

# **Return to Totalia**

## **Part One: Prelude**

By Robotech\_Master and JonBuck

## Chapter 1: Return

October 12, 157 A.L.

Zharus Orbital Traffic Control Center, Toptown

It was just another ordinary shift. Shuttles taking off, shuttles landing, suborbitals suborbiting, cargo ships moving in and out of orbit. Traffic Controller Second Class Chelsea Swinburne kept an eye on the traffic status indicators and listened to comm chatter with half an ear.

The whole system was so automated that there wasn't a lot of point in paying attention. The only reason she was here was in case the Ad-I running traffic ran into some situation it couldn't handle. She knew it didn't look good to be seen reading a book on duty, but luckily that was what implants were for. And Iphigenia Rose had a new novel out, so...

She was just getting to the part where the hunky guy who'd accidentally gotten turned into a gorgeous girl confessed her feelings to her just-as-hunky former best buddy, when a signal she seldom heard chimed for attention and she nearly fell out of her chair. "What's going on?"

"Multiple unscheduled FTL splashes detected at the edge of the Pharos system," the computer said calmly, displaying an image speckled with a dozen or so pinpricks of light.

Chelsea's blood ran cold. "What? Is it Earth? Are we being invaded?"

"Negative. Size and intensity of splashes is too small for ships. Consistent with message torpedoes."

Chelsea took a deep breath. "Then why didn't you say that *first*, you idiot computer? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Apologies, Controller Swinburne," the computer said. "Should I summon medical aid?"

"What?" She ran back the conversation, then facepalmed. The Ad-I was as old as the space elevator itself. "No. It's a *figure of speech*, you stupid tin can."

"Noted," the computer said placidly. On the bright side, its stupidity meant she could insult it or swear at it as much as she liked and it never complained. Though that also meant it was ultimately unsatisfying.

"Any indication who sent them? Where they came from?"

"Negative," the computer said. "The soonest the nearest probe's transponder can reach us is 8 hours, 47 minutes, and 34 seconds from now." A messy reentry from subspace would echo around a star's gravity well with a spray of tachyons, and message torps like these tried to make as much noise as possible. The Pharos Rangers would already have a retrieval ship on the way.

She glanced at the chart again, trying to figure out what colonies lay in that direction. Due to the gravitic interference from stars and planets, the probes would always make systemfall on the point of the sphere of space around it closest to their point of origin. She zoomed out a few parsecs and frowned. "Wait a minute, there *aren't* any colonies in that direction."

“That is correct,” the computer said.

“But...you *have* to know what that means,” Chelsea said, momentarily forgetting who she was talking to.

“Why do I have to know what that means?” the computer asked, falling back to its ELIZA subroutine as it always did when presented with an input it did not understand.

Chelsea sighed and facepalmed again. The computer was just too stupid to make the connection. It hadn't been programmed for intuitive leaps. “If it didn't come from the direction of a colony, it could only have come from a scout ship. Better comm the Scouts' office. The Rangers will be bringing them in-system as fast as they can.”

“I understand, Controller Swinburne. I have alerted the Scouts to the arrival of the torpedoes as instructed,” the computer said.

“Right. Well, good,” Chelsea said. “Uh...let me know if there are any further developments.”

“Further developments in regard to what?” the computer asked.

Chelsea groaned. “Argh! Just...never mind, you stupid idiot box. Never mind.”

“Request cancelled,” the computer said agreeably.

“Argh!”

*October 14, 157 A.L.*

*Scout Corps Spacedock, Alohavator, Toptown*

Scout message torpedos were some of the most advanced in human space. Three meters long, flattened ovoids that slipped through subspace faster than even the most advanced scout ships. They were of Eridanite make and the Scouts were *very* particular about who handled them. Three Scouts waited at the dock as they were unloaded from a high-speed courier shuttle. All wore Scout Corps khakis, and the leader, a slim woman with grey hair, wore the platinum sextant insignia of the Scout Commander at her collar.

“I assure you the crew of the *Heart of Gold* never touched your torps, Commander Lee,” a white mouse Integrate named Meyers said. He was half human size with stark white fur and beady red eyes, dressed in a white lab coat with a Pharos Rangers insignia on a breast pocket. “Six torps, all good. We selected two from each ship; the checksums indicated all torps from each ship carried identical data payloads to each other, but we didn't probe further than that. The rest will follow by slower transport and arrive in a few days.”

“Each ship'? Wait, there's more than one?” The brown-haired woman in front looked more closely at the retrieved torpedos. Lieutenant Kelly Javitz was dressed in Scout Corps khakis, but had the wrench insignia of the ground support crew.

“There were three,” Meyers reported. “Two each from the *Neu Deutschland*, the *Turbinia*...and the *Daydream Believer*.”

“Commander!” the third scout exclaimed. “Those are...”

“I know! I know! Get these torps to Forensics, double-time! Mr. Meyers, we could use some assistance,” the Commander said.

Meyers nodded. “Of course.” He brought up his lifter fields. “Lead the way, Scouts.”

A half-hour later, Commander Lee sat at her desk, staring at the hardlight display panels in near disbelief. On the other side of the panels, Lt. Javitz stood at attention on the other side of the one-way panels—not that she needed to see them to know what was on them, since she was the technician who had downloaded them herself.

There was a standard procedure for dealing with incoming scout reports. Generally they were reviewed at Toptown, then downloaded via the comm network to Scout HQ at Uplift. But occasionally a report came in that justified bypassing that procedure. Madison Brubeck’s first report had been one such, and it seemed these would be another. Of course, that was why they called her up here, to make that kind of decision, Commander Lee reflected wryly.

“So, Lieutenant, what do you think?” Lee asked. It was largely a rhetorical question, as it was painfully obvious what needed to be done, but the details were just so shocking she had to discuss it with *someone*.

Javitz smiled crookedly. “I think Madison Brubeck is a chip off the old block. Particularly where her luck is concerned.”

“There is that,” Lee admitted. “Sometimes I wonder how my predecessors back on Earth dealt with the old guy. At least, Scouts being Scouts, telling them to get lost for a few years is what you’re *supposed* to do. But this...” She shook her head. “This is too big for the Scouts. Certainly too big for the ordinary comm procedure.”

“Courier, then?”

Lee shook her head. “I’m going to hand-carry this. You know, I’ve never been a huge fan of twentieth-century media myself, but for something of this nature, I’m honestly tempted to order up one of those aluminum briefcases that comes with a handcuff attached to it.”

Javitz chuckled. “I understand that impulse, Ma’am.”

“Beyond that...I don’t know,” Commander Lee mused. “Who do you take something like this to? Who has the authority to deal with matters that may affect the entire political balance of the galaxy? The Planetary Advisory Assembly?”

“It may be it has to go there anyway,” Javitz said. “But if I could make a suggestion, Ma’am...there’s a certain tiger who should probably hear about it first...”

*October 15, 157 AL*

*Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift*

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Mr. Brubeck,” Commander Lee said to the tiger in Scout khakis on the other side of the desk. One of the other chairs in the office was occupied by a young woman with orange hair and lynx ears—his sister and assistant Agatha.

“Hey, I owe the Scouts a lot,” Zane said. “Not least the permission to make your outfit part of my public image.”

Commander Lee shrugged. “If anyone deserves to be an honorary Scout, it’s Clint Brubeck’s son. Besides, after the grants your father and you gave over the years, it would be petty of us to object.”

“So what’s this about, Commander?” Agatha asked. “You said you’ve got some news from Maddie?”

Lee nodded. "I do. But first, I need to ask you to switch off any recording devices or external comms that might be on. This is very sensitive information."

"All right, *now* you've got my interest," Zane said. "I've disabled any recorders, and activated the signal jammers and white noise generators I use for extra-confidential meetings. So what's going on?"

"In early July, we received a message torpedo from Scout Pilot Brubeck—Madison," Lee said. "She filled us in on what she'd found on the planets she'd explored up to that point, and indicated she'd discovered a potential...anomaly. A hidden star system that should have been charted before now, but inexplicably hadn't. She wondered if it might account for some missing ships in that sector."

Zane's ears canted forward. "Really? Why wasn't I informed?"

"Scout business, Mr. Brubeck," Lee said calmly. "It was a strictly internal matter. At that point, there wasn't any cause for concern."

"But now there is?" Agatha asked.

"In a manner of speaking. Three days ago, a couple of dozen scout torpedoes arrived, including some from Madison's ship."

"A couple of dozen? Scouts usually only use one or two at a time, unless there's some trouble," Zane said.

Lee handed a data card to Zane. "This is what they contained. It will save explanation if you take a minute or so to review it at accelerated speed."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Zane slid the card into a slot on his desk, then closed his eyes. His DIN pulsed. Then he opened them again. "What. The. *Fuck*. Commander, pardon my French, but I sure would like to know what you're going to do about rescuing Maddie."

"I would like to emphasize that, at this point, we have no way of knowing yet if she even needs rescue," Commander Lee said. "She may already be in subspace heading our way, in which case she should arrive in a couple of months. That said, we *have* already dispatched one of our sneakiest scout ships with instructions to scout the perimeter of the system and see what it can find out. But even if it arrives and reports immediately, Scout Pilot Brubeck would still be back before its report reaches us."

"*Assuming* she made it out," Zane growled.

"Uh, hold up a moment?" Agatha said. "Some of us are still human and would like to know just what the heck is going on? *Rescuing* Maddie?"

Zane looked to her. "Sorry, Aggie. To make a long story short, it seems Maddie discovered a century-old wildcat colony that has a habit of capturing and imprisoning scouts. She and some other scouts escaped and fought their way out, but Maddie got shot on the way to her ship. Not seriously, she *says*, but still. And last thing that happened before she sent the torps is enemy ships were closing in on her and she wasn't sure if she'd be able to jump out."

"My God," Agatha said. "It's like..."

"Like something out of a Clint Brubeck novel, yes," Commander Lee said wryly. "The irony has not escaped us. And, not to seem insensitive, but at this point your sister might be the least of our worries."

Zane nodded. "Two new metamaterials, and a thriving wildcat colony Earth has no idea even exists—or at least it *was* thriving. This is a lot to digest."

"Wait, what? Metamaterials?" Agatha said. "Could I get a copy of that?"

"I'll pass it to Annycat so you can review it together," Zane said. "But in a

nutshell, it looks like the galaxy as we know it just changed.”

“That may not be an exaggeration,” Lee agreed. “And it presents us with a unique opportunity and a unique problem.”

“If Earth knew they were there, it could walk right over them,” Zane said.

“Especially now that part of their government just staged a coup.”

“Oh, this just gets better and better,” Agatha said.

“I believe it is fairly obvious measures of some kind will have to be taken,” Commander Lee said. “And here we run into a problem. We’re Scouts, Mr. Brubeck. We find new worlds. We are not equipped to help *protect* them. That’s not our job.”

“And if word of this leaks out, it’ll get back to Earth as fast as a fast ship can go,” Zane said grimly. “So if we want to organize a relief fleet, we’ll have to do it under conditions of absolute secrecy.”

“A relief fleet?” Agatha said. “What? Zane, did you just propose mounting an *interstellar invasion*?”

Zane grinned at her. “What, me? You must be thinking of some other tiger, sis. I just want to go over and say hi to the neighbors.”

Agatha rolled her eyes. “Here we go again.”

Zane looked to Commander Lee. “I need to discuss this with my closest advisors; we’ll see if we can come up with a plan. I’ll keep you posted on what we decide. I can guarantee you nobody I talk to about it will leak it.”

Lee nodded, getting back to her feet. “Good enough. We’re going to have to inform the Planetary Advisory Assembly, of course, but we’ll make sure they understand the gravity of the situation as well.”

“Great. Well, thanks for letting me know,” Zane said. “Wow. It’s not often the entire galaxy changes in under five minutes.”

“More often than you’d think, when you’re a Scout,” Lee said. “Good luck.”

After she left, Zane shook his head. “Damn. Now there’s a thing.”

“Look on the bright side?” Agatha suggested. “Assuming she made it out—and I think we have to, she’s a Brubeck after all—our sister’s coming home!”

Zane chuckled. “Hey yeah, there is that.” He grinned. “Maybe I should shave, what do you think?”

Agatha laughed. “I think we can worry about that when the time comes.”

“Assuming it does come,” Zane said. “I’ll tell you this for sure—if she’s not here by the New Year, I’m going out there myself, fleet or no fleet.”

Agatha nodded. “Count me in on that.”

“Thanks, Sis,” Zane said. “But for now, I think I’m going to have to ask you to clear all my appointments for the next few days and see about making a few more important ones. Rhi and Kaylee, Shelley and Uncia...Anny, Myla, Carrie-Anne...we’re getting the *band* together!”

“We’re on a mission from God?” Agatha said.

Zane chuckled. “Something like that.”

Agatha nodded. “I know a few execs who aren’t going to be too pleased about that, but I’ll deal with them.”

“Oh, hey—is Joe Steader back from that grand tour thing he was doing with Rhi’s Grandma? Add him to the list.”

Agatha raised an eyebrow. “Crazy Joe? Really?”

“Hey, he’s got mad money, connections all over the galaxy, *and* he was best buds

with ol' Dad," Zane said. "I think all three of those things will come in handy. Not to mention he knows how to keep a secret. Damn, I *still* can't believe he had a RIDE nobody ever knew about."

"It seems to be contagious," Agatha said. "Next thing you know, we'll find out even Mom and Dad weren't as leery about them as they let on."

Zane chuckled. "Nah, that would be silly." He considered. "Hmm. If we're going to do this, we're going to need to start with as many big stakeholders as possible. We should probably get the Waltons in on this, the Munns too, they're VCs, they're used to being money bags. And someone from the Marshals. See if the Qube's available; if not I guess we can talk to Masterson. And whoever the highest-ranker the Rangers have around. And someone from the Integrate community..."

"Whoa, whoa, I think you're getting ahead of yourself," Agatha said. "I think we can save all those high-ranking officials for the *second* meeting. Let's get our ducks in a row with just our *local* friends for now. And Crazy Joe and Kenyon—they'll be good to have on our side when we talk to the others."

"Right, right. Shouldn't try to do everything at once. Even if I want to." Zane chuckled. "Which is why I'm so glad I've got you around, sis. You've got the more sensible head on your shoulders, while I'm inclined to run off half-cocked. You know, you really should be running this company, not me. I only got it because you liked your job in Nextus Admin too much to give it up, anyway."

Agatha chuckled and shook her head. "Oh no you don't. You're not gonna get me *that* easy."

"Anyway, let's set the meeting up as soon as possible," Zane said. "We need to get moving on this thing, because something tells me it's going to expand to fill every moment of available time."

Agatha nodded. "Right. I'll go find Annycat and start making the calls."

Zane leaned back in his office chair as she left, and glanced over at the hatrack in a corner of the room that had one of his Dad's battered old Stetsons still hanging there. He chuckled. "Well, Dad, here we go again."

"Coming up on sixty minutes, Rhi," Kaylee reported. The duo hovered over their latest DINcom experiment. The bitrate was comparable to early dialup modems, but even that little would be revolutionary. Modern data formats could fit a lot more information into the same amount of bandwidth compared to centuries past.

"Say hi to Mike Wallace for me!" Uncia said, causing Kaylee to roll her eyes. Uncia's sense of humor had yet to improve; she still couldn't resist a lame pun.

The DINcom's opposite end was one of a couple of dozen that had been taken all the way to Rhodes Station orbiting Colossus by a friend in the Rangers. After the test sequence completed, the datastream coming through was a low-res black and white image of the gas giant. Now it was just a waiting game to see how long it took before the FTL link destabilized.

"And that's one hour!" Kaylee cheered. "No sign of degradation. *Yeehaw!*"

"I'd call Beta-84 a success," Rhianna said. She smiled broadly then hugged Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia in turn. "We'll work on the bandwidth issue next. I think what we learned from working with Wanda and company in that DIN bakeoff has really helped us a lot here."

"This is the Apple I of FTL comm gear," Kaylee said. "Jobs and Wozniak built

those in a garage, you know.”

“I know. Believe me, I know,” Rhianna chuckled. “We’re getting there.”

Kaylee cocked her head. “Huh. That’s odd. I just got a comm from Aggie and Annette asking us to come over to Brubeck this afternoon for an urgent meeting with Zane. She actually sounded worried.”

“I wonder what’s up?” Rochelle mused. “Well, it’s not as if we’re doing anything important. When does he want us there?”

“As soon as possible, apparently,” Kaylee said.

“Well, then we’d better skedaddle,” Rhianna said. “We can monitor the experiment by remote. Let’s go wash up and change out of these coveralls, and we can be on our way.”

The meeting was in one of the Uplift Brubeck Mining HQ’s larger conference rooms, and when they got there they could see why. Even apart from the RIDEs, there were quite a few people there. Zane and Agatha were there, of course, with Aggie’s ride Annette. Annette’s namesake and Kaylee’s old partner Anny Hewer was also present, with her giant white lioness Leila taking up one whole corner of the room. Myla Wilson and her RIDE Sophie the fennec were seated next to Zane and Agatha, and rounding out the Brubeck staff were Carrie-Anne and Flint-Burke the Integrates.

But there were a few outsiders present as well. Kenyon Walton was just a couple chairs down from Zane. But next to him was Joe Steader, with Julius the jaguar sitting alertly behind him. And next to him was Rhianna’s grandmother Socah, wearing the flapper dress and bobbed hairstyle she’d adopted after her adding hardlight upgrades to cybernetic body.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Rhianna said. “Hey, Nana. Hi, everyone.”

Zane stood, leaning on his cane. “Hey, Rhi. Welcome to our little mini-summit meeting.”

“I remember the last summit you hosted,” Rhianna said. “Is this going to be as exciting as that one?”

Zane grinned, showing pearly white tiger teeth. “Rhianna, before this meeting is over, you’re going to long for those good old days of peace and quiet.”

Anny Hewer raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? First I’ve heard ‘bout it. It’s not good to keep little things like this from yer head o’ security, y’know. It’s like foolin’ Mother Nature.”

“She *really* doesn’t like margarine,” Leila deadpanned.

“That’s why I’m telling you now,” Zane said. “Aggie and I only just found out ourselves. So you’re getting this right from the tiger’s tongue.” He waved a hand, and shutters closed over the outside windows. “First off, I have to have your promise. All of you. What I’m about to tell you doesn’t leave this room. You don’t discuss it with *anyone* else, at least not unless you clear it with me first. After I tell you, you’ll understand why. Seriously, this could make the Fritz thing look like two little kids fighting on a playground. If you think that’ll be a problem, leave now.”

“We’re not goin’ anywhere,” Kaylee said.

“Now you’ve got us *curious*,” Uncia said. “And as many of us as are cats, that’s a powerful lot of curiosity!”

“Fuckin’ spill already,” Julius said. “We’re good at the zipped lips.”

There was a general chorus of assents as everyone affirmed their promise.

“Good. I expected no less from you.” Zane leaned his cane against the table and



rubbed his hands together. “Right. Hm. How do I begin.” He rubbed his chin for a moment. “You know what happened to all the unsanctioned wildcat colonies that splinter groups from Earth tried to found alongside the big ones, right? Scooped up, relocated...many of them ending up in bits and pieces here on Zharus.”

“I know it better than you’ll ever know,” Socah said. “The 56th was in on a couple of those operations in the early oughts and teens. To my disgust at the time and my shame now.”

Joe nodded. “The Circus visited some of those worlds. Mikel sent me footage.”

“Well, keep that in mind as you watch this.” The screen at the end of the room lit up with the picture of a blonde girl who bore a strong family resemblance to Zane and Agatha, standing in an unfamiliar canyon landscape with a sky behind her that wasn’t quite the right shade of blue.

“This is Scout Pilot Madison Brubeck, and have I *ever* got a story for you...”

:*That’s Zane’s other sister!*: Uncia commed on the garage’s private channel.

:*We sort of got that,*: Kaylee said. :*Shush and watch.*:

“This is the colony world Totalia,” Madison continued. “It’s located 13 light-years coreward from Zharus, hidden from view by the Caliburn Nebula directly between the two worlds, and not visible at all until you’re at least ten light-years out. I’m not the first scout to find it, as it happens, but I’ll get to that later.

“Founded in 2410—60 A.L.—by a coalition led by a small religious cult, the planet has a population of 3 million, most of them located in a single city, Totalia City.” Her picture was replaced by images and footage of a city whose construction looked similar to the sorts of skyscrapers and tenements they built back on Earth before modern materials science and lifters had made thinner, taller structures possible.

“Three *million*?” Socah said. “All the wildcats Earth pulled had less than a hundred thou. I think Endurance, the last one, had only twenty. If EarthMil gets wind of this they’d have to send a small fleet.”

“The tech level is by and large early to mid 24th-century—with just a couple of key exceptions, there hasn’t been a great deal of technological innovation since the state of things when they left. So, no synthetic cavorite or lifter technology, no nano-fab, just multi-lathe printers. Most aircraft use jets, rotors, or vectored thrust.

“The *main* exception...well, guys, you’re not going to believe this.” Madison grinned. “Almost all their vehicles are *nuclear-powered*. And I don’t just mean batteries. Look.” The picture cut to a two-meter tall bronze cylinder. “This pebble bed fission reactor powers the personnel carrier aerodyne we stole to escape.” The picture changed to show the blocky, angular craft about the size of Rhianna’s Dream Chaser, with Madison standing next to it for scale.

Joe perked up. “That’s like the Ford Nucleon atomic car concept! Pure Fifties zeerust. Never got beyond the scale model stage in real life. I’ve built replicas, but I had to use sarium batteries for the power plant. What are they using for shielding?”

Madison continued. “I’ve attached the specs, but suffice it to say, it provides power out of all proportion to its size. Mainly because it only needs about a millimeter of shielding.”

“That’s not possible,” Rhianna said. “A reactor big enough to fly a jet that size? You’d need several centis of lead, at least. When I was in the Reclamation Corps we had to clean up more than a few contaminated nuke sites.”

“This advance is largely due to a new metamaterial the colonists discovered while

settling their planet. It has remarkable energy-absorptive properties. In addition to absorbing nuclear radiation, it also absorbs a wide swath of the electromagnetic spectrum, including radar. They coat their space navy ships with it, which is how they were able to sneak up on us scouts despite our significantly more advanced ship tech. I've attached technical information about that, and some suggested countermeasures.

"Wait, what? A new *metamaterial*?" Rhianna asked, leaning forward.

"When I first spotted the place, I thought there was something fishy about it, so I dispatched a message torp to let you know. I hope you got it. It turned out my suspicions were right. Three other scouts had found it before me, were rounded up by the system defence navy, and locked up planetside. Those are Barbaretta Hansom of the *Red Sonja*, Marcus Trenton of the *Turbinia*, and Hamner Reinagen of the *Neu Deutschland*. They're with me now, and I'll append their own reports to this before I send it out.

"I've included reports detailing the planet's architecture, culture, military tech, geography, and other important information in detail. And there's some other important information you need, about Barsoom, another planet we visited before coming here—I actually found a *different* metamaterial there, and it could be just as crucial to Zharus's safety to secure it before Earth can.

"Anyway, we're in the process of working out an escape plan to get us all back to our ships. If you're seeing this, then it probably means we've succeeded. Really looking forward to seeing you guys. Tell Zane I said hi." Madison waved, and the picture blinked out.

"What? She found *another* metamaterial?" Myla said.

"No doubt about it, she's a Brubeck," Zane said proudly.

"All this on her first time out," Joe said. "Ol' Clint would be so proud. Just like her dad's centi-awfuls."

"When we have beginner's luck, we have *beginner's luck*," Agatha said.

"Anyway, now that the room's Faraday cage is active, I'll beam all the files across to your RIDEs, implants, or DINs," Zane said. "You can study them at your leisure. The planet with the other meta, Barsoom, is about 11 light-years away, off at an angle that puts it about five away from Totalia."

"Barsoom? You fuckin' kiddin' me?" Julius said.

"I kind of like it," Joe said.

"Yeah, you would."

"Uh, pardon me a second," Uncia said. "I just watched everything twice. There's the Barsoom meta, but there's this thing about aliens in her report...old, dead aliens, but still. It's probably aliens."

"One galaxy-changing supposition at a time, please," Aggie said tersely. "Some proper xenarcheologists will need to have a look at that to be certain. Let's focus on the *present* lost civilization out there."

"Do we know for certain if the scouts escaped?" Socah asked.

"We know they got out into space, anyway," Zane said soberly. "Three of the four ships, at least. The fourth one, the *Red Sonja*, had been dismantled, so Hansom stayed on the planet to join the Resistance against the coup they accidentally triggered in their escape. The other three all got far enough into space to fire their message torps. Which is how we got the news. If any of them did get away, they'll be here sometime in December, probably."

"That's quite the presentation," Kenyon Walton said, his wolf ears perked

forward. "I certainly hope your sister is all right."

"Thanks," Zane said. "We know she was shot during the getaway, but she made it to her ship and sent her report after that, and said that it wasn't too bad."

"So what is it yer wantin' from us, anyway?" Anny asked. "It's not as if we're in any kinda position t' do anything about it..."

Zane grinned. "Aren't we? I think we might just be the *only* ones in a position to do anything about it. Between me, Joe, and Kenyon, we represent, what, about 42% of the planet's total capital?"

"That's a good omen," Joe said. "Life, the universe and everything!" Julius rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath.

"Seriously," Zane said. "First of all, if word of this gets back to Earth...Col. Gates, do you think they've changed their stance on wildcat colonies lately?"

Socah snorted. "The only reason they stopped was they ran out of colonies to scoop up. They find out about one more, give 'em a year or two to get their fleet ready and off they'll go again."

"Right. So we need to get out to Totalia, straighten that coup out, rescue any scouts who might not have gotten away, and open relations between our worlds," Zane said. "See about getting their defenses up to modern spec just in case Earth comes calling, and secure a supply of that Totalium stuff. And the same goes for that 'nullifite' on Barsoom."

"I know how important this it, Zane," Kenyon said. "Believe me, I do. But our wealth doesn't give us the right to act unilaterally. Not with consequences that will reach to Neorus and back. I'm not putting one centimu into this unless we have the official blessing of the Planetary Advisory Assembly."

"Hey, I wasn't planning on acting without their authority. In fact, it occurs to me it might even be a good idea to dragoon some of the local ambassadors from the other colonies, too, if we can do it while preserving secrecy," Zane said. "And we'll be talking to the heads of the Marshals, Rangers, and of course the Scouts, too. And the Diet of Enclaves. But the important thing is, we need to get started laying the groundwork, because the sooner we're ready to act, the sooner we can get things straightened out. This isn't a case where we've got decades, like with Crazy Joe's long game with the twencen pop culture. Come to think of it, *we* don't have decades anymore, either, and this could be just the practice we need to get ready for if and when Earth finally gets a clue."

"Getting the right people and materiel together for something like this is going to take some time," Socah said. "You'll have to do it under the table, too. We have a fine line to walk here, everyone." She looked at Joe, who nodded, then stood up. "I'd like to offer my services as a military advisor, Mr. Brubeck. I'm sad to say I have experience with missions of this nature."

"*Nana*," Rhianna said.

"Easy, Rhianna. I know what kind of pitfalls to avoid appearing as invaders and conquerors," Socah continued. "Just do the *opposite* of what Earth did."

"Still, if we're taking enough armed forces to sort them out, we'll need a big FTL ship, big enough to carry a couple thousand troops, at least," Joe mused. "And a lot of smaller ships for landers and industrial fabbers."

"Assuming we're successful, we'll also have to bootstrap the Totalians up to galactic technological standards," Kenyon mused.

“Otherwise, Earth will show up on their doorstep with a little ‘gunboat diplomacy,’” Socah said. “Because you know word *will* leak out of this planet’s existence. Maybe even before we leave Zharus. We have to make that assumption.”

“Even if we do bootstrap them up, it’s not clear they’ll be able to stand up against Earth with a population of only 3 million,” Carrie-Anne said.

“Well, if their ships are good enough *now* to take *scouts* by surprise, imagine what they can do with a little Q tech,” Zane said. “Who knows, they may end up coming to *our* rescue someday.” He shrugged. “Anyway, the point of this meeting is to touch base and figure out where we go from here. If you’re all on board with this, then we can start talking to the other political groups. Especially those of us who have highly-placed contacts in those groups.”

“I think I can get us a core ship,” Joe said. “An *Eridanite* ship, no less. Brand new.”

“Oh?” Zane said, ears perking. “They’re a long way from here.”

“Last missive from my brother said the Star Circus was sending their new vessel our way for fitting out,” Joe said. “If I can arrange for us to borrow it, that means we won’t have to divert one of our own big ships for our mission.”

“And avoid raising eyebrows from Terran spy eyes,” Socah said. “Very canny, Joe.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Julius added. “But we need to get it here, first.”

“I was thinking, maybe we can get the Scouts to use one of their message torps,” Joe pondered. “The Circus is at Zheng He. That’s about as far as Totalia from here, so it’d get there in a matter of days.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem under the circumstances,” Zane said.

“Then I’m sure we’ll make it work,” Joe said. “They all remember Endurance. Besides, the Circus tends to be on the absolute bleeding edge of colonial tech. They’d be *ideal* to represent the rest of human space to a freed Totalia. Entertaining, too.”

“Right!” Zane said. “Well. Anyway, we can start laying the groundwork. If there’s anyone else you think we need to bring in on this, please let me know first. But let’s try *not* to discuss it over comms as much as possible. At least not unless you can verify both ends are protected by recent DINsec.”

Kenyon nodded. “I’ll be in touch.”

Rhianna nodded. “I want to review all these files and see if they shake any other ideas loose. Call you later to get together and talk about it?”

Zane grinned. “For dinner, say?”

Rhianna chuckled. “Sounds like a plan.”

Socah smirked at her granddaughter and her boyfriend. “You kids have fun.”

“We certainly will be,” Joe said, winking.

Rochelle grinned. “They’re just *made* for each other, aren’t they?”

“A good wine can take decades to age properly,” Socah said, giving Joe a scratch behind the ear. They rose together, hand-in-hand, with Julius close behind.

“Zane, everyone, you can count on Crazy Joe for anything you need,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we need some levity after the gravity of what we’ve just seen and heard.”

The group broke up, one by one and in twos, until it was just Rhianna, Zane, and Kaylee in the room. Rhianna walked over and snuggled with the tiger, purring comfortingly. “I’m sure Maddie is okay. You Brubecks know how to get out of a scrape.”

“Not always in one piece, though,” Zane said. “But hey. I’m determined not to worry about it. Not when worrying won’t change anything, and will distract me from doing what needs to be done. So why don’t you go ahead and review those files, and we’ll talk over dinner tonight.”

“Before I go, here’s something for *you* to pounce on.” Rhianna sent over the latest DINcom test results and waited for him to review it.

“Hey, nice. That’ll help out a lot,” Zane said.

“All this talk about Earth being such bastards got me thinking about early warning systems. Maybe when we bring this forward to the PAA...but I’m getting ahead of myself here. See you tonight, Zane.” Rhianna kissed him on the nose.

Zane grinned. “I’ll look forward to it.”

*October 18, 157 AL*

*Planetary Advisory Assembly Building, Zharustead, Laurasia*

“...and that’s the plan,” Zane said. “To sum up, we send a mining fleet to Barsoom to collect nullifite and study the possible alien ruins. We can get started on that right away, since there’s nobody there. Meanwhile, on the Totalia front, we organize a small fleet, arrive on the outskirts of the system and reconnoiter.

“If possible, we restore the pre-coup government; otherwise, we negotiate with the current government to get our scouts back and open trade. We use the minimum amount of force necessary to meet our goals, up to and including leaving the current folks in power if dislodging them would lead to loss of life. If they’re willing, we exchange tech and materials—our qubitite and hardlight for their Totalium—sign a mutual defense pact, and make sure their defenses are up to par. If not, well, we leave them some FTL torps just in case they change their mind.

“If we succeed, we could have another Wednesday at our backs when push comes to shove with Earth—as it almost certainly will, sooner or later. Even if they’re not interested in an alliance, it’s still worth opening relations. There’s a lot we could teach each other.” Zane nodded. “And that concludes our presentation. Any questions?”

“Pardon us while we confer, Mr. Brubeck,” The committee Chairperson said. The five people on the System Security Committee could rival Nextus bureaucrats for the humorless air they projected. They were no doubt having a private conversation about the presentation over their implants.

“What we have before us is the most significant issue since Wednesday called for help,” the Chairperson said after a couple quiet minutes. “The secrecy necessary here is, in many ways, the antithesis of our famously open society. Yet we are in agreement that it’s necessary.”

“The results of the election just prior to the coup make clear that a large majority of the Totalians wish to rejoin the rest of us,” a second committee member said. “We can’t, in good conscience, *not* take that into account. We didn’t stand by when Wednesday was in need, and we won’t do that here either.”

“You have the support of this Committee, even if we cannot overtly fund your expedition,” the Chairperson said. “Yet we can make it easier to acquire the resources you need. I suppose this is akin to those challenge tokens you have in Nextus.”

“Anything you can do would be appreciated,” Zane said. He grinned. “Not least

making sure we don't get arrested when it finally comes out we built a fleet and went off to another star system with it."

"Rest assured, we *will* be assigning proper oversight," the second Committee member said.

"I expected as much," Zane said. "Indeed, I'll be happy to have it. I don't *want* the responsibility of making those kinds of decision by myself."

"As for the details, stay in touch as events develop, for accountability's sake as well as history," the Chairperson said. He banged a gavel. "We're adjourned. Thanks again, Mr. Brubeck. I hope your sister and the other scouts arrive in good shape." He smiled.

Zane chuckled. "You and me both. Thank you, Mr. Chairperson."

"Now, if you don't mind staying a little longer, we have another presentation to hear. I believe you already know about it." The gray-haired man smirked. "After all, you've been involved since the beginning anyway."

The doors to the secure antechamber opened, revealing the Freeriders foursome all dressed in their best business attire. "Hey, Zane!" Uncia said, wiggling the tip of her tail.

"That's a very nice look for y'all," Zane said, settling into an open seat away from the presentation area. "I think I know what this is about. We've already discussed the proposal. I'm just a little surprised you're all here now."

"Opsec, as Nana would say," Rhianna said.

"I'll just sit back and watch, then," Zane said. "And afterwards, I know a few spots here in Zharustead I'm sure you'd like to see. I believe this is your first time here."

Rhianna smiled. "I'll just take you up on that. For now, let's get this ball rolling." She and the others turned to face the Committee. Rhianna cleared her throat. "From one revolution to another, ladies and gentlemen of the Committee. What I'm about to present to you is no less important than the invention of the transistor, the easy synthesis of cavorite, or the invention of FTL travel."

"All in the service of giving us a critical edge once Earth comes calling," Rochelle said.

"We give you, the DINcom," Uncia announced.

The presentation went on for hours—the Committee members had dozens of very penetrating questions about how it worked. Testimonials from the Gondwana Marshals, who had been alpha testing them for over a year now, from subspace physicists from Martinez U, and more.

"The sheer gravity of this invention, Miss Stonegate, it rivals those potential alien ruins on Barsoom," the Chairperson trailed off. "You could have brought it to market first and be richer than Mr. Brubeck."

"Oh, we have plans for market," Rochelle said. "One more year of beta testing. But it has enough bandwidth now to be useful."

"Also we have yet to test it beyond Colossus orbit, let alone sending some to Wednesday," Rhianna said. "We don't know what sending half of it through subspace would do. Testing, testing, and more testing."

"Right now we have some serious academic papers waiting in the wings for publication, as well as patent apps ready to go," Kaylee added. "But, an' it hurts to say this, we don't want to repeat what Ma...Dr. Patil did by accident and give our enemies a leg up."

“Bandwidth will improve probably as rapidly as the early Internet,” Rochelle said. “If not more. It depends. Up until now it’s just been a few of us working on the tech. If we’re going to see that kind of rapid progress on that scale it’ll have to become widespread over the whole system.”

“We can easily incorporate your current comm devices into our existing early warning network,” the Chairperson said. He was sweating over this even more than he had over the Totalia revelation. “For now, I think it’s best we take some time to digest what we’ve all seen and heard today. Thank you for your time, ladies. We’ll be in touch soon.” He banged the gavel again. “Adjourned.”

“That gives me an idea,” Zane mused. “Rhi, I think I want to take your latest design and put it in a Brubeck Mining beacon out near where those probes jumped in. When Maddie pops in, I want to be able to say hi as soon as possible. I know they don’t last long under heavy use, but they ought to stay good long enough for that, right?”

“We have them up to a 56k baud modem speeds over longer distances now, all the way to Rhodes Station,” Kaylee said. “If you want broadband we can multiplex them, though that’ll risk signal loss as they go out one by one. Once that’s gone, we don’t know how to get it back.”

“It only has to work for a few minutes,” Zane said. “C’mon, let’s go get some dinner or something. There’s a great Lebanese place just up the street from here.”

“I haven’t had actual Lebanese since Beirut,” Rhianna said. She and Kaylee fused up. “I am *exhausted*. Lead the way.”

*December 1, 157 AL*

*Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift*

“What is it *this* time?” Zane Brubeck groaned. The harried-looking tiger Integrate was barely visible behind the dozen or so hardlight display panels that hovered above his desk, displaying status reports and data streams from all over the planet. That didn’t prevent his *aide de camp* Myla Wilson from being able to find him, however.

“I’m afraid another brawl’s broken out,” Myla said. “The good news is, we moved the Sturmhaven 17th Strike Sisters’ bivouac away from the Nextus 119th Heavy Infantry, and the party responsible for putting them next to each other in the first place has been sacked. The bad news is, the new place they put them was right next to that rowdy bunch from Aloha...” Myla rolled her eyes.

Zane sighed. “Can we just get them on board the shuttles and out to the fleet before anything else happens?”

“We’re working on it. We should have some space open up in about two hours. Of course, it’s getting harder and harder to hold off the paparazzi, and they’re using actual human beings now so we can’t just shoot them.”

“Did you seriously just call paparazzi ‘actual human beings’?” Zane asked wryly.

“Golly, I did,” Myla said. “I guess the stress must be getting to me, too.” They shared a chuckle only *faintly* tinged with hysteria. Ever since the meeting with the Planetary Advisory Assembly, the effort had kicked into high gear. They still hadn’t gotten their flagship yet, but they’d traded a couple of rounds of message torps with the Circus, and Joe was set to go meet them when they hove into Wednesday in late March.

That they’d managed to do it without public leaks so far was nothing short of

amazing. Given how many people knew about it by now, it had to be one of Zharus's worst-kept secrets since qubitite, but on the bright side *most* of the people who knew about it had already been sent out to the nascent fleet. It was composed of all of Brubeck Mining's largest ships, as well as several space liners from the cruise company in which Brubeck owned stock. Even so, it was starting to fill up without its flagship.

"Any word yet on...?" Zane let the question trail off, as it was obvious who he was asking about. The estimated timeframe for Madison's return had started about a week ago, and he grew more nervous the more time passed.

Myla shook her head. "Sorry, Zane. Nothing I've heard." And Zane would have heard before she would, she thought but didn't say aloud. One of his most prominent displays was a tap into Zharus Orbital Tracking's jump detection arrays. But if asking obvious questions was one of Zane's ways of dealing with stress, it wasn't Myla's place to say anything about it.

"Well, she's got another two weeks before we decide she's not coming," Zane sighed, his ears drooping.

"At least she made it to the ship and out," Myla said for the dozenth time. "We won't know more until—" A loud klaxon made Myla jump. "Son of a—what the—?"

"Subspace splash..." Sophie and Myla said together. She and her RIDE were partial Integrates and their connection was growing ever-closer all the time. Sometimes they spoke with one voice.

Zane wiped a hand through the air and all his displays vanished save one. He expanded it to cover the whole of the desk. It was the link to the detection arrays, and a bright red pip had just appeared at the solar system's outer edge. "It's the right size for a scout ship...from the right direction..." He activated the DINcom link he'd had put into a beacon at the system's edge facing Totalia, and another panel flickered into being.

Myla walked around the desk to see it from Zane's perspective. The woman from the video Zane had shown at the briefing was on the screen, wearing a scout jacket similar to the one Zane himself affected. "This is Madison Brubeck, reporting in. Reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated, though I've tramped over enough of the galaxy to be feeling like Charlie Chaplin. Requesting landing instructions, and tell Zane to reserve that table at Cheers. I feel like I could drink a few liters of good old Zharusian beer."

Zane grinned, his ears twitching bolt upright. "Yes! Oh, thank God, she's all right!" He sat up straighter, the fatigue of the last few hours sloughing away. "That 'Charlie Chaplin' thing, that's family code. Means she's alone and not under duress. She'd have mentioned a comedy duo like Laurel and Hardy if someone was with her, or a troupe like the Little Rascals or Keystone Cops if a *lot* of people were with her."

Of course, as Zane's chief bodyguard, Myla already knew all about his family codes. But she forebore to mention it, grinning right along with her boss. "Boy is she in for a shock."

Zane paused in mid reach for the comm panel. "Uh...yeah, you know, you're right. Hang on." He composed himself, then shimmered as he adopted a hardlight disguise of his old human self. "There. How do I look?"

Myla chuckled. "Well, I didn't know you before you had fur on, so I can't say if it's authentic. But you look okay."

"Good enough." Zane tapped the comm panel. "Hey, sis! Good to see you! I'll let Diane know to tap the fatted keg."



Madison blinked and stared. “Zane? Is that you? How are you talking to me so soon? I don’t see any ships nearby.”

“We had a *little* communication tech breakthrough while you were gone. I’ll explain later,” Zane said. “For now...why don’t you land at Uplift Aerodrome? I’ll clear it with the Scouts. See you here in a day or so, okay?”

Madison chuckled. “I’ll be there, bro. With bells on.”

*December 3, 157 A.L.*

*Cheers Bar, Uplift*

*Well, I can’t say any of us expected that, Zane thought wryly. She said “Charlie Chaplin,” but maybe she should have said “Abbot and Costello.”* When his sister had landed at the spaceport, it had very nearly turned into a comedy routine, as the two of them had met in human guise and spent a good couple of confused minutes each trying to figure out how to break it to the other that, while Madison had been out in deep space, they had *both* Integrated.

They were sharing drinks at the Cheers Bar now with Rhianna and friends, and Madison had just finished telling everyone how a leopard RIDE named Samantha had broken her fetters and stowed away on board the *Daydream Believer* with her, helped her escape prison on Totalia, and then Integrated with her in the aftermath of getting shot. Then she’d prompted Zane for his story, and he’d managed to tell it somehow, though he still felt like he was halfway in shock. *So this is how it must have felt to Aggie, I guess, he mused. Seeing someone so familiar to you so totally different now. I should apologize to her again. Is that leopardess really our kid sister?*

“...and that’s how Zane Brubeck saved Christmas,” Rhianna said. After Zane had finished telling Madison how he’d met Terry and Integrated, Rhianna had taken over to fill her in on their battle with Fritz for Integrates’ right to go public.

“I’m gone almost two years, and I just don’t recognize the place,” Madison said, giving her brother a good-natured poke on his furry shoulder. The leopardess Integrate swished her tail in time with the tiger’s. “Zharus, I mean. Feels like I’m scouting my own homeworld, too.” She took a long quaff of beer. “Oh, that hits the spot. But I’m not feeling any buzz.”

“Oh, you’ll need some special Intie brew for that,” Diane said from the other side of the counter. “I have some Shangri-La Q-brew, if you’d like to try.”

“We should get you to an Intie doctor to make sure everything’s working right,” Zane said. “You have that...other stuff in you, after all.”

Madison grinned. “That’s my big brother. Always so concerned. Did I ever tell you about the time I skinned my knee and he wrapped me up like a mummy?”

“Hey! It *could* have gotten infected!” Zane insisted. “And I didn’t wrap you up like a mummy. Just your leg.”

“The *whole* leg,” Madison deadpanned. “For a skinned knee.”

“You can’t be too careful,” Zane said. “Besides, I was *twelve*.”

“I’m starting to feel like the odd sister out here,” Agatha said, twitching her tufted ears. “But one of us has to carry on the family line.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Zane said. “I froze my sperm before I took over Brubeck Mining. The corporate medical program offers it free to anyone who works out

in the field. I had to set an example.” He paused. “Er...well, I mean, if we ever decide that’s what we want to do...uh...me and whoever I end up...uh...” He glanced over at Rhianna. “You know what? I’m going to shut up now.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Rhianna said, folding her arms. “Diane, I’ll have one of the Shangri-La stouts for humans.”

“Coming right up,” the doe Integrate said.

“Oooh, cat’s in the doghouse!” Uncia piped up. Kaylee swatted her with a paw.

Zane established a secure DIN connection with Madison and slipped into fast-time. They appeared in a representation of the living room in their childhood home, both in human form. Zane looked around. “Well, I didn’t make this chatroom design. Did you?”

“No, but I imagine our collective subconscious had something to say about it,” Madison replied. She was human in appearance here, but with leopard RIDE tags. Beside her, sitting on her haunches, was a leopardess. “Home has been a lot on my mind lately.”

“And I guess this must be Samantha?” Zane said.

“Pleasetameetcha,” Samantha said, offering a paw.

“Hang on, I’ll shake Terry out of his snooze,” Zane said. “He spends most of his time dozing in my subconscious. Gets bored just hanging around and watching, he says.” He closed his eyes and concentrated, and a moment later a sleeping tiger appeared next to him.

Terry opened his eyes, yawned and stretched, then pushed himself up with his forepaws.

“Well, hello kitty!” Madison said.

“Hello yourself,” Terry said. He nodded to Samantha. “And welcome to the family.”

“It took her a while to come around, but now we’re inseparable. But then, I don’t have to tell either of you that, do I?” Samantha said.

Terry chuckled. “Hard-headed family about RIDES. But then, I was just as hard-headed about not wanting a human ‘til I met this guy. I saw right away he needed a keeper.”

Zane chuckled. “And I saw right away, Terry *was* a keeper. So we kept each other.”

“That’s the way it seems to work, isn’t it?” Madison said. “Now I’m kind of sad ‘Mantha and I only had a couple of weeks as partners before the big event. But I can’t say I’m unhappy overall.”

“We Brubecks never have boring lives, do we? Well, maybe Aggie does by comparison,” Zane said. “Always tough being the middle child, or so I’ve read.”

“Every comedy team needs a straight man to make it work,” Terry said. “Anyway, the way these things go, she’ll join us sooner or later.”

Zane sat down on the simulacrum old leather couch. “I just...well, I wanted to say that all the torpedos made it through and we’ve gone over everything with a fine-toothed comb. And like I said out there, after you’ve had some R&R, I need you to come to Zharustead and give the PAA System Security Committee a briefing.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “I know, I know. I actually sort of figured on something like this, while we were on the way back. That I’d have to wheedle and cajole people into getting a rescue effort off the ground. To be honest, I didn’t expect you’d have so much

of it already in progress. But then, last time I saw you, you were still trucking Chauncey around with you like a 10-ton security blanket.”

“He’s over at MMU’s Engineering College if you want to have a look at him, by the way,” Zane said. “I’m sure he’d be happy to see you again.”

“I think I’d like that,” Madison said. “Chauncey II didn’t turn out nearly as useful out in the black.”

“I kept *telling* her, she should have ditched the sardine can and Fused me,” Samantha said. “But noooo, had to be a Brubeck.”

“It’s a congenital condition,” Terry said. “Fortunately, it always responds to therapy sooner or later.”

“Sorry the whole thing is going to take so long,” Zane said. “More than once I thought about just taking a fast scout ship out there and seeing what I could do on the ground myself. But this is bigger than just us, or even just the other scouts. We have to do it up right for the sake of the future of all our worlds.”

“I know,” Madison said. “I’m a Scout, I know *all about* the whole colonial politicking thing.” She snapped her fingers. “Hey, that reminds me. Get a load of this.” She handed over a glowing image of a file folder representing a data transfer.

Zane took it. “What’s this?” Then he opened and scanned it. “Whoa...really?” It was an old recording from their father, Clint, talking about his decision to leave the Scouts and move to Zharus. From the metadata, Zane saw she’d found it on Costneria, one of the planets Clint had scouted.

“Yeah,” Madison said. “Someday I should visit all the other places Dad set foot. Who knows how many other recordings he left?”

Zane shook his head. “Damn, sis. I envy you getting to do that. Feels like there’s this whole other side of Dad I never got to know but you did. Now I feel bad I didn’t stick it out all month when he stuck us out in that station in the Dry as a test.”

“Hey, you’re the one with all the money,” Madison said. “Nothing’s stopping you from just *buying* a fast ship and going.” She narrowed her eyes. “And I see that hasn’t stopped you from wearing the *uniform*, anyway. Seriously, bro, I *earned* these khakis. Seeing you in them is a little...well, tacky.”

“I got permission,” Zane said. “They even made me an *honorary* Scout, when you get right down to it. Part of carrying on Dad’s public image.”

“They turned out to be a rather important symbol the last half of 156,” Terry said in support. “Newness, acceptance.”

“You and your speeches,” Madison said with a long-suffering sigh. “I think you must have *talked* that Fritz guy into surrendering. But I have to admit, from the footage ‘Mantha snagged off the net, you drove Chauncy like Dad always did.”

“I just gave the big guy his head,” Zane said. “He was the one who did all the hard stuff.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, now,” Samantha said. “Me, I’d like to see the real Chauncy in person.”

“I’ll take you over there tomorrow,” Zane promised. “You can even drive him, if you want.”

“I’d like that,” Madison said.

Zane smiled. “You know, those engineering students have read every one of those books about Dad from cover to cover. I think some of them are smart and skilled enough to figure out how to make some of those special features actually work.”

“And then there’s that girlfriend of yours,” Madison teased. “Quite a looker. You *do* know she used to be a guy, right?”

“What, you got a problem with that?” Zane said. “You grew up here same as I did. People, not plumbing, you know.”

“No, I just thought it was a little funny is all,” Madison said. “Anyway, she seems like a nice girl. I think I’d like to get to know her a little better. *One* of us has to look after our big brother if Aggie isn’t.”

“You know, she invented the FTL comm gear I used to talk to you when you surfaced,” Zane said.

“She *did*?” Samantha exclaimed. “Invented it? Like, from scratch?”

“Among a half dozen other gewgaws and thingamajigs the whole planet’s using now,” Terry said proudly. “A lot of it was just sheer luck, but hey, we’re Brubecks. We know from luck.”

“And it takes smarts to know what to *do* with the luck when you’ve got it,” Madison agreed. “Yeah. You know, I think I *will* head over to her garage sometime soon and take her up on that offer to make me a new...ugh...’DIN.’ God, what a stupid name. It’s like something a smirking Nextus engineer would come up with.”

“Which probably explains it, given that *is* where they were invented,” Zane said. “Anyhoo, let’s drop back into the Real and socialize some more. That Shangri-La Q-brew is pretty good. Makes you feel all tingly.”

“Right.” Madison chuckled. “Nice meeting you, Terry. I want to talk to you more, later.”

“You know where to find me,” Terry said.

“See ya in the funny papers!” Samantha said. A moment later, the foursome were gone.

*December 5, 157 AL*

At the end of the morning Scout HQ debriefing session, Madison felt utterly drained, and not just in the sarium batteries. They’d had her go over everything she could remember in exhaustive detail, including with memory downloads—though after her DIN blew out for a third time, they agreed to forego those until she could get a better one made. In fact, they advised her to do that this afternoon, and report back the next day for a full day’s debrief. Then, next week, she would repeat the performance in Zharustead for the PAASSC.

*:Be still my beating heart,:* Samantha snorted.

“Hey, we knew we were going to be in trouble all along, right?” Madison said. “I’m just glad a debrief is the worst thing we’re facing. We could have been arrested, you know.”

*:Yeah, like your brother would let that happen.:*

“You never know.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I think we should take Zane’s girlfriend up on her offer and get it done. I’m curious to see how she does it.”

*:The garage isn’t far away. Let’s go.:*

“Good plan.” Madison lifted a half-meter off the ground, then moved up the street. Before too long, they found themselves in the East Dome, looking at a garage that was a jumble of modular bays built around a central structure with a large hangar for a suborbital shuttle taking up a corner of the lot.

During the trip she'd sensed the ubiquitous media drones following her. Irritating, but understandable in the circumstances. She still popped a couple before landing in the skimmer parking lot. The waiting room was mostly full of people waiting for their RIDES, but to Samantha's surprise it felt more like the inside of a doctor's office rather than a mechanic's shop. *:Huh. I heard some good things about this place back in the day.:* Samantha mused. *:Never came by, though. Didn't want awkward questions about where my owner was.:*

*:You know, I doubt a place like this would've even asked,:* Madison said.

*:Yeah, probably, but paranoid kitty was paranoid.:*

Kaylee padded into the waiting room. "Come on back, you two. We don't have a lot going on today. Rhianna's fussing over her latest experiment. Nothin' that can't be interrupted. You need a DIN?"

"My kludge keeps burning out," Madison said.

"You did damned good for what you have. I'm sure Rhi and Shelley wouldn't mind talking shop with ya about it," Kaylee said warmly. "Always more to learn."

"I'd like that," Madison said. "Half of what we did to make this thing was pure guesswork anyway. I'd like to know the *right* way for future reference."

"There really isn't any one 'right' way," Rochelle said, coming in from the garage. "The Munns down in Aloha have a completely different technique, and I gather some of the technomages from the Enclaves have started their own effort to reverse-engineer it from first principles."

"Technomages?" Madison said.

*:Yeah, what the hell?:* Samantha put in.

"That's what they call them," Kaylee said. "We didn't pick the name."

"I know that look," Rochelle said. "We live in a constant state of culture shock these days. C'mon back to our workshop, we'll get started."

"You know, we really should make a proper shop out of it," Kaylee said. "Freeriders DIN Salon or some such."

"Oooh! And we can have some nice curtains, a cushy chair, a haughty receptionist up front," Uncia said.

The workshop had a healthy amount of clutter, reminding Madison of her dad's version for Chauncey or whatever other odd project he'd turned his mind to. Rhianna was staring intently at a hardlight display in front of some kind of testing rig. "Be with you in just a sec..."

"How's the bandwidth from Clementine holding?" Rochelle asked.

"I think we've improved the falloff all the way to the Oort," Rhianna said. "Baud rate hasn't dropped much."

"This is your revolutionary FTL comm gear?" Madison said with some excitement. "That would've come in really handy."

"We're not sure if it'll work over interstellar distances yet, but signs point to no," Rochelle said. "The test rig Rhianna's monitoring is all the way out on a ship in the Oort Cloud. One link that far out is like the bitrate from the twencen Voyager probes. But even they sent back hundreds of useful images."

"We think we can work around it by using massive arrays of comm units," Rhianna said. "Call 'em Massively Parallel Comm Arrays."

"The catch is that they don't work after they've been through an FTL jump," Kaylee said. "We don't know why."

“Still, that’s impressive,” Madison said. She chuckled. “If it works out, they might make *you* honorary Scouts, too.”

“We already have more fame and titles than we know what to do with,” Rhianna said good-naturedly. “Have a seat.”

The DIN-making chair hadn’t changed for several months since the Freeriders had refined their technique, but was still the jury-rigged collection of various sensor and quantum decryption gear. It worked, and it worked well; it just didn’t look pretty.

“So my brother tells me you worked on Chauncey,” Madison said after sitting down.

Rhianna’s eyes sparkled. “Oh yes. I still find the time to visit him at least once per month to see what the students are doing.”

“They had him stripped down to the skeleton when I visited him yesterday,” Madison said. “They said he’d be operational again by tomorrow, though.” *What a letdown.*

“They’ve rebuilt him a half dozen times now, so they’re quick at it,” Rhianna said. She Fused up with Kaylee and put on some diagnostic gloves. “So let’s see...as DIN plugs go, that’s a nice, accessible, non-embarrassing spot. You wouldn’t believe where some Integrates have them. If you could pop the DIN out?”

“Sure.” Madison reached up to the socket in the hollow of her throat and unplugged the DIN.

“Could I see that? Thanks.” Rochelle took it and slotted it into a scanner. “This’ll help us work out a baseline for our own hardware scans. Of course, we’ll still have to run a complete scan anyway—DINs will work somewhat if you only hit about half the connections, but the more you get, the better your throughput is.”

Rhianna injected the socket with nano-paste. “You’ll feel a little tingle here from the internal scanner...”

“Not really feeling anything,” Madison reported.

The lynx’s ears perked. “Really? Hold on a second...” She pointed at a trio of tubular scanners mounted on the ceiling, then put the image up on the hardlight displays. “Well, Shelley, have a look at that. She’s barely there.”

“As I was coming down the stair, I met a cat who wasn’t there!” Uncia said.

“Did I mention that my DE was Totalium-plated when we Integrated?” Samantha said. “We tried to give ourselves a medical scan when we woke up, and it said there was nothing there.”

“So, you’ve got this stuff integrated into your Integration,” Rochelle mused.

“We had to try a number of different things before we got scan readings ourselves,” Madison said. “Pull that gunk out of my socket and hand me my DIN back and I’ll beam you our records.”

“Just a sec...it’s out,” Rhianna reported. She clasped her hands together. “Oh, this is exciting!”

Rochelle handed her back the DIN, and she socketed it, and a moment later Kaylee and Uncia registered the file transfer requests. “There you go,” Madison said.

“So, this Totalium stuff swallows certain EM wavelengths and hard rads,” Rhianna mused. “The energy has to go somewhere. So I’m betting subspace, like our DINcom. Kay, remind me to bundle this data up when we’re done. We have more for Dr. DeHavilland at MMU to look at. You didn’t happen to bring back any samples of the stuff?”

“A few. It’s as widely-used in consumer goods on Totalia as Q and cavorite are here. You buy a pocket comm, some parts of it are Totalium-shielded against EM interference, that kind of thing. But the Scouts have all of it that’s not in me,” Madison said.

“I’ll have Dr. DeHavilland put in a request for a sample,” Kaylee said. “She has the security clearance.”

“Rose DeHavilland? I think I had a few of her FTL physics classes in college,” Madison said.

“The very same. Hmmm,” Rhianna said. “I think we can adapt these alternate scanner techniques you used to map the parts of your socket we can detect. But I’m guessing some of the quantum contacts in your socket are actually made of Totalium, and we’d need some Totalium ourselves to craft a match to them. That’s going to put an upper limit on how well anything we make can work until we can get ahold of some.”

“As long as it’s more stable than what we’ve got now, we can get by,” Madison said, unplugging the DIN again so Rhianna could repeat the procedure.

“It’ll be as good as we can make it,” Rhianna promised. “Next time you’re in Aloha, you might want to check with Wanda Munn and see what she makes of you, too.”

Madison watched Rhianna work through her process, occasionally asking her a question about her technique. Rhianna was happy to explain what she was doing. As far as Madison could tell, Rhianna had a deeper pool of knowledge and greater experience in making the parts, but they had started from similar theories. She picked up a number of pointers along the way that would let her do a better job the next time she had to craft her own.

“So the first DIN you made was for my brother?” Madison asked.

“Yep. That’s the good ol’ Stonegate-Seaford Mark One,” Kaylee said proudly.

“Took us an entire night to make it. Zane has that very first DIN in a glass display case in his office, and someday he plans to donate it to a museum.”

“As if my ego needed any further stroking,” Rhianna said, blushing slightly.

“It is kind of flattering, really,” Rochelle said. “When Zane Integrated and needed help, he turned to us first.”

“Because you’d done such a good job with Terry,” Madison said. “Which is also why he brought Chauncey to you. I got that from his story last night.”

“And so we ended up front and center in an Integrate civil war,” Rhianna said. “Just as well you missed that.”

“Yeah, well, the civil war I *started* is more than enough for me,” Madison said.

“Ouch,” Rhianna said, grimacing. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make light of your experience.”

Madison shrugged. “Eh, it’s okay. Still...bleah. I told Kendlen and the others I’d bring help in about five months, figuring that I could just get here, let people know, then turn around and go right back. I never figured there’d be all this *bureaucracy* crap involved.”

“The Scouts did send a ship to look around, at least, as soon as your torps came in,” Rochelle said. “They should be getting there in a week or so. I figure we can start expecting to hear back from them by torp pretty soon.”

“Yeah, they told me that at the debriefing,” Madison said. “I wonder if we could torp them back to try to get a message through to Kendlen to hold on.”

“Dunno. I doubt they’ll want to rock the boat,” Rhianna said.

“It’s not as if there’s much risk involved,” Madison said. “Samantha was able to run rings around their comm protocols. Any RIDE could do the same.”

“They wouldn’t have RIDes with them, though,” Rochelle put in. “Export protocols, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Madison smiled ruefully. “I’ve gotten so used to having Samantha around that I largely forgot she was technically *verboten*. Still, even a dumb computer on a scoutship should be able to out-hack whatever they’ve got and get a message through.”

“We’ll see.” Rhianna removed the nanogel from Madison’s DIN socket again. “Okay, I think we’re done here. I’m fabbing the prototype plug now. Not sure how much improvement there will be overall, but I think I did find a few more connectors you’d missed.”

“Now it’s my turn,” Rochelle said. “I’ve been having Uncia go over the firmware you coded, and you did a pretty good job, but I think I can improve on it.”

“Fair enough,” Madison said. “Anything you can do will help.”

“Your show, Shelly, Uncia,” Rhianna said. “Kay and me are going to do a burst transmission test to the *Clementine*. See how much bandwidth it can take before it fries.”

“Can we watch?” Samantha said. “This is amazing.”

“Sure, why not? They’d probably want to meet you, too. As long as it wouldn’t be too much of a distraction to Shelley...”

“Oh, go ahead,” Rochelle said. “This is old hat. I could code DINs at a death metal concert.”

Rhianna chuckled. “I don’t *think* Doubledown Derp has ever done death metal, but I could suggest it to them.”

“So, what’s your setup here?” Samantha asked.

“We have a bank of 128 DINcoms, all the same design, to share a massively parallel bandwidth setup,” Kaylee said. “Stable bitrates between the two ends are directly related to how far apart they are in realspace. The closer, the better, the more stable. So to get decent bandwidth out in the Oort, we have to use a lot of ‘em.”

“Right. If you were to, say, swallow half a DINcom and plug the other end into a data network socket, you could browse the net at full speed for hours, possibly days, before it burned out. It’d go out faster if you did a lot of big file transfers and such, of course,” Rhianna said. She chuckled. “Zane actually swallowed half of one and gave the other half to me so I could have a direct connection to him. It was kind of a sweet romantic gesture, and he repeated it a few times, but by and large we both fell out of the habit—it was just too much trouble to keep it up as the DINcoms kept burning out. Though we’ll probably start again as planning for the expedition gets underway.”

Madison shook her head. “Wow. That’s something else.” *:He’s really into her, to do something like that.:*

*:Yeah,:* Samantha replied. *:And you know, I can’t say I blame him. She’s nice and smart. He really better not let her get away.:*

“The key here is that you can boost the bandwidth temporarily at the cost of losing the entanglement faster,” Kaylee said. “What we’re doing right now is pushing it at high as it’ll go,” Kaylee said. “Okay, Clementine, ya read me?”

The female voice on the other end was a little tinny. “Clear, but not especially loud, Freeriders. We are approximately fifteen billion kilometers from Zharus. Not the



farthest we've ever been, but it's spectacular out here. The Caliburn Nebula's *gorgeous*."

"We have someone new here to help monitor," Rhianna said, nodding at the leopardess. "Say hello to Madison Brubeck and Samantha."

"Really? Xolotlan's been abuzz with her return," Clementine said. "Pleased to meet you both. My Captain says hello, too. Say hello, Wilma."

"Hello Wilma," another voice deadpanned.

"Clementine, we're going to boost the bitrate enough to get video," Rhianna said. She flipped a few physical switches on the control panel. The whole test rig was set up like an early 60s mainframe, full of blinkenlights. "Test signals good, we're stable at early broadband speeds."

When the video came up, it was highly-compressed 2D with artifacting and frequent drops to blocky lower resolution, barely enough to make out the Integrates on the *Clementine's* Bridge. With them was a woman with pale skin and neon blue hair. "Just a second, Rhianna," she said. The video cleared up. "There. How's that looking on your end?"

"Nominal. Looks like we've got about ten minutes before we lose the stream," Kaylee reported. "But this is the best yet."

"Hi, you bunch!" Uncia said. "This kitty-cat here's Maddie and 'Mantha; why don't you introduce yourselves?"

Sitting in the captain's chair, dressed in a red uniform from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with four Captain's pips, was an arctic vixen. "Greetings, Scouts. I'm Captain Wilma van Dalen, and these are my crew and my ship. We have a great deal of respect for someone who seeks out new life and new civilizations."

"We've thought of joining the Scouts recently, ourselves," a whitetail stag said. "Since things have changed for the better for Integrates. I'm Evan Dorset..."

The stag's form melted into a feminine shape almost faster than Madison could follow. "And I'm Evan's body-mate, Liis."

:*Uh, what? How?:* Samantha stammered. :*Did they just...how did they do that?:*

Madison blinked. "What was that? On-the-fly video editing?"

Liis laughed. "No, we're shapeshifters. It's not an innate ability for Integrates," Liis said. "You have to teach your Fusers how to do it. It's a skill we've been teaching for over twenty years now."

"Wow!" Samantha said. "That would have come in handy back on Totalia. After I Fused Maddie, she had to hide her tags under a hat and stuff to go out in public."

"Ahem," the barn owl at one of the bridge stations said. "I just wanted to get a word in before the video blips out. I'm Ghostate. The lot of us have been slumming around the solar system for a while now. We helped your brother learn a thing or two when he came out here for training."

"And took down Fritz's Coffeehouse," Liis added with a feral grin.

"That's pretty impressive," Madison said.

"You're not exactly chopped liver yourself," Evan said, shifting back to male again. "The first known Integration to happen outside of Zharus space. You'll be in the history books."

"Because discovering two new metamaterials *and* a lost wildcat colony wouldn't be enough to land her there by themselves," Wilma deadpanned.

"And last but not least, I'm Clementine!" the blue-haired woman said, smiling. "And I'm *the Clementine*, too. Two Clementines for the price of one!"

“Or you could say *first* but not least, since she’s the first of her kind,” Wilma said proudly.

“You’re one of those EIs I read about?” Madison said. “The first one?”

“You could say I’m the Rattigan of EIs,” Clementine said. “We’ve met, last year. The little fella’s such a card.”

“Not so ‘little’ anymore since he and Dr. Clemens have partnered up, but yeah,” Rhianna said, grinning.

“We’re starting to lose entanglement, Rhi,” Kaylee reported. “Just lost three units.”

“Already? Damn,” Rhianna said.

“Aw, man,” Samantha said. “We barely even got to say hi. When are you guys gonna be back on Zharus?”

“We’ve signed to your brother’s fleet, so we’ll meet again soon,” Wilma said. “We have a decent FTL drive we’ve been testing.”

“But we’re *serious* about joining the Scouts,” Evan said. The video flickered and went blocky. “We feel a strong need to *boldly go*.”

“Next time you’re in Uplift, we should meet up,” Madison said quickly. “Even before we Integrated, ‘Mantha and I were working on a proposal to get RIDEs into the Scouts. Integrates would just be more of the same. I’ll buy you all a couple rounds at Diane’s and we’ll talk about it.”

“Works for—” Wilma said before the video cut out.

“Damn. That’s it for that test bank,” Kaylee said. “They all died at once. We don’t even have text chat.”

*:That’s not all you want to talk about, is it?:* Samantha needed. *:You’ve been worried what Kendlen will think ever since this happened.:*

“Shapeshifting. Wow,” Madison mused. “I had no idea that kind of thing was even possible. What *else* can Integrates do that nobody ever told me about?”

“*They* don’t even know everything they can do,” Rhianna said.

“I think we’ve got the code for your DIN nailed down,” Rochelle announced. “Let’s see how this works.” She unsnapped the plug from the comm unit that made up Madison’s old DIN and fitted the new one into place. “Try that on for size.”

Madison plugged it in, and ran a series of quick tests at different speeds. “Hey, that’s great! I’m already getting about twice the throughput as from the old one.”

“See how fast you can go before it burns out?” Rhianna suggested. “Generally ours will hold up to faster speeds than the Integrates can handle themselves, but I don’t think that’ll be the case for this one.”

“Working on it,” Madison said. A few seconds later, the unit ejected itself and the socket steamed. “*Ouch*. That smarts. Maybe we need a better heatsink.”

“Our usual ones burn out so rarely it’s not usually a concern, but that’s a good idea,” Rhianna said. “Let’s plug that in and fab you another one. You’re still going to need to carry spares, I’m afraid.”

“Not a problem,” Madison said. “We’ll have to see if we can get you some Totalium. Too bad we can’t just send another scout ship to pick some up. Unlike Q, it’s pretty much all over their system in raw form; even the asteroids have it.” She chuckled. “I understand it makes asteroid mining pretty hazardous. All their mining ships have *great* optical and laser ranging scan packages.”

“Huh. You should tell Zane about that,” Rhianna mused. “He might want to get

some of our own asteroid belt rockhoppers in on the expedition.”

“I’ll make a note,” Madison said. “Well, anyway, I guess I’d better get back to the Scout HQ. They’re going to be debriefing me for at least the rest of the week. With this new DIN, I can at least beam stuff across slowly.”

“When you have time, we should get together more often,” Rhianna said, grinning. “In between talking about your scouting, you can tell me any embarrassing stories about Zane’s childhood that Aggie’s left out.”

Madison grinned back. “Ooooh, filial embarrassment. I’m down with that. You know, it occurs to me that you might be able to help me with a project I’ve been toying with, too—adapting Chauncey the Younger to work with my new Integrate body shape. Might be fun to play around with if we get any spare moments.”

“I’d love to. But to be honest, I don’t know if I have the time to add another project to my ever-growing list,” Rhianna said. “The Munns have been working on a similar project, with their bigger IDEs. And for that matter, I’m sure the students at MMU would love another challenge. I’ll let their teachers know about your proposal.”

“And it’d give ‘em a chance to work on *two* Chaunceys at once,” Kaylee added.

“Huh. There’s a thought. Thanks.” She took the half-dozen DINs Rhianna handed over, and plugged one into her slot. “Oh, good, you included the fab schematics. Great! We’ll comm you if we need anything.”

“Have fun storming the castle!” Uncia said.

Madison rolled her eyes. “Believe me, if I don’t end up ‘mostly dead’ from sheer boredom, it’ll take a miracle.” She waved, then lifted off and floated out of the garage.

*:Well, that was certainly educational,: Samantha mused. :You know, I’ll bet Integrates would make great scouts.:*

Madison grinned. “You’re just saying that ‘cuz we are one.”

*:I hope that bunch come back to Zharus soon,: Samantha said. :I’d like to get to know them better.:*

“You and me both, ‘Mantha,” Madison said. “You and me both.”

## Chapter 2: Totalia

*December 15, 157 A.L.*

*Edge of Totalia System*

“Surfacing in five...four...three...two...we’ve got surface sign!” the bridge speakers announced, as klaxons and spinning lights went off.

The sleepy-eyed pilot tapped a flashing red button to shut the noise down. “Thank you, Magic Voice. Launch return torp so Command knows we arrived,” Scout Joel Roberts replied on the bridge of the *Satellite of Love*. He cloaked the ship immediately and changed vectors at random, just in case the local sensor nets had somehow detected the splash.

Just before it cloaked, a viewer on the outside would have seen a sleek, flattened missile shape 125 meters long with a matte gray hull and the starry circular insignia of the Scout Corps emblazoned on the blunt bow. There were a pair of stubby wings aft and a pair of shorter stabilizers above them. A cluster of three large cavorite impellers propelled the scout ship forward, away from the exit point. Just forward of the wings, the signature Eridanite-style FTL Drive Ring retracted, shrinking in diameter until it was flush against the hull. Portals irised open, as well as the forward viewports, so the pilot could see outside once again.

The reports from the captured Scouts implied the Totalians had some decent gravitic detection equipment, otherwise their ships couldn’t have intercepted the scouts so quickly. He had to assume he was close enough for interception. But with any luck, the hardlight cloak would be enough to prevent that.

“Torp launched,” Magic Voice said. “It’s now in jump.”

Joel was, as far as he knew, the only human-form Integrate in the Zharus-based Scouts. His ordinary human appearance gave him opportunities that few non-shapeshifting Integrates had, and he hadn’t caviled at taking advantage of them. He’d been out exploring new star systems during the worst of Fritz’s excesses, and had only learned about Zane Brubeck’s revolution upon returning to Zharus space barely a month before getting sent out here again.

He still wasn’t sure how he felt about that—or what the implications would be for him, personally. Was it now safe for him to “go legit”? Or would it come at the cost of the rest of his scout career? It was great Integrate society was coming out in the open and all that, but there were still those pesky export regulations to consider. Was he in violation of the law every time he took his sarium-laced self out of the Zharus system? He’d just let the lawyers and boffins worry over that for a while before he said anything.

Hell, given the reports that Brubeck girl had sent back, which he’d had two months isolated in jump to pore over, maybe they were about to have a socio-cultural development that would render all that moot. He could hope, anyway.

As for his mission, it was deceptively simple recon and return. He had to determine if the other two Scouts had escaped, and if not, try and determine their status. Had the Resistance made any progress against the coup? If they had and the elected government was reestablished, he could make official contact and get the ball

rolling diplomatically.

Otherwise he was not, under any circumstances, to de-cloak and tip their hand. Silent running was the rule. He was on a trajectory that would fly through the inner system in a week without any additional impeller thrust. “Good old Isaac Newton,” Joel said.

Of course, Newton was also the enemy here. This was an unknown system and he was moving through it at a decent fraction of the speed of light. He had the ship’s sensors hooked into his own Q-based processing and would make course corrections to avoid impacts, but the totalium stuff was an unknown quantity. He’d tuned his optical sensors as sensitive as they would go, and set up a program to use the ship’s banks of telescopes to check for occlusion of the stars as Brubeck’s report had recommended. As a result, the system was *extremely* sensitive.

“Debris detected, 48 degrees mark 4, towards the opposite side of the system,” Magic Voice said. “Spectra indicates remains of Scout ship *Neu Deutschland*. Particle trajectory evidence points to self destruct.”

Joel groaned and hit his forehead on the control panel. “Well, Hamdingers.” He and Hamner Reinhaven had crossed paths a few times over the years, as active scouts tended to do. They weren’t really close, but he seemed like a nice enough guy, even if his name *was* “Hamdinger” minus a few letters. Joel hoped he hadn’t gone down with his ship. “Any sign of the *Turbinia*?”

“Negative,” Magic Voice said.

Joel drummed his fingers on the panel. He could go and investigate on his outbound swing through the system, but there was also the potential that the whole thing was a honeypot—a trap for anyone from Zharus who came to investigate. All they had to do was put enough gravitic sensors around it. It was a difficult decision. Self destruct implied the pilot at least didn’t want the ship to fall into the coup government’s hands again.

“Gather as much passively as you can, Magic Voice. Maintain current trajectory.”

“Will do, Joel,” she replied.

In over ten years as a Scout Joel hadn’t yet figured out how to make a decent version of Crow and Tom Servo, so he’d simply given up. It was hard enough to explain his obsession with *Mystery Science Theater 3000* to Scout Command as it was.

On the bright side, unlike most other scouts he had his own built-in companion to keep him from going crazy in isolation. His RIDE, Zach, had been as big an MST and Rifftrax fan as he was—in fact, Zach was the one who’d gotten him hooked on it. So now he often called himself “Magic Voice” and pretended to be the ship’s built-in Ad-I when anyone else was around.

“Have you been picking up anything in the way of broadcasts from the planet?” Joel asked.

“Some encrypted military comm chatter. It doesn’t seem like they use RF broadcast to distribute their entertainment media. Nothing really actionable, either.”

“Yeah, that figures. Pity. Going by the movies Brubeck recorded with her comm, we could amuse ourselves for days.”

“Prime riffing material there, yeah,” Zach said, dropping out of character. The duo preferred to speak to one another aloud rather than internally. The ferret rezzed an avatar the size of a real animal and sat himself next to the sidestick. Joel scratched him behind the ears.

“At least we have all the books she scanned. Some of their fiction is ripe for text riffs,” Joel said. “Very industrious girl, our Madison Brubeck.”

“It would seem that scanning books runs in the family,” Zach said. “Remember how the Scouts’ Archive got started?”

Joel chuckled. “True.”

“It seems that these people are very insular,” Zach mused. He looked out the front viewports, where the Totalia system’s star was just a little brighter than the ones surrounding it. “Their fiction bespeaks a fear of invasion even worse than back in Earth’s 1950s. And back then it was all just a metaphor for Communism, rather than, y’know, literal.”

“Have to admit, they couldn’t have picked a more perfect metamaterial to discover than one that lets them hide from sensor detection,” Joel said. “There could be a Totalium-coated crate of Hamdingers right next to us and we’d never know it. I wonder if there’s some way we could snag a sample of it?”

“Probably not, given the nature of the mission, but we can keep our eyes open. You never know.”

Joel nodded. “True.”

“So, with any luck this’ll be a boring sweep,” Zach said. “How about some...*Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*? The *original* MST cut.”

Joel smiled. The nice thing about being an Integrate was that *every* viewing could be like seeing it the first time. “Warm up the theater.”

The former ferret switched back to Magic Voice, avatar vanishing. “Movie sign in five, four, three, two...”

*December 19, 157 AL*

*Totalia Resistance*

“One,” Barbarella said, hand signaling for the others in the cell to get moving towards the Supply Depot. It hadn’t taken long for the Zealots—as the other faction had come to be known—to start using lethal ammo. The Loyalist Resistance had done their level best to avoid harming their countrymen, but the pressure was growing to respond in kind.

The Resistance enjoyed wide support among the general populace, and there were rifts within the Totalian military. But it simply wasn’t enough to curb stomp the Zealots into defeat. They were still better trained, better armed, and better organized.

The Resistance needed a victory, and soon, to keep morale up. To that end they now knew where most of the politicians were being held. It was time to get them out. This supply mission was to support that.

So far, it had been going well. If they weren’t much for head-on conflicts, the Resistance was pretty good at misdirection. The Zealots’ police force was covering three different spots on the other side of Totalia City where word had “leaked” they planned to strike tonight, including trying to keep more graffiti from showing up on Raph Clarke’s house.

Barbaretta grasped her pulser and covered the others as they moved into position. It wasn’t the prettiest of weapons by Zharusian standards, and a pre-cavorite design. The approximate size of a super soaker water gun, it weighed eight kilos, most of

it battery, but it packed a wallop. They mostly kept them locked into stun mode, but if it was necessary to use lethal force, they had considerably better stopping power than a bullet. They also had better range than the native electro-stun guns. If nothing else, thanks to the tech files Madison had given Kendlen and a scout who knew how to use them, at least they had the technical edge.

But they only had a dozen or so of the guns. The materials and tools they snagged tonight from this supply depot would let them build a better version of them—plus a few other neat toys. Kendlen was still annoyed at losing access to his factory’s machine shops, but they’d liberated a few other resources already.

So far, the operation was going well. There were only four security guards on duty at this depot, and they’d managed to stun all four of them at once. They’d blinded the cameras from long range with an infrared laser, and knocked out the power to the alarm systems. They were still moving with caution, though. It was entirely possible this was a trap.

The Resistance soldier up by the door fired a blast from his pulser into the lock and kicked the door open, taking up position beside it to cover the interior as three of his cohorts ran in to secure it. A moment later, he nodded and gestured Barbaretta to move up and join him. Barbaretta moved up to the other side of the door, and spoke into the secure comm attached to her wrist. “We’re clear. Bring the truck.”

As the other people in her squad swept the warehouse for people, their truck backed into the loading dock. Assuming they didn’t have any trouble finding the right crates, they should be out of here in fifteen minutes. Assuming nothing went wrong...

### *Approaching Inner System*

There was little time for watching cheesy movies once the *Satellite of Love* entered the inner system. Totalia was the fourth planet out, currently on the left side of its orbit in relation to the surface point. The last few days hadn’t given Joel and Zach many useful pieces of information. Sure, he could have found an open port in their network and easily hacked them with his Intie-grade talent to walk through any pre-DINsec system. *Silent running, damnit.*

Already there’d been five course corrections to avoid impacts the shields couldn’t deflect. Every time they ran the impellers they risked detection. Hopefully they were moving fast enough that the local ships simply wouldn’t be able to accelerate quickly enough to intercept, but one never knew.

Four Zharus days after entering the system, Joel was watching the Rifftrax Live version of *Plan Nine from Outer Space* for the umpteenth time when the *SOL* lurched, the lights went out, then there was an ominous clang that reverberated through the hull. But she quickly righted herself, then a Christmas tree of damage control reports lit up as the shipboard lights came back on.

“Forward dorsal hardlight is down,” Magic Voice reported. “But we’re still here. Shields did their job but the emitters are shot.”

Scout ships were automated and self-repairing wonders meant to be piloted by one person through the unknown and had to withstand the toughest scrapes imaginable. The vast majority of the *SOL*’s volume was taken up by its power generation, fuel, drive systems, and self-repair materials. By comparison the crew space was tiny.

“How big was the rock that hit us?” Joel asked.

“About three kilos. The forward hardlight heatsinks are busted. I’m putting the brakes on and doing a 180 so we don’t have another impact like that,” Zach said. “I think it’s embedded in the dorsal hull. Fortunately it didn’t punch through.”

“How did we miss spotting a three-kilo rock?” Joel wondered.

“I’ve got a guess about that, but we’ll need to see the thing to make sure. Feel up to a little EVA?”

“Sure, I’ve been wanting to get out and stretch my legs.” Joel opened the hidden locker where he kept his Integrate gear and selected an EVA pak. Camelot made great Integrate equipment. Even if it did cost a pretty penny, it had been worth it. After taking a couple of minutes to set it up, he slipped outside.

The small nebula that hid the Totalia system from Zharus covered a quarter of the sky, gorgeous in its greens and reds. It was a dusty nebula, with large dark patches the SOL’s telescopes had identified as having the dense globular concentrations of gas that presaged a forming protostar. Given a few million years, it might start getting crowded in this cosmic neighborhood.

Joel pulsed the impellers in his EVA pak and drifted around to the bow of the ship. He could see signs of the damage in the way the hull bulged and creased around it before he even had a direct view of the crumpled hull plate. “Wow. Lucky thing we had the shields. If that thing had hit us unprotected, it would have holed us right through to the toka.”

“And we’d have a *really* long walk home,” Zach agreed. “Let’s see if we can pop it out.”

A trio of Manos repair drones had deployed from their access hatches. They neatly cut away the damaged panels to bring them back to the ship’s main fabber to recycle and reinstall.

“Hang on, let me see.” Joel took a small prybar from his tool belt, and took a closer look at the rock. “Okay, that’s odd.”

“Do tell?”

“As I came out to make repair, I met a rock who wasn’t there,” Joel said, peering at the bronze-tinted meteorite embedded in the hull. “I can see it with our peepers, but to our active sensors it’s just a big fat ball of nothing. A hole in space right in front of us.”

“Well, we wanted a sampo—er, *sample* of this stuff. Looks like a sample found us,” Zach said.

“Terrific,” Joel said. “Well, I suppose it could have been worse. At least it wasn’t the Hubble. Let’s pop this thing out and get it inside.”

### *Totalia City*

The truck was mostly loaded when Barbaretta heard the distinctive “CHOOP! CHOOP!” of a pulser going off, followed by returning gunfire. “What the fuck.”

“Cops are here!” one of the door guards yelled. “They musta twigged when the cameras went out.”

“Damn. Thought we’d have more time. Everyone in the truck, we’re leaving!” Barb climbed into the passenger seat, resting her pulser on the rolled-down window. The door guards took a couple more shots, then one of them tossed a smoke bomb and



they ran for the truck.

A moment later, they pulled out of the dock and onto the street. There were two police cars coming up from the opposite direction, and not the civvie units, either—military jeeps with pintle-mounted guns. “Aw snap.” The truck turned in the opposite direction, and Barbaretta made her way to the back to join the others firing their pulsers out the back. “Nothing for it, boys. Switch to full power and shoot for the tires or the engine block.” She turned to call over her shoulder, “Make for the ramp! We’ll try to lose them in the underground.”

They depended on Barbaretta far too much for military advice. She was a *scout*, a singular explorer. In her career she’d already visited a dozen planets coreward of Zharus and Zheng He, and wore tattoos all over her body to commemorate most of them. Few of them had been deemed worthy of followup, and up until her capture five years ago her career hadn’t been worthy of even the shortest cameo in a Clint Brubeck story. But now here she was, drawing a bead on the Jeeps chasing them, trying to avoid hurting her fellow human beings and not be shot in the process...

*The Resistance needs more help than I can give ‘em, she thought. Resistance needs someone with actual military tactical knowhow... Even so, I shouldn’t have come on this op to begin with, but that’s what going stir crazy will do to ya.*

Few Resistance movements in history had ever done more than be a thorn in the side of a sitting government, even one that had staged a coup whose approval rating was as low as the Zealots’. Numerical advantage wasn’t enough. This was where the Totalians’ natural pacifism worked against them. Though they mostly hated the Zealot government they weren’t willing to take up arms against it. There was no storming the Bastille in the wings.

*If Madison and the others escaped, we should be hearing something from them soon, she thought. The timing was right. At minimum Command would have sent a sneakship to reconnoiter. If there was any justice in the galaxy it would be up there, right now.*

With any luck, there were enough Loyalists in the Cosmy to make trouble for the Zealots in space when whatever Zharus sent *did* show up.

The truck swerved, giving her an open shot. She fired her pulser at the motor compartment of one of the chase vehicles, only to have it superficially scorch the metal. “Damn.” She’d forgotten to set the switch to full power herself. She flipped it over and fired again. *CHOOP! CHOOP!*

The military’s pintle guns returned fire. Barb ducked as bullets stitched through the truck’s canvas cover. “Oh, you frackin’ bastards...” She fired again, and this time was rewarded by the lead jeep’s right front tire blowing out. “That’s one down.”

Barbaretta nearly fell backward toward the front of the truck as it bumped onto a steep downward ramp. They were heading down to a lower level of the city, one of the first parts built during the settlement. It had been where the inhabitants had been thawed and took shelter, much like the tunnels under First Landing back on Zharus. Now it was used for housing the generator and pumping machinery that ran the city’s power and plumbing, and as a home for the few indigents or self-made hermits Totalia City had—not to mention a temporary staging area and base for the Resistance.

Since few people used it for anything day to day, further construction hadn’t taken care to make it the most orderly of places. There were plenty of dead-end corridors, or corridors that seemed to lead places only to be blocked off by pipes and

conduits that a person could squeeze through but not a vehicle. And nobody had bothered to keep the maps of it current—except the Resistance, who had spent the first month since the coup exploring and charting it to a fare-thee-well. Barbaretta was fairly confident they could lose the cops entirely if they could just take out that other vehicle. *How did that old twencen song go, about moving fast in the tunnels of the underground?*

One of the other gunners in the truck with her took a bullet and went down, clutching his arm. Barb swore and resumed firing as the truck swerved into a side passage. “Come on, come on...” Her gun’s charge indicator clicked dry, and she tossed it behind her and grabbed the one the wounded man had dropped. One of the problems with the guns was that there was no fast way to change magazines—when the batteries ran out, they had to have new ones wired in. They weren’t really designed for protracted engagements.

Aware the charge on this gun was running down, too, Barbara took careful aim and held her fire, waiting for the right moment. The truck turned onto a long straightaway, which was about as good a chance as Barbaretta figured she was going to get. She centered the crosshairs on the jeep’s front grill and held the trigger down. The rapid-fire series of pulses hammered into the engine block, and a huge cloud of steam escaped from the radiator. The jeep started slowing down.

“Yeah!” Barbaretta said. “In your *face*, suckers! In your—oh, holy *shit!*” One of the jeep’s passengers had just unshipped a long tube that Barbara recognized. “They’ve got a rocket launcher! Turn! Turn now!”

The truck was just making its turn as the rocket fired. Time seemed to slow down as the warhead approached. Barbaretta just had time to think, *Shit. I really shoulda stayed home on this one.* Then everything went black.

### *Satellite of Love*

“Such a piddly little thing to have caused so much damage,” Joel mused, peering at the irregular lump of space rock on their sample table, about the size of a small grapefruit. Streaked with bronze, it resisted their scanners’ best attempts to get a read on it for the most part. They were able to pick up a few streaks and chunks of nickel-iron on the surface facing their scanner, but when they turned it, those disappeared and others came up. The Totalium completely absorbed a huge chunk of the EM spectrum, including most of the frequencies used by their navigational radar.

“It occurs to me that navigation in this system is going to be fraught with hazard,” Zach mused. “That’s probably something we should mention in our next report.”

“I wonder how the natives do it?” Joel wondered.

“Well, we could ask them,” Zach said. “It looks like we’re going to be meeting them sooner than later.”

“Huh? What?” But even as he asked, Joel checked the diagnostics himself and knew what Zach meant. “Oh, *Hamdingers on toast*. There’s *no* way we can get our cloak back up?”

“Not with that kind of damage,” Zach said. “And I don’t think I’d want to risk jumping either until we can at least replace the hull plate.”

“What about our impellers? We can still change course, right?”

“We can, but it’ll take a while to overcome the inertia we’ve already got. And we

may not have that kind of time. I'm picking up star occlusions at two o'clock high. Sixty degrees starboard, twenty-four degrees up. Occupying about three degrees of arc, so it's already pretty close however big it is."

Their radio crackled with a transmission. "Attention, scout starship *Satellite of Love*," a woman said. "You are under our guns. Power down your systems and wait to be boarded. Do not attempt to jump or flee, or you will be destroyed."

Joel sighed. "So much for silent running. I guess it's time to meet the neighbors."

"I take it firing back isn't on the table, right?" Zach said. "Should we rig for self-destruct like the *Neu Deutschland*?"

"Let's keep that option open for now. Back up the ship's computer and wipe it per standard procedure."

"Already done, partner. I'm signaling our surrender."

Joel sighed. "We're going to have so much explaining to do when we get back. Oh well, guess we should hide any tech stuff and get ready to have guests. Put them on the Hexfield, would you?"

"They aren't accepting any transmissions from us," Zach said.

"Well, that's smart. Looks like we'll have to let them take us aboard." Once the docking port registered boarders they switched over to internal chat, then awaited their visitors.

The stout woman in their lead had the same insignia as from the images of Captain Georg Sandeep Madison had included in her report. She was flanked by two men holding some kind of short rifle or carbine. "Your name, please. For our records," she said crisply.

"Scout Joel Roberts, at your service," he said. "Welcome aboard the *Satellite of Love*, for what it's worth. Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

*:I think I've got a wireless signal from their ship, Joel,: Zach said in fast-time. :Using what seems to be a forked version of IPv8. Weird accent, and it lisps a little, but I can get the gist. It's body telemetry from some of their gear.:*

*:Can we get into anything important from here?:*

*:No, too isolated. We'll have to be aboard their ship before we can do anything, if we can do anything,:* Zach reported.

"I'm Captain Debrah Forestor," the woman said. "You will accompany these gentlemen to the brig while we put your ship under tow." She looked around the Bridge, which bore a strong resemblance to the version of the *SOL* interior from Season 8 onwards. The open Hexfield showed the Totalian Cosmy ship outside. "What an... interesting setup you have here, Mr. Roberts."

"It's a one-owner ship." Joel's mouth twitched. "Do you have a brother or perhaps a son named Clayton, perhaps?"

The Captain gave him a humorless look. "Take this jokester away. I'm afraid if we can't figure out how to move it, we'll have to destroy it."

*:Hamdingers!:* Joel fumed. The guards cuffed him. It was a physical lock, which would be trivial to pick with Joel's hardlight and lifter fields. He allowed them to lead him into their ship. Once they were through the opposite side of the boarding tube, Joel entered a whole new data landscape.

Within milliseconds Zach broke the Totalian ship's mil-spec encryption, and had the run of their internal network. In milliseconds more, he had catalogued every file on their network—military documents, intelligence, schematics, technical manuals, and the

ship's and crewmembers' media libraries. He copied everything he could into his internal storage to go over later. There wasn't much time, but now he could have a little fun. He dropped into fast-time with Zach.

"Oh, God. Some of these movies in their entertainment folders make *It Conquered the World* look subtle," Zach said in their VR space. "Want to watch one before we get to the brig?"

"Tempting, but let's not get distracted just yet," Joel said. "Besides, we're not going to the brig. We *own* this ship and they don't even know it. What devilry can we do that won't tip our hand about what we actually are, and that will end up with these jokers far away from us and not in a position to retaliate?"

"Tricky." Zach thought for a moment. "But I think I have an idea. Get ready to throw up our shields."

The two guards were marching Joel through a corridor on their ship. Joel noted the corridor had a rougher, more unfinished look than those on most modern ships and stations he'd seen. The plating was diamond-deck, and there were all sorts of exposed pipes and conduits running along. It fit—they didn't have nanofab, so they had to build all this stuff by hand. That they even *could* build a ship this size like that was pretty impressive when you got right down to it.

And then his view of the corridor went away as it was suddenly filled by clouds of mist. Zach had triggered the fire extinguishers. He heard a young female voice say, "Captain! Emergency! Fire in the main starboard corridor! Please return to the ship immediately!"

In the confusion, Joel slipped the cuffs, put his shields up, and slipped away from his guards, who were doubled over, choking, from the gas. He heard Captain Forestor respond, "What? That's where the prisoner is! Security to main starboard corridor immediately!"

*:Whoops, think we better skidoo...not to mention cloak.: Zach sent.*

*:Good plan.: Joel shimmered into invisibility as the captain and her men ran in from the direction of the ship. Fortunately, there was plenty of room in the corridor to slip past them in the mist and fog.*

*"Where is the prisoner? Security!"*

*:Time for a decoy,: Joel said. He did some creative video editing, making one of the crew appear to be him as they ran down the corridor towards Engineering. Security forces were immediately sent, leaving the boarding tube free for him to zip back down into the SOL. :So now what?:*

*:I'm diddling their systems now so they'll undock from us without anyone noticing,: Zach said. :In thirty seconds, they're going to go to maximum thrust in a random direction...and I've locked their computer down so good they'll have to pull the plug and completely reformat it to stop.:*

"Sneaky," Joel said, watching the umbilical unhook from the airlock and retract away. "That's one ship down, anyway. Of course, it still doesn't solve the problem that we're visible to anyone and everyone right now."

"One problem at a time," Zach said. "Don't worry about reloading the ship's systems. I'll be Gypsy and run 'em from in here on emulation. Now, let's see if they did any damage..."

On entering the bridge they were greeted by smoking control panels and shattered screens. Captain Forestor had apparently *really* disliked his campy bridge

setup, enough to allow her mole men to use it for target practice.

Out the viewport, the massive bronze Totalian ship began to move, accelerating out into the void. Joel was sorely tempted to have every screen on the ship start showing any number of cheesy flicks from Earth, but restrained himself. He and Zach were meme-infected enough as it was.

"I've got every Manos unit working," the former ferret said. "And I think I can manage 10 gravies of thrust on the impellers."

"Plot us out to the nearest jump point," Joel said. He fanned his hand in front of his face. "Looks like we'll be controlling the ship from the Engi compartment."

"You do remember what I said about probably not being *able* to jump, right?" Zach reminded him. "They made our damage situation *worse*, you know."

"True. But it's as good a place as any to send a torp from, at least." Joel said. "We can warn them about the hazards of Totalium meteoroids, and append all the stuff we ganked from that ship."

"True enough. I guess this doesn't have to be a total loss, and...uh...you know what? Our 'scopes just picked up another occlusion. A *bigger* one."

Joel rolled his eyes. "Oh, *Hamdinger sandwiches*. What now?"

"Attention *Satellite of Love*. This is the *Kybalion* of the Totalian Loyalist Cosmy," a smooth baritone voice intoned. "We have noticed you are damaged, and are prepared to offer assistance. Please respond via this comm channel."

"Ah, Captain Georg Sandeep, I presume? Scout Captain Joel Roberts here. Forgive me if I'm a little cautious," Joel said. He commanded the gunports to open, but didn't charge the cannons. "After what just happened with your sister ship, I have my own weapons here and I'm not afraid to use them."

"I understand your hesitation, *Satellite of Love*. As far as you know, you have little reason to expect a warm welcome from any ship in this system. I hope I might convince you to change your mind. Can I just say, by the way, that I assume you had something to do with the *Foucault's Pendulum* suddenly heading out-system at full speed? I must admit I was never fond of Captain Forestor even when we were on the same side."

"I didn't like them, so I shot them into space," Joel deadpanned. "I'm sure they'll be fine, eventually. I left them all their life support. They can still eat and breathe. So just relax."

"I am assuming that you were dispatched to reconnoiter our system upon hearing from your Madison and Samantha," the voice continued. "As it happens, we have more recent information on the state of things planetside, which we would be glad to share with you. We do not support the current regime in charge, and would be happy to assist you, and to request assistance in turn in dislodging it."

:*Well, old buddy?*: Joel asked.

:*In her report, Madison suggested the guy was a straight shooter,*: Zach mused. :*It's not as if we've got anything to lose. If we have to, we can hack their systems as easy as we did Forestor's.*:

:*True enough,*: Joel said. Then he paused as a thought struck him. :*Who's Samantha? Maddie's report didn't mention a Samantha.*:

:*I don't know. Maybe we can ask him,*: Zach said. :*Well? Up to you.*:

"I guess we don't have a lot of options," Joel said. "If you really do want to help, we'd appreciate it. And we'd like to hear whatever you've got to say."

“Your ship is small enough to fit in our main shuttlebay,” Sandeep said. “Do you need any docking assistance?”

“Thanks, but we’ve got it. Transmit the approach vectors,” Joel said. He slumped into the captain’s chair in front of the ruined control panel. “SOL out.”

### *Resistance Medical Facility, Founders Tunnels*

“Kendlen, there are only two choices here,” the Doctor said in her most serious tone. “Barbaretta is beyond the ability of our med-tech to save. We either let her die, or put her in one of our few cryotubes and hope when the Zharusians arrive they can save her. That’s it. I’ve stabilized her for now, but the sooner she goes into a tube, the better.”

The makeshift Resistance hospital was full of injured fighters after the last op went sideways. The missile had clipped the corner of the truck, and the blast had sent it spinning out of control, ending up sideswiping the tunnel wall. That the survivors had been able to call for help and get rescued at all was something of a miracle in itself. Kendlen wondered if it was because of Barbaretta’s injuries—by the others’ accounts, they had fought back against the military with such ferocity as to actually make them *retreat*.

Most of the supplies they needed had been recovered, as well as the dead and injured. They had everything they needed to build the second generation of pulsers whose design Barbara had helped lay out before going on the operation. Those weapons would provide just the edge they needed to break the politicians out of their holding cells in the Zealot prison camp—or so they hoped, at least.

It was a non-choice, really. “Get her into cryo. Losing her would be...hard to explain to the Zharusians,” Kendlen said. *Who really should be here by now...*

### *TCS Kybalion*

Compared to the smaller starship Joel and Zach had just sent packing, the *Kybalion* was truly a sight to behold. From the schematics he’d snatched from the smaller vessel the Totalians used a further refined version of the pre-cavorite Inertia Displacement Drive and gravity generation used in the colony ships of two centuries ago—the machinery for that tech was massive and needed an equally massive ship. Even those had been powered by fusion, but these were pure fission—all made possible by the energy-absorbing properties of Totalium.

The *Satellite of Love* was bigger than most scoutships of her type, at 125 meters. She fit easily in the *Kybalion*’s shuttlebay with room to spare. Since there was no hardlight atmo-shield he had to wait until the bay repressurized before exiting.

*:Let’s just keep the ship’s software on emulation until we’re sure we can trust them,:* Joel suggested. He put on his dress scout khakis, since the situation seemed to call for it. If this was to be his first official, friendly contact there were protocols to follow. The Scouts had long had provisions for finding a wildcat colony—or aliens—which meant essentially a first contact situation. They’d been considered something of a joke for as long as Joel had been a scout, though he suspected *that* would be changing pretty quickly. *:Pity I can’t wear my Gizmonic red jumpsuit.:*

Sandeep had literally rolled out the red carpet for him at the base of the scout ship’s ramp. There were Marines in dress uniforms flanking each side. Sandeep and a

man in a mobile chair awaited him at the bottom.

*:That's Hammy!:* Zach exclaimed.

Formerly missing scout Hamner Reinhausen, looking a little worse for wear. He was missing his left arm below the elbow and the skin on half his face was scarred from burns. His left eye didn't look usable either.

Joel forgot all decorum and dashed down the ramp and hugged his fellow scout. "Hamner! You're alive!"

"I ejected before my ship went kaboom, but not quickly enough. Some shrapnel hit my escape pod," Hamner said. "Captain Sandeep's crew rescued me before I ran out of air. Good to see you again, Joel."

"Mr. Reinhausen is still recovering from his injuries," Sandeep said. "That he survived at all was miraculous. I apologize for not mentioning him over comms, but you never know who might be listening these days."

"Not so much miracle as sarium-charged medical nannies," Hamner said. "Saved my life."

Joel laughed. "You're not supposed to have those, you know."

"Rare indeed is the scout who doesn't have *something* they're not supposed to," Hamner said, winking. "Of course, even those would have been for naught without Captain Sandeep's medical staff."

*:Damn! Well, I'm pretty sure we can trust these people,:* Zach said. *:At least enough not to hack them immediately. I'm keeping that as an option, just in case.:*

*:Call it an act of good faith, even if they don't know about it,:* Joel replied.

"I take it that the torpedoes made it to Zharus?" Hamner continued. "The timing of your arrival would be rather coincidental otherwise."

"I was sent on my way about an hour after Command decoded them," Joel said. "So yeah, they know."

Hamner looked up at the damaged ship and tried to whistle, but his scarred lips couldn't quite manage it. The Manos drones were still doing their repairs, flitting here and there over the hull like so many bees. "Looks like a rock found you, then the Zealots did."

"Yeah," Joel said. "Tiny little thing, about the size of a grapefruit, and completely invisible to our radar."

"An occupational hazard of travel in our system," Sandeep said. "We had to develop rather good scan packages utilizing other wavelengths to detect them, and even then they have relatively limited range."

"They've got very good close-in defense lasers," Hamner said.

"Like the groundside comm lasers on Zharus, I suppose..." Joel said. Captain Sandeep raised an eyebrow. "Our homeworld has a weak magnetosphere. Radio isn't very useful for communications in most places."

"I see. We've all had to adapt to our specific circumstances. Now, would you like a tour of the ship?" Captain Sandeep said.

"Think I'm going to be here awhile," Joel said. The repair time estimates from the damage control computer were 2-4 Zharus days. "Sure, why not? A gesture of trust."

"At the end I'll share all the intelligence I have on what's happening groundside and our status in the Cosmy," Sandeep said.

An official-looking electric passenger cart whirred up to the end of the red carpet. It had two pairs of seats facing one another behind the driver. The Marines saluted, and

at the Captain's nod, marched away. "Normally we only use this when Fleet Admiral Frankel visits. Under the circumstances, I believe you also qualify."

"I'll be going back to sickbay," Hamner said. "Still have some healing to do."

"I can bring you back to Zharus with me if your doctors give the word," Joel said. *:And get him healed-up proper. He looks like that 'monster' from Monster A Go Go.:*

*:What monster?:* Zach deadpanned. *:There was no monster, remember? Sorry to make you sit through the movie.:*

"That would be nice," Hamner said. "But that would leave us without any way to send reports back until the next scout arrived. Maybe better wait a while on that."

"Guess I'll see you in a couple hours, Hammy," Joel said.

Sandeep gestured for Joel to take the open seat behind the driver. Joel shook Hamner's hand one last time before doing so. The Captain took the seat at the back that faced him, and they began their tour of the 3000-meter Totalium-coated starship.

Joel had never been on a ship so massive. There were only a few ships over 2000 meters still in service in the rest of human space. Even the legendary Star Circus couldn't match the *Kybalion* for mass. Power came from an immense cluster of thorium fission reactors that bred their own fuel via some arcane Totalium-mediated process.

"I have to admit, that's spectacular. Why didn't you stay with fusion?" Joel said. "That was old tech even when your colony ships left Earth."

"Fission is actually cheaper and easier to manufacture, has a better power-to-mass ratio, counting the necessary physical plant—especially with the thin shielding Totalium makes possible—and is by and large more forgiving of accidents," Captain Sandeep said. "It's simply a collection of hot rocks, rather than an actual *star* burning in the belly of the ship. The only problem is the radiation, and thanks to Totalium that's by and large no longer an issue." He chuckled. "That being said, one of the reasons our ships are built for length is to put the reactor at the far end from the crew compartment, just in case."

*:The older fusion tech needed a fission-powered magnetic pinch to bootstrap it,:* Zach said. *:These days a cavorite gravity pinch is enough.:*

"This is a pretty young system, isn't it? There'd be more fissionables in the crust," Joel said.

"Our Totalia is approximately three billion Earth-years old," Sandeep said. "I'm not sure how that translates to your world's calendar, but I thought I'd use a common reference."

They stopped at one of the defense laser clusters that helped keep the ship safe from asteroid collisions. Again, size was a theme. The lasers were about four times bigger than their modern equivalents, though they had been improved somewhat from their pre-colonization forebears. "I must admit, it's a pretty impressive battery."

Sandeep shrugged. "I would not say that compared to the technology I observed in Madison's ship while I was transporting it to Totalia. To be honest I can't imagine how you get such incredible performance out of such a small craft *and* have room for faster-than-light travel."

"It has to do with some of the metamaterials that were found since your forebears departed," Joel said. "In particular, cavorite, which acts as similar to a magnetic coil for gravity. Which in turn has all sorts of applications, especially when it comes to making things smaller."

"Which is probably another reason we build our ships so large," Sandeep mused.



“Our artificial gravity generators are a quarter of our mass, and take up as much space on their own as the habitable decks of the ship above them.”

“You’ve made some pretty impressive advances without it, though,” Joel said. “When they found cavorite, development on a lot of stuff that didn’t use it just...stopped. There was no need to make more efficient lasers out of physical materials, or develop fission tech any further. It makes me wonder just what you people could do if you did have it.”

“As a spacer I’d love to hear about how you developed superluminal travel,” Sandeep said, eyes glimmering with the kind of hunger for knowledge Joel had rarely seen. The man was a born Scout.

“Something tells me we’ll have a lot of time to talk about that,” Joel said. “To be honest, I’m kind of surprised you’re showing me this much of your ship rather than trying to hold back your true capabilities.”

“The vote just before the coup made it clear that our people as a whole want to come out from behind our nebula. I *want* to show you what we’ve done with the world that supports us. I’m proud of our accomplishments,” Sandeep said.

“You have a right to be. Every Colony has had its own unique challenges to overcome,” Joel said. “I’m originally from Neorus. That’s...wow...almost sixty light years from here. We were the last major colony founded. Climate is...well, I’ll say it’s a little chilly.”

:A ‘little’ chilly?: Zach added, bringing up memories of raging blizzards. :It’s a ‘little’ chilly the way the Dry is a ‘little’ parched.:

“And that is something else I should enjoy discussing,” Sandeep said. “But as you say, there will be time for that. Regardless, it is nice to have a clear conscience in regard to the stance of my *true* government. And given what Madison, Samantha, and the other scouts were able to accomplish alone, it seems obvious that our best hope of unseating the usurpers is to petition your people for aid.”

“Ah, that’s the second time you’ve mentioned a ‘Samantha,’” Joel said. “Can you tell me who that would be? She wasn’t mentioned in Madison’s report.”

“Ah,” Captain Sandeep said. “Let’s just say that when Madison first joined us, she was accompanied by a ‘pet leopard.’”

“I see,” Joel said, smirking. “Well, good for her. For them.”

Sandeep chuckled. “She quite put one over on me. Of course, she put an even bigger one over on that prat Raph Clarke. I gather that it was due to this ‘pet’ that she and her companions were able to escape imprisonment. As I said, I am *very* impressed by your technology.”

“I’m not sure how much Hammy’s told you about them. But we can get very close to our RIDEs,” Joel said. “They can be lifelong companions. The best matches are basically inseparable. As long as we’re being open, I can give you a rough outline of what they can do. I have...a few cybernetic implants I can use to upload the materials to a secure computer.”

“I would be interested to learn more,” Sandeep said. “But now, on with the tour.”

Sandeep showed off the immense ventilator fans used for circulating air throughout the ship, the shuttles and other craft in the bay where the *Satellite of Love* was currently housed, and the crew’s living quarters. These were all about what Joel would have expected to see on any ship—some technologies simply hadn’t changed much over the years. Finally, Sandeep led Joel onto the bridge.

The layout was surprisingly *Star Trek*, with bridge stations surrounding the Captain's chair. The stations all had physical controls and touchscreens from the pre-hardlight age. The Totalian nebula was visible through a quarter of the viewports, which fully surrounded the raised bridge superstructure atop the massive ship.

*:Make it so, Number One,:* Zach quipped in his best Picard impression. *:Geez. It's taking all my willpower not to hack the whole ship from here. Take out our DIN so it doesn't tempt me further.:*

"Captain on the bridge!" the duty officer announced, standing from the conning chair.

"At ease," Captain Sandeep said. "So, how does this compare to your ships from Zharus?"

"I think it's great," Joel said. "The layout makes sense, and the controls look reasonable."

On one viewscreen was a stream from the shuttlebay, where the repair drones were still doing exterior work. The interior repairs would take more time. Another screen showed sickbay, with Hamner resting.

*:Those are genuine. No fakey stuff here,:* Zach said.

*:You said you weren't going to hack!:* Joel fumed.

*:I'm sorry! I'm a ferret, I had to tunnel in. I just can't help myself,:* Zach said.

*:It's a trust-but-verify thing. You trust, I verify. I'm starting to like this guy.:*

*:Well, just don't break anything.:*

*:You kidding? I left it better than I found it. I optimized their network,:* Zach said smugly. *:Oh, hey, that's interesting—:*

The man at the Comm Station turned to face the Captain. "Incoming Resistance transmission, Captain. It's *highly* encrypted, moreso than usual. It'll take some time to see which of the keys they gave us works."

The ship was roughly a light-hour out from Totalia, so realtime communication was out of the question.

"Captain, my implants might be able to decrypt that message faster than you can find the key," Joel offered. *:What's it say?:*

*:Nutbunnies! It's about Barb,:* Zach said. *:Not good. At all.:*

Sandeep regarded him for a moment. "Granted. Lieutenant, transmit the message to Mr. Roberts." He smiled wryly. "If that's even necessary. Given what Samantha was able to accomplish planetside, I would be entirely unsurprised if you were already tapped into the shipboard network."

"Uh, heh, funny you should say that..." Joel said, blushing. "Um, anyway...looks like Barbaretta's been critically injured in a Resistance op. They'd like you to evacuate her, keep her safe, and transfer her to Zharusian care as soon as they get here."

*:Dang, these guys sure are rough on our scouts,:* Zach put in. *:If that's the way they're going to treat them, maybe we shouldn't let them have any at all.:*

"Mmm," Captain Sandeep mused. "I can't say I'm happy about having to approach that close to the planet. They still have a number of ships stationed there."

"If we can get our ship fixed up enough that we can cloak again, we might be able to slip in," Joel said. "Our own cloak doesn't depend on Totalium, so it shouldn't be susceptible to your Totalium detection protocols. For that matter, we've got a Zharus-tech autodoc on board. It's not as good as a full clinic, but should be able to do more for her than anyone else here can."

*:We should run Hammy through it, too,:* Zach pointed out. *:It won't regrow his arm, but should be able to fix up most of the rest.:*

*:Good idea. We'll do that next time we see him. Would be a good demonstration for the Captain here.:*

Sandeep nodded. "Then by all means, proceed. If there are any resources we can provide to help, let us know."

"We'll do that," Joel said. "With that in mind, we should go get to work and speed up the repairs. Thanks for the tour, and drop by our ship any time."

"I will," Captain Sandeep promised. "I shall look forward to a tour from you when your ship is in better shape. Do you need a guide back to your ship?"

"You'll have one," Joel said. "I can find my own way back to the bay." He nodded to Sandeep, then left the bridge. The thick double doors slid open for them with a dramatic hiss, opening the long corridor to the Bridge.

*:Movie sign!:* Zach said as Magic Voice.

## Chapter 3: Debriefing

*December 12, 157 A.L.*

*Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift*

Zane Brubeck paced the length of his office, a small cloud of hardlight display panels moving with him as he walked. Madison sat in one of the comfortable chairs for visitors, peering at a cluster of displays herself. They could have taken them virtual, of course, but they both found they preferred staying grounded in the real world.

“I never realized just how much effort organizing something like this would take,” Madison groaned. “Just the liasing with the Scouts part of it is a great big headache. I can’t imagine what it must be like for you.”

Zane turned and grinned at her. “Well, I’m lucky. I’ve got Aggie to do a lot of the heavy lifting, and the computer bits in my head to do the rest. We’re going to need to get you trained up in Intie theory, like Quinoa Steader and friends did for me. Maybe we can do it on the way. We’ll have a couple months realtime to kill, to say nothing of what we can do in fasttime.”

“I’d like that,” Madison said. “And I’d *really* like to learn that shapeshifting thing those people from the *Clementine* do. I got to chat with them for a couple minutes the other day.”

Zane nodded. “Rhianna mentioned. How’s the new DIN holding up, by the way?”

“A lot better than the old one. I’ve only gone through three so far. That’s a huge improvement.”

“I’m sorry they weren’t able to make one as good as their usual,” Zane said. “Apart from the upgrades I got as they improved their process, I think I’ve only had to swap out about four times since I first Integrated, and none more recent than four upgrades ago.”

Madison shrugged. “The hazards of being a prototype. I’ll get by. So how goes the war?”

“Well, we’ve got just about as many people loaded as we can without more ships,” Zane said. “We’re working on getting more people *and* more ships, but we won’t have the big one ‘til Crazy Joe can go out next month and bring it back sometime in...April, I guess. We’ve managed to keep word from leaking out, though God knows how long that will last. We’ve got the same Inties who used to trawl for searches by newly-Integrated trawling for searches on ‘Totalia’ or related terms to try to catch any leaks before they happen.”

“How have the discussions with the other polities been going?”

“Most of ‘em are happy to play ball,” Zane said. “Fortunately, even the polities that are the most ‘out there,’ like Cape Nord, generally recognize it’s best to have people in charge more sensible than the average schmuck on the street. And Sturmhaven’s gotten a lot better over the last few months. Laurasia’s taking more convincing, but they’re coming around.”

“I can’t *believe* it’s going to be half a year before we can get back there!” Madison groaned. “And that’s not even counting travel time!”

“We’re doing everything we can,” Zane said. “Going in unprepared would be an even bigger disaster. We should hear back from the advance scout in a couple of weeks.”

“I suppose it’ll have to do,” Madison grumbled. “Even if we sent another ship, the Scouts have made it abundantly clear I’m too important here to go with them. Plus I’m still in the doghouse over ‘Mantha stowing away.’” She rolled her eyes. “Never mind that without her there’d have just been one more missing scout.”

“I think we can make some headway about using Q-based tech in Zharus-based scout expeditions in the near future,” Zane opined. “What happened to you two is a prime example of saving lives. There’s really no point with those draconian regs.”

“Yeah, try telling that to Commander Lee,” Madison muttered.

“Maybe I *will* have a little talk with her sometime soon,” Zane mused. “If she’s being unreasonable—” Then a series of klaxons went off, interrupting Zane and causing Madison to jump out of the chair.

“What on Zharus was *that*?”

“Heh. That was the jump splash alert I set while we were waiting for your ship,” Zane said. “I never canceled it after you arrived.”

Madison paused. “Then...that means another ship just dropped in from out Totalia way?”

“Looks like it,” Zane mused. “Oh, hey. I’ve still got a few working DINcomms left in that comm beacon I used to say hi to you. Want to reach out and touch someone? He came in barely a light-second from the beacon.”

“Do I ever!” Madison said. “See if they’re sending anything.”

“—is Scout Pilot Marcus Trenton calling Scout HQ. I should be planetside in a day or so and I need to meet with the Scout Commander ASAP about an urgent matter. Please respond by this channel; I’ll be waiting.”

Zane opened a voice comm line. “Hey, Marcus, this is Zane Brubeck. We’re glad to see you back. Just to ease your mind, Madison made it back in one piece. She’s here with me, in fact. Just a sec.” Zane turned to Madison. “Connection’s open. I’ll switch you over to video. Wanna say hi?”

“Er...” Madison paused, and looked down at herself. “Hang on, let me get a disguise up.”

Zane chuckled and shook his head. “Word of advice, Maddie? Skip it. He’ll probably hear from whoever meets him out there what you looked like when you got back; it *was* all over the news after all. You might as well break it to him yourself first.”

“Well, that’s true,” Maddie said. Her DIN flashed. “Okay, opening the link.” She cleared away all the other panels and opened a hardlight display with a pixelly low-resolution image of Marcus Trenton on it. He wore immaculately-pressed khakis, a monocle in one eye, pith helmet on his head, and had even waxed his mustache into a handlebar. “Well, aren’t *you* looking snazzy. Hey, Marcus, welcome home.”

Marcus blinked. “What in space...? Madison? Is that...you? And Samantha?”

“The two and only,” Samantha replied. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Marcus took out his monocle and polished it with a cloth before returning it to his eye. “You know, I’m not sure what surprises me more. That you’re talking to me immediately, or that you’ve...um...stopped shaving. Where are you?”

“Back on Zharus, actually. We’ve had a bit of a comm breakthrough.” The image pixellated and started to break up.

“We just lost half the DINs. Switching it to voice-only,” Zane said.

“A bit of a breakthrough’ she says,” Marcus said.

“We’re about to lose signal,” Madison said. “Do you know if Hamner made it out too?”

“I don’t know, old girl,” Marcus said. “He was surrounded by ships and still light-seconds from the limit when I jumped.”

“Damn,” Madison said. “Well, we can hope. Comm me when you get in, drinks are on me.”

“Only if you let me buy the first round,” Marcus said. “You’re the reason we were even able to—” The signal cut out.

“And that’s that,” Zane sighed. “Going to have to send someone out with more DINcomms. Should’ve done after you got in.”

Madison sat back down and grinned. “That’s okay, bro. I’m glad for the talk-time we had.” She chuckled. “Funny, never saw his style when we weren’t roughing it. I never expected the handlebar and the monocle, though I guess I should have. Cheerio, pip pip, stiff upper lip, and all that.”

“He certainly fits the image of the intrepid Victorian explorer,” Zane said. “You know, you really missed an opportunity if you didn’t say, ‘Doctor Livingstone, I presume,’ when you first met him back on Totalia.”

“I’ll put that on my bucket list for after we invent a time machine,” Madison said. “The way your girlfriend invents things, it can’t be more than a year or two away.”

“Good thought,” Zane said. “Well, back to the old grind, I guess. Got to clean house if company’s coming.”

“Be still my beating heart,” Madison muttered, bringing up her own paperwork displays again.

*December 14, 157 A.L.*

When she arrived at the Scout Aerodrome, the *Turbinia* had an escort in the form of the *Clementine*. The larger Integrate-built vessel had seen a number of refits over her twenty five years. The most recent had added fully fifty meters to the length, as well as a superluminal drive. The *Clementine* and her namesake EI were still shaking down the refit changes, as her Captain and crew were in no hurry to leave Zharus space as yet.

Compared to the *Turbinia*’s sleek Eridanite lines, the *Clementine* bore no small resemblance to a Starfleet runabout from later *Star Trek* series, though naturally with a ring-based “warp drive” instead of nacelles.

The *Turbinia* took the landing pad next to the *Daydream Believer*, with the *Clementine* taking a larger unoccupied area of tarmac. Madison’s ship was surrounded by support scaffolding as the ground crew were deep into the post-return refitting. Similar equipment and personnel was ready for the *Turbinia*. RIDEs and even an Integrate or two awaited their opportunity to service the formerly missing ship.

Marcus’s return didn’t merit quite the press attention Madison’s had. After all, he was just another scout, not one of the Brubeck heirs. But there were still some press on hand, largely because the Brubeck heirs were there themselves, waiting for the ship to taxi to a halt and her pilot to emerge.

Once the *Turbinia* was in place the ground crew went to work even before the forward ramp dropped. Service panels on the ship’s hull automatically opened, clamps engaged to keep her in place, and the scaffolding enfolded it like a mother embracing a

lost child.

Marcus Trenton strolled casually down the ramp towards Commander Lee and the rest, looking for all of Zharus like he was just fashionably late. He removed his pith helmet and took a bow for the media floaters. “The intrepid scout has returned, after a small delay.”

“And believe me, we’re all glad to see you,” Madison said, stepping forward to give Marcus a welcoming hug. Then she put her hands on his shoulders and looked him over. “Look at you! You certainly clean up nicely.”

“It’s a wonder what a few weeks’ rest and access to a fabber can do,” Marcus said. “Though it seems to have done rather more for you than me.”

“Didn’t you hear? Fur coats are *in* this year,” Madison said.

“I would have said ‘being worn by a human’ was in, myself,” Samantha added.

“I...see,” Marcus said evenly. “Well. I’d heard the rumors about Integration, but I can’t say I ever expected to meet one. But it seems things have changed since I’ve been away.”

“We have several Integrates in our ground crews now, Marcus,” Commander Lee said.

“And speaking of meeting Integrates, this is my brother, Zane,” Madison said, beckoning the tiger forward.

“Ah, yes,” Marcus said. “I believe I do see the family resemblance. It’s the ears.”

“The better to hear you with,” Zane said. “And believe me, we’re going to want to hear all about your trip once we, you know.” He nodded toward the media floaters.

“Quite so, old chap,” Marcus agreed.

“And this is my other sister, Aggie, and her partner Annette. Aggie’s the slow one in the family, but we’re sure she’ll join us sooner or later.”

“Thank you ever so much,” Agatha said dryly. “Hello, Marcus. Maddie’s told us all about you.”

“Nothing good, I hope,” Marcus said, grinning.

Zane nodded to Commander Lee. “I realize you’re going to want to squeeze Marcus like a sponge, but I hope you don’t mind if we borrow him for a while first. There’s the matter of some drinks to attend to.”

“A post-return carousel with old friends right on landing is something of a Scout tradition, Mr. Brubeck,” Lee said. “Go right ahead.”

“Speaking of old friends, mind if we tag along?” Captain Wilma van Dalen said. The arctic vixen and the others from her crew had come up while the others were talking. In addition to Evan and Ghostate, a full-sized black poodle trotted along behind them.

“By all means, join us!” Madison said. “It’s great to meet you all in person.”

“These fine folks updated me on what’s been happening planetside while I was... indisposed,” Marcus said. “I wouldn’t have believed it if they hadn’t been able to back it up with media files.”

“And a reenactment or two,” Evan said. “I think I made a good Fritz.”

“He did! He did. I was Zane, then Kaylee in the final face-off,” Ghostate said.

“Damndest thing I ever saw on my own bridge,” Marcus said.

“I have *got* to learn to do that,” Madison muttered.

The poodle was suddenly a curly-haired girl with poodle ears, tail, and wet black nose, wearing a 1950s-style poodle skirt. “Yes, you do! It’s fun!”

Marcus, Commander Lee, and much of the ground crew stopped to look. The Commander then cleared her throat. "Well, go have your booze. I'll be waiting for you in the Debriefing Room reviewing your ship's logs."

The returned Scout saluted smartly. "Will do, ma'am!"

"Dismissed," Lee said. She then turned and walked back towards the main building.

Madison raised an eyebrow. "And who might you be?" she asked the poodle girl.

"Cabin girl first class Geena Bernadette!" Geena said, saluting. "Shapeshifting trainee and apprentice tailor, from Bartertown! It's an honor to meet you, Miss Brubeck."

"Well, nice to meet you, too," Madison said. "Let's talk more at Diane's."

"Sounds good to me," Zane said. "Let's go."

"We understand how you feel about presenting a human face to someone you... feel for," Evan said over a Shangri-La beer. "But learning to take total control of your body takes dedication, and lots of practice." The whitetail stag's shape *flowed* from Integrate, to human man, to human woman, to doe, to female barn owl, and back again. "We've been at this two and a half decades now."

"It starts with some primer code and goes from there," Ghostate said. He had assumed the form of a female cheetah, one a number of other Integrates had recognized. A number of song requests had been shouted at her upon entering. She had taken a bow and stayed close to Evan.

"Usually," Evan said. "Sometimes someone comes along and surprises us." He nodded toward Geena, who was quaffing a root beer. "We're not the only ones who've been 'shifting for a long time."

Evan's form shifted to doe, then another voice spoke. "Inties who are crossriders frequently end up being able to change between new and their birth sex. That's what happened with Evan here. I'm Liis, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Madison said.

"The other common type is what we're working with Geena on," Liis continued. "The ability to be a continuum from human to animal, among other things. Mostly it's a learned thing, but Geena came to us with very advanced Fusers. Teaching her control has been a challenge."

"It's fun!" Geena said. "I feel like I've really been stretching myself these last couple months. I'm so glad they had an opening for a cabin girl."

"She's been our only student for a couple years, to be honest," Evan said. "It's spread enough around that we're not really needed as teachers anymore."

"But they're the originals," Geena said happily. "It's like, learning the Force right from Yoda."

"They taught me a thing or two about Intie fighting, too," Zane added.

"But not shapeshifting?" Madison prodded.

"Hey, I am what I am," Zane said. "I changed the world by not being ashamed to wear this mug in public. Why would I want to change it now?"

"I guess you've got a point there," Madison admitted. "But on the other hand, this leopard *does* want to change her spots."

"We'll be happy to oblige," Evan said, raising his beer mug. He hadn't once leered at Diane behind the counter. "We're going to be groundside for a couple weeks. We have



a pitch for Scout Command.”

“We want to go where no Intie has gone before,” Wilma said.

“Given you’ve got that drive in your ship, I don’t think they could exactly *stop* you,” Zane said.

“We’d rather be more official,” Wilma said. “It’ll be like being in Starfleet.”

“Like I told you over the comm, I’ve been putting together a proposal to open scout missions to RIDEs, EIDEs, and Integrates,” Madison said. “Given how many of us ship out with technically *verboten* micro-IDEs anyway, it seems like an awfully arbitrary restriction to leave them out.”

“Besides, since RIDEs and Integrates are people too, the export restrictions aren’t going to last for much longer,” Zane said. “A free society can’t limit the movement of its citizens that way. The PAA hasn’t twigged to that fact yet.”

“You can limit the raw materials, but not the people made *from* the raw materials,” Ghostate said. “We’ve been thinking about this a lot lately.”

“That’s gonna throw a monkey wrench into Crazy Joe’s plans,” Zane said, rubbing his chin.

“What plans are those?” Madison asked.

“Basically to keep Earth in the dark about our tech by making us into the twencen themepark we are today,” Zane said. “But we knew it wouldn’t last forever. So we’d better hustle.”

“Should we really be talking about it out in the open like this?” Marcus said.

“This place doesn’t really count as ‘in the open,’” Zane said. “Diane’s very particular about her guests’ privacy.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Diane said, putting another mug in front of the tiger.

Zane grinned at her. “Gunning for a big tip, eh?”

Diane snorted. “I remember your *last* ‘big tip.’ ‘Buy Brubeck stock, we’re diversifying.’”

“Hey, it *was* a good tip, wasn’t it?” Zane said innocently.

“Not if I don’t want to get investigated for insider trading.”

“There are rather a lot of Integrates around suddenly, aren’t there?” Marcus mused.

Diane smirked. “What do you mean ‘suddenly’? *I’ve* been here for twenty years.”

“We’re just like that,” Zane said.

“Anyway, I certainly appreciate the drinks. But I need to know—if you’ve been here for a while, they must know what’s going on by now. What are they doing about... our situation?” Marcus said. “You know who they sent to recon?”

“*The Satellite of Love*,” Madison said. “Joel Roberts. I guess Commander Lee didn’t like him.”

“We’re scouts, we’re *supposed* to get shot into space,” Marcus said, grinning madly. “I like that bloke. He has the best worst cinemas and knows how to riff them.”

“As for what we’re doing about it, we’re trying to keep it on the Q.T. but we’re getting a...response together, shall we say,” Zane said. “The problem is, it’ll probably be May or June before we’re ready to roll with it. Expect to get drafted into the administration and diplomacy effort, since you’re one of only two people we have right now who’s actually been there.”

“It’ll be my pleasure to throw my lot in, once Commander Lee is finished wringing me dry. I’m bloody well not leaving Barb or Hamner there, you can bet on it,”

Marcus said, pushing back his chair. “And speaking of the wringing, the sooner I start, the sooner I have the whole bally thing over with.” He tipped his hat to everyone. “Cheerio. I’ll be in touch.”

“You know where to find us,” Zane said. “Great big administrative campus in the heart of town, has the name ‘Brubeck’ on it.”

“I’ll ask directions if I have to,” Marcus promised. “After all, it’s not as if I’m paid to be able to find my way to new places, is it?” He waved and sauntered out of the bar.

“Nice fellow,” Zane said. “I see why you like him.”

“Yeah,” Madison said. “I had pretty good luck in my cellmates. But then, they *are* scouts. I hope you can meet the other two soon.”

“Believe me, Maddie, so do I,” Zane said. “So do I.”

*December 22, 157 AL*

Reports from scouts were far from the only message torpedoes that arrived at Zharus. Indeed, they were largely the exception. Given that there was no other method of high priority FTL communication available, torpedoes arrived and departed from most colonies at least every couple of days.

The arrival of the message torp from Proxima was nothing out of the ordinary. As with any other such torp, it entered the system and made its way to one of several torpedo “catcher’s mitt” stations for refueling, reconditioning, and exchange of message payloads. From there, the messages were beamed to Zharus via standard radio.

One of those messages made its way to the private mailbox of Joe Steader, currently residing in his mansion in Uplift. It did not go unnoticed for long.

“Joe! Hey, Joe! You got a fuckin’ video mail from Locutus of Borg!” Julius announced through the Uplift house’s comm system.

“Oh, really?” Joe said. “Hang on a sec, be right out.” He shook his head. “Never fails, the comm *always* rings when you’re in the can.” He flushed the toilet, washed his hands, and came out to the living room. “On screen, Number One.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “Jooooe...”

“Hey, just getting into the spirit of the thing,” Joe said.

The wall across from the old leather couch came alive with the image of his younger brother, who hadn’t been on Zharus since 146. Mikel had changed a bit more since Joe had last heard from him, but that was the nature of quasi-organic celerite Eridanite cybernetics. The metamaterial on that world bonded well to organic nervous systems, speeding them up, enabling a seamless transition between flesh and metal even Zharusian Fusers couldn’t quite manage. It was at least the equivalent of Earth cybertech, and the two worlds knew it. They were in constant competition with each other.

The problem was that celerite and qubitite had some metachemical incompatibilities. There were rumors in the Integrate community that at least one of their number had gotten all the way to Eridani and nearly died of some kind of allergic reaction from the celerite in the biosphere. Given the crazy itchiness of Mikel’s implants the times he’d been on Gondwana, Joe could believe it. Mikel tended to confine his planetside visits to Laurasia when he was on Zharus anymore, and even then went through multiple tubes of old-fashioned topical antihistamine per visit. Joe gathered the Laurasian Eridanite embassy was a full-environment hab built to deep-space standards,

with a rigorous decontamination system in its airlocks. They tended to use hardlight projections for their interactions outside of it.

Eridanite cyborgs tended towards the pale and hairless, with an array of laser transceivers implanted in their skulls. It was kind of funny, in a way, but Mikel really did bear more than a passing resemblance to the Borgified Picard from the old Star Trek show. Joe made a mental note to tease him about it next time they were together.

“It’s good to hear from you, Joey,” Mikel began. “It’s been too long. I just wish your viddie mail had been a little less serious, but interesting times are upon us.”

“He’s got that right,” Julius said. The video paused when he spoke.

“Bella and I are talking again. First time since the divorce. I think, under the circumstances, we can work together. Quinoa will be happy to hear that, certainly. I’ve another message just for her in this data packet, by the way. Some *very interesting* news from Zharus has finally filtered all the way here. We’re looking forward to *discussing* it with her when we meet in person.”

“Gee, wonder what news *that* could be,” Joe deadpanned.

“I’ll just send her a ping to come by,” Julius said.

“Speaking of which, both Bella and I are going to have just a little bone to pick with *you* next time we see you,” Mikel added. Joe couldn’t help finding his overt display of irritation oddly dissonant with the Borg look. “Dammit, Joe, you never write, and when you do, you don’t actually *tell* me anything. I’m still ticked off that I had to learn half my homeworld was in a *war* from the news instead of you, and it looks like you haven’t changed much since then. Am I going to have to start a spy network on *Zharus* just to find out what’s going on with my own family?”

“You didn’t tell him about me, either,” Julius said. “Did you.”

“I was, uh, saving that for a surprise?” Joe said weakly. “Sheesh. Really, he should thank me for giving him and Bella some common ground. Nothing brings two people closer together than mutual annoyance at a third party.”

“Crazy Joe Steader, bringing about a unified galaxy by pissing off two fuckin’ people at a time,” Julius said, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, now that personal stuff is out of the way, we can get to the meat of this thing,” Mikel said. “The shit’s really hitting the fan, isn’t it? The Circus never really got over Macho Grande.”

“‘Macho Grande’? Like, is that a fuckin’ *Airplane!* reference?” Julius said.

“‘Macho Grande’ being a code word for Endurance,” Joe said.

“Ah right,” Julius said. “Fuckin’ Endurance.”

“So you can count on us for support. We’ll have the *Great Western* at Wednesday by mid-March, Zharus local. Be sure you top off the tank before you bring her back, and just to be clear, you’re on the hook for any parking tickets.”

“My brother, the comedian,” Joe said.

Julius snorted. “Yeah, wonder where *that* comes from. Not like it fuckin’ runs in your family or anything.”

“She’s a bit of a stripper, by the way. So bring your own beds.”

Joe nodded. “About what I figured.”

“One more thing to discuss.” The annoyance slipped away from Mikel’s expression, and now he just looked...tired. Very tired. “Local politics.”

“Uh-oh, this doesn’t sound good,” Joe said.

“There’s an issue on the ballot for this coming spring,” Mikel said. “It’s called the

‘Earth-Alignment Referendum’. I’ve appended the details to this message. I really don’t want to talk about them, but suffice to say my job is done here. I’m hopping on the Eridani diplomatic courier to Zheng He after I send you this viddie mail. The Circus is there. I’m coming home to Zharus with Bella on the *Eastern*. We’ll meet you at Wednesday.”

Joe leaned back on the couch, then replayed the last portion twice. “My little bro’s coming home, Jules. We’ve *got* to call Quinnie.”

“No going nuts over that referendum thing?” Julius said.

“That we’ve expected for years. It means that when Earth says jump, Proxima won’t stop to ask ‘how high’. This is more Romulan Empire than Federation, bro. Referendum or not, Earth’s been working on this social engineering method for a couple decades now. Proxima is small as a colony, but it’s the trade hub of the whole of human space. An ‘Earth-Aligned’ Proxima is bad for everyone else.”

“No fuckin’ kidding,” Julius said. “Well, that’s pretty much the message for us. There’s Quinoa’s to give to her.”

“I’ll comm her to get over here,” Joe said. “She’ll want to see this, for sure.”

A few minutes later, Quinoa walked in the door. “Hey, Uncle Joe, Jules, what’s up? You said you had some important news?”

“We heard from your Dad,” Joe said. “He’s coming to meet us at Wednesday, with your mom and the Circus.”

Quinoa blinked, her eyes widening. “Mom *and* Dad’s coming home? Really? That’s *great!*” She threw her arms around Joe in an impulsive hug.

“Oof,” Joe said. “Yeah. I’m looking forward to seeing him again in person. He’s looking very...Eridani.”

“I’ll bet,” Quinoa said. “It was a shock last time I saw him. I can only imagine what he must look like by now.” She paused, then frowned. “But if he’s leaving Proxima...”

“Yeah, I’m afraid it’s not all good news,” Joe said. “But at least he’s getting out in plenty of time.”

“I guess we have to look on the bright side,” Quinoa agreed.

“And there’s a little more bad news,” Joe said. “Apparently the news reports on the Fritz affair have finally trickled through to Proxima and the Circus. Including the exploits of a certain young sphinx Integrate named Quinoa Steader.”

Quinoa grimaced. There was plenty of video of her taking the hits from Tocsin at the Freerider Garage, and even more when she had confronted Fritz and carved him up a little after he had killed *a lot* of people in Uplift Government Center. Not to mention the endless news streams from her pre-Integration adventures in Cape Nord. And her spectacular dive from the “2001st floor” mansion at the top of the Aloha Elevator counterweight had spawned two docudramas and a “Mythbusters” episode. Combined with the shorter Alohavator plunge that crazy Uplift gendarme Hollins had taken shortly afterward, it had sparked a brief fad for orbital diving that was only just starting to die back again.

“Oh...oh boy,” Quinoa said, feeling sick to her stomach. “I got a lot of ‘splaining to do. I think I stepped over the line from Steader Crazy to *Crazy Crazy* a few times.”

“That you’re mature enough to realize that is a good sign,” Joe reassured.

“Not that it’ll make things any easier,” Quinoa groaned. “I never even told them

that I'd Integrated in the first place. I just thought it'd be easier to tell them in person."

"Well, you'll get that chance," Joe said. "We're leaving for Wednesday at the end of January, remember."

Quinoa rolled her eyes. "My cup runneth over."

"Anyway, I've sent the messages to your inbox. I don't think there's much point in replying," Joe said. "By the time a torp could get to Zheng He, they'd be in jumpspace on the way to Wednesday. We'll be there in person by the time a torpedo could reach them there."

Quinoa facepalmed. "Terrific. Two months of worrying about what I'm going to say."

Joe grinned wryly. "When you get right down to it, you may actually have the *easier* explanation. *I'm* the one who bought you the RIDE."

"Ouch," Quinoa said. "Well, at least that means it's only two months until I see them again. They might be a little mad, but I'm sure they'll get over it."

"Yeah," Joe said. "And anyway, we've all got bigger fish to fry at this point."

"I'm heading up to my room to watch the messages." She gave Joe a quick hug. "Thanks for letting me know. After we get the uncomfortable stuff out of the way, it'll still be great seeing them again."

"Yeah," Joe said. "After so long apart, it'll be good to have some family togetherness again."

## Chapter 4: Resistance

*December 18, 157 A.L.*

The *Kybalion*'s entire senior medical staff crowded into the SOL's small med bay to watch the autodoc do its magic, attaching a fabbed cybernetic arm to Hamner's stump and healing the flesh. Others were watching via a comm relay. "The nanotech and fabber construct the arm *in situ* to ensure complete integration with the skeletal and nervous systems," Joel explained. "This is still quicker than rebuilding the rest of his arm organically. This medical equipment is meant for speed, not quality."

"And it's completely automated?" the Chief Medical Officer asked.

"Has to be. We're all alone out in the black," Joel said.

:*Well, most of us are,*: Zach added.

"Hospitals and capital ships have more elaborate facilities that *could* regrow the arm," Joel continued. "This is just a stopgap 'til we can get him home. Incidentally, if you've got any other severe injury cases on board, I'll be happy to treat them, too, as long as supplies hold out."

"We've got them well in hand, thank you," the CMO said haughtily. "Compared to the state of our native nanotech, this is very impressive."

The autodoc hummed the completed tone, then the cover slid open. The scarring on Hamner's face was mostly gone, and his injured eye had also been replaced by one of the cybernetic parts Scouts carried as a matter of course. "We can rebuild him. We have the technology," Joel said. "Hey, Hammy, how you feeling?"

Hamner sat up, then flexed his new fingers. "I have been better...but lately I was much worse. Thank you, my friend." He nodded to the *Kybalion* medicos. "Not to forget the excellent job the rest of you did initially saving my life, of course."

"We thank you for your demonstration, Mr. Roberts," the CMO said, putting away his tablet. "I'll confer with my staff and send you any questions we come up with."

"I'm not a doctor, but I'll answer what I can," Joel said.

"I'm most impressed with the AI in the autodoc for diagnosis and treatment," the CMO said. "I could end up out of a job."

"It's no House—it can't diagnose rare diseases or genetic conditions. But for most of the stuff that could happen to a scout, it's just what the doctor who couldn't be there would have ordered if he could. If the autodoc gets something it can't fix, it puts the patient in stasis and the ship executes an auto-return to the nearest Scout base or colony."

"It shall be nice being able to dress myself again," Hamner reflected.

"And it'll be great to have another *pair* of hands to help me get this bird back in condition before we make planetfall," Joel said. "We've still got to yank that hull plate off and patch what we can before we put a new one on. Hopefully we can get the cloak back, at least for long enough to get in and out."

The CMO turned to his staff and shoed them out of the med bay. "We'll just leave you two to converse privately. I'm sure you have sensitive matters to discuss. Thanks again."

"Right this way, gentlemen," Magic Voice said, lighting the path.

“Thanks for stopping by!” Joel said cheerfully. “Give our regards to Captain Sandeep.”

Once they were gone, Hamner spoke. “Are you *really* going to try a rescue mission in a ship this big?”

“Unless you’ve got a smaller one in your pocket, I don’t see as we have much choice,” Joel said. “This is the only Zharus-tech ship in the system, which means it’s the only one that can cloak well enough to get past their defenses—and the only one that can do Barbaretta any good if she’s in as bad a way as they say. Assuming we can fix it.”

“I see they upgraded the *SOL* to full sneakship spec,” Hamner said.

A Scout sneakship had better shields, cloak, and weaponry than was standard, because a pilot never knew who they might run into out in the black these days. There were outposts of isolationists and pirate bases not on any chart. There might be no more wildcat colonies, but humanity had spread themselves wide all the same, and many of them didn’t want to be found by Scouts or anyone else.

“I’m not shooting back if I can at all help it, Hammy,” Joel said. “Scout’s honor.”

Hamner shrugged. “What happens, happens. The important thing is to help as much as we can. That being said, we should probably get to work. This ship is not repairing itself.”

“Well, actually it is, mostly,” Joel said. “But I get your drift. Meet me outside, I’ll break out the lifter belts.”

When they walked down the ramp, the officer on duty asked if he needed to turn the gravity off so they could work. Joel just smiled. “Thanks, but we’ve got it. Have you been watching the repair drones?”

“I have. I just assumed they used ducted fans I couldn’t see,” the man said. “Well, I’ll just watch you both work, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem at all,” Hamner said. He flicked a couple of switches on his belt and jumped into the air like Superman.

“Fabber is online and producing replacement hull panels,” Magic Voice said. “Diagnostics for the cloaking systems underneath are not encouraging. Looks like a damaged n-cav heatsink.”

“Hamdingers!” Joel swore. He joined Hamner on the dorsal hull. “Can’t fab that kind of cavorite.”

In its many flavors, cavorite did a lot of things. One common metaisomer—called p-cav—opened a brane to subspace that let pulses of energy through. So far the only useful way to harness it was as a weapon. N-cav opened a brane stable enough to shoot shipboard waste heat back into subspace, the perfect heatsink. It also needed fabbers that were still too large for a ship the size of the *SOL*.

“Is there no spare?” Hamner asked.

“Forestor’s mole men shot up some of my spares out of spite before they left the ship,” Joel fumed. “I can fab the busted-up remains of those and this into a substitute for lower efficiency, but you really need a single-piece fab from scratch for it to work best.”

“Is there an identical part from some less critical subsystem you could swap into place and put the inferior substitute there?”

“Nothing the right size. A piecemeal n-cav heatsink will work, but it’ll limit cloak time to about ten hours before hitting the absorption rate limit.” Joel sighed “It’ll have to do. Get started on that, will you Magic Voice?”

“Will do, Joel,” the “Ad-I” said cheerfully.

“By the way,” Hamner said. “I do not wish to alarm you, but I think you should know your lifter belt is not engaged.”

“Oh, thanks,” Joel said, reaching for the switch. Then he paused, looking down at the ground ten meters below his dangling feet. “Er...”

“I must confess, I am expecting cartoon physics to kick in at any moment,” Hamner said mildly.

“*Hamdingers on a stick*,” Joel sighed.

“Jig is up, Joel,” Magic Voice said. “My bad. I was too busy playing Gypsy. We still need to reload the SOL’s flight firmware.”

Hamner chuckled. “I *thought* that one seemed too intelligent to be an Ad-I. Might I ask exactly what you are?”

“I suggest we have a chat on board,” Joel said. He reached down into the damaged hardlight emitter and heatsink and pulled out the cracked beachball-sized unit with one hand. He handed it to a waiting Manos drone, who took it away. “There, that’s done. Let’s talk.”

*December 20, 157 A.L.*

*Resistance Forward Base, Founders’ Tunnels, beneath Totalia City*

Even without Barbaretta, the designs she’d helped lay out were so easy to build they’d managed to slap together a couple dozen of the new “Mark 2 Pulser” weapons in a matter of hours. The new weapons were smaller, used less energy, and had a better power source than the original. The Totalium-clad nuclear batteries they used, about the size of a soda can, were meant for powering motor scooter engines and would theoretically be good for at least a thousand full-power shots each before needing replacement. But there was very little time to train with them, nor had they been able to salvage as many supplies out of the abortive raid as they would have liked.

The Zealots would expect them to retreat and lick their wounds for a while, which was why it was so important to strike while the iron was hot. They’d found out where the Zealots were keeping the First Tranche of the Totaliment, and freeing them would give the Resistance just the kind of morale boost it so badly needed at this point.

A Resistance Comm Officer—one of their few defections from the proper military—approached him and saluted. “Message from the *Kybalion*, sir. They said that some ‘unexpected help’ is incoming to extract their injured comrade.”

Kendlen perked up. “No other details, Valens?”

“Only a request for an LZ for her retrieval,” Valens said. “You think the Zharusians have arrived?”

“At least some of them,” Kendlen guessed. “Calling the Loyalist Cosmy at all was a bit of a ‘Hail Mary play.’”

“A what, sir?”

Kendlen waved a hand. “Pop culture reference from the stuff I’ve been watching, sorry. It kind of gets into your brain after a while. Anyway, I mean I didn’t really expect them to be able to do anything, what with the Zealots controlling the planetary defenses, but it was worth a try. But if they think they *can* do something...who knows? But it’s not an excuse to slack off. I’ve said all along we can’t *depend* on outsiders to solve our



problems for us.”

“So what LZ should we give them?”

“The field three clicks west of the southwest tunnel entrance,” Kendlen said. “Should be big enough for something the size of the scout ships I saw photos of.”

“That’s pretty close to the city.”

“The cryotube is too fragile for too much travel over rough ground,” Kendlen said. “And if they think they can land *at all*, I don’t think it’ll matter where they set down.”

“I watched the three of those ships escape. I’ve never seen anything move that fast in an atmosphere,” the officer said. “If it’s the Zharusians, I’m sure they can do it.”

Kendlen sighed. Part of the problem trying to get the Resistance off the ground was that too many of them expected their “alien” friends would arrive, wave a magic wand to banish Raph Clarke and his ilk, and the civil war would be over. But if they didn’t do this themselves and waited for Madison to return with her magic mecha cat, it didn’t bode well for long term relations.

For the first time Kendlen hoped that it wasn’t a whole fleet of Zharusian ships, arriving guns blazing. If the rescue of the Totaliment went as planned it would go a long way to reestablishment of the legitimate government. Then, when Madison and her fleet arrived, they could simply welcome them with open arms and begin normalizing relations.

It was a nice daydream, anyway. Kendlen suspected the truth would probably lie closer to the middle—they’d pull off some victories but still need outside help to make it complete. But if that was what it took, that was what it took. “Any word on how well our ‘leaks’ went?”

“Early reports are optimistic,” the officer said. “There’s no sign they know we’ve learned of the First Tranche’s whereabouts yet, and our informants seem willing to believe the story we fed them. It looks like they’re upping the guard on the other supply warehouses.”

“Which means, hopefully, they *won’t* have enough people at the prison to be a serious problem,” Kendlen said. “Are our teams in place for the feints?”

“In place and waiting for the go signal, sir,” the comm officer said.

“Signal the *Kybalion* to send the evac shuttle while we’ve got the Zealot forces spread thin,” Kendlen said. “Let’s get this done.”

It had taken some time to determine where the politicians from the old regime were being held, though when they finally found out it made so much sense in retrospect that Kendlen had to facepalm (a gesture he had learned from an old twencen cartoon and immediately adopted as his own) that he hadn’t guessed it himself. As coups went, the Zealots really weren’t very good at this. Even Raph Clarke, chief Zealot himself, had too much respect for his fellow politicians to execute them, or even lock them up under unduly harsh conditions.

So in the end they’d taken over one of Totalia City’s minimum-security prisons, the kind of semi-luxurious place that got called “Club Fed” in the twencen stuff, used mainly for white-collar criminals who hadn’t really hurt anyone. Now it was a holding area for the eight out of the eleven other First Tranchers who still steadfastly refused to endorse the new government. Three of them—two who’d sided with Clarke in opposing contact, and one “neutral”—had gone over to Clarke’s side and were part of the new

government now, lending it a touch of unearned legitimacy. Kendlen still held out some hope they might be tried for treason once the old government was restored.

The strike team was assembling in the staging area of their base—a dozen handpicked men under the leadership of one of his most able lieutenants, Beck Hensley. He'd been a member of the Totalia Policia's SWAT team, and had since given the Resistance as much training as he could in the matter of how to fight and work as a team.

The odd thing was that at least two of the members of his strike team were men he'd previously arrested in his old career. In fact, they'd actually been held in the very prison they would be assaulting today, before the Zealots had kicked them out to have room for the politicians. Kendlen thought it was a bit odd that they wanted to join the Resistance instead of taking up with the people who'd let them out, but he supposed that crooks could be patriots too.

Kendlen resisted the temptation to go over the plan one more time. The time for micromanagement was past. It was all in Hensley's hands now. "Good luck," Kendlen said.

"Hopefully we won't need luck," Hensley said with a half-smile. "But we'll take it anyway." He nodded to his men, and they mounted up in one of the Resistance's few remaining trucks. A moment later, they were on their way.

*And now comes the worst part. The waiting.* Kendlen returned to the medicos to prepare for the inevitable dead and injured. Sometimes he wondered if it was even worth it. *Maybe we should just hide out until the Zharusians get here. At least that way we'd be safe.*

But at the same time, he understood that was a non-starter. In order for them to have any hope of forming a legitimate government afterward, they had to show they'd been working for it themselves. And that meant sacrifice.

### *Kybalion, Nearing Totalia Orbit*

*December 21, 157 AL*

The *Satellite of Love* engaged cloak just before the *Kybalion* opened the shuttle bay doors, just in case anyone was watching. Captain Sandeep had sent along a squad of a dozen Marines who were eager to do more to dislodge the Zealots than stand around on the Loyalist Cosmy capital ship. Joel, Zach, and Hamner appreciated it, since they weren't exactly military themselves. The men and women were equipped with gauss rifles and carbon-Totalium armor.

From the expression on his face the Marine Lieutenant Maxl Beregan was just as "impressed" by the ship's interior decor as Captain Forestor had been, but was diplomatic enough not to say so aloud. The platoon took their places on quickly-fabbed drop seats secured near the garage ramp, ready to deploy once they landed. Captain Sandeep had also sent one of his medical staff along to make sure Barbaretta's cryotube was operating correctly.

Zach had reinstalled all the flight software. A miniature hardlight projection of the black-footed ferret RIDE skittered across the forward control panels, making happy dooking sounds. With Hamner in the pilot's seat, he gave his mind-mate a scratch behind the ears.

“We should make planetfall in five hours,” Hamner said. “She handles excellently, Joel. I suppose this is all Integrate systems tuning?”

“Pretty much,” Joel admitted. “Not really mine, though. We have Inties in ground crews now.”

“Really?” Hamner said. “The last time I was on Zharus, they were Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Slender Man rolled into one.”

Joel shrugged. “I can’t say I entirely understand it myself, but apparently it’s been a good couple of years for coups and revolutions in general, this part of the galaxy. I’ll shoot you a file with recent news extracts, if you like. Zach and I like our privacy, otherwise we wouldn’t be a Scout.”

“I do not believe I have spent more than a month planetside on Zharus altogether,” Hamner said. “I fly out, survey my assigned prospects, make certain to stay alive, return to Zharus, debrief, then repeat the process. Most of the time I never come closer to the planet than the top of the Aloha Elevator. I hardly knew what RIDEs were until I met Samantha.” He grimaced. “Using self destruct on my *Neu Deutschland* was... more painful than I can say. She was my home for fifteen years.”

“I understand,” Joel said. “If it’s any consolation, I expect they’ll give you a *Neu Deutschland* right off when you get back. Service above and beyond, and all that.”

“Once this is over I will revisit the debris. There are some personal effects in special strongboxes I should like to retrieve,” Hamner said. Zach’s projection had ambled over to sit next to the control stick. “Well, hello there Zach.”

“Hello there yourself,” the ferret said. “I don’t get to talk to folks directly that often. At least folks that aren’t also Inties.”

Hamner raised his eyebrows. “So, if I scratch you behind the ears, am I scratching *Joel* also?”

“Pretty much,” Joel admitted. “But it’s okay, we both enjoy it.”

“I...see,” Hamner said.

“Awww,” Zach said, disappointed. “No scritchies?”

Hamner smiled, and scratched the ferret behind the ears.

The Totalian Lieutenant chose that moment to enter the Bridge. “Uh, my squad is secure and ready for the drop, Mr. Roberts.”

“Great!” Joel said. “It’ll still be a few hours ‘til we make planetfall, so you and your men might as well relax and catch some Zs, or play cards, or whatever. I’ll let you know when we’re about there.”

The marine nodded. “Hoo-ah.” He quickly returned the way he had come.

“Jarheads are the same the galaxy over,” Zach said. “You give good scritchies, Hammy.”

“I had a pet ferret as a child on Proxima Alpha,” Hamner said. He sighed and looked out the viewport at the fast-approaching disc of Totalia. “Never thought I would be homesick, but I believe I am now.”

“You’re free to come with us back to Zharus, of course,” Joel said.

“Ah, that is a thing, is it not?” Hamner said. “One of us should stay behind until the fleet arrives, to liaise and for the symbolic value. I can live with these spacer cybernetics for a few years if necessary. Many scouts have.” He flexed the carbon-metallic fingers of his artificial hand.

Over the next couple of hours, Joel monitored and decrypted the Totalian military transmissions. For the most part they were unremarkable chatter. Then, all at

once, activity spiked.

Zach's ears perked and his hardlight avatar vanished. "Looks like the Resistance is making a move down below, Joel. Several moves, in fact. I'm trying to sort it out, but I'm no military strategist."

"Is the LZ still clear?" Joel said.

"As a bell. I've gotten into the Zealot intel network over the LZ. They won't even see us *without* cloak. We'll be down in ninety minutes," Zach informed. "Whatever the Resistance is doing is causing a lot of chaos on the ground. The Zealots are being pulled in a half dozen directions at once."

"Well, that could be just what the doctor ordered," Joel said.

"Let us hope so," Hamner said. "It would be nice to have *something* go our way."

Forward Base was empty of everyone except a few defenders and medical personnel awaiting the injured. This was the worst part for Kendlen. Not having any military training and his position as the figurehead of the Loyalists/Resistance made him feel absolutely *useless* when the real fighting started. While monitoring the encrypted comm, he sat on a salvaged chair next to Barbaretta's cryotube.

"We need to get her on the truck, Kendlen," Teenette Clark said. Like him, she had no military training. Instead she used her motocross mechanical skills to keep the Resistance gear working. She seemed to work twice as hard as most of the others, possibly because she felt personally insulted that she had almost the same surname as the ringleader of the Zealots.

All right, let's do it," Kendlen said. "You six, over here!" He waved several resistance fighters over to help load the cryotube in, and hoped that the passing resemblance to pallbearers loading a coffin into a hearse wasn't a bad omen.

Kendlen climbed into the truck and rubbed on the glass, peering in at Barbaretta's pale frozen face. He carefully did *not* look lower down. "Damn. I hope they can do something about this."

"They can if anyone can," Teenette said. "Fingers crossed, huh?"

"Get her to the rendezvous," Kendlen said, climbing back down again. "Wish I were going with you, but..."

"You're too valuable, especially since we lost Barbaretta," Teenette said. "Stay safe, boss."

"Yeah," Kendlen said as Teenette climbed into the truck cab. "You, too."

As they rolled out, Kendlen walked over to the collection of desks and monitors that made up their makeshift command center. "Any word on the rescue op?"

"They're engaged, sir. But so far it's going well. Opposition is as thin as we'd hoped," the comm officer informed.

"Good," Kendlen said. "Keep me posted. It would be nice to have *something* go our way."

### *Totalia City Political Prison*

"Young man, you have to eat something." First Speaker Trilby Whitfield placed his wrinkled old hand on Darrek Sigurdssen's shoulder. "Every day we go through this. Eat, you need your strength. At least they feed us well."

"I'll try, sir. Thank you." Darrek tried to pick up his fork again and eat some of the

native Totalian crustacean that was the day's afternoon meal. It was a buttery dish, prepared with a mix of Earth herbs and a dash of native counterparts. Raph Clarke and his ilk were sparing no expense to keeping his fellow politicians well fed and comfortable, even the most staunch proponents of ending Totalia's fearful isolation. *One might think, especially them,* he'd often thought during the passing weeks.

Darrek was the (former) Chair of the Science Committee. Years ago he had been one of the first to meet Barbaretta Hansom and see her incredible ship, the *Red Sonja*. That ship was now, as far as Darrek knew, at least partly dismantled so the Zealots' scientists could study it. Not that it would do them any good in the long run. It would take *years* to be able to replicate any of that technology, even if they had all the necessary metamaterials.

From what little he had done himself before the military had taken control of the ship they even lacked some of the basic science necessary to understand the concepts like "subspace" and "hardlight" that was the basis of modern human technology. That alone should have been enough to get Totalia to open up on their own terms. *But I was a young idealist then.*

When it came down to it, even after a century all they knew about Totalium itself was that it worked, but not *how* it worked.

Three million people simply couldn't match the effort of a hundred-fold more, hard at work, moving the whole of humanity forward along with them. The sooner those stupid Zealots *saw* that, the better off everybody would be. They could go out and see the rest of the galaxy!

As if that was likely to happen any time soon. Darrek sighed again. For now, he was still stuck on this backward planet, in a luxurious prison, staring a dead Totalian neo-lobster in the face. "I *hate* lobster."

One of the guards at the cafeteria doors put his finger to his ear, listening to some incoming message. He scanned the room, lips pursed, brows furrowed, then stepped out of the secure door before breaking into a run.

The twenty people in the cafeteria all stopped. "Well, this is interesting," Trilby said mildly. "What do you suppose is going on?"

"I don't know, but the guards are abandoning their posts!" Sixth Speaker Karan Lawrence announced, looking out the mesh window down the hallway.

**CHOOP! CHOOP!**

The unfamiliar staccato sounds caused a commotion. The eight First Tranche Speakers who hadn't supported Clarke were all being kept here, along with some of the Second Tranche committee appointees like Darrek. The lights flickered and died.

"If this isn't a rescue operation I'll eat my hat," the First Speaker quipped.

"You don't have a hat, sir," Trilby's aide said.

"Then I'll have to get one first," the old man added. "Get ready to go, everyone. We need to take this opportunity by the horns, so to speak."

A trio of people holding odd-looking rifles dashed down the (formerly, perhaps) secure corridor towards the cafeteria. They weren't in a uniform, but they had a certain harried bearing with them. "Stand back from the door! Far back!" the first man said. When the power had gone out the locks had all failed-shut for security.

Everyone went to the far side of the room, then there were more, louder CHOOP! sounds as the Loyalists shot away the hinges and the heavy steel doors fell inwards with a resounding clang.

“No time to wait, everyone!” their leader shouted. “Please, come this way as fast as you can. We have an appropriated bus waiting to take you to Kendlen.”

“Wait just a moment!” Seventh Speaker Jassen Baldurson exclaimed. He had been one of the skeptics when the vote was put before the people to open relations, but had opposed Clarke’s actions as a matter of morality. “How do we know escaping won’t provoke retaliations against our loved ones? Or riots in the streets? Or simply put us into harm’s way! What can we possibly do hiding out with the Resistance that we can’t do here?”

“The very fact that the Zealots hold us captive is a symbol to our people that *they* have control, not us,” Trilby said hotly. “We simply can’t give Clarke that advantage! Our freedom has meaning and the fact the Resistance is *able* to free us is more important than I have words for. It could be the very thing that brings Clarke down.

“If you wish to stay behind, I will not force you to come with us. But I *will not* allow Clarke to continue to hold us hostage to his whims. Everyone else, follow our rescuers.”

“I didn’t *say* I wasn’t coming,” Jassen grumbled. “Besides, the food here is terrible *hoi polloi* pap I wouldn’t feed to my dog. I was simply raising a counterpoint...”

“There’s a time for politics, Jassen, but this certainly *isn’t* it,” Trilby said hotly. “Down the hall and into the bus, everyone! No time to lose!”

Darrek suddenly felt like he was in a dream world, or perhaps one of the popular action movies where a spacer family was kidnapped by space pirates and had to be rescued by the hero, typically the one the pirates left behind somehow.

The outside of the prison showed surprisingly little evidence of a fight. There were odd scorch marks from the new weapons the Resistance fighters were using. The Totalment boarded the appropriated bus. The moment all were aboard, he didn’t even wait to close the doors, gunning the atomic motors.

“Happy to see you’re all alive and well, if a little overfed,” the Resistance leader said, odd angular rifle slung over his shoulder. “Beck Hensley, pleased to meet you all.”

“Raph Clarke is nothing if not a gracious host,” the First Speaker said dryly. “I’m curious, those weapons..?”

“A design supplied by Barbaretta Hansom,” Hensley said. “They work quite well.”

“How much trouble did you have with the guards?” Baldurson asked. “Was anyone killed or injured?”

“We have everything in hand, sir,” Hensley reassured. “Just hold tight and we’ll have you all to Forward Base in two shakes.”

“The sooner the better,” Darrek said, staring out the window as the city rolled by. Would it ever be safe for him to walk openly in it again?

## Chapter 5: Herding Cats

*December 23, 157 AL*

*Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift*

The faces were a little different, but the sense of utter familiarity in the anteroom behind Zane's office felt extremely comfortable. The three Brubeck siblings had whiled away many a weekend during their childhood just loafing around their home's living room after completing their chores. To be sure, the tone at Brubeck Mining HQ was a little more serious than playing with toys or video games, but after the events of the past couple years, it was a familiarity they really needed.

"NextusMil wants to send along at least one dragon drop shuttle," Zane said. "And not one of their smaller ones, either. But if we allow that..."

"Sturmhaven will *insist* on sending a roc," Agatha said. "Then before we know it, our little secret force becomes a military operation we can't hide."

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating?" Madison asked. "I mean, how could one dragon hurt? Or even one dragon and one roc? It would probably impress the hell out of the Totalians, if nothing else."

"It's the *escalation*, Maddie," Agatha said gently, petting her partner Anny curled up next to her.

"And there's a line between impressing the Totalians and outright scaring them," Zane said.

"I understand at least three dragon *Integrates* have also applied to come along," Madison said.

"We haven't approved that yet. How we're going to even introduce the concept of Integrates is still up in the air," Agatha said. "Nobody's *quite* sure what this kind of culture shock is going to do to them. It just might scare the entire planet back into isolation again, and we'd have to honor their wishes."

"But at the same time, if we turn them down, they'll complain it's discrimination," Zane said. "Especially since we can't exactly say we're not taking any Integrates along at all." He glanced across to Madison.

"You know, nothing says that *everyone* you take along actually has to be used in the operation," Madison said. "You're going to have room to truck along some dead weight. If it makes Nextus and Sturmhaven feel better to send their dragons and rocs along, let them. If they just end up cooling their heels on the ships the whole time, well, that's their tough luck. But by my way of thinking, it would probably be better to have a dragon and not need it than to need it and not have it."

"I suppose there is that," Zane admitted. "Okay, I'll let them know they can send one, parentheses one, dragon, and alternately one, parentheses one, roc, but that they are not guaranteed to be deployed in the field. Not that this will prevent them from awarding the people in question some new medal they dreamed up...hmm. You know, that reminds me. We should come up with some kind of campaign medal and ribbon design ourselves. I'll have to have someone get on that."

"Speaking of those Integrate dragons, the Grail-holder of Camelot has requested

a meeting in regard to discussing what kind of aid they can offer to the fleet effort,” Agatha said.

“Really? That would be great!” Zane said. “They’re one of the best spaceship and space-tech builders this side of Eridani. Is she coming here?”

“No, he’d like someone to come out there,” Agatha said.

“Well, I’m up to my armpits in bureaucracy,” Zane said. “I can’t get away. But... heeeey. Maddie, you’ve never been to Camelot, right?”

“I haven’t really been to *any* Integrate Enclaves yet, except for that brief trip out to Terrania after I got here,” Madison said. “Haven’t really had the time.”

“Then we can treat it as part of your Integrate education and kill two birds with one stone,” Zane said. “Aggie, comm ahead and let ‘em know Maddie’s coming. I’ll tell CinTally to warm up the Starmaster. You’ll like Camelot, Maddie. It is a silly place.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “I was afraid of that.”

As Madison was getting ready to leave the office, Agatha answered the comm. “Oh, hey, it’s Clementine.”

The blue-haired avatar appeared over Zane’s desk. “A little birdie told me Madison will be visiting Camelot this afternoon. Since we were planning to head that way ourselves for a post-shakedown tune-up, we thought we’d offer her a lift ourselves.”

“Hey, sure!” Zane said. “CinTally will be a little disappointed, but she’ll survive.”

“That would be terrific!” Madison said. “I’ve been wanting to hang out with you some more.”

“Great! Meet us at the aerodrome in half an hour?”

“I’ll be there!” Madison promised. After the transmission ended, she grinned. “Hey, this might be a good time to hit them up about teaching me that shapeshifting schtick. They said it’s what they do, and anyone could learn it.”

Agatha smiled at her younger sister. “I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t want to see your old face again, Maddie. You too, Zane. You look good in stripes, but...well...”

“Maybe after *someone* takes this corporation off my hands and I have more free time...” Zane said.

Agatha rolled her eyes. “*Zaaaaane.*”

“Seriously, sis, I already told you,” Zane said. “This is who I am now. Me refusing to be anything else was what got us where we are now. I think I’m going to keep that up for at least a few more years so nobody can accuse me of hypocrisy.”

“Okay, Zane, okay. I get it. I won’t mention it again,” Agatha said. “You’ve won this part of the Game. I concede. Besides, I mean it when I say you look good in stripes.”

“Aggie havin’ mah ears and stubby tail’s enough for her, an’ for me,” Anny said. The lynx was laying on her back with all four paws in the air. “Ain’t it, Aggie?”

“For now,” Agatha said, smiling. She rubbed the giant lynx on her belly. “You won’t catch me complaining when we *do* Integrate, but I hope it’s a good long time from now all the same.”

“So I guess I’d better fly down to the aerodrome,” Madison said, standing up. It was funny, but the idea of having a human face (along with everything else) again was a little hard to imagine. But, for Kendlen, it was worth making the effort. She was struggling with how to even explain the concept of what an Integrate *was* to him.

“Have a good time in Camelot, Maddie, ‘Mantha,” Zane said. “Go easy on the ham, jam, and spam. They actually have *great* pizza.”

Madison gave her brother, sister, and Annycat a hug before she left the room. It



was time for a little lifter exercise anyway. There were thirty clicks between the Scout Aerodrome where the *Clementine* was still berthed and Brubeck Mining HQ. She walked outside and lifted into the air. The newness of being able to fly under her own power had yet to wear off, and Samantha was thoughtful enough to let her body-mate have fun with it, since for the former RIDE it was simply normal.

“We’re on our way, Clementine,” Madison commed ahead.

“We won’t leave without you, Madison,” Clementine assured her. “We’ll leave the dorsal cargo hatch open. Just drop right in, don’t bother with landing and coming in the airlock.”

“Got it!” Madison said. “See you soon.”

A few minutes later, Madison zipped onto the airfield and dropped into the cargo bay to find a poodle-girl in a blue Starfleet uniform waiting for her. “Hi! Welcome aboard!” Geena said as the overhead hatch closed. “Oooh, I’m so happy you could make it!”

Madison’s first impression of the ship’s interior was that it seemed quite a bit more spacious inside than being half again as long as the *Daydream Believer* was could explain. But scout ships were about eighty percent automated, and this one had more than just a piddly Ad-I to run it. It wasn’t just a mere ship, it was in effect the body of the EI that wore her. She had room for a crew of up to twenty, which lessened the need for automation.

Clementine’s avatar rezzed up next to her. “Nice to meet you two in person at last,” she said. The EI’s avatar was nude, after a fashion. There weren’t any naughty bits to show in her current state. She appeared to be a being made of light rather than *hardlight*, neon blue hair shimmering.

“You know, I’ve never met an EI in person,” Madison said.

“But now you’re *in* my person, so to speak,” Clementine said. “Come on up to the bridge and you can watch us take off.”

“So, this is a ship that dragons built?” Samantha said.

“Well, I’m on my third refit since I was built, so there isn’t much original anymore. But yes, mostly. Everyone’ll tell you that Camelot is ‘a silly place’, but their Monty Python medievalism is just a quirk, you could say.”

“I’ve heard about this ‘meme infection’ thing,” Madison said as Geena led her forward. “Are they really serious? Am I suddenly going to go crazy for Jules Verne or something and start dressing and talking like Captain Nemo?”

“Ah, that,” Evan said, sauntering into the bay before changing to female form. The doe smiled warmly. “We have something of a *Star Trek* meme here, contained. See, Integrates are more susceptible to meme infection if they have nothing else to do with themselves. And in the early days, there really wasn’t much to do around the Enclaves but stare at our navels.”

Madison chuckled. “We had a *lot* to do with ourselves right after we Integrated.”

“So we heard,” Liis said. “Building your own DIN from scratch? That’s pretty impressive. If we’d had any idea such a thing was even possible...or really known how *terrible* the DINs the technomages made were...” She shrugged. “Well, water under the bridge.”

Madison shrugged. “It was that or go spare from boredom and sensory deprivation. Anyway, our own DIN was pretty lousy when you got right down to it.”

“You’d have gotten better with practice,” Liis said.

“Practice is what it’s all about!” Geena said, smoothly dropping to all fours and trotting along next to them as a full-sized poodle.

The doe’s form changed slightly, becoming a little more busty, facial fur pattern shifting as well, adding a pair of black bars behind the corners of her mouth. “I’m Eva like this, by the way. Liis and I timeshare, and quick changes like this are just so easy for us any more.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” Madison said. “And...well, I was wondering. Could I, um, maybe ask you...”

“To show you how?” Eva asked. She chuckled. “Of course. It’s what we do.”

“We can start laying the groundwork as soon as we’re in the air, but it’s going to take practice,” Liis added. “It took us years to get to where we are today. It only took Geena a couple of months, but she’s kind of a special case.”

“I’m a prodigy!” Geena said brightly, changing back to her poodle-girl self.

“That, and she was ‘remastered’ with highly-evolved Fuser nanites right from the start,” Eva said. “Which tends to be kind of a crapshoot most of the time, but the one who did it is pretty special in her own right. In fact...well, it’s not really our place to say anything about her.”

“Aw, Auralie’s really *nice!*” Geena insisted. “She’s even helping out Aunt Aeri by loaning a couple of her selves to fill in at the shop while I’m gone training and stuff.”

“Her what?” Madison said.

“It’s complicated,” Eva said.

“Very,” Clementine added.

“You, on the other hoof, will have to do it the hard way,” Liis said. She sent a file transfer request to Madison. “And this is square one, the Primer. It unlocks the potential of your Fusers. But you’ll have to teach them—*evolve* them—into a state that’s more efficient for shapeshifting. Our Fusers are roughly a quarter the size of even modern versions. Most Integrates start out about fifty-fifty nanites and organics, but we’re basically made of them at this point, aside from some core components we can’t quite live without.”

“How did you learn how to do this in the first place?” Madison said, taking the file. It was a surprisingly small package of Fuser assembler code. Once unpacked and installed, her body tingled a little as the code spread.

“A series of fortunate accidents...though they didn’t necessarily seem so fortunate at the time.” Eva and Liis sent over a memory packet. “That is our autobiography. You can review it at your leisure. For now, let’s get off the ground. Clemmie gets antsy if she’s on the tarmac more than a few hours.”

“Spaceships are meant to be in space!” the EI said. “I bet the *Daydream Believer* would feel the same way, if she had someone like me for a mind.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Madison said. “She’s got *me* for a mind, and if I could be in space right now—and on my way back to Totalia—I would be. But if you’re gonna do something, you have to do it right, so...”

Madison followed the deer to the Bridge. Once there, she turned a critical eye to the layout. It was, as expected, very Star Trek. But what she didn’t expect was a rather more dirty, used-looking mechanical helm console. It looked like it belonged on an entirely different ship.

“I see what you’re looking at. That’s Argon’s station, when she’s here,”

Clementine said. “Mom had a *Firefly* meme infection at the time. It’s hardlight, but I leave it that way for nostalgia’s sake.”

“And because it annoys me,” Captain Wilma van Dalen said, rolling her eyes. “But that’s water under the bridge. Welcome to the Bridge, Ms. Brubeck, Samantha.”

“Honored to be here, Captain,” Madison said. “Clementine is a wonderful ship from what I’ve seen so far.”

Clementine’s avatar smiled, dimples showing. “Thank you! If you’d like to try the helm, I think that can be arranged.”

“I’d...wow, I’d *love* that,” Madison said. “I got to fly a few ships of this size class in my flight training, but...nothing that comes close to this.”

“She’s one of a kind,” Ghostate put in from his station.

“Once we’re up and away we’ll have your first lesson in the Dojo,” Evan said, having turned male again—but this time, looking somewhat like a cross between a stag and a small dragon. He smiled at Madison’s raised eyebrow. “Oh, this is just a shape I like when visiting Camelot. I call it a ‘deeragon’.”

Madison chuckled. “I gather dragons are a big thing there?”

“Rather literally,” Ghostate said. The giant barn owl ruffled his wings. “We’re ready to lift, Captain.”

“Just give the word,” Clementine said.

“Clemmie, the word is given,” Wilma said with a wave of her handpaw. “Engage.”

The ground fell away slowly on the viewscreen, the bow of the ship turning eastwards. Scout HQ was on the edge of the South Dome, where the polis was unlikely to grow further due to unsuitable topography and geology.

“If you’d like to take the helm, Madison, please do,” Wilma said, gesturing at a station next to Argon’s.

“Yes ma’am.” Madison rezzed up her Scout khakis before saluting and taking the seat. She swished her tail in anticipation. “What course should I set?”

“We’re going to take a few orbits before landing at Camelot,” Wilma said. “We have permission for maneuvers, so once we’re in space feel free to see how she handles.”

“It sounds kinda dirty when she puts it that way, doesn’t it?” Clementine said with a wink.

“My *Daydream Believer* is a new ship, so I spent a month aboard her doing my own shakedown before my assignment came through,” Madison said. She sniffed. “Ah, that new starship smell.”

“I’ve set up your controls to mimic the defaults for the *Daydream Believer*’s class,” Clementine informed her. The avatar’s ears turned pointy, her hair straight and short. A model Vulcan officer. “We are cleared for orbit burn. Take us up, Scout Pilot Brubeck.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Madison said, placing her hands on the throttle and control yoke and powering the impellers up, cautiously at first, then faster as she got a feel for them. The ship angled upward and climbed into orbit.

“Well done, Miss Brubeck, especially for your first time in a new ship,” Captain van Dalen said. “What I would expect from a Scout-trained professional.”

“Not just Scout-trained, but *Dad*-trained,” Madison said.

“Ah, of course,” Clementine said, raising one eyebrow. “Logical.”

“But really, this is the smoothest ship I’ve ever flown. Handles like something a quarter of her size,” Madison said.

“Camelot Shipyards has designs on outdoing the Eridanites,” Wilma said. “They’re setting up a partnership with Colossus-Rhodes Yards for ships that are too big to build planetside.”

“I’d say they’re most of the way there,” Madison said. “I think I know where I’m going to go if the scouts reassign the *DDB*.”

“While we’re there, you should check out their Integrate space gear,” Evan suggested. “They’re known for it almost as much as for their ships. And as an Integrate space pilot and scout, I think you’ll find it useful.”

“And don’t forget to eat at Round Table Pizza!” Geena put in. “They make the best pies I’ve ever had, and they do some great things with Intie toppings.”

Evan got to all fours, careful not to bump anything with his wings. “Feel free to do some practice maneuvers, then meet us in the Dojo.”

“Holodeck, really,” Wilma said. “It’s a multi-purpose space.”

The deeragon sighed. “At any rate, I can promise you’ll have made some progress by the time we’ve taken our orbits. But it’ll probably take at least a couple of weeks before you can do a full-body shift.”

“I’ve got nothing but time right now,” Madison said. “Thanks, I’ll be down there soon.” She patted the console in front of her, and chuckled. “But not *too* soon.”

Once in orbit Madison spent a pleasant half-hour trying out Clementine’s controls, doing a series of barrel rolls, spins, and other maneuvers. She didn’t want to try the patience of the ship or her crew too much, though, so after a while she relinquished the helm, thanked Clementine and her captain again, and made her way back to the “multi-purpose space” where Evan and Geena waited for her.

“Okay, here I am!” she announced as she entered the room. The Dojo fit the description, with rice paper walls and wooden plank floors. In a concession to the *Star Trek* theme of the ship, an Anbo-jyutsu ring was painted on the floor. It was all hardlight of course, but hard for even Madison’s own sensors to tell the difference from the real thing—the Integrate-inspired emitter designs were already starting to spread into the mainstream.

Evan started. The deeragon peered at her. “Whoa! I didn’t see you come in.” He shook his head. “Actually, it’s weird. I keep getting this subconscious feeling like you’re not really ‘there.’ I think it’s because I ‘see’ with my sensors as well as my eyes, and you don’t register on most of them.”

“It’s this Totalium coating ‘Mantha had when we Integrated,” Madison said. “I’m the half-invisible girl.”

“That could be useful, to a scout,” Evan said. “Make it easier to, well, *scout* without being seen.”

“I guess,” Madison said. Until Totalia there hadn’t been anything to hide from, but Evan wouldn’t necessarily know that. “It’s been more annoying than anything else so far. My DIN doesn’t quite work as well as everyone else’s because we don’t have any extra Totalium to build it with.”

“To say nothing about how its presence might affect the Fuser evolution cycle,” Liis mused through Evan. “This will require some study.”

“Probably nothing to worry about, though,” Evan said. “For people who don’t skip steps, the Fuser evolution is customized to the individual. The primer code just provides a starting point; the little buggers usually know how to do it best themselves.

Which is why that's the safer way to go, after all."

"So what's the first step?" Madison asked.

The deeragon took a breath, and his body flowed back into the form of a human man. "This was me, *is* me, before Integration," he explained. "Your Fusers already know what your human shape looks and feels like. Conversely, they also know the form your partner used in Nature Range. These represent the two ends of the 'natural' continuum. You just have to 'remind' them that these forms are still doable."

Evan held out his left hand. It turned to hoofhand, then all the way to forehoof, then back again. "We never actually start with a full-body change. Instead, we'll just focus on your hand."

Madison held up her hand and looked at it. Halfway between a human hand and a leopard paw, it was coated with fur and had pads on the fingertips and palm, as well as retractable claws instead of nails. "Okay...how do I do this?"

"Just imagine your hand changing back to a human one!" Geena suggested. She was in an anthropomorphic poodle shape at the moment instead of her usual human-with-poodle-tags appearance. She held up a hand-paw, and it melted back to a hand, then shifted to a paw. "You might not get it on your first try. I didn't." She shook her head, ears flopping. "I was able to shift my whole body back and forth from the start, but I actually couldn't do it a piece at a time 'til I learned how to concentrate on it here."

"It's not that easy for most beginners, Geena," Evan said patiently. "Madison, now that you've loaded the Primer, the form you're presently in is your 'natural' form as far as your Fusers are concerned. If I relax..." His form flowed into a whitetail doe. "Integrate. As a crossrider, I return to mine. This is mainly a quirk of loading the Primer into your codebase."

"I see," Madison said. "Well, as forms go, this isn't a bad one."

"I've been a leopard, but then again, I've kind of been everything," Eva said.

"Don't let that go to your head, dear," Wilma said, following Madison in. "All these years and you still can't quite manage machine forms. But please, don't let me interrupt more than I already have."

"I'm working on it," Eva huffed. "Not many 'shifters can manage inorganics, for all our RIDE halves *were* inorganic. We think it's because our RI mind still used an organic template." Next to her, Geena shrank in on herself, and a moment later a small fabber unit was sitting there, giggling. Eva rolled her eyes. "People who come to shifting younger seem to have it easier. More flexible mindset and all that. Even then, only one in a hundred can do any mechanical forms, much less do it well."

"There's a lot of variation in range among shifters, even for just the organic forms," Wilma said. "Some never get further than humanoid forms. Others can go to four feet, and others can take on six- or eight-limbed shapes. Depends on what you're comfortable with, I suppose."

Madison nodded. "Right now, I'd be happy just to be able to look human again."

"I hope we can go a little farther than that, though," Samantha put in.

"Well, if your personas are still separate, that's promising," Eva said. "For some reason it's the ones that are fully 'integrated,' like Wilma there, that have the most trouble with that."

"It helps having someone down in Engineering," Liis said. "When Evan and I were learning, we used a starship metaphor in our VR mindspace. He was Kirk, I was Scotty, down in the lower decks making the body work. There were a few times when we

*really* screwed myself up early on. But when Evan was knocked out, I could make repairs.”

“Show me how to set that up,” Samantha said. “I’m not sure what metaphor we’ll use, though. We’re not exactly attached to any particular meme that way.”

“Now, let’s see what we can do with that handpaw,” Eva said. She sat down in a Lotus pose. “I found some meditation techniques help focus your mind.”

The fabber shifted back into Geena. “They sure helped me. It was nice not being stuck as a dog all the time, but I only got any actual *range* after a lot of study.”

Madison glanced at her. “Can you really...*fab* stuff like that?”

“If I’m hooked up to a fabber matter feed, yeah,” Gina said. “I grokked the schematics of a real fabber, and told my nanos to duplicate the working parts. Took me about a month of practicing to get it right, but it was worth it.” She beamed. “I hand-tailored clothing and stuff before. I still do, but now I’ve just got a lot more little tiny hands to do it with.”

“She’s held the form for as long as a week,” Clementine put in over the room speakers. “On a dare.”

“Best fabber we’ve ever had on the ship,” Ghostate said, coming in behind Wilma. “We were tempted to keep her.”

“It was a lot quieter that way, too,” Wilma added.

Geena giggled. “I didn’t mind, really. It was kinda peaceful, and I got to sleep in for as long as I wanted.”

“*Anyway*, getting back on track,” Eva said, “I’ll beam you the details of those techniques, and we’ll get started.”

“All right, hit me,” Madison said.

“Have a seat across from me,” Eva said, motioning with her fingers. “And we’ll coax that handpaw of yours to remember being furless.”

Over the next couple of orbits, Madison practiced the techniques Eva showed her. It was a little tricky at first, but she soon found the same discipline that let her spend days or weeks alone without going crazy helped her lock the right mindset into place. By the time Clementine announced they would begin reentry in fifteen minutes, Eva was able to change her hands to human or leopard paws on demand.

“Okay, got that down,” Madison said confidently. “What’s next?”

Eva chuckled. “Next, my dear leopard, you *wait*. Your Fusers need time to assimilate the data you’ve just caused them to generate and then completely replace themselves with more-evolved versions to make changes easier. Once that happens, it’ll become easier to make the next set of changes.”

“It’s like exercising a muscle,” Wilma added. “Keep flexing and it gets stronger. Like organic muscles, you still need to rest between sessions to let them repair and improve themselves.”

“But do keep practicing the changes. Once a day for an hour or so should be sufficient for now,” Eva said. “We’ll make another appointment for a week from now and go further then. Depending on how well you’re doing it *might* include your face.”

“You know, when most people promise to rearrange your face, it’s considered a *bad* thing,” Madison said, grinning. “Got it.” She shifted her hand to human, paw, then back again. “Seriously, that’s amazing. What *else* can Integrates do that nobody ever told me about?”

“To be honest we’ve only been able to experiment freely since your brother outed us and beat down Fritz,” Wilma said. “As the biographical packet Eva sent you shows, shapeshifting was a lucky accident, and not a very popular one among the powers-that-be at the time.”

“Of course, there are also things we *can’t* do,” Eva said soberly. “Like reproduce biologically.”

Madison nodded. “I heard.”

“The Institute for Integrate Research has a whole team I’ve helped crowdfund to find a solution to our sterility,” Wilma said.

“It’s anybody’s guess whether they’ll be able to,” Eva said. “Hell, we still don’t know why we come about in the first place. There’s nothing in the Fuser codebase or RIDE construction that can even explain why it should even be possible.”

“I had a theory about that,” Madison said. “It’s not widely discussed outside the Scouts, because politics, but there’s a very interesting geological feature common to a lot of the planets we explore. A sedimentary layer dating back millions of years that contains trace elements of metamaterials—including nullifite, Totalium, cavorite, and quite possibly qubitium. And others we haven’t even discovered yet, but just know by their metamolecular signatures. Our scientists are trying to figure a way to synthesize some of them just so we can find out what they even do. The only reasonable explanation for finding those different materials together like that in so many different places is they must be the remains of an ancient civilization.” *And there are those suspiciously regular “caves” on Barsoom, but no need to go into that now.*

“*That* little fact just makes my impellers *itch* to get out there,” Clementine said.

“Qubitite having the quantum properties it does, it makes me wonder if it has more than one possible quantum state,” Madison said. “And what if one of the other states contains remnants of ancient *alien* software code that leaks across into this quantum state and messes with things?”

“Well, not the craziest idea about it we’ve ever heard,” Ghostate said.

“If you take that to its logical—or illogical—conclusion, it’s possible that it could even be a self-aware AI.” Madison grinned. “Maybe in some different universe just the other side of reality, there are mysterious beings who secretly control who we are and what we do.”

“Now this is getting more *Twilight Zone* than *Star Trek*,” Wilma said. “You see Rod Serling anywhere aboard, Clemmie?”

“There was a guy in a gray suit smoking a cigarette in Engineering a half hour ago,” Clementine deadpanned. “But he was looking for Mulder and Scully.”

Wilma chuckled. “Well, it’s just about time to return to the bridge for reentry. Care to join us?”

“Love to,” Madison said. “Looking forward to getting my first look at an honest-to-goodness Integrate Enclave.”

“Then let’s go,” Ghostate said. “We’ll be there before you know it.” They trooped out of the dojo, and Clementine dimmed the lights after they left.

Since going public, the Enclave of Camelot had spilled out of its cave system and was rapidly expanding out onto the surface of the Dry. On the west side of the butte a series of huge spacecraft drydocks were in full use with vessels in various states of construction. The air around them was full of dragons, griffins, and other mythical types

carrying components for their workflows in lifter fields. The aerial choreography was a sight to behold.

“We’re headed down to the original Shipyard Cavern,” Clementine said. “They have a dock *just* for me. Makes me feel all special.”

The entrance to that cavern loomed in front of the 150-meter ship like a mouth of pure darkness. It was nearly as wide as the Traverse Tunnel connecting Uplift to the Coastal Ring. The *Clementine* entered at a very sedate pace into a sloping, kilometers-long corridor barely wide enough to accommodate her new FTL drive ring. At the bottom there was an engraved, filigreed door that seemed a little too much. It depicted a hand coming out of the clouds with a grail in it.

Madison facepalmed. “Every Enclave I go to is going to be a shrine to some different twencen pop cultural artifact. Isn’t it.”

“Well, not all of them,” Eva said. “But most of the older ones, yeah. They’ve mostly gotten better about it since treatments for meme-infection were developed, but they still take pride in their founding metaphors.”

“If you want a hint of their ‘theme’, the name is the thing,” Wilma said. “Camelot actually has a strong contingent of serious Arthurians, too. It’s just that the Pythons are noisier about it.”

“And dragons. Always with the dragons,” Eva said. “Nextus keeps building them and they keep Integrating...”

“But they need their dragons for air superiority,” Ghostate said. “So then they build them *faster*.”

“They want to send one to Totalia, you know,” Madison said.

“Expect it and its pilot to come back in fewer pieces than they leave in,” Wilma said dryly. “The odds are pretty good.”

Clementine settled into her berth as if it was her bedroom, her avatar looking visibly relaxed. “Ahhh! There we are. Opening all access ports and service panels. Welcome to Camelot, Madison and Samantha. It’ll always feel like home to me.”

“Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home port?” Madison said.

“Exactly,” Clementine said, smiling. “I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Let’s go get some pizza!” Geena suggested, taking Madison’s hand to drag her off the bridge. “C’mon! You’ll love it!”

“Why don’t you two go on ahead?” Evan said. “We’ll join you after we’ve taken care of paperwork and such here.”

Clementine started giggling uncontrollably. “Come on, guys! That tickles!” Madison gave her a puzzled look.

“Clemmie’s always been ticklish on her portside hardpoints,” Wilma explained. “See you all later.”

Madison’s first-ever Integrate pizza at the Camelot Round Table Pizza franchise was an enjoyable new experience. A deep-dish “Montague’s All-Meat Marvel” with sarium sausage, it hit the spot in ways she’d never expected. “I knew we could eat sarium—I chowed down on a leaky battery on my way back to Zharus—but I never expected you could use it in *recipes*,” she said. “Wow. Do they make take-and-bake pies? I might have to bring some home.”

After they finished, Geena excused herself to go meet some local friends while Madison, Eva, and Ghostate headed down to Seneschal Keep for her meeting with the



Grail-holder. Wilma had stayed with Clementine to oversee the tune-up. "I hope I'm not expected to bring them a shrubbery or something," Madison mused as they walked down Camelot's dragon-broad main street. "Are we supposed to bang coconuts together as we approach?"

"They don't *usually* let that silliness get in the way of serious things like government," Eva said. "In fact, it's one of the better-governed Integrate Enclaves, a model for the ones founded after."

"It's only a model," Ghostate muttered. "Besides, the Knights of Ni disbanded fifteen years ago."

"They didn't just change their name?" Madison asked.

"One-off jokes like that don't really work as sustained gags," Eva said. "Well, here we are. Seneschal Keep."

The Keep dated from the days when Camelot was making a serious effort to go beyond its meme infections. As a result, the "neo-medieval" architecture was a little too try-hard to make itself different from the surrounding buildings. It was scaled so the largest dragons could easily go inside.

"Well, this is impressive," Madison said. "I could fly the *Daydream Believer* through this gate with room to spare."

"It's practical," Eva said. "Dragons." As they watched, a giant peach-colored draconic form emerged from within.

"Pardon me," the dragon said. Madison quickly stepped aside to let him pass. "Oh, good afternoon, Eva, Liis, Ghostate. I hadn't heard you were in town."

"We're giving Clemmie a final tuneup before maybe making a trial run to Wednesday and back," Eva said. "Still undecided, since there are other opportunities we could take instead."

"And we're also escorting Madison Brubeck and Samantha here to her meeting with the Grail-holder," Ghostate added. "Maddie, this is an old friend, Mister Peaches."

Peaches swung his long draconic snout around to peer at the leopard Integrate. "Ah, so you're Zane's sister, the scout just returned from a long journey? Most pleased to meet you both! Your surprise Integration has been quite the talk of the Integrate community."

"Uh...really?" Madison said. "It was just, y'know, one of those things. And it's nice to meet you, too."

"Well, I mustn't keep you from your meeting, especially if you're here about this mysterious new project of your brother's," Peaches said, winking. "And there are places I need to be, myself. But perhaps I shall see you around some other time. Good day!" He stepped past them and took off, his great wings causing a breeze that stirred Madison and Eva's hair.

Eva turned and waved as the dragon flew away. "Great guy. He was just a noob when we met him. He used to have to crank the main surface gates open and shut whenever someone entered or left."

"Nextus made a peach-colored dragon shuttle?" Samantha said. "Or did he get that when they integrated?"

"Nextus is crazy about some things," Ghostate said. His barn owl form shifted into the female cheetah he seemed to favor as an alternative shape. She poked Eva on the shoulder. "So you're the only one *not* in kitty spots right now."

Eva flowed into female deeragon form and spoke with Liis's voice. "What can we

say, Ghostie? We're rebels. Come on, Maddie, Boudicca is waiting." Together, the threesome walked through the gate to the keep's interior.

"I have three candidates for you," Boudicca said after the formalities of greetings were out of the way. She was a stately hippogriff, her head based on an osprey, while her equine half was a ruddy bay. "We've gone through a very exacting process to ensure they'll minimize their use of your resources. All of them are capable of long-term hibernation for the journey. We are also quite conscious of the effect a technorganic dragon may have on the Totalians' worldviews and have attempted to select as non-threatening candidates as we possibly can."

"A non-threatening...dragon?" Madison said weakly.

"I assume Mr. Peaches is one of the three?" Eva said.

"He's not just very friendly, he's also quite well-armed should the need arise," Boudicca said. She transmitted the applications. "If I could have a final decision before you leave, I'd be grateful."

"Hmm," Madison said, going over the reports. "They all three look like reasonable choices. It's possible we might even have room for more than one, depending on how things shake out." She smiled, thinking back to the bright peach dragon she'd just met, and the personal recommendation from Eva. "I think if I had to pick just one, based on personal recommendations I'm leaning toward Mr. Peaches right now."

"A splendid choice. Shall I tell him to pack his bags?" Boudicca asked.

"We're still some time from leaving the system," Madison explained. *:It'd be nice if we all had some time to train together somewhere close...:* she said to Samantha.

*:We should talk about that to Scout HQ and your brother,:* the leopardess suggested. *:Before D-Day, the soldiers had a lot of practice, you know. And didn't he say something about getting training from Eva and others on a space cruise himself?:*

*:Remind me when we're back in Uplift.:*

"I see," Boudicca said. "Is there anything else we can do for you right now?"

"We were thinking of showing her what the space pak dealers have to offer," Ghostate said. "It occurs to us that enough Integrates will be going along that it would be good to look into equipping them appropriately."

Boudicca nodded. "A good idea. I believe we can work out an arrangement on that score. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Thanks. I'll do that," Madison said. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"You're welcome, Miss Brubeck," Boudicca said. "Enjoy the rest of your stay."

"Come on," Eva said, leading Madison away. "You know, I think the pak shops will be a great place to do a little Christmas shopping for you-know-who."

"Hey, that's an idea," Madison mused. "What *do* you get for the Integrate who has everything?"

"Oh, that's easy," Ghostate said. "You just get him *more*."

## Chapter 6: Evac

*December 20, 157 A.L.*

*Satellite of Love*

The scout ship made two passes over the landing zone before its final approach. The site was a fallow farm field of Earth grasses surrounded by native Totalian vegetation, a forest of giant asparagus-like stalks with scaly trunks like a palm tree. Life was at an earlier stage of evolution on this planet than on Zharus—farther inland, the vast majority of the land was bare of any vegetation except a few Earth terraforming lichens. Totalia City was located on a lush plateau of terraformed landscape.

“There’s a truck down there,” Zach reported.

“Squawk the IFF Sandeep gave us,” Joel said.

“Done! And...it’s them!” Zach said cheerfully. “We’ll be down and away before we know it!”

“The heatsinks are 81% saturated,” Hamner said. “A little faster than we estimated. I think we have about an hour of cloak left at most.”

For the last fifty meters Joel shut down the cloak completely. “That should buy us a little more time.”

Landing skids extended, the *Satellite of Love* came to rest on Totalia’s surface. Zach opened the ramp and the marines deployed, then opened the venting hatches and deployed the more conventional heatsinks into the open air. The truck slowly trundled towards the ship. The marines spread out around the ramp, a pair sprinting out to escort the truck in.

“Uh oh,” Zach said. “Tell them to bring the truck as close to the ship as possible. I’m bringing up the cloak again and I want them in it. I’ve passed this to the marines already.”

“Why?” Hamner said.

Joel facepalmed. “Zealot intel network. Take a look.”

The forward viewports highlighted a sizable group of barely infrared-defined shapes moving quickly along the main road across from the abandoned farmhouse. Trucks, APCs, even a couple of tanks, moving with muffled heat plumes that probably would have been invisible to Totalian sensors, but not Eridanite versions. Their visual camouflage was near-perfect.

“Goodness!” Hamner exclaimed. “It’s a whole detachment! They’re heading for the tunnels. Probably the same one the truck came out of—but it does not appear they saw the truck, either.”

“This isn’t looking good at all,” Zach said. “This is only part of the force. They’re going to box in the Resistance in the tunnels. But they haven’t seen us *or* the truck. They’re depending completely on their intel drones to recon the surrounding area, and I have *those* in my back pocket.”

Joel sighed. They had to get the cryopod aboard quickly and there was only one way to do that. “Pardon us, Hamner. Take the controls. We’re going to speed things up.”

“How?” Hamner said, taking the pilot’s chair.

“Some stupid Intie tricks,” Joel said. “No time to be subtle.” He dashed down the short corridor, dropped down to the deck below using his lifters, then through the garage space at the top of the ramp that normally contained planetary exploration gear—vehicles, scientific equipment, bivouacs, and survey/medical drones. It was a good thing the equipment garage was mostly clear for this mission.

“What’s going on?” Lieutenant Beregan asked the floating man. “How...wait, don’t answer that. Need-to-know.”

“I’m updating your tactical HUDs with the current situation,” Joel said, taking control of the marines’ gear. “I’m going to get the cryopod aboard, then we’re all going to hunker down here.”

*For how long?* The heatsinks wouldn’t last that much longer and they’d *have* to decloak. And where would that leave the Resistance people on the truck, with the hundred Zealots here?

The Marine officer’s expression hardened. “We have to do something about that, Scout Roberts. I’m not going to sit here and let the Resistance crumble.”

“You’re the military tactician here, Lieutenant. Come up with something,” Joel said. He had to admit, the man was right. “Here’s the armament and shield specs of the *SOL* and the intel we have on the Zealot force. Pardon me. Job to do.”

Beregan grunted surprise as the *SOL*’s capabilities came up on his tactical HUD. “I’ll have something in a few minutes. You go do what you need to.”

The Resistance truck was right underneath the nose of the *SOL*. They had already begun to remove the cryopod. Joel waved at them in a friendly manner. “Hello everyone. Scout Joel Roberts here. Pleased to meet you.” He watched them struggle with it for a second. “Not enough time for that.”

“What?” a young woman exclaimed. “You’re not going to leave her behind!”

“Of course not! Just back away, please.” Joel extended his right hand, projecting a lifter field to support the half-unloaded cryopod. Making sure it was supported, he removed the lines holding it and carefully floated it a few centimeters over the bed of the truck.

“Holy shit!” the young woman said. All of the Totalians, including the Marines, backed away as the cryopod apparently slid off the truck of its own accord. “*How* are you doing that?”

“No time now,” Joel grunted. “Barb’s gained some weight.”

Fortunately he didn’t have to carry the cryopod very far. In short order he brought it up the ramp and placed the pod into an area behind the marines’ fabbed seats. Modular latches grabbed on to the corners and locked it down. The medico from the *Kybalion* went right to work.

“Are you...uh...human?” the young woman said, having followed him up. “I’m Teenette, by the way”

“Nice to meet you, Teenette. And to answer your question, mostly human,” Joel replied. *:With some mecha ferret.:* He walked over to an alcove that was actually an inductive charger to top off. “Teenette, bring all your people aboard, for their own protection. Looks like we need to fab more seats. I’ll get that started. How many are with you?”

“Just me and three others. There wasn’t anyone else to spare. What’s going on? How did you do that?” she said.

“Precision gravitics. And there’s a hundred Zealots headed for your tunnel,” Joel

said.

“Holy shit! *Kendlen!* The operation!” the woman explained. “Are you going to help? You can’t just fly away and leave us...”

“I have no intention to leave you in the lurch, Teenette. Get your people aboard,” Joel ordered. She nodded and dashed back down the ramp to fetch them. He opened a comm channel to the Lieutenant. “Got something for me?”

“Those amazing pulse cannons of yours should make short work of their mobile armor, just don’t hole the reactors,” Beregen said. “Do you really have a hundred missiles on that tiny ship?”

“They’re *tiny* missiles,” Joel deadpanned. A hundred Keplerian 50-centimeter missiles in four armored bays with variable yields. Nothing was more scary to a pirate than a dozen of them arcing towards their ship. With the right raw materials the onboard fabber could build more. For other weaponry there was a mix of gauss and pulse cannons in a half dozen weapons blisters for complete coverage. None had ever been used beyond tests. This would be the first time they’d be fired in anger.

“The kiloton rating in the specs isn’t so tiny.” Beregen sounded incredulous and insulted in equal measure.

“Have you got a fire plan ready?” Joel asked. “Ideally, we want minimal fatalities.”

“Of course,” Beregen said. “Wounded take up their resources to care for; dead just take a shovel. Based on that incredible intel, here’s the plan...”

Joel listened carefully to the explanation, then ran a few simulations on outcomes. There was always uncertainty, even if they had the Zealots completely outgunned, so it wouldn’t do to get overconfident. *Suppose I’d rather have them do the right thing for the wrong reason than the wrong thing for the right one*, Joel thought. *Just as well I’m not a soldier, though.* “Right. So give us one more minute to get things locked down back here, then deploy.”

*:I’m opening gunports,: Zach said. :We’ll be rigged for battle momentarily... there! I’m updating Hammy. He’s ready for some Zealot payback.:*

The twelve marines would remain on the ground and mop up after the *SOL* took out the Zealots’ big guns and as many soldiers as they could, while the four Totalian noncoms from the Resistance came onboard.

“I hate to leave the truck here, we sort of need it,” the young woman who seemed to be in charge said.

“Maybe you can come back for it?” Joel suggested. In the cargo space, the Manos drones had already added more seats. “Take a chair and buckle in. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Teenette, I’m needed on the bridge.”

Joel lifted and flew onwards as fast as he could, leaving the four stunned Totalians to stare after him.

“Looks like this is your stop,” Hensley said as the bus pulled to a halt alongside the other vehicles at the underground Resistance camp. “Home sweet home away from home.”

Outside, men and women were running back and forth in a flurry of frantic activity, closing cases and slinging bags on their shoulders. One of them was *Kendlen*, who came running up to the bus, pulser slung over his shoulder. “Oh, great, you’re all safe. Listen—don’t get off the bus. Now that you’re clear, we have no further reason to

stay here. We're going to retreat to a new base camp."

"We can certainly save the formalities for later," the First Speaker said. "But thank you for all you've done so far, Kendlen Canton. Just tell us what we need to do to make your task easier."

"For now, stay on the bus and keep your heads down," Kendlen said, grinning wryly. "As soon as we get word that our other ongoing ops been completed successfully, we're out the door. I've got to get back to overseeing the packing, but I'll be back shortly." He nodded to them, and stepped back off the bus.

"This is all very exciting!" the Seventh Speaker said. "Isn't it?"

"Frankly, I've had enough excitement to last out the millennium," Trilby said dryly.

A few moments later, a small motorbike zoomed in from the tunnel, skidding to a halt in front of the bus. The man riding on it nearly dropped it in his haste to get off. "Boss! Kendlen! They're in the tunnels! We gotta scat!"

Kendlen came running up. "What? Slow down! Who's in the tunnels?"

"Zealot military!" the man panted. "Some kind of frickin' convoy, it's coming right up the southwest entrance, with scouting parties spreading out. They're all over the tunnels, boss. It looks like they're trying to find us."

"Well, crap," Kendlen said. "Just as well we were packing already, I guess." He raised his voice. "Everyone, grab whatever's most important and be ready to move out in thirty seconds! We've got uninvited guests, and the place is still such a *mess*, we probably shouldn't be here when they arrive." He climbed aboard the bus, followed by a pair of pulser-wielding soldiers and a comms officer carrying a field radio pack. "We're moving *now*. That-a-way." He pointed to a tunnel at the far end of the camp.

Hensley threw the bus into gear as the soldiers took up position at convenient windows. "Looks like we're hitting the road again. Hold tight, everyone, and keep your heads down!" The bus pulled through the remains of the camp and entered the tunnel on its east side. *Well, here we go again*, Darrek thought wryly.

Cloak engaged, the *SOL* lifted to a hundred meters. Joel and Zach weren't using the manual controls for this. For something this important they had fully opened their high-grade DIN to become essentially one with the ship. They could sense everything, from the air pressure to the thrumming of her fusion reactor and impellers.

Hamner remained on the bridge, but was keeping their new passengers informed. Joel could see him from multiple angles and multiple spectra.

"The marines are in place," Zach said. They kicked up their time-sense. For the marines, this battle might only last a few minutes. But for them it would be *much* longer.

The *SOL*'s first shots took out the tanks, the pulse beams slicing through their dual cannons and treads, making sure to stay away from their compact reactors and crew compartments. The Zealots scattered, then fired up at the source of the beams from the high-caliber gauss cannons on the APCs. The slugs plinked off their shields before Zach took them out, too.

"Well, time to say hello," Zach said, disengaging the cloak. "Attention, Totalian soldiers! Drop your weapons and surrender! You will not come to further harm!" the ferret announced. He switched the pulse cannons down to stun mode.

"*Like hell!* We're not surrendering to alien invaders!" one woman shouted, firing

her rifle. A stun blast stopped that in short order, but then the remaining Zealot soldiers opened fire in response.

With the scout ship on overwatch, it was Lt. Beregen's turn. They *didn't* have stunners, so they shot to wound. Being attacked from above and below sent the Zealots into mass confusion. One by one, in short order all one hundred were either wounded, stunned, or both. Between the scout ship and the Loyalist marines, it was hardly a battle, it was a rout for the Zealots.

Joel and Zach disengaged from the ship's systems. Hamner slapped his fellow scout on the back. "That was incredible, my friend! Well done!"

"I don't like shooting at people," Joel said. He commed Beregen. "Let's take care of those wounded. Well done to you and your squad."

"Thank you, sir. But I doubt we have that much time before the other side of the pincer closes on the Resistance," Beregen replied. "Do you have any intel, Roberts?"

"There must be some totalium in those tunnels that's eating my wireless signals," Joel said. "I can't get further than half a klick in."

"We'll secure the prisoners and move in behind them," Beregen said. "With luck we can take them by surprise. They won't be able to use their heaviest weapons in there for fear of collapsing the tunnels, which wouldn't be fun for the buildings above. Can that magic wonder box on your ship crank out something like a tear gas grenade or a flash-bang?"

"I have something like that in the weapons locker already. It's intended to dazzle dangerous wild animals on unexplored planets, but shouldn't do any serious harm to people," Joel said. "Give me a minute."

"Off to the garage again?" Hamner said.

"You've got the conn, Hammy. Take good care of her," Joel said.

There was no time to waste. He was shortly back in the garage. The *SOL* still carried handheld weapons and environmental gear for appearances sake, but none of it had been used on the last six systems he'd been assigned. One piece of gear was a Nextus IDEworks Cyclone EX-8-SEA "Scout Exploration Armor" micro-IDE skimmer bike, never actually used. Joel slipped into fast time to consider. It would be nice to hide his Intie abilities underneath an extra layer of armor. He'd completely forgotten it was even there.

He decided there was no time for it now. Getting it operational after sitting in its alcove so many years would take time they didn't have. Not to mention, he still wasn't sure how well his Integrate body would cooperate with it and now wasn't the time to experiment. Besides, the ferret was pretty well out of the bag already at this point.

Joel gathered a satchel of flashbangs and gas grenades, then popped open the main weapons locker. The guns within were intended for animals, but would work just as well on humans. He grabbed three in lifter fields then turned around to see Teenette and the other Resistance members standing there, watching intently.

"If you don't have a weapon, arm yourselves," Joel said. "Those pistols have two settings: Stun and kill. It's best not to confuse them. Got it?"

Teenette took a pistol out of its charging slot. "Got it. We'll keep watch on the prisoners, Mr. Roberts."

"Good plan. We'll be back as soon as we can," Joel promised.

Once the *SOL* landed again, the ramp opened. A half dozen marines waited at the bottom. He floated the satchel of grenades to Lt. Beregen, then presented the three

hunting rifles. The weapons didn't look especially military, at least to Joel. But compared to the gauss weapons the Totalians carried they looked exotic. "Lieutenant, these are for the use of you and your squad. They're locked on stun."

"Understood," Beregen said, taking the one meant for large game, and distributed the other two to his best shots.

"I'll be coming with you into the tunnels," Joel said. "I haven't shown you my entire bag of tricks yet."

"Like what? Firing laser beams from your eyes?" a marine said dryly. The smile fell off his face. "Uh, can you?"

"Not from my *eyes*," Joel said, wiggling his eyebrows, pointedly *not* taking a weapon himself. "We can chat about Zharusian cybernetics later. We have a Resistance to save."

"Shit!" Kendlen swore as gauss rounds spanged off the tunnel wall near the bus. He poked his pulser out the window and returned fire at the cordon of Zealot soldiers blocking the tunnel ahead. "Other way! Other way!"

The bus careened into a side tunnel. "How did they get around us?" Hensley wondered.

"Sheer dumb luck, probably," Kendlen muttered. "They've probably spread out through much of the tunnel network by now. I feel sorry for all the vagrants."

"When I was a boy these tunnels were still in regular use," the First Speaker said. "Unfortunately there's plenty of oldsters like me willing to help the Zealots out. I'd suggest turning left at the next junction, by the way."

"Worth a try," Kendlen said. "I hope the others made it out all right, but we can't do much to help them now."

"I'm getting something from outside, Kendlan," the comm officer reported. "It has an IFF from the *Kybalion*. Should I ping back?"

"Yes!" Kendlen shouted. Making that turn had sent them in the right direction. The timing was right. The Zharusian scout ship would have only landed a half hour ago. "What's their status, Valens?"

"They have Barbaretta onboard and they brought a squad of marines with them!" Valens said. "They're on the way, so keep coming!"

"Aww, shit!" the bus driver shouted. That was all the warning they got as they came around a corner and fetched up face to face with a trio of APCs. There was a moment of uncertainty...then nothing happened. "What the *hell*?"

The vehicles were dead in their tracks, the barrels of their guns pointed in odd directions away from the Resistance vehicles. The Zealot soldiers near them were fussing with their gauss rifles, trying to get them to fire. The Resistance gunners sent them running.

*They have to have a RIDE with them*, Kendlen thought gleefully. The Zealot gear, including the soldiers' "smart" rifles, had obviously been hacked, but they also had some dumb-fire backups and manual controls on their APCs. "Keep going!"

Just then, the side door to the bus opened. Then a sleepy-eyed man appeared in the narrow aisle.

"How did you get in here? We're going fifty clicks!" Seventh Speaker Baldurson said. The man wore no special gear—just an unremarkable khaki uniform. He was completely unarmed, but had just entered a fast-moving vehicle in a tight space.



“Details, details. I’m Scout Captain Joel Roberts. As you might have guessed, I’m not from around these parts. How can I help?” the Scout said.

“Whatever you did put the Zealots off-kilter, but it won’t hold them off long,” Kendlen said. “Where’s your RIDE?”

“Uh, quite close,” Roberts said. He lifted and quickly moved to the back of the bus, then peered behind them. “Speaking of close, we have company again. Pardon me.” He then jumped out the open back door...and floated, flying *backwards* to keep pace. Pulses of white light lanced from the palms of his hands as incoming fire hit a shield of some kind.

“Fascinating,” Trilby said.

“He’s generating some kind of ECM,” the comm officer said. “And I mean, it’s him. It’s coming *from* him, sir.”

“He’s a cyborg, then,” Baldurson said.

“Or maybe an android,” Trilby mused.

“Or an alien?” Hensley suggested.

“Whatever he is, he’s saving our butts,” Kendlen said. “Keep going!”

The bus bumped and shimmied through the tunnels, occasionally scraping the walls leaving showers of sparks in tunnels that were just slightly too narrow to be able to maneuver easily. But the tunnels gradually lightened—there was daylight ahead!

Kendlen rejoined them as the last of the pursuing APCs ground to a halt without any remaining front wheels. “Well, that’s that. Hopefully we don’t get any more unpleasant surprises.”

The bus careened into daylight, coming out of the tunnels into one of Totalia City’s industrial districts. The city border was just a click or so away. Fortunately, there weren’t any obstacles at the gate—the city hadn’t been designed with the idea that they might ever need to prevent people from coming or going.

Joel looked up into the sky. “Well, this isn’t where my ship is. Gimme a moment to call her in...there.” He coughed. “Whew. I’ve got hay fever all of a sudden. Something in the air here.”

“How long until your ship gets here?” Kendlen asked.

“Hamner says he’s going to pick up the squad of marines at another tunnel exit, then he’ll be on the way,” Joel said, returning to the inside of the bus. “So let’s find put some distance between us and the city. I’ve got a hold of the local intel drones, but I can’t be a hundred percent sure I have *all* of them.”

“Got it,” Kendlen said. “I’m glad to hear Hamner is okay, though. There were some disturbing rumors from our connections in the Cosmy...”

“Well...he’s a little bit the worse for wear, but still ticking,” Joel said. He flexed his fingers. He was feeling a little overheated himself.

“So, uh, where’s your RIDE then?” Kendlen asked again.

“Oh, around. Pardon me...I’ll just go get him,” Joel said, flickering back into cloak.

*:Okay, armor up...: Joel thought. The Resistance might have some inkling about what he was, but he was in no mood to tip his hand to the Zealots more than he already had in the tunnels. Shortly he was encased in a metallic hardlight version of Zach’s old ferret Fuser, all for show, but sadly necessary theatrics. :Any sign of movement on the sats?:*

*:Looks like a few of them made it out of the tunnel, but in no condition to try to chase us. Oooh, they're scrambling fighters. Shiny, shiny fighters...:*

"Hamner, what's keeping you?" Joel said over the comm.

"The Marines have some wounded Resistance they're bringing with them," Hamner said. "Can you give us five minutes?"

*:Those fighters will be on us in two,: Zach said. :Fission-thermal vectored thrust engines, looks like. Five fighters.:*

*:This planet is a 50s zeerust dream,: Joel replied. :Atomic everything. Let's intercept the interceptors.:* Over the comm he said, "Hamner, I could use some missile support. You're well in range. Keep the yields low."

"Gotcha! You paint the target, I'll fire," the cyborg Scout said.

Everyone looked up at the red-and-gold Ferrous Ferret that streaked into the sky. "Back in two shakes," he commed them.

The fighters were already visible as five specks in the distance as they gained altitude. *:They'll be in range to fire any second.:*

"I'm firing a warning shot. SOL, Fox Three!" Hamner said.

*:Joel, I can't get into their systems. I think they finally got wise and went radio silent,: Zach said. :That, or they're using narrowcast laser comms I can't sense from this range.:*

*:This is going to hurt. Isn't it.:*

*:You know what they say. If we couldn't take a joke, we shouldn't have joined.:* Zach said dryly.

Joel rolled his eyes. *:Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.:*

The missile fired by the *Satellite of Love* broke up the formation of aircraft as caught up with them. Being an advanced piece of ordnance, it promptly turned around and chose its target, then started to chase the lead fighter like the Coyote after the Roadrunner—never *quite* catching it, but keeping the Zealot pilot on the run.

"That leaves four," Hamner said. "Want more missiles?"

"We might need them later, Hammy. Try and retrieve that one you fired if you don't explode it," Joel said. *:Okay, Zach, let's make sure the rest of those jet jockeys see us.:*

*:Righto!: the ferret RI said. :One Ultra Shiny coming up!:*

"What's going on up there?" Hensley said, eyes glued to the road ahead. It was starting to grow fairly rough—it hadn't been maintained since it had been used to transport stone from the quarries used to build the city almost a century before.

"A lot of fighting, it looks like," Kendlen said, staring through a pair of image-stabilizing binoculars. "I can't really tell that clearly, but Joel seems to be putting on quite a light show."

"Those RIDEs are something else, huh?" Hensley said.

"Yeah, sure. RIDEs, right," Kendlen said. "Whatever. How far are we from where the canyons start? Think we can take shelter in them?"

"I don't know if this bus can make it there. It's not really an off-road vehicle," Hensley replied. "It's hard enough to keep it on the road as it is."

"Well, just keep going. It should be harder to hit a moving target." *I hope*, he thought, as he stared through the binoculars again.

“We’re off the ground, Joel, on the way,” Hamner reported.

“Best news I’ve had all day!” Joel replied in the middle of an Immelmann turn.

It was impossible to outrun a laser, and the interceptors had plenty. They scored hit after hit on Joel and Zach’s hardlight armor, not getting through but making his own emitters begin to overheat under his skin. Before too long he’d have to drop the shell altogether or risk them starting to blow out. He could already feel the skin over them starting to scorch—one of the hazards of being a humanform Intie. Everything was more or less under the skin. *At least I can switch the nerves in my skin off. Thank goodness for small favors.*

:SOL’s in sight!: Zach said. :Here comes the cavalry!:

Bolts of blue pulse energy from the fast-closing scout ship hit the fighters in their engine nozzles, sending them groundward. The pilots ejected one-by-one.

“Just in time, Hammy!” Joel said. “You won’t believe this. I’ve got almost the entire Totalian ruling body in a bus.”

“Why did you not say so earlier?” Hamner said. “That is rather *important* information. Where do we plan on taking them?”

“If we can’t put them somewhere safe groundside, the *Kybalion*’s the best place,” Joel said. “We should probably ask them where they were planning to go if we hadn’t shown up. They might have a base prepared outside of the city.”

“Is that what I *think* it is?” Hensley said, watching the interceptors spiral towards the ground.

“Looks sort of like a scout ship, like the ones Barb and the others came in on.” Kendlen said. “But it’s a bit larger than the rest I’ve seen. Find a good place to stop. I think we’re getting a better ride.”

“You folks have a destination in mind?” Joel’s voice came over the bus speakers. “We’ll be on the ground in three minutes to pick you up.”

“We’ve been reclaiming one of the old abandoned terraforming stations,” Kendlen replied. “The reactor’s still good, and it’s far enough from the city to make it hard to get to.”

“You can give us the location when you’re aboard. Just hold tight,” Joel said.

The compact (by Totalian standards) starship was moving very fast, but decelerated at a pace that would have turned a Totalian pilot to a red paste, dropped to the ground like a rock until it was only a meter up, then gently settled onto the dirt road. The front ramp dropped open, a dozen men and women in Cosmy Marine uniforms dashing out. Hensley opened the door.

“Well, *I’m* impressed,” the First Speaker said. Joel landed next to the ramp, a giant metallic ferret, and waved them in.

“No time to waste,” Kendlen said. “Please, Speakers, after you.”

The bus’s occupants quickly climbed aboard the starship, Kendlen muttering, “I thought that they were angels, but much to my surprise...” under his breath.

“Hamner will get the coordinates,” Joel said. “I’m going to take care of some, uh, routine maintenance. Thanks for flying Zharus Scout Spacelines, be sure to tip your seats and return your stewardess to the upright position.” He hastily retreated into the med bay.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Joel Roberts,” Hamner said. “He will, as they say, be here

all week.”

“Ow ow ow...” Joel said, looking down at his exposed lenses after the med bay door sealed. “This is a pain that will linger.” He checked his pain nerves, winced, and hastily turned them off. The scorched skin around the rims of the lenses was beginning to ooze serum, streaked with silvery repair nanites. It was time to raid the Camelot Intie first aid kit.

By the time he was finished Joel had almost two dozen stick-on gel patches full of Intie-grade fabber matter stuck over his exposed hardlight lenses. They would heal up in about an hour, but he couldn’t wait that long before returning to the bridge. Before leaving med bay, he popped out his DIN and put in a fresh one, just in case.

With his DIN connected to the ship to monitor her systems and tactical status, he decided to give himself another minute before leaving and commed the bridge. “How are our passengers, Hammy?”

“The ship is crammed pretty full right now, Joel,” Hamner replied. “You should have seen—what is his name, Science Committee Chair—when he saw Barb’s cryotube, though. I do not believe I have ever seen a man so haunted.”

“I can’t say I’m terribly pleased about it myself,” Joel said. “Do we have an ETA from the *Kybalion*?”

“I do not have an ETA yet,” Hamner said. “But I did get a ping back from Sandeep’s ship. They are holding a light hour from orbit, so when we signal our readiness to rendezvous they will be ready.”

Joel started back for the door, but wobbled and had to lean against the wall to steady himself as a wave of dizziness overcame him. *:Whoa. What was that? Did we break something?:*

*:I’m running diagnostics, : Zach said. :It looks like some kind of foreign substance in our systems. Our immune response is going nuts. I’m trying to bring it under control, but you know how those little buggers are, they never listen...:*

*:It’s probably Totalium dust, : Joel said. :Aw, crap. Now I know how the Chinooks and Tornados must have felt back in the war.:*

*:We may need some automedic time to clear this out, : Zach said.*

*:Let’s try to hold out ‘til after we drop these people off, : Joel said.*

*:I’ll do what I can, but I’m really not feeling so shiny right now...:*

The SOL was again cloaked, with her heatsinks running below 50%, so they had some time.

“Hammy, do we know where the Loyalist base is yet?” Joel asked.

“Kendlen is with me. I suggest returning here as soon as possible,” Hamner said. “The young man seems somewhat put-upon right now. He was rather shocked to see me as I am now.”

Joel opened the med bay’s door to see Teenette with a half dozen others waiting, and immediately felt like an utter heel for locking himself in. Right behind her was the man he had recognized as First Speaker Trilby Whitfield from Madison Brubeck’s report.

“My apologies, everyone. I suppose I’m not used to carrying so many passengers,” Joel said.

“Quite alright, Mr. Roberts. Quite alright,” the First Speaker said reassuringly. “I just wanted to make sure I thanked you for your efforts here.”

“Are you okay? Do you need help?” Teenette asked.

“I’ll be fine in an hour, miss. Thank you,” Joel reassured. “Now, please excuse us—me. Please excuse me. I’m not going to relax until you’re all safe.”

They moved as much out of the way as they could in the narrow corridor. Joel made sure not to use his lifters—he felt too ill to use them anyway—and then climbed the ladder up to the bridge deck.

Kendlen decided there were a lot of things about this scout that didn’t *quite* add up, but kept those thoughts for later. For now, he was just happy to see Hamner Reinhalen alive, though the cybernetic eye that glowed blue and the carbon-metallic hand were *slightly* off-putting.

“Hey,” Joel said. “Well, I’m glad we all got out of there intact.”

“Me, too,” Kendlen said. “My thanks. I only hope everyone else in the camp was so lucky.”

“According to Lt. Beregen, a number of your cohorts were able to make it out,” Hamner said. “I do not know exactly how many, or how many you had, but it seems likely most of them made it.”

“Thank Heaven you brought the Marines,” Kendlen said.

“We couldn’t have done this without them,” Joel said, slumping into the pilot’s seat. The man’s cheeks had a white patch on each side, and there were more on his arms, all in symmetrical places. He grasped the control sidestick and the throttle gently. “So anyway, we got the message torpedoes Madison Brubeck, Hammy here, and Marcus sent along, and I was sent here as soon as they came in. Unfortunately, I can’t tell you whether either of them actually made it; they would still have been a couple months out when I left. But if they made it into jump, it seems likely they got to Zharus weeks ago.”

“We still have enough contacts in the military to know that neither was recaptured,” Kendlen said. “So, like you said, seems likely.”

“That’s a load off my mind,” Joel said.

“So how soon ‘til they send a few more people?” Kendlen asked. “A few more like you would be nice.”

“I literally have no idea. I was sent here only two days after the torps arrived, and only a couple of hours after we found out what they actually said,” Joel said. “My boss practically tossed me head first into the *Satellite of Love* here and shut the ramp behind me. So...” Joel looked out the forward viewports. “We’re cloaked. We’ve got the Zealot drone nets hacked. Where are we going?”

“A terraforming base on the other end of the continent. Hasn’t been used officially in sixty years, since they gave up terraforming the whole thing and decided to concentrate on the Totalia City region,” Kendlen said. “I already gave him the coordinates.”

Joel sighed. “I suppose I’m really out of it right now. Been a hell of a day, you know. I could use a recharge.”

“I set our course and we will arrive in five hours at subsonic speeds,” Hamner said. “A sonic boom or suborbital trajectory would give us away, cloak or no cloak.”

“Thank you, Hammy. Thanks,” Joel said. “So, I guess everyone should try and make themselves comfortable. It’s going to be a long flight. Try to use the bathroom as quickly as possible, there’ll probably be a line.” He cocked his head for a moment. “Yeah...I think I’m going to catch a little downtime in the autodoc unit. I seem to have

picked up a bug or something down there. Comm me if anything comes up.”

Kendlen watched the man stagger off, then turned to Hamner. “He doesn’t actually *have* a RIDE, does he?”

The Zharusian pursed his lips, thinking. “Ah, you might say he is his own RIDE. It is...rather complicated.”

“I see,” Kendlen said. *I suppose I’ll have to be satisfied with that vague explanation for now.* “Are there more like him on Zharus?”

“That...is probably something you should ask Joel when he feels better,” Hamner said. “It is more his business than mine.”

“I see. Well, I’m going to see how the Totaliment is doing. Many of them aren’t young anymore.”

“Well, feel free to have the run of the ship. You can’t hurt anything,” Hamner said. “As good a time as any for you to see what kind of help you’ll be getting from us.”

“Thank you, Hamner,” Kendlen said. He gave the man a friendly slap on the shoulder. “We’ll do just that.”

## Chapter 7: Christmas at Ground Zero

*December 25, 157 AL*

Weather under the Domes was normally quite predictable. It was only made to rain a few weeks out of the year during April and May, mainly for the novelty of the lifelong residents. But this year, to celebrate the return to normalcy and the emergence of Integrates into the light and RIDEs into quasi-personhood, the polis had sprung for enough extra Cascadia water for an actual snowfall. Plants that couldn't take the cold would get their own micro-domes, and a few suburb domes had voted to exclude themselves. But for everyone else, for two magical weeks Uplift truly would be the snowglobe everyone said it looked like from outside.

Once the air was saturated, a combination of cooling and expanding the size of the Domes to lower the pressure with some creative engineering with the air circulators was all it took. A full ten centimeters of snow—on average—was promised over the city. There would be more in some areas, less in others. Fabberies that usually made plastic furniture and pink flamingos had instead been cranking out sleds for the last week so there would be enough to go around.

Zane woke up early on the day, and levitated up to the roof of his apartment building as the first flakes of snow started to fall. He tipped his head back and stuck out his tongue to catch the flakes. Others landed on his nose and ears. "Snow...can you believe it?"

"Ah lived in Cascadia for fifteen years, Zane," Anny Hower said. She and Leila were also up on the roof, it being the tallest building around (and their prerogative as chief of Zane's security). Leila, wearing a giant hardlight santa cap, was curled up on the corner, and Anny, in matching cap, was leaning back in the crook of her body. "Ah've seen snow. Sure tastes like Dome Hood water, though."

"Well, of course it does," Zane said. "That's where most of the drinking and weather-generation water on this whole continent comes from."

"True 'nuff, Ah guess," Anny said. "Sure have come a long way since last Christmas. You'd just kicked Fritz's butt six ways from Sunday, an' everyone was too busy tryin' t' rebuild after the domes went down t' have a proper holiday."

"Yeah, I remember," Zane said. "And nobody felt a whole lot like celebrating anyway, apart from celebrating still being alive. What a difference a year makes, huh?" He chuckled. "And *next* Christmas, I'll probably still be—" He checked himself before speaking the next thought aloud. You could never be sure when a media drone might be listening, or someone reading your lips with a telescopic lens. "—somewhere else."

"True enough," Anny said. "An' we'll sure miss ya." Anny had already conveyed her and Leila's firm intention to stay behind and help Agatha mind the store while Zane and company were away.

"I can't believe I'm gonna have *both* my sisters here this year," Zane said. "The first real *family* Christmas since...well, since that last one with Dad two years ago." He sighed, staring off into the distance for a moment. "Well, you can't go back. Only way you can go is ahead." Then he glanced up. "Oh, hey, Maddie's here. C'mon down, Maddie."

Madison, hugging her furless self, shivered in the cold as she touched down on the roof. She wore a real jacket with a pair of jeans and sneakers, rather than hardlight clothing. She and Samantha were trying to go without their all-too-convenient hardlight when they could, devoting that energy to her Fusers' evolution.

"You could just let your fur out, Maddie," Zane suggested.

"I need to prrrractice hol-l-lding form," Madison said. "But I d-d-didn't want to miss this. It's *cold* out here."

"Here, Madison, lean against me," Leila said, reaching out with a huge forepaw.

"Th-thanks, kitty," Madison said gratefully, leaning back against the huge, and above all warm, white lioness.

"You're really coming along with that," Zane said. "You look just like the sister I remember."

"Thanks," Madison said, her voice a little steadier now. "I feel...well, not *quite* the same as I used to, but close."

"So this is what it's like to be a hairless ape," Samantha added a moment later. "Not too impressed, here."

"Oh, shush, you," Madison said. "I told you, we'll work on your form after I've got this one down."

"Hey, I hear there's a convention going on up here!" Agatha Brubeck said cheerfully, lifting over the edge of the building in Annette's lynx Fuser form. "Can anybody join?"

"As long as anybody's you, sis," Zane said. "Merry Christmas, you two."

"So." Agatha held out her arms for Annette to de-Fuse, revealing she was wearing a sensible quilted jacket, mittens, and a knitted "Jayne" hat. But then, Agatha always *had* been the "sensible" one. "Snow, huh?"

"Ah like it!" Annette said, her accent mimicking her namesake's. "We lynxes are snowkitties, too."

"So anyway..." Madison said. "How 'bout we go inside where it's warm and open our presents and stuff?"

"How is it that a scout, used to going for months or years without human contact, can *still* be the most impatient member of the family to open presents?" Zane teased.

"Well, we scouts know what's *really* important," Madison said. "So can we go *do* it now?"

Zane chuckled. "All right, miss impatient scout, let's go downstairs and raid the tree." He nodded to Anny and Leila. "You can come too, if you like."

"Thanks, but Ah'm meetin' my niece 'cross the hall for our own family shin-dig," Anny said. "We might stop by later."

Zane nodded. "You'd be welcome." He dropped over the edge of the roof, followed a moment later by Madison, and then Allison on the back of Annette's skimmer bike form. They touched down on his balcony and went inside to where the tree was all lit up, covered with lights and tinsel and various ornaments.

Madison peered at the tree. "Nice decorating job. You did it yourself?"

"Yeah," Zane said. "Well, I kinda cheated and hung the ornaments all at once with lifter fields, but hey, what's the point of being an Integrate if you can't cheat."

Madison reached out and touched a blue boxy ornament dangling from one branch. "What's this, a Tardis?"

"Yeah, I got it from Eleven," Zane said. "It's kind of an in-joke."



Annette curled up near the fireplace and Agatha squatted next to the tree. “A lot of stuff here.”

“Yeah, well...I’ve got both my sisters back again,” Zane said. “I feel like spoiling them some. And it looks like they feel the same way about me.” He squatted next to the tree and fished out a package. “Now let’s see...looks like this one is ‘From Zane, to Madison’...”

Rhianna’s mother had wholly embraced the twencen revival, and it showed in the decor around their googie suburban home in Uplift. Arlene Gates had decided that, rather than focus on a single decade, she would blend together the best trends of the century. There were 20s moderne mixed with 30s art-deco in the entryway and halls, the jet and space ages of the 50s and 60s dominated the kitchen and living rooms. Replicas of 80s and 90s computers had been placed in the appropriate rooms. A first-generation iPad replica controlled the home automation. The only decade that had been explicitly left out was the 70s.

And the Christmas tree was aluminum.

“Dear, I still think you took this a little too far,” Arlene’s husband Roy Stone said.

“It’s authentic twentieth-century,” Arlene insisted. “And you don’t have to water it.”

“Well, I like it,” Olivia said. “No reason to kill a plant just to decorate our house.”

“*Totally* metal tree,” Ivy agreed, throwing a *cornu* sign with her index and pinky to emphasize a different sense of the word. She and Cira had come back from Califia for the holiday, bringing plenty of gifts along as well as a tan that practically glowed.

Arlene hadn’t seen or heard from her newest daughter for well over a month. She gave Ivy, wearing her slinky morning robe, an appraising look but wisely said nothing about her claim to successfully ‘out-girling’ Rhianna. There had been a number of interesting family discussions the night before on how Ivy had “gone native”. She was a Califia Girl through and through, with a growing mobile skimmer repair business. Her large custom van, which served as home and business, was parked out next to the curb.

“Now, where is our lazy one remaining son and that elk of his?” Arlene said, deciding not to make further comment. Her fox tail swished in annoyance.

“Still sleeping,” Socah said, coming down the stairs. “That silly old satyr.”

“Not terribly surprising,” Roy said, chuckling. “He’s harbored a bit of a grudge against the holiday ever since he worked out for himself that Santa wasn’t real when he was seven. His very first research project.”

“At least he knew better than to spoil it for his younger siblings,” Arlene said. “Well, until the rest of the family gets here we have no young children...no reason to wake him before he’s ready.”

“Rhianna isn’t here yet, anyway,” Ivy pointed out. She smiled brightly. “That reminds me. I need to get dressed.”

Arlene coughed. “Just remember you’re with *family*, not going to a Christmas party, dear. That outfit you wore last night...”

“She won that round,” Olivia added. She was the judge and jury of the friendly competition between her brothers-now-sisters to out-girl each other. “Of course, our big sis doesn’t actually try that hard. You win two out of three of these little challenges you pose.”

“I’ll take any win I can get, sis,” Ivy said, smirking.

The silver vixen Cira nosed around the presents at the base of the tree. The gifts there mostly had anti-snooping seamless wrapping paper—it was fabled around the box, although some had the traditional hand-wrapped look. Her parents lay sprawled out along the far wall, watching her indulgently, while Lilac sat on her haunches and observed the tableau from the back of the room—undoubtedly capturing the image so she could do a Norman Rockwell-style painting later.

“Oh hey!” Lilac said. “Kaylee just commed Rhi’s on her way.”

“Ooh! I’d better hurry!” Ivy quickly disappeared up the stairs.

“What *am* I going to do with her?” Arlene said.

“Enjoy the entertainment, Mom,” Olivia said. “That’s what I do.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Cira advised. “She knows she’s being silly, but she’s owning it. Believe me, it’s a big improvement from how she started out.”

“It was worrying that we didn’t hear from you for a whole month after you left,” Arlene said.

“We were starting our business, for one thing. There wasn’t a lot of extra time between that and both of us trying to find ourselves,” Cira said. “But I think we’ve both got that behind us now.”

The doorbell rang. “Oh, that must be them,” Arlene said, hurrying to get the door. The door opened to reveal the lynx Fuser, in a hardlight Santa outfit with a red and white stocking cap cocked jauntily over one tufted ear.

“Ho ho hello,” Rhianna said, wiping their feet on the welcome mat and coming inside.

“It’s good to see you, dears.” Arlene gave them both a hug, then led them into the living room.

“I see Ivy’s not here,” Rhianna said.

“Planning a grand entrance, probably,” Kaylee sniffed.

Rhianna chuckled. “Have you known her to make any other kind? Well, far be it from me to spoil her fun.”

Olivia cocked her head, lilac skunk ears perked. “Not de-Fusing yet, I see. Oooh, gonna go for the one-up? I’d better inform my official recorder.” She glanced across to Lilac, who nodded and rezzed up a hardlight stenotype.

Socah rolled her eyes. “Boys will be girls, I suppose.”

“Exactly, Nana!” Olivia said. “And I get to decide to what extent!”

A moment later, the sound of footsteps on the stairs heralded Ivy’s return. Cira would have informed her the moment Rhianna arrived, of course. All heads turned as she swept into the room.

Ivy was dressed in a feminine take on the traditional “Santa’s Elf” outfit—peaked green cap and tunic, with a matching peasant dress instead of breeches. Green pointy-toed shoes with high heels completed the ensemble. The tunic was, of course, cut to support and display Ivy’s bosom to maximum effect, with plenty of cleavage. She paused to pose by the door.

Olivia nodded appreciatively. “Reasonable variation on a holiday theme. The bust is a little overdone, but that’s your usual style so no surprise there. I give it a 9.5.”

“Beat *that*, Rhi,” Ivy said. “I dare you.”

“Kaylee, if you would please?” Rhianna said.

The lynx’s Santa outfit and her fur flickered out, then she peeled away from her partner. Underneath it all, Rhianna had dressed in a very pink ballerina outfit, the tutu

unfurling from her waist like flower petals. With her figure she looked like a somewhat plump Sugar Plum Fairy. She then attempted to dance, but couldn't quite manage to get on her tiptoes.

"Oh, wow," Olivia said. "It's very, very Nutcracker. You really make that *work*, Rhianna. A for effort on the dancing."

"I had a few ballet pointers from Diane over at Cheers," Rhianna said. "But there's only so much you can learn in half an hour."

"Okay, adding up the scores," Olivia said. The stylus wiggled over the surface of the stenotype. "Well, sisters, I do believe we have a tie."

"Oh dear," Ivy said. "Should we flip a coin?"

"Or we could just be satisfied for once," Rhianna said, having a seat on the couch. "We're just being silly, *remember?*"

"But part of being silly is taking things to ridiculous extremes," Ivy said. "Still, point taken." She sat down next to her sister, then looked back upstairs. "You can come down now, Ferris, Franklin! We're done with the girly stuff."

"Thank Bacchus!" Ferris said. His RIDE partner, Franklin, was one of the first elk units in the War. The effects of the tags on Ferris's physiology were rather obvious. He looked like a friendly, absent-minded satyr—which made it all the more ironic he wasn't remotely interested in "girly stuff." "Hello, Rhianna, Kaylee. Good to see you both."

"Well, now that we have the floor show out of the way, perhaps we should get on to opening the presents?" Arlene said dryly.

"There sure are a lot of them," Rhianna mused. The petals of her pink tutu furled up again so she could sit.

"Just think how many there will be this time *next* year," Ivy said. "We may have to get several trees to hold them all."

Rhianna groaned and facepalmed. "Don't *remind* me. Luckily I'll be safely off-planet by then." Whereas Arlene's family had taken a quicker freighter, they'd saved money and bought themselves some time by shipping most of the aunts, uncles, and cousins on a slower route. "If I'm really lucky, I'll miss the arrival, too. Any updates on the delivery date for the Crate o' Cousinage?"

"It's looking like mid-to-late April," Ferris said. "We just got the latest tracking notice in last month's message torp. They're in a shipping depot on Zheng He right now, just two hops away from here."

Rhianna sighed. "Oh, great. I'll still be here."

"Uh..." Ivy said. "What? Are you going to Wednesday for something? Going to pitch that FTL comm of yours?"

"Not exactly. In fact, I want to talk to you about it later, while you're here," Rhianna said. "You might just want to come along. Anyway...*not* looking forward to April."

"Your brother and sisters and their kids are kind of a handful, Arlene," Socah said. "And then there's Roy's parents and their children and grandchildren. I still can't believe we got almost everybody off the planet."

"Twenty-eight of them, except for Ferris's ex-wife and kids. I know, I paid for it. With an arm and a leg, no less," Arlene said. "We'll sit on them as hard as we can, but..."

"My parents aren't *that* bad," Roy insisted, holding a steaming mug of coffee. "I turned out okay, after all."

"Most of the older generation are all right, but the cousins...ugh," Rhianna said.

“I feel bad about feeling bad about it, but I just know the moment they find out how well off I’m doing, they’re going to be *expecting* me to share the wealth, because *family*. ‘Work for a living? Why should I do that?’ They’ll rag on me for turning female, too. I was always the little twerp in the family anyway.”

“And me,” Ivy grumbled.

“Not if they want a handout they won’t,” Socah said. “They’re not *that* stupid.”

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Oh great. So *either* I get ragged on *or* I get schmoozed. I’m not sure which is worse.”

“I suppose I should forbear to mention how lucky I feel that, as an impoverished cisgendered academian, I need not worry about either of those problems,” Ferris mused.

“Yes, you probably should,” Ivy said judiciously. “If you were to bring up such a thing, we might just throw pillows at you.”

“Perhaps we should take them to a RIDE adoption agency and just neglect to mention one certain little key fact,” Olivia suggested, grinning wickedly.

Rhianna smiled brightly at her little sister. “So, so tempting.”

The expression on Ivy’s face matched her sisters’. “Please say we’ll follow through with that.”

“Girls, please,” Arlene reproved. Then she grinned, reflecting her daughters. “When you talk that way I’m tempted to swap with Roy, myself! Just to mess with my own sisters’ heads.”

“Oh, would you *please*?” Rhianna said. “What would it take to get you to go through with that? I’ll get my checkbook out.”

“You wouldn’t really do that, Arlene,” Socah said gently.

The former judge laughed. “No—at least, not solely for that reason. But it is tempting. Especially given the opportunity to be a *father* for a change.”

“It’s only fair to turn the tables,” Roy admitted. “Zharus being Zharus.” He looked at Ivy the Christmas Elf, and Rhianna the Sugar Plum Fairy again, then coughed uncomfortably, blushing. “*Anyway*, if this is going to be the first *and* last family Christmas we have for a couple of years, we should get started. Why don’t we open presents, then make breakfast?”

“Yay presents!” Ivy said happily. “Oh, you even hung stockings for all of us, just like in the old days!”

“Well, once you start a tradition like that, it’s kind of hard to stop, no matter how silly it becomes,” Arlene said.

“C’mon, sis, let’s dump ‘em out and see what we got,” Olivia said happily.

Arlene glanced over to Valda and gave her a nod, which she returned. “And you RIDEs should find a new clearing just opened up in the local Bambi’s Forest, with some virtual goodies for you. We were keeping it for a surprise.”

“Oooh!” Cira squealed. “Thank you, everyone! A virtual Christmas tree and stockings for all of us, too! That looks nice!”

“Now, let’s see...” Roy reached under the tree. “This one says, From Socah to Ryan, strikeout, Rhianna...”

Rhianna smirked. “Cute, Nana. Really cute.”

“And this one’s from Socah to Ivor, strikeout, Ivy...”

“Merry fuckin’ Christmas, bro.” Julius sat on his haunches next to the Christmas tree in the living room at Joe and Quinoa’s place in Uplift, long tail swishing back and

forth as he regarded Joe, still in his terrycloth bathrobe, on the sofa. The tree was a spectacle straight out of the 19th-century, with strings of popcorn, blown glass ornaments, and even little candles (with cold hardlight flames for safety, naturally) standing in for Christmas tree lights.

Quinoa was still upstairs, zonked out. She'd apparently spent the last 30 hours hitting every major Enclave or polity Christmas celebration in Gondwana, and a few in Laurasia. She'd returned three hours earlier with half her feathers in odd colors and the beginnings of a hangover, mumbling something about that being the last time she tried the *green* drinks, and gone directly to her room to crash.

Joe actually rather envied her endurance. He'd been practically exhausted after just an hour or two at Rick and Lance's Christmas Eve Blowout Extravaganza in Nextus. He supposed he probably *was* getting a little bit too old for Twister, but he never had been able to pass up the call of "Left foot blue!"

Quinoa would probably be out until at least noon. But that was fine with Joe, who was happy enough to spend the morning with just himself and Julius, just as it had been so very long ago. He grinned over at the cat. "Merry Christmas yourself, old pal. We've missed so many..."

"Feh. Don't think about all the ones we've missed, think about the ones we've got ahead of us," Julius said. "And if you even fuckin' *try* to give me thirty Christmas presents to 'make up for lost time,' *I'm* gonna give *you* thirty bites on your butt."

Joe chuckled. "You know me too well."

"Damned fuckin' straight," Julius said.

The doorbell rang. Joe blinked, and glanced at the wall clock. "Socah's not supposed to be here for a couple more hours. Who could that be?"

"Weird. I can't fuckin' make it out," Julius said. "Snow on the peephole camera? It's all blurry." He paused. "But it's blurry from *all* the security cameras along the front of the house, too. A spot of blurry standing on our fuckin' doorstep."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "A gift-wrapped guest. How appropo. Well, let's go tear off the wrapping paper and see who we've got." He went to the front door, followed by Julius, turned the knob, and pulled it open.

On the doorstep stood a diminutive lynx Integrate, in monochrome grey, festooned with heavy iron chains, locks, manacles, and the traditional cannonball chained to one ankle. "Ebenezer Scrooooooge..." the apparition intoned hollowly.

Joe and Julius spent a long moment staring at him. Then Joe deadpanned, "Well, if it isn't my old business partner, *Fritz* Marley." Julius sneezed, twice. "Are you even supposed to be within polity borders?" Joe continued.

"Probably not," Fritz admitted. He didn't meet their gaze, and his ears drooped. He was far from the devil-may-care hep kitty from the "good old days." "But I had to see you cats. Couldn't hold off any longer. Wanted to see if it could possibly be true."

Julius glowered at him. "It's true. Now am-scray."

Joe sighed. "You might as well come on in." He moved aside to let Fritz enter.

Julius stared at Joe. "What? Are you fuckin' kidding me? After what this pud's done to our family?"

"I've had thirty years to get over it," Joe said. "I'm at least willing to hear him out."

"*I should* fuckin' call the gendarmes and the fuckin' Marshals right now," Julius muttered. "All right, fine. But this punk makes one wrong move..."

“Hey, nice decor,” Fritz said, as Joe led the way back to the living room. “Reminds me of the old pad.”

“Glad you approve,” Joe said dryly. He took a seat on the couch again, Julius next to him. “So, here you are.”

“I can’t believe you’re back,” Fritz said, voice catching as he looked at Julius. He raised a hand as if to reach out to him, then dropped it to his side again. “What happened to you...I am *so* sorry.”

“It *was* you, wasn’t it?” Julius sneered. “You set up that sniper. Wanted to fuckin’ send us right back into war again, didn’t you?”

Fritz nodded. “Yeah. Sorry ‘bout that, man. I was out of my head with the damned neural templating. I did a *lot* of things I regret.

“Like, say, murdering my cousin Ophelia and washing her blood off in my bathroom sink?” Joe said conversationally.

Fritz winced. “Yeah. That. Dammit, I don’t even know what I was thinking now. I can’t even get into my head back then. I don’t want to. Don’t want to be that person again, *ever*. I was really messed up. You guys...well, you were the closest thing I had to a normal life. In my saner moments, I treasured that.”

“You had a fuckin’ funny way of showing it,” Julius said.

“I guess after I went totally off the deep end, I just wanted to do *something* normal to try to get away from what I just did.” Fritz shrugged. “Look...I don’t expect you’ll say all is forgiven, but I just wanted to come by, and say I was sorry anyway, and...well, *see* you. You don’t know how amazing it is to know that even *one* of the people I’d killed came back. If I’d known you could be...well, I’d have had someone look at your core a long time ago.”

Julius sneezed again. “Funny thing, that. They only figured out how to do it after Inties came out of the closet and started mingling,” he said. “If you hadn’t been out there doing your fuckin’ *boss*cat thing, who knows how much sooner it coulda happened?”

The lynx Integrate rattled his Marley chains. “I did a lot of crazy shit. But off my nut or not, it was still *me* who did it. Gonna be paying for it in squaresville iron for a long, long time.”

“What about the guy in your head?” Julius asked.

“You heard about him?” Fritz paused. “He says hi, by the way. Jiminy likes it when folks know he’s there. Ma says we might get him outta that box sometime next year.”

“Heard you’ve been doing some good work for the Marshals,” Joe said. “I still golf regularly with the Qube.”

Julius snorted. “Yeah, and guess who’s the fuckin’ caddy now?”

“Can a Jaguar *be* a Caddy?” Fritz wondered. “I thought those were different automakers.”

“Har de fuckin’ har har,” Julius said.

“And yeah...I’ve been busting my butt for the Marshals these days, with Ma and Gramps helping. It’s hard work, but at least it’s honest.” He shrugged. “Nice to have something I can be proud of at last.”

Joe nodded. “Then keep it up. Maybe someday...well.” He shrugged. “At least you did good work helping get all that media cracked. We’ve got all that Oil Age pop culture thanks to you.”

Fritz smiled. "Yeah, those were good times. Remember when that crazy lemur got stuck with *Firefly* inside his noggin?" He shook his head. "Well, I've said my piece." He gave Julius a good long look. "Just wanted to see your hep spotty pate again. Lookin' good, Jules."

"Hmph," Julius said. "Don't let the fuckin' door hit you in the butt on your way out."

Fritz grinned. "Don't ever lose that potty mouth. Maybe I'll see you around." He got up and started to walk back to the door.

Julius sighed. "Yeah, well...I guess it's good to see you, too. Take care of yourself. And 'Jiminy' too."

Fritz nodded. "Sure." Then he shimmered into invisibility, the door opened and closed, and he was gone.

Julius sniffed the air. "Yeah, he really left. Well, what the fuck."

"And that was Fritz," Joe said. "He seemed sincere to me."

"Almost ruined the fuckin' mood here," Julius said, stalking back into the living room next to the tree, then lay down in front of the big television. "But I ain't gonna let him. How 'bout a flick 'til Socah gets here?"

"Great idea, Jules. I'm going to pull up *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*," Joe said, sitting down in the jaguar's curled flank. "I don't think I've seen the *Cinematic Titanic* riff yet."

"Fuckin' A," Julius said, resting his head next to Joe's right hand for a petting. "Let the badfeelm roll."

Joe sighed. "Even after everything he did, it still kind of feels like something's missing watching this stuff without him." He glanced at the door. "Maybe someday...eh, well. For all of how it ended, I still kind of miss the old days sometimes."

"Yeah, I know," Julius said. "Give me a few years awake and maybe...well, just fuckin' maybe. Let him get eaten by a few more dragons or something first. But for now, let's watch us some cheese."

"And God bless us, every one," Joe said, reaching for the remote control.

If anyone needed proof of just how much the polity of Uplift had sprung back over the last year, the reinstatement of its annual Christmas afternoon parade would have made a great example. Drawing on the grand tradition of Christmas parades through the ages, the parade had dozens of floats put together by various local businesses and organizations that followed a twenty-klick route through Government Center where thousands of people lined the streets to catch a glimpse in person.

At the head of the parade this year was the Brubeck Mining float, in no small part because all three Brubeck siblings, including Madison, were aboard. Comprised of an immense hovertruck, this float actually bore the actual 6-meter IDE Chauncey on its back, with Zane waving from its open cockpit. Madison was seated on one shoulder, while Agatha and Annette the RIDE tossed candy at the crowds from below. Every so often they would change out positions so everyone got a turn in the cockpit. The Scouts' float, with a stylized paper maché starship and Marcus, Commander Lee, and several others in Scout khakis on board, wasn't too far behind.

Other local heroes were fairly evenly spaced throughout the rest of the floats. The Marshals were a few cars back, with Tamarind in her truck form and Katie, Relena, and the rest of the Young Guns waving from the back or the cab. The FreeRIDers garage

float, built in miniature imitation of the haphazard jumble of the garage modules around the central building, was toward the center, with Rhianna and Kaylee, plus most of the members of Rhianna's family who weren't on other floats.

Standing atop the central building portion of the float, holding a large microphone, was a silver vixen Fuser in the outfit she had worn the previous night—the kind of slinky, fur-trimmed, “sexy Christmas” outfit that had made Ivy's mother facepalm for half the evening, as she was doing right now. Ciria and Ivy were in the middle of their third rendition of “Santa Baby” and showed no sign of stopping.

There were also floats from the Uplift RIDE creche, with a quite put-upon Mary-Anne, Olivia, and Lilac busy making sure a dozen hyperactive RIDE children didn't inadvertently fall off, and the Brubeck RIDE Museum, full of veterans of the Nextus/Sturmhaven War and as many of their old partners as could be located—as well as two large bears and three excited cubs who were straining their attention almost as much as the creche's children were their minders. A few other RIDEs from the museum were also taking part in the parade separately. And a sleek Jaguar sports convertible, with Joe Steader and Socah Gates in the seats and a small jaguar lying on the hood, brought up the rear.

“Hey, 'bou!” Julius called up to the caribou RIDE Blitzen, who was pulling a skimmer-sled with a human Santa Claus in it over the crowd. “Having a fu—” Julius glanced at the children lining the parade route. “Uh, *fun* blast, eh?”

“You know it!” the veteran RIDE replied, galloping through the air. “Just say the word, Santa!”

“Ho ho ho! And away we go!” the big man said. “Onwards, Blitzen!” The flying sleigh accelerated towards the front of the parade, leaving a trail of ice crystals behind them in the air.

“I suppose you've been in plenty of parades in your time,” Joe said to Socah.

“Military ones,” Socah agreed, waving to the crowd. “I like this kind a whole lot better.”

“Me, too,” Joe said.

“Me fu—uh, *for sure* three,” Julius said. “Ugh. Dam—uh, *darn* my fu—uh, *funny* vocabulary anyway. Sheesh. I'm a computer, why can't I just *not* swear?”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “I thought that was just an affectation. You really can't *not* cuss?”

“It just fu—oh, for crying out loud. It just slips out, or starts to,” Julius said, rolling his eyes. “I don't...” he paused. “—ing realize what I'm saying until the word's half out of my fu—*funny* mouth.”

“You know, I think I'm starting to get that your ‘weapons issues’ might not have been the *only* reason they assigned you to me way back when,” Joe said. “I can just imagine the Army all lined up in neat little ranks on the parade grounds, being reviewed by General Latty all done up in brass and ribbons, and he stops and asks some random soldier how they're doing—”

“—and I go and use a...” Julius paused again. “—ing four-letter word at him. Yeah, you might be onto something there. And your good buddy Frank probably woulda thought it was a hoot to give you a RIDE who'd cuss you out all the time, too.” Julius snorted. “We early cores had quirks. *Lots* of fu—*funny* quirks.”

“Perhaps you should check with my granddaughter and her partner,” Socah suggested. “Maybe there's something they could do.”



“Nah, I wouldn’t have him any other way,” Joe said. “I’ll always remember him glaring at me out of his display panel, and those first words that convinced me beyond any doubt I wasn’t talking to just another Schnook Ad-I’s ELIZA subroutine...”

“Uh...effing A,” Julius said. “Yeah. Thanks, Joe.”

“Any time, buddy. Any time.”

Up on the Brubeck Mining float, Zane grinned and waved again. He was standing down on the float tossing candy out, now; Agatha had just swapped into the cockpit while Fused with Annette. “This is great, isn’t it? Doing things together as family?”

Agatha peered at the control banks in front of her. “What have those students been doing to our Chauncey? His joint tuning feels off.”

“Noticed that, huh? I think they managed to get about a 20% improvement in response time,” Zane said. “I think Dad would approve. You know how he was always fiddling with him. I don’t think the control panels ever looked the same way twice.”

“I was in there with him on a lot of Saturdays,” Agatha said. “I used to know every square centimeter of his chassis.”

“Yeah,” Zane said. “Dad almost left him to you, y’know. I’m still not sure why he didn’t.”

Agatha snorted. “I think Dad was a little disappointed I went into the Nextus bureaucracy. To be honest, I wouldn’t have had the chance to use him that much anyway. At least you were going to be out in the Dry all the time.”

“And he did have a hand in saving my life,” Zane said. “If I’d kept the hardlight in better tune I wouldn’t have met Terry, and I’d be at the bottom of a sandpit for a few centuries before anyone found me.”

Agatha had that expression where someone was trying to understand something a *little* beyond her. “That does not compute, Zane. I’m sorry.”

Madison laughed. “I parsed that just fine. Wait’ll you’re one of us, sis, you’ll understand.”

“At least there’s Fuser-sized seats in here now,” Agatha said. “That way Annette and I can do some clomping around if we feel like it.”

“Yeah,” Madison said. “Y’know, I wonder what Mom and Dad would say if they were still around. Could they get over how they felt about RIDEs and find partners themselves, like we did?”

“I don’t think Dad really hated the idea of RIDEs,” Zane said. “Goodness knows he employed enough of them, and was generally pretty forward-thinking in the way he treated them. I think he just didn’t like the idea of someone messing with his body. Even then, I don’t know how much of that was just an affectation by the end—keeping up appearances the way he’d always been. As for Mom...” Zane shrugged. “It’s been a long time since we lost her, and she didn’t have as long to live with them as Dad did. But looking back, it feels like it was one of those things where she said, ‘Yes, dear,’ to keep the peace in the family. Maybe if it hadn’t been for the way Dad felt, she’d have long since partnered up.”

“We’ll never know, now,” Agatha said. “Though if Mom *really* wanted to, I don’t think anything Dad could have said would have kept her from getting a RIDE. She was just like that.”

Madison nodded. “Yeah.”

Zane levitated a huge glob of candy with his lifter fields, then waved his hand to scatter it across the crowd in front of him. “Well, anyway, life goes on.”

“Yeah,” Agatha agreed, poking at the controls. “Hey, they even refurbished the Blu-ray player. Nice!”

A few floats back, Rhianna finally reached the end of her patience. “For crying out loud, sis, can’t you sing *something* else?”

“I’d do ‘Baby It’s Cold Outside’ but Ferris refused to have anything to do with the float for some reason,” Ivy said.

“There *are* Christmas carols that don’t involve unnecessary vamping, you know,” Rhianna said.

“What fun is that?” Ivy asked. “Hey, I know. If you want some other carol sung, why don’t *you* do it?”

“I have a horrible singing voice,” Rhianna said. “I sound like a mewling kitten.”

Ivy blinked. “Really? I heard you do karaoke before the change. A mewling kitten sounds like an improvement.”

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Oh, ha ha.”

“Now children, don’t make me turn this float around,” Arlene said.

“Maybe you and Dad could do ‘Baby It’s Cold Outside,’ Ivy suggested. “I think there’s an extra mic.”

“I think we’re content to leave that sort of thing to the younger generation,” Roy said.

“Oh, come on. You can argue million dollar cases before a judge and jury, but you don’t want to *sing*?” Ivy said.

“I think she’s got a point for once,” Rhianna said, grinning. “It could be a good advertisement for your new practice. The singing lawyers.”

“It looks like we might be outvoted,” Roy said. “I have no objections, to be honest. Judge Gates? Your ruling?”

“I’m not even sure I know the words,” Arlene said.

“Cira’s providing the lyrics, right into my brain,” the silver vixen Fuser said. “Her parents can do the same for you!”

“I’d have thought you’d have memorized them,” Rhianna said.

“Mom and Dad say they’re willing to help you two out,” Cira herself added, nodding to Valda and Darrik walking on either side of the float. “And they don’t mind a little more exposure right now, themselves.”

“I’m game!” Valda called out.

“Yep,” Roy said. “*Definitely* outvoted. And we can’t hope for a hung jury on this one. Your ruling, Your Honor?”

Arlene motioned for Valda to approach, then stood up on the float. Ivy hopped down from the platform and handed her mic over as she Fused, then opened a compartment built into the float to take out another one to hand to Roy and Darrik. “There you go! This ought to be good!”

Rhianna chuckled in spite of herself as she watched her parents and their RIDEs ascend to the platform. “I have to admit, that was a pretty good idea.”

“I do have them sometimes, sis,” Ivy said. “Were you serious about what you said earlier, about the trip?”

“Can’t discuss the details in public, but yeah,” Rhianna said. “God help me, I think you’d be an asset to the mission. You’re really good with skimmers. You just may not want to, since you’re just getting your own business off the ground. We’ll see.”

Ivy shrugged. “I can rebuild my business. I already did it once, I’ve got practice.

But the chance to...do what you said after we opened presents...that doesn't come around that often. If you really want me, I'm in." She smiled. "I'll even try to dial back a little, just so I don't drive you too nuts while we're stuck on the same ship for all that time. And Cira's on board with it, too."

"A whole *year* away from my parents?" Cira put in. "Why *wouldn't* I be?"

Rhianna chuckled. "Then stop by Zane's office after New Year's and let him know I sent you." She glanced up. "Oops, they're about to start. We better shut up now."

"Oooh. I'm so recording this for posterity," Ivy said.

On the platform above, the two fox Fusers looked at each other, then as the music came up, began to sing.

"I really can't stay..."

"Baby it's cold outside..."

"I have to go 'way..."

"Baby it's cold outside..."

And so the parade continued. For once, if only for a moment, there were no threats to worry about, no eminent crisis to fret over. There was peace on...well, *Zharus*.

"Yeah," Fritz muttered. He was lying spread-eagled on top of the main dome and peering down to watch the parade with his telescopic scanner vision. The weather was crystal clear for the parade. The city below looked magical in its fine coating of snow. Magical and *peaceful*. "Let's keep it that way, this time. Merry Christmas, Jiminy."

*:Merry Christmas, Fritz. But if you think I'm gonna say 'God bless us every one,' think again. That line is so overused...:* Captain Ryder said.

"Poindexter, I think you *just did*."

## Chapter 8: Diplomacy

*December 27, 157 A.L.*

*Nectar River Terraforming Facility, Totalia*

The *Satellite of Love* rested underneath the main superstructure of the ancient terraforming facility on the Totalian main continent's northwest edge. It was a sprawling facility, with an immense concrete structure resting on four pylons that rather reminded Joel of a qubitite mining rig from the Dry. It was convenient, both in providing shelter from the frequent rains and keeping the ship and people out of view of any new recon satellites the Zealots might have put up since Joel had seized control of the old ones. Not far away, the continent's third-largest river ran merrily through the open flow gates of a hydroelectric dam that hadn't provided power since the invention of totalium reactor shielding.

"You can heal her, right? You can *definitely* heal her?" Darrek Sigurdssen asked for the eighth time in as many days.

"Not in my ship's autodoc," Joel answered once again. When he'd finally gotten a good look at the state of his sister scout's injuries he'd been just as green as Darrek still looked. The good news was, there didn't appear to be any brain damage...which was lucky since just about everything else *was* damaged. "Your cryo-tech is very good. She'll be fine once we get her home."

The cryotube hummed in its corner inside the *Satellite of Love's* garage as it had for a Totalian week. The ship's pilot—the very strange Joel Roberts—had taken that time to repair systems that still had been damaged from an earlier impact by a Totalium meteoroid.

He had also taken that time to make sure he himself was fully healed. The Totalium had really done a number on his internal systems at first. But his body seemed to have adapted and built up a tolerance. He still had the substance in his system, but his immune system was no longer attacking it. He wondered if this would lead to ill effects down the road. He hoped not.

Out in front of the ramp, the Marines and Resistance were busy looking over a new batch of pulser weapons the scout ship's fabber had produced for them. Gauss rifles, pistols, RPGs, and weapons they already possessed were also in production, as well as medical kits, comms, and hand scanners beyond the abilities of their current tech. The miracle fabber took in raw materials shoveled into it from the abandoned facility—metals, semiconductors, organics—and disgorged materiel that would last the Resistance for months, hopefully long enough for the Zharusian fleet to arrive.

When Darrek wasn't stressing over Barbaretta's cryo-coffin, he was marveling at the incredible scout ship. True to his word, Joel Roberts had given the Totaliment the run of it, free to investigate or ask questions about anything that wasn't absolutely tip-top secret.

"First contact protocols with friendlies, and my own discretion," Joel had explained while petting a ferret resting in the crook of his arm. "Generates mutual trust."

So the very first thing Darrek investigated was the superluminal drive.

He was surprised to learn that the retractable “Drive Ring” wasn’t actually the drive in question. It was a very prominent feature of every ship design Darrek found in the scout ship’s history archives, from the very first demonstration ships only a century ago Earth-time. No, the ring maintained a bubble of Einsteinian space-time inside “subspace”, the high-energy realm that underpinned reality.

The *real* FTL drive was two pairs of “cortinide nodes” on the bow and stern of the ship. Opening a quantum jumpgate was relatively simple, it was surviving the journey that was the hard part. The Ring required a *lot* of power to maintain that space-time bubble, so much of the ship’s volume was fuel and tokamak fusion reactor. And the closer to a stellar gravity well, the exponentially greater power requirements were to create it, or keep it from collapsing catastrophically in normal space. Message torps had a more powerful generator for their size and only needed a small bubble, so they could jump from closer in, but even they were subject to the same limits.

*So, that’s why they had to run to the edge of the system before they could jump*, Darrek thought. It wasn’t as if there was no FTL travel in fiction on Totalia. It just tended to be of the “folded space” kind where the traveler was zapped across the distance without apparently moving.

When Joel wasn’t available—which was often, since he was frequently in conference with the First Tranche—Hamner answered his questions. As Darrek was Science Committee Chair, Hamner freely answered questions or pointed him to the right resources.

“And these ships of yours are built by...the Eridani colony?”

“They’re hands down the best shipbuilders in human space,” Hamner said. “They have a special arrangement with the Scouts. And even they don’t tell us everything. There’s some black box tech onboard I know nothing about. All thanks to one scout, Clint Brubeck—Madison’s father.”

The Clint Brubeck adventure novels were the first on Darrek’s reading list, when he had the the time. But for the short-term, there was none.

The First Tranche often called him into conference to explain and summarize what he had read. Sometimes he could report some level of understanding, but more frequently he had to tell them that the mathematics were simply beyond him. He knew a number of scientists in exactly the right fields, but they had mostly been inducted into the Zealots’ research program to study Barbaretta’s ship. They would have to wait.

Meanwhile, Teenette Clark had taken to the Cyclone micro-IDE. Joel had offloaded it as an example of Zharus’s tech level, and was thinking of leaving it behind for Resistance use since he really didn’t need it anyway. The motocross champ rode it up and down the long concrete spillway of the decrepit hydroelectric dam, or kicked it into its armor form and zipped up to the top using the lifters. She was getting pretty good with it, Joel observed.

“This is great! Is this what RIDEs are like?” Teenette asked. She and Joel were at the top of the dam, leaning against the railing to take in the view.

Joel chuckled. “Not really. That thing’s like a suit you’re in. If you were Fused with a RIDE, it would feel like an extension of your body.” He chuckled. “Those were the days. We still kinda miss them sometimes.” He reached up to pet the hardlight projection of the small ferret on his shoulder. “Of course, there are compensations.”

“I think I’d like to see what it was like with a RIDE,” Teenette said. “This is great

and all, but Samantha was *awesome*.”

“Yeah, ol’ Zach wasn’t so bad either,” Joel said.

“Hey, whaddaya mean ‘wasn’t so bad?’” Zach put in. “I’ll have you know *I* was awesome, too!”

Teenette laughed. “I’d really like to see Zharus. Are you gonna go back there now that you’ve met us?”

“We’re thinking about it,” Joel said. “If your First Tranche requests it, I might take one or two representatives and go ahead and jump back. There’s not that much more I can usefully do in-system with my cloak half-busted.”

“You think maybe I could be one of those representatives?” Teenette asked.

“That’s up to them,” Joel said. “They might want to keep you here to operate that suit for the Resistance, since you’re getting so good at it.”

“Huh.” Teenette thought about that. “Meh, this thing’s easy enough to use anyone could learn.”

“Maybe you should start teaching someone else, then,” Joel suggested. “Wouldn’t do for them to think of you as irreplaceable.”

“I might just have to do that,” Teenette mused. “Of course, that would mean less time on it for *me*, but...huh. Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’ll get right on it.”

The makeshift Totaliment-in-Exile Chamber was the former meeting room for the terraforming station’s management staff. The Resistance cleaned it up as best they could, but there was only so much they could do to make a structure abandoned for sixty years habitable again. The scout ship’s fabber produced panes of transparent aluminum to fix broken windows, replacement wall and ceiling panels, a conference table, cushy chairs, lighting, and even a roll of carpet.

During the past week Joel had continually reassured the reconvened Totaliment-in-Exile that his homeworld would come through. He showed them the story of the colony of Wednesday, four light-years Earthward from Zharus, and the millions lost there due to some horrible malfunction in their colony ships. He also related how even in the midst of that horror, human ingenuity had come through and saved the lives of many more millions with the invention of hardlight and the presence of FTL travel.

The Zharus Planetary Advisory Assembly at the time had stripped the system of every FTL-capable vessel in order to send aid. It had taken a decade before the system’s economy fully recovered—but even then the arrival of hardlight had been more than enough to balance the books.

“The results?” Joel concluded. He wore his scout dress uniform for the occasion. “There are no trade barriers between us. We are friends, brothers, in a sense. And they have no love for Earth, who refused to send any aid at all.”

“Very enlightening,” Second Speaker Torris Frankel said. “If we do formally ask Zharus for assistance—not that I don’t expect it will come regardless—what guarantee will we have that Earth will not try to assert herself here?”

“That’s not one he can make, Torris,” the First Speaker said. “We will simply deal with it when the time comes. I, for one, am glad Zharus found us first.”

“I have to tell you, Earth hasn’t been very friendly to wildcat colonies in the last century,” Joel said. “Yours is the first one we’ve found that’s survived for more than a dozen years or so. I’d imagine any aid fleet that comes will be interested in helping you build your defenses up, because Earth *will* be an issue sooner or later. Frankly, we

wouldn't be surprised if it came after Zharus before too long."

"Your billions to our millions," Trilby said. The last three days had included a sort of cultural overview of modern Zharus, a history of qubitite, the sarium energy revolution, the development of RIDEs and the Nextus-Sturmhaven War that sparked their creation. They had also been briefed on the history of faster-than-light travel and its ever-increasing speeds. "Since you began this cultural and political briefing I admit to being frightened. I'm old enough to understand why Clarke and his Zealots are so frightened, but I have the wisdom to disregard those same fears."

"Not to say we don't have reservations," Seventh Speaker Baldurson said. "But we also have *realities*. We cannot allow the Zealots to subvert our democracy."

"The voters were *very* clear on this," Frankel added. The rest of the Speakers nodded agreement. "They—we—wish to open ourselves to the galaxy. Regardless of my personal reservations or the Zealots we will follow through with that."

"We do have one more question for you, Mr. Roberts, before we give you an official ruling on this," Trilby said.

Integrates had been part of the discretionary Cultural Briefing Joel had given, so he knew what this would be about. He nodded. "Yes sir?"

"Integrates. Are you one of them? After what we saw you do during our rescue, I'd like to hear it from you."

Joel smiled. "Well sir, I may not look like it, but I'm actually part ferret." He extended his hand and rezzed a hardlight projection of Zach. "And this is my other half. Meet Zach." The little black-footed ferret waved a forepaw, then scampered up Joel's arm to lay on his shoulder. "He's a little shy around people," Joel explained.

"Absolutely incredible," Kendlen said. He had been included in the briefings all along. "A new form of life, created purely *by accident*. I was speechless when I met Samantha for the first time, but *you*? I wondered why you didn't have RIDE tags like Madison did."

"Most of the time we Integrates end up very furry," Joel said, bringing up relevant video and images on the hardlight projectors, including life-sized models. "Zach and I are an outlier. The ones that end up feral—that is, basically animal-shaped—are more common. Some of our fellow Inties called us 'meat-face', which is frankly borderline racist. We decided to get away from Integrate internal politics by becoming a Scout. Not much to worry about when you're twenty light-years from Zharus."

"Well, you've been very honest with us, Mr. Roberts," Trilby said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "We will debate this in private and have a final decision for you on the morrow."

The rescue of the Totaliment had been a Pyrrhic victory for the Resistance. Although there were pro-Loyalist demonstrations in the streets of Totalia City, there was little the Resistance could do to capitalize on it. After the Zealots cleaned out the tunnels the Resistance had lost a third of their fighters (dead, captured, wounded, and even deserted) and almost half of their materiel, including a number of the more advanced pulser weapons.

No doubt the Zealots would have their own versions of that weapon in short order. They had been built with a self destruct, but there was no absolute guarantee it would work.

It would take time for the Resistance to regroup, rearm, and recruit. With the

*Satellite of Love's* fabber, rearming would not be a problem at least. Finding enough people willing to fight for their legitimate government was another matter.

"I don't understand this at all," Kendlen said over breakfast in the *SOL's* garage. "Most of the people voted for contact, but now they're just rolling over for the Zealots."

"It's easy to *say* what you want," Joel said. "But sometimes *standing up* for that is hard. Nobody wants to bell the cat. Everyone figures someone else will do it. It's like why nobody does anything at an accident 'til someone yells to call the emergency comm code. Sometimes it just takes the right spark to strike the fire." He shrugged. "Who knows, maybe if more Zharusian ships appear in their skies, and they know it's *not* just them anymore, they'll all rise up together."

"I hope you mean *when*, not *if*," Kendlen said.

A runner from the Totaliment Chamber came up the ramp. "They're ready for you, gentlemen. They want Kendlen in there, too."

"Well, this is the big one," Kendlen said, standing up. "I can't imagine they'll say no to help."

They took the spiral stairs inside one of the concrete pylons to come out into the old terraforming building's main hallway, then another flight brought them to the level of the meeting room. The twelve members of the First Tranche In Exile (the eight rescued from the prison, plus four *pro tem* appointees) were arranged around the conference table. First Speaker Trilby Whitfield rose as they entered. "Thank you for coming, gentlemen."

"We're at your disposal, sir," Kendlen said. Joel nodded, waiting to hear what the man had to say. This would be as much for the Zharus government as for his own people, so he spoke in the formal tones of one statesman to another.

"We, the legitimate, elected government of Totalia, under the authority of the recent referendum, formally request material aid from our sister colony Zharus," Whitfield said, hand across his chest. "As much as we wish we did not need such assistance, reality proves otherwise. You and your...partner have already done much for us, Mr. Roberts. We are in your debt."

"We're fully prepared to stay if it means speeding up taking Rafe Clarke down," Joel said.

"That much won't be necessary, Mr. Roberts," Trilby said. "You have your injured compatriot to take to proper medical care. What you've provided for us here will suffice."

"We aren't *completely* helpless without you, after all," Jassen Baldurson said with a partial sneer.

"We do have two requests before you leave for home, Mr. Roberts," the First Speaker said. "First, that you take with you two Special Ambassadors, whom we will appoint shortly, on your return journey. Assuming your ship is capable of transporting more than one person."

"It is," Joel said. "And I agree. I'll be honored."

"The first Special Ambassador we've agreed upon is Science Committee Chair Darrek Sigurdssen. He is a natural for this position," Whitfield said. "He knows our own science and technology well enough to lay the groundwork for a possible exchange after studying yours." All this was being recorded for posterity, and probably a message torpedo that would precede them, so the politicians were using their most formal demeanor.



“Sir?” Darrek stammered. He rose to his feet. “I’m...I’m honored. Thank you!”

“For the second Special Ambassador, I ask Kendlen Canton to choose from the Resistance,” Whitfield continued. “Someone who can relate to Zharus firsthand our efforts to reclaim our proper government.”

Kendlen nodded. “I have someone in mind, sir. Teenette Clark. She’s been one of my best lieutenants, and she also met Madison Brubeck and Samantha personally when they were here.”

“A wise choice. So entered into the record,” Whitfield said. “We will also send along five kilograms of Totalium in ore and refined form for your people to experiment with. That much is very easy to obtain even with our present limited resources.”

“Well, good,” Joel said. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to have it. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“If possible, as you leave we would like you to transport three of us to rendezvous with the *Kybalion* and serve as our emissaries when and if more communications or ships arrive from your people,” Whitfield said. “They will be empowered to undertake any necessary negotiations on behalf of the full Totaliment.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Joel said. “Our cloak should hold long enough to let us slip past their blockade. They’ve called in every ship into orbit here to keep us on the ground.”

*:Of course, once the cloak gives out, it’s gonna be a race to the system limit,:* Zach noted. *:Those buggers are fast.:*

“I’m certain we can arrange something appropriate with Captain Sandeep,” Whitfield said. “Plus, recall you told us you downloaded the blueprints and specifications of our entire fleet?”

“Uh, heh. Yeah, that,” Joel said, embarrassed.

“You have our permission to fire upon *any* Cosmy ship that impedes you,” Whitfield said. “With your extensive knowledge I’m certain you can find ways to minimize damage and loss of life.”

*:Well, acceleration or not, we do have a maneuverability advantage,:* Zach pondered. *:It’s just those huge laser arrays. I don’t feel like ending up qubitite vapor.:*

*:I’m sure we’ll come up with something, pard,:* Joel replied.

“We have a great deal of work ahead of us,” Whitfield said, rising to his feet. “But we will succeed together. We are certain of that. Thank you, everyone—Loyalists, Zharusians, all—for your dedication and your willingness to put yourselves at great personal risk for our freedom. Thank you.”

The twelve members of the First Tranche applauded politely, then looked to the First Speaker again.

“This body is adjourned,” Whitfield said. There was no gavel, but the words were enough that everyone visibly relaxed, now that the “Official Record” recording light was no longer lit.

“I think I should go tell Teenette she’s about to take a long trip,” Kendlen said. “Pardon me, Speakers, Joel.”

“Of course,” Trilby said. “Me, I’m feeling a trifle peckish. I think I’ll take advantage of Mr. Roberts’ food fabber while he’s still here. I’ve developed a taste for Zharusian kraken.”

“Maybe in a year’s time you’ll taste the real thing and not a fabbed substitute,” Joel said. “I rather like your version of lobster.”

“Perhaps we can have a seafood exchange program in addition to our technology exchange program,” Trilby said dryly.

“Well, come on down to the ship and we’ll get your dinner,” Joel said. “Then I’m going to start prep for dustoff. No sense delaying any longer than we have to.”

## Chapter 9: Professionals

*January 4, 158 A.L.*

*Dryad Mount, the Dry Ocean*

The small dome-like building nestled in the crook of two giant boulders, sheltered from the sirocco winds that moved across the Dry Ocean. It was so well-placed, it looked almost as if it had grown there. The sheer perfection of its appearance in all other aspects rendered its one flaw all the more blatant—the big square hole in the middle of the roof. Fortunately, that hole was in the process of being filled, as the transparent aluminum panel to complete it lowered gently into place. A humanoid golden palomino mare floated just above it, her mane and tail drifting in the lifter fields her body generated.

“There we go,” the horse Integrate said with no small amount of satisfaction as it locked into place. “Airtight seal confirmed. Now you just need to run a full environmental flush to get the last of the Q contamination out, then your research team can start moving your gear in.”

On the ground below, a meerkat Fuser peered up at her and flashed her a thumbs-up. “This is *great*, Melisande! I can’t believe how quickly you put all this together.”

“It was mostly prefab,” the mare said. “I just adjusted the design for the location is all.”

“You’re too modest,” the man inside the Fuser said. “The yelps said you’re the best architect in Camelot, and I’ll be adding another review saying the exact same thing.”

Melisande floated down to touch down next to him. “All in a day’s work. I can’t say I won’t be happy for the yelp, but I’m just glad to know I helped further the cause of science.”

“And to know you’ll be getting paid, no doubt,” the meerkat RIDE put in snidely.

Melisande spread her hoof-hands in a shrug. “Well, I’d be lying if I denied it.”

“I think we can swing a bonus for completion well ahead of schedule,” the man said. “We’ll beam it to your account by the end of the week.”

“If you have any problems with the building, contact me and I’ll see they get patched,” Melisande said. “Anything else I can do for you right now, Dr. Peltz?”

“I think that just about settles it,” Dr. Peltz said. “I hope you’ll drop by in a couple of weeks to see how it is when we’re all moved in.”

“I’d love to. But anyway, I’ve got to get back to Camelot now. Call me if you need me.”

“We’ll do that,” Dr. Peltz promised.

Melisande nodded to him, then lifted into the air and headed over the dune to where her sporty little Camelot-crafted Q-proof flier runabout was parked. She could have made the trip out and back under her own power, of course, but it would have all but exhausted her batteries, and business was good enough that she could afford the small luxury.

As she settled into the cockpit, the DIN behind her left ear flashed with an incoming transmission. It was her assistant and secretary, Valerie. The ocelot Integrate waved from behind the virtual desk she used as her transmission environment. “Hey, Sandy!”

“Hey, Val, what’s up?”

“Got a line on a possible long-term contract,” Valerie said. “And I’m talking *long-term*. The details are apparently top secret, but it could be for as long as a year or so.”

Melisande’s ears cocked forward in interest. “What else do you know? Who’s it for?”

“Brubeck,” Valerie said. “The mining company. Apparently they need an architect. Buzz on the forums is that they’re suddenly hiring up a lot of professionals for some hush-hush reason. No one will say why, but apparently the pay is *very* good, even for a corporate contract.”

“Huh.” Melisande considered that. Her curiosity was piqued if nothing else. And she’d always liked what she heard about Brubeck, especially since he’d been responsible for letting Integrates finally come out of the shadows and mingle with the rest of the world. If nothing else, it had expanded her business ten-fold, as the number of customers an Integrate architect could count on had previously been limited only to other Integrates. She didn’t generally like long-term contracts, as she wasn’t fond of doing the same thing for a long time...but perhaps they had multiple projects they wanted done? “Well, I’m coming back in. Get all the info you can together and I’ll review it when I hit town.”

“Sure thing, boss!” Valerie said, and signed off.

A few days later, Melisande found herself in a well-appointed office in the Brubeck Mining campus in Uplift, peering at the tiger behind the desk. She still couldn’t quite believe she was here. She’d expected to meet with some minor functionary—she’d had job interviews before. But no, this was the man-cat in charge. “Uh...hello, Mr. Brubeck.”

“Call me Zane, please,” the tiger said, smiling disarmingly. “I’ve been reading up on your work. You’ve got a great reputation for innovative yet functional design, and almost no complaints from your customers.”

“Well, I do the best I can,” Melisande said. “And if I should call you Zane, you can call me Sandy.”

“Sure thing, Sandy,” Zane said. “So, if it’s not too personal, can you tell me a little about your background?”

“Well, there’s not much to tell, really,” Melisande said, considering. “I was force-integrated by Snatchers back in ‘45, as a witness to someone else’s public Integration—or so they tell me. I have no memory of it. No memory of anything, as RIDE or human, before waking up afterward. *Tabula rasa*, they call it.” She thought back to those early days, when she’d ended up in Camelot confused, alone, and aching with an emptiness she just didn’t know how to fill. Fortunately, there had been plenty of helping hands around.

Zane nodded. “I’ve heard about that. Sometimes Integrations just go wrong, especially forced ones. I’m sorry.”

Melisande shrugged. “Thanks, but I’m mostly over it by now. Anyway, I ended up in Camelot. Went through ‘Integrate college,’ and found I had an interest in

architecture,” Melisande said. “Whether that means I used to be a human architect, I don’t know. But either way, I studied under Camelot’s chief architect at the time, Sir Belvedere, then worked as an apprentice or journeyman on construction projects for several Enclaves—including Terrania, as it happens—and finally went into business for myself in ‘52, mostly building mini-Enclaves and hubs for Integrates who wanted to live alone or in small groups. I do most of my work in Gondwana, but I did a few things for Inties in Rodinia and even spent a few months on some space Enclave projects out near the system rim, just to broaden my range. That was just before you made your big announcement and the walls came down. Since then, I’ve branched out into non-Integrate clients—and really enjoy it.”

“Having worked in space is definitely a plus for what we have in mind,” Zane said. “How would you feel about being off Zharus for an extended period?”

Melisande’s ears cocked forward. “Off Zharus? As in, back in space? Building space hubs?” She considered the question. “Well, I enjoyed working in space before; I wouldn’t mind doing it again. But I’ll confess, I get bored with the same old same old. I’d hope there would be some variety to keep it interesting.”

Zane chuckled. “Oh, this will be *interesting*, no doubt about it. Unfortunately, it’s also very hush-hush, and I can’t fill you in on the full details until you’ve agreed to the job and actually left the planet. I realize that will probably make it harder for you to say yes, but I hope you will anyway.”

“What would I be *doing*, exactly?” Melisande asked. “Designing stuff? Building stuff?”

“Design, yes,” Zane said. “Building, probably. And I think there’d also be some room for teaching, if that’s something you think you’d enjoy.”

Melisande flicked an ear thoughtfully. “Teaching? Huh.” She snorted, the equine gesture more like a sigh than an expression of derision. “I can’t say I’ve ever *thought about* teaching, but that sounds like it might be fun. When would I be leaving?”

“Probably sometime in May or June. You’d still have time to wrap up any ongoing projects and such.”

“And of course I wouldn’t get to find out what it was about even if I *did* say yes until I left the planet.”

“Afraid so,” Zane said. “You’ll understand why when you hear it. We just can’t afford to have word leak out.”

“Staying one jump ahead of the competition?”

“You could say that.”

“Can I bring my assistant with me?”

“If they want to come, sure. Bearing in mind the same things apply to them about being away for a year.”

She smiled. “Well, you’ve certainly piqued my curiosity, Zane.”

“And the only way you’ll get it satisfied is to sign on,” Zane said, grinning. “I promise, it’ll be worth your while.”

“Well, you *did* defeat Fritz and save the world,” Melisande mused. “So you’ve earned at least some forbearance.”

“No need to make the decision right away,” Zane said. “Think about it for a day or so. Take some time, look around Uplift. Comm me when you’re ready to let me know.”

“Thanks, I think I will,” Melisande said. “Whatever I decide, it was nice to meet you.” She reached across the desk to shake Zane’s paw-hand. He had a comforting, firm

grip.

“It was nice to meet you, too, Sandy,” Zane said. “Good luck, whatever you decide.”

After the meeting was over, Melisande drifted around downtown Uplift for a while, looking in shop windows and watching the other people moving on the streets. It was such a new experience being in human society, not least because she had no memories of being in such places *before* Integrating.

For all that she was taking on human projects now, she hadn't actually spent much time in the polities. Her specialty was full-environment habs, after all, of the sort you didn't really need in a human town—and as a *tabula rasa*, without the experience of growing up among humans, it was a little intimidating to think of thrusting herself in among them. But then, Uplift itself was a “full-environment hab” on a grand scale, which was one of the reasons she'd been moved to follow up on the Brubeck offer to begin with. She'd studied the place in her architecture classes, but always from afar. Now she was actually *in* it.

And she wasn't the only Integrate, either. It was nothing short of miraculous to watch humans, RIDEs, and Integrates mingling openly on the streets and in the parks. Occasionally you saw a bit of wariness on the part of human or Integrate, but for the most part they all seemed to be well used to each other.

Somehow, Melisande found herself at a rotunda in a park where young trees were growing, and an ice cream shop shaped like a milk bottle was doing a land office business with a long line and lots of happy customers. Bemused, Melisande stepped into line behind a woman with a little girl of about three or four holding her hand.

The girl looked back and squealed. “Horsey! Look, Mommy! Horsey!”

Her mother glanced behind her, and smiled. “Yes, Courtney, she's a horsey. Hello, miss.”

Melisande chuckled, and squatted to be closer to the girl. “Hello, Courtney. I'm Sandy.” She let the girl reach out and touch her face.

“Horsey!” Courtney said happily. “I wanna be a horsey when *I* grow up too!”

“Maybe you can be,” Melisande said, standing back up. “But you have to grow up first.”

“Okay!” Courtney said happily.

The line moved forward, and Melisande soon found herself face to face with two cow Fusers and one smaller bovine Integrate behind the counter. “Ooooh, a new face,” the Integrate said. “How about a ‘Feelin’ Yer Oats’ mondae? That's a vanilla ice cream, oats, and granola mondae. Very popular with equines and ruminants. And for Integrates, we add sarium zinger sprinkles at no extra charge.”

“That sounds amazing,” Melisande said. “Please, make me one of those.”

“Coming right up!” Moments later, the dish was waiting for her on the counter. She could almost have sworn they'd prepared it in fast-time.

“Thanks!” Melisande said, taking it to a vacant table. The vanilla ice cream was sweet and rich, the oats and granola gave it some great texture, and the sarium sprinkles, the sole concession to her Integrate biology, gave it a pleasant tingle in her mouth.

As she enjoyed it, she checked the local yelps and tourist guides to see what else there was to do. There were plenty of interesting buildings around to view, of course.

Her attention was caught by one in particular—the original building Dr. Martinez’s research team had erected back in the day. *The original Dry Ocean enviro-hab. I know where I’m going next!*

After finishing the mondae and recycling the dish, she made her way the couple of clicks to the campus, where the red doughnut-shaped prefab structure was easy to find. It was small by comparison to the polity around it, but still larger than she’d expected. This was the location of the first hardlight dome on Zharus. *What an accomplishment.*

A young girl and a raccoon RIDE were waiting at the entrance. “Hello, miss! I’m Gina Martinez, and this is Jinkies. Are you here to take the tour? It’s five *mu*, and goes to pay for the building’s upkeep.”

“Sure, why not.” Her DIN flashed as she beamed the money to the tour account.

“Looks like it’s a fairly slow day today,” Gina said. “It’s just you and him.” She nodded to someone behind Melisande. She turned to see not a person, but a small hovering camera drone of the sort Camelot made for use by its larger inhabitants who couldn’t always fit into smaller spaces. It was similar to the camera drones that newsies used, but considerably sturdier and painted in different colors. This one was a bright peach.

“Hello, miss!” the drone said jovially. “Fine day for touring, hmm?”

“It certainly is,” Melisande agreed. “I’m Sandy. I take it you’re from Camelot, too?”

“I am indeed!” the drone said. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sandy. I go by Mr. Peaches.”

“I think I’ve seen you around,” Melisande said. “There aren’t so many large peach-colored dragons in Camelot.”

Mr. Peaches chuckled. “Indeed. And there aren’t that many palomino mare architects, either.”

“Zounds, I’ve been made,” Melisande said, grinning. “How’d you guess?”

“Partly, because I’ve been looking into building a place of my own outside of Camelot, and would naturally want it designed by the very best,” Mr. Peaches said. “And partly, I confess, because I’m involved in Mr. Brubeck’s little project as well. I thought this place might draw your attention.”

Melisande peered suspiciously at the dragon drone. “I see. Is this some kind of a set-up?”

“Oh, rest assured, Zane did not put me up to this,” Mr. Peaches said. “I only knew you’d been asked because as the senior-most representative from Camelot, I’m to serve as a sort of ambassador and advocate for those of its members who join our project. And since you were in the neighborhood, and I was already aware of who you were, I thought why not get acquainted?”

Melisande shrugged. “Fair enough. So has Brubeck told you any more about what the deal is?”

“Alas, I fear I’m as much in the dark as you,” Mr. Peaches said. “Mr. Brubeck is playing his cards close to his vest. I was offered a chance to join the project by Boudicca herself; all she said was that Brubeck was involved, and that it would take me away from Zharus for a year. As there are not terribly many opportunities for any Integrate to leave Zharus, let alone one of *my* prodigious bulk, I was intrigued, hence threw my hat in the ring. I gather I was fortunate enough to be chosen from among several candidates. Isn’t

it exciting?”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it,” Melisande said. She had to admit, the dragon’s enthusiasm was infectious. She was really starting to get curious now. What kind of project would take an architect *and* a dragon into space for a year or more?

“Since no one else is coming, shall we get started?” Gina said. “Follow me and I’ll start telling you this place’s history.”

“By all means, Miss Martinez,” Mr. Peaches said, bobbing his drone in a bow.

They followed her into the building, and she began explaining about how the building had been made. Melisande already knew all about it from her studies, but it was fascinating to be able to stand within it and look around in person. To think that this little shed had been all that stood between the research team and the unfriendly climate outside, not to mention the errant Q-dust in the environment. This and the Bifrost hardlight dome—which Melisande realized from the illustrations had been that installation in the park right next to the ice cream parlor—were the foundation of Uplift.

“In a very real sense, this building and its team could be considered our great-great ancestors,” Mr. Peaches mused. “They were the first to put serious study into qubitite, after all. Without that foundation, such things as sarium batteries or RIDEs’ cores could never have been developed.”

Melisande nodded. “And it’s also the first serious attempt to build a Q-proof structure, even if they didn’t entirely understand how or why,” Melisande said. “So many of the principles developed for its architecture are still in use today. It’s like the foundation behind every building I design.”

“Speaking of great ancestors, Miss Martinez, might I assume you are related to the good Doctor?”

“He was my great uncle,” Gina said.

“You must be very proud,” Mr. Peaches said. “I actually attended one of his lectures—my human half, that is, well before he met my RIDE half. It’s one of our fondest memories.”

“We get a lot of Integrates who have,” Gina said. “Some of them even share the memories with us. I like that. It’s almost like he’s still around giving those lectures.”

“I’ll be pleased to pass along my own,” Mr. Peaches said.

Gina smiled. “Thank you.”

The tour continued, and Melisande looked around and asked questions where appropriate. Meanwhile, she opened a VR connection with Mr. Peaches, standing before the immense golden dragon in a forest clearing. “So what do you think it’s all about? Some sort of, maybe, asteroid mining project?”

“That’s one possibility, though I doubt that the asteroid mining community would be terribly pleased at a corporation making inroads,” Mr. Peaches mused. “And as yet, I have not heard any protests.”

“Interesting,” Melisande said. “I don’t mind saying, I’m getting more curious by the moment. Which is probably what Brubeck’s counting on.”

“It is a powerful motivator.”

“Mining one of the outer planets or their moons, maybe? I hadn’t thought they had anything on them worth the bother when the asteroids are so cheap and easy,” Melisande proposed.

“I have a guess,” Mr. Peaches said. “I would not speak it aloud in case it should be correct; I should not like to have others speculating on it. But I noticed that this project



began around the same time the scout Madison Brubeck returned from out-system. Who knows what she might have found out there?”

“So, what, you think Brubeck’s organizing a mining expedition to *another star system*?” Melisande said. “That seems a little unlikely. He’d never get permission from the Assembly. Nobody wants to risk trouble with Earth.”

“What other explanation is there?” Mr. Peaches wondered. “I will say this—if I should be right, it will be probably be far more exciting than we might even dare to hope. Just imagine being among the first RIDEs and Integrates to be permitted to go farther than Wednesday.”

“You might just have sold me on this thing,” Melisande said. “Now I want to know if you’re right.”

Gina finished guiding them through the building, and they ended up near a small souvenir fab shop. Melisande bought a pin with the shop’s official encryption signature fabbed into it. As they thanked her for the tour, Melisande turned to Mr. Peaches in the VR clearing and said, “So, you were saying you might want to build yourself a house? Tell me about it. I can at least give you an estimate...”

At the end of the day, Melisande checked into the Uplift Sheraton for an overnight stay. It had been an interesting day. After meeting up with Mr. Peaches, she accompanied his drone to look at a few other points of interest in town, then met him personally where he was staying at the aerodrome. He was quite impressive, even bigger in person than he’d represented himself in VR, but every bit as friendly. And they’d even been able to agree on an estimate for his new bower, though they also agreed that they should wait to build it until after the Brubeck thing, whatever it was, was over.

Melisande had to admit, the Brubeck job was tempting. It was quite puzzling enough by itself, and to know that such a personable (not to mention renowned) inhabitant of Camelot was also involved was icing on the cake. She still felt obligated to *think* about it for a day or two more just so she wouldn’t feel like she was rushing into things, but she already had a suspicion she knew what her final decision was going to be.

She commed Valerie back in Camelot. “Hey, Val. How do you feel about travel?”

The ocelot blinked at her. “Travel? What, to Laurasia?”

“Probably a little farther than that,” Melisande said. “Brubeck was talking about working in space having been an advantage, and possibly being away from Zharus for a year or more. He said I could bring you along, if you want to come.”

“Out to space? Really?” Valerie shook her. “Is that all you know about it?”

“It’s very hush-hush. We don’t get the full details until we leave the planet. I met Mr. Peaches, though, and he’s involved.”

“Huh.” Valerie considered. “Well, if it’s something you want to do, I don’t exactly have any other obligations—and if you’re away for a year, then I won’t have anything to do anyway. So sure, count me in. I’ve always kind of wondered what space is like.”

“I’m still not a hundred percent sure I’m in yet, but I’m getting there,” Melisande said. “I’ll let you know when I make up my mind for sure.”

“Okay. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Probably best to put any projects past April on hold,” Melisande said. “Anyway, I’ll comm you again tomorrow.”

“See ya, boss.”

Melisande flopped down on the bed, tucking her hoof-hands behind her head. It

had been an interesting series of events to be sure. She'd fallen into a routine, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it was just begging to be disrupted. Being away from Zharus for a whole year? Yeah, that might just be what the doctor ordered. Bemused by the prospect of more interesting times to come, Melisande drifted off to sleep.

Melisande didn't remember her dreams when she woke up, but then she didn't usually. She sometimes supposed that it must have something to do with not remembering her past lives either. Maybe *they* were the ones doing the dreaming, not her.

But she did wake with a sense of certainty she hadn't quite had before. Somehow, while she was sleeping, she'd made up her mind. The job and the people she'd be working with both appealed to her. Why take any longer to decide?

A half hour later, she walked into Zane Brubeck's office. The tiger behind the desk looked up. "Hey, back so soon?"

Melisande grinned at him. "I'm in."

## Chapter 10: Dustoff

*December 29, 157 A.L.*

“So,” Joel said. “We have a dozen Zealot capital ships blockading the planet. Our tanks are fueled. Our weapons charged. It’s dark. And we’re wearing sunglasses.”

Newly-appointed Special Ambassador Teenette Clark looked at Joel in confusion. “Is that some sort of reference I’m not getting?”

Joel chuckled. “Sorry. You sort of get used to everyone on the planet knowing these things. Being on a world where no one knows what I’m talking about is kind of a new experience for me. On the bright side, we’ll have plenty of time in jump to catch you up on your cultural education.”

“Yes, but a star the mass of the one in Totalia’s system requires we be eight light-hours distant before we can safely jump. We have to get there first,” Darrek Sigurdssen pointed out. “Plus we have the rendezvous with the *Kybalion*.”

“You’ve been doing your homework,” Zach said.

“I’m going to understand how FTL works before we get to Zharus. It’s a personal goal,” Darrek said.

“Well, good luck with that,” Joel said. “I’ve got a basic theoretical understanding, and I know enough of the math to plot a course if the ship’s computer breaks, but the more-advanced N-dimensional physics are beyond me.”

“Well, I’m a scientist. I’m *supposed* to be able to learn these things,” Darrek said. “In theory, anyway.”

“The Marines just removed the last of the fabbed materiel,” Zach said. The squad of Cosmy Marines were staying planetside to train the Resistance, along with Hamner as the Scouts’ representative on the ground. That parting had been a difficult one. Hamner thought that his Zharusian cybernetics gave him a certain air of toughness, and he could continue Teenette’s work training others in how to use the Cyclone the *SOL* also left behind. “Barb’s cryopod is locked down with extra redundant power supply. The front ramp is up. We’re as ready as we’re going to be. Movie sign?”

“Movie sign,” Joel repeated. He engaged the cloak, then the *Satellite of Love* lifted off the ground, moving slowly until it was clear to the sky. He lifted it further to a thousand meters before moving off in a random direction, gaining altitude.

With approximately eight hours of cloak until the heatsinks were saturated, they nevertheless had to move slowly at first so they didn’t give away the location of the Resistance Base. The first step was to get free of the atmosphere before putting the impellers into the silent running mode that had worked well after entering the system.

The *Kybalion* had come as close to the planet as it dared, about one light-hour out. If the *SOL* could make it that far, then deliver the three First Tranche members it had onboard, then the huge Cosmy ship could take them out far enough to jump in relative safety.

“Times like this I wish we had FTL comm,” Joel said. “Would make coordinating with the Big K a lot easier.”

“That is a shame,” Darrek said. “You couldn’t send one of those FTL torps?”

“It wouldn’t work this close to your star,” Joel said. “Same problem as the drive. It’d crush the torp like a soda can.”

“Hey, the *Foucault’s Pendulum* is in orbit near here,” Zach said, bringing it up on the viewscreen. “I bet Captain Forestor’s jonesing for some payback.”

“So what’re you gonna do? Knock her out first?” Teenette asked excitedly.

“I’m not shooting anyone if I don’t have to,” Joel said. “Who knows how many in the Cosmy actually support the Zealots?” He opened up a view panel into the makeshift passenger area in the galley where the three First Tranche were belted in. “Besides, they sent along the Second Speaker. Who’s technically the Secretary of the Cosmy or whatever, right?”

“I don’t know if they’ll listen, Joel, but if it comes to it I’ll see if they’ll obey their Fleet Admiral,” Fleet Admiral Torris Frankel said. “I suspect the Zealots never cancelled my credentials to avoid raising suspicion, and if they still work they should permit at least a partial override of the ship’s comm systems. Certainly worth a try.”

“Hey, that’s an idea,” Joel said. “Zach, do we still have a backdoor into the *Pendulum*’s mainframe?”

“Survey says...yes!” Zach said. “They rebooted, but they didn’t patch the overall vulnerability. Now that I have their frequencies, I can hack them in a heartbeat.”

“Then we could play an announcement over every speaker and screen on that ship, when we get close enough,” Joel said. “Probably not have as much luck with the other ships we haven’t breached yet, but we could probably throw a monkeywrench into that one easily enough.”

“A little *space mutiny* just might be on order here,” Zach said.

“Assuming we get lucky and they have their own version of Blast Hardcheese aboard. Plot me a course close enough to chat with them, ten gravs of acceleration.”

“You can do a lot more than just ten,” Darrek said.

“If we wanted them to be on us like ugly an an ape, sure. You do the science, let me be the pilot,” Joel said.

“All right, all right, you know your own business best,” Darrek said, holding up his hands. “I just wish we could get this over with.”

“Don’t we all,” Joel said. “Unfortunately, we’re a sub, not a battleship.” Zach supplied sonar ping sounds over the bridge speakers. “They see us coming, we got problems.”

“Course laid in, Cap’n,” Zach said. “We’re on our way.”

“Fingers crossed,” Joel said. “This is the tricky part.”

Tension rose over the next several minutes as the ship crept out into space. Joel forced himself to remain calm on the outside, but in VR he was pacing worriedly back and forth, glancing at the displays that tracked the course of the Totalian ships in relation to his own and prepared to drop into fast-time at a moment’s notice for strategic plotting.

“The worst part of fast-time is that the tension just lasts so much longer,” Zach said, in anthropomorphic form next to him. “I have a reflective shield ready if we have to de-cloak and make a run for it. Might wanna consider it as an alternative. It’d last longer than the cloak and we can use their own weapons against them.”

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?” Joel asked. Even though they shared the same

body, he and Zach weren't exactly transparent to one another.

"I've been simming their laser power against our hardlight," Zach explained. "Even in fast-time it's been taking forever to find the right solution. Didn't have anything worth mentioning until now."

"And we could always reflect their lasers back and take out their own weapons clusters," Joel suggested.

"That's what I said. Still working on that one," Zach said. "But I think this'll work as Plan B, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that'll work." Joel mussed Zach's headfur. "Good job, buddy."

There were five hours left on the cloak timer before they had to drop the cloak and run, but they needed all that time to put distance between them and the Blockade. The more power in the impellers, the more gravity wake they produced, the higher chance of detection...

The Fleet Admiral called. Joel put him up on screen. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Captain Roberts, I know Captain Forestor and her crew well," Frankel said. "She's very unpopular, and her position is more of a political appointment than one of competence. I'm certain she's kept them in the dark about her Zealot sympathies. If they knew about the coup—which I doubt—they might mutiny."

"Space mutiny," Zach quipped.

"Uh, indeed," Frankel said. "As you suggested you might earlier, I request you transmit a message to that ship. I will order them to remove Forestor from command, then stand down or escort us to the *Kybalion*."

Joel pondered. "This is your call, sir. I think we can keep them from zeroing in on us. We do still have backdoor access."

Frankel nodded. "I had hoped so. Please connect me to their systems. I'll transmit my credentials and we shall proceed from there."

"I've got it all set up," Zach said.

"Great," Joel said. "Admiral Frankel, you're on."

"Attention crew of the *Foucault's Pendulum*," Frankel said in his most authoritative voice. "This is Fleet Admiral Torris Frankel, Second Speaker of the First Tranche of the Totaliment, on board the Zharusian ship *Satellite of Love*. I have transmitted my authentication code to your ship's computer. I have no information on what Captain Forestor has told you of the events of the past few months, but I will say this. Under my authority, Captain Forestor is hereby relieved of command of her vessel. The *Foucault's Pendulum* is ordered to stand down and transmit the following order to the rest of the Cosmy Fleet.

"Raph Clarke is the leader of a coup against our people. He and his faction have made a mockery of our democracy. They must not succeed. In the name of purity, they have turned our peaceful world into a bloodbath of civil war.

"You must not be a party to this slaughter. Some of you may have suspicions of what has really happened. I urge you now to act on them. Remove Captain Forestor and any sympathizers to Rafe Clarke from command, and join us in our effort to retake our world from irrational zealotry.

"Fleet Admiral Torris Frankel, signing off."

Joel nodded. "Okay, I think we're done. Push the button, Zach."

The transmission window made a *pwoosh* sound as the video shrank to a single point and vanished.

“TV’s Zach at your service,” the ferret RI said. “I’m bouncing that through the ship’s transmitter, so the whole fleet is hearing it whether the Captain wants it to or not. Admiral Frankel’s code overrode things I didn’t know could be overridden.”

“Of course, it depends on how they feel about their new government, whether it’ll have any effect,” Joel said. “Maybe some of them figure it’s legitimate enough to obey its orders. Who knows.”

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see,” Darrek said. “Either way, you’ve certainly set the ferret among the pigeons with that little announcement.”

“Whether they mutiny—”

“*Space* mutiny,” Zach insisted.

“—or not, I just hope it keeps them distracted enough to let us get to the *Kybalion*,” Joel said.

They all watched the tactical display for several minutes, waiting for some sign Frankel’s order was having an effect. The first ship to break orbit was, unsurprisingly, the *Pendulum*. They received a general hailing signal from the ship, which Zach passed to Admiral Frankel for confirmation.

“Go ahead and put him through, Joel,” Frankel said. “I know this man. This is what I’d hoped would happen.”

“Put it on the hexfield, Zach,” Joel said.

“You’re really going to have to explain all these weird things you’re saying,” Teenette said.

“Later. Let’s see what they have to say,” Joel said.

“There’s a *lot* of comm traffic in the blockade right now,” Zach reported. “Especially between the ships and the ground. It’s on a rather tight laser comm beam, so I can’t really make it out.”

“This is Executive Officer Kort Hallowell, calling Admiral Frankel. Captain Forestor has been relieved of duty and is being escorted to the brig,” he said. “Do you have further orders for us, Admiral? We’re ready to serve.”

“You’ve got a secure channel, Admiral Frankel. Go ahead,” Joel said.

“Commander Hallowell, contact Captain Sandeep on board the *Kybalion* and place yourself under his command. Relay the same orders to any other ships who follow your example. And stand ready to assist the cloaked Zharusian ship *Satellite of Love* in reaching the *Kybalion* should there be need.”

“Very *odd* name for a ship. Give the pilot my compliments,” Commander Hallowell said. “When he hijacked our whole mainframe last week he could have easily killed us. All it would have taken was ejecting the reactor cluster. Instead, we were just slightly inconvenienced. It only took part of the day to restore from backups.”

“What is your assessment of the rest of the fleet, Commander? Do we have enough loyalists among the crews to fully retake control?” Frankel asked.

“I’m afraid not, Admiral. Too many political appointments among the Captains with Clarke sympathies,” Hallowell said. “A quarter of the *Pendulum*’s crew have been restricted to quarters as it is. But we may get one or two other ships out of this.”

“Then the *real* question becomes if fighting will break out between us,” Frankel said, taking a deep breath. “Thank you, Commander. You have your orders. Frankel out.”

“Push the—”

“Got it, Joel,” Zach said, closing the screen with the same sound again. “I’m

keeping a data link open to the *Pendulum*.”

Two other Cosmy ships broke orbit soon after. They also sent out a general hail, then Fleet Admiral Frankel went through a similar routine of giving orders. The Blockade was now in pieces, without enough coverage for any one area.

“If we can get a couple of escorts I think we can drop the cloak and make a run for it,” Zach opined. “That was brilliant, Admiral. Thank you.”

“I doubt we’ve avoided bloodshed here,” Frankel said darkly. “In fact, I likely encouraged open conflict among the ships and crews. But I could not withhold the truth in these circumstances. Having some of the Cosmy join Sandeep will be fruitful in the longer term.”

“It’ll certainly mean Zharus will have fewer ships to worry about when they send someone back here,” Joel said. “Or at least will use up the Zealots’ resources to build and crew more.”

“I’m detecting some chaos on the remaining ships,” Zach said. “Including at least two cases of active sabotage.”

“Then perhaps we should forego the cloak and make a run for the *Kybalion*,” Frankel said. “Request escort from the *Pendulum* and the *Law of Learning*.”

“Probably not a bad plan,” Joel mused. “Keep a couple hours of the cloak in reserve just in case. All right, let’s do it.”

A few moments later, the *Satellite of Love* shimmered back into being again, with the heat sink panels open to radiate the waste heat back into space. They should regain cloak capacity at a rate of one minute for every two spent radiating, so staying uncloaked even for a while would buy them some extra time if they needed it. The *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *Law of Learning* were already on course to intercept and escort them. Fortunately, they were the two closest of any of the ships. But it only took a few more minutes for others to notice and adjust their courses to match.

“Gonna have to redline the impellers to keep up with our escorts, Joel,” Zach said. “And they’ll still have the acceleration on us with those supercharged Inertial Displacement Drives.”

“Now *those* I understand,” Darrek said. “Your own favorite impellers just do the same thing in a much smaller package. I’m surprised you can’t match our ships’ performance.”

“Yes, thank you,” Joel said irritably. “It’s not so much that our favorite tech can’t match it—it could, given enough power. The problem is that we don’t have those ungodly overstuffed fission plants your ships do. If you add enough thrust to it, you can make even a brick fly.” A hail came from the *Pendulum*. He put it on the hexfield viewscreen. “Hello there Commander. What can I do for you?”

“Perhaps next time we’ll meet under more friendly circumstances, Mr. Roberts,” Hallowell said. “Is this as fast as your ship can accelerate? I expected more.”

“All I can say is that it looks like we scouts don’t have the best sublight ships in human space anymore,” Joel deadpanned. “Just goes to show we’ve *both* got things to teach each other.”

“That’s as good a reason as any to hope for a peaceful solution soon,” Hallowell said. “Several ships are closing, but the only ones close enough to worry about right now are the *Cause & Effect*, the *Song of Creation*, and the *Reconciliation*. My crew are understandably reluctant to fire on our comrades-in-arms, especially so soon after

relieving our captain. We are willing to put ourselves between you and any intercepting ship, but I can't guarantee that if they fire we can respond in kind. We have some sabotage of our own we're dealing with. So be prepared to defend yourselves."

"Understood," Joel said.

Frankel, who had been listening to the conversation, rang in. "Mr. Roberts, you have my *explicit* permission to fire on any Zealot ship between us and our goal. I will take full responsibility for this."

There had been a few incidents on alien worlds where Joel had been caught between a proverbial and literal rock and a hard place, but none of those times held a candle to this. He was sorely tempted to give Frankel the ability to pull the trigger himself, but quickly discarded the idea. Joel had never felt a heavier burden in his life than he did right now. "Aye aye, sir," Joel said, giving the man a Scout salute. *:Okay, Zach, weapons hot. Pop open half the missile launch tubes so our pursuers can see them, too. I want us to be the prickly porcupine they won't want to touch.:*

Joel felt a tickle as the two escorting ships scanned his, then he was hailed by Commander Hallowell again. "Well, if you're trying to *frighten* them, I think they're backing off a little. What are the yields on those warheads?"

"They're variable yield. I use them for assaying asteroids in alien systems for potential mines," Joel said. That much was true, since the much smaller missile loads on most scout ships were used for just that purpose. "But I think they'll be just as useful against ships. Just as soon not have to find out, though."

"It doesn't seem terribly likely you'll escape it," Hallowell said. "We still have access to Zealot comms, and they just passed orders not to let you get away." The pursuing ships put on another burst of acceleration, closing the range rapidly.

"Well, there you go, then," Joel said. "Looks like we might be giving you a little weapons demonstration after all. Zach, we're in gauss range of the *Reconciliation*. Take out their forward laser clusters. Then follow up with some pulse blasts to their nav sensor arrays. If they're going to follow us we're going to make it difficult for them. We'll save the missiles 'til we see the whites of their beady little eyes."

"One well-placed thrown rock coming up," Zach agreed. "Aft weapons targeted... firing." It took several seconds for the considerably slower-than-light slug to pass the distance between the *Satellite of Love* and the enemy ship. The screen showed a flash of light from the bow. "Direct hit. Pulsing their sensors now."

The pulse cannons were rather more dramatic weapons. The inside of the barrels glowed before firing a collimated energy beam that lanced through normal space at a shade *over* the local speed of light. "Looks like we got 'em," Zach reported. "They're returning fire. Mirror shields already up. Ow! That would have been a burn."

The *Law of Learning* fired their own missile salvo at the *Reconciliation*. The four missiles split into multiple warheads, then puffed into massive amounts of chaff that scattered incoming laser beams. Not only would it diffract their attacks, but at the speeds they were moving it would cause at least some minor hull damage unless the ships could avoid it or deflect it with shields.

The oncoming ships didn't hesitate to return fire, raking the *Law of Learning* with lasers that still packed some punch even after the chaff dispersal. They followed up with a missile of their own, which didn't contain something as harmless as chaff. It struck the *Law of Learning* squarely in the stern, and its engines flickered and went dark.



“Yow. That was about a kiloton nuke, by my estimates,” Zach said. “Probably not the worst they could have done, either.”

“They don’t want to kill their own either,” Joel said.

“Not to be a bother, but are we going to do something to help our other escort?” Darrek said. “They don’t appear to be using any weapons at all.”

“I think they’re close enough for missiles now,” Joel said. “Fire plan Mitchell. Give them as much pulser fire as our capacitors can take. They can’t shoot at what they can’t see.”

“They won’t be Walking Tall after we’re done with them,” Zach said. “Emptying aft bay. Missiles away!”

Teenette hadn’t said a word since before the battle began, mesmerised by the tactical display and the sight of one of the thousand-meter Cosmy ships falling behind after their engines were taken out. Two dozen Zharusian missiles launched from the aft-portside missile bay, taking arcing trajectories as if it was some kind of airshow performance rather than a circus of oncoming death to their pursuers.

“Oh my God!” Admiral Frankel exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, Admiral,” Joel said. “Half of them are EMP decoys, and the other half are dialed to low yield. Ideally we’ll knock out some critical systems with as few fatalities as possible. Hopefully it’ll persuade their friends to back off a little.”

Explosions peppered the bronze hull of the *Reconciliation*, making the kilometer-long ship into a pock-marked shadow of itself. Joel winced as a half dozen hull breaches blew atmosphere into space, but thankfully no crew that they could see.

Joel broadcast over an open comm channel. “Attention, hostile ships. Those missiles were set to low yield. We’ve got plenty more where they came from. We don’t *want* to hurt anyone, but we *will* defend ourselves. Next batch will hurt a lot more.”

“How many more of those missiles do you have?” the Admiral asked.

“Seventy-five,” Joel deadpanned. “Our next salvos will be a lot smaller and higher-yield. That one was just for show.”

“Vampire, vampire! We have incoming missiles!” Zach reported in fast-time. “Looks like six of them, all targeting us.”

“I’m flattered,” Joel said, forcing himself to stay calm. At this level of time compression there was enough time to consider how to respond. “You’ve got a firing solution? Pulse them out of space.”

“On it,” Zach said. “There we go. Confirming destruction of all six missiles.”

All the *Reconciliation* had left were missiles. Every laser in their forward firing arc had been taken out by missile, gauss, or pulse beam. But they weren’t backing down. “Now they’re firing twelve at us,” Zach reported. “Taking them out...whew. That last one scorched the paint.”

“Captain Falco is like a dog that won’t let go of a soup bone, to the detriment of his crew,” Admiral Frankel darkly. “*His* ship captured the first three scouts, and I understand *almost* recaptured Hamner. Do what you must.”

“Pulse them a few more times,” Joel said. “If we hit them with any more missiles we might outright destroy them. And let’s not leave those other two ships out of the party. Target the *Cause & Effect* and *Song of Creation*; fire plan Sidehackers.” That involved sending five missiles each, set for medium yield, to target weak points on each ship.

Several explosions went up from the starboard hull of the *Reconciliation*, and the

ship stopped accelerating. “I think they’re dead in the water, cap’n,” Zach reported. “I’m reading critical hits on the other two ships. But...whoa boy. They’ve just salvoed two dozen missiles at us. Firing pulse, gauss, and missiles—aw crap.” Shock harnesses snapped into place around Joel and the passengers. The emergency inertial dampers kicked in, giving them the sensation of moving through thick syrup.

“Full shields!” Joel shouted. He needn’t have said anything. Power surged into the emergency hardlight emitters, encasing the *Satellite of Love* in shimmering armor—the kind only deployed to prevent damage from an uncontrolled, meteoric descent from orbit.

Even with all of that, Joel nearly blacked out as two impacts shook the ship. “*Hamdingers!* Damage report!”

“Minor damage to engines, rear pulsers one and three,” Zach reported. “Missile bay one inoperable, luckily it was already empty anyway. Lost the cloak again, too. No internal damage, and Barb’s pod is still at 100%.”

There were still over sixty missiles left in the bays. The two ships wouldn’t wait to fire a follow-up salvo to finish the job. The *Foucault’s Pendulum* could do very little besides put themselves in the crossfire, but Joel warned them off. “All right, fine. Empty the bays, max yield. They want to play? Let’s play! Fire plan Cave Dwellers!”

“You sure about that, Joel? That’s a little overkill, and there’s three more ships closing,” Zach reminded him.

“Three *more*? Grr...” Joel gritted his teeth. “All right. Fire plan Rocket Attack U.S.A. That should be more than enough and still leave us some reserves.” Ten more missiles went streaking from the bays, set to maximum yield this time but set to detonate meters away from the ships. The two ships were buffeted by explosions, disappearing in the sharp, bright blast waves, only to reappear looking like they’d been through a crusher. If any of the missiles had actually struck their hulls, the *Song of Creation* and *Cause & Effect* would have been drifting wrecks instead of merely severely damaged.

“I think that took care of them,” Zach said. “They’ve stopped accelerating altogether, and they’re leaking atmo. But those other three ships will be in firing range in four minutes. We can’t take any more missile hits like before, Joel.”

“We’ll go straight to Rocket Attack U.S.A. the moment they come into range, and keep firing for as long as the missiles hold out,” Joel said. He gripped the armrests of his seat. He really *didn’t* want to kill anybody, but if he had to, well...

“Comm blast from the *Kybalion!*” Zach shouted. “Woot! They’re incoming!”

“This is Captain Sandeep calling all ships,” the *Kybalion* broadcast. “All friendly ships, you are to defend the *Satellite of Love* at all costs! I order you to fire as necessary on the Zealots. The safety of that ship is of the utmost importance to our planet’s future! All enemy ships, you are warned to break off or stand down at once. We will *not* hesitate to defend our own.”

“The other ships are breaking off,” Zach reported. “I guess they don’t want to have to deal with us *plus* the Big K.”

“The Flagship is quite capable of surgical precision with her lasers at that range,” Admiral Frankel said. “She’s the most advanced ship in the fleet. I wonder if the Zealots managed to get any more of her class finished? I’d have thought if they had they’d have fielded them by now.”

“You have *more* of them?” Darrek exclaimed. Through the whole battle he and

Teenette had been silent, but now that it appeared to be over they were coming out of their shock. “That wasn’t in the budget, sir.”

“We have had two ‘spare’ spaceframes kept in reserve for a decade, Mr. Sigurdssen,” the Admiral said.

“Oh, great. Just *great*. Let’s hope the Zharusians arrive in force before they can launch them,” Darrek said.

“Just how quickly could they get those into service?” Joel asked.

“We may not have as advanced construction techniques as you do, Mr. Roberts, but we are good at what we do have,” Frankel said. “A matter of months.”

“Request docking instructions from the *Kybalion*, Zach. We have some repairs to make before we can jump,” Joel said.

From there, things moved fairly quickly. Between materiel requests for the Resistance, Joel had fabbed the necessary equipment for the *Kybalion* to detect, retrieve, recharge, and dispatch Zharusian comm torpedoes. He oversaw its installation and testing aboard the ship, and offloaded a couple of spare torpedoes from the *Satellite of Love* to use in case of new developments.

They spent a couple of days making repairs, concentrating on the things they had to be outside the ship to reach. There would be plenty of time during jump to repair noncritical systems from the inside. Meanwhile, after the Fleet Admiral was given a proper greeting due his rank, the First Tranche representatives settled into new quarters on Sandeep’s ship, and spent the time composing additional messages for Joel to send ahead on the torpedo he would be dispatching before jumping himself.

Teenette and Darrek pitched in to help as much as they could, for all that they were neophytes to Zharusian technology. Joel didn’t turn them down. He used it as an opportunity to give them some first-hand technical experience of what they had to look forward to after relations were established.

At last the ship was as whole as it was going to get for the time being, the Totalian messages had been collected, and everyone except Joel himself was safely aboard. He met Sandeep and Frankel on the *Kybalion*’s bridge one last time. “Well, Captain, Admiral, I can’t say it hasn’t been interesting, but it’s time to go. No offense, but I’ll be a lot happier once we’ve safely jumped out of here.”

“I quite understand, Captain Roberts,” Sandeep replied, offering his hand. Joel shook it, and Frankel’s in turn. “May you have a safe journey.”

“May the Totality protect you,” Frankel said.

“And you,” Joel said. “Well, I should get to my ship now. Thanks for everything. I hope I’ll see you both again in a few months.”

“Good luck,” Sandeep said as Joel turned to go. “We’ll be waiting.”

Joel nodded, then left the bridge and hurried back to the shuttle bay. The visit hadn’t exactly gone according to plan, and he was probably going to catch about nineteen different kinds of hell when they got back to Zharus. He’d resigned himself to that.

The ferret *was* well and truly out of the bag by this point, because even if he left the little fact of his being an Integrate out of his report the way Madison obviously had omitted Samantha, enough of the Totalians had seen it that they couldn’t fail to mention it themselves. Anyway, even *trying* to leave it out would mean having to edit the combat footage—not to mention the Totaliment’s official communiques—in ways that would be

fairly obvious to any onlooker older than about four years old.

*:What's that thing the Marshals say? Personal isn't the same as important?:*  
Zach said.

*:And I can't think of anything more important than this, so we'll just bite the bullet on the consequences,:* Joel said as they strolled through the corridors, nodding at the giant ship's busy crew. They were paying him the respect due his Captain's rank, and gave him a salute, plus no small amount of awe. *:I kind of like these people. It's not every day a scout gets to help out like this.:*

*:Unless you're a Brubeck,:* Zach said, smirking.

*:True enough,:* Joel said. *:Remind me to buy Maddie a drink when we get back to Zharus. If she doesn't buy me one first. You've uploaded all the reports, messages, and documentation to the message torpedo?:*

*:It's all ready to send once we're in the clear,:* Zach said. *:I only wish I could see the looks on their faces when they get it.:*

*:I think we'll have to be content with seeing the looks on their faces when we get back,:* Joel said. *:Whether we want to or not.:* He stepped into the shuttle bay, and paused to take one last look at his ship, sitting there with the gangplank down, ready for boarding. If all went well, he wouldn't get this view again until they were back home.

*:The sooner we leave, the sooner we get there,:* Zach reminded him.

*:Right you are, ol' pal,:* Joel said. *:Darrek and Teenette are waiting on the ship, so let's get this show on the road.:* He strode up the ramp, and it lifted shut behind him.

An hour later, Joel watched with satisfaction as the message torpedo accelerated away, then winked out as soon as it was a safe distance for the jump. "Well, there we go. No power in space can stop it now; they'll get that torp in a couple of weeks and that will be that."

"Great. How long until we can enter jump ourselves?" Darrek asked.

"Someone's a little impatient," Zach smirked. "Drive Ring is extended and humming. We're in our own private universe right now. Nodes are singing, ready to move us into subspace."

"We're just running the final pre-jump diagnostics now," Joel said. "Give me a minute." The *Satellite of Love* accelerated away from Totalia's sun, leaving the *Kybalion* behind. "Okay, that's it. We can jump at any time." Joel turned and grinned at them. "You're going to be the first people from your entire star system ever to go faster than light. Any famous last words on this historic occasion? One small step and all that?"

"It's a far, far better thing I do...I regret I have only one life to give..." Darrek grinned. "Oh, heck. Let's just get on with it."

"Second star to the left, and straight on 'til morning!" Teenette declared, pointing in Pharos's direction behind the nebula.

Joel chuckled. "Go ahead and hit the 'engage' button if you want, Darrek, Teenette. We're good to go."

Darrek and Teenette both reached for the button simultaneously, then stopped, and Teenette nodded to Darrek. He grinned at her, then reached out and slapped the button.

Ahead of the *Satellite of Love*, space-time seemed to stretch slightly, like a film of plastic over a bowl. The entire ship hummed with readiness. "Submerging now," Zach reported. Then the stars simply faded away into the featureless whiteness of subspace.

“Well, that’s that,” Joel said. “The view out the windows is going to be pretty boring until we hit Zharus space. I try not to look at it that much.” He cued the shutters to close.

“That’s it?” Teenette said. “I was kind of expecting something a little...I dunno, flashier.”

“No big whoosh going to warp, or stars streaking by,” Zach said. “But you don’t wanna know what’s *outside* this bubble. By the way, our realspace speed is equivalent to about fifty times the speed of light, give or take.”

“Wow. That’s pretty impressive,” Teenette said. She hugged herself. “Oooh, I can’t believe it! I’m going to be the first Totalian in a hundred years to see another world!”

“Two hundred years, if you count cryo time,” Darrek put in.

Joel turned his chair to face them. “So. Who’s for a movie?”

“I dunno, you got any good ones?” Darrek asked.

Joel grinned. “A few. But the terrible ones are a *lot* more fun. C’mon, I’ll show you. I think you’re really going to like this...” He led them off the bridge, and the first door shut behind them.

On the main control console, Zach derezzed and fell into character. “Movie sign in five, four, three...”

**TO BE CONTINUED**