was clear: Insectoids.

"Let's get out of here," said Took, turning his Wildcat 150-B into a sharp bank. He kept his eyes peeled on the rear scanner during the whole flight

back. But if the Insectoids had spotted them, they weren't sending interceptors to challenge them. By the time they returned to the Luna they were once again out of sensor range of the Insectoids.

On the bridge they reported directly to Harkness.

"A fleet, a big one."

"Size? Composition?"

"We didn't stop to take notes, sir," said Took. "We didn't want to risk detection."

"Risk further detection, you mean," grunted Harkness. "All right, let's set up a tightbeam to the Glory and see what command wants to do."

"Another fleet," said the War Admiral, looking very surprised.

Dulin looked surprised at the Admiral's surprise. The other officers in the war council looked similarly stunned.

"How can this be?" said the War Admiral. "There's no way another fleet could have caught up to us this quickly. We're moving away from occupied territory, so they would have to move much faster to catch up."

"Furthermore, the enemy is ahead of us," said Commander Wren. "They would have had to catch up to us without our noticing, and then made a very large circle around us at tremendous speeds to avoid our sensors."

"That's a possibility, but that doesn't seem very likely to me," said the War Admiral.

"What's the alternative?" asked one of the senior Captains.

"Perhaps the Insectoids have colonies out this far," said Captain Bennett.

"We've never been able to locate their homeworlds, after all."

"If they have colonies here, then why haven't they attacked the Alliance from this part of space?" the War Admiral said. "If so, Orotis would've

been the first battlefield. But in all our years of fighting them, they've never hit us from this region of space. We presumed that it was mutually unexplored."

"What do we have on the composition of the enemy force?" Bennett asked.

"Sketchy," said Dulin. "We've analyzed the sensor disks from Took, Obe, and the Ken Pilot, and identified perhaps thirty capital ships, but at the distance they were at we couldn't get more specific. Nor is it clear if there are even more ships than that."

"I guess the logical thing to do would be to head into a different direction," said Bennett. "We should start navigation working on-"

"Just a minute," said the War Admiral. "We can't change direction."

All eyes were on the War Admiral.

"The monument directed us to a system just two light years behind their location. If there's something there, we have to find it," said North.

Bennett cleared his throat diplomatically. "War Admiral, I understand your goals, but surely our immediate survival takes priority-"

"This search takes priority. We may be searching the rest of our lives for clues about the Chent, Captain," said the War Admiral. "How will you feel, ten years from now, when we're still searching, knowing we passed up this obvious lead?"

Bennett didn't seem to know how to respond. He obviously didn't have much faith in the War Admiral's obsession with the Chent, but didn't want to directly challenge the War Admiral.

"Do you really want to spend the rest of our lives wandering from system to system, without hope?" said North. "I admit what I propose is

difficult, and it isn't without risks. But it's the only chance we have.

We need something to hope for, however small the chances are." He paused.

"I propose a compromise. We have the Insectoid's projected course. I say we plot a course around theirs, to circle around them and come at the system from behind."

And with minimal discussion, North's plan was approved.

Now a journey that was supposed to take three more days was taking seven.

But by avoiding a direct confrontation with the Insectoids, North hoped he could preserve his fighting force as long as possible. Each battle which resulted in the deaths of one human and ten Insectoids was a victory for the Insectoids. For the Insectoids could repopulate at will, but the fleet was limited to the fighters and soldiers who had escaped the disaster at Vitalics and the fall of the Alliance.

As luck would have it, the Insectoid fleet didn't stay in one, compact group, but fanned out over several systems, to widen the scope of their search.

And one of their scouting parties found the fleet.

When he discovered they were spotted, North ordered the fleet to full attack, figuring that with the enemy fleet dispersed that he could make short work of their individual elements, one by one.

But the Insectoid fleet wasn't that dispersed.

There were two main groups, a battlecruiser squadron escorted by a cruiser group, and a second group led by a half dozen sleek battleships. North's fleet was still working on the first group when the second one showed up.

How North managed to extricate the fleet without taking even heavier losses than it did was a mystery to most. But the results were bad enough;

one battlecruiser, two light cruisers, and three destroyers were totally wiped out. One deep space cruiser was so badly gutted that it had to be abandoned and scuttled; and a badly damaged destroyer was barely kept operational. Total casualties: 800 dead, nearly 400 wounded to various degrees.

North only managed to eke out something of a draw by attacking what he thought was the Insectoids commander's ship, one of the late arriving battleships. He ordered his forces to concentrate on that one ship to the exclusion of all else; when it had been heavily damaged, the enemy pulled back.

The War Admiral grimaced. But it could have been worse, much worse. The Insectoids never got past their defense line of warships to their merchant vessels, which were their prime supplier of food and maintenance; and more ships could have been lost if the battle hadn't turned his way.

The War Admiral had destroyed the bulk of the first part of their fleet, but somewhere out there, not far away, was a still potent force of battleships and a mix of support ships. He had cut them down to size, but there were at least five battleships that were fully operational, and they wouldn't give up so easily.

Services were held for the dead, and North looked straight ahead, avoiding the gaze of his officers. Did they blame him? If the former League officers didn't, the Directorate officers certainly did. If only they had changed course entirely, and not attempted to flank the Insectoids, this wouldn't have happened.

They held a staff meeting right after the services where they discussed

battle damage and repairs. A full third of the fleet had suffered varying degrees of damage.

"We'll lay over here for repairs," said the War Admiral, pointing to the neighboring solar system. No one needed to be told that this was the system that they had been headed for in the first place.

"Is that wise, sir?" said Captain Bennett. "There's still an enemy fleet out there, and if we stay in this area they'll be sure to find us again."

"What do you suggest?" the War Admiral said.

"Let's put at least a few light years between us and this system before we stop," said Bennett. "That way, it will at least take them longer to find us."

The War Admiral reluctantly nodded. "Agreed." He created a flight path on the holographic display, one that would take them through the solar system he was interested in. "Any further comment?" There was silence. "You're all dismissed."

The senior captains filed out of the war room, looking grim. When they had filed out, leaving only Captain Dulin and Commander Wren, he simply continued to sit there silently, staring at the holographic display.

"They blame me, of course," said the War Admiral. "It's only natural. If we had tried to avoid the Insectoid fleet entirely, this wouldn't have happened."

"They're only thinking about their own short term survival," said Commander Wren.

"Eight hundred sailors and officers didn't survive in the short term," said the War Admiral.

"If we only looked out for our own survival, we would never have a chance

to liberate our homeworlds," said Dulin. "You're doing the right thing, War Admiral."

The War Admiral didn't respond, not directly. He turned away from them and said, "Please summon Captain Took and Professor Stevenson to my quarters."

As the fleet moved through the system, sensors detected a habitable planet in orbit. The Glory launched a shuttle with starfighter escort to race ahead to the planet before the fleet got there. The fleet wouldn't be stopping at the planet; so the expedition would have to do its business and leave the planet before the fleet went too far past the planet to catch up.

Orbital scans detected similar findings to their last outing; a breathable atmosphere, some plants and vegetation, but no intelligent life, nothing, that is, but a tell-tale monument on the northern continent.

Because of their hurry, they hadn't scrambled a marine detachment to accompany them, so it was up to Took, Obe, and the Ken Pilot to secure the area before the shuttle containing the research scientists could be allowed to land.

"Aren't the marines supposed to be doing this?" Obe asked, from the cockpit of his Wildcat.

"Don't be a weakling 239 chicken," said Took, referring to an infamous kind of mutated chicken. "Where's your sense of adventure?" "My sense of adventure went on permanent vacation after our homeworlds were conquered and we were chased out," said Obe, angling his fighter to follow Took, who was looking for a clear spot to land. The Ken Pilot, silent as always,

followed behind them.

"You're just depressed," said Took.

"We just lost eight hundred sailors and officers, we're fleeing for our lives, and you accuse me of being depressed," said Obe. "If I weren't depressed, I'd be delusional."

"Precisely my thought," said Took, meaning something different entirely.

"We need a morale boost."

"If this is about the newscast-"

"I spoke with Colonel Darley about the newscast-"

"-and he said no," said Took.

"Good."

"But it wasn't a considered no, just a brusque one; he didn't even think about my proposal."

"Too bad," said Obe. "What about that open field, over there?"

Took eyed it. "Not enough space. Keep looking." Took cleared his throat.

"Where was I? Yes, the newscast. We need a fleetwide broadcast. It will help raise morale-" "But Darley said no."

"-so after Colonel Darley said no, I went to Captain Dulin."

"You went over Darley's head? Are you insane?"

"Well, I figured out it was wrong to ask Colonel Darley in the first place. After all, he's the starfighter commander, but he doesn't set fleetwide policy. Only the War Admiral does that."

"Iday, you didn't-"

"No, the War Admiral was unavailable when I went after him."

"So what did Dulin say?"

"He didn't say no," said Took. "There! That field, over there, we can land

there."

"Where?"

"50 degrees to my left, follow me in."

"So Dulin gave his approval for your newscast?"

"Not exactly," said Took.

"What did he say?"

"He just said that he didn't think it was such a good idea," said Took.

"But he didn't say no."

They put down their fighters in an open field, and emerged cautiously from their 150-B's, their weapons drawn, slowly panning the area around them.

But the area looked remarkably peaceful, much like the area of the first monument. They slowly started walking to the monument, which they could see was close to the edge of a wooded area.

"Two times lucky, eh?" said Took as they walked towards it. It was big and black much like the other monument, and when they got close they could see writing on the sides of it. But this time something different did happen when they approached; they heard a slight humming noise, like the sound of a powerful machine, and suddenly, all around them, they saw snowflakes--snowflakes of all different colors of the rainbow--blue, pink, red, violet, bright green, dark green yellow, orange, sparkly, and more. But the weather was much too warm for traditional snow; and they didn't feel cold, or even a breeze.

"Wow!" said Took, staring at the flakes around him. This was the most amazing thing he had seen in some time.

"Look at all those colors," said Obe. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"This is incredible!" said Took. The snow started to emit small sounds, making noises like a gentle harp.

Deep inside the monument, an old man in robes lying on a bench stirred.

This was remarkable, because he hadn't stirred in a long time. A VERY long time. He opened one eye.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Took said to the Ken Pilot, parroting Obe.

"Look down," said the Ken Pilot.

They looked down. The "snow" was disappearing once it hit the ground.

"Look around," said the Ken Pilot.

It only seemed to be snowing in a small area around the monument.

"It must be generated by the monument," said Took, looking at the walls of it more closely. The monument, like the other, had smooth walls that showed no revealing entrances. "But what's it for?"

"Iday, we should call down the professor's team before we touch anything..."

But Took wasn't listening. He reached out to touch one of the symbols; but before his hand made contact, a smooth opening revealed itself on the side of the monument, showing a flight of stairs going down.

All three of them immediately raised their weapons in a gesture of alarm.

"What did I do? How did I open it?" Took asked excitedly.

"I don't know," said Obe, looking into the blackness of the entrance. It wasn't reassuring.

Took took a tentative first step down

"Do you think we should call down for the research team?" said Obe.

"We have to make sure it's safe," said Took, taking a second step.

"What about calling for backup?" said Obe..

"We have K for that," said Took. "Don't we, K?" He paused for a moment, but the Ken Pilot said nothing. Took spoke in an artificially deep voice, like a robot. "Yes, I will protect you." Then, switching back to his normal voice, he said, "Thanks, K."

The Ken Pilot, saying nothing, continued to be expressionless.

They started walking down, and dim light panels in the ceiling came to life, showing a narrow, dark corridor ahead of them. Moving cautiously, they went forward. If Took had been thinking clearly, he would have called for backup; what if the entrance sealed behind them? No one would ever know where they had gone or what had happened to them.

But as they hit the bottom step and started down the corridor they could still see sunlight streaming in from the entrance behind them. If this was a trap, it wasn't being sprung yet.

They walked quietly down the corridor. Probably no one had walked down here in centuries, if not millennia. They saw a well lit room ahead. With their weapons out and ready, they entered and found the room divided into two sections, each separated by what looked like a glass door.

There was a bench in each section. On the second bench they all saw an old man with a long beard wearing robes. On the first bench Took saw all kinds of precious valuables--gold, rubies, gems, emeralds, and piles and piles of credits. Obe saw something different--the first bench seemed to contain all kinds of exotic electrical devices, perhaps the very technology they had been seeking! The Ken Pilot didn't see anything on the first bench.

But what they all saw together were two powerful lasers, one above each

bench. Even as they spoke, the lasers started glowing.

"What is this place? What's going on here?" Took asked.

Something seemed to tell them that the lasers were about to fire on both benches, and they only had time to retrieve the items of one bench.

Thinking rationally about it later, of course, they realize they could have split up, with two of them blasting open one of the glass doors and removing the items of the first bench, and one of them blasting the other glass door and helping the old man off the other bench. But something innate gave them an overwhelming sense of urgency, and the sense that they could only get to one of the benches in time.

"There's a lot of goodies on that first bench," said Took, eyeing the piles of credits through the glass door.

"That technology might be just what we're looking for," said Obe.

"What technology?" asked Took.

"What are both of you talking about?" said the Ken Pilot, seeing them stare at the empty bench.

The lasers were getting very bright now and heating up.

"We don't have much time," said Took, feeling the sudden impulse to act building up in him.

Suddenly both Took and Obe, on an unspoken agreement, fired their blasters at the second door. It shattered, as if it were really glass, and Took and Obe ran into the second chamber and started pulling the old man off of the bench. He was heavier than he looked, and the laser was getting very hot....

They had managed to pull him several feet off the bench when both lasers came to life simultaneously, vaporizing both benches, including the items

that might, or might not, have been on the first bench. Took and Obe were distracted for a moment by noise and the flash of the lasers. When the lasers stopped firing and they turned around to look at the old man, he was standing calmly behind them, with a very thoughtful expression on his face.

"I've been waiting for something like this for a long time," said the man.

Took tried to recover from the shock. But why was he so surprised? It was just an old man. But this old man seemed to have a power, an inner potency that inspired respect and awe.

Took finally found his voice. "Who... are you?"

The man continued to look thoughtful. "I don't think a name would help you. A lot of it is based on your expectations. Who do you want me to be?"

Took recovered some of his bravado. "Listen, pal, we're not here to play twenty questions. We just saved you-"

"For which I'm very grateful," said the man, though the way he said it, it didn't seem to any of them as if he had been concerned that he had been in any danger. "Thankful not just for the rescue, but for finding people like yourselves." His blue eyes looked at each of them, one at a time, and for a moment each felt themselves at the center of attention of a great power.

Took felt his pulse quicken. "People like ourselves?"

"I didn't think beings like yourself existed anymore," he sighed. "I had gotten old, and jaded, you see, one disappointment after another, and

after a time, I simply gave up. But now you're here, and you give me fresh energy."

"Uh, huh," said Took. "Are you a... Chent?"

"Chent?" said the man, looking confused. "You mean, the beings who built this place? No. They are far older than I."

"Then how did you get in here?"

"That's quite a story," said the man.

"We'd like to hear it," said Took. "As well as your name and who you are."

"My name?" The man smiled. He seemed to find that amusing. "A name. What good will a name do you, if you have never heard of me?"

"We, uh, have to have something to call you," said Took. "Why not use your name?"

"Hm, good point," said the man, still looking amused. "You want to know who I am?"

"Yes, " said Took. Why did they have to coax him so much just to get his name? "Inspire us," he said, half sarcastically.

A wave of something struck Took. Suddenly, he felt taller, more confident, stronger and more assured of himself than he had ever been. Positive energy infused him. It was as if someone had flipped a switch from night into day. Suddenly, he felt... inspired.

"You may call me Inspir."

"The shuttle and its escort are returning," said Captain Dulin. "They found a monument, and the survey team make image recordings of its markings."

"Good good," said the War Admiral, studying a file on his screen.

"One more thing," said Dulin. "They're bringing back a passenger."

"A passenger?"

"They found someone on the planet," said Dulin. "An old man."

"On an empty planet?"

"Yes," said Dulin. "There's more. They found him inside the monument."

"INSIDE the monument?" said the War Admiral. Dulin had his full attention now. "How did they get inside?"

To save time, Dulin showed the War Admiral the preliminary report that Took had filed from the surface, everything from the musical snowflakes to their encounter with Inspir. The War Admiral noticed, however, that something about Took's report seemed a bit... odd. It was filled with a tone he couldn't quite identify, but one that he wasn't expecting, not from Took.

Professor Stevenson had scanned Inspir on the surface and reported that Inspir, if that was his real name, registered as a human, but that meant nothing; if this was a Chent, he certainly would be able to fool their scanners. A human certainly would not be found sleeping inside a monument on an empty planet, far outside known space. No, this Inspir was something else. But would he be friendly, or hostile?

This was something that the War Admiral had not considered. He had hoped to find ancient cities, or equally ancient ships of the Chent, abandoned and empty, whose technology they could tap into. But it never occurred to him that one of the Chent would still be alive. If this was a Chent, and it proved hostile, they could all be in great danger. And this great danger was currently in a shuttle docking in Bay 2. The War Admiral

thought about it for a moment, weighed the risks, then called Captain

Dulin on the comm. Preparations would have to be made....

Took escorted Inspir to the War Admiral's quarters. He was talking a mile

a minute, giving Inspir a rough outline of their situation. "The

Insectoids have been pursuing us for months, and their fleets keep

appearing from nowhere. We're fighting them, but-"

At that moment they came to the War Admiral's office. The door opened and

the War Admiral stood there, waiting for him.

"Come in," said the War Admiral. He looked at Took, who automatically

started to follow. "Alone," he frowned.

"Oh. Ok," said Took, crestfallen.

Inspir entered, the door closing behind him.

The feeling came at the same time the man entered the room. It was as if

the War Admiral felt a splash of warm water on his body. No, that wasn't

quite right; warm water would make him feel unexpectedly wet, something

that would cause him to recoil. The closest way to describe it would be a

feeling of something that energized the War Admiral, that made him think

more clearly than he had in days, and that for the first time in some time

filled him with real hope. And the oddest thing about it, was that he had

experienced these feelings before...

And then there was the man himself, bearded, in robes, watching North

quietly as if assessing the affect on him. Could this Inspir be unaware of

the effect he had? Could it be unintentional? Almost certainly not.

The room was silent for a moment as each stared at the other, as if the

first person who spoke would lose a certain tactical advantage; or maybe,

Inspir was just used to the effect he had on people, and was expecting the

War Admiral to be as talkative as Iday Took was.

But the War Admiral pursed his lips and said nothing.

Inspir finally broke the spell. He smiled slightly, as if conceding the point to the War Admiral. "So you must be War Admiral Norman North," he said.

"And you must be Inspir," said the War Admiral.

"That's what you can call me, now," said Inspir. "Though the name doesn't really matter; a measure of a being is what he does, not what he is."

"A being?" said the War Admiral, still not trusting the energized feeling he was experiencing. "You appear human, like us."

"Things appear in many ways to many people," said Inspir, sitting down in a chair in front of the War Admiral's desk. "Are you fleeing from the Insectoids, or moving towards something? Two perceptions, from the same action."

"We are in search of technology that will help us repel the Insectoids," said the War Admiral.

"I understand," said Inspir. "I also cannot help you with that."

"Cannot?" said the War Admiral. "Or will not?"

"Look at me, War Admiral," said Inspir. "Do I come equipped with machines that will help you defeat your enemies?" He gestured to his robes. "By now your people have searched further into what you quaintly call a monument. Have you found any technical equipment there?"

"No," said the War Admiral. "Aside from the room you were found in, there appears to be nothing else." He let an obvious question slide, and took another tact. "But if you could direct us to other planets, where

technology exists--"

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that, War Admiral," said Inspir. "All my information is woefully out of date. And I'm not familiar with this corner of this galaxy."

This galaxy? Not familiar? Then what was he doing here? And how did he get here without knowing the area through which he traveled to get here?

Inspir intruded into his thoughts by speaking again. "And in any event, that's not what I do."

"What DO you do?" said the War Admiral, speaking with emphasis.

"I help people," said Inspir. "I can help you, War Admiral."

"With what?"

"With your guilt, for one thing."

The War Admiral showed no outward reaction.

"Guilt about what?" North asked.

"Let us not play games, War Admiral," said Inspir. North glanced, ever so momentarily, at the blank comm screen on the far wall. Inspir caught his glance and looked straight at the screen, and smiled for a moment. Then he turned back to North.

"Not very trusting, are you?" said Inspir.

"You're a completely unknown entity. How trusting can I be?" said North.

"True, the external monitoring is only prudent, though I would like us to have a moment of privacy," said Inspir, raising an eyebrow slightly.

In Captain Dulin's quarters, the visual feed to the War Admiral's quarters suddenly went static. He tried to adjust the controls, but the image wouldn't return.

Dulin looked at Commander Wren. "Perhaps we should wait....."

"We can't risk it," said Wren. "That's the War Admiral in there! Order the marines in now!"

Dulin frowned. If Inspir took the War Admiral as a hostage, or even moved to harm him... but at the same time, sending in the troops could make matters even worse. Why had he ever agreed to let this alien see the War Admiral alone?

Cursing, Dulin touched a link on his desk. "Major Fortran! Have the security squad assemble outside the War Admiral's quarters on the double!"

"I'm sorry I had to do that, but I think we need a minute of privacy," said Inspir.

"Do what?" said the War Admiral, unaware of what had just happened.

"Please, War Admiral. I know you had your associates monitoring this conversation from a remote location. Very smart, actually, and a reasonable precaution," said Inspir. "Assuming, that is, that I couldn't get to them as well." He stood up, and took a step towards North, and then another....

The security squad formed outside of North's quarters, followed by a breathless Major Fortran.

"Do we go in, sir?" said Lieutenant Dolenk.

Fortran bit his lip, looking at the door. "Our orders are to wait for the Captain."

The War Admiral felt that feeling wash over him again, the feeling of... inspiration. Suddenly, he felt his creativity heightened, his thinking abilities multiplied, and along with it, his sense of hope strengthened.

But he struggled to remain outwardly calm.

"That wasn't quite true, what you said before," said Inspir. "About me being an unknown entity." He took another step, and then another one, until he was face to face with the War Admiral. The War Admiral didn't flinch.

"No?" said the War Admiral.

"No," said Inspir. "While it's true, you've never met me before, I can see..."

"I've met someone else..." said the War Admiral.

"Someone similar, just like me," Inspir suggested.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "I'm starting to remember now...."

Captain Dulin arrived breathless outside the War Admiral's quarters, followed by Commander Wren. The tactical team was assembled and ready.

"Captain?" said Major Fortran.

Dulin considered a split moment, then nodded.

"Stand aside, sir."

Fortran palmed the door. It didn't open. He nodded to Dulin, who activated the override code. The door stayed close.

Now North saw this stranger, no longer a stranger, in an entirely new light. "So what are you?" North asked.

"What am I?" The question seemed to puzzle Inspir for a moment. "Didn't you figure it out when you met my previous number? Or are you still testing me? Very well, I will answer it, for what I am is the most intelligent question you have asked since I came in here. I'm an admirer. And I'm a helper. I admire certain kinds of individuals, and races, and I help them."

"Help them how?"

"You have already seen that. I help you help yourself; the best kind of help there is. I've been doing it for a long time--though I haven't done it for a long time. You're right to be wary; there are many, many others out there besides myself who call it their mission to help others, but who end up hurting much more than they help, just as I'm almost equally sure, from what little I've learned, that there are others helping those you call the Insectoids. But their help is different from my help. I don't provide help in force of arms, or weapons, or assist in subjugating another race. I help people tap into a greater part of their potential, such as during-" and he purposely stopped speaking.

North spoke up. "The arrival of the fleet at Yartagia."

"The arrival of the fleet at Yartagia," said Inspir, filling it with significance as he said it. "I don't know precisely what happened there, but I can see you have encountered one of my kind before. From the state of your fleet, and your home worlds, I can see you need a lot of help, even from the little I now know I can see the scales have been tipped drastically against your favor by one of my opposite numbers. I am going to fix that."

North raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask the obvious question.

"You will see," said Inspir. "I can only stay a short while, if you will have me." Inspir looked towards the door. "They're getting ready with cutting tools. We'd better emerge if we don't want them damaging your door, shouldn't we?"

One of Fortran's men was aiming the laser torch at the door when it

unexpectedly opened. Everyone stood speechless as Inspir walked out, looking unconcerned at the heavily armed squad that was assembled.

Dulin and Wren rushed in. "War Admiral, are you-"

North held up a restraining hand. "I'm all right. Everything's fine. Our guest will be staying with us for a while."

Dulin and Wren exchanged glances. Had this mysterious Inspir gotten to the War Admiral?

As a concession to Dulin, North agreed that Inspir should have an escort.

Dulin figured that if anyone would be immune to the effects of Inspir, it would be the Ken Pilot. The Ken Pilot had been the least effected on the planet surface, and it was he who was detailed to accompany Inspir around the ship.

"I don't amaze you," said Inspir.

"No," said the Ken Pilot.

"I don't surprise you."

"No."

"Or even interest you."

"No."

"That interests me," said Inspir, looking closely at the Ken Pilot. "It's as if part of your mind has been burned out, or shut down."

"Correct."

"Well, then your Captain Dulin was right, you're a very suitable escort," said Inspir.

Inspir's first stop was a thorough debriefing with Professor Stevenson and his staff.. Inspir was friendly but not particularly helpful. How did he get into the monument? The details were vague in his mind. Where did he

come from? That was a long time ago. How long had he been asleep? He wasn't really sure.

He was obviously being evasive, but that didn't seem to irritate the Professor or his colleagues; in fact, they beamed as Inspir talked, and the conversation soon changed to other topics.

"Do you realize how important your work is here?" said Inspir. "You are the most important people not just in this fleet, but in your Alliance. Your War Admiral has put a lot of faith in you to locate new technology that can help you fight your enemies."

"Yes, well, we're doing the best we can," said the Professor.

"You're worried," said Inspir. "Worried that you won't find what you're looking for, worried that if you do find it, you won't be able to decipher the workings of such radically different technology."

"Yes, that is a concern," said Stevenson, looking uncomfortable.

"But you are among the top scholars in your Alliance, are you not?"

Cautious nods. "No one can do more than you can. All you can do is your best."

"But what if we fail?" came a timid voice in the crowd of scholars.

"As long as you're all alive, you haven't failed," said Inspir. "Each day that you survive is another victory over the Insectoids. Where there is life, there is hope. Where there is another day, there is hope."

A murmur seemed to travel over the crowd of scholars and scientists.

Inspir turned to the Ken Pilot, who looked bored. "We may go now."

They wandered around the Glory, seemingly at random, visiting different crew decks and duty stations. Sometimes Inspir would simply walk by a

room, or other times he would purposely stop and talk to crewmembers; usually, before he entered a room He roamed one of the hanger decks, with the Ken Pilot following silently in tow. The Ken Pilot didn't seem to mind giving up his free time to follow him around. The truth of the matter was that the Ken Pilot didn't seem to care much either way.

Inspir walked among the long rows of Wildcats awaiting maintenance and inspection. He cast a glance at members of the flight crew, all of whom stopped what they were doing and looked up when Inspir walked by. The sound of his footsteps wasn't what did it; it was the sense and feeling of hope in the air, like a splash of warm water, that attracted everyone's attention. Inspir gave a smile and a nod as he walked by, or stopped to speak a word or two, but didn't stop for long until he reached a Wildcat where the tech working on it didn't look up as he approached.

Inspir stood still as the tech continued working for a few seconds on the fighter's left wing. Then he stiffened, stopped what he was doing, and turned around. It was Zetho Arkasian, the deputy chief armaments officer in Bay One.

He looked at Inspir. Inspir looked back at him. The Ken Pilot, as usual, didn't make introductions or say anything. After staring at Inspir for a moment, Zetho growled, "I don't need an audience," and started to turn back to his work.

"But you do need appreciation," said Inspir, speaking for the first time.

"Eh?" said Zetho, turning around again.

"You've gotten so used to being unappreciated that you bottle up the resentment within you," said Inspir.

"Huh?" grunted Zetho. "Yeah."

"When in reality, you have one of the most important jobs here," said

Inspir. "Even I, a complete stranger, can see that."

"Yeah," said Zetho, considering.

"Without you, none of these ships could fly," said Inspir. "Without you, fighters would be malfunctioning in combat, exposing pilots to unnecessary risk. Without you, ordinance wouldn't detonate properly. You are, I believe, the foremost ordinance expert on the Glory."

"Yeah," said Zetho. Then, "Who are you?"

Inspir put an arm on Zetho's shoulder. "Just someone who cares," he said quietly. Zetho felt the warmth radiate within him. He felt a new energy, as if he didn't have to force himself to do his job anymore, as if he could prep a hundred ships with all the energy he now had within him, because he knew he was doing it for a higher purpose. He got to his feet, and, whistling for the first time in years, started for one of the tool banks.

Inspir turned to the Ken Pilot, a broad smile on his wise face.

"Don't even think of touching me," said the Ken Pilot, speaking for the first time.

Half Commander Stacy Wren looked around the bridge of the Glory. Everyone was calmly manning their controls. The War Admiral was nowhere in site. Probably in his office, getting ready for the staff meeting. She quickly sat down in her chair next to Dulin, who was studying a duty report.

"What are we going to do?" she hissed.

Dulin pretended to keep reading his report. "This is not the place or the time."

"Make time," Wren hissed.

Dulin looked up from his report and raised his voice. "Commander, would you accompany me to my office. I'd like to go over a few items in this report."

They went to the Captain's office, just off the bridge. The Glory, designed to have both a commanding Admiral and a Captain onboard, had both an Admiral's and a Captain's office just off the main bridge. Wren had an official office too, but that was several levels belowdeck.

As soon as the doors had closed behind them Dulin turned to Wren. "Now, Commander, what do you have to say?"

"The War Admiral has given that alien free run of the ship. He's been going around manipulating the crew."

"Manipulating?"

"Feeding them a false euphoria," said Wren. "He's like a narcotic."

"The War Admiral doesn't seem concerned."

"That's because he's been affected too," said Wren.

Dulin considered. "What would you have me do?"

"Put some constraints on this Inspir. Confine him, or better yet, drop him off where he came from."

"And violate the War Admiral's orders?" Dulin said. "Or were you also suggesting I relieve him of duty?"

Wren opened her mouth and then closed it. She hadn't thought that far ahead. Suddenly, they heard Lieutenant Shishman's voice over the comm.

"Captain Dulin, Commander Wren, please report to the war room."

All the senior fleet officers were gathered there. "Now that we're all assembled, we can begin," said the War Admiral, eyeing Dulin and Wren

coming in last. They took the only remaining seats, next to the hologram of Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna. He always liked to sit near the end of the table, by the door, even when he only appeared in hologram form. Most of the fleet officers were present in hologram form from their own ships; obviously, this was not considered to be one of the more vital meetings.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

"Gentlemen," said the War Admiral. "The most vital repairs on our ships are complete. We can now get under way." A three dimensional star chart appeared on his screen. "The last known location of the Insectoid fleet was here," he said, indicating a flashing sector.

"So we should probably head in the opposite direction," said Captain Bennett of the Half Carrier Amory Til. His hologram flickered slightly due to momentary interference with his signal.

"Not the direct opposite," said Captain Harkness. "That's the first place they'll look."

"I propose we move here," said the War Admiral, pointing to the flashing sector where they had last seen the Insectoids.

"You want to move to their last known location?" Bennett said. "Why?"

"To attack," said the War Admiral.

"Seeing the losses they inflicted on us the last time, do you think it's a good idea-"

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "I realize that our goal is survival, not combat. Each time we engage in battle we sustain losses that cannot be replenished. Nevertheless, I'm convinced it's best that we seek them out,

rather than wait for them to find us. If you'll recall, the core of their fleet are a number of super battleships that are capable of causing us a great damage if they get close. If they find us and take us by surprise again, we'll sustain heavy casualties, again."

The War Admiral turned to the map, and a number of fighter symbols appeared on the screen. "But we also have a significant advantage. We have fighters and they don't. My intention is to locate them first, from a distance, and to send our fighters in to destroy them, without risking any of our capital ships. That way we can destroy them safely, from a distance, with a minimum of losses."

There was a murmuring around the room. They hadn't gone on the offensive in some time. Their primary goal had been escape, not combat. Their confidence, shattered by the loss of their home worlds, had reduced them to flight. This was a new mentality, a new way of thinking, and they had to adjust to that.

"What if in trying to locate them they locate us first?" one of the captains asked.

"It's a risk, but seeing as we have fighters to engage in recon and they don't, again we have the advantage," said North. "We'll send out elements of two full squadrons in every direction to search, and have the other squadrons ready to launch on a moment's notice."

The captains looked around and nodded. The War Admiral's plan was risky, but it also made sense. North, seeing from their expressions that he had formed a consensus, nodded. "Captain Dulin and Colonel Darley will coordinate our efforts with the squadrons on the Amory Til and on the other capital ships. Dismissed." The holograms shimmered out of existence,

leaving North in a nearly empty room with Dulin, Wren, and Colonel Darley.

Darley excused himself, saying he had to prepare the mission schedules.

North nodded, and turned to look out the windows at the stars. "Yes?" he said, to the two silent officers behind him.

"An attack is a very provocative gamble," said Wren.

"Yes, it is," said North.

"I have to wonder how much of it is your idea," said Wren.

"Commander!" said Dulin sharply.

"No," said North, raising a hand. "If I can't encourage my closest officers to speak freely, then we're in worse trouble than I thought." He turned away from the window and looked at Wren. "Continue, Commander."

"What happened during the eighty eight seconds you were off-surveillance with this Inspir?" Wren asked.

North raised an eyebrow.

"This Inspir has been roaming around the ship, raising morale and giving everyone new-found confidence."

"And you object to this?" North asked.

"I think he did the same thing to you," said Wren. "I think he's setting us up for a trap, making us overconfident enough to attack in a set place and time of the Insectoids' choosing."

"Hm," said the War Admiral. "And why do you think this thought didn't occur to me?"

Wren swallowed. "You're obviously being, well, influenced by him." Her voice trailed off.

"Influenced, or controlled?" said the War Admiral. "Because if you believe

that he's working for the Insectoids, and he controls me, you're being very, very foolish to confront me with your suspicions directly. I could have you arrested and confined until the attack. No one would question my orders." He glanced at Dulin, as if to assess whether Dulin also shared her convictions.

Wren gulped. "We... I hope you're merely influenced, Admiral. That's why I'm bringing my concerns to you directly."

"Influenced, then," said the War Admiral, looking more at ease. "In that regard, then, you're correct. I have been influenced, just as you are influenced whenever you listen to anyone else's opinion or line of reasoning."

"Not in the same way," said Wren.

"No, not in the same way," said the War Admiral. "But I haven't become a blind follower. My ability to reason is intact... and, just as importantly, so is my memory. I take it that neither of you were in service during our conflict at Yartagia?"

Dulin and Wren shook their heads.

"I was," said the War Admiral. "It was a tough time. Our fleet was faced by superior numbers, and had just been defeated in battle. It was a turning point in the war. If our fleet were wiped out, well, our homeworlds would've been next."

"And then a mysterious man appeared, just like Inspir. He gave us hope, and courage, and the will to fight back. And we did."

"And Yartagia went down as one of the greatest victories in history," said Wren. "So this Inspir is that same man?"

"No," said the War Admiral. "This one is different. But he's from the same

group."

"Group? The Chent?"

The War Admiral shook his head. "An old race, but not as old as the Chent."

"How can you be sure that this Inspir is from that race?" Wren asked.

"Because," said the War Admiral, "The feeling I get is familiar."

The fleet moved into position over the next two days. The Amory Til launched two dozen fighters, a mixture of Wildcats and older Lancers, in every spherical direction away from the fleet, in search of the Insectoids. The effects of Inspir's visit seemed to be visible on the crew. The fighter pilots grew more confident; the productivity of the tech crews increased 20%; and even the morale of the non-combat support staff improved. Inspir was even seen in other ships of the fleet, even though he never left the Glory. Pilots on the Amory Til reported waking up in the morning remembering strange, inspirational dreams, telling them they were important defenders of the fleet and that they had the ability to keep everyone safe; gun crews on the other warships reported similar experiences. And Iday Took resolved to start his newscast.

"-but Captain Dulin said no," said Obe. They were sitting in their crew quarters, arguing once again about this.

"For the last time, Obe, he didn't say no, he just said it wasn't a good idea," said Took. "That's not a no."

"Then go and do it then," said Obe.

"I need a camera man," said Took.

"Oh no, you're not getting me mixed up in this one," said Obe. "I'm not

going to carry a heavy camera-"

"One ounce-"

"Around and get into trouble as well."

"It's your friend," said a familiar voice.

They both turned to see Inspir standing there, trailed by the Ken Pilot.

How long had they been standing there?

"Your friend needs your help," said Inspir.

Obe's opposition seemed to melt away at the sight of Inspir, but a stubborn kernel of it remained. "Yeah, but the Captain said-"

"He's trying to do some good," said Inspir. "He's trying to raise morale, to bring a sense of community to your fleet. You're all that's left of free humanity; an unplanned community of several dozen ships, splintered and shattered and disconnected. He's trying to build a unifying force that can bring you all together."

"Uh...."

"He's your friend," Inspir repeated. "Will you help him?"

Obe blinked. "Ok, I, uh, guess I'll give it a try."

"Very good," said Inspir, putting a fatherly arm on Obe's shoulder. He turned to Took. "You're doing good work. And I can see it's only the beginning. Although you excel at it, your skills are almost wasted as a fighter pilot."

"I am? They are?" said Took, a bit confused.

"Your skill is not unlike mine," said Obe. "Improvement of the spirit."

"Like you?" said Took.

"A bit less developed," said Obe. "But you have that vital spark within you. Never let it die."

And with that he turned away.

"See Obe," said Took, when Inspir had gone. He beamed. "I have a vital spark."

"Just don't start a fire," Obe grumbled.

Wren pulled the closings on her uniform as she dashed on the bridge.

"Sorry I'm late," she told Dulin.

"Had trouble waking up?" Dulin inquired.

"You might say that," said Wren.

"Want to talk about it?" Dulin asked.

"No," said Wren, reddening. She changed the subject. "Has anyone seen the War Admiral?"

The War Admiral sat behind a row of containers in one of the Glory's vast cargo holds. It was a giant sized room, but filled to capacity, making it seem very, very small. He came to places like this to think, sometimes.

Other times he wandered around empty corridors or rooms, pacing back and forth, to think, to think.

"Perhaps I'm losing my touch," came a voice.

The War Admiral looked around. Inspir was standing there.

"I thought I ordered David Norman to accompany you wherever you went," he said.

"He did," said Inspir.

"Well?" said the War Admiral.

"I'm with him now," said Inspir. "He's asleep, on his bed in the crew quarters, and I'm lying in a cot right next to him."

"I see," said the War Admiral. "Am I asleep as well?"

"No," said Inspir, frowning as if this were an odd question. "No, you are reliving your guilt while you are wide awake."

"My guilt?"

"It seeps out of you--your recent feelings of guilt because of your crew losses. But that only touches on your deeper guilt."

"The ambush at Vitalics. The loss of our fleet. The loss of our homeworlds," said North. "How did you know?"

"I didn't," said Inspir. Then he added, "You cannot consume yourself with guilt."

"If I had acted, I might have been able to prevent it."

"Possibly," said Inspir. "What do you estimate your chances for success would've been."

"Small," said North. "I would have had to effectively stage a coup against the Alliance. But a small chance of success would have been better than this," he said, indicating his surroundings.

"Really? If you had failed, would any portion of your fleet had survived? Or would everyone around you be either dead, or enslaved?" said Inspir.

"You believe that you are your race's only chance to regain their freedom. If that is true, your survival was essential, and by not acting, you did the right thing."

"But what if-"

"What if, what if, what if," said Inspir. "Let yourself be paralyzed by the past and there will be no future. Let us assume that you were wrong and should have acted. Does that negate your obligations in the future?"

North muttered something.

"You and I know that you are best able to lead this fleet. Do not

incapacitate yourself and allow yourself the luxury of guilt. Do what you do best," said Inspir.

"Is that what you tell everyone?" said North, cracking a small smile.

"Only those who do the right kind of things," said Inspir. "I am needed elsewhere tonight. Think on what I have said."

The following morning a fateful report came in from one of the scouts.

"Fighter 8 from the Til's Lancer D squadron reports a sighting," said Lieutenant Shishman, illuminating a section of the bridge's floating holographic map.

The War Admiral swiveled his command chair to face Shishman. "Specifics?" said the War Admiral sharply.

Shishman listened to the comm. "...five battleships... three battlecruisers... five heavy cruisers... ten lesser ships...."

The War Admiral turned to Colonel Darley. "Launch all fighters. Alert the fighters on the other ships."

As Took climbed into his 150-B cockpit he felt a surge of elation.

Finally, they were going to get to strike back. As he prepared to close the cockpit Zetho poked his head in. "Hey, you know that problem you were having with your tactical display?"

"Yeah." It had been flickering for several months at odd times. Zetho never the time or the resources to find out what was wrong with it.

"I figured it out, late last night; some of the circuitry from adjoining systems wasn't properly insulated. It's fixed now."

"Great!" said Took.

"Good luck," said Zetho, banging on the hull of the 150-B with his fist.

Took gave the thumbs up signal and launched.

Strictly speaking, only the Defenders and the four EC "Whales", large fighter dreadnaught ships, were designated as bombers. But seeing that the Insectoid fleet had no fighter protection, the War Admiral had ordered nearly all Wildcat and fighter ships to be equipped with bottom mounted missile racks. These slowed the ships down and made them less maneuverable in combat, but would enable them to strike heavy blows against the Insectoid capital ships. Only a single squadron, Wildcat "A", was designated strictly for fighter escort.

"Just my luck," grumbled Took. "Everyone but me gets to blow up something."

Obe checked to make sure that he was on a private circuit with Took. "It makes sense; the War Admiral wants his best fighters available for escort."

"Escort? Escort against what?" Took said. "They don't have any fighters."

"Check your scopes!" said Obe suddenly. "We're in range."

The outer edges of the Insectoid fleet was appearing on their scopes. A wave of fighters was approaching them.

"Where are they from?" said Took. "One or two of those capital ships must have had a squadron tucked into their landing bays."

Then he counted the number of fighters approaching and knew he was wrong.

A moment later, when a new ship showed up on extreme sensor range, he knew where the truth lay. "Glory, this is Captain Took! They have themselves a flat top!"

North took the news calmly on the bridge. One standard carrier. They were called flat tops because of the absence of heavy guns on the outer hull.

Only a few carrier/battleship combinations like the Glory had heavy guns on their exteriors.

"Shall we order one or two additional squadrons to jettison their missile loads and revert to CAP?" Dulin asked.

North considered for a moment. The fewer the number of fighters they had on the attack, the less of a chance they would have to permanently destroy this pursuing fleet. North looked up. Inspir was on the bridge. Inspir was looking purposefully away, and wouldn't meet his eye.

"War Admiral?"

North looked back at Dulin. "No. Continue as planned."

"Well, that's just great," said Took. "Four of their squadrons against one of ours." He checked the sensors. They were close; in seconds they would be in battle.

"A minute ago you were complaining that you weren't going to see any action at all," said Obe.

"It never drizzles but it always pours," said Took. "Let's go get'm!"

Wildcat A engaged the lead fighters, two squadrons from the Insectoid flat top. There weren't enough Wildcats on CAP to engage both squadrons; so some of the Insectoids got through to the Defenders and the converted Wildcats. But the Insectoid fighters couldn't get a clean shot at any of the opposing ships; they were weaving and bobbing crazily, despite their reduced maneuverability. Finally the Insectoids got a clean shot off at one of the Defender's, shredding a heavily armored wing, but by that time Wildcat A had finished clearing away the first squadron--and in record time too.

Took found himself flying better than he ever had before. He picked off one, two, three Insectoid ships in a row, in rapid succession single-fire shots. And he wasn't the only one. It was as if the whole squadron was flying with the proficiency of the Ken Pilot.

The third and fourth Insectoid squadrons closed, but not before the Wildcats reached weapons range. On Colonel Darley's orders half of them launched their missiles at extreme range, freeing them to take on the additional squadrons.

It was a slaughter. Not a single fighter was lost in the ensuing dogfight, and only two fighters were lost when they went in for close attack. Once the Defenders and the rest of the Wildcats got close they launched their missiles at the other capital ships, and then switched to lasers.

Insectoid battleships burst in a wave of explosions. Even their mightiest battleships were being blown to pieces. In moments, four of the five battleships were crippled and the fifth was heavily damaged. The fighters turned their attention to the supporting ships, who had been targeted with fewer missile salvos.

Meanwhile the Whales, giant heavily armored multicrew fighters, launched their first salvo at the middle of the Insectoid flat top. The missiles burst at one point and their combined force split the giant ship in two.

The Whales next turned on the surviving battlecruisers and heavy cruisers.

"...all capital ships destroyed or crippled... all enemy fighters destroyed... only four fighters lost," said Lieutenant Shishman, reading the action reports aloud.

There was a deafening cheer on the bridge. The crew actually clapped as

the War Admiral stood up from his chair. They all knew whose idea this battle was.

"Thank you, thank you," said the War Admiral. He looked genuinely pleased.

"I appreciate it, thank you." He turned to Captain Dulin. "The bridge is yours." The War Admiral retired to his office.

He wasn't surprised to find Inspir there, waiting for him.

"Just like before," said the War Admiral.

"Just like before," said Inspir. "And now I must leave."

"Just like before," the War Admiral repeated.

"Yes," said Inspir. "Your people must not come to rely on me, like a crutch; my role is only to show them what they can do."

"Where will you go now?" North asked.

"I sense I am needed elsewhere," said Inspir. "I would like to take one of your shuttles. Unfortunately, there will be no way for me to return it."

North didn't ask where Inspir would go in a short-range shuttle. But he nodded. "I'll have one prepped and readied for you."

"Before I go, I have a few things to tell you, about the current path you are heading on." And then he said a few things that had little significance to North at the time, but, as it turned out, would have tremendous importance later. In particular, he warned the War Admiral of other aliens he might encounter. "You may find others who want to help you. But the kind of help they may offer may not permit you the free choice of accepting or rejecting," said Inspir. "And the kind of help they offer may be intended to help them more than you. Be wary of them."

That sounded ominous "If they are as powerful as you, how can we resist

them?" North asked.

Inspir stared at North. "Look inside yourself. There you will find all the strength you need."

The shuttle launched from the Glory's Bay 3 and headed away from the fleet.

"Where can he go in such a short range ship, sir?" Dulin asked, studying the tracking displays.

"The bridge is yours, Captain," said North, returning to his office.

The shuttle left their sensor range shortly before it reached the outskirts of the solar system where Took, Obe and the Ken Pilot had found Inspir. The ship touched down on the same field on the same planet where they had landed. Inspir made his way to the monument and, with a gesture of his hand, opened a panel and entered inside of it.

He found himself in a very different room from the one that Took and Obe had explored, one filled with a frame of some sort set against a wall and some very sophisticated and alien looking controls. Inspir made some adjustments to the controls and the frame lit up, showing a different background against the far wall. Inspir calmly walked to the frame and then through it. Behind him, the frame darkened, the wall returned to normal, and the machinery went silent.

Chapter 3

A War Admiral And His Dog

"Two full fleets, destroyed!" Queen Zsst raged. "How can one small human fleet without reinforcement cause so much damage?"

"War Admiral Norman North," said Admiral Stay. Stay was one of her most

brilliant admirals. She spoke simply and to the point.

Norman North. Queen Zsst knew the name well. She used her higher brain functions to calm herself, and considered for a moment. North's fleet was already well outside their space; further resources would be a waste of effort. Time to cut the losses.

Another one of her aides, Admiral Zsss, suggested as much, "We have wasted enough time and effort on this pitiful enemy," said Zsss. "Let us turn to-"

"No," said a voice.

The hooded figure of Baracki entered the room. "You must continue to pursue them."

"Why?" said Zsss. "They are far from our space now, and, according to reports, heading even farther out. It would take them months simply to return to regions under our control. We waste vital resources sending fleets in piecemeal to attack us. If they ever returned, we could concentrate all our forces for one mass attack. As it stands now, however, we have to send our several smaller fleets to track the humans. As they head farther and farther from us, they could be anywhere in a larger and larger region of space and we have to send more and more fleets after them. We currently have two fleets seeking them out; we'd have to send another two to have any reasonable chance of finding them within a year. And while our fleets represent only a fraction of our strength, they only attack in full force."

"They must be destroyed," Baracki hissed.

"Why?" Zsss persisted. "They are no threat to us! You have helped us,

Baracki, and we are grateful for your help. But we have no further need of it!"

Baracki looked at Zsss, and Zsss started to shake. Then there was a cracking sound, and another, and another. One by one Zsss's bones were being broken. Crack, crack, crack! Zsss's body mass started to decrease as it fell into a heap onto the ground. Crack, crack, crack! Zsst's aides were sickened as they watched but were powerless, or too afraid, to interfere. Finally, when the body was no more than a bag of mush on the ground, Baracki turned to the others.

"Is there anyone else who rejects my help?"

No one spoke.

"Good," said Baracki, flicking a pink tongue. He turned to Queen Zsst.

"The human fleet must be destroyed because they are a threat. Not today, or tomorrow, or next week or next year, but someday they may return and be a threat. Potential threats must be eliminated."

"We already have two fleets looking for them," said Queen Zsst. "We have increased ship production to maximum, but do not yet have the resources to send multiple large fleets while maintaining an adequate force over our occupied zones and attending to the conquests we are currently making."

"So you're saying that there's nothing more you can do now?" said Baracki, giving Zsst a dangerous look.

"Wait!" said Admiral Stay, stepping forward. "While we build up our fleet, there may be other options."

"Good," said Baracki. He turned to Stay, with a dangerous look in his eyes. "Impress me with your creativity."

* * * * * From the log of War Admiral Norman North, 1 year after

Vitalics: Things have been very quiet. It's been six months since our encounter with Inspir and the last of the Insectoid fleet. I am newly confident that we are far enough away from their region of space to avoid further attack. And yet there may be other hostile alien forces out there we'll have to face, so we must stay in a constant state of battle readiness. We're already running low on supplies. We're almost out of anti-aging serum, though fortunately many of us had our boosters, which are good for 20 or 30 years, relatively recently. After that, we'll slowly start aging again. I've talked with the medical staff about synthesizing a serum onboard, but we simply don't have the technical equipment or the raw materials to do so. More immediate is our need for fuel, food, and parts. We have successfully converted over the ships to run on hydrogen, which we skim from compatible stars and gas giants we come across. The fuel burns more quickly, and causes more breakdowns in our engines, but at least we are confident of having all the energy we need for the time being. Food is a bigger problem. The ship farms are barely producing enough to sustain our needs. I've authorized turning empty cargo sections of the Glory into farms, using soil we scooped off of hospitable environments, and we're growing more food, but we still face shortages. We're worse off when it comes to spare parts. As parts wear out we find that we have nothing to replace them with. Already several fighters have been cannibalized to provide parts for others. Our least replaceable parts are munitions--once we run out of missiles, there's no way to manufacture more of those. Thank goodness we haven't had to go into battle for several months. And then

there's morale. Morale sharply improved during Inspir's visit, but has gradually waned since. I've tried to authorize limited shore leave on every uninhabited world we've encountered, but that's only been two in the space of six months. And the shore leave is on empty worlds, offering little more than walks among vegetation. Captain Took has taken it upon himself to improve morale by launching a fleet-wide vid cast. Some of his exposes have been irreverent and "borderline subversive", in the words of Captain Dulin, although I secretly enjoyed a parody he did of Colonel Darley--Took got his clipped manner of speaking just right. Captain Dulin has asked me for permission to shut down Captain Took's broadcast on the grounds that satire isn't "military", but, quite frankly, we need more efforts like Took's, not less. The only other news to report is that we're approaching a nebula. Nebulas can contain anything, including a hidden attack force, so just to be safe I've ordered the Blue Luna to go ahead and check it out first, just to be safe. * * * * *

* * * * * Once upon a time, the War Admiral had a dog. It was a small dog, a mutant type 34 Pomeranian. This was centuries ago, during one of his breaks in service. The War Admiral was very attached to his dog, and kept a hologram of it at his desk. Whenever he was tense, or tired, he would activate the hologram, and look at his cute little dog. * * * * *

* * * * *

"-I tell you, Obe, I'm convinced it's a conspiracy," said Took, piloting his fighter.

"Uh huh," said Obe, flying a few lengths behind him. They were entering the edge of the nebula, and the foggyness of it prevented them from seeing

more than a few feet around them.

"A conspiracy to kill me," said Took for emphasis.

"I mean, why else do they always send me out on these scouting missions?"

Took said. "They always send the Blue Luna out in front, and always send me out in front of the Blue Luna."

"Don't forget me," said Obe. "And what about the Ken Pilot?" He glanced behind him, making sure the Ken Pilot's ship was still there.

"No, you're incidental," said Took dismissively. "I'm convinced they want to kill me."

"Who?"

"Captain Dulin. Commander Wren. Probably Colonel Darley too. He's been after me ever since I broadcast that imitation I did of him."

"Who can blame him?"

"I'm the only free press in the fleet, and they want to silence me," said Took.

"Have you ever thought there are ways of doing that short of killing you?"

"Sure, but they don't want it to LOOK like they're silencing me," said

Took. "If they shut me down, it looks bad for them. But if I die in combat, or during a freak accident, it's not traceable to them... get my meaning?"

"Sure do," said Obe. "Hey, are your instruments reading what I'm reading?"

"Not very much," said Took. "My sensors can't penetrate very far in-"

"No, I mean the chemical analysis."

Took looked at the chem analysis. "Oxygen. Nitrogen. Helium--this stuff is breathable. What are the odds of that?"

"I'm picking up gravity too. Almost one quarter standard G."

"Gravity? This far out?"

"Look!"

Suddenly, through the clouds, they spotted what looked like a landmass. It looked almost like solidified clouds.

"You think we can breathe and walk on that thing?"

"In a nebula?"

"There's only one way to find out," said Took.

"Took, no, our instruments may be wrong!"

"I'll take a deep breath." Took glanced at the air pressure, making sure it was roughly equivalent to the pressure inside his cockpit. He decelerated to a slow speed. Then he took a deep breath, and pressed the button to open his cockpit.

Exposing himself to outer space.

"Took! Took!"

Took let out a bit of his breath, and took a small breath.

"Took!"

Took took another small breath. It smelled a bit salty, like fresh sea air. But it smelled fine.

"I'm still here," said Took.

"That was a crazy risk!"

"Not at all," said Took. "Now I can say I'm the first person to breath in outer space without a suit. Why don't we go and check out that landmass?"

"No," said Obe. "Enough with the wild risks. We don't even know if that is

a landmass. Let's get out of here and call a research team to do it properly."

"Oh... all right," said Took. He angled his ship back in line with Obe's and Ken Pilot's. "Ready."

"Took? Aren't you forgetting something?" Obe asked.

"Oh. Oh, right," said Took, closing his cockpit. "You know, it's kind of nice flying with the wind on your face."

When they cleared the nebula they made their report to Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna. When they suggested they send in a scientific team he grunted. "Let's check with command."

Much to Took's disappointment, it turned out that they were ordered to wait for the Glory and the rest of the fleet to catch up. The War Admiral decided he wanted some of his best scientists on the Glory to check it out, and so they would have to wait.

"I knew I should have landed there when I had the chance," said Took. "Now I won't be able to get a scoop on this story!"

"Iday, I didn't bring the camera anyway," said Obe.

"Then it's your negligence," said Took. "You should always bring it with you."

"In my cockpit?"

"A journalist must always be prepared," said Took.

The following day the Glory caught up with them. Captain Harkness ordered additional patrols of the nebula, just to make sure there was nothing in there waiting for them. The nebula was so large they could only explore a small part of it; but they did discover several more of what looked like

land masses, and Took only narrowly avoided crashing into one of them that was obscured by nebula fog.

When the technical team from the Glory arrived they found that the land masses were solid enough for them to land on, and they landed on one of them, accompanied by a squad of marines and Took and Obe.

The first thing that Took noticed was how crunchy the ground was, the way their feet seemed to sink a few inches into the ground, like it was snow.

They were wearing protective suits, just to be on the safe sides, but they soon opened up their faceplates.

It looked like an exotic winterland, with snow sculptures formed in exotic shapes around them. But when Took tried to touch one of them, his hand almost went through it. "Hey, what gives?"

One of the scientists checked his scanners. "The substances on this planetoid exist in various mixtures of solid, gas, and liquid form. We're just lucky we were able to land our ships on a part that was more or less solid."

"Hm," said Took, picking up part of the "snow", or whatever it was, bunching it into a ball, and throwing it at Obe. The ball dissipated before it reached him, and Obe, looking in another direction, didn't even notice he had been attacked.

"Well, that was no fun," Took grumbled.

The scientists seemed to be having more fun as they examined the semi-gaseous material the small planetoid was constructed of.

"Great," said Took. "They're playing with the snow and we're standing around doing nothing."

"You volunteered us for this duty, remember?" said Obe. "Something about a

photo essay?"

"You're right," said Took. "Even this hunk of snow qualifies as news on a slow day. Got your camera, Obe?" Obe held up the camera.

"Good. Get a view of the ridge line and the sky behind me. Ready? Let's roll."

Obe nodded, and Took immediately went into showman mode. "This is Command Captain Iday Took on the front lines of exploration, here on the snow planetoid."

A swirling mist seemed to gather in the distance behind Took. Obe saw it through his lense. "Uh, Obe."

"Shh! We're taping this," said Took. Clearing his throat, he continued,

"Around me we have the wondrous semi-gaseous planetoid that brave scouts from the Blue Luna, namely myself and Lieutenant Obe-" At this point the swirling gas cloud came closer very quickly, as if it were moving deliberately towards them.

"Took!"

"What?" said Took, dropping his persona. "You know if you keep interrupting, you're the one who's going to have to edit out-"

"Behind you!" Obe pointed.

The swirling cloud was almost on the scientists, who suddenly just noticed it themselves. The cloud moved quickly over several of the scientists, and they started screaming.

Took and Obe drew their weapons and started towards the scientists at a run. "Quick! Back to the ship!"

Some of the scientists started running for the transport, others stopped

to help their screaming companions, but they started screaming too, clutching their own bodies, even through their protective suits. The marine detail started firing into the cloud, but didn't seem to have any noticeable effect--except that the cloud moved over to them, leaving the scientists, for the moment.

"Quick!" said Took, dragging one of the injured scientists, as Obe directed the other scientists to help the rest of the wounded back to the transport. Took ignored the screams behind him as he pulled the wounded scientist as rapidly as possible. They had just reached the transport when the screams abruptly stopped. Still not looking back, Took entered the transport, whose doors were already opened.

"Hurry, hurry!" said Took, waving the others in. The swirling cloud had finished doing whatever it was doing, and was heading towards them quickly.

"Hurry!" cried Took, watching the cloud close in on Obe, who was half carrying the last straggler.

In retrospect, it was an interesting math problem. Can Obe, moving at a fraction of the speed of a gas cloud, cover a fraction of the distance to the transport before the much faster gas cloud, which had a longer distance to go, could?

Some of the scientists were screaming for him to close the door, close the door, and Took knew that if the gas cloud got in there that they would all be dead. But he also knew that if he closed the door before Obe got there that Obe would be dead.

Took waited until the last possible moment, and that's just when Obe and his wounded companion staggered into the transport, with the gas cloud

almost at their backs. He slammed the door control shut, and the outer airlock door quickly slid close almost in the face of the gas cloud.

They heard a thump from the other side of the door, and then there was silence. Took eyed the door cautiously. If that thing got inside....

Took went forward and assessed the wounded. Many of the scientists had burn marks over parts of their bodies, even parts that were protected by the suits. Took soon found out why, when he saw the corroded parts of their suits. The gas had literally cut through their suits to strike at them. If that could cut through the hull....

"We've got to get out of here," said one of the scientists, realizing the danger.

"What about the marines?" Obe said.

Took checked the external scanners. "It looks like they didn't make it," he said, noticing their bodies, as well as one of the scientists.

"Lifesigns?" said Obe.

Took frowned. "I can't tell, even at this distance. Interference."

"Do you think any of them could still be alive?" Obe asked.

"No way to be sure," said Took. "Unless we go out and look."

"No!" said the scientist who had spoken before.

"We can't leave without checking," said Took. "Besides, what about our fighters?"

"What about them?" said the scientist.

"There are two perfectly good fighters out there."

"Leave them!"

"Wildcat 150-B's don't grow on trees," said Took patiently. "And we're a

bit far from our resupply depot. Obe, where is this cloud now?"

"Don't see it on any of the visual scanners," said Obe.

"Anywhere?" said Took anxiously, checking the scanners himself. Nothing.

It was either in hiding, or gone.

"We should contact the fleet and get further instructions," said Obe.

"A swell idea, but we'd have to take off out of the nebula to reach them,"

said Took. "And we might not even find this particular planetoid again.

No, the senior officer has to make a decision."

"And that would be...." Even now, Obe hadn't entirely lost his sense of humor.

"We have to consider what this thing is. If the gas cloud is an intelligent form of life, it may be waiting for us in ambush," said Took.

"A gas cloud is a form of life?"

"If, on the other hand, it is alive and acts instinctively, it may have simply wandered off," said Took. "And if it's a natural phenomena, there's no reason to think it's hanging around."

"Cut the analysis. I say one of us goes out there and sees if any of the marines are still alive," said Obe.

"I always love the scientific method," sighed Took. "All right, I agree.

You stay here."

"Hey? What? Why me?"

"Well, they're going to need someone to pilot this thing if I don't return," said Took. "Under no circumstances are you to open the airlock doors if something appears."

"Took... that's so... brave."

"Yeah," said Took, cocking his head. "I guess it is."

Took cautiously peered out the airlock door as it cycled open. His blaster would be useless; his only weapon was speed. He tried to tell himself that they had been on the planetoid over an hour before the gas cloud had attacked them; maybe it was long gone by now.

He walked cautiously towards the bodies of the marines, constantly looking around him, ready to run at the first sign of trouble. Every snow drift looked suspicious, a possible hiding place for the deadly gas cloud....

Took moved closer to the marines. None of them were moving. They all looked very dead. Was he risking his life for nothing?

And then one of them moaned, and moved slightly, and Took forgot about everything and rushed over to the body. One of them, at least, was alive.

"Got one, alive," said Took. "Anything on the horizon?"

"Nothing I can see," said Obe. "But hurry, that thing can move quickly.

Took looked over the bodies quickly, constantly looking over his shoulder.

It turned out that four of the marines were still alive. "Four!" he yelled. "I'm going to need some help here."

To their credit, three scientists rushed out of the ship to his location.

They each quickly grabbed a body and slowly pulled them towards the ship.

"We could do this a lot quicker if we had more help," said Took.

Four more scientists came out, looking very fearful, and helped carry the bodies quickly to the ship. Took didn't push their luck by insisting that they go back for the deceased. When they got back to the transport, Took said, "Careful! They're badly burned. Ready to make a dash for our ships, buddy?"

Obe opened his mouth, then closed it, then nodded.

They made a mad scramble for their ships. The yards separating them from the transport seemed like miles, even though their ships were closer to the transport than the spot where the marines had fallen. But both knew that this would be the last opportunity the gas cloud would have to strike at them. Took scrambled to his ship, climbing up in one fluid motion, slid into the cockpit, and slammed the closure button.

Nothing seem to happen for an eternity. Then, the cockpit slid closed. A few seconds later, so did Obe's.

Whether the cloud had been intelligent or a freak of nature, it didn't strike, and Took gave a sigh of relief as his did his preflight.

One of the scientists fired up the engines on the transport and they headed off.

"We have emergency wounded coming back on the transport," said Lieutenant Shishman.

"Wounded? How?" said the War Admiral.

"Seven dead, four badly wounded," said Shishman, listening to the comm report.

"Seven Dead! What? Who are you communicating with, is that Took? Put me through to him directly," said the War Admiral. For a moment Shishman paused, and the War Admiral realized he hadn't stopped to ask whether Took was one of the dead or wounded. But in seconds Took's voice came over the comm system.

"-attacked by some kind of gas cloud. It came up all of a sudden-"

"Weren't you wearing your protective suits?" the War Admiral asked.

"Yeah, though our faceplates were open," said Took. "But it cut right through the suits. We made it back to the transport, and it either

couldn't enter there, or didn't try."

"The transport," said the War Admiral, studying the sensor blips. "But you're reporting from your Wildcat."

"Yeah, I went out to get it when I checked for the wounded," said Took.

"You went out there, totally defenseless?" said the War Admiral, looking surprised. "Foolish, but commendable."

"Yeah, I'm usually an odd mixture of both," said Took. "We managed to save four marines, but I'm not sure if they'll all make it. Have medical standing by, bay two."

North nodded to Shishman to make it so. "I'll want a full report when you return."

Major Fortran requested permission to leave his post and report to the landing bay. The War Admiral nodded.

The most seriously wounded were the first off the transport, followed by the mixture of moderately and unwounded scientists, and finally Took and Obe, who arrived from their recently landed 150-B's.

"What happened?" said Major Fortran, watching his men being carried off.

"A killer gas cloud. We couldn't stop it; blasters didn't even phase it," said Took. "But they distracted the cloud long enough for the others to get away. They gave their lives to save ours."

Fortran nodded, and followed his men down to the medical bay.

"You're a hero too, Iday," said Obe, putting an arm around him.

"Don't remind me," said Took, slowly walking away from the landing bay.

It was only much later that the final occupants of the transport disembarked; two small swirling gas clouds, first one, then another. They

seemed to be chasing each other, or zigging back and forth aggressively against each other; but when they emerged, each quickly went in separate directions, one into the ventilation system on the port side of the bay, the other into the starboard one.

A gas cloud flittered through the ventilation system, moving this way and that, seemingly at random. In times of battle the ventilation system would be sealed off, to limit the damage caused by hull breaches; but right now the ship was on normal duty status, and the vents were open. The gas cloud, after a number of fits and starts, finally arrived in the quarters of a high ranking officer. The quarters were empty, but contained a desk, a bed, several chairs, and a small table. The gas cloud flittered around, first at the bed, then at the table, causing a small electronic pad to swish to the ground; and then the cloud moved to the desk, and then solidified enough to press different parts of the desk. Purely by accident, the cloud pressed a button from the holoccontrols, and suddenly, a holoimage of a small mutant Pomeranian sprang to life.

The gas cloud sprung back, as if sensing that someone else had suddenly appeared in the room. But all the mutant Pom did was stick out its tongue, and give the dog equivalent of a smile. The gas cloud observed this for a while, and then started to change shape; and before long it started to solidify, with something like fluffy fur forming around the edges.

The gas cloud noticed the Pom's sharp ears, and then something resembling ears appeared in the front of the gas cloud, which was more and more resembling a floating version of a mutant Pom every minute.

And then the image of the War Admiral entered the range of the holorecorder, reaching down to pet the Pom, muttering, "Good doggie, good

doggie," over and over. The Pom made a small crying sound.

After a moment, the gas cloud did too.

"-a senseless loss of life," said the War Admiral, speaking into his personal log in his office. "Two of the wounded marines died shortly thereafter in sickbay, but Doctor Farb informs me the rest should survive. The burns were caused by cells being exploded within the body. It's still not clear if the attack was made by an intelligent lifeform, or if it was simply the nebula's equivalent of a storm. But the way the gas cloud focused on the marines after they fired their blasters convinces me that they were an intelligent form of life, and I have decided to change course to avoid the nebula. What a senseless loss of life! And yet not senseless, for we need the courage to continue to investigate to find the location of the Chent. These marines gave their lives today for this cause as surely as any other member of the crew did in our battles against the Insectoids."

There was a buzz on his comm, and the War Admiral stopped speaking.

"Come."

Commander Wren entered his quarters. "War Admiral, shouldn't you be off duty by now?"

"I'm just clearing up a few things," said the War Admiral.

"You've been up 18 hours; you should get some sleep, sir," she said.

North looked amused. "Is that an order, Half Commander?"

"A suggestion, sir," said Wren. She paused, looking down at the deck for a moment, then back at him. "Don't tear yourself up about this sir. This is the price of exploring the unknown."

"I'm used to paying this kind of price," said North bluntly, thinking it a bit ironic that her words had echoed what he had just written into his log. "But it just seemed so... senseless. Why did the cloud attack? What did they want? We don't even know the answers."

Wren nodded, but said nothing.

"Oh very well, Commander," said North. "I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed."

North yawned as he entered the code to open the door to his quarters. The marine on guard nodded as he approached. This had also been Wren's idea, ever since their encounter with Inspir. But Inspir was gone now and who was going to infiltrate the Glory without being detected and attack him in his own quarters?

The War Admiral didn't spend much time pondering this as he entered his quarters. He sniffed the air. It smelled kind of salty, like sea air. How could that be? Must be something from the air that circulated from one of the other quarters. Or could it be a symptom of a bigger problem? Probably nothing, but better to check it out. He pressed a button.

"Bridge, this is North," said the War Admiral.

"Yes War Admiral," came Wren's voice. "What can we do for you?"

"Probably nothing," said the War Admiral. "I'd just like you to run a routine atmospheric and life support check."

"Certainly. Any reason?"

"I'm smelling an odd sort of salty smell in my quarters," said the War Admiral. Behind him, a gas cloud started swirling.

"A salty smell?"

"It's probably nothing," said the War Admiral. "But just check the

internal atmospheric sensors and let me know what you find. I'll be in my quarters."

Behind him, the shape was taking form...

"Of course, sir," said Wren. "I'll have a report for you in a few minutes."

"North out," said North, flicking the switch and swiveling slightly in his chair.

The cloud behind him gasified and dispersed into the vent, loitering just inside the intake.

The War Admiral turned around to go to bed. The smell was stronger now. Just where was it coming from? Realizing for now that he'd have to leave this minor mystery unsolved, he changed into his sleeping wardrobe and went to bed.

Wren had Lieutenant Kao run the atmospheric check while she sat in the center chair. Her shift and Dulin's didn't overlap for a few hours yet, she was technically in command. What kind of sweet smell could the War Admiral be smelling? She pulled up a schematic on her screen to locate all the rooms surrounding the War Admiral's quarters. That entire section was residential. Could someone be burning a candle, or eating something-
"Alert, alert!" came a voice. Wren immediately looked up. "Report," she said.

"Security, deck 22. We found a tech badly burned down here."

"Burned?" said Wren. Deck 22 wasn't too far from engineering. "By what? A console exploding?"

"No, we found him in a corridor," said the voice of the sentinel. "Burns

over his hands, face, neck. He's unconscious, taking him to sickbay."

Burns? The mission team experienced burns. "I'll meet you in sickbay,"

said Wren. She pointed at Shishman. "Have Captain Took meet me there."

"He's got some serious burns, but he'll make it," said Doctor Farb,

working rapidly.

Wren looked at the burns with distaste. What had caused them? At that moment Took entered the sickbay.

"Whoa," said Took.

"Are those the same kind of burns that your team suffered?" Wren asked.

Took took a look, and grimaced. "Yep. But this guy wasn't on our team.

Where-"

"Deck 22," said Wren.

"Deck 22?" said Took, looking very alarmed.

"You brought this thing back with you," said Wren.

"No," said Took. "We closed the hatch before it got to the transport. I'm sure of it."

"Then maybe it could get through the hatch," said Wren. "Or..." She

thought a moment. "Think back, before the attack. Were the doors of the transport open, or closed?"

Took considered. "I'm.... I'm not sure."

"Think!"

Took did think, and then he remembered. "I remember when we ran for the transport, the doors were open. One of the scientists must have left it open to let the salty air in-"

"What did you say?" Suddenly, her conversation with the War Admiral returned to her.

"The salty air," said Took. "The air had this weird kind of saltiness to it. You know, like sea air-"

"Oh no," said Wren. She punched her wrist com. "War Admiral! War Admiral!"

She waited a moment. There was no response. She switched frequencies.

"Security," came Major Fortran's voice.

"Intruder alert! Activate a full shipwide security alert! Get a security squad to the War Admiral's quarters, on the double! He's in grave danger!"

Why didn't he answer? Only one possibility came to Wren's mind, and she started trembling as she ran down the halls, with Took in hot pursuit.

The War Admiral put out the light and went to bed. He lay on his back in the dark for a few minutes before he turned on his side and went to sleep, as was his custom. By now he was used to the salty smell and didn't really notice it.

But then something happened that he did notice. He felt an air current brush his face, and then he heard a faint whine, as if from an animal.

The War Admiral lay perfectly still. He must have be imagining things.

There was no way that there was an animal in the room with him. The whine, if he had really heard a whine, was the distorted, distant sound of something electrical, or mechanical.

And then he heard a puffing sound, like a small dog used to make--like HIS small dog, Puffy, used to make. But Puffy was long since gone. Could the holorecording on his desk have somehow become activated? The War Admiral looked in the dark at his desk, but couldn't see anything. The only light

in the room was from the very dim emergency lighting in the floor, and while he could see the clear outlines of his desk, it was obvious that nothing was activated there.

And then the War Admiral felt something... almost furry, but not quite, brush his hand, and he knew he wasn't alone. The War Admiral swiftly sat up and pressed the light controls by his bed.

And found himself facing a swirling gas cloud.

"War Admiral! War Admiral!" he heard from the comm at his desk. His own wrist comm was also on the desk, but unfortunately the gas cloud was between him and his desk. And the exit.

The War Admiral took in the situation immediately. A piece of the gas cloud that had attacked the mission team had gotten aboard the Glory and was here, with him, in his quarters.

It hovered before him, spinning and swirling. North knew it could burn him before he reached the door. Maybe if he stood perfectly still it wouldn't attack. Maybe he could buy time until Wren got there with a security detachment. If only there were some way to signal the guard outside his door!

The gas cloud moved closer to him, and then higher, right up to his face.

What if it burned his eyes? North found himself gulping, but willed himself not to move. The cloud was now mere inches from his face.

Then, suddenly, it started to change. The outer edges of the gas cloud started to thicken, to solidify, almost. It formed a soft, puffy looking material and the entire cloud changed into an almost cylindrical shape.

The end started to form sharp points that became fox-like ears. And then, to North's surprise, a black eyes, nose, and mouth formed.

The gas cloud thing opened its mouth and a vaguely pink tongue came out.

The thing started to appear to breathe heavily and puff, like a real dog.

What was going on here? Not only did it look like a dog, but not just any dog--it looked like Puffy!

The gas cloud thing watched him for a moment and whined slightly, as if puzzled by the lack of response. Then it backed off, retreating to North's desk. North still didn't move.

The gas cloud thing hovered over his desk, and then a fake paw reached out and flicked a button.

The holographic image of Puffy appeared on the screen.

"Ruff! Ruff!" said Puffy.

"Ruff! Ruff!" said the gas cloud thing.

North slowly got out of bed and, step by step, moved slowly to the gas cloud thing that now looked like a dog. It was hovering in mid air, watching him.

Wren arrived at the same time as Major Fortran's squad. The guard outside looked bewildered. "What's wrong?"

"The War Admiral is in danger," said Wren, gasping for breath. "Open the door!"

"Good doggie," said the holoimage of North, petting the holoimage of the dog on the head.

North looked at the gas cloud thing, which was imitating the same extended tongue as the holoimage of Puffy.

"Good doggie," said North, reaching out as if to touch the gas cloud. His hand hesitated before he touched the edge of it; after all, all the

reports indicated that it burned flesh on contact. But what if contact alone wasn't enough to burn? What if the creature could control its effect. Tentatively, North reached out and touched the very outermost edges of the thing.

It felt real, almost like fur, except, with a little resistance, his hand could pass through it. But North felt not the slightest pain or discomfort.

The thing continued to smile as North gently pet it, stroking its "fur".

"Good doggie," North continued.

Suddenly, the door slid open and marines rushed in.

The thing reared, growled, bearing teeth North hadn't seen before, and slid into the vent and was gone.

"War Admiral, you're-" Wren blinked. "Did I see what I just thought I saw?"

"I'm not sure what I saw, so I can't confirm it, Commander," said North.

"As you probably know by now, that gas cloud snuck aboard the transport and is on the ship," said Wren. "It wounded a crewman on Deck 22. This creature seems to give off a salty smell. When you told me about what you smelled, I rushed over." She paused. "But it didn't look like it was going to attack you. In fact," she said, looking at the War admiral oddly, "it looked very much like a dog." Wren turned to Took.

"No, we weren't attacked by dog shapes, just gas clouds," said Took. He added, "If we had been attacked by dogs, I would've remembered it."

"Why didn't it attack the War Admiral?" Wren asked. "So far, it's been uniformly hostile."

"I don't know," said North. "But if it wanted me to be dead, I'd be dead."

"Regardless, we can't take any other chances," said Wren. "I'm sealing off the ventilation system while we hunt."

"How long can we do that for across the entire ship without suffocating?"

"Three hours," said Wren.

"And what do we do once we find it?" said Took. "It barely even notices blasters."

"A good point," said the War Admiral. "When you find it, call me."

"Oh no," said Wren.

"For whatever reason, it doesn't seem to want to attack me," said the War Admiral. "We should find out why. Maybe it's trying to communicate."

"Like the way it was trying to communicate with the men it killed?" said Wren skeptically.

"I have an idea," said Took suddenly. "The particle intake units our hazardous environmental units use. We could use those as a vacuum to suck that thing up."

"Good idea," said Wren. She turned to Fortran. "Find out how many we have and issue them to search teams."

"Fine," said the War Admiral. "But I'm joining the search too."

It turned out there were only four particle intake units on the ship, and they were each issued to a search party. But on a ship the size of the Glory four search teams could search for days without finding anything.

This the War Admiral was very much aware of. After two and a half hours he ordered the ventilation units turned back on, over Wren's protests. But, curiously, once he ordered the vents reopened, he stopped searching

himself, and just returned to his quarters.

Twenty minutes later, he had another unauthorized visitor.

Wren monitored the pace of the search. So far, nothing. But the gas cloud could travel at great speeds, and could be very difficult to detect. She sat on the bridge with Dulin, monitoring the pace of the search. How would they ever find this thing before it struck again?

Suddenly, they heard the War Admiral's voice over the comm. "Captain, Commander, please join me in my quarters."

Why did the War Admiral want to talk with them in his quarters? Almost without exception he summoned them to his office, on the bridge.

They found out when they entered his quarters.

"Come in slowly," said the War Admiral, his back turned to them. When he moved away, what they saw made them gasp.

A gas cloud, in the shape of a small dog. And the Admiral was petting it vigorously, without being harmed!

"Good dog, good dog," said the War Admiral soothingly.

"Admiral, that thing's a killer," said Dulin.

"Perhaps," said the War Admiral. "But it's not killing now, is it?"

"It's unpredictable at best," said Wren, staring at it in horror. "It could attack at any time."

"Admiral, that's not just any dog, is it?" said Dulin, remembering something the Admiral had once shown him.

"It's taken the shape of your old dog," said Wren. "War Admiral, that's NOT your dog!"

"I know," said the War Admiral, calmly petting it. "But I don't believe it has hostile intent."

"Then why did it kill our men on the planetoid? And attack the engineer on deck 22?"

"I don't know," said the War Admiral. "But I think it would be safest, for now, if it stayed with me."

Wren was about to open her mouth to object when her comm chimed. "Alert!" It was Major Fortran. "Another crewman was just attacked on Deck 21. Badly burned."

"When?" said Captain Dulin.

"Sometime in the past hour," said Fortran.

"Get a particle intake unit to the War Admiral's office immediately," said Wren.

"No, Commander!" said the War Admiral.

"Don't you see, it's manipulating you, Admiral," said Wren. "It's appearing as something pleasing and reassuring to you while hunting the rest of us."

"No," said the War Admiral. "I don't think so. That's the action of a very highly intelligent being. I think this life form acts on instinct."

"It looks like a dog, War Admiral; that doesn't mean it has the mind of one," said Dulin. "I agree with the Commander on this one."

The War Admiral looked conflicted. The thing, sensing a change in mood, started to give a low warning growl. Wren and Dulin took a step back. At that moment a suited environmental officer appeared at the doorway with a large sucking device in his hands.

"No!" said the War Admiral.

The thing assumed gaseous form and flew into the vent.

"Back to square one," sighed Wren.

"Get me the incident report on the planetoid and the attack on the two crewmen," North snapped. There was something not quite right here, something he was missing.

No one moved.

"Now!" he barked.

And so the search teams started out again. This time North, after reviewing the incident reports, joined them, accompanying a team on Deck 20. The two previous attacks had been on Decks 21 and 22; it made as much sense as any to search here as anywhere else.

North walked ahead of the small team. One person carried the bulky particle intake device; others came along as spotters to look for the gas cloud.

North walked along with them, not looking too hard, confident that trouble would find him.

After two hours of searching the corridors and maintenance rooms they started to tire. North knew that a search to locate the cloud would probably be fruitless; the Glory was simply too big, and the gas cloud was too big and elusive. But he had another goal in mind.

And then, searching in one of the secondary generator rooms, he smelled it. A faint salty smell.

North snapped his fingers, sniffed, and pointed in the direction of the smell. It was just around the corner, behind a bulkhead. Cautiously they moved forward...

and a gas cloud spun around the corner, barely whipping past North before settling on two of the marines. They screamed and clutched their faces.

The Marine in the environmental suit turned the particle intake machine on them, but the cloud turned on him, and he dropped the device, clutching his face too.

North backed away, triggering the alarm with his wrist comm. The marines were still screaming; only the ones in back were unaffected, but they didn't have any weapons that could stop that thing. And the cloud was between North and the only exit.

The marines dropped to the floor, and the cloud turned and moved toward North.

Things happened very quickly at that point, and only someone with a sharp eye could describe exactly what happened.

A second cloud, which had formerly been transparent, dropped down from above and formed a misty sphere in front of North. The first cloud turned red, and then the new cloud also turned red.

Bolts of electricity flashed between the two clouds, back and forth, back and forth. It was as if a miniature storm was brewing in engineering.

Little shrieks could be heard as the bolts blasted hot and fast.

The clouds circled around each other, faster and faster, shooting at each other, and then they started to become fainter and fainter, one fainting much more quickly than the other one.

And then, in an instant, it was over; one of the clouds faded completely, and the other one stopped spinning and whirring.

North held his breath, not knowing, for a second, which one had won the battle.

And then it solidified in front of the War Admiral, and, to the total

astonishment of the marines, they saw something that looked like a pink tongue lick his hand.

"-And so I knew there had to be two of them," said North, sitting down to dinner in the war room with Wren and Dulin. "Given the time of the attack, there was no way it could've been on deck 22 and in my quarters at the same time."

"So what if there were two of them?" said Wren. "They both could have been equally hostile."

"Possibly," said North. "But consider this; how did they get on the transport? Captain Took testified that none of them sneaked onto the transport during or after the attack; therefore, they must have gotten aboard before the attack. Therefore, they must not have been the ones who attacked our marines."

"But they could've been just like them."

"Possibly," said North. "But accept, for a moment, my hypothesis that these beings have the intelligence of animals, and attack on instinct, nothing more. Why wouldn't they have attacked the occupants of the transport?"

"Obviously, something must have been holding them back," said North. "I hypothesize that there at least two kinds of gas cloud creatures, the aggressive ones that attacked our crew, and another kind that only attacks the aggressive ones, like this one," he said, reaching down to pet the gas cloud dog, who was sitting obediently by his chair.

"Two gas clouds boarded our shuttle. This one must have been restraining the other one from attacking, otherwise the transport would never have reached the Glory. But when the transport landed, this other gas cloud

escaped, and they went their own separate ways."

"And you purposely sought out the hostile cloud, knowing the friendly one would stick around to protect you," said Dulin. "That's really risking your life on a hypothesis, isn't it?"

The War Admiral smiled. "We haven't had any more attacks in the past few days, have we? I would say that my hunch paid off."

He took another bite of his dinner.

"Just what does that thing eat?" Wren asked.

"We're really not sure. Doctor Farb hypothesizes it gets nutrition by breaking down the molecules of the oxygen around it," said the War Admiral. "But please don't call it a thing. His name is "Puffy" or "the War Admiral's dog", if you please."

"I thought pets were against military regulations," said Dulin.

"He's not a pet, he's a mascot," said the War Admiral, affectionately putting his hand in and through Puffy's "fur". Puffy smiled at the attention he received. "Goood doggie!"

And that is the story of how the War Admiral got himself a dog.

Chapter 4 Loss of Vision

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 2.5 year after Vitalics: We have continued our search for Chent civilizations but haven't come up with anything promising. We've found several more monuments, but nothing substantial, like a Chent city or derelict warship. I have to be realistic about things--it may take years, even decades for us to find anything

useful.

The only piece of good news is that we've finally eluded the Insectoids.

We haven't seen even a sign of them in over a year, and I now think we're too far out to be caught by their pursuing fleets, if there are any.

Conversely, of course, the farther out we go the longer it will take us to get back; if we find useful technology 5 or 10 years down the line, it will take us an additional five or ten years to return. I'm not sure many of the crew here have thought that far ahead.

Morale is low, mostly from lack of action and boredom, so I've staged a series of wargames to keep the fleet occupied. The only ones excused are Captain Took, Lieutenant Obe, and the Blue Luna, who are reconnoitering a binary system not far from our present trajectory. We expect to link up with them in a few hours.

The human deep space cruiser loomed large on the screen of the Insectoid flat top. Admiral Torss stared at the image of the cruiser as he waited for the visiting shuttle to dock with his carrier.

This is what they had in mind when she called for reinforcements. Her fleet--two flat tops, two battlecruisers, and eight destroyers, was small by any standard, and certainly not capable of taking on the human fleet.

When Torss had been sent out she had been promised reinforcements before she had located the humans. Well, she had located the humans, had even located them without being detected (so she thought), and this solitary ship was all the reinforcements she had received!

One, solitary ship. A human ship, one of their deep space cruisers.

The Captain of the ship, one SStosss, came onto the bridge.

"Welcome," said Admiral Torss. "Where is the rest of our reinforcements?"

Sstosss pointed to the human ship on the screen.

"I don't find that amusing," said Torss. "We do not have a force strong enough to defeat the humans, even with you and your crew."

"You do now," said Sstosss. "And I don't have a crew."

"No crew..." Suddenly, it all made sense. "A trap?"

Sstosss nodded. "The ship is lined with special explosives."

"Won't they detect it?"

"No," said Sstosss. "All has been taken care of."

"Are the explosives enough to destroy their entire fleet?" Torss asked skeptically.

"If detonated at close range, they can destroy the Glory and any nearby ships."

"Our sensors show the humans have approximately 50 or 60 combat vessels. Will that be enough to ensure our victory against them?"

"Yes," said Sstosss. "Remember I said these were a special kind of explosives. Exploding them creates a special byproduct, a brilliant white light which will blind them all."

"Blind," said Torss, suddenly understanding the significance. "Then it won't matter how many ships they have! They won't be able to see or function!"

"Exactly," said Sstosss. "It is all part of Admiral Stay's plan. Once the Glory and its immediate escorts are destroyed and the rest of the enemy is blinded, you can go in and finish them off."

"Launch the ship at once!"

"It's a conspiracy, Obe," said Took, sitting in the mess hall of the Blue Luna.

"You always say that," said Obe.

"Because it always is!" said Took.

"Lower your voice," Obe hissed, looking away from the other diners.

"It always is," said Took. "Think about it. Global war games, and the War Admiral has everyone participate except his two best pilots. Why?"

"You tell me," said Obe.

"He's grooming someone to replace us," said Took.

"To replace both of us?"

"Ok, just me," said Took.

"That's what you thought when the Ken Pilot came aboard."

"Ok, so I admit I was wrong about K."

"Glad to hear you admit you were wrong about something."

It had been like this for the past two days. They had been sent out to reconnoiter some planetary bodies around the binary star just at the edge of sensor range. What they found when they got close was nothing--not even a habitable atmosphere. And now they were returning to the fleet, empty handed.

"What a waste of time," said Took.

"What's really bothering you?"

"Oh, I wanted to participate in the war games," said Took.

"They'll be other war games," said Obe. "Besides, they're probably all over by now; everyone's back on board, just trying to get through another humdrum day."

On the Glory, Lieutenant Shishman said, "Sir, getting a blip on sensors."

"Identity?" said Captain Dulin. "Is it the Blue Luna?" If so, they were returning a few hours ahead of schedule.

"No..." said Shishman. "It's coming from a different direction." He tapped a few keys, and an IDENT code appeared on the holographic display by the blip. "A deep space cruiser."

"We don't have any deep space cruisers out on patrol," said Dulin.

Shishman tapped a few keys. "Sir, it isn't one of ours!"

Dulin tapped a key. "War Admiral, to the bridge!"

The War Admiral came out of his office a moment later. "Yes, Captain?"

"Sir, we're being approached by a DSC; but it's not one from our fleet."

The War Admiral raised an eyebrow, turning to the holographic display, and studied the readings. "Has anyone tried hailing it?"

"Sir, they are hailing us now," said Lieutenant Shishman.

"On open comm," said North, sitting back in his chair. This would be interesting.

A holographic image of a captain sitting on a cruiser's bridge appeared before them. "My name is Captain Thomas Smith of the Deep Space Cruiser Sharon. I wish to speak to your commander."

North stood up again, trying to restrain the feeling of excitement. "This is War Admiral Norman North of the combined fleet-"

"North? War Admiral North? Is that really you? You survived, sir?" said Smith.

"Yes, and a number of ships of the line," said North.

Smith looked almost speechless. "Sir, I'm honored. You've been a living

legend all my life!"

North held up a restraining hand. "That's quite all right, Captain Smith.

Tell me, how do you find yourself this far out here? Were you at Vitalics?"

"Yes, we were at Vitalics," said Smith, looking subdued.

"What happened there?"

"We were attacked by some kind of special weapon."

"What kind of weapon?"

"We don't know, we were on the very edges of it," said Smith. "We were lucky to escape."

"Did you see any other ship escape?"

"No," said Smith. "We fled deeper into the Alliance as the Insectoids advanced, broadcasting warnings where we could. When we hit Orotis we heard that the remnants of our fleet had just been by, and started after you."

"And so you've been following after us, these past two and a half years," said North.

"Yes," said Smith.

"Very lucky that you've found us," said North, not letting his tone or expression change.

"Well, yes, we've been searching a long time."

"How is your crew?" North asked.

"They're fine, Admiral," said Smith.

North could see some of them in their chairs in the background shot of Smith's bridge, attending to their consoles.

"What do you suggest?" said the War Admiral.

"A meeting," said Smith. "We can trade information we've gathered. We've also got a lot of supplies you might be able to use--we've stocked up on a lot of extra food we can't eat ourselves."

"We have a perennial shortage of food, that would be most welcome," said North.

"I think the best way to distribute it is by docking and making the transfer direct," said Smith. "It would take too many transport flights to ship it over to you."

"Hang on, Captain," said North. He gave a tight smile. "We'll have to clear this with our logistics department. Can I put you on hold for a few minutes?"

"Certainly," said Smith. "It will take us almost an hour to get in range anyway."

"Fine," said North. "Talk with you soon." He gestured to Shishman, and the image faded.

North turned to the other officers. "Opinions?"

"He looks just like what he seems," said Dulin slowly.

"I think it's nothing short of fantastic that he managed to locate us," said Commander Wren. "But he looks and acts human."

"Yes...:" said North. He closed his eyes, seeming to think for a moment.

Then, opening them, he said to Lieutenant Shishman, "Get me Captain Tens Zender of the Fast Attack Destroyer Suny Blue."

North turned to Wren. "Check to see whether the Sharon was attached to the Vitalics battlegroup."

"I just did," said Wren. "It was. Its transponder code also matches the

Sharon's."

The hologram of a destroyer captain appeared on the bridge. "War Admiral?"

"I thought your ship was the only surviving ship from the disaster at Vitalics," said the War Admiral. "It seems I was wrong. Was your ship positioned anywhere near the Deep Space Cruiser Sharon?"

Zender frowned, thinking. "No, I don't think so."

"Do you have any telemetry footage of the Sharon, as you departed the battle, either showing it intact, damaged, or destroyed?"

"I'd have to check," said Zender, nodding to one of his officers.

"Check quickly," said North. He checked the sensor scan of the Sharon. It showed a standard Deep Space Cruiser. Maybe he was being too suspicious. He had been suspicious when Zender's ship had shown up, and Zender had really been what he appeared to be.

But Zender had shown up before they were out of Alliance space, not lost among thousands of cubed lightyears of uncharted space. This encounter was much less likely. But it was still possible.

"No sir, no footage," said Zender.

"Thank you, Captain," said North. Then, almost as an afterthought.

"Captain?"

"Sir?"

"One more thing. Tell me again about this special weapon that attacked you at Vitalics."

"It wasn't so much a weapon as a dampening field, some sort of mist that drained the energy in our ship's systems."

"You had no problems detecting this mist?"

"Detecting, no, we could see it visually," said Zender, looking puzzled.

"I see," said North. "Thank you, Captain." He nodded, and Shishman terminated the signal.

"Admiral?" said Dulin.

"Why couldn't Smith better describe what kind of weapon they used at Vitalics?" North asked.

"Maybe he couldn't see from where his ship was located," said Dulin. "It could be anything. That's not reason enough to blow his ship out of the stars."

"You think Smith is being coerced, or operating under some kind of mind control?" Commander Wren asked.

"Coerced?" North shook his head. "Possible, but not very likely. I don't want to believe that any fleet captain could be coerced by the enemy to betray his own. Mind control? Also possible, but does that mean he's been under mind control for several years, while they hunted for us? No, if they were going to do something like that, they wouldn't rely on him being under their control for that long. There would have to be other Insectoids aboard, to monitor his behavior, and I don't think that's the case here."

"Then... maybe he is exactly what he seems to be," said Wren.

"Maybe," said North, suddenly thinking of another possibility, one that made a lot more sense. He nodded to Shishman. "Get him back." He turned to the bridge crew. "Whatever I say, or do, don't react.. It's very important you act as if everything is normal."

In a moment Captain's Smith hologram filled the bridge.

"Have you sorted things out with your logistics department, War Admiral?"

Smith asked pleasantly.

"Yes, we're looking forward to meeting you in person," said the War Admiral.

"Docking scheduled in 45 minutes," said Smith, checking a readout.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "What kind of missiles are you carrying?"

"Standard 44-J warheads," said Smith.

"What colors are roses?"

"Red," said Smith.

"If you stand outside in a rain, what happens?"

"You get wet," said Smith, smiling.

"What do you do when your boots start losing color?"

"They need to be polished," Smith grinned.

"When you walk one mile north of your home, what's the most direct route back?"

"One mile south," said Smith, smiling gently.

The entire bridge crew of the Glory worked hard at maintaining a normal expression.

"You must miss your family," said North.

"Yes, it's very sad to think I won't see them again," said Smith looking unhappy.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Red!" said Smith, smiling again.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Thank you, War Admiral," he said, smiling again.

North pressed a button, and the image faded. "The better they make them, the stupider they get."

"Sir?" said Dulin, uncertain as to what had just transpired.

"A computer, Captain," said North. "Programmed to answer my questions, to look happy when certain subjects are discussed, sad at others, and generally content about minor matters. Commander! Turn the fleet around, top speed!"

"Sir?"

"I'll be you your commission that our friendly deep space cruiser is packed from stem to stern with high energy explosives. Do it!"

Shortly after the fleet turned around, their sensors readings of the deep space cruiser changed.

"Now I'm reading a non-standard configuration," said Shishman. "Heavily shielded. And it's catching up to us."

"How much time do we gain by flying away from it?" North asked tightly.

"It will reach the slowest merchant ships-"

"It's after bigger game," North said, interrupting. "How long before it reaches us?"

"One hundred and fifteen minutes."

"I've done a scan of it's shielding; it seems to have a very strong configuration; the entire ship seems to be forcescreens and armor," said Dulin, pointing to a schematic.

"And explosives," said North.

"We could send our battlecruiser squadron out to engage it," said Dulin.

"And what would happen to our squadron when it detonated?" North asked, studying the schematic intently.

"It depends on how much explosives were onboard, and at what distance they

were," said Dulin.

"Got it," said North, referring to something else as he studied a close scan on the corner of the schematic. "Get me your best demolitions expert." He paused, considering. "And get me the Ken Pilot."

"Is this really going to work?" said Zetho Arkasian, as he let himself be strapped to the underside of the Ken Pilot's beatup fighter.

The Ken Pilot gave no answer, but continued to tie the straps around Zetho's spacesuit.

"Zetho, who talked you into this crazy mission, flying on the outside of this fighter?" This was from his burly brother Yurgi, the Glory's chief engineer. Not many knew the two were even related, though there was some resemblance.

"The War Admiral," said Zetho.

"Hold this," said the Ken Pilot, giving Zetho an equipment satchel, as he secured a harness around Zetho and attached it to a ring on the tip of his ship. "You have all your other equipment?"

"Yes," said Zetho. "Right below the thruster pack. But I've never flown on the outside of a ship before! Any advice?"

The Ken Pilot considered for a moment. "Close your eyes."

"You take care of yourself, Zetho!" said Yurgi. He watched as the Ken Pilot jumped from a wing into the cockpit in one easy motion and the ship prepped for liftoff.

"This had better work," said Dulin, watching the fighter takeoff.

"We're sending the best," said the War Admiral.

"Don't let Captain Took hear you say that," said Dulin dryly.

"Time?"

"If it goes for point-blank detonation, seventy three minutes" said Dulin.

"Disperse the fleet," said the War Admiral. "There's no sense in letting any other ship get harmed."

"Admiral, are you sure you don't want a screen of battlecruisers as a last minute defense?" Dulin asked.

The War Admiral shook his head.

Half Commander Stacy Wren bit her lower lip.

The Ken Pilot maneuvered to the cruiser quickly; it had no external weapons, so there was no worry about coming under attack. Zetho felt the great sensation of acceleration, but kept his eyes tightly shut.

The Ken Pilot shot past the cruiser, then turned around, giving chase, matching velocities and quickly closing in. When he was a few hundred feet behind the aft section, he matched velocities perfectly, and started studying his scanner very, very closely.

"What's happening?" said Zetho, over his suit radio.

The Ken Pilot gave no answer. He studied the sensor readings very closely as he minutely turned the ship slightly to the left or slightly to the right, his hand poised over a button and his eyes also glancing at a targeting site.

And then, in a split second, his hand jerked and pressed the fire button, and a grapple shot out from the Wildcat-5, heading straight for the cruiser. It narrowly shot through the nineteen inch gap between the ship's lateral and port shields, and stuck firmly to the ship's hull.

"Ready," said the Ken Pilot. And then, uncharacteristically, he added,

"Good luck."

Zetho opened his eyes and unstrapped himself, and pulled on the line connecting him to the tether. He activated his suitpack and started accelerating slowly towards the cruiser.

"I'd pick up the pace if I were you," said the Ken Pilot, monitoring his progress. "You have at most 45 minutes."

"If I go too fast I could hit the shielding," Zetho snapped. But he went a bit faster all the same.

The Ken Pilot said nothing.

Zetho slowed down rapidly as he approached the ship. The glare from the cruiser's engines made it difficult to see clearly. He set the polarizer on his suit to half maximum. He still had to see enough to see... there!

Flickering on the edges.

Breathing heavily, Zetho twisted around so he was on the side of the rope farthest from the nearest forcescreen. One instant of contact would be enough to breach his suit....

He slowly pulled his way through, and didn't breath easily until he was on the hull. Lying down against the hull, he started to crawl under the forcescreens around the ship towards the port airlock.... "I'm at the airlock," he reported, eyeing it warily. "I'm going to check for-"

"No time," came an unexpected voice over the command circuit. It was the War Admiral. "It's not likely they anticipated boarding."

"Not likely," Zetho muttered. Taking a deep breath, he entered the airlock and triggered the cycling mechanism.

There was a thin atmosphere inside the ship, though Zetho didn't bother to check the readings or see what kind. Still in his spacesuit, he was

racing, on the run, to the bridge. Someone had left the lights on in the ship; either they had forgotten to turn them off, or someone was actually on board! Zetho had a blaster with him, but he hadn't fired a weapon, even on the practice range, for some time.

The bridge was at the other end of the ship, and Zetho wasted precious time hobbling there in his bulky suit. But that was the logical location to go to, the nerve center of any ship. He scrambled as fast as he could.

"Arkasian, you have thirty minutes," said the War Admiral's calm voice.

"What is your situation?"

Puffing as he moved rapidly, Zetho entered the bridge. He stepped through the door and-

found himself in an empty room. A completely empty room.

"I'm on the bridge," said Zetho, trying to catch a breath and recover from the surprise at the same time."

"Can you deactivate the ship?" said the War Admiral.

"No," said Zetho.

"Are you sure?" said the War Admiral, thinking the answer came too quickly.

"War Admiral, there are no controls on the bridge."

The War Admiral thought quickly. "They could be anywhere."

"And you have twenty eight minutes," came the Ken Pilot's dry voice.

"Get to engineering," said the War Admiral. The engines, at least, had to be located in one set place.

So Zetho started running back the way he had come.

On the bridge the War Admiral muttered, "I don't like it."

"Sir?" said Wren.

"We only have 28 minutes if it's set to point blank detonation; if it's set to detonate at a farther range, we may have even less time."

Zetho realized that he was really out of shape. He gasped for air, and, despite himself, had to stop for a rest in a corridor.

"What are you doing?" said the Ken Pilot. "Why have you stopped?"

"What?" said Zetho. The ship was shielded from intensive scans; how could the Ken Pilot know that he had stopped?

"I hear your breathing slowing," said the Ken Pilot. Odd, that he would have such good hearing.

"Arkasian?" came the War Admiral's voice.

"I'm moving again, sir," Zetho puffed, starting to run again.

He reached engineering, or where engineering should be, only to find a sealed bulkhead in his way.

Zetho explained the situation quickly. "--it will take too long to cut through."

The War Admiral frowned. Well, that ruled out the possibility of shutting down the power or turning the ship around. There was only one choice left, then. He cleared his throat, and said, "Proceed with the last contingency plan we discussed. Are you sufficiently near the explosives?"

Zetho slowly walked down the corridors, opening the door to one room, and then another, and then another. His helmet lamp showed that each were tightly packed with brown boxes. "I don't think that's a problem, sir."

"Then proceed."

Zetho gingerly opened the satchel the Ken Pilot had given him. The explosives had a shiny exterior that reflected the light from his helmet

lamp.

"You have twelve minutes until point blank detonation," said Captain Dulin. "If indeed we even have that much time." The deep space cruiser loomed large on the screen, closing rapidly on the Glory's stern.

"Set it for a five minutes," said the War Admiral quietly.

"Sir?" said Zetho, a bit startled. Then, understanding, he said, "Yes sir." Then, a few seconds later. "Explosives set."

"Get out of there NOW!" That surprising exclamation came from the Ken Pilot.

Zetho, not really sure what he planned to do, was jolted into action by the Ken Pilot's words.

He started running heavily. "Don't... wait.... for me...."

"You now have four minutes and thirty seconds before detonation," said the Ken Pilot. "I would recommend more speed, less speech."

Zetho ran until he thought his lungs were about to burst, and then he ran a bit more. He reached the airlock, entered, and pressed the cycle button.

Nothing happened.

"You now have two minutes, and thirty seconds," said the Ken Pilot dryly.

Zetho hit the controls again. The air started to spill out of the lock.

The doors slowly opened. Zetho started crawling frantically across the hull. "I won't make it... with enough time to escape," he rasped.

"You now have one minute, twenty seconds" said the Ken Pilot.

On the bridge of the Glory everyone watched the ship approached. "All hands, brace yourselves for detonation," said the War Admiral, his finger

depressing the comm. Wren grabbed a railing; Dulin sat down in his chair and grabbed the arms securely. The War Admiral grabbed a console. There were no seatbelts; no one ever expected a ship as large as the Glory to encounter rough sailing.

Zetho crawled along the outer hull. "I can't see the line!"

"You now have fifty five seconds," said the Ken Pilot, adding "I'm getting impatient."

Then Zetho crawled some more, and saw the line around the curve of the ship. he grabbed it, started pulling....

The Ken Pilot watched closely. "Forty five seconds." The second that Zetho cleared the shield, or at the least the second the Ken Pilot thought he cleared the shield, he turned the ship around in one smooth maneuver and headed away at full velocity. "Hang on," said the Ken Pilot dryly.

The end of the rope attached to the cruiser's hull snapped, and Zetho was yanked away. He held on for dear life as the battered Wildcat-5 accelerated at full speed. Zetho started to lose his grip with one hand as the rope pulled away, and he tried to hold on harder with the other hand.

On the Glory, Shishman was monitoring the countdown as the cruiser loomed closer "...Seven... six... five... four... three... two... one....".

There was a giant explosion and the cruiser detonated two hundred and twelve miles astern of the Glory. The ship shook with the vibrations of the explosion, but then, in the body of the explosion, a white light formed, spreading outwards. Everyone instinctively closed their eyes and covered them with their hands, but the light penetrated everywhere; through the hull of the ship, through bulkhead after bulkhead, and even through their hands and closed eyes. The light spread outwards,

encompassing the other ships of the fleet, even those that had already put some distance between themselves and the Glory. The force of the light only started to dissipate over a distance of hundreds of thousands of miles, and even then, those who saw it had to cringe at the white flash.

"What was that?" said Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna, blinking at the spots in his eyes from whatever had just passed them.

"Some kind of bright white light, sir," said an officer.

"I know that," Harkness snapped. "Tell me something I don't know."

"It seems to have come from an explosion in the vicinity of the fleet."

"This far out?" said Harkness, stunned. It must have been some explosion.

"Get me the Glory."

His comm officer signaled the Glory.

"No response, sir."

"No response?" said Harkness. "Try the rest of the fleet."

Patience. One minute, then two, then three, then

"Again, no response."

Harkness refused to consider the obvious. Had a massive explosion destroyed the fleet. "Long range scan," he barked.

To his relief, the images of the fleet's ships were intact. "All there," he muttered. "They're just not answering. Could it be some kind of EM dampening field?"

"Negative, sir," said the comm officers. "Our signals are being received and bounced back."

"Then something is very, very wrong with the fleet," muttered Harkness.

"All stop! Get me Captain Took and Lieutenant Obe, on the double."

The pair of Wildcats streaked towards the fleet.

"I love it whenever someone else decides I'm expendable," said Took. "I just wish they'd come out and say it."

"The Captain didn't want to risk the ship until he finds out what's going on," said Obe.

"Maybe it's a comm failure."

"On every ship in the fleet?" said Obe.

"We'll find out soon enough," said Took nervously, as they maneuvered into the body of the fleet. From the outside everything looked normal.

They tried to raise the Glory again, but got no response.

"Glory, this is Captain Took, requesting landing clearance," said Took. No response. "Glory, this is Captain Took, requesting landing clearance."

Again, no response.

"This is really spooky," said Took, as he flew over the mammoth ship. "All right, Glory, this is Captain Took, and I am designating Bay 1 the Captain Idaho J. Took Memorial Landing Bay. You'd better not have anything launching where I'm landing."

They landed in the bay, and almost from the instant they exited their ships, they knew something was wrong.

The bay crew were there, but they were crying, or yelling, or wandering around aimlessly.

"What's wrong?" said Took, to one of them; but the tech simply walked right by him, as if he didn't see him, crying about something.

Another tech said, "Took? Took, is that you?"

"Casey?" said Took, looking at the tech.

"Took, it's you!" she said.

"Of course it's me," said Took. "Can't you tell? And why are you looking so oddly at me."

"I'm not looking at anything," she said. "Took, I'm BLIND!"

Suddenly, everything became apparent.

They made their way to the bridge, past the disconsolate, confused, and upset crewers.

When they stepped onto the bridge they saw the crew, sitting at their controls. Good. Maybe they weren't affected.

"Who's there?" said Captain Dulin, sitting in his chair.

Oh oh. "Captain Took and Lieutenant Obe," said Took.

"Can you see?" said the War Admiral.

Oh no, not him too. Took walked right in front of the War Admiral. He stared right through them.

"Yes," said Took.

"The Blue Luna?"

"We're all fine."

"The rest of the fleet?" said the War Admiral.

"We don't know, but... we can't raise any of them," said Took

"They're all blind," said the War Admiral. "I should've foreseen this," he said, without the slightest hint of irony.

"-and that's the situation, sir," said Took, speaking into the comm to Captain Harkness. "Some kind of booby trap."

"Any sign of hostiles?" came Harkness's craggy voice.

"No, but I imagine it will only be a matter of time before they show up," said Took.

"One moment," said the War Admiral, interrupting. "Captain Harkness"

"Sir?"

"I am giving you operational command of the fleet during this crisis. You will follow my instructions directly."

"Sir, yes sir."

The War Admiral said, "What is your crew complement, I believe, 82 officers and 397 men, if I remember correctly?"

"Sir, yes sir."

"I recommend you disperse them so that at least a half dozen are on every ship."

"Sir, with only six men per ship, we we'll be vulnerable to-"

"Captain, our immediate priority is for the care of the crews. We cannot even eat or sleep much less man our stations without assistance."

"Yes sir," said Harkness.

"Captain Took," said the War Admiral.

"Sir?"

"I am putting you in command of the Glory."

"Sir, I'm not a naval captain, I'm a spaceforce pilot, wouldn't one of Captain Harkness's senior officers-"

"You are the sighted officer with the most experience on the Glory," said the War Admiral. "Your first task is to try the best you can to tend to the crew. When the crew from the Blue Luna arrive, set up group messhall and sleeping arrangements."

Six people, to do that for 3,000 crewmembers?

"Sir-"

"Do the best you can," said the War Admiral. "Lieutenant Obe."

"Sir?"

"David Norman's fighter was near the area of the blast. See if you can locate it on sensors."

Obe checked the sensors logs. There was a tense moment, then he said, "No sir. Nowhere on sensors."

The War Admiral swallowed heavily. "Very well."

Took looked at the officers, still sitting calmly in their chairs. He went over to Commander Wren. "How come when we came in you guys weren't groping around, like the others?"

"The War Admiral told us not to touch anything," she whispered. "Who knows what a blind person could do accidentally with the controls."

"Hm," said Took.

"Attention all hands, attention all hands, this is acting Captain Iday Took," said Took, speaking over the comm. "I mean, when I say "acting", I mean it's not like I merely play one on holostories. I'm a real captain, but just a space fighter captain; the acting part is the naval part-"

"Took," said Dulin warningly.

"Ah, yes, well, there's some good news, and there's some bad news." Should he deliver the good news first, or the bad news? Took always liked delivering the good news first. "The good news is that I and Obe and the ten crewers who landed from the Blue Luna have our sight," said Took. Now comes the bad part. "The bad news is that no one else on the ship does. So we're setting up group assembly points on decks four, eight, twelve, and fifteen. Try to feel your way there by touch. We have a doc coming up from the Blue Luna, he's going to check you all out, and everything should be

fine," said Took reassuringly. One doctor. For 3,000 patients. It was truly mind boggling. What else was there to say? "Ah, I'll be back with more news, later." He closed the channel.

The War Admiral, in his office, heard a buzz. "Come in," he said.

The door slid open, someone came in, and the door slid close. "Have a seat, Commander. There should be one about five feet from the door, if I recall."

Wren was incredulous. "How did you know it was me?"

"I smelled your perfume."

"I don't wear any," said Wren.

"I recognized the sounds of your footsteps."

"On carpeting? I don't make any, Admiral."

"Just a lucky guess, then," said the War Admiral, smiling to no one in particular. He knew it had to be her. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing really," said Wren. "I just wanted to talk."

"Talk is about all I'm capable of right now," said the War Admiral. "For once in my life, I have plenty of time."

"What if... what if it's permanent?" said Wren.

"Our blindness?" said the War Admiral.

"I've been a soldier most of my life. I can't bear the thought of spending the rest of it as a cripple, taken care of, coddled like a child."

"It won't come to that," said the War Admiral grimly.

"What do you mean?"

"Do the math, Stacy," said the War Admiral gently. "Approximately 20,000 crewmen blind, with only 500 crewmen to tend the rest of the fleet. How do they run and maintain a fleet of this size, while at the same time caring

for all of us?"

"They can't," said Wren.

"Exactly," said the War Admiral. "Why do you think I've retained ultimate command?"

Wren didn't answer.

"If there's no prospect of recovery, I'll order the Blue Luna to recall its crew and head off on its own," said the War Admiral. He left the obvious unsaid.

Wren started trembling. "I've never been afraid to die... but to go like this....." She looked at the direction where she thought the War Admiral might be standing. "Aren't you scared?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral, very calmly. "Yes, I am."

"Where is that doctor?" said Colonel Darley. "He should have been here some time ago."

"The doctor will come," said the War Admiral, entering the bridge slowly from his office, walking the route he knew so well from memory. Commander Wren followed close behind, feeling for the railing around her.

Suddenly, they heard someone enter the bridge. "The Doctor was delayed," said a familiar voice that all could recognize by sound. It was impossible to believe... but it was the Ken Pilot!

"David!" said the War Admiral. "You're alive!"

Took looked over at the Ken Pilot, who was in the company of the doctor. He had some mild burns on his face.

"What happened to you?" said Took.

"Radiation," said the Ken Pilot. "From the explosion. I had to borrow the

doctor to treat Arkasian."

"Arkasian is alive too?" said Wren.

"I yanked him out just in time," said the Ken Pilot. "But his radiation burns were worse than mine."

"Wait a minute," said Colonel Darley. "Are you blind?"

"Apparently," said the Ken Pilot, refusing to concede anything.

"You were outside the ship in your fighter."

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot.

"Did one of the Blue Luna's crew rescue you?"

"No," said the Ken Pilot.

"Then how did you get back to the Glory?"

"I flew into Bay Two," said the Ken Pilot.

"And you can't see a thing."

"No," admitted the Ken Pilot.

"How did you-"

"Can this wait?" said the doctor. "My name is Doctor Gurn, Captain. I'd like to take you to sickbay and examine you."

"Take Commander Wren," said Dulin. "My place is on the bridge."

"You should both go," said Took.

"No, I'd rather stay-"

"Don't make me give you an order, Captain," said Took.

Dulin opened his mouth, considered, and then turned to where he thought the War Admiral might be. "War Admiral-"

"He's in charge," said the War Admiral. "You might as well go, Captain.

There isn't much any of us can do here."

"You should go too, Admiral," said Took.

The War Admiral acted as if he didn't hear Took. "I'll be in my office.

Alert me if anything arises."

As soon as they had filed out, Took looked around him, at the majesty of the being in command of the largest ship in the fleet. The bridge was large, two stories tall, with crew members sitting by panels on both levels. The power of the Glory to launch starfighters, deliver laser batteries, and launch destructive missiles was awesome. And he, a lowly starfighter captain, was in charge of it all.

"I never thought I'd be in charge of all this," Took muttered. "But then, I also never thought I'd be in charge of a ship full of blind people, either."

Suddenly, an officer shifted position, and one of the consoles bleeped.

"Hey, watch where you put your elbow, Shishman," said Took.

Managing the ship was a nightmare. Crewmembers tried to make their way to the gathering points, only to find that that navigating by touch and memory sometimes had unpredictable results; several of the crewmembers heading towards the messhall on Deck 16 found themselves lost in the engineering section, and couldn't find their way out. Others who did make it there found themselves on the ends of very long lines waiting to be served by the single crewman assigned to that collection point. Obviously, the crew couldn't survive very long going on like this.

Took kept to the bridge, partially because there was nothing he could do, but mostly because the sight of all those blind crewmembers lining the hall depressed him too much. He tried to issue positive announcements to keep his spirits up, but then he got some discouraging feedback from Obe,

who had been trying to help guide lost crewmen below decks.

"How is the crew holding up?" said Took.

"Not well," said Obe. "I've been spending the last two hours helping lost crewmembers make their way to the collection points."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," said Obe. He hesitated. "A small thing."

"Name it," said Took, eager to help.

"Some people wants you to stop making announcements."

"Some people?"

"More like everyone," said Obe. "Well, just everyone I've encountered."

"What?" said Took. Then, "Oh."

"It's nothing personal, Iday," said Obe. "It's just that when you're facing permanent blindness and you're scared and you're hungry, unabashed cheerfulness tends to cut through you like a vibroblade."

"Oh," said Took. "All right." But he looked crestfallen.

Some time later there was a ping of an incoming signal. Lieutenant Shishman instinctively tried to activate the controls, but he only succeeded in expanding the size of the holographic map.

"That's ok, I got it," said Took, pressing the appropriate button.

"I got your message you wanted to talk to me," came the holographic image of Captain Harkness. "Report."

"The doc has just delivered some good news," said Took. "The blindness is probably temporary."

"Probably?"

"Well, it doesn't look like anything vital was destroyed, their optic nerves were just paralyzed, or something," said Took, trying to remember

what Gurn said. "Sorry, but I'm not very good with this medical stuff."

"Did he say when their vision might return?"

"The Doc thinks maybe a few hours, maybe a few days, that it will vary from person to person" said Took.

"Well, that's really great," said Harkness. "Have you taken a look at your long range sensors lately?"

"Uh...."

"Check them now. We just picked them up a few minutes ago."

Took expanded the sensor range. There, just on the edge of detection, was an Insectoid fleet. It was relatively small--two flat tops, a few battlecruisers, and some destroyers, but against a blind fleet, it was more than enough.

"Trouble," said Took. "I wonder why they haven't attacked?" Suddenly he heard another pinging. "Just a moment." He checked the source. "Sir, we're getting an incoming signal, from the Insectoid fleet!"

Sstosss was livid. They should have attacked hours ago. But Torss, the ever cautious one, wanted to be certain the enemy was blinded.

"Look," she had said, right after the attack. On extreme sensor range, they saw the human fleet. "All their ships are intact, including the Glory. Your plan failed."

Sstosss checked the scanner readout. "The Glory may be crippled; at this range we can't get a good reading on it. In any event I detect debris from our ship; it definitely detonated."

"Perhaps, but perhaps it detonated too far away to do any good," said Torss.

"The range of the white light-"

"So you say," said Torss. "I propose we wait on the edge of sensor range for a short time and see how they react."

"How they react?"

"If they move to attack, we will know they aren't blinded, and we will be able to retreat."

And so they had waited, and waited, and nothing had happened. They were so close to the edge of their sensor range that it wasn't even clear the humans could detect their ships. Finally, Torss agreed to approach, and prepare for attack, but Torss wanted one more test. "We will contact the humans, and see for ourselves what their condition is."

"On screen," said the War Admiral.

The flat two dimensional image of the Insectoid bridge appeared on their screen. The Insectoids had selected this mode of communication on purpose, so they could see more of the Glory's personnel.

"I am War Admiral Norman North," said the War Admiral. "Perhaps you've heard of me."

"Yes," hissed Torss through her translation device. "I have been sent to destroy you."

"An admirable goal," said the War Admiral. "Have you checked with your predecessors to see how they've done?"

"I am calling about surrender...."

The War Admiral blinked. "I'm sorry, but we're not taking on any prisoners at this time." Lieutenant Obe chose this moment to walk over to the Admiral with a pad, handed it to him, and he promptly signed it. "Thank you," he said, looking up at Obe, who returned to his post.

"We are calling for your surrender!" Torss hissed angrily.

"Sorry, we're not in the market for that either," said the War Admiral.

"The way I see it," and he put no special emphasis on his words, "we have you outgunned. Captain?"

Took, standing at the holographic display, pointed to the images of the Insectoid fleet. "Two carriers, a few heavies, some destroyers... an easy job." He turned and directly faced the War Admiral. "Please Admiral, let me launch an attack against them, please?"

"I'm having trouble restraining my men," said the War Admiral. "If you want to live, you'd better retreat."

"We do not retreat!" Torss hissed again.

"Strategic withdrawal, then," said the War Admiral. "End communications," he nodded to what he thought was Shishman, though it was Obe who was at his console.

"Well?" said Torss.

"It was quite obviously an act!" said Sstosss. "They made a point of showing that they had vision, which proves they do not!"

"How can they pretend to have what they do not have?"

"We saw a crewman walk forward. That could have been rehearsed. Even a blind being can walk rehearsed steps. We saw the War Admiral sign something in his hands. That is not difficult either. I am more convinced than ever that they are all blind--and I can prove it." Sstosss ordered the comm being to pull up the record of the most recent communication.

"Scan the Admiral's eyes; what was he looking at during the conversation!"

The communications being looked to Torss for permission; Torss nodded.

In a moment the analysis was complete. "Run, with overlay," Sstosss ordered.

On the screen they could see themselves, with Admiral Torss speaking to the War Admiral. A red arrow appeared on the screen, just to the right of Admiral Torss. There it stayed throughout much of the conversation.

"Just as I thought!" said Sstosss triumphantly. "Don't you think it a little odd that during your communication the War Admiral was always looking past you?" Sstosss said.

"This is merely a projection," snapped Torss. "We don't know exactly how our image appeared on his screen, or precisely what angle he was looking from."

"If you will not attack, permit me the honor!" said Sstosss.

Torss considered. If word of his hesitancy got back to the Queen, she would surely be relieved of command, and probably worse. But to attack without certainty...

"All right," said Torss finally. "I will order an attack. A probing attack. Two squadrons."

"Only two squadrons!"

"If the humans are blind, we shouldn't have any losses, should we?" said Torss. "If this attack is successful, then we will launch our remaining squadrons."

"They're launching," said Took. "Looks like two standard Insectoid squadrons, 19 ships each."

The War Admiral nodded. "You'll have to take Wildcat "A" to intercept them."

"Uh, sir," said Took. "I don't want to be too sarcastic, but you have to know that Wildcat "A" is not exactly up to full strength right now. In fact, we're a bit less than full strength. In fact, you might say it's just me, and Obe-."

"Take the pilots you need from the Blue Luna," said the War Admiral.

"The Blue doesn't have any fighter pilots right now," said Took. "Oh... I see what you mean."

"Shuttle pilots, transport pilots, anyone who's ever had experience flying anything outside of an atmosphere," said the War Admiral. "Find ten warm bodies."

"Me and Obe and ten amateurs, against 40 Insectoid fighters? How can we defeat them?"

"I can," said the Ken Pilot, appearing on the bridge. "I'm joining you."

"Ah, have you regained your site, K?" said Took, hoping against hope.

"No."

"So you're blind."

"Just get me to my ship, I'll do the rest," said the Ken Pilot.

"So you're saying you're too blind to get to your ship, but once there, you won't have any troubles flying, or fighting?" said Took.

"Correct," said the Ken Pilot.

Took turned to Obe. "Is it just me?"

"You're running out of time," said the War Admiral. "You'd better call Harkness on a scrambled channel and make the arrangements. Hurry."

It wasn't just a matter of getting pilots from the Blue Luna; with the Blue's crew dispersed among the fleet, a more urgent problem was finding

pilots on ships which had Wildcats stationed on them.

But, twenty minutes later, they were in Bay One, almost ready to launch.

"I still don't think this is a good idea," said Took, standing next to the Ken Pilot.

"Just point me to my ship."

Took did so, and the Ken Pilot climbed up on the wing and into the cockpit. It was only when Took saw what the Ken Pilot was doing inside the cockpit that he began to understand. "What's that you're putting in your ear?"

"My audio sensor," said the Ken Pilot.

"Audio sensor?"

"It makes a different sound, depending on where the enemy ship is in relation to mine. When I hear this sound, for example" the Ken Pilot pressed a button, and Took heard a small sound. "I know an enemy is directly in line with my rear turret., and I can fire."

So that was how the Ken Pilot managed to fire both in front and in back at the same time!

"But how do you-"

"No time," said the Ken Pilot, closing his cockpit.

Took ran to his own ship.

As soon as they launched and he had linked up with the other Wildcat pilots, he activated the special scrambled circuit he had set up with the squadron.

"Took here," he said, as soon as he launched. "Ok, I know a lot of you are new to fighters, they're just like shuttles and transporters, only much nimbler and with a lot of firepower. I want everyone except for Obe and

the Ken Pilot to hang back while we handle the Insectoids.

"Three of you, against 40 of them?" said one of the new pilots.

"Obe and I are actually just going to watch," said Took. "The Ken Pilot has handled 40 enemies before on his own, haven't you, K?"

"41 enemy fighters," corrected the Ken Pilot. "Of course, I wasn't blind at the time."

Obe, flying parallel to Took, gave him a worried glance.

Would the Ken Pilot be able to literally fly blind? Was there a danger he might shoot one of them by accident? "K, are you going to be ok?" said Took.

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot. "I can handle all 40. It just may take a few minutes longer than usual."

"Don't worry, Obe and I will take one or two of the while you handle the other 38," said Took. Without a trace of irony, he added, "That should make it easier."

"Here they come!" said one of the pilots.

The battle began. The inexperienced pilots scuttled to get out of the way, and the Insectoid ships split off to give chase.

Took lined up one in his sights and fired. "Well, that's one down."

Suddenly, laser fire burst around him as he was targeted by three different ships coming from three separate directions. He broke furiously, turning this way and that, but only managed to lose one of them. The laser fire burst closer to his ship.

"Obe, I'm in a bit of trouble here," said Took.

"I'm a bit busy right now," said Obe, and Took heard laser fire over the

comm. So they were overwhelming him too.

Took twisted left and then hard right, but the two still stayed with him, and their laser fire came closer. Then, all of a sudden, both ships exploded into debris.

"Sorry, I was delayed," came the Ken Pilot's voice.

Took did a quick glance at his short range scanner. Nine Insectoid ships had been destroyed.

Momentarily free from pursuit, Took went on the attack, destroying one of Obe's pursuers and a moment later destroying another. In a matter of minutes it had turned into a rout, and the remaining Insectoid ships, some fifteen in all, turned tail and retreated. But not before they destroyed two of the ships with the new pilots. The new pilots simply had no knowledge of sophisticated turns and rolls, and were easy pickings for the Insectoids, at least until the Ken Pilot was able to turn his attention to them.

"All right, form up on my wing and let's head back to the Glory," said

Took. "K, can you land with that hearing aide system of yours?"

"Yes," came the stolid reply.

And then Took realized that he must have done it once before, when he had brought Arkasian in.

"Our squadrons were defeated!" Torss raged.

"Once again, you draw the wrong conclusion!" said Sstosss. "They sent out only one squadron to meet our two."

"And defeated us handily."

"Yes, because you didn't send overwhelming force, as I recommended," said Sstosss.

"What difference would it have made?"

Sstosss had a sneaking suspicion. "Give me some time to analyze the combat footage and I will show you."

Two hours later Sstosss had her answer. She brought her findings to a now thoroughly skeptical Sstosss. "Look at the footage now". Each of the Wildcats were painted pink, except for three Wildcats that were painted blue.

"Notice how erratically the pink ones are flying?"

"So?"

"Do you notice how all our losses were attributable to the three blue pilots?"

"Is that true?" said Torss, showing interest for the first time.

"Yes," said Sstosss. "In fact, one of the blue fighters accounted for most of our losses."

"How is this possible?"

"The other ships must have been flown remotely, or by incompetent pilots.

I was wrong when I said that everyone has been blinded--but I would suggest that most of their fleet has been blinded. That's why they weren't able to muster more than three fighters to attack us."

"And the War Admiral?"

"He was obviously blind. The other crewmen must have been among the few who weren't blind. Perhaps they were on a long range patrol when the explosion occurred, or on the far side of the fleet. Either way, this is conclusive evidence that they are blind. If we attack with overwhelming force, we can win!"

"I'm not certain."

"Think!" said Sstosss. "We're still at extreme range, and we're a smaller force. Why has the War Admiral not yet attacked us?"

Torss considered. Sstosss' analysis was still speculation, but it made sense. And if Torss didn't attack, Sstosss's report and Torss's failure would still probably be enough to get her removed from command. That left one choice.

"Launch a full-scale attack."

Seven full squadrons launched from the flat tops, and the small fleet moved forward behind the advancing screen. At first the humans didn't launch any fighters to intercept them. In fact, their fleet stayed perfectly still.

"You see?" said Sstosss. "It was all a bluff!"

But then, when the fighters and the fleet got closer, many things happened at once.

The Glory launched five of its eight squadrons. The Amory Till launched two squadrons, and other capital ships launched several fighters as well. Fast attack destroyers and battlecruiser suddenly powered up, heading directly towards their small fleet.

In moments, the humans were engaging their fighters. Soon after, they started taking heavy losses. Obviously, blind people were not at the controls of all those ships.

"What's happening?" said Torss. "This is no deception! You were wrong! The humans weren't blinded! Retreat!"

The fleet started to turn about, but the fast attack destroyers were on them too quickly, firing torpedoes. Torss's ship was rocked by several

explosions amid ships.

"Damage report!" shouted Torss.

"We're getting a transmission!" yelled a comm officer over the sounds of explosions.

The image of the War Admiral appeared on the screen.

"You!" said Torss. "It was all a trick!"

"No," said the War Admiral. "We were blind when you thought we weren't, but we were simply no longer blind when you thought we were. You were simply a victim of poor timing," said the War Admiral. "Would you care to surrender?"

Several more torpedoes slammed into the flat top, hitting the munitions deck. Suddenly, North's image of Torss's bridge was cut off as the flat top exploded.

On the bridge of the Glory, the War Admiral remarked, "I guess my timing was poor too."

The small fleet was quickly overwhelmed and destroyed, although there were some Wildcat losses in the fleet. Not all the combat pilots were sufficiently recovered enough to fly, and some of those who did had suffered double vision and blurriness, which reduced their efficiency in combat. But they had secured a victory, while keeping casualties to a minimum.

Captain Dulin appeared on the bridge. He walked over to his chair, where Took was sitting, watching the repair reports coming in after the end of the battle. "Good work, Took," he said. "I relieve you."

Took looked at the War Admiral. "Can he really do that, sir?"

The War Admiral hooked a thumb towards the bridge's starboard exit, but couldn't resist a grin.

"Oh, all right," said Took, grumbling as he got out of the chair. "It was fun while it lasted."

Dulin sat down in the chair.

"Listen, Captain, if you ever need a substitute again-"

Dulin gave him a withering look.

"-I'm sure you'll find someone else," said Took, his voice trailing off.

The laughter on the bridge was as welcome as it was unexpected.

"Hmmm....." came the sound from the Ken Pilot's cockpit. "That's the sound of someone 170 degrees, behind me.

"And what's directly behind you?" said Took.

The Ken Pilot pressed a button in the cockpit. "Hmmm....."

"Sounds the same to me," said Took.

"No, it's different," said the Ken Pilot.

"A different sound for each set of trajectories," said Took. "How many different sounds are there?"

"Currently about 20," said the Ken Pilot.

"And how do you know if the sound represents an enemy or a friend?"

"The hum makes a slighter higher pitch at the beginning if it's an ally," said the Ken Pilot. "Listen." He played two examples, both of which sound identical. "Hear the difference?"

"No," said Took. "But I know one thing; we're lucky you're not tone deaf, or else we'd all be dead."

Zetho Arkasian, supported by Yurgi, hobbled over to the ship.

"Hey, I heard you made it," said Took. "You really saved us, pal."

"And the Ken Pilot saved me," Zetho rasped.

"He shouldn't be out of bed, but he insisted on thanking him personally," said Yurgi.

"Thank you," said Zetho.

"You're welcome," said the Ken Pilot, without any overt display of emotion.

"Just one thing... I must know," said Zetho.

The Ken Pilot said nothing.

"When you pulled me out, on the rope, it was attached at one end on your ship, and on the other to the cruiser. When you pulled me out, how did you know it would snap on the end attached to the cruiser, and not on the end attached to your ship?" Zetho looked quizzically, expecting an explanation of how the magnetic grapple worked and how the Ken Pilot deactivated it.

"I didn't know," said the Ken Pilot.

"You didn't?"

"I couldn't deactivate the grapple, that's one of the parts of my ship I've been meaning to repair, and there wasn't time. I figured that if I pulled on the line, it could snap on either end, and that maybe you had a 50-50 chance of getting lucky," said the Ken Pilot. "It seemed like a reasonable risk to take, given the alternative."

Zetho, looking a bit shocked, nodded.

"I'd better get him back to bed," said Yurgi, giving the Ken Pilot a stern glance.

Took, grinning, shook his head. "K, promise me you'll never change."

"I don't make promises," said the Ken Pilot.

Chapter 5 Dangerous Journalism

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 5 year after Vitalics: Time is slowly passing. I keep thinking that we've seen the last of the Insectoids, but it seems, almost like clockwork, that we run into another one of their fleets every nine to twelve months. We repulse every attack, but we can't replace our losses, and we've lost more three ships. As it is, normal wear and tear is taking a toll on our ships; we have almost exhausted the jury-rigging and cannibalization that we're able to do; in a year or two we're going to have to start abandoning some ships to keep others working, which will create difficult decisions of what to do with their crews.

I have to be honest and say that we haven't made very much progress in locating Chent inhabited planets; it's been over two years since we even encountered a monument. I knew it would be a difficult search to begin with, but I think that because of our desperate need I had irrational hopes that we would find what we were looking for sooner, rather than later. I now have to face up to the prospect that we may never encounter a Chent civilization that can help us; and as our ships break down, the homesteader sentiment grows stronger.

It started about a year ago. There have been some rumblings in the fleet that we should stop our endless quest and settle down on one of the habitable worlds we encounter from time to time. Occasionally someone has worked up the nerve to mention this idea in my presence. My answer to them is always the same. If we settle down somewhere, not only are we giving up

any chance we might have of rescuing our home worlds, but we will be defenseless when the Insectoids find us. And they will.

But our crew, in flight for so many years without relief, is beginning to believe the fantasy that they can find a place where we can be safe, some obscure planet where the Insectoids will never look for us. But as their regular attacks indicate, they haven't given up.

The most interesting question is, where are the Insectoids coming from? We haven't located any signs of Insectoid bases in this area of space; it would seem that their ships must be coming from formerly Alliance space. But that is years and years behind us now. How are they catching up to us so quickly? Do they have hidden bases we haven't detected? Or have they invented some method of propulsion that enables them to cross light years in minutes? That last would seem unlikely; when they attack, they come at relatively the same speed as our ships. So how are they throwing all these fleets at us, and how are they finding us so easily?

I can go mad if I don't find ways to relax, so I have taken up hobbies, and invited the senior staff to participate. Sometimes it's holography, or three dimensional problem solving, or simple graphical games; lately I've been interested in musical composition. I invited Roger Dulin and Stacy Wren to join me, but Dulin quickly dropped out; he prefers quiet time on his own. When it was down to just Stacy and me, I invited some of the junior bridge crew to join us; but for whatever reason, they too dropped out. So it's just me and the Commander. I sometime wonder how the fact that we spend so much time alone together appears to the crew, but then I realize that the crew probably has bigger issues to worry about.

A short musical composition played over the comm. When it finished, North looked at Wren expectantly.

"A little lighter on the drums," said Wren. "You really like the drums, don't you?"

"I like military music," said North. "Military music uses drums." He turned to the console and made some adjustments.

"Is there anything you like that isn't military?" Wren asked.

"I've been in the military for centuries, for most of my adult life," said the War Admiral. "If I had a life before that, I don't remember it." He pressed a button. "How about this?"

Wren listened to a clip that lasted a few seconds. "Better," she said. "I like the long-winded trumpets."

"That's military too," said the War Admiral.

"Yes, I appreciate the military too," said Wren. "But I had a life before the military. I was a senior administrator on Ulos."

"Yes, I remember reading something like that in your service record," said the War Admiral. "What persuaded you to go military?"

"I was on the planet during the siege of Ulos," said Wren quietly.

North nodded. Nothing more needed be said.

The awkward silence was interrupted by a buzz by someone wanting to enter.

"Come," said North.

Captain Dulin entered the room. "He's gone too far this time, Admiral!"

"Who, Captain?" said the War Admiral.

"Oh," said Dulin, calming down. "I presumed you had seen it. I was referring to Took's broadcast about maintenance requests on the civilian ships."

"Yes?"

"He criticized the military, saying that we give maintenance repairs on civilian ships the lowest priority, sometimes forcing them to wait weeks or months for repairs."

"And is it true?" said North.

"Of course not," said Dulin. "Admiral, you know as well as I do that we prioritize based on the seriousness of the repair. Of course, military repairs are often more vitally needed than civilian ones. Still, if there were a serious problem with one of our merchant ships, like a core breach, we'd be on that-"

"Captain, why are you telling me this?" said North.

"Sir?"

"You should be telling Took," said North. "I'm sure he would interview you for his show."

"Sir, are you seriously suggesting that I dignify his little broadcast with my presence?" Dulin asked.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Have you checked the usage logs, Captain? They show that an incredible 91% of the fleet open their weekly e-mail video report from Captain Took. That's an even higher rate than your fleet bulletin."

"I know, sir," said Dulin. "But the fleet bulletin is important-"

"I'm not blaming you or the bulletin," said the War Admiral. "What I am saying is that Took provides something vital--entertainment, discussion, excitement--things in very short supply. And as long as he doesn't advocate the violent overthrow of the fleet command, I would encourage him

to continue."

"But sir... it's just not military."

"Neither is a quarter of the fleet, Captain," the War Admiral pointed out.

"And we've been together, without leave or relief, for a long time. Even the strictest military organization can't be so taut and proper for so long. I trust I've made my point."

"Sir. Yes sir," said Dulin. He turned and left.

Wren says, "His criticisms don't bother you at all?"

"Believe me, Commander, Took is the least of my worries. The homesteaders bother me ten times as much. They're the ones that we're going to have more and more trouble with over time," said the War Admiral. "The longer we go without finding anything, the greater the pressure they will put on us to settle on a planet and simply give up."

"What will you do when the pressure rises to a boiling point?" Wren asked.

"The music, Commander, help me work on the music," said North.

"All right," said Wren. "But on one condition. When we're off duty, like we are now, you can call me by my name."

"Very well, Wren," said North, giving a rare grin. "Now help me with these violins...."

"It's going to be a masterpiece, Obe!" said Took.

"Go away," said Obe, turning his head to face away.

"Obe, I'm on a mission!" said Took. He shook Obe.

"Go away! I'm trying to sleep!"

"But I need my camera man!"

"I'd rather sleep."

"But Inspir said you should help me."

"Get Inspir to hold your camera for you."

"Very funny. Are you going to help me with my biggest story ever, or not?"

"What is it?" Obe muttered.

"Corruption of something vital to our very survival."

"Yes?" said Obe, as if he were waiting for something more.

"Our food supply," said Took.

Obe opened his eyes. "All right," said Obe. "But this better be good."

They took a shuttle from the Glory to the Marist. The Marist was the largest merchant ship they had taken with them from Orotis, and like most of the others it had been converted into a farming vessel. The walls had been broken out between compartments and soil had been laid on the ground, which now grew a constant rotation of thirty day potatoes, rice, wheat, and other crops.

"So the thing about it is, these ships have actually been producing less and less food over time," Took said to Obe, as they walked across a "field" on deck 4.

"Is that really surprising?" Obe says. "Equipment breaks down, soil becomes exhausted, that sort of thing."

"No, no, no," said Took. "According to my information, we actually have more acres under cultivation now and more fresh soil available now than we did when we started, five years ago. We've run into a series of habitable planets lately that have helped us restock."

"If that's true... then why are we under increased rationing?" Obe said.

"Oh, so are we actually interested in my little investigation now?" said

Took.

They reached the office of the administrator, Tarolly Odusk.

They rang, but there was no answer. They rang again, but no one responded.

"This is a day shift, isn't it?"

"Yep," said a high-pitched voice behind them.

They turned to see a teenager pushing a grav tram full of dirt.

"Hey, do you know where the director is?" Took asked.

"Gee, you look familiar," said the young man, peering at Took. "You're that guy, that guy on the e-mail program!"

"Yes, why yes I am," said Took. "The name is-"

"Took, of course," said the teenager. "I watch your show all the time. In fact, I reroute the e-mail so I get it first before everyone else."

"You do?" said Took. "No offense, but I didn't think you farmer types knew a lot about computers."

"Oh, computers are just a hobby, they're easy," said the kid dismissively.

"By the way, my name's Billy Holiday. But Bill, most people call me Bill."

"Good to meet you," said Took, automatically reaching out to shake the kid's hand. But when he pulled it back he found it grimy with black dirt.

"Sorry about that," said Bill.

"Listen, kid, can you tell me where we can find the director?"

"No," said Bill. "But if you're looking for him, don't try his office."

"Why not?"

"He never shows up there, except for inspections."

Took and Obe exchanged glances.

"Any idea where we can find him?"

Bill shrugged. "You might try leaving him a message."

"That's a pity," said Took. "We were hoping to ask him some questions about farm production." He turned to Obe. "How much food do you think this ship alone can produce?"

"Assuming an undifferentiated 30 day potato crop with constant soil, temperature, and fertilizer conditions and four potatoes per square foot, the approximate yield would be... 19,455 potatoes across the entire ship," said Bill.

Took looked at Bill. "You're serious?"

"I never joke about potatoes, Mr. Took."

"Bill, what, ah, did you do before you became a farmer?"

"I was the Chief Engineer on the Blue Luna," said Bill.

"You, a kid, a teenager, C.E. on a battleship?" said Obe.

"Well... they called me Chief," said Bill. "At least, that's what they called me while I fixed their engines."

"You fixed the engines on a pocket battleship?"

"Sure," said Bill. "I saw an easy way they could do an upgrade to make the ship almost as fast as your standard battlecruisers. At first no one would listen, but then I showed them the schematics, and they set me to work on it."

"I knew the engines were upgraded... but how come we never heard that a kid did it?"

"That was a few years ago," said Bill. "I think they didn't want word to

get out that a kid was fixing the engines of our only battleship."

"So you did it, alone," said Took.

"Yep."

"Had you ever worked with engines before?"

"Nope," said Bill. "Although I read about them, once."

"Once. Then how did you...."

"It just made sense to me," said Bill.

"And how did you get here?"

"Oh. They got tired of hiding me during every inspection tour. One time, when I was almost discovered, they decided it was time for me to move on. So they sent me here."

"And doesn't it bother you, doing farm chores when you could be working on engines?"

"Not really," said Bill. "It gives me a lot of free time. We only really have to work three or four hours a day." He noticed their expressions.

"Actually, I don't think I was supposed to say that."

"I think we better have a talk with Director Odusk," said Took. "But first, I think we have an interesting story to report, don't you?"

"-and so this incredible young man rebuilt the engines on the Blue Luna, and now his most complicated job is moving piles of dirt around," said Took, speaking into the camera.

"Well, shucks, it isn't such a big deal," said Bill.

Took had been interviewing Bill for the past few minutes, careful to avoid questions about the farm management system. He was on the trail of a much bigger story and wanted to catch certain people off guard. For now he would have to be content with this "local boy makes good engines" story.

He interviewed Bill for a few more minutes, and then, in mid-interview, someone walked in front of the camera.

"Hey," said Took. "We're filming."

"Hi Bob," said Bill. "Captain Took, this is my friend Bob."

"Oh, your friend?" said Took, seeing another angle. "Sure, let's meet your friend." He pulled Bob back into camera range.

"Whoa, what?"

"What's your name?"

"Bob Jord," said the farmer. "Is that a camera?"

"Yep," said Took. "Did you know all the wonderful things that your friend Bill can do?"

"Uh... sure," said Jord, looking distracted.

Jord obviously wasn't very enthusiastic, so Took let him go after another harmless question or two.

When he edited the interview before broadcasting it, he edited down Jord's appearance to fourteen seconds.

Those fourteen seconds killed Bob Jord. He died, a day later.

Took didn't even find out about it, until the day after it happened.

"Did you see the fleet bulletin?" said Obe. "The kid we interviewed is dead."

"The kid?" said Took, looking bewildered for a second. "You mean Bill?"

"No," said Obe. "The other one. His friend; the one we interviewed for a few seconds."

Took frowned, taking the pad from Obe's hand. "Let me see that." But the details were few. It was an accident report; he had been mauled to death

by a malfunctioning thresher.

"This is either got to be the biggest coincidence I've ever seen, or there's something else going on here," said Took.

In moments they were on a shuttle bound for the Marist. Their first stop was Billy Holiday. Bill was morosely pulling a dirtsled when they stopped by.

"I heard what happened to your friend," said Took. "You have my sympathies."

Bill nodded. "He was such a careful guy, too. I can't imagine how he got caught by the thresher."

"Neither can I," said Took. "Listen, was Bob working on anything sensitive?"

"Sensitive?" said Bill.

"Did he happen to stumble across anything, or know something that would've gotten him in trouble?"

Bill thought for a moment. "No, not that I know of."

"Did Bob have any enemies?"

"No."

"People who disliked him?"

"No."

"Not even a little?"

"Not that I know of," said Bill.

"What are you doing interrogating my worker without permission?" said a new voice. They looked up to see a man in a finely tailored civilian suit.

"Just doing my job," said Took.

"Your job?" said the man. Then recognition dawned on his face. "You're the man from that little show."

"Or, you can call me Captain Took," said Took. "Do you have a name as well?"

"Odusk," said the man. "Director Odusk. What are you doing on my ship without permission?"

Took gave Obe a "what's going on here?" glance. "I, ah, didn't realize we needed permission."

"Well you do," said Odusk. "Our work here is vital and can't be disrupted." He turned to leave.

"Was Bob Jord disrupting things?" said Took.

Odusk turned back. "Do you have something to say?"

"I'm here to ask some questions about Jord's death, and the farming ships."

"I don't have to answer any of your questions," said Odusk, turning away again. He started to walk away while Took looked helplessly at Obe. Obe gave him a "Well, I don't know what to do either" look.

"If you don't answer our questions, you'll have to answer the War Admiral's," Took called after him.

Odusk stopped. "The War Admiral sent you?"

"I, ah, that's right, I'm investigating things for him," said Took, not very convincingly. Obe tried to look elsewhere.

"That's different then," said Odusk. "Why don't you gentlemen come to my office?" he said, giving a sly smile.

As they walked Obe muttered, "Took, does the War Admiral know what you're

doing?"

"Relax, buddy," said Took. "What he doesn't know won't concern him in the slightest."

They were offered seats inside Odusk's spacious and luxurious office. The walls were decorated with photos and awards, the desk and countertops of his exotic furniture was lined with exotic sculptures and awards, and the plush carpeting must have been among the best that Orotis had to offer.

"Nice awards," Took commented, taking a seat.

"Yes, in recognition for my tireless work," said Odusk, typing some keys on his console.

"What are you doing?" Took asked.

A face appeared on the screen. "Yes?" said a familiar voice.

"Ah, Captain Dulin. I was wondering if you could put me through to the War Admiral."

"What-why are you contacting the War Admiral?" Took asked.

"Merely to personally assure him of my full cooperation with your investigation," said Odusk. "I believe in keeping the lines of communication open, don't you?"

"Ah...." For once, Took was speechless. Odusk could obviously tell from their manner that the War Admiral hadn't sent them--and now he was going to make them face the consequences.

"Larolly, what can I do for you?" said a deep familiar voice.

Odusk turned the paper thin screen so that it faced both him and Took and Obe. "War Admiral, I believe you are acquainted with these gentlemen."

"Indeed I am."

"They say they have come here on your behalf, to investigate the tragic

accident we had the other day."

"On my behalf?" said the War Admiral, looking and sounding confused. "Is that what they said?"

"Yes," said Odusk innocently. "Why, is something wrong?"

"No," said the War Admiral, recovering smoothly. "So why are you calling me?"

Now it was Odusk's turn to be speechless. "I... I assumed...."

"You are to give them your full cooperation," said the War Admiral. "Was there anything else?"

"No," said Odusk, looking confused.

"Glory out."

"Let's start with some background questions, shall we, Director?" said Took sweetly.

Odusk recovered quickly. "What-what do you want to know?"

"About Bob Jord. How does a man get killed by a thresher?"

"It was moving, and he walked into the path of it," said Odusk.

"Didn't the operator see him?"

"There was no operator," said Odusk.

"My understanding is that threshers don't move without an operator sitting onboard."

"Normally, no, but this one did," said Odusk. "We hypothesize that he left the thresher on idle, and a malfunction caused it to start moving again."

"A malfunction," said Took. "I'd like one of our techs on the Glory to take a look at this thresher."

"Oh, that's not possible."

"Why not?" said Took.

"It was disassembled immediately after the accident."

"Why?" said Took sharply.

"No one wanted to work with it," said Odusk. "Some of our workers are unduly superstitious. And we're always in need of spare parts for our other threshers. It was for the best."

"I see," said Took. "And what about the scene of the accident?"

"What about it?"

"Were there any tracks, or clues?"

"I have no idea," said Odusk.

"Well, I'd like to see the area," said Took.

"You're welcome to, but it's a waste of time."

"Why?" Took asked.

"The entire part of the level has been reseeded."

"Reseeded? Why?"

"It's what we do after harvesting," said Odusk, starting to run out of patience.

"All in one day?" said Took.

"Yes," said Odusk. "And now, if there's nothing else-"

"I'm not quite done yet," said Took. "I have a few other questions to ask you. Why has overall farm production declined, while acres under cultivation and soil quantity gone up?"

"This has nothing to do with your investigation," Odusk frowned.

"I'll be the judge of that," said Took. "You did promise the War Admiral your full cooperation, didn't you?"

"We've had problems with soil toxicity," said Odusk, glaring at him.

"That, and equipment breakdowns, have hampered productions."

"I see," said Took.

"Do you have any other pressing questions?"

"No," said Took. "Not right now," he added. Then he got another thought.

"You have monitoring stations in every farm bay, correct?"

Odusk nodded.

"Did anyone see the accident happen?"

"No," said Odusk. "The wheat was too tall for the observer to see anything."

"I'd like to speak to this observer," said Took.

His name was Walter Teeks, and he was a grizzled farmhand, but even he had been shaken by what happened.

"I wasn't paying much attention," said Teeks. "We're only supposed to generally supervise the workers, making sure the crops get the proper rains and artificial sunlight, not look out for the safety of the workers."

"When did you first notice something was wrong?"

"I heard a loud crash; when I went to investigate, I found that the thresher had crashed against the wall; and Jord's body was mangled inside of it."

"I see," said Took. He looked at the observation post monitors. "What are these hooked up to?"

"Surveillance. Mounted all around the deck."

"Did any of these show the accident?"

"I don't know," said Teeks blankly.

"You don't know?"

"I never thought to look," said Teeks. "Listen, I saw Jord's body crumpled into pieces. I wasn't anxious to relive the experience on the monitors."

"Where can I get a copy of the tape for the relevant period?"

"I can punch it up," said Teeks. He peered out of the observation post.

"Camera seven should have given a mostly unobstructed view." He typed a few keys on the keyboard. Then he frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't retrieve the tapes for that day."

"What do you mean?"

"They're wiped; or gone; or never inputted into the system. I can't really tell which."

"There's no log entry on it?"

"Apparently not; it's as if they were never filed. But they always are, automatically. Jerensky set up the system himself."

"Jerensky?"

"Our equipment tech."

Suddenly there was something that sounded like a crash below, and they heard someone yell, "Whoa!"

They ran down to see what was happening. A worker was trying to restart a mulcher.

"It's... it's stuck," he said.

"Try opening it up," Teeks suggested.

The worker flipped open the side, where they saw the mangled body of a fleet technician.

"Jerensky," Teeks whispered.

"I think we have something a bit more substantial than your typical

"thresher bites farmer" story," said Took.

On the shuttleflight back to the Glory, Took said, "Jord and Jerensky were murdered."

"Yes," said Obe.

"But why?"

"Maybe they had an enemy."

"Or maybe they discovered something they weren't supposed to," said Took.

"What?" said Obe.

"I don't know," said Took.

They were on final approach when they got a comm from Commander Wren. "Are you gentlemen returning?"

"On final approach," said Took.

"Good," said Wren. "The War Admiral would appreciate the pleasure of your company, at your earliest convenience."

"-It didn't start out that way, War Admiral," said Took. "I just meant to say that we were investigating."

The War Admiral looked sternly at them.

"And then your name kind of slipped out."

The War Admiral continued to stare.

"I mean, something's up, right? We've definitely got one murder on our hands, and maybe more. My investigation has revealed that much, hasn't it?"

The War Admiral walked close to Took.

Took gulped.

"Next time, Took, before you use my name, ask me first," he said.

Took nodded.

"Now," said the War Admiral, speaking completely normally, "I do believe you have stumbled onto something important, which is why I've let you proceed. Although sometimes your untamed approach has a tendency to backfire, sometimes you pick up on things the rest of us don't. What do you have to report so far?"

Took was busy trying to decode the back-handed compliment he had just received. He recovered quickly, saying, "Not sure, sir. We need to investigate more. Something is definitely going on there."

"Proceed," said the War Admiral. "And feel free to use my name if it will help your investigation further."

"Thanks!" Then, suddenly unsure if the War Admiral was being serious or sarcastic, he gulped.

"Dismissed," said the War Admiral.

Took and Obe filed out.

Captain Dulin stepped out of the background, while the War Admiral chuckled softly.

"I wouldn't have found it so amusing, sir," said Dulin.

The War Admiral stopped laughing. "But he is on to something. I've been studying the reports. Farm production has been slowly declining."

"Odusk has explained-"

"Yes, and we've been very quick to accept his explanations," said the War Admiral. "I'm a soldier, Captain, not an administrator; if I were a good administrator I would have noticed and looked into this problem months ago. But administration was never my specialty...." He looked as if he

were remembering something, or someone.

"You're thinking of Quick," said Dulin.

"He was one of the best administrators there ever was, as well as the bulwark of the Alliance. He ran the Directorate more efficiently than its ever been run, before or since."

"It's a pity he died in that freak accident," said Dulin. "He could have been very helpful in our war against the Insectoids."

"Yes, a pity," said the War Admiral.

"So what do we have?" said Obe. Took was in his bunk, reading something.

"I don't know," said Took. "I can't make heads or tails of these farm output statistics," he said, holding up a pad. "For all I know, Odusk could be telling the truth."

"Why are you focusing so much on farm output?" said Obe. "What does that have to do with the murders?"

"I've heard rumors of surplus food being sold throughout the fleet, on a kind of black market," said Took. "I've never been able to locate this black market, if it really exists, but the thought occurs to me that if someone's been skimming food off the top, and Jord found out about it--"

"That would make him a liability," said Obe. "But it doesn't make sense.

Jord was just a farmhand. Jerensky, who handled the security and surveillance system, was a key man. But I think Jerensky was killed only to cover up whatever really happened to Jord."

"Well, I know one thing," said Took. "I won't get the answer here, wrestling with these figures." Suddenly a thoughtful look crossed his face. "But I do know someone who is very good with figures."

"I really shouldn't be talking to you, Mr. Took, I'm supposed to be working," said Bill Holiday, rapidly raking the soil.

"I thought you only worked three hours a day," said Took.

"Well, this is one of them," said Bill.

He grabbed Bill by the shoulders. "Bill! Bill, two people have been murdered. More could be in danger. We need to find out who's behind this."

"What do you want of me?" Bill said.

Took showed him his pad. "I need you to help me make sense of these figures. If this ship really is producing eight tons of harvest every month--"

"Oh, that's not right," said Bill. "It's almost double that."

"Double?" said Took. "How do you know?"

"Easy," said Bill. "Simply count the number of outbound transports filled with produce that leave the ship every week. There are 14 of them. If you assume a capacity of--" He ran through a set of numbers too quickly for Took to follow.

Took wasn't listening especially hard, he was getting a remote link to the fleet scheduler. Bill was right; there were an average of 14 transports leaving the Marist every week. Why so many transports if the crop yield was so low? Took brought up another manifest, showing food distribution schedules; only eight of the fourteen transports stopped at ships where food was scheduled to be delivered. Where were the other six transports going?

"Hey kid, would you like a free shuttle ride?" said Took.

They hung in space a short distance behind the Marist. The transport they

were waiting for finally launched.

The transport leisurely took its time setting a course, and Took waited until its course was set and let it travel some distance before setting a course to follow.

"Got an exit vector, Obe?" said Took.

"Could be one of three ships," said Obe, checking the scanners. "Wait, no, it's probably the fast attack destroyer Yorkshire."

"Then that's where we're going," said Took. He pressed a comm. "Yorkshire control, this is Glory shuttle eight, requesting landing clearance."

"This is Yorkshire control," came a military voice. "Purpose of visit?"

"Ah, engineering inspection tour," said Took. "Regulations."

"Glory Eight, you're cleared for landing in the bay."

They landed only a few minutes behind the transport. When they exited, Obe whispered, "Look."

Sealed crates were being unloaded from the transport. Workmen started to move them.

"Let's go," said Took, eager to follow.

"In our fighter pilot uniforms?" said Obe. "Don't you think that will be a bit conspicuous?"

"He's right, Mr. Took," said Bill.

"Thanks for the advice, kid," said Took. "All right."

They went the opposite direction, into a changing room just off the landing bay. They borrowed two worker uniforms and changed into them.

No one gave them a second glance as they followed the workers carrying the crates down below. When they got to the lower decks, they were in for a

shock.

In one of the corridors that supposedly housed the ship's munitions, the crates of food were being stacked one on top of the other! One of the Yorkshire's officers was directing the workmen, while another was haggling with the foreman.

"I'd better hang back," said Bill. "That's one of my bosses, he'll recognize me."

Took nodded, and lifted one of the crates to give him an excuse to walk by the officer who was talking to the foreman.

"-All right," said the officer. "10% more. But you can't keep raising your prices forever."

"You know as well as I do that you can make 50% above that on the resale market," said the foreman, a heavy set balding man. "Shall we transfer the credits now?"

Took heard all that he needed to. When they linked up with Bill, who was waiting around the bend in the corridor, he only needed to ask one question: "What is the name of that foreman?"

"Roberto Virtuoso," said Bill. "Is he going to get in trouble?"

"You might say that," said Took. He turned to Obe. "Ready?"

"I think so," said Obe.

"Let's get back to the Glory and dig up what we can on this Virtuoso from the fleet memory banks," said Took. "I'm sure he's not the man at the top."

"Odusk?"

"He's suspect number one," said Took.

They boarded the shuttle and lifted off without incident. "What amazes me

is how openly they did it," said Obe. "I wonder how far this web of corruption extends?"

"I don't know," said Took. "If they're so relaxed about it, what that tells me is that they've let down their guard because they've been doing this for so long that they don't expect to be caught."

Suddenly, a red light lit up on his panel, and alarms sounded.

"What's wrong?" said Obe.

"The engines are overheating," said Took.

"Shut them down!" said Obe.

"I can't!" said Took, desperately pressing buttons. The whine of the engines grew louder. "They're going to blow if we can't shut them down."

"Let me have a look, Mr. Took!" said Bill.

Took looked at Obe, who shrugged. "Go ahead, kid!" said Took.

Bill immediately took over the console, moving his hands almost faster than he could see.

The whine of the engines grew into a roar.

"That's not fair," said Bill. "They've deactivated the engine controls."

He pulled up a series of computer codes on the monitor, started working furiously.

"Ah... kid... I'm not sure we have time for that," said Took, trying his best to be heard over the roar.

"We're at 105% maximum, we're going to blow at any second!"

"Hm, yeah," said Bill.

The roar grew so loud that they had to cover their ears. But the kid kept working, hands frantically moving, until he suddenly finished what he was

doing, and pressed one of the buttons that Took had pressed before. The whine of the engines died down.

"What did you do?" said Took.

"It was a soft-disconnect--in the software only," said Bill. "Sorry, I should've realized that sooner."

"It's ok, kid," said Took weakly.

Bill managed to restore the controls and assured them it was safe to return to the Glory. While he was doing so he pulled up a comm log. "Here it is," said Bill.

"Here what is?" Took asked.

"We received an anonymous signal that triggered the engine overload," said Bill. "It was set up to be triggered remotely."

"Where did the signal come from?" Took asked.

"The Marist," said Bill.

"Clever," said Obe. "They blow us up not when we're leaving the Marist, but the Yorkshire, to divert attention away from them."

"Yeah, clever," said Took, appearing to agree, but not sounding fully convinced. An explosion now would've drawn attention to the Yorkshire, something the black marketeers shouldn't be interested in doing.

"An interesting report," said the War Admiral. "So now you're perceived as the threat."

"Yes, sir," said Took.

"So you're convinced that Odusk has been producing extra food, falsifying records, and selling this food on the black market for his own profit?"

"Yes sir."

"And this has been a widespread practice, going on for years without our

noticing?"

"Yes... yes sir," said Took.

"Where's the evidence and exactly who is involved, Captain?"

"I'm close to getting the evidence we need, sir," said Took.

"Very good. Keep me posted with regular reports," said the War Admiral.

Then, as an afterthought, he said, "Why don't you take David along with you, while you wrap up your investigation?"

"Did the War Admiral order me to accompany you?" the Ken Pilot asked.

"Not exactly an order... well, maybe it was. It was a suggestion, but from the War Admiral, you know?" said Took.

The Ken Pilot gave him a dead look. He obviously wasn't eager for this assignment.

"We'll be docking with the Marist in five minutes," said Obe. "Do you have the clearance codes?"

"Yep," said Took. "And we arranged for our good friend Mr. Virtuoso to be called off-ship for the next few hours."

After they landed they found Bill purposefully loitering in the corridor near Virtuoso's quarters. He nodded as they approached.

"Ready?" said Took.

Bill nodded.

Took used his access codes to open the door to Virtuoso's quarters. They entered, completely ignoring the contents of his quarters--except for the computer. Bill took a seat, started typing rapidly. "Hm, encrypted."

"Can you handle it?" Took asked.

"Computers are only my hobby," said the kid, typing rapidly.

"Do you need help? We could call in a specialist-"

"I said they were only a hobby. That's because they're so easy," said Bill scornfully.

"Oh," said Took.

"Here you are," said Bill, slowing down the pace of his mad typing. Files started appearing on the screen.

"Names... contacts... dollar amounts... production figures... it does look complete," said Took. "Can you do a search for Bob Jord?"

"Accessing," said Bill, typing rapidly.

In a few seconds part of a file came up. It was an internal log. It read, it part "Jord has caught onto us. He saw one of the transports being loaded and started asking too many questions. I think he has become a liability."

"Well, that seems pretty clear," said Obe.

"Yes," said Took frowning. "It does."

"I'll call Captain Dulin," said Obe. "He'll have security brought here from the Glory."

They were actually able to locate nearly 200 conspirators; a surprisingly large number, given how secret the conspiracy had been, but not so surprising, given how widespread the black market had grown. Odusk had indeed been skimming farm produce and reselling it privately across the fleet to fleet officers and sailors, who in turn resold it to others. At first he had skimmed only 5% of the produce, then 10%, and then more and more, until he expanded production as much as he could and was skimming nearly 40% of the agricultural produce. Only a small core of the farm workers received the vast majority of the profits from the skimming

operation; the rest of the farmers involved simply got paid to move shipments, or to look the other way. And many farmers, like Bill, simply didn't know what was going on.

The War Admiral dealt with the profiteers sternly, sentencing the ringleaders to confinement in the brig for years; he reassigned others to the maintenance section of the civilian merchant ships, tending the dirtiest jobs imaginable; and a few he left on probation. He could hardly have put the entire farming staff in confinement; manpower was too sorely needed.

A stickier matter concerned what to do with the fleet officers who had been involved in the trade. Again, a handful, seven officers and a number of crewmen, had been involved in actively making a profit. These were court martialed and sentenced to varying terms in confinement. But then there were forty seven other officers and men who were more peripherally involved, whose fate was not so easy to determine. The fourteen officers in the group were demoted or reprimanded, and reassigned; and many of the crewers were also reprimanded and reassigned.

"I'm really surprised how widespread it was," said North, shaking his head. He was talking to Dulin and Wren in private. "They made us look like fools."

"We're military men, not administrators," said Dulin tersely. "That's why we put Odusk in charge in the first place, because he had a background in administration."

"Well, now we'll need to find someone else," said the War Admiral. "One minor mystery remains, though."

"Sir?"

"No one ever admitted to killing Jord and Jerensky."

"Do you think anyone would want to admit to capital murder?"

"No," said North. "But a number of conspirators have confessed and testified against their fellow conspirators, in return for more lenient sentences. I would've thought that someone would have pointed us to the guilty party. Nor have we identified the person responsible for the attempt on Captain Took's life."

"It's regrettable," said Dulin. "Either Odusk ordered it, or one of his chief underlings like Virtuoso did. In fact, Virtuoso implied in his personal files that he got rid of Jord."

"Implied, but didn't admit," said North. "No, I get the impression that there's still some unfinished business here."

"It would be nice to know who the killer is," said Dulin. "But he's almost certainly in confinement; he won't be harming anyone else for some time to come."

The War Admiral said nothing. The War Admiral wasn't the only one with doubts. Took reflected on some of his own as he waited for the prisoner to be brought from his holding cell in the Glory. In a few moments he faced the welcoming glare of ex-director Odusk.

"You! Have you come to gloat?" said Odusk caustically.

"No," said Took. "I want to know why you killed Jord, and why you tried to kill me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Odusk.

"You rigged my shuttle's engines to overload, remember?"

"I did no such thing," said Odusk. "I admit to using my position to my

advantage; there's no sense in denying it, given the evidence you amassed.

But I didn't kill anyone."

"Then one your underlings did."

"I never ordered any such thing."

"What if they did it without telling you?"

Odusk snorted. "Killed someone? Without clearing it with me? I hope you're a better pilot than you are an investigator."

"Why?"

"Don't you find it convenient that all the details of my guilt were conveniently stored on Virtuoso's database, just waiting to be cracked?"

"Well...."

"Guess what--he never had access to that information."

"You're saying it was fabricated?"

"No, it was real enough--stolen from my database," said Odusk. "And put on Virtuoso's. Someone was helping you get to us."

"Who?"

"The killer, probably," said Odusk. "Once you figured out what else we were doing, it wouldn't take much imagination to blame us for the murders."

"That's an interesting theory," said Took. "But how do I know that you're just not trying to avoid the blame for committing the murders? After all, you were never charged with the murders, and the case is still open; you have no incentive to admit it. And we still practice capital punishment in the military," Took added grimly.

"Why would I want to kill Jord?" said Odusk.

"To silence him when he discovered-"

"Jord WORKED for me," said Odusk.

"What?"

"He was on my payroll, he knew what was going on all along!" said Odusk.

"Then why wasn't his name listed in the records-"

"It was listed in my records," said Odusk. "But I'll bet that his name disappeared from the list before you got to it."

Took leaned back in his chair, stunned. Jord had been working for Odusk?

If that could be proved, then there definitely was another player

involved. But who could it be? Someone who had the ability to kill. And someone who was exceptionally good with computers.

Took was once again on the Marist, where the hustle and bustle of the new work teams coming aboard were causing a babble of confusion and excitement. He had just finished taping the latest installment of his muckraking special, but he wasn't quite ready to move on to other matters, not yet.

He made his way to one of the observation posts, where Bill was filling in for one of the observers who had been arrested.

"Hey Mr. Took!" said Bill.

"Hey Bill," said Took dully. "I see you've gotten a promotion."

"Well, gee, it may only be temporary," said Bill.

"You know, Bill, there's something that's been bothering me," said Took.

"I just spoke with Mr. Odusk earlier today."

"Gee, how's he doing?"

"He says he's pleasantly surprised by his new accommodations, and is actively searching for a good interior decorator," said Took. "But that's

getting off-topic. He also told me that Jord was on his payroll, that he knew all about the black market operations."

"Gee, really?"

"Gee, really," said Took. "I did a little digging, and found out that Jord had a secret account, that was keyed to a special number chip found in his quarters."

"Interesting--I guess," said Bill.

"Interesting, because if he was working for Odusk, why would he be killed?"

"Beats me," Bill shrugged.

"And why didn't we find his name in Virtuoso's records, the records that you, Bill, retrieved for us?"

"Beats me," said Bill, shrugging his bony shoulders.

"And why is it a fellow as smart as you didn't realize that there was black market activity going on around here?"

"Oh, I never pay attention to such things," Bill assured Took. "If it doesn't involve science, or numbers, I'm really not interested." Then, a thought occurred to him, "Gee, you don't think I killed Bob, did you?"

"Well, now that you mention it.... yes" said Took. He stood ready, watching Bill closely. Would he bolt? Would he try to draw a hidden weapon?

But Bill just shook his head. "You got me all wrong, Mr. Took. Why would I want to kill Bob? He was my friend."

"I don't know," said Took. "But we found those records a little too easily, and you had the opportunity. You worked here, where he died, and

you could easily have tampered with the files before we recovered them."

"It sounds like a lot of guesswork to me," said Bill. "But gee, you seemed pretty worked up about it. Why don't you give me a few minutes to look into it?" He turned to his keyboard, started typing.

"What are you doing?" said Took, his hand close to his holstered blaster.

"Going into the fleet's library system. Do you have access codes for that?"

"Uh..." said Took, debating whether he should give the ones that Captain Dulin had provided.

Bill's hands moved furiously over the keyboard. "Never mind," he said, as the words "Access granted" appeared on the screen.

"You can break into our system that easily?"

"Sure," said Bill. "It's really no effort at all. Hang on, give me a moment or two." He started digging into the records, and pulled up the file on Bob Jord.

"Gee, that's odd," said Bill.

"What?" said Took, not noticing anything.

"It says here that Bob joined the fleet at Orotis," said Bill.

"So he did," said Took.

"And this file is dated five years ago, when the fleet was at Orotis."

"So it was," said Took.

"So why did the internal directory listing-" and Bill pointed to a corner of the screen, "-say that this listing was created four years ago, a year after Bob came aboard?"

"I... I don't know," said Took.

"Give me a minute, let me dig some more," said Bill. "This kind of

investigating is fun, isn't it?"

"Keep digging, Bill."

Bill kept typing. "It's pretty easy now, actually. All I have to do is check the directory for a file that was purged on the same day this one was created, and reactivate it."

"Wouldn't a previous file have been deleted?"

Bill gave Took a pitying look. "There's no such thing as a delete when it comes to computers, Mr. Took." He typed away madly. "Here we go."

Took gave a low whistle when he saw what appeared on the screen next.

"His real name was Bob Rigil," said Took. "At least, that's the name that he boarded the ship with on Orotis."

"And then a year later he got into the ship's database and created a different identity?" said the War Admiral.

"Yes," said Took. "He started off as Bob Rigil, a cargo hand on the merchant ship Crawler, and then soon after he was Bob Jord, farmhand on the Marist."

"Why would he need an alias here, in the fleet?"

"Unknown," said Took. "But another thing we confirmed was that he did receive payments from Odusk's organization. It seems unlikely that his own organization had him killed."

"Curiouser and curiouser," said the War Admiral. "A farm hand tries to cover up a past as a cargo hand. And we have a murder without a motive. This Bob Rigil wasn't wanted by fleet security for any crimes, was he?"

"No," said Took.

"Hm," said the War Admiral. "Keep digging, Captain."

"Why would someone want to kill a farmhand?" Took muttered, lying in his bunk.

"Maybe they didn't like his tomatoes," said Obe, lying in the bunk above him.

"He switched names, jobs, and ships. He was obviously hiding from something," said Took.

"Well, if he was hiding from something, or someone, it wasn't a bright idea for him to appear on your vidcast," said Obe.

"Yeah... that's it!" said Took excitedly.

"What's it?" said Obe.

"That's why he was killed!"

"What?"

"Whoever was after him saw him on the vidcast, recognized him, and killed him," said Took. "Remember how reluctant he was to appear on camera?"

"Yes," said Obe. "Yes, now that you mention it, I do."

"But that gets us back to the original question," said Took. "Why would anyone want to kill him?"

"Maybe he irritated someone in the fleet," said Obe.

"Or something he irritated someone before he got here," said Took. He sat up, moved to the terminal on the nearby desk, and activated the voice interface.

"Computer, activate voice interface, voice authorization, Took, Idaho J, Command Captain."

"Activated," said the soft voice.

"Access Orotis database."

"Access was limited to brief linkup accomplished during our orbit in the

Orotis system."

"Did access include news retrieval?"

"Affirmative."

"Search parameters, Bob Jord or Bob Rigil."

"Searching." Then, a few seconds later. "Found. One reference, relating to the criminal known as "The Modem"."

Took gave Obe a look. Jackpot!

"Provide text download of reference," said Took, staring at the screen.

"-A criminal known as "The Modem", War Admiral," said Took. "Not much was known about him. He was a computer expert who committed a series of crimes on Orotis. His specialty was stealing funds electronically, or stealing information and selling it to the highest bidder." Took paused. "He also was wanted for murder."

"Where does the murdered farmhand come into this?" said the War Admiral.

"Rigil was a low-level worker at a bank, working late one night when he stumbled on "The Modem" working on a secured terminal in someone else's executive office. Rigil was smart enough to get out of there and call security. But by the time security got there, The Modem was gone." Took paused. "This made the news about two days before we arrived, which is why we picked it up when we linked into the planetary net. Rigil provided a general description of what The Modem looked like, but only Rigil could really identify this guy. Rigil became an instant celebrity, and put under close police guard."

"And then we arrived," said the War Admiral.

"Both of them must have gotten aboard one of the merchant ships we took

on," said Took. "I'm guessing that about a year after we left Orotis, their paths must have crossed. Only Rigil spotted The Modem without getting spotted himself. That's when he changed his name and purged his identity. Then he spent the next four years laying low... until I captured him on video," said Took grimly.

"You couldn't have known," said the War Admiral. "Do we have any idea who this "Modem" is or even what he looks like?"

"No," said Took. "But we do know that he was on the Marist when Jord, or Rigil, was killed, and on the Marist again to launch the signal to my shuttle. If he's not a crewmember, he's someone who's been there several times, and there should be records in the transit log."

"And what is the result of your search so far?"

"It's unlikely that this Modem is a current member of the Marist crew; if the Modem had been a member of the crew, he would have spotted and killed Rigil long before now. Transit records show nineteen possibles who were visiting the Marist at the time that Rigil was killed, and eight possibles who were there when the signal was sent to my shuttle."

"And the overlap, people who were there during both times?"

"None," said Took. "He's gotten to the transit logs, obviously."

"I'll assign some computer specialists to assist in the search," said the War Admiral.

"I already have Bill looking into things," said Took.

"Yes, that's nice," said the War Admiral. "But it would also be nice to have fleet officers responsible for internal security looking into this too."

"Oh. Oh. I see. Ok," said Took reluctantly.

He returned to his quarters, and activated his comm. "Bill, have you got anything yet?"

"No," said Bill. "He's covered his tracks pretty thoroughly. Much more professional than Bob did, by the way. I'm still searching the database though. I'm very impressed by your professional ratings; did you know you have several commendations from the War Admiral in your record?"

"Bill, you're supposed to be searching for the killer!" Took said.

"Sorry. I got distracted for a minute."

"Hacking into the Glory's personnel database qualifies as a minute's distraction?"

"Sure," said Bill. "I'll keep looking."

"You do that," said Took, frowning. The Modem would have been sure to cover his tracks thoroughly, probably erasing all records of his boarding on Orotis, and anything else that could be used to trace his identity.

But what if a record existed that The Modem didn't realize existed, or knew existed but didn't know the importance of erasing?

"Bill, you still there?" said Took, unsure of how long he had been lost in thought.

"Yeah."

"Do a search of the Crawler."

"The Crawler?"

"Personnel transfers and visits to the ship, about the same time that Rigil changed identities."

"I'll dig into it, but it may take a little while."

"I'm going to bed," said Took. "Call me when you have something."

He dropped off to sleep, and was only awakened by the persistent beeping of his terminal several hours later.

"What is it?" he said, a bit sleepy. He flicked on his terminal. There was a priority e-mail, waiting from Bill.

"Took, come quickly, I've found something," Took slowly read. "But we have to meet in private." Attached was the location of a storeroom on the lower decks of the Marist. Well, Bill must really have found something important. But why didn't he simply call over the comm?

Took yawned, kicked Obe's bunk.

"Leave me alone," said Obe, not opening his eyes.

"I think we're getting to the bottom of things," said Took. "Obe, don't you want to be there to see when I break this story wide open?"

When the shuttle docked with the Marist, they headed off for the location that Bill had specified.

"I still don't know why he didn't just tell you what he found over the comm," said Obe.

"Maybe he thought our comm lines were being tapped," said Took.

They walked through the empty corridors of the Marist; the ship was in "night" phase, and only a skeleton staff was on the upper decks, monitoring the farms and life support.

"17-B, here we are," said Took, fingering the contact which opened the door. The inside was dim, lit only by a light source on the other end of the room.

"Bill?" he said, cautiously entering the room, followed by Obe.

They were in a storeroom of some sort; they made their way past the crates to the lightsource, and, around a corner, found Bill.

All tied up to a chair and gagged.

"Uh-oh," said Took.

"Don't move," said a voice behind them.

"Definitely uh-oh," said Took. Then, "I know you said you didn't want us to move, but can we get a variance to turn around?"

"Slowly," said the voice.

They turned to find themselves facing a tall, thin man with brown hair, pointing a blaster at both of them.

"The Modem, I presume?" said Took.

The man nodded.

"You wouldn't mind filling in a few gaps; before you kill us, I mean," said Took.

The Modem stared at them, considering. "As long as it doesn't take long," said the Modem.

"You killed Rigil when you spotted him on the vid."

"Yes," said The Modem. "You can't imagine how surprised I was to see him."

And then, in a darker tone. "But, then, you can't imagine how surprised he was to see me."

Took didn't pursue that line of questioning, remembering the grisly description of the thrasher. "And you killed Jerensky because he had the security video of your attack on Rigil."

"Yes."

"And you tried to pin the blame on Odusk."

The Modem nodded.

"And the attempt on our lives?"

"Yes to that too," said the Modem, who seemed mildly pleased to finally be able to recount his feats. "At first, I thought killing you would be simpler. But you didn't cooperate and die quickly."

"Sorry," said Took.

"I was of course quite aware of the black market organization, and it occurred to me that, if logically presented, you might accept them as the culprits."

"Only I didn't."

"No, you didn't," said the Modem. "And then I detected this young man searching in areas of the database where he shouldn't have been."

"And that set off an alarm," said Took.

"And that set off an alarm," The Modem agreed. "I secured this young man, and sent a message to secure you."

"And now... after having confessed, you're ready to give yourself up?"

The Modem laughed. "Not quite. This young man has one last service to perform. He's going to go into the database to help me remove any possible reference to me or my activities."

"And then?"

"And then... well, you have seen my face," said The Modem. "It's not enough to get rid of you, Captain. You're too persistent, with too much free time on your hands."

"What if I promised to take up a new hobby?"

"It's too late for that, Captain," said The Modem.

"Bill will never cooperate."

"Mmm Mmm," said Bill, through his gag.

"Oh, he'll cooperate," said The Modem, touching an electroblade that was

hanging from his belt.

"I guess I was pretty gullible to fall into your trap and be lured here by a simple e-mail message," said Took, speaking louder than usual, and very artificial and mechanical like.

"Yes, I guess you were," said the Modem.

At that minute they heard a swishing, like the door of the compartment opening, and then closing. But from their positions behind the crates they couldn't see who it was.

The Modem put his finger to his lips for them to keep quiet, and raised his blaster menacingly. If they spoke or made any noise, he would shoot. They heard the quiet sounds of a methodical footstep. One, then another, then another. Getting closer to them.

Took looked at Obe. Obe looked at Took. Bill looked bewildered.

The footsteps came closer. And then, around the corner, they saw-- Ken Pilot, 04.

"Don't move," said the Modem, gripping his weapon tightly. He was fortunate enough to have Took, Obe, and the Ken Pilot bunched together in the same field of fire.

"Couldn't you have come from behind him?" Took sighed.

"He knew I was coming when the door opened," said the Ken Pilot.

"You could at least have had your weapon drawn," said Took.

"Mmmm Mmmm," Bill added.

"An unexpected guest," said The Modem, his eyes narrowing.

"He was listening to my open comm the whole time," said Took. "The War Admiral appointed the Ken Pilot as my bodyguard for the duration of this

investigation. He flew here with us on the shuttle. Only he was supposed to come in and catch The Modem unaware," he said, glaring at the Ken Pilot. "With a DRAWN weapon."

"There's no way I can silence an active door," said the Ken Pilot.

"You could at least have had your weapon drawn," said Took.

"It wasn't necessary," said the Ken Pilot.

"You're the Graftonite," said The Modem.

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot. "But I've been off-planet for a long time. My reflexes have slowed. They might even be as slow as yours, if you're quick enough."

"K, unless you're going to draw and shoot him first while he's got a gun pointed at you, please don't provoke him," said Took.

"All right!" said The Modem. "Turn around, all of you! Slowly! Facing away from me."

Took and Obe complied, but the Ken Pilot just stood there, as if he were calculating something.

"Unless you think you're faster than a half depressed trigger finger, you'd better comply," said The Modem, his eyes glinting and narrowing.

The Ken Pilot considered a second more, and then turned away like the others.

"Now, I want each of you to remove your weapon from its holster, and then let it drop to the ground. And when you move, I want you to do it slowly! Graftonite, you go first."

"That's pretty smart," said the Ken Pilot. "After all, there's no way I can draw and fire on you if I'm not even looking at you, is there?" He said it lazily, as if he were bored, or mildly amused.

"Less talk, more action!" screamed The Modem. "You could be useful as hostages for Bill's good behavior, but if it takes too much effort, I may just change my mind and shoot you now."

"All right," said the Ken Pilot mildly. Still facing away from The Modem, his hand slowly went to his blaster, and rested on its butt.

"Pull it out slowly, and drop it!"

The Ken Pilot slowly pulled the blaster out of its holster. Then, in a movement almost too quick to see, he flicked the gun backwards and pulled the trigger.

They turned to see The Modem screaming, clutching the charred remains of his gun hand as he twisted to the ground, sobbing.

Took and Obe quickly drew their guns.

"You couldn't even see him and you were able to shoot him that precisely?" said Took. "Do you have one of those electronic humming sensors build into your gunbelt?"

"It wasn't so difficult," said the Ken Pilot. "After all, I saw exactly where he was before I turned around."

"Excellent work, Command Captain," said the War Admiral. "You know, I've always felt that your vidcasts were important to keeping the fleet's morale up. But you did two useful tasks this week, and you've done a really fine job."

"Thanks, War Admiral," Took said. "I just wished we could have located The Modem before we broadcast that vid we did with Rigil."

"You had no way of knowing what would happen," said the War Admiral. "It was random chance. I don't doubt that this Modem is responsible for a

number of unsolved crimes in the fleet. But now, like Odusk, he'll never be able to harm anyone again."

"Will he get the death penalty?"

"Perhaps," said the War Admiral. "The only other alternatives are banishment, or permanent confinement. I'll be holding the trial next week--one of my duties I'm less fond of," said the War Admiral grimly.

"Based on his confession to you, his guilt is clear. He could face life confinement, or banishment, or capital punishment. We'll see." He turned away. "Was there anything else?"

"Hm," said Took. "Just one more thing, War Admiral. Are there any openings in engineering for a civilian engineer?"

"We don't take civilians on the Glory for essential ship's functions, Iday," said the War Admiral. "You should know that."

"Well, there's a special case I think you should know about, in case you're of a mind to make an exception....." Chapter 6: Gifts and Traps From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 7 year after Vitalics: As our supplies continue to dwindle, so does fleet morale. We've managed to be reasonably self-sustaining with our food and air supplies (although we've been on short rations at times too). Fuel or power hasn't been an acute problem, since we've mounted hydrogen collectors on several of the ships, . The problem is dedicated equipment--engineering components for the ships of the fleet, especially the Wildcats. It's gotten so bad that two full squadrons have been deactivated, as their ships have been cannibalized for spare parts to keep the other squadrons running. Needless to say, this hasn't done much for the morale of the Wildcat pilots.

And they're not the only ones. More and more, I hear voices of dissent,

from those who have lost faith in our quest. They say we should stop our fruitless search for Chent technology, and find a habitable planet to settle on. They ignore the fact that the Insectoids will hunt us wherever we go, preferring to believe that it's only the fleet they're after. This "homesteader" faction has been around for some time, but their voices have grown stronger, especially when we approach a habitable planet, as our scouts are doing now. I am concerned that sooner or later this split will become more than words and manifest itself in action, or even mutiny. It might be easier to let those who want to settle to do just that.

But those who left would be signing their own death warrants. I won't allow that to happen because of my inaction. Not again.

"There, I picked it up on my scanner!" said Took, checking the readout on his 150-B.

"Where?" said Obe.

"Relaying the coordinates now," said Took. He pressed a button. "Got it?"

"Yeah," said Obe. "Let's check it out."

They angled down into the atmosphere.

"Isn't it nice that these monuments always seem to be on habitable worlds?" said Took. "Clear, fresh air, mountains, trees, fields...."

"Yeah, but that really stokes the homesteader movement," said Obe.

"Those guys are idiots," said Took dismissively. "I mean, it's nice to get some fresh air, but who wants to spend the rest of their lives being a farmer?"

"I'm getting a fix," said Obe. "It's in that forest, down there."

"In the forest?" Took looked down at the countryside.

"I don't see any good place to land," said Obe.

"What about there," said Took.

"Where?"

"Two o'clock."

"You couldn't land a microchip there," said Obe. "We'll have to let the marines make first contact on this one." Transports and shuttles, with their vertical landing ability, could land in tighter spaces than starfighters.

"They get all the fun!" said Took. He activated the fleet com. "Glory, this is Took; how are you?"

Another pair of fighters, led by Captain Ben Hunter of Wildcat-B and wingman Jane Tiegs, were simultaneously on long distance patrol in a completely different direction.

"Just empty space out here," said Tiegs. "The nearest solar system is several light years away."

"We've still got to be on watch," said Hunter. "You never know what you'll find."

Hunter was entirely correct. Suddenly, a blip appeared on their scanners.

"Where did that come from?" said Tiegs, wondering why it didn't show up before.

"It's very small," said Hunter, flipping a switch. "It looks like it just came live when we entered into its range. We're being scanned."

"It's too small even to be an enemy fighter," said Tiegs. "My scanner can't identify it. What is it, some sort of Insectoid spy probe?"

"If so, they've got a take on us," said Hunter. "Switching to weapons-"

Suddenly, his comm signaled. "Wait a minute, I'm getting something on the

comm-"

Just as suddenly, there was a small flash ahead, and the blip disappeared.

"What happened?" Tiegs asked.

"It self destructed," said Hunter. "But not before sending a message to us."

"Expeditionary Force Alpha, you're cleared for launch," said Captain Dulin. He watched the holoscreen as first the transport carrying the marines and then the shuttle carrying the research scientists launched.

Two Wildcats from Bay Two launched seconds later to provide escort to the planet.

"Another monument," said the War Admiral.

"I hope we get more out of it than the last one," said Wren ruefully. They had spent days studying the last one, the "Whistler Monument", to no avail; Stevenson's people couldn't even figure out why it whistled.

"Sir, we're getting a signal from Captain Hunter's patrol," said Lieutenant Shishman. With a nod from North he put it on speakers.

"-and it self destructed after relaying the message."

"A set of coordinates, five light years distant in a neighboring solar system," said the War Admiral.

"This could very well be an Insectoid trap," said Dulin.

"Very possibly," said the War Admiral. But he stood very still for a moment, as if weighing the alternatives. "Any signs of other ships in the area?"

"None sir; we're surrounded by empty space," said Hunter.

"Very well," said the War Admiral. "Do you know where the sensor device exploded?"

"Yes sir, we have the coordinates marked in. But there's nothing there now."

"Hmm," said North. "Stand by."

"Sir?"

"Remain at your current position," said the War Admiral, closing the comm.

He turned to Dulin. "Captain, launch a recovery team in a shuttle."

"Yes sir," said Dulin. Then, looking confused, he said, "What are they going to recover?"

"Fragments from that self-destructing sensor," said the War Admiral.

The marines were out of the transport even before the engines had cooled, forming a sweeping perimeter as they moved to secure the monument. They had only a short distance to go when they reached it, a tall black shape in a clearing by the trees.

"Area secure," said Lieutenant Kirby, the duty officer.

Several minutes later they could hear the whine of the shuttle dropping down and tucking in behind the transport. When the scientists landed, they found an escort of two marines waiting to take them to the monument. The War Admiral had ordered the scientists to be well protected.

Professor Stevenson and his colleagues slowly made the short walk to the monument. Their faces brightened when they saw it, and they immediately started scanning it with complex equipment.

The EVA officer cycled through the shuttle's airlock, grasping the pieces of the device that had destroyed itself. He put them in an experiment box and handed them to one of the Glory's mechanical engineers, who started

scanning the bits and pieces curiously.

After a few minutes he nodded and said, "Get me the Glory."

"Of human manufacture?" said the War Admiral.

"Yes sir," said the holoimage of the officer on the shuttle. "There aren't enough pieces to tell me what it was supposed to do, but the bearing and type of the metal--it's pure Alliance, sir. Manufactured recently, too."

"Really? How recent?"

"Spectral dating suggests this is eight, maybe nine months old," said the officer. "If this device was sent here immediately after manufacture, it hasn't been here that long."

"Interesting," said the War Admiral. "A human-manufactured device put out here only several months ago, in an area where we can confidently say that no human has ever been before."

"It must be part of a trap on the part of the Insectoids," said Dulin.

"Really, Captain? And why did they use a device of human manufacture?"

"They anticipated that we would analyze the remains," said Dulin. The War Admiral arched an eyebrow at him, frowning. Dulin felt uncomfortable.

"What other possible explanation could there be?"

"The device was destroyed in an attempt to prevent us from learning of its origin," said the War Admiral. "If they had wanted us to know it was of human origin, they wouldn't have ordered it to destroy itself."

"I... I didn't consider that," said Dulin.

"Sir, no humans have ever been out this far," said Wren, coming to Dulin's defense.

"That we know of," said the War Admiral.

"Even if an explorer had been here, this device wasn't left by an errant adventurer."

"Agreed," said the War Admiral. "This was left specifically for us."

"But who, besides the Insectoids, knows we're out here?" said Wren.

"Who indeed?" said the War Admiral. He stood frowning a minute more, and then said, "I'll be in my office if I'm needed."

"Orders, sir?" said Dulin.

"Recall the shuttle," said the War Admiral.

"And the pilots?"

"Tell them to hold position," said the War Admiral.

"Sir?"

"Until further notice," said the War Admiral, as the door hissed behind him.

The marines were spaced out in the woods, in a rough circle around the monument and the landing area. That meant that each marine was only barely within eyesight of the other marines in their cordon. But Lieutenant Kirby only had two squads of men available and had deployed them as best he could. He ordered each trooper to report in every ten minutes and personally inspected each guard station every hour. He wondered how long the scientists would be this time. He hoped it wouldn't be as long as the last time, when they were at the whistler monument. It had been very annoying, camping there for days, listening to that thing whistle idiotically.

One of the guards, a Corporal Qaye, stared into the forest around him. It seemed nice and peaceful. A soft wind blew in the distance, causing the leaves of the trees to rattle a bit. And then Qaye heard a twig snap.

He was instantly alert, looking into the direction of the sound. It was behind some bushes. But he could see nothing.

He waited again, and heard another snapping sound, as if something was slowly walking towards him.

"Post eight," he said into his comm. "I hear something in the bushes. I'm going to check it out."

"You sent for me, sir?" said the Ken Pilot.

"Come in, David," said the War Admiral. "We have a situation I need a volunteer for."

The War Admiral explained about the mysterious signal. "My command crew believe it's almost certainly a trap, set by the Insectoids."

"A logical conclusion," said the Ken Pilot. And then, "But you don't believe it."

"Let's just say I'm not sure what to believe," said the War Admiral. "The Insectoids have set traps for us before, but rarely anything this subtle. I think the odds are that it is a trap. But it could also be something else."

"What else could it be?"

"That's what I want you to find out," said the War Admiral. "I want you to go in there."

"With what kind of support?"

"None," said the War Admiral, figuring that if anyone could survive a trap, it would be the Ken Pilot. "Unless you want support-"

"No," said the Ken Pilot, "They'll just slow me down."

"Incredible," said Professor Stevenson, murmuring with the other

scientists as they looked at an indicator on their scanning device.

"What, Professor?" said Lieutenant Kirby.

"This monument is six months old," said Stevenson.

"What?"

"It's made of simple titanium," said Stevenson. "It's a fraud."

"Just a moment," said Kirby, listening to one of his marines report something. "Qaye, come in."

There was silence on the other end.

"Corporal Qaye, report," said Kirby.

"Qaye here," came his voice. "False alarm. It was just a small animal."

"Very well," said Kirby. He turned to Stevenson. "I think we'd better get out of here."

"I quite agree," said Stevenson, shivering as he looked at the forest around him. Suddenly, it didn't look so tranquil.

Kirby switched to his command circuit. "Platoon, we're clearing out!"

The thing that spoke with Corporal Qaye's voice looked down at the mangled and bloody body of the marine. The thing turned the body over, studying the face and uniform. Its features, vaguely humanoid, shimmered, and then became an identical copy of Qaye's. The thing grabbed Qaye's equipment, and then started back for the shuttle.

"The team from the planet is returning," said Captain Dulin, turning away from the image of the Ken Pilot's starfighter, streaking away from the Glory.

"So soon?" the War Admiral said.

"Sir, the monument is a fake," said Dulin. "Stevenson reported that the monument was build several months ago, much like the pieces of the sensor

we recovered."

"What?" said the War Admiral. He got on the line and spoke to Stevenson himself for several minutes. When he closed the comm, he shook his head.

"It doesn't make any sense."

"Sir?"

"If they're trying to lure us somewhere else, what was the purpose of the monument?" said the War Admiral. "On the one hand, we have a monument luring us here, and on the other hand, we have a relayed message telling us to go several light years in another direction."

"They could have placed the monument to bring us here, and the sensor device to send us to the final ambush zone," said Dulin.

"No," said the War Admiral. "They already had us here. Why do they want us to go somewhere else?"

"Sir, I think we should recall the Ken Pilot," said Dulin.

The War Admiral made no answer, just walking slowly to his office.

"Sir?"

The War Admiral disappeared into his office.

"I've never seen him quite like this," said Dulin, turning to Wren.

"Puzzled, you mean?" said Wren.

The Ken Pilot reached the position where Hunter and Tiegs were holding position.

"Where are you going?" said Hunter.

"I'm going to the coordinates you were sent," said the Ken Pilot.

Hunter and Tiegs, parallel to each other, exchanged glances. "Alone?"

"Yes. The War Admiral says you're relieved," said the Ken Pilot.

Hunter watched the Ken Pilot fly past him. "We can't let you go in alone."

"No," agreed the Ken Pilot. "Only the War Admiral can do that."

"We'll remain here on point, in case you need help for a quick retreat."

"Fine," said the Ken Pilot. "Just don't get in the way or expect me to save you."

The transport and the shuttle docked with the Glory. The troopers casually filed out of the transport, and the scientists disembarked from the shuttle. An officer was waiting at the exit hatch, to escort Professor Stevenson to the War Admiral.

No one paid any attention to Corporal Qaye as he filed out with the rest of the marine detachment. When they reached the barracks, the very first thing he did was go to a public terminal and punch up a list of the officers in the chain of command.

"Are you certain?" said the War Admiral. "Perhaps it was simply a new monument created recently."

Stevenson looked disgusted. "The Chent have been dead for hundreds of thousands of years."

"But suppose one of them were still alive," said the War Admiral.

"The date of manufacture is only one piece of the puzzle," said Stevenson.

"This monument doesn't match the composition of any of the other monuments. It's simple titanium, something that we could have manufactured, or-"

"The Insectoids," said the War Admiral.

Stevenson nodded.

"Lieutenant, were there any incidents on the planet?" the War Admiral

asked.

"None, sir," said Kirby. "The scientists were safely escorted to and from the ship."

"No contacts of any kind?"

Kirby thought about Qaye's non-contact with the local animal life.

"Nothing of substance, sir."

"Substance?"

"One of my men encountered a small wild animal. The animal ran off without incident."

"Hm," said the War Admiral.

"If the Insectoids created this as a lure, then they know we're here," said Stevenson. "We should leave this system."

"Hm," said the War Admiral again.

"Sir?" said Dulin. "I agree."

"There's only one problem" said the War Admiral. "If this were a trap, the Insectoids would have sprung it by now."

The Ken Pilot streaked into the solar system indicated by the coordinates, ready for anything. The system had no planets, only a bright type C star.

It was as if whoever picked the coordinates choose a location where there would be no place to hide, no place to spring an ambush.

The Ken Pilot detected a blip on the sensors. Now that was interesting.

There was a very large cargo ship in the system. And, although the Ken Pilot didn't know the configuration, it was clearly a ship of human design.

The Ken Pilot briefly considered calling the War Admiral for instructions.

But if it were a trap, and the Insectoids homed in on the signal, he would be giving away the fleet's location.

No, the safest thing to do was to take a roundabout way back, make sure he wasn't followed, and rendezvous with the other fighters, head back to the Glory and report his findings.

Without hesitation, the Ken Pilot accelerated towards the large cargo ship.

"AA five on blue four," said Wren.

The War Admiral didn't move, but only continued to stare at the holographic puzzle. They were slowly assembling a three dimensional image bit by bit. Lately, that had been how they had been spending their off-duty time together.

"Sir?" she said, wondering if he had heard her.

"It won't work," said the War Admiral.

"Sir?" she said again.

"AA five fits too easily on blue four," said the War Admiral. He gestured to another piece of the puzzle. "We're not even ready for green five yet.

I think it will fit into brown sector, when we get to that part of the puzzle." But he seemed distracted, even as he said it.

Wren walked over to the War Admiral. "You're not really thinking about the puzzle, are you?"

"It's the first time they've been able to stump me, Stacy," said the War Admiral. "Usually, I can see in an instant what they're up to, but this time... I don't know, I just don't know."

"I still think it's a trap," said Wren.

"We've been in this solar system for nearly two days now, and still no

sign of attack," said the War Admiral. "When is the trap going to be sprung? No," he said, shaking his head. "If it's a trap, it's a new kind of trap, one with a kind of danger that we won't recognize, not until it's too late."

The Ken Pilot landed in the giant cargo ship's docking bay. His scanners had indicated no lifesigns, but he took nothing for granted. If it were a trap, most likely the ship would blow up the instant he landed.

And yet he landed. Something, instinct, perhaps, told him that this wasn't a trap, or at least, not a conventional trap.

He landed, and got out of his fighter. The silence was deafening.

But the bay was well lighted. And packed with supplies.

The Ken Pilot walked over to one. Studying a box with a hand scanner, he flipped it open.

It didn't explode. The box contained a familiar looking mechanical part. A Wildcat engine motivator.

The Ken Pilot inspected a few more boxes. Then he went to the door separating the bay from the rest of the ship. After checking with his scanner, he operated the door.

The ship still didn't explode.

The rest of the ships were filled with containers. The Ken Pilot checked some of the others. They contained spare parts too.

He went back to his ship and prepared to begin the long trip home.

The next morning the War Admiral sat back in his chair in the war room, looking expectantly at his senior officers. Captain Dulin had just finished delivering the shipwide status report, and now all eyes were on

the Chief Engineer.

"Everything the same as last week," said Yurgi Arkasian. "Those parts we jury rigged from the Marist's secondary processors are holding up, but when they're gone, we're going to have to figure out something else or deal with a 50% reduction in our top speed."

"You'll have to figure out something else, then," said the War Admiral.

"Commander?"

"The ship is functioning reasonably well," said Wren. "Though I echo the Chief's concern about a lack of spare parts. We've shut down some non-essential systems, but if this problem goes on much longer, we're going to have to seriously begin cannibalizing some of the other ships to keep ours operational."

"Colonel?"

"Ditto," said Colonel Darley. "Two squadrons of Wildcats are already down. We're only going to lose more over time."

"Have we tried manufacturing the parts we need?" said the War Admiral, turning back to Arkasian.

"We've been able to modify some parts, and manufacture some basic things we need, but these are really complex parts we're talking about," said Arkasian. "We'd need a complex electronics production facility, and that we simply do not have."

"I see," said North, weighing the alternatives. Suddenly, the comm chimed.

"Sir, we have a signal from the Ken Pilot, on final approach."

North checked his watch. It was almost time for the fleetwide briefing.

But he really wanted to hear what the Ken Pilot had to say. "Patch the audio in here." And then, "David. We're listening."

"It's a giant cargo ship, War Admiral," said the Ken Pilot.

"Really," said the War Admiral. "Did you scan it?"

"I went on board."

The War Admiral blinked, as if the move were either very brave or very foolhardy. "And what did you see?"

"Spare parts."

"What?" said the War Admiral, looking very, very surprised.

"All kinds of spare parts--engineering components, and the like. I even recognized some Wildcat parts."

"And there was no one or nothing else on board to tell you where this generous gift came from?"

"No," said the Ken Pilot. "All I found were another set of coordinates, but they're lightyears away from here."

"Hm..." said the War Admiral, looking out the window for a moment. "David, land in Bay 4. I want you and your ship to go through decontam, to see if there was anything in the atmosphere of that ship. When you're done, report to me in my office." He closed the comm line.

"How fortuitous," said Dulin.

"Yes, how fortuitous indeed," said the War Admiral.

"I still think it's a trap," said Wren. "At least, it's much more likely to be a trap than the gift of some anonymous donor."

"I agree," said the War Admiral. "But given our situation, the possibility that it's not a trap is one that we can no longer afford not to investigate." He checked his chrono. "It's almost time for my fleet meeting. You're dismissed."

Everyone except for Captain Dulin started to file out. On the way out

Major Fortran caught the War Admiral's eye. "Major? I'm sorry, we didn't hear from you. Did you have anything to report?"

Major Fortran, being in charge of the marines who were seldom in action, usually had nothing to report, and was often overlooked. "Nothing substantial, sir," said Fortran.

Substantial. That was the same word that Lieutenant Kirby had used when reporting to him. "Wait," said the War Admiral. "What's unsubstantial to report?"

Fortran looked embarrassed. "One of my men has disappeared, sir."

"Disappeared?"

"It looks like he's gone AWOL; at least, he didn't report for morning muster," said Fortran. "It's Corporal Qaye."

The name didn't ring a bell. "So? Have you initiated a search?"

Fortran reddened. "I was investigating the matter myself, first. Sometimes the men party a little too much and lose track of time-"

"I see," said the War Admiral. "Begin your search, Major. Let me know what you discover."

"Aye, sir," said Fortran, eager to leave in a hurry.

Wren looked curiously at the War Admiral. "You didn't come down very hard on him, sir."

The War Admiral gave a barely perceptible glance at Dulin before saying,

"We all need to occasionally blow off some steam, Commander."

Corporal Qaye, or the thing that looked like Corporal Qaye, was hunched in a maintenance tube just below the main bridge. He opened a panel containing comm conduits and took out some wires of his own....

The holographic images of the other fleet captains shimmered and appeared in the war room. North welcomed them, going over routine matters. He didn't mention the ship that the Ken Pilot had found. But he did mention the planet where the false monument had been found.

"We don't know who put it there or why," said the War Admiral. "The Insectoids are a very obvious possibility."

"Then what are we still doing here?" asked Captain Michael Bennett of the Amory Til.

"Investigating other possibilities," said the War Admiral generally.

"Sir, we're overlooking the obvious," said one of the fleet captains. It was Captain Shang of the Battlecruiser Renown, and one of Bennett's Directorate officers.

The War Admiral raised an eyebrow. "Enlighten us, Captain."

"Who cares what kind of monument we found or didn't find? The point is there's a habitable planet down there--hospitable atmosphere, water, vegetation, animal life."

Not again. "Your point, Captain?"

"We should think about settling there," said Shang. "I don't know about you, War Admiral, but my crew been inside a ship for seven years, and we're tired of chasing elusive monuments that lead nowhere."

"What would you have us do, Captain? Abandon our ships and become farmers for the rest of our lives?"

Shang reddened. "Some of us will have to farm, yes, just as some of us are farming now. We'll be building a new community, a new life away from the empty wanderings we have now."

"And what happens when the Insectoids come looking for us?" North inquired.

"They won't be looking for us on a planet," said Shang. "They're only looking for our ships."

"And you know that because...." North let his voice trail off.

"They're only interested in our ships because only our ships can threaten them."

"I see," said North. "And all our worlds without ships that they conquered, they conquered because...."

"Our planets had manufacturing facilities that could build weapons, ships," said Shang. "I hardly think they'll even be interested in a small out of the way agricultural settlement. Since they're looking for ships, they may never even find us."

"I see," said North. "If an Insectoid fleets comes into this system, they'll only scan the space around the planets for our ships. They won't come closer and scan the planets for lifesigns."

"Correct," said Shang.

"Your argument makes perfect sense," said North. "Perfect sense, if you are really naive enough to believe that's how the Insectoids will act. I remind you, gentlemen, that we are already many years beyond even the farthest edge of Alliance space, and still they come after us. They will not stop until all of us are dead or enslaved."

"There are those of us who don't share that assessment, War Admiral," said Shang.

"Yes, I know," said the War Admiral. "Fortunately, I am in command. Now, what is the next item of business?"

The thing that had been Corporal Qaye slithered out of the maintenance tube, removing the earpiece as it did so. As the thing walked down the corridor it saw two marines walking around with a photopad. Undoubtedly, they were looking for him. He ducked into one of the rooms on the corridor, a technical workshop. A short scream could be heard, than nothing else.

The two marines entered the room a few moments later. They saw a naval tech working on some components on a table.

"Hi," said one of the marines. "Have you seen this man?" they said, showing the photopad.

The tech looked at the photopad closely. "No," he said. "Haven't seem him."

"If you do, contact security," said the marines, leaving.

"I will," the tech promised as they left.

The tech looked down. Below the waist, he was still Corporal Qaye. He opened a supply cabinet, staring at the body of the tech. The lower part of his body shimmered.... "War Admiral," said the Ken Pilot.

"Did you go through decontam?" said the War Admiral.

The Ken Pilot nodded. "At your request, Doctor Farb checked me and my ship out personally. He found nothing out of the ordinary."

"So it's not some kind of bio warfare trap," said the War Admiral. "What do your instincts tell you?"

"If it is a trap, it's not of the obvious 'ship will blow up when you get too close' kind," said the Ken Pilot. "The ship was placed in open space, which would make an ambush difficult."

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "At least, a conventional ambush." He nodded, deciding. "I want you to go back there with a destroyer and a scanning crew. Tow that thing over here, and have the crew go over the ship from stem to stern enroute. I want to know everything that's onboard, and I want every inch of that ship, including the walls and electronics, fully checked out."

The Ken Pilot nodded and left.

At the end of his shift, the War Admiral left his office and walked across the bridge to the exit.

"Good evening, sir," said Dulin, as North left, nodding in return.

North went directly to his quarters, where the marine soldier on guard snapped to attention. "As you were," said North. "You're relieved for the next four hours."

"Sir," said the marine, saluting as he departed.

A few minutes later the War Admiral reentered the bridge.

"Sir?" said Captain Dulin. "Did you forget something?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral, heading to his office. Once inside, he activated the comm.

About thirty minutes later, the War Admiral came out of his office. "Clear bay four, Captain."

"Sir?" said Captain Dulin.

"I need bay four cleared for a few minutes," said the War Admiral. "For security reasons."

Dulin opened the comm and gave the orders. "Sir, do you want me to order security-"

"No," said the War Admiral. "I'll handle this myself," he said, leaving

the bridge.

Dulin turned to Shishman. "Do we have anything coming into bay 4?"

Shishman checked the sensors. "Just a shuttle from the Renown. Not on our daily schedule, but it's been cleared."

"By whom?"

Shishman checked the logs. "The War Admiral."

What kind of secret meeting was the War Admiral going to, and why was he holding this meeting in a landing bay?

"So I'm telling you, Obe, I think it would be a great idea to reinstate the fleet olympics," said Took. Took and Obe were taking a walking along the lower decks on their way back to their crew quarters. When they were off duty they took frequent walks to exercise and to relieve the tedium. Sometimes they would walk the perimeter of each landing bay just for variety's sake.

"Uh-huh," said Obe.

Suddenly they saw the War Admiral, walking towards them in a hurry.

"Hey War Admiral," said Took.

The War Admiral ignored them, just walking past them rapidly without saying a word.

"What's gotten into him?" Took said. He looked back at the fleeing form of the Admiral. "And why is he wearing a gun holster?"

Captain Shang of the Renown exited the shuttle. He found himself in a deserted landing bay, deserted, that is, except for the War Admiral, who was standing there waiting for him.

"All right, War Admiral, I came alone, as you requested," he said wearily.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"I'm no longer willing to tolerate your interference with my command,"
said the War Admiral.

"What are you going to do, demote me to bay worker?" said Shang.

"No," said the War Admiral. "I am going to kill you." Before Shang could react, he pulled his blaster, and fired.

"What was that?" said Took. "Sounded like blaster fire."

They raced into the bay, and saw the crumpled body in front of the shuttle. Took reached down to feel for a pulse. "Call the medics!" he yelled.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. He turned to face it directly and saw the back of the War Admiral, fleeing through another exit.

Captain Dulin couldn't believe his ears. The War Admiral, shooting a fellow officer in cold blood? There must be some other explanation. He summoned Major Fortran, and went below decks.

When he got to the War Admiral's quarters he was surprised not to find any sign of the marine guard posted outside his quarters. Major Fortran showed up moments later with two of his men.

"Where's the marine guard, Major?" Dulin asked.

"I don't know, Captain," said Fortran. "We'd better see if the War Admiral is all right." He pressed the buzzer.

For a long moment there was no answer. He pressed the buzzer again. They prepared to forcibly enter his quarters when-

"Yes?" came the voice over the filtered comm.

"Sir, it's Captain Dulin," said Dulin.

"Yes Captain?"

"Sir, I need to see you," said Dulin.

"Captain, I'm off duty. Is this urgent?"

Dulin frowned. That didn't sound like the War Admiral.

"Yes, sir."

"One moment."

They waited outside the War Admiral's door for considerably longer than one moment before the door opened. The War Admiral was there, buttoning his shirt as he stood in the doorway, blocking their entry or further view into his quarters. "This better be good, Captain-" he started to say, and then he saw Major Fortran and his men. "What's going on here?"

"Sir, there's been an incident in hanger bay 4," said Dulin. "Captain Shang has been shot."

"Shot? What was he even doing on the Glory?" said the War Admiral. "Did any of the tech crews see anything?"

"You ordered the tech crews out of the bay, sir," said Dulin. "But Lieutenant Took saw you leaving the scene-"

"What?" said the War Admiral. "Back up, Captain. I've been in my quarters for the past two hours. I didn't order the bay crews to do anything-"

"Respectfully, sir, I saw you do it, on the bridge," said Dulin.

"You saw me, on the bridge?" said the War Admiral.

"Right after you went off-duty, you came back," said Dulin. "Don't you remember?"

"No, I most certainly do not," said the War Admiral.

"Admiral, where's your marine guard?" Dulin asked.

"I sent him away," said the War Admiral. "Let's get some answers." He moved forward, letting the door to his quarters close behind him, and ordered everyone to accompany him to sickbay, leaving no one behind at the entrance to his quarters.

"How is he, Doctor Farb?" The War Admiral asked, staring at Shang, lying on a medbed in sickbay.

"He'll live," said Farb. "He was shot at point blank range, but luckily for him the shooter wasn't a very good shoot--it just hit him in the side. He's lost a lot of blood, but he'll make it."

"Can we speak to him?" said the War Admiral.

"He's conscious, War Admiral," said Farb. "But he may not want to speak to you."

The War Admiral walked over to his bed, followed by Dulin and Fortran. Shang's eyes widened when he saw the War Admiral. "Coming to finish the job?" he rasped.

"I didn't shoot you," said the War Admiral.

Shang just glared at him bitterly.

"What were you even doing on the Glory in the first place?" the War Admiral asked.

"You summoned me," said Shang. "You said I had to come alone. The reason why is obvious now."

"I never summoned you," said the War Admiral.

"I just checked the comm logs," said Dulin. "You did send a transmission from your office after you returned to the bridge."

"I never returned to the bridge!" said the War Admiral. "It wasn't me.

Were there any witnesses to this shooting, besides Shang?"

"I saw you," said Took, entering the medbay. "I saw you entering the bay. You were armed. And I saw you fleeing the scene right after Shang was shot."

"It wasn't me, Captain," said the War Admiral. "How often do I go around armed? You can go to my quarters and check my gun, if you like; it hasn't been fired in days."

"You were clearly reluctant to let us into your quarters before, sir," said Dulin.

"Well, I'm not reluctant now," the War Admiral snapped.

The impromptu fleet meeting the following morning was as tumultuous as one might have expected.

"Is this what we've come to, War Admiral?" said Captain Bennett.

"Executing those who disagree with you?"

"I didn't shoot him," said the War Admiral.

"Shang says you did! Your own Captain Took saw you fleeing the scene!"

"That wasn't me," said the War Admiral.

"Then who is this?" said Bennett. He projected a image from the security vid from Bay 4. It showed the War Admiral walking up to Shang and shooting him at point blank range. How had Bennett secured the Glory's security video? An interesting question.

"War Admiral, I demand that you step down pending an investigation and trial," said Bennett.

"Demand?" said the War Admiral, his eyes narrowing.

"War Admiral," said Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna, "This is a very charged situation. Whether you're guilty, or innocent, you have to agree

this raises a lot of questions. I think it prudent for you to take a temporary leave of absence while you get this sorted out."

The War Admiral tried to hold in his anger, to maintain an outward calm. Biting his lips, he slowly nodded. He waited a moment, trying to regain control of his emotions so he could speak calmly. Then he said, "Very well. Captain Dulin."

"Sir?"

"You are in operational command of the fleet until further notice," said the War Admiral, glaring at Bennett. There was no way he was going to put Bennett in charge. "Major Fortran!"

"Sir!"

"Conduct your investigation."

"I demand that the War Admiral be placed under arrest pending the outcome of this investigation," said Bennett.

"You demand?" said Dulin, his eyes narrowing. "We may have an arrest, but not the one you're thinking of."

"I request, then," said Bennett. He wasn't ready to take on Dulin, not yet at least.

"I will stay in my quarters, and only exit with a marine escort. Will that satisfy you, Captain?" said the War Admiral acidly.

"For now," said Bennett.

The War Admiral slammed his fist down on the disconnect button, and the images of the fleet captains faded. "You realize what we've got here, don't you?" he said, turning to Dulin. "We've got an imposter onboard."

"No, of course I don't think the War Admiral would do such a thing," said Took. "At least, I didn't think he would, before I saw him do it."

"We didn't actually see him do it," Obe reminded him.

"They caught it on the security vid," said Took.

"Vids can be altered," said Obe.

They reached the War Admiral's quarters. The two marines on guard were expecting them and let them pass. The War Admiral buzzed them in.

"Well, gentlemen, we do have a situation," said the War Admiral. "It's obvious we have an imposter aboard."

"An imposter?" said Took.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Something, or someone, who can change shape and appearance at will."

"And voice," said Took. "Don't forget the voice."

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "That wasn't me you saw in the corridor, Took."

"Sir," said Took, looking unsure.

"You told the investigators that I didn't respond when you greeted me. How many times have you seen me in the corridors, Captain?"

Took shrugged. "Hundreds."

"How many times have I failed to respond to your greeting?"

"None," said Took. He started to look thoughtful. "If it was an imposter, why wouldn't he respond?"

"I have a theory," said the War Admiral. "This imposter may be able to look and sound like us, but he doesn't have our memories. This imposter couldn't greet you, because he didn't know who you were, and was afraid of getting caught in a conversation."

"That's possible," said Took.

"Furthermore, have a look at Shang's injury. Shot at point blank range--but the aim was miserable, and he's still alive. Shang was left alive on purpose, to testify that I attacked him."

"But what kind of being could change its appearance at will?" said Took.

"Ask Corporal Qaye," said the War Admiral grimly.

"Who?"

"A marine soldier missing since he apparently returned from the expedition to the planet."

"Apparently returned?"

"I think someone or something murdered Corporal Qaye and took his place. And that someone or something is aboard this ship."

"And this thing could be masquerading as anyone, then" said Took.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Anyone."

"What do you want from me?" said Took.

"I want you to investigate and get to the bottom of things," said the War Admiral.

"Major Fortran is investigating--"

"I'd prefer an investigation through unofficial channels as well," said the War Admiral. He didn't explain further, and they didn't press him.

"So how do I know that you are really Obe?" said Took, as he launched the shuttle he was piloting from the Glory's landing bay..

"Oh, please don't start with that," said Obe, sitting in the copilot's seat..

"If you're the real Obe, tell me what we had for dinner last Friday," said Took.

"The same thing we've had all week--30 day potato rations."

"Oh," said Took. "You're right, that's too easy. Ok, when we were on patrol last week, why did you fire your lasers?"

"I didn't," said Obe. "You did, accidentally. So you claimed."

"You're Obe, I guess," said Took. Another thought occurred to him. "At least you are, until you leave my sight again."

Obe sighed. It was going to be one of those weeks.

They landed in the original zone where the first expeditionary force had landed. When they got out of the ship, they both drew their weapons. The forest around them looked dark and sinister.

"I told you we should've brought K," said Took.

"Which way shall we go?" said Obe.

"Let's start with the monument."

They walked uneasily towards the monument.

"Lovely place," said Took uneasily, listening to the distant howling sound of the wind blowing through the trees.

They reached the monument in the clearing, where it cast a shadow over the afternoon sun.

"So that's a fake monument," said Took. He tapped the outer shell. "Looks real enough to me."

"Let's start looking for signs of Qaye," said Obe.

They started a standard military search--a slowly outward spiral from the monument. Obe and Took stood ten feet apart, each within constant eye contact of the other. On the third loop they came across the bushes that Qaye had investigated. Obe saw a leg sticking out of the bushes.

"Took!" he yelled.

Gingerly, his hand on his weapon, he pulled on the leg, revealing the mangled body of Corporal Qaye.

"The War Admiral was right," said Took, stunned. "We do have an imposter on board."

"And now we have proof," said Obe. He opened a pouch he was carrying, and started to unroll a body bag. "Let's get him back to the Glory."

Captain Dulin nodded at the marine guards as he entered the War Admiral's quarters. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Did you see both of the reports I sent you?"

"Yes," said Dulin. "I just finished reading Captain Took's interim report."

"It would seem that we brought back something from the surface that wasn't Corporal Qaye," said the War Admiral. "I think it's reasonable to assume that if it could assume Qaye's appearance on the spot, that it could look like anyone else, including me."

"I accept that implicitly, Admiral," said Dulin. "But I'm not sure that Captain Bennett will."

"Well, then we'll just have to be convincing," said the War Admiral.

"Because as of this moment I am returning to active duty. Time is too precious to waste sitting around here."

He waited to see what Dulin's reaction would be. Would Dulin try to prevent him from returning to duty?

Dulin stiffened, saluted. "Sir, yes sir."

The War Admiral nodded. "Now, have you looked at the other report from the tech team?"

"Yes, and it's incredible," said Dulin.

"Isn't it?" said the War Admiral. "Not only does that large cargo ship have parts we can use, it has the exact parts we need. Not just any Wildcat parts, but the critical Wildcat motivators that we're short on and have had to cannibalize parts for. Most of the parts on the Chief Engineer's wish list are also there as well."

"How is that possible?" said Dulin.

"You mean, if it's an Insectoid trap, how could they know exactly what we need?" said the War Admiral. "Odd as it may sound, I don't believe it is an Insectoid trap. Did you see the analysis of the ship? Like the equipment, it was manufactured in the past two months. The ship was never built to carry a crew or go very far--in fact, it's practically peeling at the seams. It seems the ship was meant to fly only a short distance--Captain Hunter traced its trajectory to just outside the system where it was found."

"Just outside the system?" said Dulin. "What does that mean?"

"Either it was manufactured just outside the system, in the emptiness of space, or something else we can't detect carried it there," said the War Admiral. "It would be a technology that's beyond us, and yet our analysis shows that the equipment on that ship was produced using current Alliance technology."

"Current Alliance technology?" said Dulin. "It only gets more and more confusing. How does this tie in with the false monument and the imposter?"

"I don't believe it does," said the War Admiral. "I think they are two

separate and unrelated events. The purpose of the false monument is now clear--to get us down there and to plant this assassin in the fleet. The purpose of this cargo ship is different. It is to resupply us."

"What does it mean?"

"We can only find out if we follow the coordinates left for us on that ship," said the War Admiral. "But my guess is that we've got allies out there, allies we didn't know about."

"If we have allies, why don't they reveal themselves?" said Dulin.

"Another very interesting question," said the War Admiral.

"And so you see, gentlemen, Corporal Qaye was killed on the planet. And yet someone looking like the Corporal came back on the transport.

Obviously, we are dealing with an enemy who can change appearance at will," said the War Admiral, addressing the holographic representations of the fleet captains.

The fleet officers looked shocked and surprised.

"And your officer confirms that he saw this Qaye return on the transport?" said one of the captains.

"Yes," said Lieutenant Kirby, at ramrod attention.

"Then it seems we owe you an apology," said Captain Harkness. "I never believed you would do such a dumbfool thing, War Admiral, but you understand why we had to do what we did."

The War Admiral nodded. "There are no hard feelings. Our duty now is to locate this being. We are acting on the assumption that it is still on the Glory; and we are also acting on the assumption that there is only one of it. A second crewmember, a technician George Gage, has been reported missing, and his body was discovered only minutes ago. We think one of the

imposter's weaknesses is memory--it can look and sound like whomever it chooses, but it doesn't have the memory of its victim."

"What do you suggest?"

"Everyone pair up in two's," said the War Admiral. "As of now, the Glory is under embargo--all flights in and out are canceled. Security will go around, person by person, and ask each crewman questions from his personal bio."

Some of the fleet captains rolled their eyes. They knew the Glory had a crew of nearly 3,000.

"I sense skepticism," said the War Admiral. "Does anyone have any better suggestions?"

"So you were born... where, exactly?" said Took.

"On Zalto," said Zetho Arkasian.

Obe checked his pad. "That checks out."

"Give me another question," Took instructed Obe.

"Not another," said Zetho, working on a fighter with a coworker. "I busy."

"We've already asked him four questions," said Obe. "I think he's ok."

"You can never be too sure," said Took.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you like it," said Obe. "It's just like being a journalist, going around, bugging people with your questions. Only this time, you have a real excuse for doing it."

"Obe," said Took, opening his mouth to give a rebuttal. Then he closed it.

"Let's get on to the next suspect."

Captain Dulin entered the bay and approached them. "Status report," he said crisply.

"Sir, we've covered nearly a dozen bay workers, but no sign so far," said Took. "We have no way of knowing if this memory trick will work."

"Elaborate," said Dulin.

"Well, we're asking people things about their personal bios," said Took.

"But if the imposter had taken the time to look up their own bio, it won't do any good."

"I see," said Dulin. "Carry on," he said, marching away.

"He's pretty chatty today, isn't he?" Took remarked.

They moved on to the next bay worker, and then the one after that. While they were interrogating him, Captain Dulin and Commander Wren entered the bay.

"Status report, Captain," said Dulin.

"Not much has changed in the past five minutes," said Took, looking quizzically at him.

"Five minutes?" said Dulin.

A worried look crossed Took's face. "Oh oh. Tell me I just spoke to you five minutes ago."

"Was I alone?" said Dulin.

"Uhhh..."

"Yes, you were," said Obe.

"Fools! You know that none of us travel alone," said Dulin. He spoke into his wrist comm. "The intruder is currently masquerading as myself, Captain Dulin. If you see me unaccompanied by Commander Wren, detain me

immediately!"

He turned to go, but caught something in Took's expression. "Was there something else?"

"I, ah, may have mentioned something about-"

"Fool!" said the War Admiral. "You surprise and disappoint me, Idaho Took."

"Yes sir," said Took, standing stiffly at attention.

"Well, now we've lost the advantage of surprise," said the War Admiral.

"We've locked down the personnel database, War Admiral," said Dulin. "It can only use what it's already accessed."

The War Admiral nodded. "Continue the search. You may turn up with something. Dismissed."

Took, his head hung, headed for the exit. He opened his mouth to say something as he walked by the War Admiral, but, seeing his expression, he thought better of it and left.

As they filed out Wren entered his office. "Things not going well?"

"I don't think this search is going to work."

"What will work?" Wren asked.

"We have to figure out what this creature's goals are," said the War Admiral. "Once we figure out what it's really up to, we can be there to nab it."

"Knowing you, you've already figured that out," said Wren.

"Hm," said the War Admiral non-commentally, abruptly heading for the door.

"Hey," she said, touching him on the shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"To my quarters," said the War Admiral. "It's been a long day, I'd like some rest."

"All right, we got a lead!" said Took, listening to the report that just came over the wrist comm. He started running, and Obe followed.

"Where?"

"Marine country," said Took. "One of our men reported a navy crewman tapping into the database near the barracks. He called in, and said he was going to investigate."

"And what happened?" said Obe, starting to gasp for breath.

"He never reported back."

When they reached the marine barracks Major Fortran and his men were already there, bending over a body dressed in marine greens. "What happened?"

"Private Koshori didn't wait for backup," said Fortran grimly. "Now this thing could be posing as a marine again."

"Or as anyone," said Obe. "If this bug can change shape at will, there's no way we're going to catch him."

Fortran's search teams started to disperse. Took, however, stood very still, frowning.

"Iday?"

"Why would he come back here?" Took asked.

"I don't know, maybe he was just keeping on the move," said Obe.

"The marine said he was accessing a terminal," said Took. "Why?"

"To try and get some personal bio info, maybe," said Obe.

"No, he would've found out by now that that info was locked down," said Took. "And he made a point of coming here to look it up."

"He?"

"It, he, whatever, we'll establish gender at the dissection," said Took, distracted. "What would he need here that he couldn't get anywhere else?"

"Nothing," said Took. "If he wanted to access a terminal, he could try and do that anywhere."

"You're wrong," said Took, snapping his fingers. "There's one thing here that can't be found in any other specific place."

"Come on, Took, if you have the answer, don't keep me waiting," said Obe.

"Marines, buddy, marines."

"But there are marines all over the ship right now, on patrol," said Obe.

"Yeah, but what if you're looking for a specific marine?"

"Why would he want a particular marine?" said Obe blankly.

"Just think about it, buddy. This alien's been discovered. His primary job, to sow dissension in the ranks, won't work. What's left for him to do?"

"Sabotage?"

"Maybe. What else?"

Obe concentrated. "I don't know."

"Think, Obe. Not all the marines are on patrol," said Took, suddenly making a decision, as he lit up and sprang down the hall.

"Oh no," said Obe, suddenly understanding. "The War Admiral's guard sentinel."

Corporal Zelas approached the door to the War Admiral's quarters. "I relieve you, sir," he said to the marine on duty.

The other marine, a private, saluted and departed for the barracks. Zelas

waited a good, long moment for the other marine to disappear. Then he used his access code to enter the War Admiral's quarters.

It was dark inside, the only illumination provided by a dim reading light in the War Admiral's bed. The War Admiral was in bed, reading.

"Yes, who is it?" he said, peering out into the dark.

The door slid closed behind Zelas. "We've never met," said Zelas, stepping into the edge of the light. His hand tightly gripped the blaster. "But I must say it's a real honor to meet you. My employers think quite highly of you."

"Very nice. I take it you're here to kill me," said the War Admiral calmly, slowly putting down his book.

Zelas, or the thing that was Zelas, nodded.

"What will be gained by killing me?" said the War Admiral. "The fleet will still go on."

"You underestimate your importance," said Zelas. "Your elimination or neutralization was always a strong secondary goal. Unfortunately, when you saw through my ruse, I was forced to act more directly."

"I see," said the War Admiral. "And what do you plan to do once I'm dead? You can't destroy the whole fleet by yourself."

"Can't I?" said Zelas "You presume that you're going to disappear. You're not. You're simply going to be replaced."

"You're going to become me," said the War Admiral.

"I've done it before," said Zelas.

"How do you intend to destroy the fleet when you take over?"

"Not that it really concerns you, but there's a binary star some 20 lights years distant. We will go there and then take our weapon systems off-line

for a very, very thorough overhaul."

"And that's when the attack will occur."

"Yes," said Zelas, gripping the blaster slightly.

"Before you kill me, would you mind if I asked how you got here?" said the War Admiral. "After all, we're a long way from Insectoid space."

"Your petty Insectoids didn't send me," said Zelas. "Their masters did.

But you're right, I did come a long way. They used the particle cannon to send me here."

"Particle cannon?"

"The same cannon they've been using to send massive fleets after you.

There have always been three or four fleets searching for you. Each time you fight one, another is sent in its place," said Zelas. "The particle cannon can send ships many, many lightyears in mere hours."

"I didn't know the Insectoids had developed such advanced technology," said the War Admiral.

"They haven't," said Zelas. "I'm afraid our time is running short."

"Wait, one more question," said the War Admiral. "Who or what are you?"

"Let's just say I'm a special hire," said Zelas. "My employers spared no expense to send me here. And now, I'm afraid you've run out of time for questions-"

"Very well," said the War Admiral, sitting up slowly in bed. That was the signal. The smell of fresh sea air always faintly in the room, grew stronger. "Are you prepared to give up?"

Zelas laughed, momentarily lowering its blaster slightly. "War Admiral, I must admit, you have quite a reputation, but I can see nothing that will

save you this time."

"What will save me is your fatal flaw," said the War Admiral.

"My fatal flaw?" said Zelas, its human face looking curious.

"You can look like us, and sound like us, but you don't have our memory.

You don't even know a very common fact about me that every single crewmember knows." As the War Admiral talked, a cloud started to form behind Zelas.

"Don't worry, I'll be sure to read all about you before I assume my role," said Zelas.

The foggy cloud became almost solid, assuming a familiar canine form.

"It's a bit too late for that," said the War Admiral.

For the first time a look of hesitation formed on Zelas's face, and he moved to steady his blaster arm.

"Sick'm!" The War Admiral barked a command and jumped to the side, but he was in no danger, as his assailant was already screaming, his gun dropped to the ground as Puffy burned the creature's arms and neck.

The War Admiral pulled a blaster out from under his blanket and yelled "Lights!"

The assassin was on the ground, trying to wrestle with Puffy, but there was no way he could push away a semi-gaseous cloud.

"Off, boy, off!" said the War Admiral, just as Took and Obe burst in.

The creature, now looking like a generic humanoid with bloody burns on its skin, lay unmoving on the ground.

"Call Doctor Farb!" said the War Admiral. He turned to Puffy, who was whining and sticking out his tongue. He reached out to pet the animal; the gas that had so recently burned felt mildly cool to the touch. "Good

doggie!"

"The hardest part was training Puffy not to attack until I called him," said the War Admiral.

"You were taking a terrible risk," said Wren. "What if that thing was immune to Puffy's attacks?"

The War Admiral shrugged. "Would it have been better to let this thing pick off the crew one by one? Not only was it killing people, but it was preventing us from working together coherently as a team. That would have been devastating in an attack."

"Why didn't you tell Puffy to attack immediately?" Dulin asked.

"I wanted some answers," said the War Admiral. "I know enough to know that there's a lot that's going on that we don't know about. It's a pity that thing isn't still alive. We'll have to have Doctor Farb do an autopsy."

"Well, it was a major gamble, but it paid off," said Dulin. "A particle cannon? That's how they've been launching their fleets at us?"

"It seems that way," said the War Admiral. "Even more interesting is the fact that this being wasn't hired by the Insectoids. I think someone is manipulating them. But who, and why? The next time we capture one of these beings, we'll have to get more answers."

"I hope that won't be soon," said Dulin. "One was quite enough."

"What about the spare parts shipment?" said Wren. "I guess that was part of the trap."

"How do you mean?" said the War Admiral.

"Well, it seems obvious they used this particle cannon to send the cargo ship to us. Our own scans showed a drive trail that only extended to the

edge of the system," said Wren.

"If it was part of the trap, then what was it's purpose?" said the War Admiral slowly. "We all agree that the false monument was a lure to get the imposter onboard, correct?"

Wren and Dulin nodded.

"If so, then what need was there for this cargo ship full of supplies?"

Wren was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Maybe the imposter would have ordered us there to-"

"You forget," said the War Admiral gently. "The imposter told me he was going to maneuver us to a binary star system 20 light years away.

Lieutenant Shishman has tentatively identified it for us." He touched a button, and a holomap appeared, showing their location and a flashing star system some distance away. "Furthermore, there were other coordinates in this transport." He touched another button, showing a path leading away from the system. "To follow these coordinates, we'd have to go away from the binary system, not to it."

"That doesn't make sense," said Dulin. "It's almost as if two different plans are at work here."

"Precisely," said the War Admiral. "I believe that whoever sent us those supplies means us no harm. We've already started integrating and testing the components and I'm told they're working fine. We should have all our disabled Wildcats up and running within a week; and all the critical components we need for engineering purposes should be installed even sooner than that."

"If we do have allies, who are they?" said Dulin. "The Alliance didn't have particle cannon technology."

"An interesting issue, isn't it?" said the War Admiral. "These parts were either manufactured by humans, or by aliens having intimate knowledge of our manufacturing techniques. In fact, whoever sent these items to us must have had intimate knowledge of our needs, because in nearly all cases they sent us exactly what we most required."

"But how could they have known? And why don't they show themselves?" said Dulin.

"These are questions we must consider. But I have decided to follow the coordinates provided to us in the transport," said the War Admiral. He illuminated them on the flashing map.

"That must be... that will take us more than two years to get there!" said Dulin.

"Two years and four days, to be precise," said the War Admiral. "And that's assuming we don't stop along the way except for an occasional refueling. But isn't that what we're looking for? A source of advanced technology that can help us defeat the Insectoids? Anyone that can develop particle cannon technology may be able to help us develop weapons to defeat the Insectoids. And whoever else is guiding them."

There was a buzz from the comm.

"Enter," said the War Admiral loudly. Idaho Took entered. "You sent for me, War Admiral?"

"So I did," said the War Admiral. He looked at Dulin and Wren. "If you two will excuse us please?"

Wren and Dulin filed out, giving Took an odd stare. Since when did the War Admiral have private conferences with Took?

Took gave the War Admiral a so-what's-it-all-about look.

"I just wanted to thank you for uncovering the imposter's ruse so quickly.

Your timely action helped limit the disruption in unit morale and cohesion."

"You're welcome, sir," said Took. He gave a broad smile. "Do I get a medal for that?"

"Do you want a medal?" said the War Admiral. Whether he was irritated, serious, or secretly amused, Took couldn't tell.

"Well, no, sir, that's not necessary, I have enough of those already.

There is only one thing I would really like-

"An interview," said the War Admiral. "It's not as if you haven't been asking me for what, years?"

"Just a short interview, War Admiral. I promise you'll come across as very dignified-

"I'll consider it," said the War Admiral curtly.

Took shrugged. Well, that was the best he had ever gotten out of the War Admiral. The War Admiral nodded informally, indicating he was dismissed. Took turned to go, and turned back. "Just one last mystery remaining, War Admiral."

"Yes?" said North.

"Why you picked me for this investigation?"

"Well, you did a quite capable job in the investigation of the farm corruption several years ago, as I recall," said the War Admiral.

"So I did," said Took. "But I instigated that investigation; this was different. You made a point to put me on this one, even though this was a purely military matter, properly a job for internal security, who was also

investigating it."

"I knew you could come to the solution more quickly," said the War Admiral, still appearing calm.

"Perhaps you also knew that I of all people would believe in your innocence," said Took. "And perhaps you also knew that in investigating this matter, not only would I be more likely to clear it up more quickly, but that would preempt a more thorough investigation into the possibility of your guilt."

"Are you saying that I did shoot Captain Shang?" said the War Admiral.

"No, but by cutting the investigation short, we did leave a number of smaller mysteries unsolved."

"Such as?" said the War Admiral.

"Why you ordered the marine guard away from your quarters. I think some of the others assumed that your duplicate gave the order; but I think you did," said Took.

"What if I did?" said the War Admiral.

"I did some discrete checking around," said Took. "In my capacity as a discrete investigator. It's not the first time you've ordered guards away from their post outside your door, especially late at night."

The War Admiral said nothing.

"Furthermore, when the Captain and the Major came to your door, you came out, but refused to let them in, as if there was something, or someone you didn't want them to see," said Took. "That would also explain why you ordered your marine guard away at certain times, to prevent them from seeing what they shouldn't."

The War Admiral remained silent.

"If Major Fortran had continued his investigation, he would've focused more on this. Oh, he probably knows that you've ordered the guards away before, but he's never focused on the why of it. Or, to be more precise, the who of it," said Took.

"And your conclusion?" said the War Admiral.

"My conclusion?" said Took. "It doesn't matter. The case is closed, sir. We found the imposter. What else is there to know?" He gave the War Admiral a meaningful look, and turned to leave.

"Took."

Took turned around.

"After everything has settled down again, maybe the middle of next week, come and see me. I'll give you your interview," said the War Admiral.

"Thank you, sir," said Took.

But they both knew whom was really thanking whom.

Chapter 6 Mutiny

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 9 years and 5 months after Vitalics I'm still turning the events of three months ago over in my mind.

After a little over two years of travel, we reached the coordinates specified by the cargo ship we found. We arrived prepared for anything--a trap, contact with an alien civilization, an Insectoid battlefleet--anything.

What we found was not what any of us expected: another giant cargo ship, nearly identical to the first, filled to the brim with more spare parts

that we desperately needed. Yes, once again the ship's inventory almost perfectly matched the kind of spare parts we currently need.

Obviously we are either under close observation without realizing it, or someone in the fleet is transmitting classified information without our realizing it. I'm not sure which alternative is more alarming. Whoever is supplying these parts is obviously trying to aid us, at present, but it would be nice to know who they are and what their agenda is. We've been provided with a new set of coordinates, ones that will again take us approximately two years to reach, and we've set a course in that direction.

It's a good a direction as any; I have to confess that after nine years of searching we are no closer to locating Chent technology than we were when we started. But there is obviously an organization out there who can help us, and I think it a better bet to seek them out.

We continue to have run-ins with the Insectoids; like clockwork, it occurs every nine to twelve months. If what the imposter told us is correct, they continuously field several large fleets to seek us out, and it's only a matter of time before we run into one. We've lost several ships, but at least with some form of resupply we're able to maintain the ones we have left.

But morale understandably low; after the let down of the encounter with the second large cargo ship, many in the fleet understandably feel we're not making progress, and the homesteading movement is once again gaining strength. It's now been several months since we encountered the second cargo vessel, and I am trying to relax by taking up holographic painting.

I'm not very good at it, but I have a very good teacher: Commander Wren, who seems naturally gifted at it.

As we spend more and more time together, and our relationship has become more and more a matter of public knowledge to the crew, I have misgivings about keeping her attached to the Glory. It is simply not proper for a senior officer to have a relationship with a more junior officer directly under his command. And yet, if I transferred her to another ship, we'd have less time together, and visits would have to be much more public. For now, I'm leaving things as they are.

"Sensors confirmed, it's habitable," said Obe.

"Oh no," Took groaned in his cockpit. "Can't we pretend that we just didn't see it, or something?"

"You know the drill," said Obe. "Let's report in."

"Let's wait," said Took. "Let's get closer so we can give a complete report."

"We're going to have to give a report sometime," warned Obe.

"I know, but... everytime we find a habitable world, the homesteaders start acting up," said Took.

"I know," Obe sighed. "I can't blame them. I'm tired of being locked up inside a metal can too."

"And you think I'm not?" said Took. "But you remember what the War Admiral said, and you know it's true. The bugs will come after us wherever we go. The only difference is that if they find us defenseless on a planet, we'll be wiped out."

"They haven't seem to have let up," Obe agreed. "But that hasn't stopped the homesteader movement from growing. And it's not just ex-Directorate

people, but even some of our League officers."

"Let's take a closer look," said Took. "If we're lucky, we'll find something poisonous in the atmosphere."

But at that moment an indicator popped up on Took's scanning screen.

"We're being scanned!"

"From where?" said Obe.

"The planet," said Took.

"Impossible," said Obe. "I'm not reading any signs of power generation or installations on the surface. Just lower level vegetation and animal life."

Their comms crackled. "Attention spacecrafts. Identify yourself."

For a moment, Took was tempted to automatically respond with his ID. But all he did was push the transmit button and say, "You first."

Obe, in his cockpit, looked over at Took as if to say, "Great one liner."

"Are you human?" said the human sounding voice.

"Yes," said Took. "And you?"

"Humans," said the voice. "It has been a long, long time since we have heard from other humans."

"That's nice," said Took. He decided it was time to take a chance. "My name is Command Captain Idaho Took of Alliance Command Carrier Glory.

Ah... do you have a similarly long name or title?"

"No," came the voice. "Just a moment."

The comm went dead.

"Just a moment he said," said Took. "He's probably looking for a business card."

"Or getting ready to attack," said Obe. "Iday! Check your scans of the planet!"

Before their eyes, their readings changed. Where before they detected nothing but forrests and wilderness, now they were detecting a small agricultural settlement generating minimal amounts of power on the northern continent.

"How did we miss that?" said Took.

The comm sputtered to life. "Command Captain Took, are you there?"

"Yep," said Took.

"I have just conferred with the council of elders. It's been decided to invite you down to the surface. Are you capable of landing?"

"Ever since my 15th birthday," said Took. "Would you mind telling me who and what you are before we come down?"

"We are what you might call a colony, established nearly 50 years ago," said the voice. "My name is Ingore."

"50 years ago? How did you get out this far? And why didn't we detect you on our sensors?"

"I'll be happy to explain everything when you land," said Ingore.

"Right," said Took. "See you soon." He switched to the narrowband squadron frequency. "Buddy, what do you think?"

"A colony, this far out?" said Obe. "Trap."

"Trap," Took agreed. "Well, we'd better signal the Glory before we walk right into it." He adjusted a dial to boost his transmission signal.

"A colony? This far out?" said the War Admiral.

"Unlikely," said Captain Dulin. "Captain Took suspects a trap."

"I do too," said the War Admiral. "Tell him to proceed."

"Sir?"

"If the Insectoids have gone through the effort to construct a colony in order to trap us, I don't think they'll settle for killing two of our pilots, even if one of them is the illustrious Captain Took," said the War Admiral. "And I'd like to find out more about exactly what kind of trap it is. It can give us insight into what the Insectoids are not only planning now, but what they may be planning in the future."

Took and Obe slowly climbed down from their cockpits. They had landed in a field just outside the main settlement. A small crowd of people wearing robes stood nearby, watching them curiously, even with a sense of awe. Took and Obe walked over to them, a little awed themselves. The villagers looked dirty and worn out, but they also definitely looked human. And they weren't armed, except a few with long walking sticks.

Took and Obe walked forward until they were a few feet away, then they stopped. The villagers continued to stare uncomfortably at them. Finally, after it became clear that none of them would say anything, Took said, "Take me to your leader."

That broke the spell. One of them stepped forward. "I am Ingore," he said.

"Iday Took, Kato Obe," said Took. "I'm very surprised to see you. You're the first humans outside our own fleet we've seen in some time."

"And you're the first humans outside our own group that we've seen in fifty years," said Ingore. "Come to the village meeting place, we will talk."

They followed his lead through the fields, animal pens, and thatched huts.

It looked like a very simple agrarian community. Smelled like one, too.

"Pretty low-tech here," Took commented, wrinkling his nose.

"By choice," said Ingore. "That's why we left the Alliance."

"Hm," said Took, busy taking in all the sights around him.

They reached a large hut with a thatched roof. Inside was a smooth wooden table with wooden chairs. Took hadn't seen real wood in years. He gingerly sat down on one of them, feeling he was sitting on an antique. Other elders sat down at the table, as did Ingore.

"May we ask more specifically why you left the Alliance, and how you came out here?" Took inquired.

Ingore smiled. "We rejected the highly technological, and preferred to live a simpler life, closer to the earth. Ironically many of us who felt that way were scientists. We purchased our own ship and came out here."

"It's a mighty long distance to come just for some privacy," said Took.

"We didn't want to be contaminated by outside influences, outside technology."

"And yet you invited us down," said Took.

"So we did," Ingore sighed. "The first such invitation we've ever given.

You have to understand, Mr. Took, that there are only fifty of us here. We value the community that we've built, but over time we've also missed news and contact with the outside world. What has happened? Has the Alliance expanded out this far yet?"

Took and Obe exchanged glances. "Not exactly," said Took.

"Are you part of an expedition?"

"You might say that," said Took. "We're part of the last survivors."

"Survivors?"

"A race of beings called the Insectoids conqueror the Alliance nearly ten years ago," said Took. "They destroyed the fleet, almost all of it, anyway, and occupied our worlds. The remnants of our fleet gathered together and fled Alliance space. We're representatives of that fleet."

The elders started murmuring amongst themselves worriedly.

"Humanity... destroyed?" said Ingore.

"Or enslaved," said Took. "We haven't been back home to check in a while."

"So you are... looking for a place to settle, is that it?"

"Ah, not exactly," said Took.

"Well, you can't settle here," said Ingore. "Go back and tell your leaders that. We value our privacy. We wish you well, but don't want an influx of new settlers."

"That's quite all right, we're not the settling down type," said Took. "We just want some information. Have you seen any Insectoid ships pass by in the past several months?"

"Insectoid?"

"Well, maybe that answers my question," said Took. "Come to think of it, how did you manage to stay hidden? On our first pass our sensors didn't-"

"A feat of ingenuity that I'm proud to say I helped develop," said Ingore.

"The one piece of technology we tolerate. A cloaking shield which gives sensors the impression that this is empty forest land."

"Very handy," said Took. An idea occurred to him. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to show us how you do it? We could perhaps trade you-"

"No, I'm sorry, but we do not share the secrets of this technology with

outsiders," said Incore firmly. "If knowledge of our technology were to be disseminated, others might figure out how to penetrate our camouflage shield."

"Wouldn't want that," said Took, grimacing. Well, it was worth a try.

"So let me make sure I understand," said the War Admiral. "A group of scientists set out from the Alliance fifty years ago in search of an agrarian lifestyle. They don't want to be contaminated by other societies that do use technology, so they fly for ten years into uncharted space, and then, to top it off, they use a cloaking shield to further protect their privacy."

Took and Obe were testifying at a gathering of the fleet captains. It was one of the few times Took had ever been invited to such a meeting. He wondered if he could pick up a few interviews with some of the fleet captains afterwards.

"Sounds like overkill to me," grunted Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna.

"They could have picked a planet a few months outside of Alliance space, or even inside an Alliance space, and not even be found for years."

"I also think it's odd that a society that so desperately wants to avoid technology is uses technology, even to protect itself," said another captain.

The War Admiral reclined in his war room chair. The camouflage shield was part of the puzzle, but what that part was he hadn't yet figured out. "And you say they don't want us to settle there?"

"They brought up the subject, and made a point of saying they don't want us to settle there," said Took.

"They did, did they?" said the War Admiral.

"In fact, they specifically told me to tell you that."

"Hm," said the War Admiral. "In the trap I'm imagining, they would want us to come down and colonize."

"But they wouldn't want to appear too eager," said Captain Perko Gale of the fast attack destroyer Always Ready.

"Correct," said the War Admiral

"You're assuming that this is a trap," said Captain Bennett of the Amory Til.

"That's the operating assumption," the War Admiral agreed.

"I think we need to investigate the matter further before we come to any firm conclusion," said Bennett.

"For once, Captain, I agree with you," said North. "That's why I propose to send a medical and tech team down there to see if they really are what they appear to be."

"A team from the Glory?" Bennett asked.

"Yes, Captain," said the War Admiral.

"Sir, I propose a more balanced team," said Bennett. "These recons are almost always performed by Glory officers. I think our survey teams would benefit by having crewmembers participate from other ships."

The War Admiral considered, but just for a second. "Very well, Captain. Would you like to send a team from the Amory Til to accompany them?"

"That I would, War Admiral."

"Very well," said the War Admiral. "We're adjourned." He pressed a button, and the holographic representations of the fleet admirals faded, leaving him alone in the room with Dulin, Wren, Took, and Obe.

"Sir are you going to let-" Took was cut off by the deceptively calm stare of the War Admiral.

"I want you to accompany the tech team," said the War Admiral. "Since you made the initial contact, you'd be an ideal liaison."

"Somehow, I don't think that's the only reason," said Took, waiting for the inevitable.

"And while you're there, use your good journalistic instincts to snoop around while the others keep the colonists occupied," said the War Admiral. "Dismissed."

When Obe and Took filed out, Dulin and Wren stayed behind.

"Sir, I didn't want to speak up in front of Captain Took, but I agreed with his sentiment. You let Captain Bennett get away with too much, especially in front of the other captains."

"It's a delicate balance, Captain," said the War Admiral. "Too little pressure, and he runs amok and ruins discipline. Too much pressure, and we'll have a split in the ranks." He turned away. "But you're right about one thing. The time is fast approaching when we're going to have to deal with Captain Bennett."

As Took piloted the transport into the atmosphere, he noticed the shuttle from the Amory Til had already streaked ahead of them. "They're in a hurry, aren't they?" Took muttered.

But the real surprise came when they landed and everyone disembarked from their ships--from the transport, the tech and medical crew, and a couple of marines; and from the shuttle--none other than Captain Bennett himself and two of his men.

"What's he doing here?" Obe whispered.

"Do you have something to say, Lieutenant?" said Bennett, walking over. If he didn't like the War Admiral, he certainly didn't like the War Admiral's trained pets. And there was something additional about Took that rubbed him the wrong way.

"Ah, he wasn't saying anything sir, just that he was delighted to see you," said Took, giving a little smile. Although Bennett outranked him, he didn't fear him.

"Can we get on with this?" growled Doctor Farb, hefting a shoulder bag filled with equipment.

"You have returned," said Ingore, giving Took a broad smile.

"Yes, I-"

Bennett stepped in front of Took. "My name is Captain Michael Bennett, I'm in command here."

"But Mr. Took is also a Captain, is he not?" said Ingore, puzzled.

While Bennett was explaining the confusion between spaceforce and naval ranks, Took whispered, "While the commodore here is making second contact, keep your ears open."

"Where are you going?" Obe whispered back.

Took gave a mischievous smile and turned to go.

"Yes, you can go too, Lieutenant," said Bennett to Obe, glad to see them go.

"Afraid not," said Took, turning back. "Lieutenant Obe is a trained diplomat, having spent decades in the foreign service before joining the navy."

Obe barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"I am ordering you both to leave. You're dismissed!" said Bennett, a glare burning in his eyes.

Took stared back, giving an irritating smile. "You're very good with that, you should get that look patented."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please, no arguing," said Ingore gently.

Took gave Bennett a sarcastic salute and headed off.

He checked in first with the agro workers. "What do we have here?" he asked, pointing to one of the fields.

"Looks like potatoes," said one of the techs.

"Ha ha, very funny," said Took. "Have you learned anything useful?"

"Other than the fact that from our readings these are common sixty day potatoes, and that they were planted two weeks ago, no."

Another tech approached from a field down the road. "Same thing there," the second tech said. "It looks like they all did their plantings two weeks ago."

"Anything unusual in that?" said Took.

"No," said the first tech. He scanned the soil. "That's odd, though."

"What?"

"This soil is very rich."

"Meaning..."

"Either there's something unusual about the soil, or this is the very first crop that they've planted on this spot," said the tech.

Took raised an eyebrow. "Scan the surrounding area. They may rotate among different fields. See if you can spot any areas that have been plowed before. And don't go anywhere without a marine guard" He turned, and spotting Doctor Farb looking annoyed, walked over to him. "What's up,

doc?"

"These fine farmers won't permit me to conduct a medical examination."

"We're fine," said one farmer.

"We're all fine," said a second farmer dully.

"Why not let the doc check you out?" said Took. "You should always get a routine physical once every 50 years, just to be safe."

"No," said the farmer. "No electrical equipment. He can examine us, but no scanners. It's our beliefs, you understand."

"I'm beginning to," said Took.

Took wandered around for the next hour, checking out the farming community. Everything seemed completely ordinary. So this is the life that Captain Bennett wanted them all to live. To homestead and become simple farmers. Really boring. Personally, Took would rather take his chances with the Insectoids in space.

As he wandered around the outskirts of the village a small building caught his eye. Small, but clearly, unlike the others, made of metal. Using his hand scanner, he tried to see what was inside of it. But whatever was in there was shielded.

"What are you doing?" said a farmer, smiling pleasantly as he walked up to Took.

"Just looking around," said Took.

"No electronics, please," said the farmer, looking disapprovingly at Took's scanner. Took took one more look at his scanner that gave him a small surprise, then set the save button to record his readings, and then reluctantly closed the scanner down.

"Better?"

"Much," said the farmer placidly.

"Mind if I ask what's inside there?"

"That's the building containing the only electrical device in the colony,"

said the farmer. "Our camouflage device."

"Mind if I take a quick look?"

"Entry is forbidden."

"All right," said Took. He would've been really interested to go inside,

but at this point, it wasn't really necessary, not after the readings he

had obtained on his scanner.

Took walked back to the council hut, where the elders were just breaking

up after what looked like a big meeting.

"It's decided," said Ingore, smiling graciously. "We approve."

"Approve what?" said Took, unsure whether to ask Ingore, or turn to Obe,

who was trying to get his attention. Bennett was ignoring him entirely.

"We will permit you to settle here, in the valley several miles to the

south," said Ingore.

"Really? Only yesterday you were telling us you didn't want us here," said

Took.

"Forgive my manners," said Ingore. "I wasn't entirely aware of your

plight. Your Captain Bennett has told us the touching story of how you

have been hunted by these insect creatures, and how many of you have been

wounded and killed. As it is a matter of life or death, we will permit you

to have refuge here. You must establish settlements of your own and do

your own farming, you understand, and respect our ways, but we will accept

you and use our camouflage shield to protect you, so that you may live in

peace."

"We can start bringing down transports with supplies and crew almost immediately," said Bennett.

"Ah, Captain, aren't you forgetting one little thing?" said Took.

Bennett glared at him.

"The chain of command? Doesn't the War Admiral have to approve any general disembarkation?"

"You let me worry about him, little man," said Bennett. Nodding to Ingore, he said, "We'll speak again." And he turned and left for his shuttle.

"I'm five foot ten inches tall, and that's without my boots," said Took.

"That's plenty tall. Why does everyone taller than six feet feel they have free license to call me 'little man'?"

"Took, don't you think we have bigger things to worry about?"

"You're right, buddy," said Took. "Let's collect the crew and get back to the shuttle." Took spoke into his wrist comm and ordered the others to gather at the landing site. "I remember, though, what happened to the last guy who called me 'little man'."

He was referring to the ex-farming director, Odusk, who was enjoying a comfort suite in the Glory's brig the past few years.

"Very interesting," said the War Admiral. "Very interesting indeed. A farming community that's been on the planet for forty years and yet has only been farming for two weeks. A community with not a single sick person and all refuse to have a routine medical scan." He turned to Took. "And most interesting of all, a metallurgical analysis of the building containing their precious camouflage field shows that the building was

forged sometime in the last year."

"Obviously a trap," said Captain Dulin.

"Obviously, a trap," said the War Admiral. "The moment we leave our ships and settle down, that's when the Insectoids will come for us."

"We should leave immediately," said Wren.

"There's no hurry," said the War Admiral. "I'm sure that the fleet that's waiting for us will suddenly appear if we head out of orbit."

"But... there's no purpose in staying," said Dulin.

"There just might be one," said the War Admiral calmly.

The holographic image of Captain Shang looked thoughtful as he sat in Captain Bennett's office on the Amory Til. "I don't know, Captain."

"This could be our last chance!" said Bennett. "Think about it, Feng.

Every time we've proposed settling down somewhere, the War Admiral has always thrown his 'they will hunt us down and shoot us' argument at us.

But for the first time he doesn't have this argument to use against us.

We'll be well protected by the camouflage shield."

"We don't know that for sure."

"Nothing is for sure!" Bennett thundered. "But this is the best chance we'll have to settle down! A hospitable planet, friendly allies, and technology to protect us. What more can you ask for?"

"It's not that simple," said Shang. "You're asking me to mutiny against the War Admiral." He looked sharply to the side. "Is this line still secure?"

"Scrambling every tenth of a second," said Bennett, checking an instrument pad. "It's not mutiny--we're not taking over, and, strictly speaking, we're not properly under his command. We're Directorate officers, and he's

League, you know that, Shang."

"But the Alliance--"

"The Alliance died ten years ago at Vitalics," said Bennett. "What we're talking about is a chance to live! Do you want to spend the rest of your life on the run from the Insectoids! Every time they engage us, we lose more and more ships and men. You know it's just a matter of time before we're all dead. This is your last chance--will you take it?"

Shang nodded reluctantly. "All right. I'm in."

"Good. I'll be in touch soon." Bennett terminated the signal, and then called the next officer.

Captain Harkness of the Blue Luna.

Bennett generally preferred to contact Directorate officers who he knew would be sympathetic; but there were a few League officers who he thought might also join up. Harkness has never shown much sympathy to the homesteader movement, but neither did he openly attack them; and Bennett remembered that he was among the first officer to request that the War Admiral step aside during the imposter incident several years back.

Whatever he was, Harkness was a free thinker, and might be open to persuasion. And the Blue Luna was the third biggest ship in the fleet, after the Amory Til and of course the Glory. It would be worth the risk to try and swing him over to their side.

"What are you talking about?" Harkness frowned.

It wasn't going well from the start. Harkness decided to try one more time. "This may be our only chance for survival."

Harkness grunted. "I'm a soldier. I don't think I'd be much of a farmer."

"At least you'd be alive," Bennett pointed out. "And not everyone will have to farm."

"Ok, but how can you be so sure this is on the level? The War Admiral thinks it's a trap."

"He thinks anything that will dilute his power is a trap," said Bennett.

Then, seeing the expression on Harkness's face, he changed tact. "He's a brilliant soldier. But he's not empowered to make this kind of non-military decision."

"Are you saying we should mutiny?" said Harkness.

Obviously, Harkness would not be persuaded. Time to back up and obfuscate.

"Of course not," said Bennett soothingly. "I was only thinking of presenting a united front to the War Admiral, to try and persuade him otherwise. I would never consider taking action without his approval."

"Hm," said Harkness. Bennett couldn't tell if he believed.

"All right," said Harkness, not giving anything away. "Let me give it some thought."

"You do that," said Bennett, relieved, signing off.

Harkness did think about it, for a full hour, which was a long time for him. He was a free thinker, but one who came to quick decisions. Then he called the War Admiral.

"They're obviously plotting some kind of mutiny, War Admiral," said Harkness. "Just thought you'd like to know."

"I appreciate the warning, Captain," said the War Admiral, acting totally nonplussed.

"What are you going to do?" said Harkness.

"We'll talk about it at the fleet meeting tomorrow morning," said the War

Admiral.

"A fleet meeting tomorrow morning? Admiral, this has gone way beyond-"

"I appreciate your concern," said the War Admiral. "North out."

"He's right, sir," said Dulin, standing out of range of the image North had been transmitting.

"I second that, sir," said Wren.

"I appreciate your opinions," said the War Admiral. "Please return to your posts."

Dulin and Wren filed out of his office. "He's really keeping his cards close to his chest on this one," said Wren.

"I'm sure the War Admiral knows what he's doing," said Dulin. "I hope," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Everyone was in attendance at the fleet captain's meeting North had called the following morning. "And this evidence should prove, I think, that this is an elaborate trap set for us by the Insectoids. I propose now that we move on-"

"Just a moment, War Admiral," said Captain Bennett.

The War Admiral permitted himself to look surprised. "Yes Captain?"

"We haven't finished discussing this topic," said Bennett. He took a deep breath, and launched into a speech. "I have seen this settlement firsthand and met with their leaders, and I can tell you all, this is no trap. In fact, this may be our best hope to live the rest of our lives in peace. I think you see a trap because you want to. I think you are so headstrong in favor of this fruitless quest you've had us on for the past ten years that you can't take a step back and realize that there's another alternative."

We haven't found any useful Chent technology and we never will. All we've done is lose lives as we've been hunted down by the Insectoids. This may be our only chance to save the rest of our remaining lives."

He looked at the War Admiral, waiting for an explosion.

But the War Admiral took it calmly. "What do you propose?" he asked.

"A choice," said Bennett, surprised that the War Admiral wasn't putting up more of a fight. "Let the ships that want to disembark, disembark. Those that want to go on, can go on."

"And how will each ship decide?" The War Admiral asked.

"By each captain, of course," said Bennett.

"Of course," said the War Admiral. "And if any of the crew have a different opinion?"

"Well, they can transfer to another ship, I suppose," said Bennett. He hadn't considered that point.

"I respect your opinion, Captain," said the War Admiral. "But it's just that--your opinion."

"Not just mine, War Admiral," said Bennett.

"Really?" said the War Admiral. "Who else shares your view?" It was as if they were debating an abstract, scholarly subject. "Don't be shy," said the War Admiral. "Stand up!" he said, his voice hardening.

A few fleet captains stood up, and then a few more, some of them very hesitantly. "Is that all?" said the War Admiral. "What about the merchant captains?"

"We have convinced some of those as well," said Bennett.

"Well, by all means, let's bring them in and hear what they have to say," said the War Admiral, looking annoyed. It was obvious that he was going to

try to use the force of his personality to browbeat them into submission, but it wouldn't help, this time.

There was an awkward silence while the merchant captains were patched in.

When their images materialized in the war room it was positively crowded.

"For those of you who just joined us lately-" began the War Admiral acidly. He quickly explained the situation, and ask those who supported Bennett's position to stand up as well. And a number of them did.

"You see, War Admiral, it simply isn't my opinion," said Bennett.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Your dangerous opinion is shared by many."

He turned to the captains whose holographic images were standing. "You still want to embark on this, even though you know it's almost certainly a trap? You heard the report about the potatoes; they've only been farming for two weeks! You heard the metallurgy report; that building is only a few months old! Can't you see that this is clearly a trap!"

"You present this information as if it's conclusive," said Bennett. "We haven't done conclusive studies of the soil; it may not lose as much nutrients in each replanting as ours does. As for the building, that's not conclusive either; they could have built a new building to replace an old one that they tore down. Maybe you can explain, War Admiral, how likely it is that the Insectoids would pore an incredible amount of resources into creating a phony colony, and how likely it is that they'd be able to convincingly brainwash fifty people, and furthermore, how likely it is that they'd know exactly which planet we'd stop by."

"We've already see them put an incredible amount of resources into hunting us down, that's not new," the War Admiral responded. "As for brainwashing

or mental control, it's been done before. Don't forget that none of them would let Doctor Farb examine them. As for the last point, I don't know how they knew we were coming here, but it's obvious that they did."

He looked at each of the wavering fleet captains, pacing back and forth among them. "At the end, it all comes down to trust. You all know I have saved each of your lives countless times. You have trusted my judgment, my instincts, for years, putting your lives in my hands. I say once more, trust me again! If you leave us here, we will not be able to return to protect you. The Insectoids will come and slaughter you not in weeks, or months, but days." He stopped, standing nearest the captains he thought might be wavering the most. "I can't tell you what will happen if you stay with us. But if you leave the fleet, I am certain what your fate will be. You will die. Period. I ask you, one last time, trust me now!" He turned to one captain standing up. "Will you trust me?"

That captain, looking chagrined, slowly sat down.

"Will you trust me?" said the War Admiral, moving to another--who also slowly sat down.

He went down the row, fixing each of them with the stare, asking each the same question. In the end seven sat down, leaving 16 standing--16, out of 71 captains in the fleet.

"All right, you've had your say," said Bennett. He had been nervous that even more captains would back down.

"What are your intentions?" the War Admiral said.

"We're going down to the planet," said Bennett. "We've decided."

The War Admiral looked down for a moment. Then he gave Bennett a dark look. "And you expect me to sit back and let you do it?"

Bennett said nothing.

"I did that once," said the War Admiral. "Sat back and let things happen.

The result was tens of thousands, perhaps millions dead, and the whole of humanity enslaved. I don't think I will let that happen again."

"What are you going to do?" Bennett said. "You're not going to fire on us."

North said nothing for a moment. Would he fire on them, or even threaten to? A majority of the military ships were on his side, but would they fire on their own ships, even if the War Admiral ordered him to?

But they would never find out. "No, I will not fire on your ships," said

North, his head bowed in apparent defeat.

"Then I think we've finished our talk," said Bennett.

"I agree," said North. He raised his head and spoke into the air. "NOW, Major Fortran!"

The holographic images of the fleet captains who were standing up could be seen looking sharply to the side, and then, one by one, they were pulled off-screen, to be replaced by a marine.

"Renown secured, sir," said one marine.

"Crawler secured, sir," reported another.

"Ratara secured, sir," said a third.

One by one they reported in.

"No, you can't do this!" said Bennett, as he was yanked from view.

"Actually, I can," said the War Admiral. "You are all under military arrest. You and your senior officers will be put under preventative detention. You will not be allowed contact with any of your crew, pending

your transfer to the brig on the Glory."

One of the merchant captains who had stayed loyal muttered, "Was this really necessary?"

Surprisingly, it was another captain who answered. "Of course it was, you fool," said Captain Harkness. "If we lost a third of the fleet, what do you think that would do for our chances of survival?"

North, nodding, said, "I'm going to be quite busy for the next few hours, gentlemen. I'll be in touch soon," he promised.

"I understand now," said Wren. "You wanted Bennett to approach the other officers first, so you could see who was loyal and who wasn't."

"And you prepositioned Major Fortran's men on the ships most likely to go over to his side," said Dulin. "Masterful job, War Admiral."

"Thank you," said the War Admiral. "But now we have a mess on our hands. Where do we find 16 loyal captains to replace them? We know about the disloyalty of these men, but what about their bridge officers? How far down does the trouble go? Right now I have a handful of marines on each ship's bridge and engineering section, but if the trouble spreads, they could easily be overpowered."

"I suggest we not worry about the crews for now, War Admiral," said Dulin.

"We couldn't replace them even if we wanted to."

"Quite right," said the War Admiral. He paused a moment, making a decision. "Set up interviews with the senior officers on each ship. Try to get a sense of who is loyal and who isn't."

"And what do we do with each group?"

"The disloyal officers, those who won't recommit to their oaths, will be stripped of their rank and sent to perform civilian duty on the merchant

ships. If they like the idea of farming so much, they'll get their chance.

Then leave about half of the so-called loyal officers where they are, and arrange a schedule to have them swap positions with officers on loyal ships. We're going to have to promote some first officers on the loyal ships to become captains on the vacant ships, so there will be some openings."

"So you hope by integrating the potentially disloyal officers, you can limit their ability to do damage."

"Precisely," said the War Admiral. "If they're on a ship with a loyal crew, there's a limit to what they can do. We don't have time for anything more. In fact, I want this done in eight hours."

"Eight hours?" said Dulin. "Impossible!"

"Any more than that and we risk bringing the Insectoid fleet down on us," said the War Admiral. "If we don't take the bait soon they're going to come anyway. And when they do we're going to need trained crews in place."

"And what do we do with the disloyal captains?"

"Leave them to me," said the War Admiral.

"Yes, we're really excited about coming down to the planet," said Took, over the comm.

"Where's Captain Bennett?" came Ingore's voice.

"He's busy, uh, packing," said Took. "We have a lot of equipment to bring. The first shipment should start coming down in twelve hours."

"All right," said Ingore. "But I'd like to hear from Captain Bennett soon."

"I'm sure you will," said Took. He closed the comm, and received a nod from the War Admiral.

"Is there any way we can help them?"

"Assuming they're under some form of mind control or conditioning, the minute we went down to the planet to grab them, we'd spring whatever trap is waiting for us," said the War Admiral. "There could be whole battalions of Insectoid troopers waiting below the surface." He looked thoughtful.

"No, their fate was sealed, like everyone else's, the minute we agreed to meet the Insectoids at Vitalics."

The interviewing process proceeded quickly. Captain Dulin reported in to the War Admiral. "Only a handful have refused to retake the oath. I'm afraid a number of disloyal ones will slip through."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that right now," said the War Admiral. "Perhaps their attitudes will change after the events of the next two days unfold." He didn't elaborate further. "Do you have the duty lists and transfers ready?"

"Here's a rough draft," said Dulin. Normally, high level transfers were considered for hours, by a committee. Here they were proposing to transfer dozens of senior officers to dozens of ships with just a few minutes of consideration.

"That will have to do," said the War Admiral, studying the pad Dulin handed him. "But this won't work," he frowned, pointing at one entry. For the new captain of the Amory Til.

"She's the logical choice, sir," said Dulin. "In fact, there is no one else suited to command a half-carrier."

The War Admiral said, "I can think of someone else, Captain. If you're up

for it."

"WHAT?" said Wren.

"It's not polite to yell at your commanding officer," said the War Admiral mildly.

"You want me to take command of the Glory?" said Wren. "You only promoted me to full commander a few years ago!"

"I agree under normal circumstances that this wouldn't occur for another two decades, but circumstances aren't normal. Experienced ship officers are rare; Experienced ship officers who know something about command carriers number only two. Yourself, and Captain Dulin."

"Then why not keep Roger here and put me in charge of the Amory Til? The Amory Til is a smaller ship, it's like a demotion for Roger."

"A smaller ship filled with smaller, more rebellious minds," said the War Admiral. "It's a much more difficult assignment, which is why we need the more experienced officer there."

"Is that all?" said Wren.

North didn't answer, didn't even pretend not to understand what she was talking about.

"Is that all?" she whispered.

North turned away, looking out the window. "I don't know," he said slowly.

"My decision definitely makes logical sense, and yet, where you're concerned..." he slowly turned and looked back at her. "I warned you something like this could happen when we became... involved." He paused, then said, "Would you really prefer to go to the Amory Til in Roger's place?"

Wren didn't say anything. Then, in a small voice, "No. No, I really wouldn't."

A stunned silence broke out in the Glory's brig when the War Admiral entered. The 16 former captains and handful of other senior officers glared out at the War Admiral behind a forcefield.

"I really wish it hadn't come to this," said the War Admiral. "If the fate of the remainder of the human race hadn't been at stake, I might have let you have your own way." And then his voice hardened. "But it wasn't just a matter of letting you go to your deaths, but your crews, too. What shall I do with you now?"

"We're entitled to a trial, War Admiral," said one Captain.

"We're under martial law, I and I alone will chair any tribunal," said the War Admiral. "I ask again, what should I do with all of you?"

His only answer was silence.

"The penalty for mutiny is still death," said the War Admiral.

"I'm not a military officer," said one of the captains, who had been in charge of one of the merchant ships.

"But you're under military command," said the War Admiral. "Where was I? Yes, the death penalty."

"If you're going to kill us, just get it over with," snapped Shang. The others spoke up in a babble of voices.

"Quiet!" the War Admiral thundered. "Or are the rest of you as eager to die as former Captain Shang?"

The cellblock was silent again.

"Good," said the War Admiral. "As I said, the traditional penalty for mutiny is death by firing squad. However, the military penal code does

permit me to commute the sentence in the case of mitigating circumstances." He hardened both his voice and his gaze. "Are there any mitigating circumstances?"

"What do you want?" said Captain Bennett, speaking for the first time since the War Admiral entered the cellblock.

"A message to each of your crews, assuring them you're all right, telling them you accept the full blame for what happened, and advising them to cooperate with us," said the War Admiral.

"In return for?"

The War Admiral stared at Bennett. "20 years for the others; 30 for you."

"30 years? In here? Forget it!" said Bennett.

The War Admiral shrugged. "You each have two hours to prepare for your executions." He turned to leave.

The first cries came before he had taken his first step. In the end, no one was executed.

The War Admiral entered the bridge.

"Captain," he said by way of greeting.

Captain Stacy Wren nodded, looking self-consciously for a moment at the additional full strip on her shoulderboards and sleeves. "War Admiral."

"Are the crew readjustments complete?"

"Yes sir," said Wren. "The fleet is ready and awaiting your command."

"Activate holomap."

"Yes sir," said the newly promoted Half Commander Fletcher. The three dimensional map appeared in the center of the bridge.

"There are three neighboring systems where the Insectoid fleet may be

waiting for us," said the War Admiral. No one even thought to challenge his assessment that the Insectoids were waiting for them.

"Naturally, the Insectoids have us under surveillance, so the instant we break orbit, they will attack," said the War Admiral. "But it's important we don't move towards the system where their fleet is waiting for us." He stared at the screen intently, and then pressed a button, causing one of the solar systems to flash. "They're waiting for us there," he said quietly. "And that means we have a chance to escape, at least for now, if we plot this course," he added, drawing a path with an electrowand.

"Set a course, Captain, and engage," said the War Admiral.

"Aye sir!"

The fleet moved out along the trajectory the War Admiral had set forth.

Less than an hour later, they detected movement, from the very solar system the War Admiral had warned them of.

"Long range detects several battleships... battlecruisers... heavy and light cruisers... destroyers... several carriers," said Lieutenant Shishman.

"We'll be able to elude them in the NG-149 gas cloud we're heading for," said the War Admiral.

"How did you know they weren't waiting for us in NG-149? And how did you know which system they were waiting in?" Wren asked.

"I guess," said the War Admiral, "It comes down to a matter of trust."

The briefing was projected to the rest of the fleet the next day, when they were safely inside the nebula and had eluded their pursuers. It was broadcast to every holoprojector of every ship of the fleet.

"As far as we could tell there were 68 ships in that attack fleet," said

the War Admiral. "Including a large number of heavy battleships, flat tops, and other support ships. For years many of you have been asking the question, 'what if we just settled down on a planet? Would the Insectoids come after us'? I think now you have your answer. They are so desperate to destroy us that they fabricated an entire colony at tremendous expense to themselves. One thing I think we can all agree upon; if we stop, we die. We have no choice but to go on. I hope this, once and for all, finishes the debate about homesteading."

Later, in his quarters, Wren said, "That was a masterful speech."

"Half of being an officer is giving masterful speeches," said the War Admiral. "But I think this will prove to anyone except the most hardcore of the homesteaders that settling down on a planet is impossible now. Ironically, the Insectoids have made us stronger, by removing this as an issue of debate."

"Have they?" said Wren. "We have an awful lot of new captains with unhappy crews."

"The crews will settle down, now that they realize that there isn't another viable option. Once you defeat an opposing ideology, the followers tend to drop away."

Wren smiled at him, pouring herself another drink. "All except the ones in the brig, of course."

"Of course," said the War Admiral. "It still pains me though that two of the eighteen, two League captains, two of my people, defected to the other side."

"You always tend to look on the dismal side of things," said Wren,

snuggling up to him in bed. "What about the overwhelming majority of your captains who didn't desert you? After all they had been through, it's amazing they haven't all mutinied or gone AWOL by now. It's only been the force of your personality that's held them all together."

"Very flattering," said the War Admiral, always unable to take a compliment. "But-"

Puffy, sitting in a corner eyeing them, barked approvingly.

"See? If you don't believe me, believe your pseudo-pet," said Wren.

"I can't counter an argument like that," the War Admiral admitted.

Chapter 7 Peace, Love, And Happiness

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North, 12 years and 10 months after

Vitalics We continue in our search for Chent artifacts. We have come across a few promising leads but have not found anything substantial yet. We continue along the path set fourth by the latest large cargo vessel we found. As I indicated in my earlier entries, the first large cargo ship led to a second one, and now the second one has led to a third one, which we found last year. This too, was filled with supplies and spare parts we sorely needed, and this too, came with a set of another coordinates.

Obviously, our benefactor wants to keep us well supplied. Equally obviously, our benefactor wants to keep us at arms length. I have not been content with the situation and have been investigating leads to determine the source of these large cargo ships, but it may take one or two more rendezvous with additional cargo ships before I am able to track their source.

The Insectoids continue to track us, using what we now know is their particle cannon technology to launch new fleets from Alliance space to hunt us down. We try to evade their ships as long as we can before fighting them, knowing that any fleet we destroy is replaced by another. But they have so many fleets hunting for us that we have to fight a battle every few months, and slowly but surely that's taking a toll on ships and crew. That's why it's vital we locate the source of these cargo shipments, and I'm fairly confident of being able to do so within the next shipment or two.

In the meantime, we barely eluded an Insectoid fleet last week. They're pursuing us, and we have to try and avoid contact as long as possible. To that end, I've launched long range scouts in every direction.

"Bank left," said the Ken Pilot. "Now right. Left, left, right."

They tried to copy his maneuvers in their Wildcats, but he was going way to quick for them.

"Aren't Graftonites supposed to lose their reflexes after they've been off-planet for a while?" Took said.

"We do," said the Ken Pilot. "But even my slowed reaction times are still faster than your pitifully slow ones."

Took sighed. Captain Wren had "suggested" that the Ken Pilot attempt to teach them some of his piloting skills, but so far the only thing rubbing off was resentment. What was even worse was the fact that were it not for this little class he'd be out on point patrol right now. Took knew they were coming up on a system with planetary bodies, their first in over a week. He wished he could be out there.

Captain Chang-Wha of Wildcat "G" checked his sensors. "You getting that, Baker?"

Baker, his wingman, nodded. "Habitable planet. We should check it out for monuments."

The thought of homesteading no longer even occurred to them, or anyone else in the fleet. Their experience with the Insectoid "farming community" had convinced them all of that.

They orbited the planet. "Looks habitable," said Chang-Wha. "I'm reading vegetation, lower level animal life, but no-"

Suddenly, a powerful feeling gripped him. Baker felt it too.

"I think we should check out the planet," said Chang-Wha slowly. "Let's go down."

"Captain?"

"Yes Colonel?" said Captain Wren.

"Patrol 4 is overdue," said Colonel Darley.

"What was their last report?"

"They were closing in on system S-12897, had found a habitable planet, and were going to check it out," said Rey.

Wren bit her lip, wondering if this was worth bothering the War Admiral about. They were so short-handed now that she was forced to take one watch in three, running two other watches with relatively inexperienced officers--Half Commander Shishman and Half Commander Kearse. The War Admiral didn't take a watch, but instead popped in on all three watch periods, observing and occasionally making helpful comments. Biting her lip, she made a decision. "War Admiral?" she said, pressing the comm.

The War Admiral emerged from his office. Wren filled him in on the

situation.

"So they were either intercepted in space or something happened to them on the planet," said the War Admiral. "Any signs of other ships in the sector?"

"None," said Wren. "But they could be hiding behind that planet in S-12897. And we're heading in that direction."

"Hm," said the War Admiral. He pressed the comm. "Fleet command, this is War Admiral North. All stop." He turned to Wren. "Deploy a rescue shuttle. Send a squadron of fighters to back them up."

"Do you want me to send Wildcat "A"?" said Wren. "They're still in training."

The War Admiral considered. "Who's on standby right now?"

"Ben Hunter with Wildcat "B"."

"That will do fine," said the War Admiral.

"Where are they going?" Took grumbled, watching the squadron take off as it escorted the shuttle.

A low powered laser burst exploded near his ship.

"Hey!" Took yelled.

"Don't let yourself be distracted," said the Ken Pilot. "Now, are you going to even attempt to copy the maneuver I just performed, or need I show it to you yet again?"

"Closing on the planet," came the shuttle pilot. "No sign of debris."

"This is Hunter," came a different voice. "We've circled around the planet. No sign of the enemy. I don't think they had any problem in space."

"Picking up their ships on the planet," said the shuttle pilot.

"Descend," said Colonel Ray. "Hunter, have your squadron take up position in orbit."

"Roger," said Captain Hunter.

"Patch me through to the shuttle commander," said the War Admiral.

Lieutenant Fletcher nodded and pushed a button.

"Kirby, this is the War Admiral," said North.

"Sir."

"I want you to wear a surveillance brace when you land," said the War Admiral. "I want to see everything you do."

"Yes sir."

In the shuttle, Kirby put on the wires and clippings that would secure the small holocamera to his shoulder.

The shuttle touched down near the two Wildcats. They watched the image on the main bridge holoprojector. It was expanded to maximum size, so whatever Kirby was seeing twenty feet in front of him also appeared in full three-dimensional color on the main bridge.

The image jerked slightly as Kirby walked in the field towards the Wildcats. When he and his squad of marines got there he reported, "They're empty, sir."

"Any signs where they may have gone?" said the War Admiral.

Kirby looked down. "I see footprints leading down into that valley yonder.

Squad! Form up!"

They walked down a moderate incline into a beautiful valley. It was filled with flowers and trees and bushes and plants. Beautiful birds chirped from the trees. A small stream winded its way through the lush natural

surroundings.

They found the two pilots sitting in the grass.

"Chang-Wha! Baker!" Kirby yelled, while keeping his eyes open for an ambush.

Chang-Wha and Baker just sat there, oblivious to the approaching marines.

Their eyes were open, but it was as if they were asleep. They were clearly gazing into the distance, with goofy smiles on their faces.

"They seem to be drugged or hypnotized, sir," said Kirby. He put an arm on Chang-Wha's shoulder and shook him; Chang-Wha's expression didn't change in the slightest.

"Get them out of there and withdraw," the War Admiral snapped. Something definitely wasn't right here.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said a soft, feminine voice.

Kirby, and the camera on his shoulder, turned to see a woman in a green gown. The woman was slim, attractive, with long brown hair flowing off her shoulders.

"Who... are... you...." said Kirby, finding his voice slowing down.

"That's bet-ter," said the woman, smiling directly into the holocamera.

"Get out of there, now!" said the War Admiral.

Through the camera they could only see two of the marines, but they were on their knees, and they were smiling.

"Kirby, get out of there!" said the War Admiral.

"Nice...." they heard Kirby say. And then he must have laid down on the ground, because the holocamera was showing the sky.

The War Admiral turned to Colonel Darley. "Get the squadron out of there

now!"

Rey turned to his sensors. "Squadron leader, Wildcat B, withdraw, repeat, withdraw."

"They're not in orbit around the planet anymore," said Shishman, checking the sensors.

"They're going in for a landing," Darley confirmed. "I can't reach them."

"Or maybe you can, but they're just not responding," said the War Admiral, a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Why all this unhappiness?" said the sweet voice.

They turned back to the holoinage, which was still projecting the clouds and the sky.

And now also a face, looking down at the camera, the face of the young woman. "Pretty pretty," she smiled.

"Who are you? What do you want?" said the War Admiral.

The woman smiled at the War Admiral, and he felt a chill run down his spine. "I want to bring you joy and happiness." She reached out an arm, and on the bridge her holographic arm reached out as well. The War Admiral was too far back to be touched, but Shishman wasn't, and she actually reached beyond the edge of the holographic field to touch him. Shishman sighed, gave a goofy grin, and slumped in his chair.

"Terminate transmission!" the War Admiral barked.

"No effect!" Wren shouted, jamming the key repeatedly.

The holograph of the woman reached out to another officer, touched him, and he sighed and slumped to the ground.

The War Admiral pulled a blaster out of a marine guard's holster. Wren wondered if he were going to shoot the hologram. But the War Admiral aimed

and fired at the holographic projector instead. The image of the woman flickered for a moment, and then disappeared.

"Red alert!" said the War Admiral. "Turn the fleet around, full reverse!

And get Doctor Farb and additional security up here, on the double!"

Wren scrambled to keep up with the War Admiral's orders. "What about the men on the planet? The marines, the entire squadron-"

"They're lost," said the War Admiral. "And if we don't get out of here quickly, we will be too."

It was only two hours later, when the fleet was turned away and heading in the opposite direction, and there was no sign of pursuit, that the War Admiral allowed himself to breathe a little more easily. He and Captain Wren sat in the war room, watching a holographic projection of Doctor Farb from sickbay.

"We've had no luck in waking Lieutenant Shishman and Ensign Opeg," said Doctor Farb. "I say 'waking' but they're not really sleeping. They're in some kind of deep dream state, but it's not like any kind of dreaming condition I've never seen."

"Explain, doctor."

"When the body is normally asleep, certain parts of the brain are active in certain ways. These same parts of the brain are active in the same way, but incredibly active. Hyperactive. Whatever they're dreaming about, it's very vivid to them."

"From the looks on their faces it looks like they are happy dreams," said the War Admiral dryly.

"Yes," said Doctor Farb. "And you said a hologram did this? One

originating from millions of miles away?"

"Yes, doctor," said the War Admiral. "Keep evaluating their situation. Try to work out a course of treatment to wake them. My hope is that once we get far enough away from that planet, that they'll wake up on their own.

North out." He touched the terminate button.

"Those beings must be very potent, to affect us over such a distance,"

said the War Admiral. He l