
Array Wars: Episode 2.0

Return of the Phantom Menace

Peter Jones

Also by Peter Jones:

Array Wars Episode 1.0: The New Hope Strikes Back

ARRAY WARS EPISODE 2.0

RETURN OF THE
PHANTOM MENACE



An electronic copy of this book is online at
http://www.petesplace.id.au/array_wars/

This is the second pocket size edition,
prepared for POD publication in July, 2008.

It corrects numerous irritating little errors which found their way
into the first edition, and which formed a powerful lesson: don't
rush it to print just to make an arbitrary deadline!

Array Wars: Episode 2.0, Return of the Phantom Menace

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This book was written for the 2006 National Novel Writing
Month. However, no liability on their part is suggested or implied.

The final word count, after a mammoth editing session in
September/October 2007, is **73689**.

For Team Daffodil:

*Thanks for your friendship
and support!*

Return of the Phantom Menace

Author's Notes

Greetings, gentle reader. Welcome to the second instalment in my *Array Wars* trilogy.

As with *Array Wars Episode 1.0: The New Hope Strikes Back*, this novel borrows from a wide range of sources. Apart from the obvious three—*Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Star Trek*—I shall not bother, this time, to list those other works of fiction from which I have so shamelessly borrowed. Playing ‘spot that reference’ is half the fun!

Of course, this story would not exist without the work of George Lucas, the Wachowski Brothers, and Gene Roddenberry. Without the universes they created—and that so many other people worked to flesh out—I would have nothing to parody. (I might even be forced to think up my own stories!) My novel is, of course, intended as a parody of said works, and of the characters and situations created and owned by Lucas and Wachowski and Roddenberry. It is certainly not intended for any commercial use, nor is it intended to in anyway disparage said works (of which I am a great fan; I quickly found that the only way to write a story such as this is by having intimate knowledge of the stories it is based upon; the sort of knowledge that only comes from watching them a dozen times over...) In short: please don't sue me, guys.

Any resemblance between any characters in this story and any people, living or otherwise, is purely unintentional—including, of course, those few cameo roles which I have inflicted upon certain of my friends; you know who you are! Needless to say, such cameos should not be taken too seriously; they are **in name only** (more or less), and no aspersions should be drawn between the people featured and the characteristics their namesakes might happen to bear herein. In short: please don't sue me, guys. (Besides, I've still got to write *Episode 3.0* yet...)

Additional Thanks:

I would like to extend my additional thanks to Chris Baty and the people who make NaNoWriMo¹ work every year. If not for them and their crazy, wonderful idea, this novel would never have been written: this is, of course, my effort for **NaNoWriMo 2006!**

I would also like to thank all of my friends who put up with my wild enthusiasm for this crazy, wonderful project, and who nagged me when I fell behind, and who cheered me on when I was doing well, and urged me on (and threatened me with grievous bodily harm) on those occasions when it seemed like I might not finish. Thanks, guys and gals. This novel was, for some reason, a lot harder to write than the first; if you all hadn't stood behind me, I might never have gotten it finished. As Matthew Reilly once said in the foreword of one of *his* novels:

'To anyone who knows a writer, never underestimate the power of your encouragement.'

That is so true!

¹ National Novel Writing Month: <http://www.nanowrimo.org>

Then there's Boadicea. In the introduction to my first novel, I said I owed her a T-shirt. Well, she got her shirt, just in time to make it onto the cover of the book. This time around, when I decided that she would need to be on the cover of both this book and the next—*Array Wars Episode 3.0: Attack of the Stiff*—I decided to get her some new apparel. Of course, I went back to Julie Keightley of *HotGraphix*, who had made the original shirt, and she came through for me again. Thanks, Julie!

Warning: Parental Guidance and Spoilers

If you've read *Episode 1.0*, you'll have a good idea of what to expect from this novel. It has all that, and more! This novel is a lot *darker* than my first. It also has more adult language and situations than the first—or as the classification boards would say: 'Violence, Sexuality, Torture, and Drug Use'! Oh my! This was the dark path that my story wanted—needed—to follow.

Don't worry, though, there's nothing *too* explicit! After all, I'm still hoping my mother will be able to read and enjoy it!

Additionally, my story may well contain certain plot spoilers for *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*. If you have somehow managed to miss seeing these movies (and their sequels) I really do recommend that you go watch them *before* you read this story. (Besides which, if you know *them* you will likely get more out of *this*...)

Enjoy!

Return of the Phantom Menace

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Introduction

Once Upon a Thyme...

A beginning is a very delicate time. Know, then, that it is the twenty-first standard year of the New Imperial calendar. The known galaxy groans beneath the heavy-handed rule of the Stiff Imperator, Palpatore the First.

In this time, the most expensive substance in the galaxy is the spice, *Menaajatwaa*: the spice extends life; the spice expands consciousness; the spice is vital to the black market. The smugglers who carry the spice make up a large percentage of all space traffic, and its trade contributes significantly to the economies of several planets. Those who use the nacarat spice gas claim it gives them the ability to fold space—that is, to travel to any place in the galaxy, without moving—but you have to expect that sort of crazy talk from a bunch of spaced-out junkies.

The spice is a xerophyte, and is found on only one planet in the entire galaxy—a desolate, dry planet, with vast deserts.

Hidden away within the rocks of these deserts are a people—known to outsiders as the Desert Dwellers—who call themselves the Freema. They have long held a prophecy that a man would come, a messiah, who would lead them to true freedom. These are a people who

choose to live in the deep deserts, who roam where they will, who do what they like, and who pay heed to no laws or government but their own tribal code—and who spend all of their extensive spare time wishing they were free. Needless to say, they are not well liked.

In truth, their messiah has come and gone, and even *he* didn't like them very much. He wasted many weeks attempting to spur them into action, to rise up and quash their mostly imaginary oppressors, to do *something* more than sit around on their backsides all day whining “Life's tough, I wish we were free!” Finally, all patience exhausted, he led one small tribe into the only true freedom they would ever know: freedom from the continual struggles of daily life. The Freema did not take kindly to the slaughter of an entire clan, and were generally unappreciative of his efforts.

The planet on which the *Menaajatwaa* plant grows is Ratatouille, also known as Doona—which roughly translates from the language of the Freema as “ugly purple dung-heap of oppression.” They are a thoroughly miserable, wretched, and ungrateful people, with all the nobility of a dried slug.

Be glad that this is not their story!

Chapter 1

Hoff Surprise

The planet Hoff was a frozen, forbidding world, far from its sun. The few indigenous species it supported scraped out a precarious existence from the permafrost and the occasional protruding outcrop of granite. Life was tough on Hoff.

Dark, angry clouds scudded across the gloomy sky, menacingly low over the snowfields. Gusts of wind puffed harsh ice crystals into the air and swirled them in every direction. On the horizon—which was closer than it seemed—a huge roiling mass of sleet and snow and ice grew steadily larger. Lightning flickered constantly within the grey-green storm front.

Astride his mount, Lurk Splitwhisker eyed the approaching storm warily. He had grown up on a hot desert world, and felt vaguely unnerved at the best of times to be constantly surrounded by frozen water. He did not believe he would ever get used to the constant, biting cold. He certainly had no wish to be caught outside in the electrical storm and its accompanying blizzard. His snowrunner stamped one large, clawed footpad into the crusted snow beneath them and whickered nervously; it seemed to share Lurk's thoughts on the matter. It tossed its large head, and snorted loudly; Lurk reached forward

and rubbed the loose skin behind its small ear with his gloved hand, and after a moment it calmed down.

“What’s your problem, girl?” Lurk asked it. “You smell that storm coming, huh?”

The snowrunner turned its shaggy head, rolled back one small eye, and peered quizzically at him for a moment. Then it snorted again and stamped its other foot.

“Right,” said Lurk. *It doesn’t count as madness*, he told himself, *unless you start expecting a reply*.

He pulled his scarf up to protect his mouth and nose, adjusted his goggles down over his piercing blue eyes, and shrugged a little more snugly into his heavy furred jacket. Then, with a muffled click of his tongue, and a nudge with his booted heel, he spurred the snowrunner into motion. The creature leaned forward, extended its stubby tail for balance, and broke into the long, loping gait which it could maintain almost indefinitely.

Standing about twelve feet tall, the bipedal snowrunner was native to these icy wastelands. Despite the fearsome-looking claws on each of its broad, padded toes, it was actually quite a gentle—albeit moody—creature, and had adapted quickly to domesticated life. Hardy, yet agile despite its bulk, it made a great mount for scouts and patrols.

As they crested a shallow rise, Lurk tugged on the reins. His snowrunner planted its foot deep in the snow and stopped abruptly; Lurk clung tightly to the saddle horn, well aware of the cantankerous beast’s tricks. It whuffled softly and rolled one eye back at him again.

“Still here,” Lurk told it.

He pushed his goggles up onto his forehead and lifted a compact set of electronic binoculars to his eyes. He turned slowly, scanning the horizon. Nothing broke the dreary white and grey vista. He was about to lower the

glasses again when one of the readouts along the bottom spiked, and the unit beeped softly at him. He frowned. Shifting slightly in his saddle, he adjusted the binoculars and zoomed in for a closer look. Nothing was visible.

Thoughtfully he returned the binoculars to their place on his belt, then fished a battered old communicator from one of the jacket's deep pockets. Once more he pulled the thick woollen scarf down, exposing his face to the chill wind. He exhaled, and his breath fogged thickly into the air before being whipped away.

"Rover Three to Rover Five," he said into the comm, "are you there, Mal?"

The wind gusted suddenly, and a stinging cloud of ice crystals swept over Lurk. He closed his eyes until the flurry passed, and shivered as a sudden chill went through him. He leaned automatically as his snowrunner fidgeted and shifted beneath him.

"Where else would I be," crackled the comm. "What you got, kid?"

Lurk grinned; he was glad to hear the older man's voice.

"I'm just about finished my sweep," he said into the communicator. "I'm not picking up any signs of life. Even my damn 'runner is getting bored!"

"Can't say I blame it," said Mal. "We've been scouting this region for weeks. The only fools fool enough to fool around on this ice cube are us! I'm heading back in before that storm hits!"

Lurk glanced briefly over his shoulder at the ugly, bruised cloud mass. "Yeah," he concurred, "I'm with you on that! I've got a faint metallic trace that I want to check out—no doubt it's just another piece of space junk—and then I'll head back."

“There’s so much damn debris in this system,” growled Mal, “I don’t know how we’re supposed to spot incoming ships. Be careful, and I’ll see you back in the warmth in twenty!”

Lurk chuckled. When your home base was carved directly into glacial ice, “warmth” was definitely a relative term.

“Sure thing, Mal,” he replied. “See you in twenty.”

Lurk returned the communicator to its pocket and carefully sealed the flap. He lifted the insulated flask from where it sat on his hip and took a swig of warm water to wash away the dryness in his mouth and throat. That was the craziest thing about this whole crazy world: water everywhere, locked away in crystals of ice, and yet the air was drier than it had ever been back on Ratatouille.

Suddenly his snowrunner shuddered beneath him. Its head was cocked at a strange angle, and it uttered a low whine—an eerie sound which Lurk had never heard it make before now. Then it toppled sideways, and Lurk scrambled frantically to extricate his feet from the stirrups.

Too slow. Too late.

Lurk heard two loud cracking sounds, simultaneous but distinctly different. One was similar to the sound made by the primitive kinetic energy weapons used by the desert dwellers on his home planet; muted somewhat by distance, it rolled across the ice plain and washed over him. The other was louder, but muffled; the sound of bones snapping as the dead weight of the dying snowrunner landed heavily on his trapped leg. The snow was packed hard here, and did little to cushion his fall. Pain blossomed briefly, and he thought he heard an agonised scream as darkness washed over him.

A small cloud of ice crystals puffed into the air around the fallen bodies, and the worsening wind swirled it away.

The clatter and scrape of clawed feet on bare ice echoed through the cavernous hangar bay. A couple of animal handlers, dressed in the well-padded orange overalls which were standard arctic issue to Rebel Coalition ground crews, ran out to calm the irritable snowrunner as Mal Single reined it to a stop. The ‘runner snorted and stamped impatiently, and Mal was happy to swing down out of the saddle.

“Take care of him, guys,” he told the handlers. “And you might want to check his left foot; he seemed to be favouring it a little on the way in.”

“Will do, Captain Single,” acknowledged one of the handlers. She nodded her thanks for the warning. Mal nodded in reply, then turned away and headed across the frozen floor. As he walked, he unbuttoned the front of his insulated, fur-lined white overcoat. Underneath—as was his preference—he wore a brown shirt.

It *was* warmer inside, but not by much.

The hangar was a bustling hive of activity. The number one priority for the Rebel Coalition was to get their small fleet of ice-speeders—deep-space fighters being modified to operate in low altitude atmospheric conditions—up and running; everywhere Mal looked, orange-clad mechanics worked on that task.

Mal’s own ship, the *Serendipity Sparrow*, sat on the ice against the far wall of the hangar, partially hidden behind one of the larger transport ships.

It had been barely a month since the Rebel Coalition, fleeing from the forces of the Imperial Navy, had settled upon the remote, frozen planet of Hoff. An important

factor in their decision had been the existence of this frozen base—the hangar itself, and a warren of winding passages and chambers behind it—cut into the solid ice of an enormous glacier. The base had once been part of an illegal mining operation, abandoned several years ago after the vein of rare ore trapped in the ice—the remnant of an ancient meteor strike—had been exhausted.

Mal entered a narrow passageway in the back wall of the hangar and wended his way through the maze of tunnels towards the Operations room. Many of the people he passed greeted him by name, but he was too distracted to notice. He kept his gaze on the frozen floor, glancing up now and again to check his location. A thoughtful frown sat upon his broad, honest features.

“Hey Mal, where are you off to in such a hurry?” said a voice loudly.

Mal stopped and looked up. He blinked.

“Oh, hello,” he said. He paused for the barest of moments as he dredged the man’s name up from his memory. “Sorry, Rudy, I didn’t see you there. I’ve got a lot on my mind. How are Elsa and the girls?”

“They’re fine,” said Rudy. He was a short man, bundled up against the cold in several thick layers of clothing. He idly scratched at his ear.

“Good,” said Mal. “Uh, listen, Rudy, I hate to cut and run but I’m a little busy at the moment...”

“Oh yeah, sure,” said Rudy. “I was just wondering if you were playing tonight?”

“Is it that time already?” mused Mal.

“It surely is,” nodded Rudy. “It’s just that, well, Smitty can’t play this week because of his hip; it’s been giving him a lot of trouble recently. And I was thinking that...”

"I really don't know if I can make it tonight," said Mal. "You know I'd like to, but I'm just, well..."

"Busy, yeah," said Rudy. "Sure, no problem. We can probably..."

"Sorry, Rudy, I've really got to go. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," said Rudy. "Next week then?"

"Next week," promised Mal. "I hope so, anyway. See you around, Rudy."

"Next time," called Rudy as Mal strode away.

Yeah, thought Mal, I hope there will be a next time...

He stopped at the next intersection he came to, and looked around. A pair of technicians—arguing loudly with each other—approached, and he squeezed against the icy wall to let them past.

"All I'm saying," said the taller of the two technicians—a heavy, bearded guy whose shirt, visible beneath his half-open jacket, bore an image of a popular singer—"is that Vogg files are better quality for the size."

"So you say," said his lean, blond companion. He wore his jacket buttoned closed, with the collar up. "But I bet you can't tell the difference between Vogg and Emmmy just by listening to them."

"Maybe," shrugged the bearded guy, "but that's beside the point. The point is, they're better quality, and they're free."

"That's two points," the blond guy pointed out. "You're just ... oh, hi." This last was directed to Mal.

"Evening, guys," said Mal. "Don't you two ever let up?"

"Nope," said the bearded guy. "Where would be the fun in that?"

"See you around," said the blond guy. "So what was I saying?"

“Beats me,” said the bearded guy as they continued down the corridor past Mal.

“Have you seen those new *meShell* ads?” asked the blond guy of his companion. “Y’know, ‘we sell *meShells* by the sea shore’?”

“Why would I want to see that?” asked the bearded guy. “Those damn *meShells* don’t even play Vogg files. And what’s with the colour? Dark Plum?”

“It’s not Dark Plum, it’s Mocha.”

“Looks like Dark Plum to me,” said the bearded guy. They rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, but Mal could still hear their voices drifting back on the still, chill air. He shook his head.

“Amazing,” he muttered.

He looked around again. Nearly there! He turned down the passage the two technicians had come from, rounded the corner, and entered the controlled chaos of the Operations room.

This was where the planners and strategists of the Rebel Coalition gathered to plan and strategise. From tracking Imperial movements, to plotting supply raids, to furthering their ongoing campaign to foster sympathy for their cause in otherwise neutral systems; if the Rebels were doing it, this was where it was coordinated.

Libby was here most nights.

Mal spotted her on the other side of the room, deep in discussion with Commander Bekkalu. Princess Labia Orgasma was a head shorter than the Commander, but it was obvious to any who cared to look that the Princess was leading the conversation. From the age of six—when her father had married the eldest daughter of the planet Alderbark’s royal family—she had been brought up to one day rule a world. The Commander, on the other hand, had inherited nominal command of the Rebel forces

barely six weeks ago, upon the death of Commander Armada. She had done a valiant job of leading the fleet to safety, but she had been wise enough to consult with the young Princess every step of the way.

Mal felt his heart thump a little faster in his chest as he watched Libby talking excitedly. She wore rugged military-style pants and a heavy, fur-trimmed jacket—both white—but not even the heavy clothes could hide her feminine curves, her grace, her delicate beauty. He could not see the colour of her eyes from across the room, but he already knew they were hazel. Quick to sparkle with excitement or joy, quick to flash with anger, her eyes alone tantalised him in his dreams. He watched her soft lips move as she spoke, and he sighed. He knew it was hopeless—he knew she had her sights set on the strangely reluctant Lurk, and besides, he was old enough to be her father—but she was never far from his thoughts.

She looked over suddenly, as though feeling his gaze, and caught him staring at her. He grinned roguishly, and half-shrugged. Excusing herself to the tall pale woman beside her, the Princess waved him over.

“Libby,” he greeted her.

“Mal,” she responded with a slight nod. “How was the patrol?”

“Same as always.” Mal shrugged. “There’s no sign of intelligent life out there; not within a hundred miles of *this* place, anyway.”

Libby nodded. “And Lurk?” she asked casually, her expression set in a careful neutrality.

Mal glanced up at the chronometer on the wall of the Operations room. “He should be back any minute now,” he said. “He stopped to check out some space junk, out by the north ridge. We couldn’t hang around out there: tonight’s storm was coming in fast.”

Libby looked away from him, her gaze wandering around the busy room. Seeing nobody who demanded her immediate attention, she turned back to Mal.

“Was there something else, Captain?” she asked.

“I just came to say goodbye,” he told her.

She blinked. “You’re leaving already?” she asked. “I thought you’d decided to stick around a while longer.”

“I had, but that bounty hunter we ran into on Orb Mandrill changed my mind.”

“Orb Mandrill?” Libby’s brow furrowed briefly. “That was weeks ago.”

“Yeah, it was,” he agreed. “And I’ve done my part to see that everybody is safe. But this price on my head isn’t getting any smaller, and if I don’t settle things with Flabby the Butt soon, I may end up drawing more trouble down on everyone here.”

Libby looked up at him. “Well, if that’s the way it has to be,” she said, “the Rebel Coalition will be sorry to see you go. We need good pilots like you.”

Mal raised one eyebrow. “‘We need’?” he said. “What about ‘I need’?”

“‘I need’? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mal shook his head. “Probably don’t,” he said, more sharply than he’d intended. *What did I expect?* he asked himself. *A teary goodbye?* “Well, don’t get all mushy on me. So long, Princess.” He turned on his heel and stalked angrily out of the room. *Stupid, stupid thing to say!* he chided himself. *Too late now, though!*

“Mal, wait!”

Mal stopped. He stood without turning. Waiting. Her small hand touched his arm—even through the thick material of his jacket, he could feel her warmth—and the tension drained from his body.

“I...” she began, then hesitated.

He half-turned toward her, expectantly.

“I *will* miss you,” she said softly. “Of course I’ll miss you. Will you be back?”

“Soon, I hope,” he said. “Once I’ve paid off Flabby, I’ll be right back.” He turned to face her.

“And you know how to contact us, if we’ve moved on from here?”

Mal nodded. “I *will* find you,” he told her.

Libby reached up, and lightly brushed his cheek with her fingertips. “Take care, Captain Single,” she said.

“I will,” he said. He reached up and covered her hand briefly with his own. Then, releasing her, he turned and walked away.

Lurk tried to open his eyes. One seemed to be frozen closed; the other opened enough to admit a blurry smear of flickering grey light. He spent several seconds trying to determine exactly what was wrong with what he was seeing, and finally decided that the horizon was not normally vertical.

His head ached. His leg—well, something felt wrong with his leg, but he could barely feel anything below his waist. He tried to wiggle his toes, but had no idea whether the attempt was successful or not. His body ached, and his arms ached, and his neck ached. His face was burning.

He blinked.

Snow. Ice. This was *not* Ratatouille. Perhaps his face was not burning, perhaps it was freezing. This was Hoff. But why was the horizon vertical?

He blinked again.

The dark amorphous blob at the lower range of his vision swam slowly into focus, but for a moment he couldn’t identify it. Fur, lots of fur. Small stubby horns.

Small stubby ears. A streak of blue-green running horizontally. Lurk knew it was important, but he had no idea what it was.

He blinked a third time, and suddenly he was staring at the head of his snowrunner lying on the ground in front of him. It was not the horizon that was oriented wrongly, it was himself. He was lying on the ground, half-buried in a drift of snow. His mount lay there too, a trickle of blue-green blood—copper based, he remembered somebody saying to him, so very long ago—frozen down the back of its head.

He tried to sit up; his upper torso twisted slightly, and a bolt of pain ripped through his leg.

He screamed, and consciousness fled once more.

Chapter 2

Imperial Secrets

The *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda* cruised silently through the depths of interstellar space. It was huge, menacing, an unstoppable juggernaut which represented the pinnacle of the power of the Imperial Space Fleet. Like gnats around the head of an alligator, patrolling THIGH Fighters swarmed around its mile-long wedge-shaped hull.

The recreation deck of the *IPD Bermuda* was crowded with off-duty Shock Troopers, mingling with a variety of other personnel.

At one end of the large hall, the food court was a neat cluster of small tables, arrayed in regular rows; behind the tables, several food preparation outlets provided a broad range of meals, guaranteed to appeal to almost every crewmember's tastes. Just beyond the food court, a couple of taverns provided more private and intimate booths for the consumption of an equally broad range of beverages, alcoholic or otherwise. The rest of the room was taken up with a variety of different gaming tables and machines. Discreetly positioned along the opposite wall of the hall, where the lighting was dimmest, were thirty small private rooms, provided for the use of couples who could not find any privacy in their own crowded dormitories. Provided they did not interfere with

the chain of command, or distract from one's duties, on-board relationships between crew were not forbidden.

"I'm telling you," said Mikki loudly over the roar of the conversations going on around them, "that's what I heard." He leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms above his head. Mikhail 'Mikki the Mouse' Tetrakovavonovich was a little short, for a Shock Trooper. His blond hair was shorn so close to his skull it was practically invisible against the pink of his scalp. His thin face was not unattractive, despite the narrow scar which began beside his left eye and ran up past his hairline. His slender frame belied his wiry strength, and he could move like lightning if necessary. He wore his standard issue fatigues, the shirt sleeves rolled loosely to his elbows. On his breast pocket, an embroidered patch showed a small grey mouse baring improbably large fangs. "Five!" He shook his head.

"But that's crazy," said Izzy around a mouthful of food. Only slightly taller than Mikki, Izzy 'Killer' Jenkins was visibly more muscular than he was. She was dressed to show it off, too; her legs were clad in the same fatigue pants that Mikki wore, but over her athletic torso and small bust she wore a clean white singlet, cut short to expose an inch or two of her taut midriff. As she sliced off another piece of rare, pink steak, the muscles in her arms flexed beneath her tanned skin, and the tattoo below her left shoulder—a grinning white skull, impaled on a dagger dripping red with blood, crossed by a scroll inscribed with the word 'KILLER'—seemed to laugh silently at the world. Her dark hair was cropped short, but not as severely as Mikki's. Her features were blunt and broad, and her flat nose had healed a little crooked the last time it had been broken. "It's always been four to a squad."

“I know,” said Mikki. “But this guy I know said he overheard a couple of high-ranking officers talking about it.”

“Talking about what?” said Fib. Holding his tray of food with one large hand, he spun a chair around with the other, turning its back towards the table. He straddled the chair and sat down, placing the tray on the table as he did so. Fib was a large man; tall, heavily muscled, he probably outweighed Mikki and Izzy combined. His pale grey eyes were his most striking feature—although the large pale ribbon of scar tissue which snaked its way up the back of his forearm and disappeared beneath the rolled sleeve of his fatigue shirt was also hard to miss. Everybody called Fib ‘Fib’; he had various nicknames which were based upon his initials—most of them uncomplimentary—and he swore with a straight face that his mother had christened him Fellatio Brown.

Mikki leaned in closer. “Apparently there are moves afoot to change the size of a squad from four Troopers to five.”

To those who didn’t know him, Fib was an imposing, scary man. He was rarely seen to smile, his face seemingly twisted into a perpetual scowl. Now, though, he laughed aloud, and loudly, his deep-set eyes twinkling. A momentary silence fell as the people on nearby tables turned to see what was going on. Laughter from Fib was almost as scary as the man himself.

Fib shook his head. “Mikki, Mikki, Mikki. When are you gonna learn?”

Mikki shrugged. “Hey, what can I say? My source is reliable.”

“As reliable as the guy who told you that an entire platoon of Troopers got defeated by a bunch of Teddewoks?”

“Well okay, so that was...” began Mikki.

“As reliable,” interrupted Fib, “as the guy who told you he saw a damn cow floating through an asteroid field?”

“Hey, it could be...”

“As reliable as the guy who told you that crazy cucumber story?” asked Fib, a hint of anger in his deep voice. “That’s the problem with these damn nutters: they always come up with totally unbelievable theories!”

The official story surrounding the disaster in the Yawn system was that Rebel terrorists, in an unprovoked attack, had employed some new, secret *Weapon of Mass Destruction* to destroy the pride of the Imperial fleet, the *Devastator* Station—and this only a day after a similarly unprovoked, cruel and savage Rebel attack had resulted in the total annihilation of the planet Alderbark.

As always when events of such magnitude were involved, the conspiracy theorists had come out of the woodwork, whispering of government cover-ups. Some radicals were even saying that the *Imperium* had caused the destruction of Alderbark at the direction of some shadowy cult which existed behind the scenes, manipulating the strings that made the Emperor dance. A few of the crazier stories suggested that—for reasons unknown—the *Devastator* Station had been turned into a zucchini, or possibly a cucumber. Needless to say, anyone who might have actually been able to confirm such wild stories had conveniently “mysteriously disappeared”, either silenced permanently, or taken away for “re-education”.

Such stories were particularly abhorrent to those people who had lost friends on the *Devastator* Station, or on the *IPD Isosceles* which had been lost in the same attack. As members of Team Badger, one of the two

surviving squads of the *Isosceles*' Raptor Command, Fib and his comrades had little patience for such nonsense.

"Yeah, okay," said Mikki loudly. "Okay. You've made your point. But I'm telling you, this time it's true. They reckon it's going to be announced in a couple of days."

"But that's crazy," said Fib.

"See?" said Izzy shortly. "It'd never happen."

"Why not?" said Mikki. "I don't see why you guys won't believe me."

"It'd never happen," said Fib with exaggerated slowness, "because it's crazy." He shrugged. "Everything—from the bunk arrangements to the damn troop carriers—is designed around a squad size of four. To even attempt to fuck with something that works so well would be, well, crazy!"

"Well, the way I heard it," Mikki leaned in even closer and lowered his voice to barely more than a whisper, "this comes from Palpator himself."

Izzy and Fib glanced at each other. There were rumours—passed from ear to ear in careful whispers, for one was never sure who might be listening—that Emperor Palpator was no longer entirely sane. It was said that some of the more puzzling directives which had been plaguing the usual ruthless efficiency of the Imperium of late had come directly from his office.

"But even *he* wouldn't..." Izzy's voice trailed off into a thoughtful silence.

"Surely he can't be that far gone?" said Fib quietly.

"That's what I hear," said Mikki, almost apologetically.

The three looked back and forth at each other. Finally Fib said what they were all thinking.

"Aw fuck! I need a beer!"

“You and me both!” agreed Mikki.

“I’ll get them,” said Izzy, standing up. “You boys wait right here!”

“Thanks, Killer,” said Fib, smiling sweetly. “You’re such a darling.”

“Fuck you, Fib,” she replied automatically. “I’ll make sure yours has a little something extra in it, from me to you.”

“Knew I could count on you, my girl,” said Fib.

With the barest hint of a grin curling her lip, Izzy moved away with all the lithe grace of a cat. Both men watched her go. Mikki let out a small sigh.

“You know she’d chew you up and spit you out, don’t you?” said Fib casually.

Mikki glanced at him. “That obvious, huh?”

“Only because I know you so well,” said Fib.

Mikki nodded. “Yeah, I do know it. But hell, there’s gotta be worse ways to die.”

Fib snorted. “Maybe, my friend. But the last guy who put the moves on her isn’t dead. Yet. They say he may even walk again, given time.”

“I heard something about that,” said Mikki. “Ouch!”

“I’m just saying,” said Fib, “don’t rock the boat!” He lifted the pair of eating sticks off his tray, pulled the bowl of steaming food closer, and lifted a morsel into his mouth.

“Admit it,” said Mikki with a devilish grin. “You just want me for yourself, don’t you?”

Fib snorted. “In your dreams, perhaps,” he said. “I know where you’ve been! I just don’t want there to be trouble in our squad; our future is uncertain enough as it is.”

Mikki held up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay. I give in. I wouldn’t do anything silly anyway—but a guy can dream, can’t he?”

“What you do in the privacy of your own bunk is up to you!”

Mikki chuckled. After a moment, though, his grin became a concerned frown.

“What *are* you eating?”

Fib slurped a few loose noodles into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “It’s *THIGH Rong Pong*,” he said.

“THIGH food?” demanded Mikki. He eyed the mound of odd shapes and slimy noodles in Fib’s bowl suspiciously. “Isn’t that stuff toxic to humans?”

Fib sighed. “You’ve really gotta stop listening to the wrong people, Mikki! This stuff is fine. A bit of an acquired taste, perhaps, but it’s perfectly safe! You should try it some time.”

“I’ll pass,” said Mikki.

“Your loss,” said Fib. “Speaking of which, aren’t you eating?”

“Not today,” said Mikki. “I think I overdid it a little last night. Spent half the night in the can, throwing up. I’m still not ready to tackle solid food. Beer, though—where *has* Izzy got to?” Mikki looked around for a few seconds, then frowned at the big man across from him. Fib was no longer looking at him; instead his gaze had shifted slightly. Mikki turned to see what had caught his friend’s attention. In the shadows across the room, he saw Sergeant Strong talking to someone. Sammy ‘Mauler’ Strong was the fourth member of Team Badger, their leader and—as much as was possible—their friend. Now he was deep in conversation with—Mikki squinted into

the gloom. Oh! The Sarge was with Jenna Lopez, Sergeant of Team Fennec.

“You’re not still carrying *that* torch, are you, big guy?” he said with a sigh.

Fib met his gaze sheepishly. He shrugged.

“After the lecture you just gave me, I’m sure I don’t need to elaborate on why it’s an extremely bad idea, do I?”

“I know,” said Fib quietly. “I know. It’s wrong, it’s a mistake, it’ll never come to anything.” He sighed. “But dammit, Mikki, knowing is one thing, but I can’t help how I feel, can I?” He curled his upper lip in what might have been a grin as he repeated Mikki’s own words back to him: “A guy can dream, can’t he?”

Mikki laughed. “So I’ve heard, buddy. So I’ve heard!”

“What have you heard?” asked Izzy as she set three large glasses of beer down on the table. She sat down, and wiped her damp palms down her trousers.

“Oh, y’know,” said Mikki. “Whatever other shit they throw at us, our dreams are still our own!”

She nodded. “That much, at least, is true. For now, anyway.”

Fib nodded, but his gaze drifted across to the far side of the room once more. He took a large swallow of beer, and watched as Strong and Lopez slipped into one of the private suites and closed the door. He sighed.

Elsewhere aboard the *IPD Bermuda*, a section of cargo bay had been converted to a makeshift dormitory. Guards had been posted, quarantine signs had been erected. Inside slept seventeen THIGH Pilots, among them Lieutenant Colonel Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah. His friends knew him as Joe, but at the

moment he had no friends. None that knew he still lived, anyway.

A fine, medicated mist drifted through the room, and was continually recycled and refreshed through the fully sealed ventilation system. The drugged air ensured that Joe and his fellow THIGH Pilots slept, and listened.

These were the sole surviving Imperial forces of the Yawn Incident. These were the witnesses of which Mikki's conspiracy theories spoke. These were the sort of people who tended to disappear after an embarrassing incident; all that saved them from a short trip into a garbage compactor was that THIGH Pilots were incredibly expensive.

Piped into the darkened room was a recorded voice. It was only a short message, but it repeated itself over and over: "The Rebels destroyed Alderbark. Their secret weapon destroyed the *Devastator* Station. There was no cucumber. The Rebels are scum."

A second message overlaid the first, at a pitch which bypassed the ears and drilled directly into their genetically developed cerebral cortices. Apart from anything else, THIGH Pilots had been designed to be programmable. This second message was slightly shorter; it said simply: "Your memories are not your own. Your dreams are not your own."

Joe slept. Joe listened.

Joe's dreams were not his own.

"Damn, Sammy boy, now I know why they call you 'Mauler'; my boobs are gonna be bruised for a month!"

Sergeant Samson Strong lay on his back on the crumpled sheet; it clung damply to his bare skin. He was breathing heavily, and a light sheen of sweat covered his face and upper body.

Sergeant Jenna Lopez lay beside him, on her stomach, her body nestled tight against his. She rested her head on his shoulder, her face turned towards him, and draped one arm limply across his chest. Her leg was wrapped around his. She was breathing heavily too, each exhalation warm against the side of his face. He idly stroked her bare hip with one roving finger.

There was not much room on the narrow bed, but it was meant for purposes other than sleeping.

“You gave as good as you got,” said Sammy. “Some of these scratches are going to leave scars.”

“As if you don’t already have enough of those,” she said, dragging a fingernail lightly down a line of puckered white skin which ran across his shoulder. He shivered involuntarily at the sensation.

“Ticklish, Sammy boy?” she chuckled.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. He lifted his free hand lazily, and captured hers; their fingers entwined. He raised her hand to his mouth, pressed his lips to her smooth skin. She tasted salty. “But only with you,” he added.

“You better believe it, lover,” she murmured against his chest. She lay there for a while, content to listen to the whisper of his breathing, the strong rhythmic beating of his heart. Her eyes drifted closed, and for a few moments she allowed herself the luxury of drifting on the edge of sleep.

“How much time do we have?” she asked finally.

“Why?” he asked, his lips curling into a smile. “You want to go again?”

“Soon,” she said. “Soon. Are you smiling?”

“How did you know?”

"I can hear it in your voice," she said. She kissed his chest, flicked her tongue idly over his salty skin. "How long?"

"I booked for the whole night," he told her.

"That's what I love about you," she murmured.

"What?" he asked. "My hopelessly romantic nature?"

"No," she said. "Your optimism! You're smiling again."

"Maybe."

"Mind if I just doze for a while?" she said.

"Go right ahead," he told her.

She did. He lay for a while, listening as her breathing became slow and steady. Eventually he closed his own eyes, and allowed sleep to claim him.

If he dreamed, he did not remember.

Much later, after making love a second time, they lay facing each other. The top sheet, which had been kicked to the floor fairly early in the proceedings, had been recovered and now lay loosely over their legs, covering them both to the waist.

"You do know he loves you, don't you?" asked Jenna softly.

"Fib? Yeah. I know."

"What are you going to do?"

Sammy shook his head against the soft pillow. "I have been doing my best to avoid that question," he told her. "So far it's worked out pretty well."

"Will it last, though?"

Sammy closed his eyes for a moment, and drew a deep breath. "It has to," he said. "I can't mention it to him—you and I both know *that* would only end badly."

"What about..." Jenna bit her lip and hesitated.

"Say it," he said.

"What about a transfer?" she said.

“Well, there’s the problem. Apart from anything else Fib’s a hell of a soldier; I’m not sure I’d want to lose him. And I love the guy like a brother. He’s a friend. I can’t do that to him.”

Jenna stared mutely at him.

“Besides, you know what the Imperial Army is like,” said Sammy. “Officially it’s an open and accepting policy; unofficially, they’d crucify him. He’d spend the next twenty years pulling sentry duty on some backwoods planet; any chance he might have at a career would be over.”

“So ... what? We just pretend there isn’t a problem?”

“Is there a problem, though?” he asked her. “Fib’s not stupid; he’s certainly smart enough to restrain himself. And if he ever *does* say anything, well, *then* is the time to handle it. Not before.”

She sighed. “Okay. We’ll play it your way, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

“It’ll be fine. Besides,” he grinned, “why do you have a problem with it? It’s my cute little butt he wants, not yours!”

“And a cute little butt it is,” she agreed. “Maybe I’m just jealous. It’s mine, not his!”

“That’s what I love about you,” he told her.

“What? My insanely possessive nature?”

“No,” he said. “Your cute butt!”

She sat up. “Don’t change the subject,” she said. Grabbing the lone pillow, she swung it around and whacked him with it. Sammy rolled and dove for her, and as they began to wrestle, she giggled. “What, again?”

The planet Yawn was different from every other known planet in the galaxy, in that it was not easily described or catalogued. The Galactic Planetary Index, which

maintained a short descriptive list of all planets—most of them having one-line entries—would have been only half as long if the entry for Yawn were removed. It was a diverse mix of a multitude of differing environments and weather conditions. Most people—of those who cared to consider the question—agreed that it was a boring planet.

The space above Yawn had been the site of the Imperium's most devastating defeat in the twenty-odd years since Palpatore had declared himself Emperor.

Now, the entire system was officially off limits. It was blockaded and quarantined. A small fleet of Imperial scientific ships trawled through the system, collecting and analysing every last trace of evidence in an effort to determine exactly *what* had happened. Much of the evidence they collected seemed to be organic in nature—and although a strict edict had been passed that the word “cucumber” was not to appear in any reports, many agreed that the “undefined organic debris” would probably be good in a sandwich.

The *ISV Einstein* was one of the smaller ships of the fleet. It had been in a slowly advancing orbit around Yawn for several weeks now, collecting everything which had fallen into the planet's gravity well but not yet to its surface.

In a refrigerated storeroom behind one of the laboratories, several small snowballs of dirty greenish ice lay on a steel shelf, awaiting examination. They ranged in size from a couple of inches to about a foot, and were irregular clusters of smaller, frozen organic particles. One of them, about six inches across, had quite a pinkish tinge through the green, with a darker patch in the middle.

There was nobody in the storeroom to observe a strange green shimmer which suddenly emanated from the centre of the pinkish snowball. When the shimmer

faded a few seconds later, the pink object at the heart of the snowball had gone. Empty now, the lump of ice sat for a second or two before slowly crumpling, collapsing into its own hollow centre.

The room was silent, and dark.

A broken figure of a man lay on the soft bed, covered by a cool white sheet. He tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep. He flailed one hand around, groping in the dark for something. He only had one hand with which to grope; his right arm was little more than a stump, ending well above where the elbow might once have been. His legs, too, were stumps; the sheet which covered them lay flat on the mattress where his knees would have been.

His face, contorted now by an expression of fear which mirrored the nightmarish images playing in his mind, was scarred and pale.

There was a blue shimmer in the dark beside the restless figure; moments later his flailing hand closed over something soft and pink. He clutched it like a lifeline, bringing it up to his chest, wrapping his left arm tightly around it. His twitching stopped, and rest came at last to his tortured soul.

Chapter 3

Rebels on the Rocks

“**W**hat are you doing?” demanded Mal of his co-pilot.

Towering head-and-shoulders over the human, the woolly Woonky snarled and grunted in frustration. *I’m fixing the damn inlet manifold that you keep ignoring, what does it look like I’m doing?*

Waving away the Woonky’s angry protests, Mal shook his head. “Dammit, Shaggus, I’m trying to get us out of here and you pull everything apart.”

The Woonky, Shagpile Duphus, stood beside one of the *Serendipity Sparrow’s* huge VTOL engines. The cowling was open, and several parts lay scattered around the large feet of the green giant. He grunted again: *Well, if you would tell me your plans in advance...*

“Just put it back together, okay?” said Mal.

Shaggus glared at him in silence.

“Hey look,” said Mal softly, “I’m sorry, pal, I really am. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately; you know how it is.”

Shaggus lifted his broad shoulders in a slow shrug. He had a pretty good idea what—or who—had been on Mal’s mind.

“But we really do have to get out of here,” Mal continued, “and the manifold can wait.”

Shaggus grunted. *If you say so...*

"Thanks," said Mal. "As soon as I say goodbye to Lurk, we can leave."

Shaggus grunted again: *Whatever*. His broad green face crumpled into a scowl and he opened his mouth in a snarl. *Where is Lurk anyway? He promised he'd come by, but I haven't seen him.*

"He must be around here somewhere," said Mal.

"What do you mean, he hasn't come back yet?"

"I'm sorry, Captain Single. Captain Splitwhisker has not checked in." The technician tapped a few buttons, then turned the screen towards Mal. "His snowrunner is not back in its stall, and nobody has reported seeing him for several hours. It's possible he came up the Back Passage, but..."

"But then everybody would know about it," said Mal. The Back Passage was a narrow, winding chasm with barely room for a person; it was not set up to accept incoming snowrunners. "Damn."

Mal left the tech and jogged across the hangar bay floor to the snowrunner stables. "Saddle my snowrunner," he said to the first person he saw. "I'm going out."

"But sir," he said, "it's a blizzard out there, and it's almost night. The temperature is dropping rapidly."

"That's right," snapped Mal, "and my friend's out in it."

"But you *and* the snowrunner will both freeze before you reach the outer marker."

"Then I'll see you in Hell," said Mal. "But if you don't go fetch my snowrunner *now*, I'll send you on ahead to let them know I'm coming." He yanked open a

supply closet and began pulling out extra equipment and clothing.

“What’s going on here?” said a short stocky woman, the same handler Mal had spoken to earlier that afternoon.

Mal was busy shrugging himself into a second outer jacket. “I need my snowrunner, now. I’m going out to look for Lurk.”

She looked at him for a second, then nodded. “You,” she said to the junior handler, “go saddle Bella. Load her up with a rescue kit. Now, dammit, we’ve got an emergency on our hands.” The young guy ran.

“Thanks,” said Mal. He sat down and started removing his boots. “Bella?” he asked.

“Your snowrunner has an injured toe and won’t make it far in this weather,” said the senior handler. “Bella’s one of our oldest ‘runners. She may not be quite as fast as some of the younger ones, but she’ll get you safely to your friend and back again. She’s seen a lot of winters, and survived the worst this planet could throw at her.”

Mal paused in the act of pulling a second pair of insulated socks over the first, and looked up at her. “Thanks,” he said again.

She shook her head. “Just bring your buddy back in one piece; you can buy me a drink when you get back!”

Mal grinned. He pushed his feet, one at a time, back into his boots. “You’ve got yourself a deal,” he told her. He fastened his boots tightly, and stood up.

He was zipping up his third jacket when the young stable hand led a large old snowrunner into the chamber. Behind the saddle was a large pack—the rescue kit, loaded up with a weatherproof tent, a week’s supply of rations, and numerous other tools and gadgets which might be required to survive a night or two out in the

open. Mal checked his pockets one last time, then stepped up into the stirrup and swung himself up onto the saddle.

“If I’m not back by morning, send a rescue team,” he said. He spurred the snowrunner into motion; Bella lumbered forward, gaining speed rapidly, and they passed through the ‘runner hatch into the howling storm beyond.

“Good luck,” said the senior handler quietly as the door slid slowly closed behind them.

The metallic clang of the hatchway sealing echoed throughout the hangar.

Visibility was practically nil. A barrage of stinging ice crystals, flung by the savage wind, pounded the lone snowrunner and its huddled human rider. The clouds above, low as they were, remained invisible; only the constant flickering of electrical discharges within their hidden depths provided a clue to their presence. The distant sun was slipping below the horizon, but all daylight had long since been extinguished.

The snowrunner barely managed to make any headway through the onslaught. Every couple of minutes, Mal lifted his head long enough to check the compass clutched within his double-gloved hand; he tugged on the reins a little if necessary, to alter course, and whenever Bella seemed ready to stop, he spurred her on. He spoke softly to her from within his huddle, muttering words of encouragement—although given the noise made by the howling blizzard, he doubted she heard him. He suspected he was speaking to himself, trying to convince himself that he would survive this night.

Slowly but steadily, rider and mount made their way towards Lurk’s last known position.

Lurk drifted in and out of consciousness. During his lucid moments he reminded himself that he needed to stay awake, that if he slept he would probably die. When he slept, he dreamed he was trapped in the snow, and that if he didn't wake up he would die. Dreams and reality blurred together and became one; he could not determine where sleep ended and wakefulness began.

Falling snow began to form a mound, drifting against the fallen bodies of Lurk and his snowrunner. Gradually it began to bury him, piling up around him until it blocked the worst of the hungry wind which was doing its best to suck the life from his body.

Lurk dreamed, and woke, and dreamed.

Shimmering and indistinct, a ghostly figure stood over him. It wore brown robes which did not flutter in the wind.

Lurk, said a voice that the fallen youth recognised.
You must go to the Daggyboil system.

"Bent," gasped Lurk in a frozen whisper. "Bent, help me. I've fallen, and I can't get up."

You must train with my old master, Yodel, said Bent, ignoring Lurk's plea.

"I know," whispered Lurk. "You told me already."

He will lead you to mastery of the Source, said Bent.

"I'd prefer a hot bath," gasped Lurk. The figure faded away, and only the storm remained.

"Bent," moaned Lurk.

Lurk woke, and dreamed, and woke.

A shadowy figure loomed over him. Dressed all in white, outline indistinct, it approached cautiously. To Lurk's blurred vision, it seemed human, but the face was like something from a nightmare, all large eyes and strange angles.

Lurk tried to speak, but no words emerged.

The figure crouched beside him. Steam rose from the snow where it stood, then whirled away, taken by the wind.

Lurk waved his arm to attract attention. It seemed like a good idea, but his limb refused to obey, and did not move.

Pushing a drift of snow aside, the figure lifted Lurk's hand and gripped it carefully as though feeling for something.

Lurk watched, helplessly, unable to gather enough strength even to move his finger.

The figure began to feel around inside Lurk's jacket; suddenly its head jerked up, and then it silently backed away and was gone, lost to the storm.

Lurk dreamed, and woke.

A third ghostly figure appeared from the swirling blizzard—a third strange visitor—and loomed over him. It was vast and alien, impossible to identify. Then it split, became two unfocussed blobs. One of them leaned over him as everything went black once more.

Mal leaped down from Bella's back and ran to the huddled figure in the snow. "Lurk, speak to me," he yelled. He dropped to his knees beside the motionless body of his fallen friend and brushed away some of the ice crystals from his face. He removed both gloves from one hand—gasping as the chill seeped into his exposed flesh—and slid his fingers into Lurk's hood. He pressed them against the cold—so cold, too cold—flesh of the lad's neck, feeling around. *There*. He repositioned his hand slightly, and waited. *Again*. Weak and slow though it was, Lurk still had a pulse.

Mal thrust his hand back into the gloves, and clenched his fingers. They ached already, even from such brief exposure to the wind.

“Hold tight, Lurk,” he said. “It will take me a minute or two to get the shelter up.” He pushed himself to his feet, and stumbled through the knee-deep drift of fresh snow, fighting his way the short distance back to the snowrunner. Freed from the urging of its rider, the beast had curled up to protect itself from the worst of the wind. Mal fumbled for the rescue kit; after a couple of false starts, he managed to get it open. There on the top lay the emergency shelter. Mal hauled it out; it was surprisingly light.

The wind complicated the task of erecting the survival tent, but once the first piton had been fired deep into the snow the task became a little easier. Mal tugged on the thin but strong tie rope firmly; it gave a little, then held fast. He repeated the procedure with the second piton, and then the third. Quickly he ratcheted each of the tethers tight, until the tent was locked into place on the snow and would not blow away. Then he opened the valve of the inflation cylinder. The structure took shape quickly as the compressed gasses in the cylinder filled the support vanes and puffed the tent up to its full domed shape.

Moving quickly now—or as quickly as the howling wind would allow—Mal retrieved the miniature heater, the first aid kit, and an armful of food packs from the rescue kit. He threw them in through the open entrance flap of the tent, then turned his attention once more to Lurk’s fallen body.

It was plain at a glance that the lad’s leg was trapped beneath the frozen corpse of the snowrunner. Mal considered his options. Digging him out was the obvious

choice, but it would take too long—and in this blizzard, with this wind, would be well nigh impossible. Dammit. *Were* there any other options?

Then Mal remembered Lurk's light rapier. He felt around on the kid's belt; sure enough, the silver cylinder was slung from its usual place on Lurk's right hip. Mal unfastened the holster and gingerly removed the weapon. He examined it for a moment without touching anything, then pressed a round silver stud. Three feet of humming energy blade hissed into existence, and Mal squinted against the sudden blue glare. An aura of steam surrounded the blade; driven snow and ice puffed instantly into vapour as they came into contact with the harnessed energy.

Moving cautiously—he'd seen what this blade could do—he stepped closer to the lifeless snowrunner. He touched the cylinder of light to the back of the large creature, just past the edge of the saddle, and slowly cut into the carcass. The stench of seared flesh rose around him, and he gagged. Even through the scarf which protected his nose and lower face from the cold, it smelled awful. He cut deeper, further, and the stench grew worse as he severed the creature's intestines. Releasing the switch which activated the blade, Mal turned away, gasping for breath.

"Damn," he muttered. "And I thought they smelled bad on the *outside*!"

He turned back, and examined the cut he had just made. It was already freezing up again, filling with frozen green blood. This was not going to work—which left only one alternative.

Mal shivered; whether from the cold, or from the thoughts running through his head, he couldn't say. He activated the light rapier again. Carefully he slid the

humming blade into the triangle of space formed by Lurk's two legs and the tough leather saddle.

"Sorry, kid," he muttered, "but it's the only choice left."

Before he could change his mind, he pushed the blade down. There was a brief sizzle as it sliced through Lurk's thigh, severing his leg. From the depths of his unconsciousness, Lurk moaned.

There was very little blood. The heat of the blade neatly cauterised the wound.

Mal dropped the light rapier into the snow, then leaned down and grabbed Lurk's arms. With a grunt, he heaved him backwards a few inches, and then a few inches more. It took a couple of minutes, but finally he managed to get the unconscious lad's body into the shelter. He sealed the flap, and activated the heater. Then he turned to the medical kit, and pulled out a large syringe.

It was a stimulant, for use in case of extreme shock or trauma; Mal figured that this situation more than qualified. Acting quickly, he pulled open Lurk's jacket and tore open the garment beneath it. Finding a patch of bare skin, Mal felt around carefully until he found the correct spot. He pressed the needle to the point he had identified, and then pushed down hard, driving the thick needle into the lad's chest. He pushed the plunger, delivering the full dose of stimulant directly into Lurk's slowly beating heart, then pulled the needle out. Lurk screamed, thrashed around for a few seconds, then sank back into sleep again.

Mal checked for his friend's pulse; it was there, stronger than before, and more regular.

He sighed with relief, and sank back against the wall of the tent. He was trembling with a mixture of relief and

fatigue. Soon he would have to bandage Lurk's leg, and perhaps administer another drug or two to stabilise his condition, but now he rummaged through the first aid kit looking for something else.

"There you are," he said aloud as he pulled out a small bottle of medicinal whiskey. Quickly he unscrewed the lid and took a large swallow. Heat flooded through his frozen body, and he felt some of the knots in his back begin to ease.

They were safe.

Mal woke to the crackle of his communicator.

"Repeat, Rover Twelve to Rover Five, come in. Rover Twelve to Rover Three, please respond."

Mal scrambled to pick up the communicator. He keyed it: "Hello, Rover Twelve; glad you could join us, Ramirez! I'm activating my beacon now."

"Roger, Rover Five. I am, uh, five minutes from your position. It's good to hear your voice." There was a pause—no doubt young Ramirez was relaying their position back to the Rebel base—before the comm crackled back to life. "Transports are on their way, Captain Single. Should be a couple of minutes behind me. What is your condition?"

"I'm good," said Mal. "Captain Splitwhisker is stable for now, but requires immediate medical attention." He looked at where Lurk lay; after a fitful night, he seemed to be sleeping peacefully at last. The bandage that covered the stump of his leg was spotted with red stains, but it was no worse than Mal had expected.

"Acknowledged, Rover Five." There was another pause—without a network of booster satellites, the communicators had a limited range, which required

messages to be relayed back down the line from person to person—and then Ramirez said “I’ll be right there.”

“See you soon,” said Mal. He unfastened the tent flap and crawled out, emerging into the brilliant morning sunshine. The sky was a deep clear blue, and only the snow piled up against the side of the tent remained to show that the night’s storm had actually happened. Mal stretched and looked around. A short distance away stood Bella; the old snowrunner was scratching with determination at a patch of icy ground and occasionally lowering her shaggy head to nibble at whatever she had unearthed.

A loose mound of fresh snow marked the resting place of Lurk’s ‘runner. Something which had caught Mal’s eye the night before had been niggling away at the back of his mind, but at the time he had been too busy to take a closer look. Now he wandered over to the mound and began to brush away the snow until the beast’s large head was exposed. He squatted down—his stiff knees cracking and popping as he did so—and examined the dark spot beside the ear. It was a hole. A wound. It hadn’t been made by a blaster bolt, though. He frowned. Who still used antiquated projectile weapons?

He straightened, and stretched again. *I’m getting too old for this*, he told himself. He lifted the communicator to his mouth—and suddenly something snatched at his shoulder and spun him around. He tumbled to the ground, the communicator flying out of his hand to land in the snow beside the tent. As he landed heavily, he heard the distant, unmistakable *crack* of a kinetic energy weapon.

“Fuck, that hurts,” he complained aloud to the universe at large.

His left shoulder throbbed hotly, and he could feel heat spreading down his back as blood flowed freely,

soaking into his jacket. With his right hand, Mal fumbled with the fasteners of his outer coat. Once it was open, he scooped up a gloveful of snow, thrust it inside the coat, and pressed it firmly against the inner jacket, over the wound. He felt the cold seeping in through the material. That should slow the bleeding enough to keep him awake for the next few minutes; he didn't have time for anything more fancy.

Gritting his teeth, and staying low, Mal rolled over. Pain blossomed, but he did his best to ignore it.

Staying low—and hoping the carcass of the snowrunner was ample cover—he extended his right arm, thrust his clawed hand into the snow, and laboriously dragged himself forward. Pushing with his left leg, he repeated the move. Once more, and the tent loomed over him. He stretched out, and his fingers closed over the communicator.

“Rover Twelve, Ramirez,” he screamed into it, “get down. We’ve got a sniper.”

“Say again, Rover Five,” came the voice of Ramirez over the comm. “Did you say...”

“Sniper,” shouted Mal. “We’ve got a sniper, probably Imperial. Jump down off your ‘runner, lad, and kiss the snow before the bastard blows your head off.”

There was a long pause. Finally the comm crackled again.

“I’m flat in the snow, Captain Single. I’ve relayed your message. Command Central wishes to confirm your statement.”

“You tell those sanctimonious pricks that I’m lying here bleeding to death,” snarled Mal, “and if they’ve got any doubts they can come take a look for themselves.”

“Uh, roger Captain,” said Ramirez. Another pause. “Do you have a location on the sniper?”

Mal thought about that for a moment. “Roughly south-east of my position, range could be up to a mile.” Now the choice of weapon made sense; anyone firing a blaster immediately revealed their own position but a projectile weapon would be a lot more difficult to spot. Only the sound gave it away. “Any chance of air support, Ramirez?”

“Confirmed, Captain Single. Three of the ice-speeders are operational; they are *en route* to your position now.” Mal heard a muted roaring sound through the comm, and then Ramirez spoke again. “Also, the transport just went over me, and is headed your way.”

Shit! “Negative, Rover Twelve. Do you hear me, transport? Back off.”

“We’re almost to your position, Captain,” said a new voice.

“Negative,” said Mal hoarsely. “There’s a good chance this guy is firing armour-piercing rounds.” Another advantage; an energy weapon would be ineffective against even minimal shielding. “You set down here, you’re just another target for him. Go pick up Ramirez and wait there until the ‘speeders flush him out.”

“Roger, Captain Single, returning to evac Rover Twelve. Will stand by until further notice.”

Breathing heavily, Mal let the communicator fall from his frozen fingers. When the first of the ice-speeders screamed past his little makeshift camp, he was already on the long slide into unconsciousness. He barely heard the excited crackle from the comm as one of the pilots yelled “Yippie-kiyay,” and the sudden blast of heat as his rescuers turned their target zone into an incendiary nightmare washed over him unnoticed.

Stamping impatiently in the snow, Bella snorted noisily. There was no reply from the unconscious man.

Chapter 4

Enter the Muff

“**W**hat’s all this about?” whispered Fib to Sergeant Samson Strong.

The entire ship’s complement of Shock Troopers and THIGH Pilots was assembled—in two separate groups; the Imperium had learned that lesson well from the *Agamammanon* incident—on the main flight deck of the *IPD Bermuda*. All were in their formal dress uniforms, seams sharp and buttons polished. Standing at the front of the flight deck, facing outwards, were two Shock Troopers clad in the deep crimson combat armour of the Imperial Honour Guard.

The absolute silence of the attentive parade had lasted about thirty seconds before the murmuring began.

“Some new damn officer, the way I heard it,” Strong whispered back. “Inspection of the troops, usual officer crap. Must be someone damned important, by the looks of those Redsuit goons; *they* don’t get assigned to just anybody.” He shrugged. “Seems to me, if I were the Rebel Coalition, I’d simply wait till the Imperator sent out somebody important, wait fifteen minutes, then attack. They’d catch us with our pants down—but neatly pressed—every time.”

“You don’t think they *would*, do you?” asked Mikhail Tetrakovavonovich from the other side of Sergeant Strong. “Attack, I mean.”

“We’ll find out in about two minutes,” said Izzy Jenkins from the other side of Mikki. “Hell, I’m about ready to start a war just to get off this damn parade. How much longer are they going to keep us here?”

“Heads up, guys,” said Strong. “Something’s happening.”

There was a rustle of motion through the room as everybody snapped back to attention.

“About bloody time,” said Fib, his whisper loud in the sudden silence.

On the gantry along the front end of the flight deck, a minor functionary had scuttled in and placed a microphone in the point under the spotlights. He tapped it with his finger.

“Testing one two,” he said into it, and his nervous voice filled the large room. “Uh, sorry about the delay, but there has been a hitch with the, uh, oh what?” This last was directed to somebody out of sight behind the door from which he had appeared. “Oh, right, sorry...”

He released the microphone and scurried back to the safety of the door.

Silence for a few seconds, then: “Gee, I’m sure glad I got dressed up for *that*!”

“Shut up, Fib,” hissed Sergeant Strong as nervous laughter rippled outward through the serried ranks.

Movement on the gantry caught their attention once again. A short figure was strutting towards the microphone. He stepped out of the shadows and stopped behind the microphone—and looked up at it. A murmur ran through the assembled warriors. The man could not have been more than four feet tall. An untidy mop of dark

hair sat atop his head, sprouting tufts in all directions. His face was twisted into a petulant scowl—his large bushy eyebrows meeting above the bridge of his large round nose—as he glared up at the microphone. Even from this distance, the large mole on his right cheek was clearly visible. Tucked into his right armpit, its end clutched in his upraised right hand, was a short swagger stick. He wore the severe grey uniform of an Imperial Muff.

The Muff extended his swagger stick, and tapped the microphone stand impatiently.

The minor functionary scuttled into sight once more. He fumbled with the stand for a few painfully long seconds before managing to loosen the adjustment screw. He lowered the microphone until it was the right height for the diminutive officer to use, tightened it into place, and scurried away again.

The officer stepped forward, opened his mouth to speak—and the microphone began to slide slowly downwards. The officer glared at it, then began tapping with his swagger stick again.

“Y’know,” muttered Fib *sotto voce*, as the hapless functionary scurried back to centre stage, “I’m pretty sure I’ve seen this routine before. Next the guy’s cane turns into a bunch of flowers.”

“Fib,” warned Sergeant Strong, equally quietly, “shut the fuck up!”

The functionary adjusted the microphone to its correct height again. As he did so, it picked up his mumbled voice and broadcast it quietly around the room: “sorry sorry sorry...” He tightened the screw, gave it an extra twist, and stepped back. For a moment, both the functionary and the officer stood, staring expectantly at the microphone. It didn’t move. The officer said something quietly—not meant for the microphone—and

the functionary stepped two paces back, out of the spotlight, and snapped to attention.

The officer smacked his swagger stick lightly into the palm of his left hand. He stepped forward again.

"I am Muff Aleeto Farquhar," he said in a thin, reedy voice which the sound system broadcast throughout the flight deck.

Sergeant Strong closed his eyes. *No*, he willed, *don't say it!*

"He certainly *is* a little fucker!" declared Fib in a stage whisper. A ripple of stifled sniggers radiated outwards.

"I swear, Fib," muttered Strong, "if you don't shut your mouth..."

"The Emperor," continued the Imperial Muff, ignoring the murmurs which swept the room, "is most displeased with your apparent lack of progress in locating the location of the hidden Rebel base." He frowned in thought, as though mentally reviewing his last sentence. He cleared his throat.

"In the continued absence of the Stiff Lord, Barth Vapour, the Emperor has sent me, personally, to take control of the fleet, and to bring these terrorists to justice once and for all." He emphasised the last four words by smacking his swagger stick into his palm with each word. "Decisive action is required, and I am the man for the job!

"Yes, I know. You look at me and you see a runt. You giggle at my height, and at my name—no, I know it's true. You laugh at me." He scowled out at the assembled ranks.

"Rest assured, though, that I am *not* the cousin of the Emperor's wife's sister. I am *not* his father's brother's nephew's cousin's former roommate. I earned my rank

by being the best at what I do. Stay on my good side, and we'll get along. Mess with me, and you'll learn exactly how much of a nasty bastard I really am. I reward excellence as I see it, but..."

He suddenly extended his arm, poking the attentive functionary in the side with his swagger stick. The man began to shudder, quietly at first, but then a soft keening became audible throughout the room, growing into a strangled, agonised wail. The Muff folded his arm back up, tucking the swagger stick neatly into his armpit. Released, the functionary slumped bonelessly to the gantry. A curl of blue smoke drifted up from his open, gaping mouth.

"But," continued the Muff into the absolute silence which now gripped the room, "I do not suffer fools lightly."

He turned and strutted out of the spotlight, stepping daintily over the fallen body as he went. The silence stretched; all eyes were on the smouldering body—obviously now a corpse—of the wretched functionary.

Another officer stepped into the circle of light; he glanced down at the body, sniffed, then looked out over the room. It was Admiral Muzzel, who—with the arrival of Muff Farquhar—had been replaced as leader of the Imperial fleet. He was a tall man, with greying hair and a thin moustache.

"Now that you have all met Muff Farquhar," he said, ignoring the low microphone—his booming voice carried naturally to all corners of the large chamber—"you know that the Imperator is quite serious about ending the Rebel threat." A grimace flickered across his face. "To that end, several new directives have been passed down from Coruscate Primus, with the intent of streamlining our operational capability. Bear in mind that these directives

come, uh, direct from the Emperor and are not to be questioned. They *will* improve our chances of ending this war with the Rebel Coalition.” The expression on his face suggested that he had his doubts.

“First, THIGH Flight Teams are to be enlarged to four, from three. Some Teams may need to be split up, but most of you should remain intact.” There was an angry muttering from the THIGH half of the room. Mikki and Jenkins exchanged knowing glances.

“Second,” said the Admiral loudly, “the size of Shock Trooper Squads is to be increased from four to five.” Now the Trooper half of the room erupted into subdued dissent.

“Please, I know how you feel,” said the Admiral, raising his hands for silence, “but there has obviously been a great deal of thought put into such a sweeping overhaul of our basic military structure. Perhaps some good will come out of this organisational review. Perhaps the Emperor feels that a good shake-up will cure our complacency.

“Whatever the reasoning, it is not negotiable. Deal with it.”

He waited a few seconds, then held his hands up for silence once more.

“The good news, however, is that very few Squads or Flight Teams will need to be split apart to make this work. Obviously we shall do our best to minimise disruption, and to ensure that everything continues to work smoothly. We have been promised an influx of new recruits to fill out your groups as appropriate.” The Admiral leaned on the railing and peered down at the assembly.

“Dismissed,” he said. He stepped over the body on the gantry and stalked into the darkness.

Time is a funny thing. Not only is it relative—the faster you are moving, the slower it passes—it is also subjective. The more distracted you are, or the more fun you are having, the quicker it passes. This can actually result in localised rifts occurring in the space-time continuum—“time-rips”—if you place two people, at opposite ends of the time subjectivity scale, in close proximity. Such rifts are one of the main reasons why odd socks go missing. Sure, the underwear gnomes get the blame, but they are mostly misunderstood, and almost certainly mythical.

Inhaling large quantities of the pungent nacarat gas of the spice *Menaajatwaa* can actually induce a state of supreme distraction, often causing time to stop altogether for users of the drug. The resulting space-time rifts are so large that they tend to cause more than socks to go missing. This is one of the main reasons cited for the common phenomena of waking up to realise you are standing at a party, with no recollection of how you got there, or of why you are wearing nothing more than one strategically-placed sock. Of course, you have to expect that sort of crazy logic from a stoned junkie.

Although no *Menaajatwaa* was present on the flight deck of the *IPD Bermuda*, quite a sizeable time-rip briefly enveloped the Shock Troopers and THIGH Pilots assembled on her flight deck. To those people—both the natural-borns and the genetically enhanced—on the deck, transfixed by the corpse on the gantry and overwhelmed by all the sudden changes in their lives, it seemed that several minutes passed before the silence was finally broken—by Fib, unsurprisingly, muttering an expletive. To an outside observer, however, it seemed as though

barely more than a second elapsed between the departure of the Admiral and the explosion of chaos amongst the ranks.

“This is great,” muttered Fib amidst the uproar. “Just fuckin’ great! We are screwed.”

“Belay that shit, Fib,” snapped Sergeant Strong.

“But they’ve just single-handedly inflicted more damage to the might of the Imperial fleet than the Rebellion ever did, even *counting* the damn Yawn incident. And they’ve put a jumped-up midget in charge!”

“I said shut it,” hissed Strong. “Let’s get out of here!”

“But we’re screwed. Game over, man. Game over!”

Strong stepped closer to the big man. The Sergeant was not small himself, but Fib was a good three inches taller, and packing another thirty pounds of very solid muscle. Strong moved with an amazing speed; he swung one hand up, wrapped his fingers around the back of the larger man’s closely shorn skull, and dragged him down until they were eye to eye, noses almost touching.

“Shut. Up.” Strong stared unflinchingly into Fib’s wide, grey eyes. Finally, Fib blinked.

“Thanks, Sarge,” he said. “Sorry.”

“Are you done now?” asked Strong, his eyes searching the big man’s face.

“Depends,” said Fib. “I don’t normally kiss on a first date but if you don’t let go I might have to make an exception.”

Yeah, thought Strong, *he’s back to normal.*

“Let’s all get out of here and find somewhere more private, shall we?” said Strong. He released Fib and turned to find the other two members of his Team; Mikki and Izzy were a short distance away, watching the two men.

“Are you two going to get a room,” asked Izzy, “or shall we come too?”

“We could always get a room of our own,” said Mikki with a grin, “and leave them to it.” He recoiled as Izzy turned to glare at him.

“I like you, Mikki,” said Izzy quietly, “so for the sake of our friendship I’ll forget you just said that.” She strode off towards Fib and Strong; as she did so she grinned evilly, and winked at the two men.

Mikki blinked. “Hey,” he said, “I was just ... it was a ... hey, wait up, guys!”

The primary bridge of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda* was always busy, and today was no exception. The mood was slightly more subdued than usual, though; word had spread rapidly through the crew. It is a well-known scientific fact that the gossipon—the sub-atomic particle responsible for the transmission of gossip—is the only particle, other than the tachyon, to move faster than the speed of light.

“He’s coming,” hissed somebody loudly, and the bridge became a veritable hive of industrious activity as everybody found something very important to do.

Imperial Muff Aleeto Farquhar strutted onto the bridge. He had his lethal swagger stick tucked casually under his arm; his left hand was folded up stiffly behind his back. He was muttering something under his breath, and his eyebrows were bunched in an angry scowl. Two crimson-clad Imperial Honour Guards followed him onto the bridge and took up stations either side of the door. The Muff strode across the bridge, looking neither right nor left, and entered one of the small briefing rooms.

The entire bridge seemed to heave a communal sigh of relief as the door slid closed behind him.

In the briefing room, two high-ranking officers were reviewing the data coming in from the probes and spy teams which were actively engaged in seeking out the Rebel Coalition, wherever they might have gone to ground.

Soon after the *IPD Bermuda* had joined the *Equilateral* and the *Scalene* in orbit around the planet Yawn, Admiral Muzzel had formally taken charge of the fleet. His first action had been to order the launch of every probe ‘bot aboard the three ships. Six had been despatched to each likely planet—and more than a few unlikely ones—within a hundred light year radius. As reports had come in—either crossing that planet from the list, or providing details of some uncharted colony or illegal smuggler’s base—the ‘bots had moved on, slowly expanding the search. Since the fleet could not possibly go chasing off to investigate every one of the hundreds of possible sightings, Muzzel had sent out small teams to take a closer look and provide a more definitive judgement on the identity of the settlements than the ‘bots were capable of producing.

The galaxy was a big place, and it was a slow process. So far, about a quarter of their current quadrant had been scanned by the ‘bots, and about a quarter of *that* had been either discarded by the preliminary report, or identified by the spy teams as being harmless. A few had been flagged as requiring a visit from an Imperial battle cruiser or two, once the current crisis had been dealt with.

Reports were pouring in.

Captains Thursan Yak and Jaempa Lardine were huddled over a monitor, examining the image it displayed, when Muff Farquhar strutted up behind them.

“What do you have here, gentleman?” he asked, leaning over their shoulders to get a closer look.

“Well sir,” said Captain Yak, “it appears to be a standalone Type Three power generator. We’ve seen quite a few of them in the last few weeks.” He turned to face the Muff, and recoiled an inch as he came nose to large bulbous nose with the short officer; apart from anything else, the Muff obviously had no concept of—or respect for—personal space.

Muff Farquhar nodded. “A Type Three power generator,” he said thoughtfully. “A Type Three...”

“They’re suitable for running large planetary installations,” added Captain Lardine helpfully. “You could practically power an entire city with one of these things. They can convert just about any matter you feed them into energy, with a ninety-three percent efficiency; they’ll even convert free hydrogen from the atmosphere if nothing else is available. Very popular among the smuggling and pirating crowds. Not quite as powerful as the Type Sevens, but a lot...” He trailed off as he became aware of a rhythmic smacking sound; the Muff was slapping his swagger stick impatiently into his palm.

“I *know* what a Type Three power generator is, thank you, Captain,” said the Muff. “That is them. I feel it.”

“But sir, there are many uncharted settlements; we were just about to eliminate them from our list. The reports coming back from...”

“Don’t argue with me, Captain. The Rebels *are* there,” said the Muff decisively. “What planet is that?”

Captain Yak tapped a few keys, and the name of the planet appeared superimposed across the bottom of the screen: *Gryczczycyzalzzcycz.*

“There,” said the Muff. “Set course for Gricizzzzleza... Grizzlezizzlewiz... Grizizizzle...” He frowned at the screen, momentarily defeated.

“Uh...” began Captain Lardine.

“Enough, Captain. Uh, what is next on the list?” said the Muff.

Yak tapped a few more keys. The image changed to show another Type Three power generator. Across the bottom of the screen was the much shorter and eminently more pronounceable planet name: *Hoff*.

The Muff nodded happily. *Hoff. No hassle there!*

“What information do you have on that system?” he asked.

“Sir,” said Captain Lardine, examining the data that rolled across the screen, “our sniper team on Hoff sent back a preliminary report of a large force massed there, but could not identify them more clearly. Her last report is overdue, although given the weather conditions on the planet, that is no cause for alarm.”

“The Rebels are *there*,” said the Muff decisively. He glared from one Captain to the other, daring either man to contradict him.

“Uh, yes sir,” said Yak.

“As you wish,” said Lardine.

“Set course for Hoff,” said the Muff. “Notify the fleet—contact *IPD Acute* and *IPD Obtuse* as well. We shall all rendezvous above Hoff, and eliminate the Rebel threat once and for all.”

“Yes sir,” said both Captains. They stood and left the briefing room to relay the Muff’s orders.

Imperial Muff Aleeto Farquhar settled into one of the comfortable chairs and stroked his swagger stick thoughtfully.

“The Imperator wants to see decisive action,” he said aloud to the empty room, “and that’s what I shall give him.”

Chapter 5

Revelations

Princess Labia Orgasma stood behind the plasteel observation window and stared into the medical bay. Her dainty lips were pursed into a worried frown.

Beside her stood a humanoid ‘bot, its metallic skin gleaming gold under the bright lights of the medical complex. “His” designation was CP-*Oui*-P, and he looked surprised more than worried. Of course, he always looked surprised; his face was a simple smooth sheet of metal, with round crystalline eyes, and a round, latex-lined hole for a mouth. The CP-*Oui* series ‘bots were primarily designed as sex toys, with secondary functions including etiquette and protocol. Since first encountering Lurk on the planet Ratatouille, he had become accustomed to being referred to as “Seepy Weepy”.

“Do not worry, Mistress Libby,” said Seepy Weepy in a voice which sounded as though it carried enough concern for the both of them. “I am sure that both Master Mal and Master Lurk will be fine. These medibots are very good at their jobs.”

Beside Seepy, a short domed astrobot beeped and whistled urgently. This was RT-4RT, Seepy’s long-time companion. “She” was commonly referred to as “Arty Farty”.

“Hush, Arty,” scolded Seepy. “Mistress Libby does not need to hear that.”

“What?” said Libby. “What did she say.”

“Oh, nothing, Mistress Libby,” said Seepy. “Pay her no mind.”

“Tell me what she said,” said Libby.

“Oh,” said Seepy. “Well, she merely said that she cannot see what is going on.”

Libby turned to stare into the glowing eyes of Seepy Weepy, then both the human and the humanoid ‘bot looked down at Arty Farty. The astrobot whistled, and rotated her domed head to illustrate her point. Her round lens was below the bottom edge of the plasteel window.

“I *did* say it was nothing,” said Seepy apologetically.

“Hmmm.” Libby went back to staring through the window.

In the medical bay, Mal Single lay on a narrow bunk. A pad of white gauze was taped to the front of his shoulder; another—although Libby could not see it—was taped across the exit wound on his back. He was a little pale from blood loss, but a drip fed essential nutrients into his body through the needle inserted in his arm. He was asleep.

At the back of the medical bay, a large clear cylinder bubbled with pink-tinged healant. Floating in the slimy goop, naked but for a loincloth and a respirator mask strapped across his face, was Lurk Splitwhisker. He thrashed and twitched against the loose restraints which held him in place, and Libby knew that he was dreaming again—he was frequently plagued by nightmares.

He had suffered extensive frostbite to his extremities; one of the fingers on his left hand had turned gangrenous, and had been amputated. Along with the leg that Mal had been forced to amputate to save his life, and the hand

which he had lost to the light rapier duel with his father, Lurk was rapidly running out of limbs. A new mechanical leg had been fitted to replace the old. It was practically indistinguishable from his human leg; the circle around his thigh which marked the join between flesh and plastic was the only visible reminder that his left leg was artificial. There was a similar circle around his right forearm.

The healant in which he floated was helping his body to accept the new limb, and repairing other damaged tissue. Libby wondered if it would help repair his tortured mind.

“I’m sure they will be fine,” said Seepy again.

Lurk opened his eyes. He was lying in a narrow bed in a Rebel Coalition medical bay.

“Welcome back, old buddy,” said a familiar voice. “How do you feel?”

Lurk blinked and looked around. Libby and Mal were beside his bed. Mal had his arm in a sling.

“I’m a little tired,” Lurk replied to Mal. “And I’ve got an itchy foot. Other than that I’m fine. What happened to you?” He nodded at the sling.

Mal grinned. “Got shot rescuing you,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

“Rescuing me?” asked Lurk. “Why? What happened?”

“We were hoping you could tell us that,” said Libby. “What do you remember?”

“Nothing much,” said Lurk. “I was out on patrol, about to head back in. I spoke to Mal, I think?”

“Sure did,” confirmed Mal. “Said something about a trace reading of metal. Some space junk you wanted to check out.”

“Oh yeah,” said Lurk. “And then...” He frowned. “I seem to remember falling. My snowrunner fell over. I guess she got shot too?”

Mal nodded. “Looks like we had a sniper out there. We drove him off, but found no trace of him; chances are he’s still out there somewhere.”

“Then I was trapped, couldn’t move—my leg. I think my leg is broken?”

“Yeah, it was. When they retrieved it, it was crushed and gangrenous. Doc says if I hadn’t cut it off when I did, you’d have died for sure.”

Lurk was staring at him in horror. “You cut my leg off?” he said.

“Well, yeah,” said Mal. “You were pinned pretty tight beneath your ‘runner, and it was just me and the blizzard. I had no choice.”

“You cut my leg off?” shrieked Lurk.

“And saved your life, yeah,” said Mal. “Besides, based on the state of your leg when they recovered it, the Doc says he’d have removed it if I hadn’t.”

“You cut my leg off,” muttered Lurk, gazing down at where his torso disappeared beneath the sheet.

“You’re welcome,” said Mal darkly.

“Well,” said Libby softly into the silence which followed, “that could have been handled a little better.”

Mal shrugged. “I’m a smuggler, not a diplomat.”

Libby placed her hand on Lurk’s arm. “Lurk, he saved your life; he had no other choice.”

Lurk met her sympathetic gaze. “But my leg...”

“Replaced, better than new,” she told him. “You’ve got the finest of artificial limbs.”

“Yeah, great,” he muttered. He remembered Bent K’nobby’s description of Barth Vapour—Lurk’s father—as being “more machine than man.” *Must run in the*

family, he thought bitterly. He raised his hands—one real, one artificial—and glared at them. Then he frowned.

“So did you cut off my finger too?” he said calmly.

“The Doc did that,” Libby told him. “It was gangrenous, and could not be saved.”

“But, what, I don’t get a robotic finger?” he asked.

Libby shook her head. “I’m afraid not. It’s not practical, apparently. Something about the attachment point being too small.”

Lurk nodded. “Right,” he said quietly.

“Are you gonna be okay, buddy?” asked Mal.

“Bits of me are,” said Lurk bitterly. “Although I guess we can just keep hacking bits off till there’s nothing left.”

“Hey, fine,” said Mal, throwing his free hand in the air. “Forget I asked.”

Lurk took a deep breath, then turned to stare at the other man’s chest, and the white sling which held his arm against it. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m just a bit ... overwhelmed. I’ll be fine.” He lifted his eyes to meet Mal’s gaze. “Thanks for coming to get me. Thanks for saving my life. I appreciate it.”

Mal shrugged, and winced as his shoulder rebelled against the movement. “You’d do the same for me,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Lurk. “I guess I would at that.”

“Okay,” said Libby. “Now, do you remember anything else?”

Lurk frowned at her. “No, nothing really. Just images. Dreams, nightmares, whatever. I was pretty much out of it, I think.”

“Okay, no problem,” said Libby.

“I saw Bent,” said Lurk. “He told me to go to Daggyboil. Reminded me, rather; this is not the first time

he's tried to send me there. I guess I should take off soon, see who I can find there."

"Must you?" It was Libby's turn to frown.

"Yeah," said Lurk slowly. "I think it's important."

"Well, if you..."

"Oh shit!" said Lurk loudly, interrupting her. "Bastard!"

"What..." began Libby.

"I just remembered. It was an Imperial Trooper. The guy who shot at me—the sniper."

"Are you sure?" asked Libby.

"I thought it was a dream at the time, nothing made any sense. He came in out of the blizzard to check on me, started searching through my jacket for ... I dunno. Identification, I guess." Lurk patted reflexively at his chest; of course he was only wearing pyjamas now.

"Are you sure it wasn't a dream?" asked Mal, but he nodded slowly. "I mean, if it *was* an Imperial Assassin, why did he leave you alive?" Mal had already voiced his own suspicions about the identity of the sniper.

Lurk nodded, and laughed. "He thought I *was* dead," explained Lurk. He held up his right hand. "He even checked my pulse. This thing may look and feel pretty real, but it's not *that* real!"

"So did he find anything?"

"I don't think so. Something scared him off. I guess that was you, Mal old buddy."

Mal shivered. He'd spent the night with an Imperial Assassin skulking around outside his tent.

Libby stood up. "It doesn't matter what he found, or didn't find, on Lurk. Our rescue transport had insignia on it which could possibly be traced back to the Rebel Coalition. Those 'speeders set the whole area ablaze, but we found no trace of anyone. Of course, an Imperial

sniper would have full stealth armour; we could walk all round him and not know he was there unless we tripped over him.” She hesitated, looking from Lurk to Mal and back again. “There’s a good chance the Imperium knows we’re here.”

“Damn,” said Mal. He stood too. “Get your strength back, kid,” he said to Lurk. “You should be out of here in a few hours. Looks like we’ve got an evacuation to organise.”

The recreation deck of the *IPD Bermuda* was abuzz with excitement.

“I heard they were issuing Arctic Combat Armour,” said Bent Davyss, his voice raised over the background roar.

“Whitesuits?” said Karnn McKavern. “I hate those things, there’s no room in them.” She scowled.

“Yeah,” agreed Bent, “and they’re heavy too.”

“Shouldn’t worry you, Turtleboy,” said Grunt Wheedle, a devilish twinkle in his eye. “It’d be just like a shell, wouldn’t it?” Grunt was the leader of the squad of Shock Troopers—Team Daffodil—seated around the small table.

Bent sighed. From the moment the other members of the squad had learned that his favourite vidshow was a little-known classic named *Turtleboy Returns to Uranus*, they had teased him about it.

“I just hope they’ve got enough to go round,” said Kumm Stolid. He paused to take a mouthful of beer, then shook his head. “Remember that debacle on Sikarra? I don’t want to go into a fire fight in the snow with nothing but one of Aunt Nellie’s knitted pullovers to keep me warm.”

For a moment, silence fell over the table as each of them thought back to their last arctic exercise.

Of the four, three wore baggy combat fatigues and had their hair shorn to regulation length. Bent, with his spiky blond hair and his brown T-shirt, was the odd one out.

“They wouldn’t do that to us,” said Bent, but he didn’t sound confident. “That was just a training mission, anyway. This is bigger than that.”

“What makes you think they’re any better organised this week?” asked Karrn. “I know *I’m* gonna be wearing an extra pair of socks, just to be safe.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Kumm.

“Where are we headed, anyway?” asked Bent. “Does anybody know?”

“You know they never tell us anything,” said Grunt. “To be honest, I really don’t care, so long as they aren’t sending us to Uranus.”

“That place stinks,” Kumm added quickly before Bent could respond to this latest gibe.

“Ha fuckin’ ha,” said Bent, glaring around the table. “Y’know, jealousy is a curse.”

“Jealousy?” queried Karrn cautiously, raising one eyebrow.

“I know you’re all just jealous that my tastes are so much more refined than yours,” said Bent. He ignored his team-mates’ derisive snorts and continued. “Just because I recognise good, quality entertainment when I see it does not give you guys the right to...” His voice trailed into silence, and the others turned to follow his gaze. He stared unblinkingly at the young woman who had approached their table.

“Are you guys Team Daffodil?” asked the newcomer hesitantly.

“Gah,” said Bent.

“Someone kick-start Bent,” muttered Karrn.

“Who’s asking?” asked Grunt.

The newcomer saluted smartly. “Private Dorn Stalwart, reporting for duty,” she said.

Grunt returned the salute lazily. “I’m Lance Corporal Wheedle,” he told her. “Reporting for *what* duty, exactly?”

“I’m here as your new Team member,” she said.

“But we’ve got ... but that makes ... oh!”

“Someone kick-start Grunt,” muttered Karrn. Aloud she said, “So you’re our fifth, huh? Welcome to The Pot. Pull up a pew.” She waved one hand idly in the air.

Dorn looked around, but there were no empty chairs nearby. “Um...” she said. Her brows furrowed.

“At least stand at ease,” Karrn told her.

“Oh, yeah, stand easy,” said Grunt. “Sorry. We weren’t expecting anyone quite this quickly.” He studied the confused expression on the standing woman’s face for several seconds. “Any questions?” he asked at last.

“Uh, what is ‘the pot’?” she asked.

“You’d have to ask Karrn,” Grunt replied.

“We are the Pot,” said Karrn. “It’s our nickname, our collective term: the Pot of Daffodils.”

“It’s a long story,” added Kumm helpfully.

“Don’t worry,” Karrn told her, “you’ll fit right in in no time. Anyway, I’m Karrn. That’s Grunt, that’s Kumm, and the shy one over there is Turtleboy.”

“Bent,” said Bent. “Don’t listen to them.”

“Um,” said Dorn.

“Um,” said Grunt.

“Um,” said Karrn.

“Um,” said Kumm in agreement.

“So, uh,” said Bent, “fire it up!”

The other four Troopers turned to stare at him. He shrugged, and grinned cheekily.

Chapter 6

Hassle on Hoff

Imperial Muff Aleeto Farquhar sat in his meditation chamber.

The small room was panelled with imitation wood, and several prints of fractal images—in tastefully muted colours—hung from the walls. A small sand garden filled the centre of the small chamber, soothing patterns traced in the dry golden sand. Against one wall was a small shrine, containing a couple of flickering candles arranged around a marble bust of the Muff himself. Opposite the shrine, a low wooden platform supported a large, soft cushion. Here the Muff sat, legs crossed, hands resting lightly on his knees.

“Little Miss Tuff sat on a Muff,” he mumbled to himself, “eating his...” He paused, and his lips moved as he ran various possible words through his mind in an attempt to finish the sentence. Nothing seemed to fit. Leaning forward slightly, he drew deeply from a large tube, inhaling the nacarat gas which bubbled up through the cool water.

There was a muffled beep. The Muff sighed and abandoned his poetical endeavours. He pushed the bong to one side and attempted to stand. However, the room had started to sway from side to side, and his crossed legs refused to cooperate. The beep sounded again. The Muff

rocked forward, back, forward again until he was balanced precariously on his knees. His legs were still crossed, his feet angled atop his thighs.

A strange smile drifted across Aleeto Farquhar's face. This was the moment. He had partaken of the gas of the spice *Menaajatwaa*, and his mind was expanded. He didn't need the mysterious Source powers that were wielded by the Stiff; his potential had been enhanced in other ways. He would now transport himself to the next room, to answer the comm panel, without moving. He grinned widely, and one of his eyes rolled lazily in its socket until it stared at the large nose beside it.

The Muff toppled forward and landed face-first in the sand garden.

Struggling and thrashing, he managed to untangle his limbs. He leaped lithely to his feet, and promptly collapsed again as they gave way beneath him. His legs had gone to sleep.

The comm in the next room beeped again. As much as a simple innocuous beep could manage, it conveyed a sense of urgency.

The Muff clambered to his feet once more. Sand trickled down the inside of his uniform. He brushed the outside relatively clean and, spitting more sand from his mouth as he went, dragging one numb foot behind him, he hobbled from the room.

He tapped the flashing button beneath the comm panel. The blank wall changed to show an image of Admiral Muzzel standing patiently on the bridge of the *IPD Bermuda*. Behind the Admiral stood Captain Pyotrovich. Both men blinked as the image of Muff Farquhar appeared on their view screen. The Muff's hair was a ruffled mess, a patch of sand clung to his cheek,

and his eyes seemed to be operating independently of each other.

“I left strict orders,” snarled the Muff, “that I was not to be disturbed while busy!”

“Uh, sir,” said the Admiral. “We have come out of hyperspace into orbit around the planet Hoff. Our sensors detect a planetary defence shield in place over the, uh, Rebel base. An analysis of all sensor readings indicates that this actually *is* an installation belonging to the Rebel Coalition. You were right, sir.”

“Was I?” said the Muff. “I mean, of course I was. It’s not luck at all. Just skill.”

“Of course, sir,” said the Admiral.

“A platypus defenestration shield, you say?”

“A, uh, planetary defence shield, yes.” said the Admiral.

“You have come out of hypnospace too close to the planet,” said the Muff, swaying slightly from side to side, as he spoke. “The Rabbits are alerted to our presence. You are as incontinent as you are foolishnessness.” He blinked owlshly at the screen. His wandering eye straightened, then slowly rolled away again, doing its own thing.

“But sir,” said the Admiral as a blank look of extreme patience slid onto his face, “the shield was already up when...”

“Your excuses do not concern me, Admirubble.” The Muff was holding one hand in the air in front of him, making pinching motions with his fingers.

“Uh, sir?” said the Admiral. “Are you quite okay, sir? You do know that you are not a Stiff Lord, don’t you, sir?”

“Of course I’m not Stiff,” said the Muff. “I’m a Muff. Everyone knows that Muff and Stiff are two different

things—although they can make wonderful things happen when they work together.” He hiccupped suddenly. “Besides, being held by you isn’t quite enough to get me excited.”

“If you say so, sir,” said the Admiral.

“I don’t want to talk to you any more, Admill,” said the Muff. “Go away. You’re in command now, Adimubble Ploppovich.”

“Uh, thank you, sir,” said the Captain, stepping forward and glancing nervously at the Admiral out of the corner of his eye. Muzzel shrugged and shook his head.

“Launch a salt grinder, I mean a salty ground, I mean a ground of salt,” said the Muff. He frowned. “Take out the shield genera-whatsit, so we can land Troopers.”

“Yes, sir,” said Captain Pyotrovich. “We’ll take care of it.”

“Good lad,” said the Muff. Tears welled in his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. “Did I ever tell you about your mother?” he asked. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped to the floor.

The two Imperial officers gazed at the view screen for a couple of seconds. There was no sign of movement in the Muff’s quarters. They looked at each other.

“Your mother?” queried the Admiral as the Captain severed the comm connection..

The Captain shrugged. “Beats me, sir!” he said. After a short pause, he continued: “Don’t worry, Admiral, I’m sure he’ll have forgotten all about my ‘promotion’ when he wakes up.”

“It won’t matter,” said the Admiral. “A copy of that conversation from the archives, stored in a safe place, is all the security I’ll ever need. Doping up on *Menaajatwaa*? That’s dereliction of duty at the very least.

Not to mention, of course, all those who witnessed his murder of poor Smithers.”

“Yes, sir,” said the Captain.

“Initiate the ground assault against the generator,” said the Admiral.

“Yes, sir,” said the Captain. He saluted smartly and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Captain,” added the Admiral.

“Sir?”

“Send somebody in to put the Muff to bed.”

The Rebel Coalition’s Command Centre was more tense and busy than usual.

“Another two *Planetary Dominators* just dropped out of hyperspace,” said Libby, reading the information as it flooded across her screen. Her voice was steady, but there was a worried look in her eyes.

“Five? That’s the entire Imperial fleet for this sector,” said Commander Bekkalu.

“The shield will keep them out for a little while,” said Mal, “but they will no doubt target the generator with a ground assault.”

“Deploy the defence teams,” said Bekkalu decisively. “We’ve got to give the transports as much time as possible.” Outside the Command Centre, frantic effort was underway to load as much equipment and as many personnel as possible into the few grounded transports. Those Rebel ships which had been in orbit, unable to assist in the evacuation, had fled, jumping into hyperspace within seconds of the arrival of the first Imperial battle-cruiser.

General Dogidu tapped the chart. “They will land *here* somewhere, and make their way across this snow plain towards the ravine. I have all available troops *here*,

along with perhaps thirty defensive turrets. I don't know what the Imperium will send against us, but you can bet it will be heavily armoured."

"Plodders?" asked Libby.

"Probably," said the General. "Our troops won't hold out long against that sort of firepower. Perhaps the ice-speeders will slow them down—we might even take out a couple of them—but there is no way we can stop them. Not with these weapons."

"Do your best, General."

"Goes without saying," said the General. "But once they take out the generator, this place will be swarming with Troopers within minutes—or they'll just nuke us from orbit. We have to be out of here by the time that happens."

"We shall do *our* best, General," said Bekkalu.

The Rebel Captain raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the horizon. It was a hazy afternoon, and visibility was not as good as he would have liked. Was that movement? Or just his eyes playing tricks? He lowered the binoculars and peered into the distant haze. Nothing. Blinking, he wiped a gloved hand over his eyes, then raised the binoculars again.

Something moved. He waited, and the object appeared out of the haze. It was a huge but squat, boxlike contraption, supporting its weight on six articulated legs. Several independent cannons were mounted around its hull. Inside, the Captain knew, would be twenty Shock Troopers—although the Troopers they carried were rarely necessary after the cannons had done their work—and another three to four crew manning the guns and driving the vehicle slowly forwards.

It was an Imperial Plodder. Its official name was a confusing acronym which had something to do with its all-terrain capabilities, but everybody—absolutely *everybody*—called them Plodders. That was what they did. Slowly, surely, inexorably, they plodded onward.

It lifted three of its legs, swung them forward, and planted them again. Snow puffed into the air from the impact of each large foot.

“Plodder,” he shouted. “Plodder at 273 degrees.”

“Another one at 281 degrees,” came a call from further down the defensive line.

The Captain reduced the zoom on his binoculars. There were four of them in all, appearing out of the haze. They were closer than he would have liked—damn these small planets with their close horizons—and he felt his gut clench in a momentary panic.

“They’ll be within firing range in thirty seconds,” he shouted. “This is it, everybody: get ready!” He dropped down into the snow trench which would hopefully provide some measure of cover.

“Where the hell is our air support?” he wondered aloud.

One by one, the Rebel gun emplacements opened fire, and flak began to burst around the armoured hulls of the slowly approaching vehicles, seemingly without effect.

Twelve Rebel ice-speeders in close formation swept out of the main hangar bay. The force field shimmered up behind them. As they roared out across the plain, the group split into four groups of three.

“Alpha Leader to Alpha Wing,” said Lurk Splitwhisker into his comm, “we’ll take the Plodder on the far left.”

“Acknowledged, Alpha Leader,” crackled the voice of Alpha Two in his ear. “Uh, sir? Are we sure this is going to work?”

“Nope,” said Lurk. “It looked good in the simulations, but you know how useful *they* are.”

“Oh,” said Alpha Two. “Right.”

The ‘speeders zipped over the defenders waiting at the front lines. The Rebel cannons fell silent as the ‘speeders entered their line of fire.

“Sir,” said Alpha Three, “can’t you just ... you know?”

“Can’t I just what?” said Lurk.

“Well ... change them. Like at Yawn, y’know?”

“No,” said Lurk shortly. It was not a thought he wished to pursue; the memory of all the Imperial blood on his hands, caused by his use and abuse of the Source, had given him nightmares enough already. “Now get ready; we’re coming into range of their cannons.”

Blaster fire suddenly began to spew from the cannons atop the Plodders, and Alpha Wing took evasive action.

“Stay as low as possible,” shouted Lurk into the comm. “That way they can’t bring all their guns to bear.” The ice plain flashed past beneath the bellies of the ‘speeders as they wove and dodged steadily closer to the armoured behemoths.

An energy bolt clipped the rear stabiliser of Alpha Three, and the speeding craft wobbled dangerously before its pilot brought it back under control.

“Are you still with us, Three?” asked Lurk.

“Yes sir,” said Alpha Three. “Got a little fried, but the secondary stabiliser kicked in okay.”

“Good,” said Lurk. “You take the first pass, then get out of here.”

“No problem, Captain,” said Alpha Three.

“I’ll take the second pass. Alpha Two, you follow me. And watch out for those guns as you go over!”

Alpha Three swung about—a thin ribbon of smoke trailing from the ice-speeder’s scorched hull—and accelerated directly towards the Plodder. At the last possible moment, he pulled up sharply and shot across the top of Imperial vehicle. As he did so, there was a puff of vapour as the Rebel pilot fired their secret—and hopefully effective—weapon. The cloud of water spray splashed across one side of the Plodder, and instantly froze solid in the icy, sub-zero conditions. As Alpha Three turned and headed back to base for emergency repairs and a refill, Alpha Two repeated the manoeuvre from the other side. As soon as Alpha Two was clear, Lurk made his own run, dumping a thousand gallons of atomised water onto the massive metal hull.

The water filled every crevice, seeped into every gap, and froze, and expanded. The Plodder’s massive legs stopped moving, three of them suspended in mid-air. The cannons kept firing—their barrels were so hot that the water vapour which touched them simply turned to steam—but could no longer rotate to track the retreating craft. Grumbling and shuddering, the Plodder strained against its icy bonds. One leg moved a little, and then stopped.

“Hit them again, Alpha Two,” said Alpha Leader.

“Sure thing,” said Alpha Two. The ‘speeder made another pass, and dumped the rest of the water across one side of the Plodder. Lurk followed him in, adding another icy layer.

“That thing’s not going anywhere for a while,” said Lurk. “Let’s get out of the way of our cannons.”

The two remaining ‘speeders of Alpha Wing turned and headed back towards the defensive line. The

‘speeders of the other wings had met with similar successes; the only casualty had been Gamma Two, which had taken a full hit in the underbelly as it made its first approach.

“Alpha Leader to gun crews,” said Lurk, “finish them off.”

The Rebel cannons opened fire once more, concentrating all firepower upon a single helpless Plodder. For a while the heavy armour withstood the fierce pounding—the Plodder even began to move forward again, as the barrage melted the ice which entombed it—but eventually, weakened by the extremes of temperature, it gave way. The behemoth shuddered violently, and an internal explosion punched a large hole in the hull as its ammunition store detonated. A second explosion gouted flame as the fuel ignited. Black smoke began to billow from between the twisted armour plates.

The Rebel defenders cheered raggedly, then grew silent as the guns turned upon the next Plodder in line.

Designated PLWDR-7449—the acronym stood for Perambulatory Legion and Weaponry Deployment Redoubt, and yes, the Imperial functionary who came up with it *had* been summarily executed—the second Plodder trembled as the defender’s guns zeroed in. Along with Teams Hyrax, Beaver, and Zorilla, the five Shock Troopers of Team Badger were huddled inside. The pounding thunder of the Rebel barrage was deafening. Only the fact that their helmets were fitted with personal comm units made it possible for the Troopers to make themselves heard.

“Into the launch tubes, dammit,” growled Sergeant Strong. “All Troopers into the launch tubes. This hull

won't last much longer. We've got to take the fight to them!"

In the garish red light within the Plodder, the Troopers scrambled to obey.

"Are you all ready to kick these Rebel scum back to the ice age?" shouted Strong.

A ragged chorus of *hooyah* came back as the response.

"Then let's go," said the Sergeant. "I'd recommend the rest of you get out, too," he added to the three-person crew of the Plodder. "Take your chances out on the snow. We'll do what we can to distract the Rebels from your position."

"Thank you, Sergeant," said the young officer in charge of the Plodder. "Your actions today will not be forgotten."

"See you when this is over," shouted Strong as he backed into the final empty launch tube. He rotated the hatch closed and hit the large red button.

Ice shards flew and smoke billowed from the armoured back of the crippled Plodder as its Emergency Personnel Deployment System was activated. Red flashes lit the boiling leaden shroud as numerous tubes were launched high, cylinder following cylinder, into the frozen air. A couple of them exploded as they were caught by the withering barrage of cannon fire which still pounded the hull of the Plodder; the rest sailed clear. As they reached the zenith of their path, each tube sprouted small guidance fins and began to glide, falling rapidly, towards the Rebel front lines.

For the barest second, silence fell over the battlefield as the Rebels readied themselves to meet this new development.

The first of the tubes thudded heavily into the snow; upon impact the front face exploded outwards, sending the defenders diving for cover as a hail of shrapnel ripped through the air. The others landed in a ragged line either side of the first, each adding its own deadly spray of metal fragments to cut through the Rebel ranks.

From out of the midst of each carefully shaped explosion stepped a fully armoured Shock Trooper, garbed in Arctic Camouflage colours and wielding an ugly black Gemini Mk-III Vaporiser. Several of them were firing their weapons before their booted feet hit the snow, keeping the Rebels pinned down behind the ramparts of their trenches.

“Form up on me,” shouted Sergeant Samson Strong, his stentorian voice cutting across the excited chatter on the comms channel.

“Right behind you, Sarge,” shouted Fib. He fired a quick burst at a Rebel soldier who had raised his head into view; the Rebel fell backwards out of sight.

“Let’s move,” Strong ordered. “It won’t take these guys long to regroup, and we’re too exposed out here; even this disorganised rabble could pick us off like this.”

Even as he spoke, a bolt of blaster fire seared through the chill air in front of him, so close he heard it sizzle. He returned fire and began moving forward in the nearest approximation to a double-time trot he could manage; the snow crackled and gave way beneath his boots with each step he took.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” said Jenkins urgently. She stood her ground, waiting as the rest of the Troopers scrambled past her. Behind the brutal visage of her mask she scowled. “Who’s missing? We’re a couple short!”

“Worry about roll call once we’re in cover,” said Strong.

“The tower, Sarge,” shouted Jenkins. She pointed towards the new threat, although he could not see her. Many of the gun emplacement turrets had ceased fire; one of the nearby ones was slowly rotating, bringing its barrel to bear on the advancing cluster of Imperial invaders.

“The rest of you head for the North trench,” shouted Strong, his voice ringing out clearly—with just a hint of electronic distortion—from the amplifier in his helmet. “Take it and hold it. Team Badger, with me.” Strong began to run for the threatening laser cannon tower. The other four members of Team Badger were right on his heels as he reached the hatch. It was locked.

Strong turned to Jenkins. He held up one finger, then pointed up at the narrow view slot through which the crew manning the cannon peered. Jenkins nodded. She lifted a small thermal grenade from its place on her belt, and pressed the activation switch. She held up one gauntlet-clad finger, two, three, four... She tossed the small grenade casually up into the air; it clattered through the narrow slot and into the interior of the tower. Moments later there was a muffled explosion, and thick black smoke began pouring out of the destroyed emplacement.

Further down the line, a second tower was rotating to face them.

Suddenly another heavy rain of escape cylinders fell upon a second section of the Rebel front line. First one of the remaining Plodders, then the other, had followed Sergeant Strong’s lead.

“Take out the rest of those towers,” ordered Strong over the assault comm channel.

“Already on it,” said a new voice. There was a flash of flame, a wave of heat, and the next nearest tower was reduced to a smoking pile of scrap metal.

“Glad you guys could join us,” snarled Strong.

The Rebel forces had regrouped now, and the incoming small arms fire was becoming increasingly accurate. Several sections of the first trench had erupted into savage close combat as the Imperial Troopers had flooded over the edge onto the Rebel soldiers sheltering within.

“Team Badger, head for that trench,” ordered Strong. “Take out that far tower.”

Suddenly a distant rumble caught his attention and he looked around. The Rebel ice-speeders were returning to the battle.

“The fighters are back,” screamed Mikki.

“Let me worry about the fighters,” said Strong, “you just worry about that tower.” He headed back towards the first tower they had blown.

Fib was racing for the trench when a glowing bolt of blaster energy caught him square in the chest. He went down hard, flat on his back. Steam hissed as the hot metal of his armour hit the snow.

“Man down,” said Strong. He hesitated, torn between doing his job and heading back for his friend.

“I’ve got him, Sarge,” said Jenkins. “You go deal with those fighters.” She crouched down beside the fallen Trooper. Mikki laid down a withering blast of suppressing fire in the general direction of the Rebel lines.

The fifth member of Team Badger, the new guy, squatted on his haunches beside Fib and Jenkins, his weapon panning back and forth in search of a Rebel target. His name was Gorman Basski, and the quaver in

his voice betrayed his nervousness as he asked "How is he?" This was only his second combat drop.

"Speak to me, Fib," said Jenkins, ignoring Basski's question.

Fib coughed. "I'm fine," he said. His voice sounded strained and weak. "The armour absorbed most of it. Just give me a minute, okay?"

"One minute," agreed Jenkins, "and then we've got to go."

"Those fighters are going to be breathing down our necks any second," warned Mikki.

Fib hissed sharply.

"Are you okay to move?" asked Jenkins. "We've got to get to cover now!"

"Yeah, sure," said Fib. "Damn suit just gave me a triple dose of healant. Give me a hand up."

Jenkins and Basski each grabbed one of Fib's armoured wrists; between them they hauled the big guy to his feet. Mikki scooped up his fallen weapon, and the four of them began to make their way towards the safety of the nearest trench.

From the cockpit of his ice-speeder, Lurk scanned the battlefield in disbelief. The entire Rebel defensive front line had dissolved into chaos, and Imperial Shock Troopers were everywhere.

"What the hell?" he said. "We had them defeated when we left."

"What was that, Alpha Leader?" asked Alpha Two.

"Nothing," said Lurk. "Target that second Plodder." He looked again. "I'll take out those guys on the ground." He swung his ice-speeder round, lining himself up with a small group of Shock Troopers who were struggling

through the snow. His finger tensed on the trigger of his 'speeder's guns.

Without warning, a blast of energy ripped through the air in front of him. "What in Hell's Handbasket?" he muttered in disbelief as he glanced towards the source of the blast. One of the Rebel cannons, despite the smoke pouring from its damaged hull, was tracking him. He took evasive action as it fired again. The blast fried his fighter's electronics, and the controls went dead in his hands. He switched to manual and hauled back on the stick, but without power from the engines, the 'speeder had all the glide characteristics of a rock.

"I'm going down," he shouted, but there was no response. The comms unit was as dead as everything else. Wrestling with the controls, he managed to lift the 'speeder's nose; then the snowy ground came up and hit him. The harness bit deeply into his shoulders as the 'speeder lurched to a stop, half-buried in a drift of snow. His helmeted head rattled against the inside of the canopy, and for a dangerous second blackness roared over him.

Fumbling blindly, he released the catch and the canopy popped open. The freezing air poured in, kissing his exposed face. He jerked back in his seat, fully awake again. Struggling free of the harness, he pushed himself out of the cockpit and half clambered, half fell into the snow.

His shoulders throbbed with pain.

"That's gonna leave a mark," he muttered to himself.

Moving gingerly, he disentangled his legs and dragged himself to his feet. He had overshot the lines of combat, skimmed past the row of now-abandoned Plodders, and ploughed a long furrow in the snow. There was nothing he could do now but start the long walk

back, and hope that the Rebels would manage to hold out until he got there. Leaning into the cockpit of the downed 'speeder, Lurk retrieved his blaster pistol.

With one last backwards glance at the wreckage, he set off across the snow-field.

Far removed from the raging battle-front, nestled at the end of a blind valley, the Type Three generator emitted a quiet hum which resonated in the ribs of the squads of waiting Rebel soldiers. Mostly hidden behind the bulk of the generator, the primary shield emitter projected the protective field which kept the orbiting Imperial forces at bay.

Captain Albert "Goober" Cudingjam looked up from the sensor display and ran his gaze across the valley entrance. Nothing moved. The sensor array was already telling him that—with its motion detector, infrared camera, electromagnetic disturbance meter, and numerous other gadgets which the Captain only vaguely understood, it was much more accurate than plain old eyesight, but Cudingjam hadn't grown to be an old soldier by putting all his trust in fancy equipment.

Cudingjam sighed. He tapped the screen of the display, calling up the tactical chart, and sighed again. The Imperials were miles away yet. The Rebel front line was collapsing as the defenders fell back before the concerted push of the Shock Troopers, and Cudingjam ached to take his boys and join the fight—although even with his years of experience, he knew there was little he and his eighteen warriors could do to slow down the finest fighting force in the known galaxy. Nonetheless, he felt wasted here, so far from the action. And yet...

He switched the display back to the sensor output. Still nothing. With a frown, Cudingjam lifted his

binoculars and scrutinised the snowy vista carefully. Nothing moved, nothing looked out of place, nothing showed to suggest there might be a problem. He lowered the binoculars thoughtfully.

“Anything?” asked Sergeant Wills.

“There’s something out there,” said Cudingjam slowly, his breath puffing visibly in the still, cold air.

“Where?”

The Captain shook his head slowly. “I don’t know,” he said. “I see nothing, and the sensors all agree, but something is out there! I feel it in my bones.” And he did; the throbbing ache between his shoulder blades had nothing to do with the hum of the generator.

“Sniper?” asked the Sergeant. She was a woman of few words, and she certainly wasn’t going to waste any on arguing with her Captain’s instincts.

“Probably,” said Cudingjam. “Reports say the bastard probably has stealth armour. Even so, the sensor net we’ve laid across the valley should pick up *something*. But...”

“Yeah,” agreed the Sergeant.

“Of course, if his armour is good enough to defeat the sensors,” said the Captain, “then it’s always possible...” He trailed into silence, and turned to look back down the valley towards the generator. Nothing moved. “I wonder, Sergeant Wills, if you would be good enough to take a few men back and do a thorough sweep of the ground back there?”

“Yes sir,” said the Sergeant with a nod. She turned away sharply, and selected four soldiers from the waiting squad, summoning them with brief hand gestures. “Recon,” she said to them as they gathered around her, “sweep and clean. Barstowe, you take point.”

Private Barstowe nodded and turned to lead the way back down the valley towards the generator. He gripped his blaster firmly, eyes darting from side to side with each step.

As the small group moved out, Cudingjam studied the steep side walls of the valley. Nothing. *Nothing* was everywhere he looked, and he felt a chill ripple down his spine that had little to do with the sub-freezing temperature. He hoped he was wrong, he hoped it was just his imagination playing tricks, he hoped...

The sharp crack ripped through the still air and echoed violently between the snow-covered walls of the valley, making its origin impossible to determine. Barstowe stumbled and fell, and lay motionless in snow which blossomed into a pink halo around his head.

“Down,” shouted Cudingjam; those who hadn’t already reacted dove for cover, but the second shot sent another member of the recon team crashing lifelessly to the ground.

A blur of movement, half-way up the steep slope, caught Cudingjam’s eye and he fired a salvo of shots towards it; snow and steam erupted upwards where they hit, but there was no sign that he had caught anything more than a wind-tossed puff of snow. Then a third shot cracked out, and the blaster was torn from the Captain’s hand.

He slumped back, his arm ablaze with pain. “Bastard,” he muttered, “now you’re just playing with us...” He looked over at where his blaster lay, now nothing more than a shattered, smoking ruin, and he realised with a chill that it gave away the sniper’s position. “Behind us,” he gasped, “he got behind us and we never saw a thing!”

Before he could gather the strength to repeat this revelation more loudly, to alert his men and call down a rain of blaster fire on the Imperial Assassin, the world tore apart with a bone-rattling *kaboom*. Pressure, sound, heat, debris; the explosion rolled over the cowering Rebels and left them deafened, gasping for breath. Blackness clutched insistently at the Captain; he tried to fight it, to lift his head and look, but he knew without having to see the smoking crater that the generator and the shield emitter were gone.

“The third transport is away,” declared a Rebel comms officer from where he sat, one hand pressed firmly over the small speaker in his ear. He looked up and said, a little more loudly this time, “the third transport is away!”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Mal, “we heard you the first time.” He turned his attention back to the silent, solemn figure of Princess Labia. She stood so straight and still, an island of peace in the chaos of the Command centre. She was focussed fully on the reports flooding back from the front line, and only the faint worry lines which creased her brow hinted that the news was mostly bad. She was a pillar of strength, and it seemed at times as though she carried the weight of the entire Rebellion on her slender shoulders. Mal wondered if anybody else saw through her masks to the fear and fragility beneath. He hoped not. Seeing her like this made his heart ache.

“Come on, Princess,” he said. “There’s nothing more you can do here. This battle is over.”

The room fell silent as those who remained behind turned to look at the young woman.

Libby looked into Mal’s eyes. He met her gaze unflinchingly.

“Okay,” said Libby with a sigh. “Perhaps you are right. We’ve held out as long...”

The complex rumbled and shook, and lumps of compacted snow fell from the ceiling. The lights went out. After a couple of tense seconds, red emergency lighting flickered dimly into life.

“The generator,” said Mal softly.

“We’re out of time, people,” said Libby loudly to the room. “Sound the retreat, and get to your transport now! We’ve just lost the shield, and we’ll be knee-deep in Shock Troopers in no time!”

The room erupted into chaos once more.

“Shaggus,” Mal shouted into the small comm unit in his hand, “get the *Sparrow* warmed up now! We are leaving!”

Captain Pyotrovich and Admiral Muzzel stood on the bridge of the *IPD Bermuda*, watching the battle play out on the tactical screens. It was going well; the Rebel forces were falling back rapidly as the Shock Troopers pushed forward. So far, however, three transports had lifted off from the planet’s surface and taken evasive action, spiralling dangerously away within the atmosphere in an effort to get past the Imperial blockade. Two of those had managed to escape to hyperspace; the third had been crippled by a well-placed barrage to its engines, and was currently held snugly captive beneath the steel belly of the *IPD Scalene*.

“Sir,” said a lieutenant loudly.

“What is it?” asked the Captain without taking his eyes from the screen.

“I’ve just detected a large explosion, roughly four miles north of the battle-front,” said the lieutenant, barely

containing his excitement, “and, well, my sensors say the Rebel shield is down.”

“What?” The two senior officers turned to look at the young lieutenant. “Can somebody confirm that, please?” said the Admiral.

“I’m not getting any reading on the shield,” said another lieutenant, looking up from her station. “But surely I should be reading *something*, whether it was up or down?” she added uncertainly.

The Captain shook his head. “No,” he told her, “there is no reason you would get a reading on an inactive shield. Why would you?”

“Sorry, sir,” she said. “I just thought...”

“Never mind,” the Captain said. “I know it’s a popular misconception. Tends to get spread around by entertainment forms aimed at the unwashed masses.”

“Oh...”

“Incoming message from the surface, sir,” said one of the communications officers into the momentary silence. “Coded, matches the signature of the Imperial survey team.”

“And it says...” prompted the Admiral.

“It says simply: ‘Shield down, generator down, come on down.’” The comms officer fought the urge to grin.

“And it is definitely from our team on the surface?” asked the Captain.

“Definitely, sir!”

“Very well,” said the Admiral. “Captain, launch all Troop Carriers; I want that base. Intact if at all possible.”

“Aye, sir,” said the Captain.

“And Pyotrovich?”

“Sir?”

The Admiral's nose wrinkled in momentary distaste. "You had best send somebody to inform the Muff. If he is awake."

"Sir!"

Mal and Libby ran up the ramp of Mal's freighter. The princess paused a moment to close the ramp behind them.

"Oh my goodness," gasped Seepy Weepy excitedly as Mal came through the narrow doorway from the cargo bay. "I was beginning to think you were never going to come and fly me away from here." The 'bot was seated in the small lounge area of the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

"Buckle up," said Mal as he ran past. He had meant his words for Libby, but she followed him through the lounge to the cockpit.

"Very well," said Seepy primly. As he clumsily manipulated his seat restraints he added quietly, "I do hope Arty will be okay." Nobody responded. The 'bot was alone once more.

Mal dropped into the pilot's chair. As he did so, Shagpyle Duphus snuffled a greeting: *How's it going?*

"Same as always," said Mal shortly. He watched through the forward view screen as the final Rebel transport lifted off the deck and soared out of the massive hangar doors, leaving the way clear for their own escape.

That bad, huh? snorted Shaggus.

"Imperium's right on top of us," Mal told him. "Let's get out of here."

Libby dropped herself into one of the spare seats in the cockpit.

Mal punched buttons. The *Sparrow's* engines revved hungrily for a second, then rumbled and died.

That doesn't sound good, whuffed Shaggus.

Mal banged the side of his fist against the overhead bulkhead. Dutifully, the engines roared back to life.

“If only all problems could be solved so easily,” Libby said wryly. “Now, can we leave?”

“Working on it,” said Mal.

Shaggus grunted something indecipherable and waved his large woolly arm excitedly towards the mouth of the hangar. Mal glanced up from the controls to see a flood of white-armoured Imperial Shock Troopers pouring into the cavernous space. Several of them began firing their blasters towards the freighter, and the ship shuddered as her shields dissipated the incoming energy.

“Perhaps I should have taken my chances on the transport,” Libby muttered.

“Yeah, right,” said Mal. He threw the main thrust lever forward, and the Sparrow jumped into the air and hurtled towards the exit. A couple of the Troopers continued firing; most wisely dove to one side as the ship roared overhead and escaped the confines of the hangar.

A short distance away from the Rebel hangar, several small fighter craft sat on a broad, snow-covered shelf of rock, awaiting the return of their pilots. These were the ships of the ice-speeder pilots. A couple had already taken off; most of the rest would wait in vain for pilots that would never return.

A solitary row of smudged footprints led onto the shelf from the snow-plains beyond.

Lurk was clambering into the cockpit of his Cross-Wing fighter when a familiar roaring sound made him look up. The *Serendipity Sparrow* shot through the cavernous maw of the hangar and angled away towards the safety of deep space. Several laser blasts—mostly from hand-held blasters—chased the fleeing ship, but

none of them hit her. Lurk raised his free hand and waved after the ship.

“Good luck, Mal,” he said softly. “May the Source be with you.”

He settled himself into the seat of his fighter and closed the hatch. It sealed with a muted click.

“Okay, Arty,” he said as he flipped switches, starting the fighter’s engines. “Let’s get out of here.”

In the socket behind the cockpit, securely locked into place, Arty whistled and beeped urgently. Lurk glanced down at the small screen which translated her reply so that he could read it. *I couldn’t agree more*, she said.

A laser blast ripped through the air in front of him. Lurk glanced to one side. Like ants, a swarm of Shock Troopers boiled out through the hangar entrance onto the flat snow plain. Several had turned in his direction.

“So long, guys,” he muttered. He pushed the thrust lever smoothly forward, and his fighter leaped into space, leaving the planet Hoff, and her new Imperial owners, safely behind.

As the blue outside his cockpit deepened and became star-studded black, he looked around. In the distance he saw one of the *Imperial Planetary Dominators* accelerating away—no doubt in hot pursuit of one of the Rebel transport ships. Nothing seemed to be waiting for him; nevertheless, he angled away from the Imperial warship and took his small fighter around the curve of the planet before he dared to relax his vigil long enough to program the hyperspace module for his jump.

Those are the wrong coordinates, whistled Arty Farty.

“It’s okay, Arty,” said Lurk. “We’re not heading to the rendezvous point. I have to go and see an old friend of an old friend.”

But what about Seepy?

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” said Lurk. “He’s with the Princess, and she will be quite closely guarded.”

Arty whistled dubiously; the translation device chose to ignore her comment. Then she whistled and beeped again: *Do you want me to engage auto?*

“No thanks, Arty,” said Lurk. “I’d like to fly for a while.”

The hyperspace module flashed. The route was calculated. Lurk hit the green button in the centre of the panel, and the stars outside turned to streaks as the fighter accelerated into the shifting depths of hyperspace.

Chapter 7

The Noble Art of Running Away

Mal Single breathed a sigh of relief as the icy planet fell away beneath them.

“See,” he said, “I told you everything would be okay!”

Shaggus whuffed something beneath his breath; Mal ignored him.

“Some day,” Princess Labia Orgasma told him, “you’re going to be wrong, and I just hope I’m around to see it.”

Shaggus snorted, and growled loudly: *I’ve seen it; it’s not a pretty sight!*

Mal continued to ignore his co-pilot. His fingers danced over the controls as he programmed the jump into hyperspace. Suddenly a klaxon went off, and they all jumped in surprise.

“What’s that?” demanded Libby.

“Proximity alert,” snapped Mal as he flicked a switch. “Damn, where the hell did *they* come from?”

“Who?” asked Libby, but Mal was busy taking evasive action. Libby felt her stomach lurch as he threw the ship into a tight roll, spiralling away from the new threat. After a short pause to be sure her breakfast wasn’t going to come back up, she reached out and keyed the aft camera feed. Directly behind them, gaining rapidly,

loomed the huge, triangular bulk of an *Imperial Planetary Dominator*.

“Where the hell did they come from?” she wondered aloud.

“That’s what I said,” said Mal tightly. “We nearly flew straight into them. Sorry. With the trajectory we were in, the *Sparrow* has a small blind spot.”

“There’s nothing small about a *Planetary Dominator*,” said Libby.

“Hold tight,” said Mal. He leaned sharply on the joystick, and the *Serendipity Sparrow* rolled out of the path of the oncoming behemoth and angled away. Libby hoped that she merely *imagined* the sound of the hull groaning under the extreme stresses. There was nothing imaginary about the loud clatter which suddenly sounded from somewhere beyond the bridge.

“What was that?” asked Libby.

Mal sighed. “I think Seepy just fell over. Shaggus, go get that damn ‘bot secured; we don’t want him bouncing around inside the cabin when we jump to light speed.”

Grumbling, Shaggus stood and lumbered out of the small bridge.

“Hold tight,” Mal called out after him, “only a few more seconds...”

The *Sparrow* rocked violently as incoming blaster fire raked her hull.

“Just a few more seconds,” repeated Mal.

The hyperspace indicator light on the console began to flash, and Mal grinned.

“Watch this,” he said triumphantly as he punched the hyperspace jump button. The jump engines whined briefly, then sputtered and died. Nothing else happened. The stars outside stubbornly refused to stretch into streaks of light.

“Watch what?” said Libby.

Mal punched the button again, with identical results. The *Sparrow* shook again as another blast seared her hull.

“Oh crap,” said Mal.

“No light speed?” asked Libby.

The *Sparrow* rocked and shuddered, and a flight of four THIGH Fighters flashed past the cockpit window.

“I think,” said Mal, “that we may have a small problem.”

“No kidding,” said Libby. “Can’t you just, y’know, punch it? I thought that fixed everything?”

Mal frantically punched buttons but otherwise showed no sign of pursuing her suggestion. “Not that easy, I’m afraid,” he muttered.

“What are you doing?” asked Libby.

“I’m setting the autopilot,” Mal told her. “We’ve got a few evasive manoeuvres programmed into her; she’ll keep us out of reach of that *Dominator*’s attractor beam—for a while, at least.”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Emergency repairs,” he said. “If anything changes up here, let me know!” He turned and ran from the bridge.

The roguish smuggler and his tall woolly partner seemed to many to be an odd couple, but they knew their way around the engine room of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. There was barely room in the small chamber for the two of them, but somehow they managed to stay out of each other’s way.

“What about this,” shouted Mal. He was bent over a low railing, with his head buried deep within the open cowl of the hyperdrive engine. He was testing relays, one after the other.

Shaggus grunted. *Not that one!*

“This?”

No!

“What about...”

Suddenly the *Sparrow* shuddered in protest, and a loud clang echoed throughout the ship. Mal stood up, engine problems temporarily forgotten. His ship shuddered again, to the sound of another ringing impact.

“That was no laser blast,” he said. “Something hit us.”

The comm beeped, and Libby’s voice said urgently: “get up here.” The room was empty, however; Mal was already racing for the bridge, the Woonky close behind him. As they ran through the galley, Seepy Weepy—strapped firmly into one of the chairs—attempted to ask what was happening; they ignored him.

“What?” Mal asked as he dropped back into the pilot’s seat.

Libby pointed. “Asteroids,” she said simply.

Mal stared. Stretching away before them, as far as the eye could see, was a vast, drifting cloud of extremely large rocks. Without stopping to think, Mal switched back to manual control—and steered the *Sparrow* directly towards the heart of the asteroid field.

“What are you doing?” squealed Libby.

“Well, they’d be crazy to follow us, wouldn’t they?”

“I take it back,” said Libby quietly. “I’d much rather watch your mistakes from a nice safe distance, if you please.”

“Too late to change your mind now,” Mal told her shortly.

“Y’know, if you’re trying to impress me...” she began.

“Please,” he said, “I need to concentrate.”

She nodded, and closed her mouth.

The *Sparrow* spun and weaved like a thriving cottage industry as Mal took her into the field. Behind them, THIGH Fighters followed closely in hot pursuit.

Aboard the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda*, Admiral Muzzel and Captain Pyotrovich were studying the tactical readouts. The fugitive freighter had angled into the chaos of the asteroid field. The *Bermuda* had come to a stop at its fringes—massive though the *Imperial Planetary Dominator* was, some of those rocks were large enough to pose a real threat to its safety—and a multitude of THIGH Fighters had pursued the fleeing ship into the field.

With the shifting mass of rock and iron out there, telemetry reception from the THIGH Fighters was hazy at best. As the Imperial forces pursued the freighter deeper into the field, the tactical screen was slowly becoming useless. Several Fighters had already been lost. Usually highly manoeuvrable, they were falling victim to their own gravity drives; in the depths of the asteroid field, with thousands of small masses all around them in close proximity, the gravity drives became unstable, and even had a tendency to draw the Fighters towards the nearest large asteroid.

On the screen, three more small icons representing THIGH Fighters shimmered and faded from view as their transponder signals were swallowed by the field. One flashed bright red and disappeared as the Fighter collided with a rock the size of a large freighter.

Admiral Muzzel winced.

“This is getting us nowhere, Captain,” he said.

“I agree, sir,” said the Captain. “Shall I order our Fighters to withdraw?”

“Withdraw?” said another voice. “Never!”

The two officers turned. Muff Farquhar stood behind them, tapping his swagger stick lightly against his leg.

The Admiral's eyes narrowed slightly. "But sir, they are getting hammered out there; amongst those asteroids, THIGHS are virtually ineffective."

"Asteroids do not concern me, Admiral," said the Muff darkly. "You *will* continue your pursuit until we catch, uh, whoever we are chasing." He blinked. "Who *are* we chasing, Admiral. I require a full status report at once."

"Of course, sir," said the Admiral. "If, uh, you will join me in the briefing room, I shall bring you up to date."

"Very well," said the Muff. He turned and strutted towards the door at the back of the bridge.

The Admiral leaned close to the Captain. "Recall our Fighters, Captain. Set up a sensor net around that field—if that freighter comes out, I want to know about it—and send in every probe 'bot we can spare."

"Yes sir," nodded the Captain.

The Admiral turned and strode quickly after the Muff.

"So, Admiral Muzzel," demanded Muff Farquhar, "what is our situation?"

"During our ground assault on the Rebel base on Hoff," said the Admiral, "several large transport ships took off from the surface; one has been captured. The others escaped into hyperspace. As our Troopers penetrated the base, one final small freighter—and several lone fighters—attempted to escape. We determined that, for a freighter as small as this one to wait so long before leaving, there was an eighty-three percent chance that someone vital to the Rebel cause would be on board. Therefore, of course, I ordered the *Bermuda* into pursuit."

“I see,” scowled the Muff.

“The freighter—a small Firebug class ship, illegally modified—matches the profile of a freighter that fled Lord Vapour’s forces some months back. It entered the asteroid field in an attempt to elude us. I have ordered a sensor net to prevent their escape, and launched probe ‘bots to seek them out.” The Admiral paused. “If they are still in one piece, we *will* find them.”

“Very good, Admiral,” said the Muff. “Any word from the other *Dominators*?”

“The *IPD Scalene* reports they have boarded the captured Rebel vessel. Heavy resistance has been encountered by the boarding parties, but they are making good progress through the ship. Many high-ranking Rebels have already been captured.” The Admiral’s eyes narrowed slightly. “The other *Dominators* have not been so lucky. They have been attempting to track the escaped transports. Every possible destination along their last known trajectories has been placed at the top of our target list.”

“Excellent,” said the Muff. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Admiral Muzzel,” he said at last, “I seem to be, uh, that is I feel it is possible that I may have acted a little inappropriately, uh, earlier this afternoon.”

“I am not sure what you mean, sir,” said the Admiral, his face expressionless, his voice flat.

“I just, uh, I trust I did not say or do anything, uh, unbecoming an Imperial Muff?”

“I am sure that the Muff acted, in all ways, exactly as one might expect a Muff to act,” said the Admiral carefully.

Muff Farquhar nodded. “Of course,” he said. “Thank you, Admiral. You may carry on! Dismissed.”

The Admiral clicked his heels together, saluted smartly, and marched out of the briefing room. The door hissed closed behind him.

“Jumped up little bastard,” he muttered under his breath. “You’ll get exactly what’s coming to you.”

“I think we’ve lost the last of the Fighters,” said Mal as a fireball blossomed briefly in the view screen showing the aft video feed. He guided the *Serendipity Sparrow* around a tumbling asteroid, then surveyed his options. “I think I’ll take us in closer to one of the bigger ones.”

“Closer,” gasped Libby.

Shaggus growled doubtfully.

“Yeah,” said Mal. “We’re gonna get pulverised if we stay out here much longer. I can almost *feel* my luck running out as we speak. The larger ones should provide a little more protection.”

“If you say so,” said Libby.

“There,” said Mal. “That’s just what I was looking for.”

The asteroid he pointed to was large enough to be almost spherical in shape. Its surface was pocked and scarred with innumerable impact craters. It almost rated as a small planetoid.

“I see what you mean,” said Libby, as the *Sparrow* skimmed over its surface. “But now what?”

“We need to put down somewhere until I can fix the hyperdrive.” Mal frowned as he studied the rocky features rolling past beneath them.

Libby studied his profile. His lips were pursed in concentration beneath his long nose, and his strong chin was set in determination. His eyes were steely, hawk-like, as he scanned for somewhere to land his ship. His shock

of brown hair was a little more tousled and unkempt than usual.

Suddenly he turned and caught her staring at him. He grinned, and she felt her cheeks burning as she looked away.

Shaggus snorted; the social interplay between humans often amused him.

“Down there looks good,” said Mal. He pointed. It was a huge crater; at its centre, a large hole bored down into the rock. “We should be safely away from prying eyes in there.”

He flew over the hole—it seemed to be a huge round tunnel, leading straight down into the asteroid. He reduced speed, and took the *Sparrow* into a wide, looping roll until she was headed directly down into the tunnel.

As he activated the fore spotlights, something moved in the gloom in front of them.

“I have a bad feeling...” began Libby. Before she could finish the sentence, something huge lunged up out of the hole towards the descending freighter. Mal didn’t even have time to react. They had a brief impression of a massive worm-like thing headed their way, then the creature’s jaws opened—revealing a mouth full of boulder-sized teeth—and snapped shut around the *Serendipity Sparrow*. The giant space worm retracted into its burrow to digest its latest meal.

Chapter 8

Dark Dank Daggyboil

The planet Daggyboil hung in space, as planets tend to do. It was a muddy brown-green sphere, with extensive grey cloud cover. It looked about as inviting as its name suggested.

Lurk examined his scanner readout thoughtfully.

“I’m getting massive life form readings,” he said, “but nothing which registers as a city.”

Are we going to land? asked Arty Farty.

“We certainly are,” said Lurk. “But I have no idea where. I guess I could just crash-land at random, and trust to the Source that, with an entire planet to choose from, we just happen to land in Yodel’s back yard.”

Please don’t! Arty whistled urgently.

Lurk chuckled. “Don’t worry, Arty,” said Lurk, “I’m not that silly. If nothing else, I’ve learned a little patience since we first met.”

Arty chose to make no reply to this assertion.

“What do we know about this planet?” asked Lurk.

Arty beeped and whistled. *Extensive biosphere, no known settlements.*

“One thing’s for sure,” said Lurk, “there’s something alive down there. We’ll try a higher resolution with the scanner. If there’s any civilisation at all down there, it’s got to show up eventually.”

He pressed a few buttons, boosting the scanner's effective resolution, and settled back to wait. The planet rolled slowly beneath the orbiting fighter. After twenty minutes, there was a small bleep as the scanners picked up something other than swamp and mud. Lurk tapped a couple of keys on the scanner panel, enhancing the detected structure.

He frowned.

"Looks like a small ... well, spaceport, for want of a better word," he said. "One landing pad, couple of shacks. Nothing else around it, though. Can't see any reason for it to exist. Still, it's our only lead so far; we'll give it a try."

Are you sure this is a good idea, Master Lurk? whistled Arty.

"Nope," said Lurk cheerfully. "But we've come all this way; we can't really leave without at least trying to find this Yodel character."

Arty whistled mournfully.

"Don't worry," said Lurk. "What can possibly go wrong?" Ignoring the extensive list which began to scroll up the translation screen as Arty whistled and beeped urgently, Lurk set the landing coordinates, and circled around to begin his approach. He guided the fighter into the atmosphere, and visibility fell to zero as boiling clouds swallowed everything. He reduced his approach velocity slightly, and the entire craft shuddered as it hit a spot of heavy atmospheric turbulence. Finally they emerged from the clouds, although wisps of fog still swirled around his cockpit. Suddenly a small tower loomed out of the fog before them; Lurk jerked his joystick over, narrowly avoiding the ragged structure. Then the flashing lights of the landing pad beckoned, and

Lurk touched down smoothly. The engines whined down to silence as he cut their power.

“You know,” he said finally to Arty, “it *was* a rhetorical question.”

Arty fell silent.

Lurk popped the hatch of the cross-wing fighter. His eyes instantly teared up as the malodorous atmosphere rolled in and filled his lungs. It was breathable—but hardly enjoyable. It smelled of a thousand unpleasant things. Top of the list were methane and ammonia, but he detected more than a hint of sulphur too. It smelled like the men’s toilets after a hard night of curry and beer.

Lurk coughed, and blinked his eyes to clear them. After a couple of seconds, he began to rummage around in his pockets until he found an old bandanna; he folded it, and tied it across his nose to keep out the worst of the stench.

Arty beeped and whistled, but Lurk could no longer make out the words which scrolled across the readout. He blinked again, trying to clear his eyes.

“If you’re saying that coming here was a bad idea,” said Lurk, “I’m beginning to agree with you.”

As he slowly adjusted to the stench, he became aware of the sound. From every direction it came, rolling in from the swamp on the odiferous air. Crickets, and frogs, and all manner of small croaking critters filled the air with a constant croaking, chirping buzz.

“Well, this *is* a pleasant place,” he said.

Arty whistled.

Lurk stood and clambered out of the cockpit. As he jumped down the last couple of steps onto the hard surface of the landing pad, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Hey, you can’t park there!”

Lurk turned. Standing before him was the stooped figure of a thin old man. He was leaning on a gnarled cane, and he lifted it now to shake it angrily at Lurk. As he did so he lost his balance, and had to hurriedly return the cane to the ground before he fell flat on his face. He twisted his face into a tired old snarl, revealing toothless gums.

“Why not?” asked Lurk.

“That’s the main landing pad,” said the old man. “You can’t park there. What if the supply ship comes.”

Lurk looked around the small pad. Its surface was cracked in places, and weeds sprouted everywhere. Creepers crept across it, and small lizards scurried back and forth.

“Well, when is the supply ship due?” asked Lurk.

“Any day now,” said the old man testily. He coughed, and something rattled unhealthily in his chest.

“Doesn’t look like there’s been anything landing here for a long time,” said Lurk.

“Maybe,” said the old man. “Maybe not. But it could come, any day now, and when it does it won’t want to find your ship taking up its space.”

“So is there somewhere else I can park?” asked Lurk.

“Can’t park here,” said the old man. He coughed again, harshly, and spat a slimy mouthful onto the cracked pavement.

“Is there somewhere else I can park?” repeated Lurk.

“Can’t park...” The old man’s words dissolved into a spasm of coughing. It sounded to Lurk as though he was bringing up what little remained of his lungs.

Alarmed, Lurk closed the gap between them and patted the old man lightly on his bowed back. He could feel the man’s ribcage clearly through the thin cloth of his shawl. He gripped his shoulder and did his best to support

him as the coughing fit racked his bony old frame. After a while the man began to retch, heaving miserably as he tried to clear the congestion from his throat. Finally he spat a large lump of something onto the ground at his feet. It glistened redly in the dim, filtered light.

“Are you okay?” asked Lurk, feeling stupid even as the words left his mouth. “Can I get you something?”

Gasping for breath and leaning heavily on his stick, the old man waved one scrawny arm vaguely behind him. Lurk looked, and saw the open doorway through which the man had obviously come.

“Wait here,” he said. He released the man’s shoulder carefully, hesitated a second until he was sure the old guy wasn’t going to fall over, then ran for the door. He entered a small room. In one corner was a rickety old chair with a light behind it. Stacked on the chair were several threadbare cushions. Beside the chair was a low table, on which sat a dirty glass, half-full of clear fluid, and several bottles of pills. Lurk grabbed the chair with one hand—it was quite light—and picked up a bottle of pills in the other. He threw the bottle onto the chair, and picked up the glass.

The old man was still standing where he had left him, his bony chest heaving as he struggled to draw each laboured breath. Lurk put the chair down behind him, grabbed the pills off it, and put both the glass and the pill bottle on the uneven floor. Then he took the man’s thin arm and helped him to lower himself back onto the seat.

Dropping his cane, the man sank back into the couple of remaining cushions as though exhausted.

Lurk hurriedly opened the bottle and shook a couple of pills into his hand, but the man waved them away and pointed weakly at the glass. Lurk handed it to him; he swilled a mouthful between his gums then leaned to one

side and spat. Then he reached for the pills. Taking them from Lurk's hand, he popped them in his mouth, then took another long swig from the glass and swallowed laboriously.

Lurk examined the bottle as he fastened the lid. Whatever the pills were for—they had some long, expensive-looking name—they were twenty years out of date.

The man's breathing slowly eased as he rested. Finally he nodded shakily.

"Thank you, young man," he said. Even speaking those few words seemed to tire him again, and his breath whistled harshly in his throat. He closed his eyes, waiting for his strength to return.

"Any time," said Lurk.

The man's bony old frame began to shake. Alarmed, Lurk placed his hand lightly on his shoulder. It wasn't another coughing fit, however: tears rolled down the man's wrinkled old cheeks, and Lurk realised he was sobbing.

Eventually, he reached up and wiped roughly at his damp cheeks.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's okay," said Lurk.

"It's just that you're the first visitor we've had in a long time, and my only thought was that there wasn't room in that tiny ship for me too. And then I nearly chased you away because you weren't the supply ship."

"It's okay," said Lurk again.

The old man lifted his tired old eyes. They were red and rheumy, and he peered at Lurk closely as though seeing him for the first time.

"You look like a nice chap," he said at last. "Despite the mask."

“Er, thanks,” said Lurk. “I try.” He pulled the bandanna down from his face and smiled his winning smile.

The old man nodded.

“So, what happened here?” asked Lurk. “How long have you been here without supplies?”

The old man coughed and shook his head. He gestured back to the room. “Let’s talk inside,” he said. “The air out here rots your lungs...”

The air purifier in the wall rattled and hummed alarmingly, but it managed to filter most of the foulest odours from the air. Some still seeped in through the gaps around the closed door, but it was far more bearable inside than out.

Lurk had locked his cockpit securely—it wouldn’t do to come back and find that some other desperate denizen of this dismal dive had stolen his ship—and told Arty to stay put. A swamp planet was no place for an astrobot.

Now, Lurk sat cross-legged on the floor across from the old man’s chair, and leaned back against the wall.

“Name’s Rivven,” said the old man, taking a sip from his refilled glass. “But my mates used to call me Teach, back in the day.”

“I’m Lurk,” said Lurk.

Rivven nodded. “Well, Lurk, I sure am glad to meet you. Like I said, you’re the first visitor to this thriving metropolis of our in a long time. A long time.”

“How long have you been here?” asked Lurk.

Rivven shrugged. “We came here, oh, a little over twenty-two standard years ago. We were the advance scouts for a new mining venture. Someone’s brilliant idea to extract energy from the atmosphere here, or something like that. There were seven of us originally. Then the

damn tagors got Willy and Mayarna, and one night ol' Grumbles just up 'n vanished. Wandered off into the swamp and was never seen again..." Rivven stared through Lurk into the distant past as he dredged up old memories. A tear glimmered at the corner of one eye, but did not fall. He blinked it away.

"So why didn't you leave?" asked Lurk.

"The supply ships came every month," said Rivven. "For three months, they brought vast stockpiles of food for when the full work crews arrived, and drugs to combat the long-term effects of the atmosphere. We've been living off that, and what we've been able to get from the swamp, for over twenty years." He shrugged, and focussed on Lurk's attentive face. "One day, they just stopped coming. Damn supply ships just stopped coming, work crews never came. We waited, of course—at first we thought they were just a little late—but they never showed up."

He coughed, and took another sip from his glass.

"It's like the damn Republic just forgot we were here," he said.

"Ah," said Lurk. "This was a Republic operation?"

"Not officially," said Rivven. "Private sector, I believe, but the Republic were their major backers. If the mining plant had worked out, they would have had a new source of fuel to last them a thousand years." He paused. He'd seen something in Lurk's expression. "Why?"

Lurk shook his head. "The Republic no longer exists," he said sadly.

Rivven stared at him. Slowly he shook his head. "That's not possible," he said at last.

"Senator Palpator declared himself Imperator some twenty-odd years ago," said Lurk. "He swept the Old Republic away, and crushed many of their sympathisers."

Now the galaxy is an Imperium, and Palpatore rules with an iron fist. That would be why the supply ship stopped coming. There was nobody left who knew to send it.”

Rivven closed his eyes.

“Are you okay,” asked Lurk.

The old man shook his head wearily. “We waited, and hoped, for so long,” he said. “Nobody ever told us. None of them told us.”

“None of who?” asked Lurk.

“Oh, we’ve had a visitor or two, over the years,” said Rivven. “Some old hermit landed in the swamp just outside town. We fished him out, but he just wandered off somewhere. We see him occasionally, but he mostly avoids us, and we avoid him.” He coughed, and sipped. “Then some crazy man wandered in from the swamps. No-one knows how he got there. Oh, he’ll be happy to tell you his story, but it doesn’t make sense. A couple of others called by, in the first two or three years—all in small, one-man ships, like yours—but they never told us anything, and they never returned.”

“Well, I *shall* return for you,” promised Lurk. “I’m looking for somebody. Once I find him, I’ll return to my people, and bring back a rescue ship for everybody who wants to leave.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Rivven. He sniffed, but tears began to run down his cheeks again. “You don’t know how good that sounds. But you’re not part of this Imperium? Are you?”

Lurk hesitated. “No,” he said at last, “I’m not. There are those of us who—disagree, shall we say?—with the Imperium’s methods. I’d really rather not say more, but I *can* promise you and your friends safe passage to a civilised port.”

Rivven nodded. “That’s good enough for me,” he said. “So, who is this person you’re looking for? Although I really doubt you’ll find him here.”

“I’m looking for a ... teacher, of sorts, called Yodel.”

“Yodel,” mused Rivven. “Sorry, can’t say I know the name. And I’m the only teacher around these parts. Used to be, leastways.”

“What about this ‘crazy man’?” asked Lurk. “The person who sent me here was often called crazy back on my home planet; perhaps it’s him.”

“Hope not, for your sake,” said Rivven. He shook his head. “You’ll find him in the tavern down the street, most of the time. But you’re unlikely to learn anything from him. His brain was pickled when he wandered in here, and he’s been drowning it in alcohol ever since. Don’t know what he’ll do when he finally drinks the place dry.”

“Well, thanks for your time,” said Lurk. “I’ll go and talk to him, anyway.”

“Stay for dinner, please,” said Rivven. “It’s not much, but it’s edible—and besides, it’s almost night out there. There’s lots of unpleasant critters living in the swamps, and they mostly come out at night. Mostly. They’ll come right into town, too—but then, there’s not much to stop ‘em.”

Lurk looked out the grime-streaked window. The light was fading rapidly from the sky.

“Uh, thanks,” he said. “I’d be happy to stay for dinner.”

The following morning, after a breakfast that had been almost as unpalatable as the dinner the night before, Lurk stepped out onto the single main street of the tiny shanty town. He was draped in a waterproof poncho that Rivven had insisted he take, and he was glad of it. A fine drizzle

of water drifted slowly downwards from the gloomy sky. It was more than fog, but not quite rain. It misted against his face and made his skin tingle.

He pulled his bandanna up around his nose, and looked around through watering eyes. Each end of the street led to the swamp which covered the entire planet. Twisted trees fought for space, and creepers sheathed every tree in an inescapable grip of death. It looked impassable.

Several buildings lined the street. Nobody else was visible. Rivven had explained that they very rarely left their chosen living quarters any more; there was nothing worth saying to their neighbours that hadn't already been said a hundred times. He might expect a visitor or two later in the day, if anybody had heard Lurk's ship arrive—but even that was unlikely. With the doors sealed, the hum of the air purifiers, and the ceaseless roar of the life in the swamp, very little could attract their attention.

Lurk turned right and headed down the street towards the tavern at the far end.

The street itself was little more than a muddy track. Lurk stepped carefully, and avoided the worst of the water-filled potholes. He felt a shiver run up his spine at the realisation that some of those potholes were actually fresh impressions left by the large, clawed foot of something heavy. Nervously, he eyed the swamp at the end of the street. Nothing moved.

He pushed open the door of the tavern, and it creaked loudly. He stood in the doorway, dripping water onto the floor.

“Hello,” he called.

There was no reply.

Shaking off the poncho, he removed it and hung it on a hook beside the door. There were a couple of similar ponchos already hanging there; one seemed to be caked in dried mud, and looked as though it hadn't been moved in years.

He stepped into the dim room and closed the door behind him. It creaked again.

"Is anybody there?" he called. He unclipped a small lamp from his belt and turned it on; its light pushed back the crowding shadows. He looked around the room. There were several tables scattered through the place; most of the chairs, however, had been stacked untidily against the far wall. A bar ran along another wall, and a couple of stools sat in front of it. The shelves behind it were empty. There had once been a mirror there too, but it had been smashed; all that remained were a few shards on the corners, reflecting the light of his lamp back at him.

"Hello," he called again.

Silence.

Lurk was heading for the archway which led through to the back room when he heard a noise behind him. His hand dropped to the light rapier which hung from his belt, and he spun around.

"Hello?" he said.

"Whadda you want?" slurred a voice. A head appeared from behind the bar, and blinked at Lurk with bleary, sleep-filled eyes.

Lurk gazed at the figure with dismay. If *this* was the Jubbly master upon whom he had pinned all his hopes, the Rebellion was doomed.

"I'm, uh, looking for someone," he said at last.

"Found someone, you have, I would say," said the figure. He cackled wildly for a moment, then belched,

then suddenly disappeared behind the bar again. Lurk heard the sound of retching.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. The retching sounds ceased and silence fell. Lurk waited, but nothing more happened.

“Hello?” he said again.

“Hello what?” said the voice. The man suddenly sprang to his feet, popping up from behind the bar like some nightmarish, hung-over version of a child’s toy. “Whadda you want? Oh, it’s you again.”

“I, uh, never left,” said Lurk.

“So whadda you want?” said the man. He was quite a large man, and might even have been muscular once. A grizzled beard, matted with various lumps and chunks which Lurk had no wish to identify, hid his chin. His clothing was a strange assortment of leathers and furs. “No wait,” he said as Lurk opened his mouth to speak. “I’m getting a feeling that, that...” He held his hand to his forehead and mimed fierce concentration. “That you’re looking for someone,” he said at last.

Lurk sighed.

“Yes, I’m looking for someone.”

“Found someone, you have, eh?”

“Yes,” said Lurk. “I think we’ve already been through this.”

“Oh,” said the man. “Well, who are you looking *for*, eh? Who are you looking *for*?” The man staggered around the end of the bar and slumped down onto one of the remaining stools.

Lurk stepped cautiously closer, and sat down on one of the other stools. He placed the lamp on the bar between them.

The man belched again, blinked owlishly, then peered more closely at Lurk. He looked at the lamp. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed it.

“Hey,” said Lurk, the old whine creeping back into his voice, “that’s mine!” He reached for it, but the other man jerked it back out of his grasp.

“Mine now,” he said petulantly, “or help you I will not.”

“What makes you think I want your help?” said Lurk, but he sighed and gave up on the lamp. “I don’t even know what I’m doing here. Wasting my time, I guess.”

“So,” said the old drunk, “who do you seek?”

“I’m looking for a mighty warrior,” said Lurk.

The man snorted. “I was a mighty warrior, once,” he said. “At least that’s what they said about me. Bards wrote songs about my exploits, fair maidens—and more than a few experienced strumpets—swooned in my arms. But let me tell you, lad: wars do not make one great. Mostly wars make one dead. You survive them, you’re a mighty warrior.” He coughed, and shrugged wearily. “Makes sense to someone, I guess.”

“I don’t suppose you’re a Jubbly knight, are you?” asked Lurk.

“A Jubbly? Yodel! You seek Yodel!”

Lurk stared at him in disbelief. “You know Yodel?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” said the man. “Take you to him, I will.”

“Uh, I don’t suppose,” asked Lurk cautiously, “that *you* are actually Yodel, and you’re just being coy?”

“Nope,” said the man, “not me. My name is Boldaar; there’s no wizard’s blood in me!”

“Oh thank the gods,” muttered Lurk.

“What was that?” The man scowled at him.

“Nothing important,” said Lurk. “So, uh, Rivven tells me you weren’t part of his little group?”

“Rivven, huh? So, you’ve got a ship, I take it?”

“Maybe,” said Lurk cautiously.

“Of course you’ve got a ship; how else would you get here?”

“There’s only room in it for one, I’m afraid,” said Lurk. “But I promise I shall send back a rescue ship as soon as I get out of here.”

“That’s what they all say,” muttered Boldaar.

“But how did you get here?” asked Lurk.

“Got dumped here,” said Boldaar. He scowled at the memory. “Someone I trusted dumped me in the swamp. There I was, in a battle for my life against a giant snake, and he just up and left, abandoned me to my fate. I always figured he’d come back sometime, but he never did.”

“So you don’t have a ship?” asked Lurk.

“Would I still be here if I did?” snarled Boldaar. “I was stuck, wandering through this endless darn swamp, with only the bugs for company. The bugs, and the snakes, and the tagors, and a thousand other hungry beasties, all wanting to make a meal out of me. Hadn’t been for the *Minnow* I’d be long dead.”

“The *Minnow*?” asked Lurk.

“Yeah. That was the name of the supply ship. The *CSS Minnow*. I heard it landing—on its final trip here, unfortunately. The sound led me here to the town, but by the time I crawled in out of the swamp, half dead and delirious, it was too late. It had already left. Never came back again, neither...”

“I see,” said Lurk.

“But if you’ve got a ship,” said the aging warrior, “I can finally get out of this hellhole.”

“Uh,” said Lurk, “but there’s only room for one person on my ship, remember.”

“Oh yes,” said the man, “but that’s okay.” He winked. “Won’t be a problem, if you know what I mean?”

Lurk stared at him.

“Are you saying you’ll take it anyway?”

“What, no,” said the man. “Did I say that? Did I say that out loud? Twenty years of this awful stench, that’s what it is, drives you crazy. I have no inner monologue any more; spent far too long talking to myself.”

“Uh, right,” said Lurk.

“So anyway, how about I take you to see Yodel?” said Boldaar. “I’ll take you out into the swamp, to his decrepit old hut, and leave you with him. Then I can come back and steal your ship. If that old bastard Rivven hasn’t already taken it, that is.”

Lurk blinked. “Uh, right,” he said. “Excuse me a moment, will you? I’ll be right back.”

Lurk wandered outside with a feigned air of casual indifference. As soon as the door banged closed behind him he plucked his comm from his belt.

“Arty Farty, are you there?”

Arty bleeped, then launched into a frantic tirade of beeps and whistles.

“Whoa, slow down, I don’t understand,” said Lurk. “One beep for yes, two for no: is there a problem?”

Beep.

“Somebody trying to break into the ship?”

Beep.

“Have they had any luck so far?”

Beep beep.

Well, that was something to be thankful for, at least.

Beep beep beep.

“Three beeps? What the hell is three beeps?” asked Lurk. He thought for a second. “Are you worried that he might get in soon?”

Beep.

“Okay. Has he damaged you or the ship at all?”

Beep beep.

“Okay, Arty, I want you to start the engines. Once the man gets clear, I want you to take the ship into a stable geostationary orbit over this location. Do you understand?”

Beep.

“If I need you, I’ll contact you. Until then, switch to minimum power consumption mode and wait for my signal. Okay?”

Beep.

Lurk watched the dismal skies over the landing pad. Through the persistent drizzle, the shape of his Cross-Wing fighter rising into the air was almost invisible, and the sound of its engines was lost to the continual drone from the swamp.

One less problem to worry about, he thought. He returned the comm to its place on his belt, and pushed the door to the tavern open again. It creaked loudly, as before.

Boldaar was nowhere to be seen.

“Hello,” called Lurk, but there was no reply. He glanced behind the bar, in case the old drunkard had returned to his earlier resting place, but there was no sign of him.

Shrugging back into the wet poncho, Lurk exited the tavern. He wandered back up the street to the landing pad. As he entered through the outer door, he heard the sounds of a heated argument coming from within. He stepped through the open inner door, out onto the empty landing pad. Rivven stood there, yelling abuse at Boldaar.

Both men stopped as they became aware of Lurk’s presence. They looked at him sheepishly.

“I just came down to, uh, protect your ship,” said Boldaar, eyes downcast.

“I’m sure you did,” said Lurk calmly.

“It just took off, all by itself,” said Rivven. “I never even touched it, honest.” He held a large spanner in one hand; slowly he moved that hand behind his back, out of sight.

“I sent it into orbit,” said Lurk. “I may be here a little while, and I wouldn’t want it to take any damage from this atmosphere.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Rivven.

“Jolly good idea,” added Boldaar.

“So now,” said Lurk, “can you take me to see Yodel, please?”

Boldaar frowned suspiciously. “What do you want with him, anyway? ‘Cos he’s a friend of mine. Sorta. He’s cool, for a wizard.”

“He’s a friend of mine, too,” said Lurk. “Well, a friend of a friend anyway. I have been sent to find him, to train with him.”

Boldaar coughed. Then he glanced skyward before meeting Lurk’s gaze. “Yeah sure, I’ll take you to him.”

Chapter 9

Worm Bait

“ about this,” said Libby slowly, completing
• • • her sentence. She had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach, and suspected that, unless she was actually already dead, her immediate future held the strong prospect of a change of underwear.

Mal hauled back on the thrust lever and brought the *Sparrow* to a dead stop.

Shaggus barked angrily, and at length; he shook his long woolly arms in the air above his head. Mal waved him down.

“What the fuck was that?” said Libby.

“Space worm, I think,” said Mal. “I’ve heard about them, but I never thought I’d see one.”

“Did it just do what I think it just did?” she said.

“Depends,” said Mal. “Do you think it just swallowed us whole?”

“That was how I saw it,” she said.

“Then yes,” he said. “You’re right, it just swallowed us whole. Reared up out of its lair and snatched us right out of space. I heard tell, one time, of a guy who flew his ship right down the throat of one of these things, set down to make repairs, and flew out again before it could...” He broke off.

Libby stared at him. “You seem to be taking this remarkably calmly,” she said at last. “A monster the size of—well, it’s so huge I have nothing to compare it with—has just swallowed us whole and you’re just sitting there playing word games.”

“Telling tales, actually,” said Mal. “Tall tales, I suspect.”

“Well, *now* you’re playing word games,” she chided him. “We’ve just been eaten, dammit!”

Shaggus whuffed at them both.

Mal shrugged. “But look where we are,” he said. He pointed out of the cockpit window. In the brilliant glare of the *Sparrow*’s spotlights, the slimy gullet of the space worm stretched away before them. It was ridged, and as they watched, muscular peristaltic contractions slowly rolled down past their position.

“Yeah,” she said, “we’re inside a worm.”

“We’re still airborne, though,” said Mal.

“So we’re *airborne* inside a worm,” she said. “What’s your point?”

“We’re quite safe here,” he told her. “We must be in a vacuum, so there’s no danger of corrosive gasses, at least not in the short term. We’re airborne, so this thing can’t swallow us down into its stomach, or wherever its digestive fluids might be. We’re undamaged, so we can hold this hovering position for several hours—which should be more than enough time to make the repairs we need to make. We’re a good safe distance from the walls, because this thing is so big. And we’re inside a worm, so even the Imperium is unlikely to look for us here.”

She stared at him in disbelief.

“You wanted somewhere safe and quiet,” he told her, “and I delivered.” He grinned at her.

“But,” she said, slowly and quietly, stressing each word, “we are inside a fucking worm!”

“I know,” he said. “Ain’t it cool! And on the plus side, think of the fishing you could do with bait like this. There’s *always* a bigger fish!”

“Shaggus,” she said desperately, “tell him. Tell him that we are inside a worm.”

Shaggus looked at her and shrugged. He grunted something softly at her, then shrugged again.

“What...”

“Shaggus is right,” said Mal. “You seem to be a little hung up on the whole worm thing. We are just in another hostile environment, with a few unique characteristics. Sure, we’re surrounded by living tissue, but *we are in no immediate danger*.” He said his last few words very deliberately and succinctly.

Shaggus whuffed something.

“Well yeah,” said Mal. “Sure. If it moves, things become interesting. But for now it seems quite content to sit back and try to digest us.”

Libby looked back and forth from Mal to Shaggus. Then she looked out the window again. Finally she met Mal’s level gaze, and slumped back into her seat.

“You’re right, of course,” she told him. “We’re safe, it seems, despite the ‘whole worm thing’. Sorry.”

“Hey, no problem,” said Mal. “It’s not every day you get swallowed by a worm, after all!” He grinned at her.

“There is one question, of course,” she said.

“Which is?”

“How do we get out again?”

Mal shrugged. “Let’s worry about that when we’re ready to leave,” he said. Tapping a few buttons, he engaged the auto-pilot and programmed it to maintain its current hovering position.

Shaggus sniffed, and whuffled a question at Mal.

“You smell it too, huh?” said Mal. “Don’t know what it is. One thing at a time, okay?”

Libby sniffed, and blushed hotly. She stood up awkwardly.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said, with as much dignity as she could muster, “I shall be back shortly.” She walked gingerly out of the flight deck.

Mal and Shaggus looked at each other.

“You know,” said Mal, “if we ever mention this, there’s a good chance she’ll kill us.”

Shaggus whuffled in agreement.

“The Emperor wishes to speak with you, my lord,” said the trembling comms officer.

“Very well,” said the Muff calmly. “Please inform him that I am on my way to the audience chamber.” Slapping his swagger stick against his leg, he turned and marched briskly off the bridge before the comms officer could reply. His ever-present Honour Guard gave him several paces head-start, then followed him from the room.

Out in the hallway—oblivious to the presence of his crimson shadows—Muff Aleeto Farquhar let out an excited yelp. “Me,” he exclaimed. “The Emperor wants to speak with me! Woohoo!” He began to scurry down the corridor towards the privacy-shielded audience chamber, almost skipping in his glee. “Momma Farquhar’s little boy. Ha! If only that fat bastard Krigwalla could see me now! It’s almost a shame I had him killed! Oh, but...” The Muff’s pace faltered. “What if it’s bad? What if he’s decided to remove me from command? What if somebody else is his favourite?”

He stopped outside the door of the audience chamber. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and he wiped them carefully down his dark grey uniform trousers, clamping his swagger stick under his arm as he did so.

He could hear his mother's voice, echoing out of the past. *You'll never amount to anything, boy*, she had said to him. *Your daddy was a worthless loser, and you're just the same.*

"No, mamma," he said softly, "look. I'm a Muff now! Please, not the closet again, I'll be..." He suddenly straightened and looked around quickly. Apart from his ever-present honour guard, the corridor was empty.

He sighed.

"Chin up, 'Leeto," he told himself. "Be a man!" He took a deep breath, then keyed the door controls and marched into the dark chamber beyond. The crimson-armoured Troopers stationed themselves either side of the door as it hissed closed.

"Oh my! I don't know *where* the *Sparrow* learned to communicate," said Seepy Weepy primly, "but she is quite rude."

"Look, metalhead," said Mal impatiently, "I don't care how rude she is. Just ask her if she can isolate the problem."

"Oh, I see," said Seepy. "That's where she picked it up." He turned back to the computer port of the *Sparrow*, and jacked back in. He stood motionless for a few seconds, then unplugged again. "It seems," he said, "that the secondary power coupling has been polarised. I think it will need to be replaced."

"Well, of course it will need to be replaced," said Mal. He walked across the cargo bay to where Shaggus

had opened a couple of panels and was probing around in the wiring behind them.

“Shaggus,” he said quietly, “when you’ve finished there, it might be a good idea to replace the secondary power coupling. No rush, though.”

Seepy stared at the human in amazement. “Impossible man,” he muttered to himself as he wandered back to the galley.

Muff Aleeto Farquhar knelt on the holo-scanner pad and bowed his head. “What is thy bidding, my master?” he asked in as deep a voice as he could muster.

The holographic projection of Emperor Lizzard Palpator—Barth Sifyllous, Hard Lord of the Stiff, despotic overlord of the galaxy, and loving grandfather—shimmered into focus in the air before the kneeling Muff. His face was enshrouded in darkness, and the dim light shining up from below turned his every wrinkle into a chasm, his eye sockets into shadowy craters. His was truly a fearsome visage.

“Speak, Muff Farker,” intoned the Emperor, his voice deep and booming.

“Uh, ‘Farquhar’, sir,” said the Muff carefully. It would not do to appear to be correcting the Hard Lord. He was not known for his forgiving nature.

“‘Farquhar’? Are you sure?” said the Emperor.

“I, uh, could be wrong,” said the Muff meekly.

“No matter,” said the Emperor. “Now, Muff Farker, why have you called?”

The Muff swallowed. “You called me, your Excellency,” he said.

“Did I?” said the Emperor? “Did I indeed? Well, what did I call about?”

There was a sudden flare of light, and Muff Farquhar squinted against the glare. After a second, the holographic projectors compensated for the new light levels in the Emperor's office, and the Muff could open his eyes again.

No longer forced to sit with his face right in front of the holo-scanner, the Emperor was leaning back in his chair, blinking his eyes back into focus. Without the shadows, without the frightful illumination from below, Emperor Palpatine looked like a kindly old man in his seventies. Only the small scar which tugged at his lower lip hinted at an adventuresome past.

"Ah, that's much better," he said cheerfully. His voice was normal-sounding, too, now that he was not speaking directly into the microphone—with just a hint of a rhotacistic speech impediment, courtesy of his scarred lip. "Sowwy, Muff Farker, we've been having some pwoblems with the lighting here in the Capitol building." He squirmed back into his large leather armchair and rested his hands lightly on the wide desk—real wood, Farquhar noted with interest. Behind the Emperor, a large picture window flickered back to life, showing a restful forest scene.

"Now, where were we?" He squinted down at a notepad—real paper too; such extravagance!—which sat on the desk. "Ah, yes. What plaything can you offer me today?"

"Uh..." Muff Farquhar blinked slowly. He had no idea how to respond to that.

"Oh, sowwy," said the Emperor with a slightly embarrassed chuckle. "Wong page. I have many, many, many things to think about." He flipped the top page of the pad over and peered at the next sheet. "Here we are," he said. "Muff Farker, uh..." He squinted more closely.

“‘Farquhar’,” he pronounced carefully. “Muff Farquhar, what is the news on those naughty Webels?”

“The Webel, uh, *Rebel* base on Hoff has been overrun, my Lord,” said the Muff, grateful to be back on firm ground. “Many top-ranking Rebels have been captured, and we are currently following...” The Muff swallowed nervously, then took a leap of faith. “We are following their leader, and will...”

The Emperor frowned? “Isn’t it a stwange time to be playing party games,” he asked.

“Party games?” asked the Muff. He felt his stomach contents roiling slowly, and he knew this conversation was not doing his ulcer any favours.

“Follow the leader’, Muff Farquhar,” said the Emperor. “I do wish you would pay attention!”

“I said...” The Muff reined in his sudden flare of frustration, and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, my lord, my mistake. I meant we are pursuing the Rebel leader, and hope to have him apprehended shortly.”

“Vewy good,” said the Emperor with a friendly smile. “Vewy, vewy good! I haven’t had news this good since my pwocologist told me it was just a mild case of pimples!”

“Uh...” said the Muff again, dropping his gaze uncertainly to the floor.

“Now, what news on this new Jubbly menace?” said the Emperor. “Lord Vapour’s weport came as quite a shock, I can tell you. We thought they were gone—to have them weturn after all this time is a little twoubling!”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Farquhar. He had the horrible feeling that he must have missed a very important memo, because this was the first he’d heard that there might be a Jubbly involved. “We are, uh, looking into it, my Lord.”

“Hello, my little love muffin,” said the Emperor. Muff Farquhar looked back up, but the Emperor had turned away from the holo-scanner and was addressing somebody else in the room. The faintest whisper of a female voice was picked up by the microphone, but the Muff could not make out any of the words.

“Wight away, my little blue snuggly-wuggly,” said the Emperor. He started to stand, but the female voice stopped him. “Oh yes.” He turned back to address the holo-scanner. “Keep up the good work, Muff Farker,” he said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, some vewy important Imperial business has, uh, come up!” He giggled, and cut off the holo feed just as something—someone—blue moved into the edge of the field of view.

The audience chamber went dark.

Libby was finishing up in the engine room. She had finished testing all of the relays—they had all been functioning perfectly—and was trying to lock the hyperdrive engine cowlings back into place. She pushed the lever firmly, and turned it, but it hit the edge of the latch and would turn no further. She tried again, with no luck.

Suddenly Mal was behind her. “Here,” he said, “let me help.” He put his arms around her and gripped the lever.

“Let go,” she said irritably, shrugging him away from her.

He backed off. “Hey, sorry Princess. There’s no need to get all excited.”

“It would take more than having you breathing down my neck to get me excited,” she told him. She half-turned to look at him.

“How about if I breathed in your ear instead?” he asked.

“I doubt that would do it either,” she said.

“Well I’m sorry,” he said, “but I really don’t have time for anything more at the moment.”

She sighed and shook her head, feeling her cheeks flush hotly. “You really are impossible, aren’t you,” she said. “I don’t know where you get your delusions, laser brain.”

“Delusions, huh?” he asked. “Admit it, you think I’m alright?”

“You’re a good pilot, yes,” she said.

“No,” he told her. “Well, yes I am, but that’s not what I mean and you know it. I’ve seen the way you look at me when you think I’m not looking.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. She turned back to the locking lever, and savagely twisted. She jerked her hand back, and winced; she’d pinched her finger between the lever and the clasp. Angrily she jammed the sore finger between her lips and sucked on it.

“Here, let me look at that,” Mal said, concerned. He gripped her hand gently and examined her finger.

“Let me go,” she said.

“You’re trembling,” he told her.

“I am not,” she said. “Now let me go, my hands are all dirty.”

Mal looked at them. “So they are,” he said. “We’ll have to wash them before we apply a bandage.”

“I don’t need a bandage,” she told him. “I’ll be fine.”

He lifted her hand for a closer look, then leaned in and gently pressed his lips to her sore finger. “Perhaps that will do, then?” he asked, meeting her gaze.

She didn’t pull her hand away.

“You do like me a little, don’t you?” he persisted.

“I happen to like nice men,” she said.

“Hey,” he said, somehow managing—despite his grin—to sound genuinely hurt. “I’m ‘nice men’!”

“No you’re not,” she said. “You’re a scoundrel.”

“Scoundrel?” he mused. He pressed his lips to her finger again. “Yeah, I like the sound of that.” He looked up at her. His face was bare inches from hers. He stared into her eyes, and she stared back. The moment stretched. Mal began to lean forward, towards her, angling his head slightly. She closed her eyes. His nose brushed hers, and he felt her breath on his lips, hot and sweet.

“Good news, sir,” said Seepy Weepy loudly, tapping Mal on the shoulder. “Shaggus has replaced the secondary power coupling and says we are ready to leave.”

Mal jumped, and turned towards the excited ‘bot. The moment passed, the mood evaporated, and Mal felt Libby’s slender hand pull away from his. He turned back, but she had slipped away.

“Great,” he muttered. “Just great.”

“Oh yes,” said Seepy. “We can finally leave this awful place.”

Mal glared at him for a second. Then he locked closed the hyperdrive engine cowling—there was a trick to twisting the lever at just the right angle—and stalked away.

Seepy stared after him.

“What did I say?” he wondered aloud.

“Are you ready?” asked Mal. He was in the pilot’s seat, gazing thoughtfully out of the cockpit at the insides of the worm.

Shaggus grunted in the affirmative.

Libby nodded. "Of course—but how do we get out?"

"That's easy," said Mal. "Watch this."

He flexed his fingers a couple of times, then carefully gripped the *Serendipity Sparrow*'s control joystick and disengaged the autopilot. With gentle movements, he rotated the *Sparrow* slightly, and manoeuvred her closer to the wall of the living tunnel in which they were trapped. He fired the hover jets, blasting the moist flesh with superheated plasma. The *Sparrow* spun away, and he cut the engine again. Suddenly there was movement all around them. Responding to the sudden pain, the space worm opened its cavernous mouth and effectively coughed the *Sparrow* out into empty space. She tumbled for a few seconds, then Mal asserted control and flew them out of range of the monster.

"See," he said. "Nothing to worry about."

There was a clunk against the window. Mal glanced up, and came eye to lens with an Imperial Probe 'bot. It studied them for a second through the plasteel, then whirled and sped away at great speed.

"That, on the other hand," he added, "could be a small problem!"

"Things are gonna get bumpy again, aren't they?" said Libby.

"Apparently," agreed Mal. He wrenched the control stick over and took the *Sparrow* in the opposite direction from that taken by the 'probe bot.

"I'd better go make sure Seepy is strapped in," said Libby.

As she stood to leave, Mal reached out and touched her arm lightly. She stopped and looked at him.

"Strap yourself in too," he said. "It's likely to be a little less bumpy back in the galley."

"I'd rather be in here," she said. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Okay," said Mal. "Don't be long; we need to leave in a hurry." As she walked quickly from the room, Mal smiled.

Shaggus whuffled something at him. *Do you know what you're doing?*

"Don't worry," said Mal. "Everything will work out. Nobody's going to get hurt."

Shaggus snorted. *What about Lurk?*

Mal shrugged. "Lurk is playing hard to get, and I'm not sure why. As I see it, it's the lady's choice."

Shaggus whuffled doubtfully.

After a couple of minutes, Libby returned to the flight deck and buckled herself into her seat.

"All set," she said. "Let's go."

Mal simply nodded, and accelerated out of the shadow of the planetoid into the shifting chaos of the asteroid field. For several minutes, a tense silence filled the flight deck of the *Sparrow* as Mal flew an erratically looping path through the field, carefully avoiding numerous potential collisions.

"Shaggus," he said at last, "program the coordinates for the rendezvous point into the hyperspace computer. I want to be able to make the jump just as soon as we get clear of these rocks."

Shaggus whuffled, and began to tap buttons on the hyperdrive console. His large hairy fingers were surprisingly dextrous as they danced across the controls.

Calculating, he grunted.

Mal threw the *Sparrow* into a tight, coiling spiral to avoid a large, tumbling asteroid, and then, suddenly, they were in empty space once more.

“Piece of...” he began, and was cut short by a pained shudder as a laser blast splashed across their hull.

“Shit,” he finished. “Damn THIGH Fighters are on us already.” He angled away from the incoming Fighters, and continued flying evasively.

Libby clenched the arm of her seat tightly between her fingers. If this rocking and jarring kept up for much longer, she was going to be sick. She suddenly envied Seepy Weepy’s ability to power himself down at a moment’s notice.

The light flashed on the hyperdrive console.

“Hold on to your seat, Princess,” said Mal—oblivious to the fact that she was way ahead of him there. “Here goes nothing.”

He hit the hyperdrive button. The hyperdrive engines powered up, whined, and then died away again—exactly as before.

“So it seems,” said Libby mildly. “Would it help if I got out and pushed?”

“It might,” muttered Mal. He thumped the button again, in case it had been asleep the first time. Again, nothing happened. Libby turned in her seat to look at him.

“No hyperdrive?” she asked.

“It’s not my fault,” he said petulantly. “It’s not my fault.”

“We have them now,” said Admiral Muzzel. Standing on the bridge of the *IPD Bermuda*, with Muff Farquhar on one side, and Captain Pyotrovich on the other, the Admiral stared closely at the tactical screen as the newly visible freighter was herded slowly but surely towards them by a circling pack of THIGH Fighters.

“Excellent, Admiral,” said Muff Aleeto Farquhar. He tapped the tip of his swagger stick against his gloved palm.

“Prepare the attractor beams,” said the Admiral. “Lock onto them the moment they come into range.”

“Yes sir,” said the Captain. He turned on his heel and strode away to relay the orders.

“There’ll be nothing to stop us this time,” said the short Muff. “The Imperator will be very pleased with our efforts here today.”

“Yes sir,” said the Admiral tightly.

Shaggus growled something at Mal. *She can’t take much more of this.*

“Tell me something I don’t know,” said Mal.

Shaggus paused and looked at him. *The square root of forty-two is six point four eight*, he whuffed at last.

“What?” said Mal, shooting his huge furry co-pilot a puzzled look.

You told me to tell you something you don’t know, said Shaggus.

“Now is *really* not the time for you to develop a sense of humour,” said Mal.

“What did he say?” asked Libby.

“Trust me,” said Mal, “that is one of those questions that is best not pursued.” The *Sparrow* rocked and shuddered around them.

“So what are we going to do?” she asked. “The *Sparrow* can’t take much more of this.”

“Yeah,” said Mal, “so I’ve heard.”

“What?” said Libby. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she looked from Mal to Shaggus, and back to Mal.

Now see what you’ve done, Shaggus growled.

“Me?” said Mal. “You started this. Everybody hold on!” He threw the *Sparrow* into a sudden roll, and when he straightened out again, they were headed straight for the imposing bulk of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator* which had doggedly followed them from Hoff. He accelerated.

“Uh,” said Libby as she stared in dismay at the rapidly approaching battle cruiser. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking the fight to them,” he said.

“Are you mad?” she asked. “There’s no way we can take on something like that.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but do they know that?”

“Yes,” said Libby tightly, “I’m pretty sure that they do!”

“Hey, we fought our way out of the *Death Tube*, didn’t we?”

“Because they let us escape, remember?”

“Besides,” said Mal, “they certainly won’t be expecting it, will they?” He glanced at her, and winked, then pushed the throttle smoothly forward and accelerated to full speed.

“But...”

“Trust me,” he said, “I know what I’m doing.”

Shaggus whuffed softly: *I hate it when you say that!*

“They’re accelerating to full attack speed,” said Captain Pyetrovich, the disbelief plain in his voice.

“Well, this is certainly unexpected,” said Muff Farquhar. “I’ve never heard of a lone freighter *attacking* a *Planetary Dominator* before. Still, this should make it that much easier to get an attractor lock on them.”

“Uh, actually...” began the Captain nervously.

“Shouldn’t it, Admiral?”

“Actually, sir, no,” said the Admiral, staring down at the Muff. “Attractor beams are designed to trap escaping vessels, drag them in, and hold them. They are almost entirely ineffective against vessels accelerating towards us.”

“What?” said the Muff dangerously. “Who designed these things? Why hasn’t this fault been rectified?”

“It’s never come up before, sir,” said the Admiral. “As you so astutely pointed out, *nobody* ever accelerates towards a *Planetary Dominator*.”

They stared out the forward plasteel view port of the *IPD Bermuda*’s bridge. The tiny freighter was within visual range now, skimming past the enormous hull of the *Bermuda*. It was inside the firing arc of most of the hull-mounted guns, and the pursuing THIGH Fighters had stopped firing, lest they hit their own ship. It was heading directly towards the bridge.

“It, uh, it’s going to hit,” said the Muff.

“Oh shit,” said the Captain. He ducked instinctively. The small freighter shot over the bridge of the *Planetary Dominator*, so close that there was a loud clang as it clipped the protruding edge of the battle cruiser’s bridge. Then it was gone from view.

The Admiral did not flinch.

“Did they go to hyperspace?” he asked.

Captain Pyetrovich straightened sheepishly and studied the tactical display for a moment.

“No,” he said.

“Did they cloak, or something?” asked the Muff, his voice a little more shrill than usual. “I never heard of a ship that large having a cloaking device, but who knows what the Rebels have cooked up.”

“Er, no,” said the Captain. “They’re still right there.” He tapped the display with his index finger. “They never

left our sensors.” He tapped a few buttons, calling up a replay of the last few seconds. “It seems that they shot over our bridge—and then just stopped, behind us. According to these readings they’ve engaged some sort of magnetic clamping device, and locked themselves to the back wall of our bridge. And the readings are confirmed; reports are coming in from at least three THIGH Pilots who have a visual on them.”

The Admiral frowned and examined the display.

“What do you think they’re doing?” he asked. “Do they think our only means of tracking them was by looking out the window?”

“It almost seems that way, sir,” agreed the Captain.

“Recall the THIGH Fighters,” said the Admiral. “Leave them alone; let them think they have us fooled.”

“What are you doing, Muzzel?” said the Muff. “This is our perfect opportunity to capture them!”

Admiral Muzzel stared at the tactical display for a few seconds, until the urge to glare ferociously at the annoying little Muff had gone away. He was not used to having his orders questioned. He was not used to having to bite his tongue around some psychopathic officer with delusions of invincibility and no active combat experience.

“Respectfully, sir,” he said, “I must disagree.”

The Muff tilted his head back slightly to stare up into the Admiral’s eyes. He waved his swagger stick in the air. “Did I hear you correctly, Admiral?” he said loudly, his face turning red. “Are you proposing to let these Rebel scum escape, after everything we’ve done to catch them?”

“Not at all, sir,” said the Admiral calmly. Temper tantrums did not scare him. “I am merely suggesting that we currently have an enormous advantage over our prey.

They seem to think that do not know where they are; I am suggesting that we put the situation to good use.”

“Yes,” said the Muff. “By capturing them.”

“To what end?” asked the Admiral, still calm.

“To make them talk, of course,” said the Muff. He frowned at Admiral Muzzel as though he thought the man was an idiot. “To interrogate them. To strip them naked, and play with needles and electricity and pain-enhancing drugs. To get out the hot irons, and the pliers. To make them scream, and scream, and...”

He stopped abruptly. Both officers were staring at him—the Captain seemed to have gone a little pale—and he found himself hoping the sudden erection within his uniform trousers was not visible.

“I see,” said the Admiral carefully. “I am sorry, sir, I was obviously mistaken. I thought the point of capturing them was to find out where their rendezvous point might be, and perhaps to locate other Rebel bases.”

“Well, that too,” said the Muff.

“In which case, taking this opportunity to attach a tracking device to their ship and following them once they detach, thinking they’ve escaped, might prove slightly more productive.”

“Oh,” said the Muff. “Yes, Admiral, I guess you have a valid point.” He sounded disappointed. “Carry on.”

With only the dim glow from the star field through the cockpit window to light her way, Libby felt her way carefully back to her seat. She was returning from the galley, where she had deactivated Seepy Weepy. The entire ship was powered down.

“There’s something you don’t see every day,” she said, nodding towards the window. Outside, the rear wall of the *Planetary Dominator*’s bridge structure stretched

away from them, a vast metal plain. At its far edge, the enormous engine exhausts glowed white. She turned to Mal as she lowered herself into her chair. “Are you sure this will work?”

“Well, they’ve stopped shooting at us, haven’t they?” he said quietly.

“I’ll give you that,” she said. “So now what?”

“So now they’ll recall all their fighters and return to Hoff. It’s only a short distance, but they’ll make the journey via hyperspace anyway—it will save them a couple of hours—and we’ll simply detach before they make the jump.”

“What makes you think they’ll return to Hoff?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Even the Imperium isn’t going to just abandon a small army of Troopers.”

“Fair point,” she said.

“I have my moments,” he said.

“Not often,” she said, “but you do have them. So how will you know when they’re going to jump?”

“Typically they dump their garbage before jumping to hyperspace. When we see that, we just hit the switch, and float away.”

“With the rest of the trash,” said Libby.

Shaggus snorted.

“Something like that,” said Mal, refusing to take the bait.

“But what if they don’t have enough garbage to be worth dumping?” she persisted. “After all, they’ve only gone about six hours since they dropped out of hyperspace around Hoff—and they would have emptied their trash compactors before *that* jump, wouldn’t they?”

“Then we detach *after* they jump to hyperspace.”

Shaggus snarled something: *That could tear us apart!*

“Isn’t that incredibly dangerous,” said Libby at the same moment.

“Hey,” said Mal, “let’s just wait and see, shall we? It’s not like we have many options, anyway.”

Silence fell across the flight deck, and the minutes ticked by.

“Mal,” said Libby.

“Libby?” said Mal.

“What then?” she asked. “Where do we go after we detach?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” said Mal. “We need to find somewhere to get the hyperdrive repaired. There’s an old buddy of mine who’s gone semi-legit; he runs one of the Tibrogargan gas mines. I think he’s our best shot.”

Bad idea, snarled Shaggus. Have you forgotten what happened the last time we saw him?

“No,” said Mal defensively, “but it’s been a long time. I’m sure *he* has forgotten it.”

“Forgotten what?” said Libby. “No, on second thoughts, don’t tell me. But Tibrogar? From here? With no hyperdrive?”

Mal shrugged. “At maximum speed, the trip should take about three weeks. It’s pretty far, but I think we can make it—and like I said, he’s our best shot. Our only shot.”

“Three weeks?”

“That should give us plenty of time to pick up where we left off in the engine room,” said Mal. He grinned at her in the dark.

Libby made no reply.

“Besides, with three weeks up our sleeve, we might even get the darn thing fixed ourselves.”

“Look,” said Libby. She pointed out the cockpit window.

“They’re dumping,” said Mal. “Told you they would. Shaggus, disengage the magnetic clamps.”

The *Serendipity Sparrow* drifted away from the bridge structure of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator*. The huge battle cruiser accelerated away from them, then suddenly contracted to a dot and was gone into the shifting void of hyperspace. The *Sparrow* powered up, then accelerated away in a different direction. The Imperial probe ‘bot that clung to her hull remained undetected, its cloaking device rendering it virtually invisible.

Chapter 10

Off to See the Wizard

“**W**atch out for snakes,” said Boldaar as he struggled to pull his foot free of the clinging mud. “They like to drop out of trees around here.”

Lurk nodded. They were both knee-deep in shallow water and soft mud, and there were no trees in this open stretch of swamp, but the land rose ahead, and gnarled, twisted trees crowded the slimy bank.

“I don’t like snakes,” said Boldaar. He hawked and spat, and the glob of phlegm floated, glistening, on the surface of the brackish water as though even *it* preferred to stay out of the murky depths. “It was around here somewhere that I ran into the last one.”

“What happened?” asked Lurk as he took another slow step through the sludge.

“Long story,” said Boldaar.

“We’ve got time,” said Lurk.

The older man shrugged. “Killed it,” he said.

Lurk waited, but it seemed his guide had nothing further to add.

“Y’know,” he said after a while, “that’s not a very long story after all!”

“Guess not,” drawled Boldaar. “Hush now, voices tend to carry across the open water.”

“Oh?” said Lurk.

“Attracts tagors,” added Boldaar.

“Oh,” said Lurk. He opened his mouth to add something more, then closed it again. From what he had heard so far about these tagors, he was in no hurry to meet one.

They entered the shadow of the first misshapen tree, its branches overhanging the water, and Lurk glanced up nervously into the tangle of vegetation as the chill fell over them. Nothing moved up there, but still Lurk lowered one hand to touch the hilt of his light rapier.

“Come on,” said Boldaar as he splashed and squelched up onto land which was only nominally drier than the muddy stretch of water. His boots sank ankle-deep into the slime. He reached back a hand and helped haul Lurk up onto the bank.

“How much further,” said Lurk.

The old man stared at Lurk speculatively for a moment. “You won’t forget me, will you? You won’t abandon me here like my last buddy did?”

Lurk shook his head. “I give you my word of honour,” he said.

The old man spat again. “Well, lad, don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t exactly know that your word is worth a whole hell of a lot. And honour, well, I’ve never had much truck with it meself.”

“Fair enough,” said Lurk. “I guess you’ve got no reason to trust me. But then, I’m not sure I have any way to convince you that my word is good.” He shrugged. “I have to meet with Yodel, I have to ask him to train me. Once I’m done, I *will* bring back a transport to pick you up. And *them*, of course,” he added, waving back the way they had come.

Boldaar grunted. “Reckon that’ll have to do,” he said. “Just hope you find your friend.”

Lurk frowned. "I thought you were taking me to him," he said.

Boldaar shrugged. "I'm taking you to where I saw him last. Old Yodel don't get found by nobody unless he wants to be. It's the best I can do."

"Okay," said Lurk. He grinned. "Reckon that'll have to do," he added.

Boldaar stared at him for a long moment before turning away. "Come on," he said over his shoulder. "Not far now."

The next twenty minutes passed in silence, save for the squelching of mud and the steady, ever-present drone of insects. Once there was a small yelp and a splash as something small and furry was grabbed by something large and scaly, and Lurk gripped his light rapier more firmly. Boldaar never even turned toward the sound, so after a few seconds Lurk continued on after his guide.

If the other man was following a path through this slimy desolation, Lurk could not see it.

When Boldaar *did* gasp in surprise, Lurk drew his light rapier and lunged forward, his thumb tensed to activate the weapon.

"Oh," he said.

A large, twisted branch had been ripped from a tree and jammed deeply into the mud in the centre of a small clearing. Mounted on the branch, snarling at the two men, was a large spiky skull with a mouth full of very pointy teeth.

"What is it?" wondered Lurk aloud.

"Tagor skull," said Boldaar. "It's a sign. Says 'keep out!'"

"No kidding," agreed Lurk.

“I go no further,” said Boldaar. “This is Yodel’s territory now, and he’s obviously not as friendly as the last time I met him.”

“Oh,” said Lurk. He looked back and forth from the menacing skull to the old man.

Boldaar shrugged. “You say you’re his friend? I’m sure you’ll find him.”

“Right,” said Lurk slowly. “Well, uh, I guess this is goodbye, then.” He stuck out his hand. After a moment Boldaar took it, and clenched tightly in a bone-crunching grip that would have been painful if he gripped flesh and bone rather than electronics and plasteel.

“See you,” he said. “And don’t forget, we want *off* this mud-ball! Don’t keep me—us—waiting too long!”

“I won’t,” said Lurk, but the old man had already turned away and begun wending his way back through the trees the way they had come.

Lurk glanced at the skull—he definitely did not want to meet a tagor—and stepped past it. The path out of the clearing was faint, and he followed it only a short distance before it petered out. Now there was nothing before him but swamp. Trees, and gnarled shrubs, and stagnant water which plopped and bubbled occasionally as something stirred beneath its surface. Flat lily pads covered some of the watery surface; in other places the water gleamed dully in the dim light. None of it gave Lurk any clue as to whether the water was three inches deep, or hid a pit of sucking, hungry mud. He dared not go any further.

“Hello,” he called out. The thick fetid air dampened his voice, crushing it into silence. There was no echo. There was no reply at all but the eternal drone of the insects.

“Hello,” he called again. “I’m looking for Yodel.”

No reply.

Lurk looked around. There was no sign of intelligent life; even the skull on the pole was lost to view behind the twisted, tangled vegetation and the miserable drizzle.

Now what?

Lurk reached up under his bandanna and scratched his chin thoughtfully. He wondered if the Jubbly master was even still alive; from what little Bent K'nobby had said about his former master, Lurk had got the impression that Yodel was ancient. Perhaps he had simply died, out here in the swamp, with nobody to know, or to mourn his passing.

On the other hand, thought Lurk, he is supposed to be in hiding. Probably doesn't want to be pestered by every passing tourist with nothing to do but give in to idle curiosity—the skull back there says that much!

Lurk reached out with his mind, feeling for the Source. It was vibrant and strong here—and hopelessly tangled and, somehow, murky. *That makes sense!* Lurk nodded to himself. *If he's hiding from anyone, it's from the Emperor and Vapour. What better place to hide than in a place like this?* He shuddered. The Source was far from friendly in this place.

Lurk thought about what Bolbaar had said to him. Perhaps Yodel *would not* be found—but perhaps *he* would find Lurk.

Lurk closed his eyes, and concentrated on his own inner peace. Gradually, the noise of the swamp faded away—even the stench seemed to lessen somewhat—as Lurk's senses contracted to a small puddle of stillness in his mind's eye. From that still centre, he pushed his awareness out through the Source, spreading himself out through the virtual code—messy, spaghetti code—which

defined the swamp which surrounded him. Finally, he spoke in his mind.

Master Yodel, are you there? I seek training.

There was no reply. Lurk tried again.

Master Yodel, please. I need your help.

Still no reply, but Lurk had the distinct impression that the silence was that of somebody listening intently.

Master Yodel, I seek an audience. He waited. *Bent K'nobby sent me.*

Bent? came the distant reply.

Obeah Bum K'nobby.

“Well,” croaked a voice from behind him, “why say this before, did you not?”

Lurk yelped in surprise, and spun around. In his haste he got his feet tangled, and with all the grace of a three-legged hephelump—which, for the record, is one of the most graceless things in the known galaxy—he tumbled to the ground, splashing heavily into the slimy water. Coughing and spluttering, he thrashed his arms in the foul-smelling goop until he managed to sit up.

Standing on the path, squinting at Lurk in dismay, one eyebrow raised in an expression of disbelief, was a three foot tall albino frog. It leaned on a short, gnarled walking stick—thickly knobbed at one end, narrowing almost to a point at the other—and wore a threadbare brown robe. One tiny foot was deformed and turned inwards.

Lurk had no idea what a rabbit was—something which would make a good stew, perhaps?—but he had the sudden unshakeable feeling that he had just tumbled down the rabbit-hole.

“Excuse me, little frog,” he said inanely, “did you speak to me?”

The frog drew itself to its full height—almost three foot one inch—and said: “A frog I am not.” It did not

sound happy. It *wasn't* a frog, Lurk realised—although there were many similarities. Frogs, though, did not have large pointed ears, as this creature had.

It was the creature's distinctive manner of speaking which finally caught Lurk's attention. It used an unusual grammatical twist, and it seemed to Lurk that it was a speech pattern which would be tempting to imitate. He had heard that same pattern before, from Boldaar, and from Bent K'nobby. Both men had spent time with...

"Yodel?" asked Lurk.

Yodel nodded. "Serve you well, your insight does," he said. "Although, not much of a leap, it was!"

"I'm screwed, aren't I?" said Lurk with a sigh.

"Make a good first impression, you do not," agreed Yodel.

"A thousand apologies, Master Yodel," said Lurk humbly. "You startled me, and I was expecting someone..."

"Taller?" asked Yodel.

"Well, yes," said Lurk.

"A lot, I get that," said Yodel. He leaned forward and poked Lurk in the chest with the muddy tip of his walking stick. "Late you are, young Splitwhisker. Waiting, I have been."

"You know who I am?" asked Lurk.

Yodel sighed and shook his small, frog-like head. "Master of the obvious, you are," he said. "Told me, Obeah Bum did, that on your way you were. Six weeks ago, that was!"

"I'm sorry," said Lurk. "I had to go to Hoff, to make sure..."

But Yodel had turned away. He tilted his head and spoke to the empty air. "Train him, I cannot," he said. "Impetuous, he is. Wilful."

Was I any different when you trained me? replied the empty air. Lurk blinked as he recognised the voice.

“Bent?” he asked.

Limned with a soft green glow, the figure of Obeah Bum K’nobby shimmered into view.

Yodel shook his head. “Too old, he is. When you I trained, young you were. Impetuous too, yes—and look to where that led.”

Lurk stood up slowly. His clothes were soaked, and he felt thick, cold mud oozing unpleasantly down his legs inside the trousers of his flight suit.

“But I’ve learned so much,” pleaded the young man. “Tell him, Bent.”

Yodel shook his head again. “Too old.”

He must be trained, said Bent. He is too powerful. Without guidance, he is a danger to all around him—and he will be turned easily to the Hard Side of the Source.

“Yeah,” said Lurk. “A danger to ... hey, wait a minute.”

“True, this is,” said Yodel. He sighed deeply. “Very well,” he said at last. “Train him I must.”

“Thank you, Master Yodel,” said Lurk. “I think.”

“But first, eat we must,” said Yodel. “Come, young Splitwhisker.” He turned and hobbled away through the swamp. The path he followed was clearly visible, although Lurk was sure it had not been there earlier. He glanced at the shimmering, translucent figure of Bent—his old mentor shrugged apologetically before fading silently away—and then turned to follow the small form of Yodel. For a shuffling, crippled frog, the Jubbly master moved surprisingly quickly.

Lurk sat on the hard-packed dirt floor, hunched double so as not to bang his head against the low ceiling. The hut

was as tiny as its owner, and Lurk felt like a giant, cramped and confined.

At least it was dry.

Yodel bustled around the tiny kitchen—little more than a fireplace with a large metal pot suspended over the flickering flames, and a tiny pantry. Lurk watched the short Jubbly master as he stirred the contents of the pot, then spooned some of the liquid into a bowl which he handed over to the youth. Lurk took it carefully, and accepted the proffered spoon. He peered suspiciously into the bowl. The liquid was thick, and numerous unidentifiable chunks floated in it. He sniffed cautiously, and struggled to keep the grimace of distaste from his face.

Lurk had grown up on the hot, dry planet of Ratatouille; he had never had stew before. On the icy world of Hoff, however, the Rebellion's cooks had introduced him to the wonders of steaming hot meat pies. He would gladly trade this slop for a dish of cubed steak and vegetables, topped with a light and fluffy pastry.

"Eat up," said the Jubbly Master, and he poked his young guest with his walking stick. "Much energy you will need, if trained you are to be."

Lurk stirred the bowl of stew, and something green and slimy bobbed to the surface. He blinked at it. To his horror it blinked back. He dropped the spoon hurriedly back into the bowl.

Yodel cackled with laughter. "Eat up," he said again.

"But..."

"Stew, or stew not," said Yodel, "there is no pie!"

Lurk stared up at the creature in disbelief. "You can read my mind?" he asked.

“Read your mind, I can,” agreed Yodel, “but much energy does that take. Easier to read, your face is. Now eat. Long, tomorrow will be. Much to do there is.”

Lurk lifted another spoonful from the bowl and studied it cautiously. It didn’t seem inclined to start moving, so after a slight pause he placed it in his mouth. It actually tasted pretty good. Yodel sat down opposite the young man and began to eat heartily from his own bowl. For a while the hut was filled with the slurping sounds of stew being swallowed.

“Yodel,” began Lurk as he set his bowl aside.

“More?” asked Yodel.

“No!” said Lurk quickly. “I mean, uh, no thanks, I’m quite full.”

“Suit yourself,” said Yodel as he refilled his own bowl.

“Um, Master Yodel,” began Lurk again. “I have a question.”

“Always so impatient, young Splitwhisker,” said Yodel. “For eating there is a time, and for talking there is a time.”

“Sorry, Master Yodel,” persisted Lurk, “but I have to know. I have held onto this question for some time. It concerns my, uh, it concerns Barth Vapour.”

Yodel sighed and put down his bowl. “Told you, did he? Unfortunate, this is.” The Jubbly master nodded wearily. “Your father he is.”

“Oh, not that,” said Lurk. “He never told me that!”

“Whoops,” said Yodel. “Forget, you must. Unlearn what you have just learned...”

“It’s okay,” said Lurk. “I figured *that* out before I even faced Vapour. No, I just want to know what happened to him after the, uh, battle at Yawn.”

“Oh,” said Yodel. He tilted his face upward quizzically.

Did I not mention that? came Bent’s sepulchral voice. *I’m sure I did.*

“Mention it you did not,” said Yodel sternly.

Sorry, said Bent.

“Now, Lurk, your father...” Yodel paused, and stared blindly into his bowl of stew. “Gone, his presence is from the Source. But dead he is not. A puzzle this is!”

“Are you saying that even you do not know where he is?” demanded Lurk. “How can he be gone but not dead? I don’t understand.”

“Possible it is, that Vapour from death saved himself.”

“But how?”

The same way I did, said Bent gently. He shimmered into view, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the increasingly crowded kitchen. In fact, he did not fit completely, and one shoulder was buried in the wall of the hut. It did not seem to bother him. *Or a similar way, anyway. You may recall I told you something about writing oneself into the very Source code itself?*

“Well yes,” said Lurk, “but I kind of assumed that if Vapour had done that, you would still be able to detect his presence?”

Indeed, confirmed Bent. *That is not what he has done. Perhaps, though, he managed to move himself over to another simulation entirely.*

“Another simulation?” asked Lurk.

Think of it as a parallel universe, said Bent.

“Like, but not alike,” added Yodel cryptically.

Lurk shook his head. “I think you’ve lost me.”

All this, as I told you, is merely a virtual reality. Bent waved his hand, indicating the hut and, beyond that, the

entirety of the known galaxy. *The machines generate it to keep us docile, under control.* Lurk nodded. *One popular theory is that the machines are actually running multiple such simulations. In parallel, as it were. With enough incentive, in theory, a Stiff Lord could travel from one simulation to another.*

“Oh,” said Lurk.

“Only theory it is,” said Yodel. “No proof do we have. But possible it is.”

“Wow,” said Lurk, blinking. “That is just...” He trailed off, lost for words.

Isn't it? agreed Bent.

Lurk stared back and forth between the two Jubbly masters, the living and the dead. Bent's very existence was proof enough that the Source held many secrets.

“I wonder where he is,” Lurk said at last.

Chapter 11

Virgin Territory

The room was silent, save for the soft murmur of the monitors, and the occasional friendly beep.

Barth Vapour opened his eyes a crack, and squinted out at the bright white ceiling above him. It was too bright; his helmet had been removed, and with it the myriad of filters through which he normally viewed the world. He closed his eyes again and listened.

Where am I?

He reached out with his senses, feeling for the Source from which he drew his strength—and recoiled in horror. It wasn't there. What did that mean? Was he *awake*? Or was he just *elsewhere*?

He reached out again, concentrating hard on the white ceiling which was all he really knew of this place. The Source—the code which generated the virtual world of the Array—should have been there, shimmering and green. Vapour felt nothing.

And yet, something *was* there. He could feel it, like an itch in the back of his mind, a splinter wedged way back out of reach; he couldn't touch it, or see it, but he knew it was there.

He relaxed, allowing his consciousness to expand. One by one, he lowered the mental shields which had built up over the years.

Detecting the Source was easy once you knew how; it was like those puzzle images which just looked like white noise until you learned the correct way of looking at them, of focussing without focussing, and then the image was suddenly there and you said “Oh, a sailboat!” and went on to the next one. Some people could see them easily, and some people would never see them, no matter how long they spent staring at them. And sometimes, although you could easily lock onto an image you had already seen, a new image would require a bit more effort.

The Source was there, but it was different from the Source which Vapour had stared at for most of his life. In order to make sense of it, in order to focus, he would first need to open his mind, make himself receptive. Only by losing his focus would he regain it.

Gradually at first, creeping around the edge of his vision behind his closed eyelids, the green hiss appeared—except, he realised after a moment, it was not green at all, but blue. It registered on all senses at once; it smelled blue, it tasted blue, it felt blue. The blue hiss grew louder, like a distant wave breaking on the shore then rushing, leaping, boiling up the sand towards him. It washed over him—and there it was. The Source. The same, but very different. He could see the entire room he was in, all delineated in blue code—but the code was strange and alien, and he could not even begin to make sense of it.

It would take time before he was proficient in its use. Time during which he would be vulnerable.

The room was empty—it seemed to be a small medical bay of some kind, although the equipment was alien to Vapour, and there was no sign of the medical ‘bot which would have been in attendance in an Imperial

sickbay. Vapour opened his eyes. It was bright, but not as brilliant as he had first thought. Once his eyes had adjusted to the light, it seemed barely brighter than what he considered normal.

He looked around for a while without moving, taking stock of his situation. He was naked, he realised, covered only by a thin, cool sheet. Not only had they—whoever *they* were—removed his helmet and his stillsuit, they had apparently also removed his prosthetics. His arm was missing, and his legs—well, they had been useless anyway, the prosthetic limbs severed just above the knee in his light-rapier battle with young Lurk Splitwhisker the day before...

Before what? What had happened? He had been on the *Devastator* Station, the countdown to the firing of the weapon and the end of the Rebel Coalition was reaching its final seconds. Young Splitwhisker had done *something*, tweaked the Source in some way, and everything had gone green. Green, then black.

He took a deep breath. He blinked, and took another. The air was cool in his lungs, but something was different. The discomfort had gone, the congested feel that came from trying to breathe through scarred, damaged lungs. It was gone. His lungs appeared to be whole again.

Interesting... he thought.

He lifted his left hand to examine it, and was surprised to discover that his bright pink teddewok, Boadicea—a gift from one of the Emperor's many great grandchildren—was clutched in his tightly curled fingers. He turned her over, and read the white words across the front of her black T-shirt: *STIFF HAPPENS*. He grinned, briefly but savagely. Then, carefully, he placed the stuffed animal on the bed beside him, and lifted his hand

to his face. He clenched his fingers into a fist, released them, clenched again. His grip felt weak, but firm.

It would be enough. It had to be.

Vapour rolled over onto his right side, pressed his hand against the mattress, and sat up.

As he did so, the friendly beep changed tone, became faster and more urgent. If anybody was monitoring him, they now knew he was awake. Vapour turned to face the door of the small room; he adjusted his sheet slightly to protect his modesty, and waited.

Time to meet his new—what? Captors? Benefactors? He would know soon enough.

The door hissed open.

Ensign Pi Larfin was deeply engrossed in her novel—an antique form of storytelling which her brother had given her as a graduation present—when the alarm sounded. She looked up at the console, and tapped the flashing light.

It was the man they had taken to calling Rip. He was awake.

Larfin tapped the communicator badge pinned to her tunic. “Pi Larfin to Doctor Brusher, please report to sick bay three; our guest is awake.”

After a short pause, Doctor Cavity Brusher’s voice responded: “On my way, Ensign Pi.” She sounded as though she had just awakened—which, of course, was the case.

Larfin stood. Carefully she marked her place in the book, and put it away in a drawer. She tapped a couple more buttons on the console, getting a readout of Rip’s status. Heartbeat was good, blood pressure good. There was some slightly unusual brain activity, but nothing to be concerned about. His blood chemistry was *unchanged*

from earlier readings—although it was different in several key respects from the human norm.

Idly she rubbed at her nose ridge. Needless to say, the “human norm” wasn’t the only standard to go by.

The outer door hissed open, and Doctor Brusher strode into the monitoring room. She was in her early forties, and the cascade of coppery hair which fell around her shoulders distracted attention from her attentive blue eyes. Like the Ensign, she wore a blue tunic; the communicator badge pinned to her tunic, midway between breast and shoulder, was the stylised logo of the *United Planets Foundation*.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Readings are normal, Doctor,” said Larfin. “Blood chemistry has not changed.”

Doctor Brusher nodded. She consulted the timepiece on her wrist, and frowned. She tapped her communicator badge. “Computer, is the Captain awake?”

“Negative, Doctor,” replied the softly modulated voice of the ship. “Captain Pilchard has been asleep for four hours and seventeen minutes. Would you like me to wake him?”

“No,” said the Doctor. “Please inform him when he wakes that the patient in sick bay three has come out of his coma and is conscious.” She hesitated. “Also, please order a security detachment down to sick bay three.” One could never be too careful.

“Confirmed,” said the computer. “Message logged. A security detail is on its way.”

“Well,” said Doctor Brusher to Larfin, “let’s go meet our guest.” She picked up a medical quadricorder from the shelf where they were stored, and stepped towards the door of the private—and secure—room.

“Computer,” she said, tapping her badge again, “please unlock this door.”

“Confirmation required,” said the computer. Its synthesised voice had not changed, but to Pi Larfin it always seemed to sound more brusque, less friendly, when demanding a security clearance code.

“Code *Cavity one unlock alpha*,” said Doctor Brusher.

“Confirmed,” said the computer. It beeped. The door hissed open.

Doctor Cavity Brusher stepped forward into the room, and Ensign Pi Larfin followed her.

Their guest was sitting up on the bed, the top sheet wrapped around his waist and draped over the stumps of his legs. He faced the two women.

Beside him, also facing them, sat the small pink teddy bear which had appeared as mysteriously as he had. Pi Larfin had the sudden eerie feeling that it was looking into her soul, judging her sins. She shuddered. She was not a particularly spiritual person, not prone to flights of fancy or superstition, so this sudden anxiety surprised her.

“Where am I?” the man demanded. His voice was deep and rich, and it made Ensign Pi feel all tingly in places which hadn’t tingled in far too long. “What is this place?”

“How do you feel?” asked Doctor Brusher, ignoring his questions. She approached him, and held out the quadricorder to scan him. He glanced down at the device in her hands, his eyes narrowing. Once he decided that it was not going to do anything dangerous, he looked back up, meeting the Doctor’s gaze.

“What is this place?” he repeated.

“You’re safe here,” she told him. “I’m Doctor Cavity Brusher, Chief Medical Officer of the *USSS Ender’s Prize*. You are in one of my sick bays.”

He stared through her for a moment, his eyes losing focus as he processed this information.

“That name means nothing to me,” he said at last. “How did I get here?”

Doctor Brusher held up her hand. “Please,” she said, “I’d rather you spoke to my Captain. He is keen to initiate an exchange of information.”

“So I am to be interrogated,” he said flatly. His eyes narrowed again.

“No, not at all,” said Doctor Brusher. “We are not your enemies; however, your—presence—does raise a few questions which we would very much like to resolve.”

“You are not my enemies?” he asked. “How do you know that I am not *your* enemy?”

“We don’t,” said Doctor Brusher. “Which is why the door is locked, and a security detail stands guard outside.” She smiled. “Sorry, but you did ask.”

“Indeed,” he said.

They studied each other for a moment.

Apparently forgotten by both of them, Pi Larfin stared surreptitiously at the man. He was disfigured, of course—a triple amputee with one remaining arm—and scarred heavily, but there was something about him which fascinated her. Perhaps it was just the voice—but she sensed an aura of power around him that went beyond anything she had ever encountered. This was a man who was used to having his own way. He had the potential to be dangerous—of that, there could be no doubt—but Larfin had always been attracted to dangerous men.

“Very well,” said the man. “I shall be a patient patient, and await a visit from your Captain.”

“Thank you,” said Doctor Brusher.

“May I ask, though, where my arm has gone?”

“Ah, yes,” said the Doctor. “It is—nearby. We thought you might be...” she paused to consider her words. Finally she shrugged. “Again, I think that is a question best left to Captain Pilchard to handle.”

“And my lungs? Or is that a question for your Captain too?”

“Your lungs?” The Doctor consulted her quadricorder. “Oh yes. When you—arrived—our preliminary scans revealed extensive tissue scarring which must have made it quite difficult for you to breath without your, uh, environment suit. We could not imagine any reason why you had not had the damage repaired long ago—but by the same token, we could not imagine any reason to leave the injury untended. The tissue regenerator repaired most of the damage; it is estimated your lung capacity is now almost back to one hundred percent.” She looked him in the eye. “I hope this has not caused any offence?”

He raised one eyebrow—Larfin thought the gesture looked very Hephaestan—and shook his head. “Offence? No. You have my thanks—something I have not given in a long time. I have not breathed without discomfort in over twenty years.”

“You are welcome,” said the Doctor. “In fact, it was Ensign Pi here who guided the regenerator.”

Larfin blinked in embarrassment at the sudden attention.

“Thank you, young lady,” said the man in his deep, deep voice.

“My p-p-pleasure,” stammered Larfin. She felt her cheeks flush hotly; a flutter of excitement stirred deep in her belly.

“May we ask your name?” asked the Doctor.

“I am...” the man began. He trailed off thoughtfully, then continued: “My name is Mannequin Splitwhisker.”

Larfin felt a sudden, terrible urge to burst out laughing. *Splitwhisker*? She clapped her hand over her mouth and pinched her nose tightly. She felt her eyes begin to water.

The man—Mannequin Splitwhisker—was looking at her. She thought she might die of embarrassment, and she struggled to regain control.

“Sorry,” she said after what felt like an eternity, but could not have been more than a couple of seconds. “I felt a sneeze coming on.”

“Indeed,” said Mannequin. His tone suggested that he knew exactly what she was thinking, and that he had seen her reaction many times before.

“Go take a shot of anti-histamines, Ensign,” ordered Doctor Brusher brusquely, and Larfin cringed. She knew that the Doctor was the butt of more than a few jokes—most involving dentistry—because of her own name, and that she would not be particularly sympathetic to Larfin’s excuses.

“It’s okay, Doctor,” said Larfin meekly. “It has passed now. Sorry.”

“Very well,” said the Doctor, her eyes narrowing briefly. “But we must go now anyway.” She turned back to Mannequin. “I would recommend getting some sleep, Mister Splitwhisker,” she said. “It will be several hours yet before Captain Pilchard is ready to see you. The *Ender’s Prize* is currently in the middle of its night cycle.”

Mannequin nodded. "Sleep would be—desirable. Thank you."

Cavity Brusher turned and shooed Larfin out of the small room. The Ensign stepped through into the monitoring room. There were two burly men—dressed in the red tunics of Security—standing impassively against the outer door. She nodded to them and smiled; true to their profession, they stared straight through her.

Doctor Brusher paused in the doorway and looked over her shoulder at Mannequin. "This door will, of course, be locked," she told him. "I'm sure you will understand that we do not mean our precautions as a personal judgement against you."

Larfin heard him reply: "In your position, I would doubtless do the same. Good night, Doctor Brusher."

"Good night, Mister Splitwhisker," said the Doctor. She stepped through the doorway, and the door hissed closed behind her. "Computer, lock this door; code *Cavity one unlock alpha*."

"Confirmed," said the computer.

"What was *that*, Ensign?" said Doctor Brusher sternly.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, I was nervous and I just couldn't help myself and it won't happen again," said Larfin, her words tumbling over each other in their haste to escape from her mouth.

"I expect a certain level of professionalism from my ensigns," said the Doctor.

"Yes Doctor," said Larfin. She met the Doctor's stare.

Satisfied, Doctor Brusher nodded. "Okay, no harm done. And you're right, there is something—imposing—about him." She glanced at her timepiece. "Your shift is up in about three hours. Monitor him, make sure he remains stable."

“Yes Doctor,” said Larfin.

“I’ll leave the Security detail here in case he causes any trouble,” continued the Doctor, “but I doubt we’ll hear a peep out of him tonight.”

Larfin nodded.

“I’m going back to bed. Good night, Ensign Pi.”

“Good night, Doctor Brusher.”

Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, gazed at the door thoughtfully as it closed behind the two women.

During their conversation, he had cautiously extended his feelings, exploring the nuances of this alien yet familiar Source which surrounded him. It behaved in ways subtly different to anything he had seen before; so far those subtleties eluded him, but it was only a matter of time before he regained his full mastery. Until then he could look, but not touch.

Doctor Brusher’s code had shown all the signs of a strong-minded, strong-willed woman. Even once he learned how to apply his Stiff abilities in this new place, she would not be easily manipulated. The Source could be used to subvert the will of the weak-minded; *she* would be a tough nut to crack. In fact, he suspected that she hid much of herself—both physically and psychically—behind masks of her own making, which made him wonder whether she was used to spending time around Source-sensitive people. She was a woman who would not give up her secrets easily.

The young Ensign, on the other hand—oh, she was a delight. All her thoughts and emotions seethed and roiled just beneath the surface, easy to read. Fear, fascination, lust—that last had surprised him; it had been a long time indeed since he had inspired *lust* in anyone—all were right there, on display for anybody sensitive enough to

see them. He had been tempted to caress her emotions through the Source, but had been surprised to discover that his voice alone had been more than enough to distract her and throw her into turmoil. Part of her *wanted* him. Part of her *mind* wanted him, too, and he knew she would dream of him when she finally slept.

Vapour knew from long experience that his birth-name had the potential to evoke amusement. His childhood had not been a happy one. When Doctor Cavity Brusher—*she should be a dentist*, his mind interjected—had asked him his name, he had tossed out ‘Mannequin Splitwhisker’ to see what reaction it got. He had not been disappointed. Doctor Brusher had not reacted at all—he suspected she was probably inured to such petty details as an embarrassingly awful name—and young Ensign Pi had barely held back a giggle.

Ah yes, just delightful. He looked forward to having some fun with *her* before he left this place.

He wasn’t entirely sure where *this place* was, of course, but from what he knew of the Array, and what he had seen so far, he assumed he was in a simulation other than his own. The Array was an artificial reality, generated by the Source and imposed upon humanity by the Machines for reasons unknown. What *was* known was that there were multiple simulations running, each based upon some particular form of popular culture borrowed from humanity’s own ‘Golden Age’—and that finally, after several centuries, the boundaries were beginning to blur.

He didn’t know how it had happened, but Barth Vapour was in virgin territory: where no Stiff had gone before.

Chapter 12

Become a Jubbly in Three Easy Lessons

“**S**trong, you are, with the Source,” said Yodel. “But unguided your strength is. Learn to control it, you must, or control *you* it will.”

“I understand, Master Yodel,” said Lurk. “I am trying, but...”

“No!” said Yodel sharply. “Try not. Do, or do not; there is no ‘try’.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” muttered Lurk to himself. He sighed. If there was no ‘try’, then he was obviously destined to fail.

“Again,” said Yodel. He pointed.

The old Jubbly master and his young Patabum apprentice stood together in a small dry clearing, little more than a bump of solid ground surrounded by the mud and slime and water of the swamp. Of course, in the near-constant drizzle, ‘dry’ was a relative term at best. At one edge of the clearing sat the small domed structure—built of dried mud and matted vegetation—that was Yodel’s humble hovel. At the far side of the clearing, half-buried in the mud, sat a rotting log. Perched atop the log was a thick length of stick, roughly the size and shape of a deactivated light rapier. In a small jumbled heap on the dirt beneath where the stick was balanced, half a dozen orange vegetables lay where they had fallen.

Lurk's face was masked by the bandanna, now soiled and damp.

Lurk closed his eyes and reached out his hand towards the stick. The hand gestures were apparently not necessary, but Yodel had assured him that they helped to focus one's concentration.

"Reach out," said Yodel. "Feel the stick with your mind."

Lurk concentrated.

"Now, grasp it gently. Feel its texture. Feel its weight."

His hand moved gingerly in the air, as though holding and stroking the stick.

On the log, the stick wobbled slightly.

"Good," said Yodel. "Now lift it, and bring it to you."

Lurk pictured the stick moving, visualising his goal, seeing it float through the air into his outstretched hand. He massaged the code of the stick, manipulated its Source. He *tweaked*, and another root vegetable toppled off the log onto the growing pile.

"No, no, no," said Yodel. "Stick, we want. No more carrots."

"I'm sorry, Master Yodel," said Lurk.

"A parsnip, at least, would be nice," muttered Yodel. He looked up at Lurk.

"That seemed very familiar for a second," said Lurk, "as though I'd done it a thousand times before. Every time I think I've got it, though, I just *tweak*, and it changes into something else."

"Most impressive it is," said Yodel, "but more there is to the Source. A sledgehammer you use, when required a feather is. A habit this is. Break it, you must. Unlearn what you have learned, you must."

“But I never even really learned this,” said Lurk. “I just sorta picked it up along the way.”

“And yet, unlearn you must,” said Yodel. The Jubbly master sighed. “Never before, this dilemma have I faced. Knows too much, my Patabum does. Requires some thought, this does.”

“Shall I try it again, Master Yodel?”

Yodel sighed and shook his head.

“Do, I mean,” said Lurk. “Shall I do it again?”

“Later, young Splitwhisker,” said Yodel. “Now, time to eat, it is. Again, carrot soup we will have.”

“Yes master,” said Lurk. He trudged across the clearing to retrieve the pile of vegetables.

“A different approach we will try,” said Yodel. “Empty your mind, we must. Discipline, you must learn.”

Yodel wriggled to get comfortable. He was seated in a pouch strapped to Lurk’s back.

“What must I do, Master Yodel.”

Yodel chuckled until he coughed. “Many things,” he said mysteriously. “Many things. Now, though, run you will.” He prodded Lurk’s shoulder with his walking stick. “Run,” he said again. “That way.”

Lurk ran.

He ran with his eyes half-closed, using the Source to guide him. With just a little concentration, he could see the correct path to follow through the mire. He could distinguish solid ground from bottomless bog, shallow water from deep—and he saw it all several paces before he reached it, enabling him to pick out his own path through the trackless wastes.

As he ran, Yodel spurred him onwards. “Faster,” he would say, or simply poke the panting youth with his walking stick.

Before long, his legs began to ache, and the weight of the Jubbly master on his back became impossible to bear, but Yodel would not allow him to stop. “Faster,” he said, and Lurk searched deeply within himself to find new reserves of energy. Finally, though, he could simply go no further. Legs weak and trembling, chest heaving as he gasped for each foul-smelling breath, he collapsed to his knees in the mud.

“I can’t,” he gasped. “I’m exhausted. I have to rest.”

“Very well,” said Yodel. “Five minutes, no more. Then return we must.” The Jubbly master laboriously dismounted from the pouch, and dropped down into the shallow water. He made no splash, and Lurk glanced down despite his exhaustion. He blinked. Yodel was standing on the surface of the water, as though it were solid.

“I don’t ... don’t believe it,” gasped Lurk.

Yodel shook his head sadly. “Believe, you must, or fail you will.”

Lurk shook his head. Yodel shuffled across the water to the nearest fallen log—in this environment of bad light, acidic water, and steamy heat, fallen logs lay everywhere—and jumped up onto it.

The five minute rest period seemed far too short to Lurk, but at least, when Yodel motioned that it was time to continue, he was no longer gasping for breath. In this atmosphere, gasping for breath was *not* a good idea.

Lurk said as much to Yodel.

Yodel shook his head. “No smell, there is,” he said.

“With respect, Master Yodel, but you have lived here so long you’ve gotten used to it. The air is awful. It smells and tastes like concentrated urine, and that’s on a good day.”

Yodel shook his head again. “No smell there is,” he repeated firmly. “Where we are, remember. The smell the machines implant, as a detail. Unreal, it is.”

“But...” began Lurk.

“No,” said Yodel. “Only if bound by the source you are, a smell there is. For those of us, aware of the Array, the Source, no smell there is. Ignore it, we can.”

Lurk frowned as he considered this. “Of course,” he said. “Here in the Array, even the act of breathing is merely a simulation.” He examined the Source, and carefully took a breath. The smell was not as strong as it had been. With practice, he should be able to eliminate it completely.

“Thank you, Master Yodel. I see the wisdom in what you say.”

Yodel shrugged. “Now, your run, continue you must.”

Once the Jubbly master had settled himself back into his saddle on Lurk’s back, the youth pushed himself to his feet and began to run back the way he had come.

Everything seemed different. At first Lurk put it down to the fact that he was simply facing the other way, but eventually he realised that he was no longer on the same path. He was headed in roughly the right direction, but via a different route.

Yodel did not seem concerned.

Suddenly Lurk hesitated. Even with the Source to guide him, he could see no way to proceed. He had brought them into a dead end. Breathing heavily, he slowed and stopped.

“I am sorry, Master Yodel,” he panted, “but I seem to be lost.”

“A wrong turn you have taken,” said Yodel.

Lurk began to apologise again, but Yodel waved him silent. “Guided you here, I did.”

He tapped Lurk on the shoulder, and the youth crouched so that Yodel could dismount. He looked around. Something smelled rotten. Of course, the whole damn planet smelled rotten, but this sense of wrongness did more than fill his nose; it seeped into his awareness of the Source as well.

“Something is not right here,” he said.

Yodel nodded. He pointed with his walking stick. “There,” he said. “Strong with the Hard Side of the Source, that place is. Enter it, you must.”

Lurk turned to look. A huge, gnarled tree sat in the mud as though it had been there a thousand years. There was something obscene about it; Lurk realised that it looked as rotten as it smelled. Its trunk was broad and squat, and a twisted tangle of leafless limbs wrapped it in an impenetrable shroud.

“What do you mean, ‘enter it’?” he asked. “It’s a tree.”

“Beneath the tree,” persisted Yodel, “a cave there is.”

“What’s in there?”

“Only what, with you, you take.”

“Oh right,” said Lurk. “Some sort of spiritual thing, right. Like I take my fears with me, and it manifests them? Next you’ll be saying I don’t need to take my weapons.”

“Perceptive, you are,” said Yodel. “Beware, young Splitwhisker: nobody, a smart-ass likes.”

“Well,” said Lurk, “this smart-ass is going to take his light rapier with him into the cave. I prefer to be prepared.”

Yodel sighed. “As you wish.”

Lurk picked his way through the mud until he was close enough to the tree to touch it, if he chose. The thought of actually doing so made his skin crawl; the bark

was peeling and flaking, and it looked more like decaying flesh than simple wood. Words like *scabrous* and *leprous* slithered into his brain, and he shuddered.

Gingerly, without touching it, he made his way around the tree until he found the dark hole nestled between two thick, snaking roots. He peered inside, but saw nothing.

Bracing himself with his gloved right hand, he squatted and felt inside with his left leg for a foothold. Somehow, touching the diseased tree and the putrid mud with his robotic limbs seemed less distasteful. His foot touched something solid—another tree root, perhaps—and he began to lower himself into the hole. Suddenly the object on which he was resting his weight seemed to squirm beneath him, and then he was tumbling and rolling and slithering down the slimy, muddy slope. He landed with a splash in a shallow pool of stinking water. He tried to clamber quickly to his feet; instead, he merely succeeded in falling again, this time into a deeper part of the puddle.

Soaked to the skin, dripping filth, he sat up. “Just great,” he muttered. “And I thought the sewage pit on the *Death Tube* was bad!”

Carefully, moving slowly, he got his feet under himself and stood up. Trying to ignore the thoroughly unpleasant sensation of cold slime dribbling down his body inside his clothing, he took a tentative step forward. Something squeaked indignantly and scampered out from under his foot.

It was dark down here, but not completely black. Some light filtered down from above, and once his eyes adjusted somewhat to the gloom he could see that the walls were swarming, squirming, alive with luminescent

worm-like creatures whose glow added dimly to the faint illumination.

Sliding his foot along the squishy ground through the freezing layer of water, he took another step forward.

Nothing happened.

“Hello,” he called softly. His voice echoed eerily around the slimy chamber. A chill ran down his spine—or was it just a lump of mud?

“Well,” he said to himself, “if my worst fear was that this would be a nasty, slimy cesspit, it has certainly been realised.”

He took another step forward, reaching out with his hand for the far wall. There wasn’t one. The cave was larger than seemed likely from the outside.

“Of course,” he said—the sound of his own voice was comforting, in this evil-smelling place—“my next biggest fear is probably that the entrance will cave in and I’ll be trapped down here, buried alive.” He turned his head slowly to look behind him. The faint circle of daylight still glimmered, although it was now barely visible.

“After that,” he continued, “I think what I fear most is that I’m wasting my time, letting myself be trained by a swamp-bound frog.”

He blinked. There appeared to be a patch of slightly brighter blackness up ahead. As he stepped closer, he became aware of indistinct shapes moving in the half-light.

Suddenly there was a bright flare in front of him, and out of nowhere, light rapier bursting into life, the menacing masked figure of Barth Vapour stepped in front of Lurk, coming between him and the pool of light. His breath gasped and clicked through the respirator unit. Lurk reacted quickly, raising his own weapon even as the Hard Lord swung at him. He parried, pushed the Stiff

Lord back, and swung his light rapier. The blade slipped past Vapour's defences, and sliced through the armoured neck. Vapour's helmeted head spun to the floor as his body toppled backwards to land with a splash in the mud.

Lurk looked down at the black mask; it reflected the shimmering blue light of his rapier blade. The rapier which had been his father's, before Mannequin Splitwhisker had turned to the hard side and become Barth Vapour. Suddenly the mask split open and inside, features slack in death, was Lurk's own face, staring up at him.

Lurk stared at the grisly scene for a moment. Then he laughed.

"That's the best you can do?" he shouted. "The fear that I might one day become my father? Make the same mistakes he made?" He waited until the echoes of his voice died away. "You'll have to do better than that," he said softly into the silence.

The headless torso, and the bodiless head, faded away as though they had never existed—for, of course, they *had* never existed. As Yodel had said, all that was here was what he had brought with him. He couldn't help but wonder, however, what would have happened if he hadn't had his light rapier. What happened to you if one of your fears—*would that be a vaporous fear?* he wondered—sliced your head off?

He deactivated his weapon and returned it to the holster on his belt.

A soft giggle caught his attention. He looked up.

The pool of light was brighter now. It shone on something which seemed to be a bed, although the black silk sheets made that determination difficult. Something moved beneath the sheets, there was another giggle, and then a shape reared up and the sheets slid away, revealing

the smooth, naked back and buttocks of a young woman. Her long dark hair, tousled and tangled, hissed down around her shoulders and back. From the way she moved her hips, she was not alone in the bed.

No, thought Lurk. *Not this*. Suddenly he found himself unable to move. Frozen to the spot, dreading what was to come next but unable to look away, he watched with growing horror. Despite his sudden revulsion, however, he also felt a stirring in his groin.

The woman shifted position slightly, and now Lurk could see that the second person in the bed—the man she was atop—was himself, an intense look in his eyes and a dopey grin on his face. She began to move faster, grinding herself down onto his double, until she cried out in ecstasy. She turned to face him.

“That was wonderful, lover boy,” said Libby.

Lurk screamed. In a wild panic, he turned and ran for the safety of the swamp above.

Freshly showered, but still wearing his old flight-suit, Lurk sat cross-legged on the dry, hard-packed dirt floor of the small dining area in Yodel’s domed mud house. The diminutive Jubbly master bustled around the kitchen, preparing yet another pot of rat and carrot stew.

“Tell me, you must,” said Yodel, “what troubles you. What you saw in the cave, share, you must.”

Lurk shrugged. “It was...” He stopped, unsure of how to proceed. “It was basically one of the dreams I have been having since ... well, since all this began.”

“One of?” asked Yodel. “Dreams, you are having? Or nightmares?”

“Well, they’re not pleasant,” said Lurk. “Some of them are confusing, and probably packed with all sorts of symbolism. But there are three or four which repeat, over

and over, and it's pretty darn obvious what they are about."

Yodel tossed a few handfuls of chopped herbs into the pot and stirred the simmering stew slowly. "Tell me," he said simply.

"I'm not sure I want to discuss this," said Lurk. "It is private, and disturbing."

"Dangerous, nightmares are, for a Jubbly. Signs of unrest, they can be. A path to the Hard Side, they may become."

Lurk considered this.

"Well, first I saw my father, Barth Vapour," said Lurk. "But I could handle that."

Yodel stopped stirring and studied the young man for a few seconds.

"Go on," he said at last.

Lurk met Yodel's gaze. "Master Yodel," he said, "how did my father fall from grace? How did he fall to the Hard Side?"

Yodel sighed. The stew began to bubble noisily, and Yodel resumed stirring.

"Led him astray, the Emperor did," said Yodel. "While training he was, to be a Jubbly, whispering in his ear, Senator Palpatore was. But love, it was, and lust, which the gap in his armour, opened. His love for your mother, vulnerable it made him, to Palpatore's evil lies."

Lurk frowned. "That explains my other vision, I guess, but I don't understand. Isn't love—normal healthy love between two people who have no reason not to be together—supposed to be a good thing?"

Yodel shrugged. He paused to taste a sip of the soup. "More salt, I think," he said. "To answer your question, yes and no. Love, good it can be. But weaken you, it does. If love someone you do, a target they can become."

Used against you they may be. For a Jubbly, dangerous it is.”

“But if you can keep the person you love safe from your enemies,” began Lurk, “surely...”

“Not your enemies,” said Yodel. “In here, the biggest threat is.” He touched the centre of Lurk’s chest lightly. “Love overrides intellect, overrides reason, even morals will it conquer. Dangerous, it can be, for one who follows the Jubbly path.”

Lurk sighed and stared at the floor. “In my vision, I defeated Vapour, only to discover my own face behind the mask. I scoffed, thinking that the fear of turning to the Hard Side was a minor one. But then the cave showed me something else.”

Yodel placed a couple of wooden bowls—hand carved, by their rustic appearance—on the low bench, and began to spoon hot stew into them.

“I fell in love once,” said Lurk quietly. “Oh, it was driven mostly by lust at first, but I came to love her too. I wanted her, and she wanted me. Then, Bent told me she was my sister.”

“Oh,” said Yodel. Then: “eww!”

“I know,” said Lurk. “I have been having nightmares about it ever since. That was what the cave showed me.”

Yodel nodded soberly. “Difficult that is,” he said. “But aware, you are. A problem this is not.”

“Not for you, maybe,” said Lurk, “but I cannot get her out of my head. Thoughts of her destroy my sleep, and my calm. I keep dreaming of what might have happened if Bent had not told me who she really was.”

“But a possibility that no longer is,” said Yodel. “Let go, you must.”

“I know,” said Lurk. “I am trying.”

“Try not,” said Yodel.

“Yes, Master Yodel, I know,” said Lurk. “Do, or do not. But easy it is not.”

Yodel nodded. “What else?”

“What else what?”

“Your dreams. ‘One of’, you said. Your others, you must tell.”

“Oh,” said Lurk. “Well, I’ve just...” He sighed. “Since the battle at Yawn, when I, uh, *tweaked* the *Death Tube*, I have been feeling guilt over the number of Imperial crew who died as a result of my actions.”

“I see,” said Yodel. “No choice you had. Acted to save your friends, you did.”

“Sure, they were trying to kill us all,” said Lurk, “but that was the officers, the Fighter pilots, the Shock Troopers. A place that size, though, must have had vast numbers of non-military staff. Cleaners, kitchen staff, plumbers. All dead at my hands.”

“Difficult that is,” agreed Yodel. “Collateral damage there always is, in war. Learn to accept it, you must, otherwise paralysed you will become.”

“I have been paralysed,” admitted Lurk, “afraid to use the Source to attack my enemies.”

“A good thing that is,” said Yodel gravely. “Always for defence must a Jubbly use the Source. Never for attack. Remember, though, sometimes the best defence, a good offence is.”

“Either way,” said Lurk, “I have been afraid to use the Source against those who have attacked us.”

“Meditate, you must,” said Yodel. “Right your actions were. Always in context, one must judge oneself, never in absolute. Dangerous, fear is. Kill your mind, it will.”

“Meditate?” asked Lurk.

“Yes,” said Yodel. “Come, close your eyes, think on what I have said. Guide you I will.”

Lurk slowly closed his eyes. Gradually, as he sat in silence, listening to the omnipresent noise of the insects, and the gentle drone of Yodel's voice, the faint frown lines on his brow smoothed and faded.

Chapter 13

The USSS Ender's Prize

Barth Vapour was perched upon something which Ensign Pi Larfin had called a wheelchair. It seemed remarkably low-tech for a people with such amazing medical technology. It was essentially a hover chair, such as the one he had been confined to back on the *Devastator* Station, except that it had no anti-grav capability; instead it was fitted with wheels, and was forced to roll along the floor. It was guided by a little control stick on one of the arm rests.

Vapour held his pink teddewok, Boadicea, between the stumps of his legs. Over the black T-shirt, she wore a blue sash bearing the emblem of the *Ender's Prize*; the addition to her wardrobe had been presented to Vapour by a giggling Pi Larfin.

Followed by two Security goons, Vapour trundled down the curving corridor. Beside him walked Doctor Cavity Brusher.

"If you feel tired at any time," she said to him, "just say the word and I shall call the meeting to an end."

"You can do that?" asked Vapour. "I thought your Captain Pilchard was in command."

"Oh, he is," said Doctor Brusher. "But I can overrule him on medical decisions if necessary for the safety of my patient."

“Interesting,” said Vapour. The concept of having a supreme commander who was not actually in supreme command was alien to him.

“Here we are,” said Brusher. As the door hissed open, she stepped back to allow Vapour to precede her into the room.

He did so.

The oval-shaped briefing room was dominated by a large oval table. Around the far end of the table sat a loose cluster of six or seven people, all watching him as he manoeuvred himself into the room. He took the place at the end closest to the door, where a couple of chairs had been removed to make way for him. He heard Doctor Brusher speaking to the Security detail—“wait out here”—and then she followed him into the room and took a seat beside him.

The man at the other end of the table stood up, and tugged briefly on his tunic. It was red, with a black bar across the shoulders. Four silver dots—rank insignia, guessed Vapour—were attached to his collar. Like the Doctor, he wore a silver sigil upon his chest. He was a tall man, and the lights of the briefing room shone off his smooth bald head.

“Welcome, Mister Splitwhisker,” he said, his voice calm and mellifluous. “I am Captain Jon-Lurk Pilchard of the *USSS Ender’s Prize*, flagship of the Foundation Fleet.”

“Captain,” nodded Vapour.

“Please allow me to introduce the rest of my senior staff. My Executive Officer, Billy-Bob Piker.” Billy-Bob sat at the Captain’s right hand. He wore a uniform practically identical to the Captain’s; only the insignia on the collar was different. He had a neatly trimmed moustache, and a little goatee beard. He nodded.

“The ship’s counsellor, Dee Dee McTroy.” Dee Dee sat to the left of the Captain; for some reason she wore a tight cat-suit—which exposed quite a lot of bare flesh, and emphasised her cleavage—rather than the standard tunic that the rest were wearing. She smiled prettily at Vapour. The Stiff Lord smiled back, then dismissed her as being little more than entertainment for the ship’s male officers—it was the only logical explanation for her outfit. She *must* be some sort of ship’s whore or sex slave. “Counsellor” indeed! That was like referring to a CP-*Oui* ‘bot as a master of protocol.

For some reason, the lovely young woman’s smile changed briefly to a glare before vanishing.

“This is my science officer, Lieutenant Commander Info,” said the Captain, indicating a pale man with slicked-back hair and golden eyes.

“Hello sir,” said the Lieutenant Commander. “I wonder if we might discuss, at some point, the intricacies of your prosthetic limb? It would seem to be...”

“Later, perhaps, Info?” interrupted the Captain.

“Of course, sir,” said Info.

“My Chief Engineer, Gordo von Seilon,” continued the Captain. Gordo was dark-skinned. In the galaxy Vapour came from, dark-skinned humans were very much in the minority; based on what he had seen so far, he had to assume that the same was true of this reality. The Engineer wore a complicated-looking device—a visor of some sort, although his eyes were not visible behind it. A small red light moved continually from side to side, as though the electronics of the device were constantly scanning the room.

“My Head of Security, and Tactical Officer, Bork.” Like Gordo, Bork was dark-skinned—but it seemed unlikely that he was a human. He did, however, appear

mostly human, so perhaps the extensive ridging of his forehead was merely the result of a horrific childhood accident. His eyebrows were so bushy that his eyes, too, were completely hidden. “He also cooks, from time to time,” added the Captain. Bork grunted something which might have been a greeting, or might have been an attempt to clear phlegm from his throat.

“And, of course, you’ve already met my Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Cavity Brusher.” Captain Pilchard sat down again.

“Indeed,” said Vapour. He looked at Brusher, then glanced back across the table at the cat-suit-clad cutie beside the Captain. He wondered how the Doctor felt about being in the same room as the men’s plaything. *Perhaps she prefers women?* he mused.

“Now, we have a couple of questions for you,” said the Captain, “if you are feeling up to it?”

“Go ahead,” said Vapour, “although I’m not sure what I can tell you.”

“First, then,” said the Captain with a warm smile, “can you tell us where you are from?”

Vapour considered the question. He wondered how much information he should give away, and how much he should keep. Cautiously he reached out for the Source, wanting to scan their minds, to get an idea of how much they knew. As he did so, however, he saw young Dee Dee twitch and glance at him curiously. He pulled back quickly.

The Source is strong with this one, he thought. He nodded to himself. Source sensitivity would be a useful attribute in a pleasure slave. *Or,* he admitted to himself, *in a Counsellor. Perhaps I have underestimated her role here after all.*

"I'm afraid," he said after a pause, "that is not as easy a question as you might think, and I suspect the simple answer would tell you very little. Can you answer one for me first? How did I get here?"

"That was going to be my next question for you," said Pilchard. The two men stared at each other across the length of the table. Pilchard sighed. "Very well. We do not know how you got on board. We were engaged in a conflict, our shields were raised—and you simply popped into existence in the centre of my bridge. That *should* have been impossible."

"That never stopped anybody before," muttered Billy-Bob.

"Thank you, Number One," said the Captain.

"I do not remember that," said Vapour, ignoring the interruption.

"No," said Captain Pilchard. "You were unconscious at the time. At first we suspected a trap; your prosthetic limb and your outfit were reminiscent of—an enemy of ours."

"Enemy?" asked Vapour.

Pilchard's lips thinned slightly. Piker took over.

"We call them the Droid," said the Executive Officer. "They were human once. Sorry: 'humanoid biological entities'." Piker lifted his hands to make air-quotes as he said this phrase. "Whatever. Now they are mostly machine. They roam through space looking for raw material to convert. They take both people and technology, and produce more of their kind."

Captain Pilchard shuddered minutely. "They are very dangerous; you *don't* want to meet them."

Vapour shielded his thoughts carefully. He did not think that Dee Dee was listening in, but it did not hurt to

take precautions. These Droid sounded *very much* like somebody he might want to meet.

“Anyway, we beamed you to a quarantined room, performed a thorough scan, and then moved you to the secure sickbay. We removed your prosthetics as a precaution, once it was determined that we could do so without harming you.”

Beamed? wondered Vapour.

“Also, we discovered traces of what appears to be a microscopic alien life form living within your blood. We were unsure whether they were meant to be there or not, but they did not appear to be overtly dangerous so we did not touch them.”

Vapour nodded. “Those are the Minty Chlorines,” he said.

“Minty Chlorines?”

“They, uh...” Vapour hesitated. The Minty Chlorines were something of an embarrassment, and were rarely spoken of in polite circles. They were a xenobiotic organism which served to purify the bloodstreams of the Stiff—and the Jubbly—and hence strengthen one’s connection to the Source. Although Source ability was possible in those without the Minty Chlorines in their blood, it was rare. As a general rule, the higher the Minty Chlorine count in your blood, the stronger your Source ability—and as a side effect, the less likely you were to suffer from bad breath.

“It is a personal matter,” said Vapour at last. “Suffice it to say that they help to keep my blood free of toxins.”

“Clean living through parasitic symbiosis,” said Info. “Fascinating!”

The Captain nodded. “Since then,” he continued with his explanation, “you have remained in your bed, in a

coma, for several weeks. Until you awoke this morning, that is.”

Billy-Bob Piker leaned close to the Captain and whispered something in his ear.

Pilchard nodded. “Also, about three days after your own arrival—we’re not sure exactly *when*, because nobody saw it happen—your teddy bear appeared in your bed.”

“Teddy bear?”

“The, uh, pink toy you have there on your wheelchair.”

“Oh. It is a teddewok,” said Vapour, a little embarrassed to notice that he had brought it with him. “Boadicea.”

“Boadicea?” asked the Captain. “Interesting.” He paused, and Vapour watched him cautiously, but he did not seem inclined to expand upon that observation. “So, now that you know how you got here—or at least as much as we know—can you tell us where you came from?”

Vapour nodded thoughtfully. He stared at the table for a few seconds, wondering how to proceed.

“I think the simplest answer to your question is that I come from another universe. A parallel universe, if the term is familiar to you?” He stared around the table at the nodding heads.

“We were—engaged in a conflict of our own. For twenty years, a rebellion has raged against the rightful rule of the Imperium. We had tracked the Rebel forces back to their home base, and were about to strike a decisive blow, when—something happened. I am not sure what it was, but everything went black. I woke up here.” He shrugged.

“I see,” said the Captain. “And what makes you think that *this* universe is not your own?”

Vapour thought about that. It seemed likely that the “Counsellor” had detected his cautious probe, and already knew his secret; therefore it only made sense to reveal it.

“It tastes different,” he said. “It feels different. *She* knows what I mean”—Vapour nodded towards Dee Dee—“or she would, at the very least, be able to detect the same differences I am detecting. I am sensitive to the Source.”

“The Source?” asked the Captain. Beside him, Dee Dee McTroy frowned thoughtfully at Vapour.

“It is our name for the ... *framework* of the universe,” said Vapour. It was true, more or less, and it gave away no details.

Dee Dee leaned in and whispered something in Captain Pilchard’s ear. The Captain nodded.

“And your injuries? If it does not distress you to speak of them—did you receive them in this battle?”

Vapour smiled bitterly. “Not the last battle, no. I lost my arm a long time ago ... in a galaxy far, far away.” A slightly puzzled expression flitted across his face and was gone again. “In a duel with Count Ducky. I was young and brash, and he was better than I was. My legs I lost to my former mentor, who betrayed me and the Imperator; most of my other injuries—some of which your Doctor Brusher kindly healed—were received then, when he dropped me in a river of magma and left me to die. In a strange twist of fate, my mentor then turned my own son against me, and I lost my prosthetic legs to *him*, just a day before that final battle.”

“That is certainly rather unfortunate,” agreed Captain Pilchard. “I am sure that...”

Suddenly the ship rocked around them. Moments later, the lighting dimmed to red, and the computer's calm voice said: "Red alert. All crew to battle stations."

The sigil on the Captain's chest beeped, and another voice said: "Captain Pilchard to the bridge, please."

Pilchard tapped the badge, and Vapour realised it was a communicator. "Acknowledged," he said. Then, to Vapour, he said: "My apologies. It seems there is a small matter which requires my attention. Do you mind if we continue this conversation at another time?"

Vapour gaped at him. A red alert, the ship obviously taking fire, and the Captain was politely requesting a leave of absence from a conversation with a mysterious stranger? What in Hell's Handbasket was *wrong* with these people?

The ship shuddered again. Vapour realised the Captain was still calmly awaiting his reply.

"Of course," he said.

Captain Pilchard nodded. "Thank you." He stood up, tugged lightly on his tunic, and gestured for the rest of his senior staff to file from the room.

"Uh, Captain Pilchard," said Vapour as the others began to leave—clearly the Captain was in no hurry—"may I accompany you to your bridge? I would be interested to learn a little more of this new universe in which I find myself."

The Captain frowned at him for a moment. "It may be a little dangerous," he warned. "It seems we are under attack."

"I am prepared to take that risk," said Vapour. *Besides, he thought, if the ship is destroyed before you ever get to the bridge, will it make any difference?*

“Very well, then,” said the Captain. “If you wouldn’t mind joining us, Cavity, our guest will be visiting the bridge.”

Chapter 14

Trek to Tibrogar

“Oh dear,” exclaimed Seepy Weepy.

Libby looked up from the food she was preparing. The elegant evening gown she wore seemed out of place in the *Sparrow*'s cramped kitchenette, but her choices were limited. Her entire wardrobe had been packed aboard one of the Rebel Transports, and the small selection of female clothes aboard the *Serendipity Sparrow* had been left behind by a woman whose chosen lifestyle dictated the exquisite over the practical. It was all gowns and lacy lingerie, with not a decent pair of thick trousers or a rugged tunic to be found.

Her own outfit was in the wash.

Mal had plopped himself down into one of the chairs in the small dining area and was staring tiredly into the distance. He was smeared with grease and grime, and the expression on his face was not a cheerful one.

“Keep chopping these,” she said to Seepy Weepy. She placed the knife onto the cutting board and wended her way past the ‘bot, out of the tiny kitchenette. Sitting in the seat across the table from Mal, she took one of his hands in her own.

“What is it?” she asked him.

He shook his head. "I had hoped that, with a little peace and quiet, we'd be able to repair the hyperdrive engines and be on our way."

It had been sixteen hours since the *Sparrow* had detached herself from the *Imperial Planetary Dominator*. Libby had slept for a while, and woken feeling refreshed. Mal—with Shaggus at his side—had spent much of that time in the engine room. Now his eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion.

"No such luck, I take it?"

He shook his head again. "The exotic energy focuser is cracked; without that, we're not going anywhere. Except at sub-light speed, of course."

"Cracked?" she asked. "I thought those things were practically indestructible."

Mal shrugged. "Well known fact that if something is 'practically indestructible', it will break it the worst possible moment—and, of course, be impossible to get at when it does." He lifted his free hand up in front of his face and inspected the filth which coated it. His fingers were trembling. "We had to dismantle most of the port exhaust manifold to take a look at the thing!" He sighed. "It's probably a stress fracture; I've been running the *Sparrow* too far and too fast for far too long now."

Libby hesitated before asking the obvious question. For a man as carefree and confident as Mal usually was, he already looked alarmingly depressed.

"And no," he added, answering her question before she had to voice it, "I don't have a spare! Don't need one, remember? Bloody thing's indestructible! And we don't have the facilities on board to repair it, either."

"Well," she said lightly, "I guess we're still going to Tibrogar, then."

"Yeah," he said. "Sorry."

“Don’t apologise,” she began, but he shook his head.

“I’m sorry I’ve let you down. I’ve failed you. You put your life in my hands and...”

“... and you kept me alive, and free, against overwhelming odds,” she said sternly. She squeezed his hand tightly in hers. “Don’t you start doubting yourself now. I have total confidence in you, but I need you to keep it together for me.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Sorry.”

“I *will* smack you,” she told him fiercely.

He grinned, and she felt her heart lighten at the sight of it. “Gotta catch me first,” he said.

She looked at the table between them, where her hand still clasped his. “Looks like I’ve already caught you,” she said, returning his grin.

He also looked at their linked hands. Lightly he ran his thumb across the back of her hand, leaving a dirty smear across her fine, pale skin. His grin faded, and a strange expression flitted across his face. “Yeah,” he agreed, “looks like...”

For a minute or two the silence was broken only by the sounds of Seepy Weepy carefully slicing vegetables and dropping them into a pot.

“Three weeks isn’t so bad,” said Libby softly. “The Rebellion will survive without us for that long.”

“I guess we could probably both do with a break from being chased across the universe,” agreed Mal. He blinked slowly, his eyes heavy with the need to sleep.

“Where’s Shaggus?” asked Libby.

“In his bunk,” said Mal. “I think I could do with a nap myself.”

“You go to bed,” Libby told him. “If there is a problem we’ll wake you. I promise!”

“What about...” Mal nodded towards the kitchenette.

Libby shrugged. “The food will be ready for you when you wake up.” She chuckled. “Besides, I suspect Seepy has spent more time in a kitchen than I have; between the two of us it will likely be eight hours before we’re ready to serve it up! Go. Go to bed.” She disengaged her hand gently from his.

Without further argument, Mal pushed himself to his feet and wandered down towards the sleeping quarters.

The days flew past on the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

Of course, for the ship’s small crew, since they had no sun to steer by, the actual day-night cycle was artificially regulated. Studies had shown that, for space voyages longer than 96 hours, it rapidly became vital for some regular lighting cycle to be instituted in order to preserve the mental health and well-being of those on board. Nobody wanted a repeat of the events—rapidly attaining the status of legend—which had taken place during the ill-fated maiden voyage of the *IPD Agamammanon*. Imperial or Rebel, one could not help but shudder when the ship’s name was mentioned. An entire crew turning upon each other in a frenzied bloodbath was just plain bad news, and not the sort of thing any space-faring person would wish upon his enemies.

Such dark thoughts, however, found no place to fester in the minds of Mal and Libby and Shaggus—and Seepy Weepy, not having a mind as such, was immune to the horrors of fear and depression.

The four of them rapidly fell into a routine.

Each morning—as the ship’s lights brightened to full intensity from the dim, almost-darkness of the “night” cycle—they would gather in the dining area. Mal and Libby would share breakfast duties in the kitchenette. They had banned Shaggus from preparing food after his

first efforts, following which they had all spent several hours coughing up fur balls.

Seepy, despite all his table-setting talents, had proved to have all the culinary capability of a rat—and despite the rumours that *some* rodents from Lurk's home planet were better cooks than the moisture farmers, that exception had no bearing on Seepy's lack of ability. "I'm only a sex 'bot," he had said quite early on, "and not very good at making breakfasts. Not at making them interesting, anyway!"

After they had eaten, they would typically go their separate ways until lunch.

Mal could often be found in the cockpit, checking that the auto-pilot was still on course, scanning the path ahead for any impending obstacles, or merely staring out at the star-speckled blackness through which they were passing. Once he called everybody up to join him in watching the beauty of a passing rogue comet, and once they all gasped in awe at the sight of a distant nebula flaring brilliantly, lit up by the blast of a star going nova. Mostly, though, he spent his mornings alone.

Libby spent the first few days of the journey exploring every nook and cranny of the *Sparrow*, familiarising herself with the layout and capabilities of the ship. Once she had done so—the *Sparrow* was by no means large, as freighters went—she took to reading. The ship had a small library, stocked with perhaps a thousand books; in pride of place were three antique novels made from real paper, and Libby was very carefully working her way through those. She had only ever read one other paper book, and the feel of these, the smell, brought back memories of her childhood. They were not easy to read; they were written in one of the dead languages of old Earth, a language she had studied long ago but with

which she was far from fluent. However, the sheer joy of holding them in her hands, of feeling the texture of the paper beneath her fingers, more than made up for any difficulty in following the text. *Besides*—she asked herself—*how could anyone resist a book with a pink teddewok on the cover?*

Shaggus preferred to spend his mornings tinkering in the engine room. Perhaps the hyperdrive engines were beyond repair, but there were many other systems which were long overdue for a good service. After the first couple of weeks he had increased the *Sparrow*'s energy efficiency by almost fifty percent, and repaired six critical components which had also been on the verge of failing. He also managed to boost their sub-light speed enough that he shaved a whole day off of their travel time to Tibrogar.

Typically Seepy—with no great desire to better himself, and not prone to boredom—simply shut himself down until the evening meal.

After a light lunch, Mal and Libby generally gravitated to the lounge. There they played board games, spoke about their respective mornings, or took the conversation to deeper, more private topics.

Once or twice Shaggus popped in on them to let them know of his latest victory in the engine room, but most of the time the Woonky left the two humans alone; the required maintenance wasn't going to perform itself! Besides, with his highly developed sense of smell, he knew from the pheromone levels in the air that Mal wanted to mate with the female; from what little he knew of human mating practices, Shaggus preferred to stay well away. Given Mal's prior prowess in the mating arena, Shaggus could only wonder why the two had not

yet gotten the act over and done with. Woonky social and sexual behaviour was so much simpler!

All four of them would return to the dining area for the evening meal. Seepy did not eat, of course, but it was a chance for them all to talk about whatever came to mind. It did not take them long to discover that, with his prodigious memory and his excellent ability to mimic almost any sound he had ever heard, Seepy was a natural story-teller—although his sense of comic timing occasionally left a little to be desired. Many times they would sit for hours as Seepy entertained them with tales of previous owners. He assured them, of course, that he would never tell such tales about his current owners.

Afterwards, Seepy would settle himself into one of the seats in the cockpit to keep watch in case of an emergency, and the other three would retire to their separate sleeping quarters.

The days flew past...

“What am I looking at?” asked Libby. She was peering out the front view port.

Mal moved to stand beside her, his arm pressed warmly against hers. “There,” he said. “See that bright star? The big one, with the other one beside it?”

Libby nodded. “What about it?”

“One of them is not a star. It’s Tibrogar!”

“We’re here already?” said Libby. Her surprise was genuine; she had not been counting the days.

“Allowing for deceleration, we’re perhaps eleven hours out,” said Mal.

Libby turned to look up at him. He was staring forward at the planet and its star. Once or twice over the last three weeks he had floundered in a sea of depression from which she had been unable to lift him. Now,

however, with their goal in sight, he wore a huge grin and he seemed every inch his usual cocky self.

On a whim, she hoisted herself up onto her toes and pressed her lips briefly against his cheek. He turned towards her then, a question in his eyes. He leaned forward. Closing her eyes was easier than facing his unspoken question. She brushed her lips lightly against his, then more firmly. She felt his own lips part beneath hers.

Suddenly she felt the urge to thrust her tongue wildly into his mouth, to crush her body hard against his, to drag him to the deck and tear both their clothes off and grind herself against him in an orgy of unbridled passion. The urge was almost irresistible.

Almost.

Instead she lowered her heels slowly to the deck, drawing away from his kiss. She opened her eyes again, and stared into his. He was so close, so damned gorgeous, that it took every last ounce of willpower she could summon to turn away from him and stare back out the view port. She sensed his confusion, and she wanted to hold him and console him.

Instead she clasped her fingers lightly around his.

"It's beautiful," she said softly, once she was sure she could keep her voice steady. Even in the last five minutes, the distant planet seemed to have grown larger.

"It certainly is," agreed Mal. He was still gazing down at her. "It certainly is."

The planet Tibrogar loomed hugely to one side of the *Serendipity Sparrow's* view port. It was a gas giant, its atmosphere a swirling green colour, laced with vast eddies of blue and orange. The gas mines were giant orbital cities, floating domed discs perched atop large

cylindrical shafts which plummeted down, down, down into the clouds below where the raw materials were siphoned from the atmosphere and pumped back up to be refined.

All four of the *Sparrow*'s complement were in the cockpit, watching as the planet rolled slowly past their starboard wing. After the monotony of deep space, the view was a welcome change. The ship was on the final approach to Gas Mine Epsilon. The locals called it "Cloud City"—but this was true of all but one of the seventeen Tibrogargan Gas Mines. (The exception had been christened "Titan Uranus" by an administrator who had wanted to pay homage to humanity's first gas mine, in the old Sol system. Barely a week after the name change, the administrator had been thrown over the edge of the city by a mob of angry citizens, and he had become a permanent part of the gas giant; however, the name had stuck.) Three light fighters flew in formation around the *Sparrow*, guiding her to the designated landing pad.

A laser blast rocked the ship.

"Hey," said Mal Single urgently into the comm, "what are you doing?"

"You will not deviate from the specified flight path," came the reply. "You will follow us to landing pad sixty-eight. Failure to obey will result in your destruction."

"What the hells?" muttered Mal. He keyed the comm. "We *are* obeying," he said. He guided the *Sparrow* past the many cylindrical towers which formed the skyline of the city.

"Well, see you continue to do so!"

Shaggus snarled angrily: *They seem very touchy about something!*

"It's going to be okay," said Mal. He did not sound as confident as his words suggested.

“I wonder why they don’t want us to stray?” mused Libby. “There must be something here which they don’t want us to see. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Lardo is a businessman,” said Mal, “and all businessmen have secrets. After a while, protecting those secrets takes priority over everything else; even protecting them from people who aren’t interested.”

“Maybe,” said Libby. “Are you sure you trust him?”

“With a name like Lardo Carntrustim?” asked Mal. “He always used to say that the only thing about him you could trust was his name. But he has no love for the Imperium, I can tell you that much. He’ll repair our hyperdrive for us. He’ll do it for the sake of our friendship—or he’ll do it for cold hard cash. Either way...”

“It’s not like we have any choice,” Labia finished for him.

This was not the first time they had discussed variations on this theme, and no matter what else they decided, it always came back to the simple truth that they had nowhere else to go.

“There’s pad sixty-eight,” said Mal, pointing. He pushed forward on a lever, taking the *Sparrow* down towards the circular pad. The ship touched down gently, the pneumatic landing gear absorbing any slight shock, and Mal cut the power to the engines. The fighter escort roared past overhead, then disappeared behind a building.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s go meet our friend.”

Just watch your back, snarled Shaggs.

“Always,” said Mal. “Come on. You too, Seepy; we could *all* do with some time away from the ship, I think.”

“Oh my, yes,” said Seepy Weepy. He stood and followed the two humans and the Woonky through the cargo bay of the *Serendipity Sparrow* and down the ramp.

They stood together as the ramp hissed quietly closed behind them. Mal wore his habitual brown outfit, and his long coat flapped in the strong wind which whistled across the landing pad. Beside him, Libby once more wore her padded white pants and fur-trimmed jacket. Shaggus wore a coarse cotton tunic beneath his thick, brown leather vest. Seepy wore nothing, of course; his metallic skin gleamed redly in the light of the setting sun, and reflected the glorious orange hues of the clouds which drifted serenely around the floating city. Apart from the four of them, the pad was deserted. A long walkway stretched from the pad itself to a door leading into the interior of the city.

“There’s nobody here,” said Seepy. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“I’m sure Lardo is very busy. He probably can’t take time off to meet every old friend who drops in unexpectedly after twenty years.”

“Yeah,” said Libby. “I’m sure that’s it.”

“I guess we should just go on in,” said Mal. He began heading across the walkway. Libby and Shaggus followed him, and Seepy Weepy scurried to catch up.

Suddenly the door they were heading for hissed open, and several armed guards ran out towards them, weapons drawn. Mal stopped, and rested his hand lightly on the butt of his own laser pistol. Through the door waddled a huge man, as wide around the waist as he was tall—and he wasn’t a short man. A crimson cloak fluttered around him as he moved. He approached rapidly, finally lumbering to a stop just inches away from Mal.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here after what you pulled,” he said.

“Well, hey,” said Mal, “I always figured we both made plenty on that deal.” Mal cautiously backed up a step.

The big man suddenly lunged at Mal—and hugged him fiercely. “Great to see you again, you crazy old pirate,” he said, laughing.

“Hey, Lardo,” squeaked Mal as he disappeared into the man’s huge grip. After a few seconds, he began to flap his arms in the air. “Can’t ... breathe!” he struggled to say.

“Whoops, sorry,” said Lardo, releasing him.

“Same old Lardo,” wheezed Mal. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Well, a little greyer, perhaps,” said Lardo. “But you, you haven’t aged a day. What’s your secret?”

“Clean living,” said Mal, “and a clear conscience.”

“Yeah, right,” scoffed Lardo. “But I see you have a new crew? And such a lovely crew at that.” For a man of his size, Lardo was surprisingly graceful. He stepped easily past Mal—barely noticing that the other man was swept aside by his huge bulk—and took one of Libby’s hands in his own. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her daintily. “And who are you, my sweet?” he asked.

“Alright, you big smoothy, that’s enough,” said Mal, quickly scrambling back to his feet and inserting himself between the Princess and Lardo. “This is Libby.”

“*Enchanté*,” said Lardo with a charming smile. “Truly, Libby, you are an angel, and belong with us here among the clouds.”

“Thank you,” said Libby, returning his smile.

“And I’m sure you remember my co-pilot,” said Mal, indicating the towering Woonky.

Lardo nodded up at Shaggus. "Hello," he said. He frowned slightly. "I never forget a face; have we met before?"

Always the joker, grunted the eight foot tall furry green Woonky.

Lardo grinned. "Oh Shaggus, it's you. Hardly recognised you! What are you still hanging around with this pirate for?"

Shaggus whuffled a reply which was far too obscene to translate, and shook his arms above his head.

"True," said Lardo. "True." Finally he relinquished Libby's hand.

"And I," said Seepy, stepping forward excitedly, "am Seepy Weepy, human cyborg relations, at your..."

Ignoring the 'bot, Lardo turned away. "So Mal," he said, wrapping his arm around the other man's shoulders and half-dragging him towards the door, "what have you done to my ship?"

"Your ship?" said Mal. "Hey, I brought her from you fair and square."

"Well," said Seepy as the two men walked away. "How rude!"

"He seems very friendly," said Libby thoughtfully. "Shaggus, keep your eye on him, okay?"

Shaggus grunted agreement.

Chapter 15

The Doctor's Daughter

The turbolift doors opened with a noise which was half hiss, half squeak, and Barth Vapour wheeled his chair out onto the bridge. Cavity Brusher followed him, and the doors hiss-squeaked closed behind them.

The bridge of the *USSS Ender's Prize* was calm. The red lighting and the low whoop of the red alert klaxon added a certain tense air to the room, but there was no panic evident in the crew; they sat or stood at their various stations spaced around the circular room, in orbit around the lone Captain's chair in the centre.

All eyes were on the Captain, who had obviously arrived only moments before Vapour and his escort. He was standing in front of his chair. He tugged at his tunic, and sat down. In the two chairs to either side of him sat Billy-Bob Piker and Dee Dee McTroy.

"Would somebody silence that alarm, please?" said the Captain.

After a moment, the alarm fell silent, and the standard bridge noises—various beeps and blips and trills—reasserted themselves.

"Thank you," said the Captain. "Now, what is our status, Mister Piker?"

"Sir, a Mowglian Battlebird is claiming that we have violated the *Tract of Tranquillity*. They fired upon us

immediately, and are now demanding our unconditional surrender.”

“I see,” said the Captain. “Lieutenant Chowder, you were in command when this happened. How did you respond?”

A young woman, obviously Lieutenant Chowder, turned from her seat at one of the fore consoles. “I attempted to point out that we are nowhere near the *Tract of Tranquillity*, sir,” she said. “When they fired again, I requested that they wait and speak with you. They gave us five minutes, which is...” She consulted her terminal. “Almost up, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” said the Captain. “Well done.”

Vapour realised he had been sitting up in anticipation, and he slumped back in his chair. Had he been in charge, he would have had the young woman summarily executed for her gross incompetence. Of course, whether she could have done any differently under the circumstances was irrelevant; gross incompetence was everywhere, and the occasional execution was necessary to keep everybody else in line.

“Then I contacted you, and...” she paused.

“And, Lieutenant?”

“And Ms Brusher,” said the Lieutenant.

Vapour frowned slightly. Wasn’t Brusher standing beside him?

“Very good, Lieutenant,” said the Captain.

“Sir,” said the pale-skinned Info, “we are being paged.”

“On screen,” said Captain Pilchard.

The large view-screen at the front of the bridge shimmered briefly with static, then resolved into the image of a young man with a severe haircut, and

eyebrows which angled upwards rather than curving to follow the delicate line of his eye-sockets. His forehead was subtly ridged—nowhere near as severely as Bork's bony crest—and his ears were pointed.

"Surrender, Foundation ship," the man said, "and the lives of your crew will be spared."

"I am Captain Jon-Lurk Pilchard," said the Captain, "of the *USSS Ender's Prize*. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"Ah, Captain," said the other man, "are you ready to surrender your ship? Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded."

"To whom am I speaking please?" the Captain persisted.

"My identity is unimportant," said the other man. "You are in violation of the *Tract of Tranquillity* Treaty, and must surrender your vessel immediately."

"Sir," Info said in a low voice, "two more Mowglian Battlebirds are decloaking, one to port, one to starboard."

"According to the Mowglian Naval Charter, section seventy-three, sub-section five, paragraph sixteen," said the Captain, "all vessels operating on behalf of the Mowglian Triumvirate, in defence of the *Tract of Tranquillity*, must identify themselves upon reasonable request."

"Is that so, Captain?" said the other man.

"It is indeed," said the Captain. "Given that we are three point two light years from the *Tract*, and that you refuse to identify yourself, I am forced to conclude that you are merely Mowglian pirates preying upon innocent shipping lanes, and that you have no official jurisdiction here."

"In that case," said the Mowglian pirate, "conclude *this*." The screen went blank.

“All three ships have fired photogenic torpedoes, Captain,” said Info calmly.

The Captain glanced expectantly at Vapour.

What the hell am I supposed to do? thought Vapour. Then he realised that Pilchard was looking past him, towards the closed turbolift doors.

“Five seconds to impact, Captain,” said Info. “Three seconds, two, one...”

The ship shuddered under three separate, almost simultaneous explosions.

“Damage report?” asked the Captain. He was still calm.

“Shields are down to fifty-three percent,” said Info. “Sensors indicate sub-molecular stress planes forming in the hull at each of the points of impact. One minor injury reported: crewman Smithers fell out of his bunk and sprained a finger.”

The entire bridge crew chuckled with amusement at this news; Vapour blinked in disbelief. What in all the hells was going on here?

“Very well,” said the Captain. “All reverse, one third impulse.”

“Aye sir,” said another member of the crew.

“Sir,” said Info, “another two Mowglian Battlebirds decloaking, directly astern.”

“Hmm,” said the Captain pensively. “It seems they have us boxed in.”

Billy-Bob Piker leaned towards his Captain from the next seat. “Sir, it seems from their chosen locations, that they have boxed us in—but only in two dimensions. Is it possible that they are not accustomed to three-dimensional space travel?”

“You mean...?” said the Captain.

“Yes,” said Piker. “I mean that if we go straight up, we may yet elude them.”

“Personally, I was never convinced that anyone would fall for that trick when they taught Captain Quirk’s adventures in the Academy—but it’s worth a try, Number One.” The Captain stood up, and tugged his tunic down.

Wouldn’t it be easier to get a size that fits properly? wondered Vapour.

“Ensign,” said Pilchard to the young officer manning the helm. “Set a new course, straight up. One third impulse.”

“Aye sir,” said the ensign again. “And may I just add, sir,” he said as he tapped the controls, “that this is a brilliant manoeuvre.”

“Sir,” said Info, with just a hint of concern now appearing in his calm, inflectionless voice, “another four, five, uh, seven Battlebirds have decloaked around us. They have us boxed in, in at least six different dimensions.”

“Oh well, Number One,” said the Captain calmly, “it was a useful thought at the time.”

“Worth trying again sometime,” agreed Piker wistfully.

“Sir,” said Info, “four of the newcomers have also fired at us. Photogenic torpedoes closing.”

“Brace for impact,” said the Captain. Again, to Vapour’s bemusement, the Captain glanced to the door of the turbolift.

The ship shuddered again, more fiercely than ever before.

“Damage?” asked the Captain.

Info picked himself up off the floor and returned to his seat. “Shields down to two percent, Captain. We have two hull breaches; decks six and fifteen have been sealed.

No casualties reported, although there are several more minor injuries. And, uh, Smithers has sprained another finger.”

Everyone—except the thoroughly confused Vapour—chuckled again. This time, though, the laughter sounded a little forced.

“Captain, another direct hit will destroy our shields, and the *Ender’s Prize*,” said Info. He sounded tense now.

“Acknowledged,” said the Captain, still with that same infuriating air of calm. “Any ideas, Number One?”

“There is one idea I’d love to try sometime, if we had a convenient flammable nebula to hide in,” said Piker. “Failing that, though, I’m all out of ideas.”

“McTroy?” asked the Captain.

Dee Dee shrugged, a catlike move which lifted her bust and briefly incapacitated every male in the room. “I am sensing triumph, Captain, and arrogance. They think they have won. It may make them careless.”

“The pirate is paging us again, Captain,” said Info.

Captain Pilchard blinked, tore his eyes away from Dee Dee’s cleavage, and turned to face the view screen. “Put him on,” he said.

“Surrender or die, Captain Pilchard,” said the pirate, without wasting any time on pleasantries. “We can plunder your ship, or we can pick through your debris for anything of value. Either way works, for us.”

“What of my crew?” asked Pilchard. “Can you guarantee their safe return to a Foundation planet?”

“I can guarantee them death in deep space if you do *not* surrender,” said the pirate.

Dee Dee leaned closer to the Captain. “He does not appear to be bluffing, Captain,” she whispered.

Piker also leaned closer. He said nothing; as far as Vapour could tell, his only purpose had been to stare down McTroy's gaping top.

We're going to die here, thought Vapour, and nobody seems the least bit concerned.

"Sorry," said the Captain to the Mowglian pirate. "Not good enough. I have a better deal for you: surrender now, and we won't have to destroy your ships."

The Mowglian pirate laughed. It was not a friendly sound. "Oh Captain," he said at last, "you have been most amusing prey. Even if we find nothing of value in your debris, the story itself should be worth a few drinks! Goodbye, Captain."

The screen went blank again.

"Captain," said Info. "All Mowglian ships have fired. That is a total of twelve photogenic torpedoes inbound. What are your orders?"

"Um," said the Captain. He glanced again at the turbolift doors; they remained closed.

Vapour saw the first hint of worry furrow the Captain's brow.

"Ten seconds to impact, Captain," said Info helpfully.

"Lieutenant," said the Captain, with just the slightest hint of an impatient edge in his voice, "are you sure you..."

The turbolift doors hiss-squeaked open behind Vapour and a young woman—barely more than a girl—in civilian clothing ran onto the bridge.

"Hello Captain," she said. "Sorry I'm late, but I got..."

"Five seconds to impact," said Info.

"Oh yes," said the girl. She ran down onto the floor of the bridge, and stood beside Info's console.

"Excuse me, Info," she said, smiling prettily at him as her fingers danced across the controls. Suddenly the front

view screen began to flicker rapidly, showing image after image of small objects—presumably the incoming torpedoes—moving through space towards the camera’s location.

“That should give us a few seconds,” said the girl. She ran across to the other console.

“That’s amazing,” said Info. “The missiles have slowed down. Impact now in, uh, ten seconds.”

The girl smiled at the Ensign on the helm console. “Just a quick change here,” she said, her fingers flying. The ship lurched briefly one way, then the other.

“We appear to have slipped back twenty seconds through some sort of localised temporal vortex,” said Info. He spoke in hushed, awed tones as though in the presence of a god. Or, in this instance, a goddess. “Impact in, uh, I estimate thirty seconds, but the ships have not actually fired yet.”

The girl had now run back up to the tactical console.

“Excuse me, Bork,” she said. “I’ll need a few seconds to recalibrate these phasers.” Her fingers danced as though they had lives of their own. “Now, targeting,” she said.

Her face was half-turned away from Vapour as she concentrated on the console in front of her, but he could see, reflected in the glass, that the tip of her tongue was protruding slightly from one side of her mouth.

“There we go,” she said. “That ought to do it. Three, two, one, and *fire*.” She hit the appropriate button. There was a bright flash from the view screen, and then it went dark, showing only the empty blackness of space and the twinkling of stars.

“Wow,” said Info. “That was just *so* cool!”

“I’m glad you could join us, Ms Brusher,” said the Captain. “You cut it a little finer than usual.”

“I know, Captain. I’m sorry.” She moved down to stand beside the Captain’s chair. He gazed up at her as though besotted.

“No harm done,” he said at last. He blinked as though recovering his wits. “Info,” he said, “what is the status of the pirates?”

Info stared stupidly at the Captain and the young girl for a few seconds. “Huh?” he said at last. “Oh, the pirates. They are, uh...”

“You *will* need to look at your console, Info,” the Captain reminded him.

The rest of the bridge crew laughed at Info’s momentary look of confusion.

“Oh yes,” he said. “The pirates. They are, uh, all pirate ships have been destroyed, Captain.”

“Excellent work, Ms Brusher,” said the Captain.

“You truly are a credit to this crew,” said Dee Dee. “Or you will be once you actually become a member.”

The girl blushed prettily, and smiled. “It was nothing, Dee Dee, really.”

“That’s my girl,” whispered Doctor Brusher proudly in Vapour’s ear.

Piker leaned closer, and put one hand on the girl’s hip. “I’d like to give you a member,” he said. He blinked. “Uh, make you, that is. Make you a member. Of this crew.”

She smiled at him too, and lightly touched his hand. “Perhaps one day,” she promised.

“But how did you do it?” asked the Captain.

“It really was nothing, Captain. Destroying the pirate ships was simple. All I needed to do was take the data that our sensors recorded as each of them fired their photogenic torpedoes, feed it back into the targeting computer *before* they were fired, and program our phaser

banks to target each torpedo just before it began phasing through their shields. This caused their shields to solidify in the path of the torpedoes, which detonated on impact. The resulting explosions were contained by their shields, and inflicted massive damage upon their own ships, thus destroying them.”

She shrugged. “Like I said; simple!”

Several members of the bridge crew began a ragged round of applause. She curtsied.

“Very impressive,” said the Captain. “If I had a son, I’d want him to be just like you.”

Doctor Brusher’s daughter smiled some more. She seemed to be very practiced at smiling. Vapour wondered whether a frown had ever dared to darken that pretty face.

“But,” said Info, “I’m confused. How did you slow down the torpedoes?”

“That was a little trick I thought of while reading the latest *Starship Weapons Monthly*,” she said. “Because of their method of propulsion, photogenic torpedoes are inherently vulnerable to external imaging devices. It’s complex, and involves conflicting reversals of the photon/tachyon interface field, but essentially I programmed the view screen to display each of the torpedoes in turn, and they each stopped, in turn, to have their photograph taken.”

“That’s incredible,” said Info. “But doesn’t that mean that our own photogenic torpedoes are similarly vulnerable?”

“Well, yes, it does,” said the girl. “And that is one of the reasons I was a little late getting here.” She turned back to the Captain. “I was down in Engineering when the red alert sounded, attempting to explain the principle—and my suggested fix for our torpedoes—to the staff there. Of course, it was a little beyond some of

them, so I felt it worth waiting an extra couple of minutes for Gordo to arrive.”

“Well done,” said the Captain.

“Excuse me, Miss Brusher,” said the Ensign on the helm console.

“That’s *Ms* Brusher,” said the girl, her eyes flaring briefly.

“I’m sorry, *Ms* Brusher,” said the Ensign, cringing. “Please forgive me.”

“Of course, sweetie,” she said, all hostility apparently forgotten as quickly as it had flared up. “Do please go on.”

“Well, it’s just, I was wondering, how did you...?”

“The temporal vortex,” she asked. She giggled. “That was the easiest part of all, although I wasn’t sure if it would work—in which case, I might have had to try plan ‘B’.” She sighed.

“But how...?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “It’s something I found in a fascinating old documentary—dating, I believe, from the late twentieth century. Hard to believe that they had such amazing technology back then. All about aliens, and teleportation, and...”

The girl gushed. In fact, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say she enthused. Effusively, at that.

“But,” the Ensign tried again, “how did it work?”

“Oh, right,” said the girl. She blushed. “Sorry, I do get so excited about these things, don’t I? Silly of me, I know. It’s actually quite simple. They call it the *Time Warp*.”

“Yes?” asked the Ensign.

“It’s just a jump to the left,” she said, “and then a step to the right.”

"I see," said the Ensign, although he sounded a little discombobulated by her explanation. "That's nothing short of astounding!"

"Of course, I had to modify it slightly to suit a whole ship, but if you replay your flight logs you'll get the idea."

"Thank you, Ms Brusher," he said sheepishly.

"If you like," she said to the young Ensign, "I'd be happy to stay back with you one evening and teach you a few moves."

The Ensign's jaw fell open, and she giggled at his response. She turned, looking around the bridge, and her gaze fell upon Vapour.

"Oh my," she said. "Captain, we have a visitor. Here I am showing off and wasting time, and I haven't even been introduced." She took a step forward. "Please do forgive my rudeness, sir," she said to Vapour.

Under the full glare of her dazzling smile, Vapour suddenly felt like a trapped animal, unable to move. Yet he felt no fear, only a wild, trembling exultation. His heart fluttered in his chest in a way he had not felt in far too long. The rest of the bridge seemed to disappear, fading away, leaving nothing in his universe but the girl and her beautiful smile.

She *was* beautiful, he realised; her eyes were pale and limpid, with a hint of violet glimmering in the iris. Her hair was long and flowing, and highlights of russet and rubellite tourmaline shimmered through its fiery auburn strands as she tossed her head. Her teeth were perfect; dazzlingly bright, impossibly straight and even. Only one minor flaw marred her perfect face, and even that—a tiny scar above one eye, disappearing into her eyebrow—served only to enhance the effect of her beauty.

Then she blinked, and cast her eyes shyly downwards, and the hypnotic effect seeped away. No longer under its influence, Vapour could see that she was, in truth, nothing special—although he still felt a twinge of guilt run through him as he dared to express the thought to himself. Her hair was brown, her eyes were the same blue as her mother's—attractive, perhaps, but not out of the ordinary—and her teeth were, well, a little crooked. Surprisingly, he noted, there was no scar above her eye.

Then she met his gaze again, and even despite being prepared for it this time, he found himself pinned helplessly to his chair, unable to think clearly, unable to do much of anything but gape at her tragically flawed beauty, and admire her quiet determination to always do the right thing.

“Hello,” she said.

“This is Mannequin Splitwhisker,” said Cavity Brusher, although Vapour was barely aware of her voice. “And this,” continued the Doctor, “is my daughter, Fanny.”

“Although,” said Fanny Brusher, “I prefer to use my middle name, Marisu.”

“Blah,” said Vapour stupidly. “Blah blebble bler.” He blinked, and tried again. “Very pleased to meet you, my dear Marisu,” he said.

She giggled, and he felt his heart soar with delight, despite himself.

“It was nice to meet you too,” she said. “And now, if you will excuse me, Mannequin. Captain. Mother. I have homework to do.”

“Of course,” said the Captain, “please do come back anytime. We love having you on the bridge.”

“I'd love to have you on the bridge too,” said Piker with a smile.

“Be good,” said Marisu’s mother, as mothers are wont to do.

“Oh, mummy,” simpered Fanny Marisu Brusher, “I’m always good.”

“Yes, you are,” agreed Cavity proudly. “Yes you are!”

“Love you, mummy,” said the girl. Then the turbolift door hiss-squeaked open, and she was gone from the bridge.

Vapour blinked, waiting for the feeling of love and admiration to fade. It took longer than it had the first time. Finally, he felt clear-headed enough to examine the events of the last few minutes.

What the fuck was that? he thought.

Once safely back in his sickbay bed—he had claimed exhaustion, although in truth, he had never felt more awake—Barth Vapour meditated upon the enigma that was Fanny Brusher. ‘Marisu’, she called herself. That was the clue that led Vapour to the enlightenment he sought.

In his training as a Stiff Lord, Vapour had been immersed in many of the finer details which knit together to form the totality of the Array, the virtual reality in which they all lived. As a master of the Hard side of the Source, he knew many things which the Jubbly, the Soft-siders, did not.

One detail, though, of which both sides were aware, was that this particular version of the Array was based upon certain forms of popular entertainment taken from humanity’s prime, their peak, their golden age. Of course, there was more than one simulation running—a fact Vapour had learned first-hand when he had woken up *here*—and each simulation was loosely based upon a

script. Not a programming script, but an actual story which defined the characters, the places, the events.

Some scripts, of course, were better than others. All had their flaws, their inconsistencies, and as such, the machines had long since given up attempting to enforce an exact adherence to the scripts. Occasionally they would correct a particular plot point which was necessary for the furtherance of the story—when such a change occurred, those nearby often experienced some form of *deja vu*. If he followed that particular thought too deeply, Vapour found himself wondering exactly how his own cross-over had been permitted to occur, and such doubts left him feeling unsettled.

Characters, though. Heroes, sidekicks, cannon fodder, villains—Vapour had no illusions about his own standing on that scale. However, some characters were just poorly written extensions of their own author's wants and needs. Such characters could be dangerous, in that they completely overrode any attempt at consistency or fairness in the stories in which they appeared. Everybody loved them, and trusted them, and needed them—Vapour remembered his own feelings of helplessness in the girl's presence, and shuddered.

Fanny Brusher, it seemed, was such a character; a singular singularity around whom all else revolved. Vapour had heard the rumours, but until now he had never encountered one in the virtual flesh.

Vapour scowled. She would be a danger to his own plans, he realised. He already knew that this weak, insipid crew were worthless to him. He needed to get back to his own universe, to hunt down his son and turn him to the Hard Side so that they could overthrow the Emperor and turn the running of the galaxy into a family business. As it was, he feared that his own absence left things

dangerously unbalanced, liable to spin out of control before he could return to put things right. To do that, he needed to find a ship of his own—or, better yet, take control of this one. It would be easy, he knew; the crew were weak-willed, weak-minded, vulnerable to his Stiff ways.

The one obstacle to his plan was Fanny Marisu Brusher. Anything he attempted which threatened the status quo—or, at least, *her* status quo—was doomed to failure.

There was no doubt in his mind. Marisu must die.

He sat back, and closed his eyes. Staring at the swirling patterns of red and black—blood and death—which played across the insides of his eyelids, Vapour wondered where she got her power.

Obviously, it must be Source-based. The Source was, after all, the ultimate, well, *source* of all power in the Array. The image she projected was very strong, and very specific. It must be her own residual self-image. The troubled yet carefree beauty, the intelligence, the instant ability to win people's hearts, this was how she truly saw herself. And her Source ability was so strong that she could imprint her own reality onto everyone, and everything, around her.

Essentially, he realised, whatever she believed became reality.

He wondered idly how many times he could face her reality before falling into it completely, inescapably. Obviously the rest of the crew of the *Ender's Prize* were entirely under her spell, all the time. Or were they? Certainly the Captain seemed to be. And Fanny's mother, Cavity, but that went without saying. What about Piker, though? His comments had been more than a little

skewed, probably quite a way beyond the innocent little thoughts of Fanny herself. Was he a potential ally?

And the Ensign had made a mistake, had upset her briefly. Perhaps he was new to the bridge crew, and had not been exposed to her self-fulfilling delusion before today.

How far did her influence extend?

Suddenly he found himself thinking of the attackers—the Mowglian pirates. Had *they* been real? Or had they simply been part of Marisu's reality, conjured up to give her a convenient foe to utterly defeat with such spectacular timing?

And did the concept of reality make any sense in this virtual setting?

Vapour frowned. "This fucks with your head," he muttered. Deep in thought, he lifted Boadicea into his lap and began to idly stroke her soft, plush fur.

It was like dealing with a conspiracy theory, he realised. Conspiracies were ridiculous at best—until you bought into them. Then, once you believed, everything became connected, no thought was too bizarre to be entirely dismissed. Where did you stop? Was Marisu's influence merely localised, contained within the hull of the *Ender's Prize*? Or did it extend to the space beyond? Or, worse yet, was this entire reality nothing more than her private playground, existing only to make her look good, to feel good about herself.

Had her very presence subverted the reality of an entire universe?

What chance did he stand against her? Any weapon he aimed at her would mysteriously fail to fire, or perhaps even misfire. Any trap he set would miss her. He suspected even flushing her out of an airlock, bound and gagged and naked, would somehow backfire upon him.

Marisu must die, but she led a charmed life. She could not be harmed, she could not die. Unless...

Vapour opened his eyes, and laughed. "Of course," he said. "How obvious..."

Marisu could not die, unless she believed it was for the best. From what he knew of her type, he knew that a tragic, heroic death would likely appeal to her. All he needed now was a suitably threatening foe to challenge her.

"Computer," he said aloud. Ensign Pi had been good enough to teach him how to retrieve information from the ship's library.

The computer beeped softly.

"Tell me everything about the Droid," he said.

Chapter 16

Departure from Daggyboil

Once again, Lurk stood on the bare patch of ground outside Yodel's hut. He stared fixedly at the stick balanced atop the log. He closed his eyes and extended his hand.

"No more carrots," he muttered to himself.

He reached out with his mind, examined the Source, found the stick. Carefully, he imagined wrapping his fingers around it, clutching it, drawing it close to him.

On the log, the stick wobbled.

Lurk slowly curled his fingers, beckoning the stick to come to him.

Slowly, the stick lifted off the log. It floated through the air, and Lurk opened his hand again. It sailed neatly into his waiting fingers, and he clutched it triumphantly.

"Haha!" he shouted, "I did it." He opened his eyes.

Yodel nodded. "Good," he said. "Control, you have learned."

Lurk lifted the stick out before him. He released it with his fingers, and it hovered in the air. Slowly at first, Lurk began to make it turn end over end, faster and faster, until it was a spinning blur.

Suddenly he cried out. As his attention slipped, the stick shot through the air and drove itself into the rotten

old log. Lurk collapsed to his knees and gripped his head in his hands.

“Mal,” he whispered. “Libby.”

Yodel looked on, concerned. Closing his eyes, he reached out and gently shielded the youth from the ripples in the Source which were causing him so much pain.

Lurk sagged. “They’re in trouble,” he said. “Mal and Libby.” He frowned. “She’s on the *Sparrow*? I thought she’d gone with her transport?” A look of confusion crossed his face, but he blinked it away. “They’re in a city in the clouds. They’re in pain. I must go to them.”

“The future it is that you see,” said Yodel. “Always in motion, the future is. Happen this may, or not.”

“Will they die?”

Yodel shrugged. “Everybody dies,” he said simply.

“And Jubbly masters always speak in riddles,” said Lurk, “but you know what I’m asking. Will they die?”

Yodel sighed. Closing his eyes again, he stretched out his awareness, studying the patterns in the Source. “Difficult to see,” he said at last. “Bound to your friends, you are. Muddy the waters, your intentions do.” He opened his eyes and looked up at his young Patabum apprentice. “Die now, however, I do not think they will.”

“Nonetheless, I must go,” said Lurk. “If I can stop them from suffering, I have to go.”

“Beware, young Splitwhisker,” said Yodel. “If you go, help them you might. But unready you will be. Incomplete your training is. If to the Hard Side the Imperator lures you, undo everything they are fighting for you will.”

“I shall not turn to the Hard Side,” said Lurk. “Besides, I am not going to face the Imperator. Not yet.”

And Vapour is ... elsewhere. All I'm doing is getting in, freeing my friends, and getting out."

Yodel shifted his weight and leaned on his stick more heavily. "A trap this is," he said at last. "Wants you, the Emperor does. Made to suffer, your friends are, to lure you."

"And that is why I must go," said Lurk.

Yodel sighed. "Your father's stubbornness you have in you! A bad feeling I have about this. But do what you must, you must."

"Er, yeah," said Lurk. "Trust me. I shall return to complete my training."

"Very well," said Yodel. "Keep you here I cannot."

Lurk had to bend double to enter the front door of Yodel's hut. He rummaged through his small pile of belongings until he found his communicator.

"Arty," he said into it, "are you there?"

There was a long pause, and then Arty's beeping response came from the small device.

"Everything okay up there?"

One beep. *Yes*.

"Can you home in on the coordinates of my signal, Arty?"

One beep. *Yes*.

"Okay. I want you to land the ship as near to my location as possible. There is a large dry clearing just a short distance north of here. It's time for us to leave."

Arty beeped and whistled excitedly.

"Talk to you when you get here," said Lurk. He shut the comm off, then shoved it into his bag. Hastily he grabbed his few scattered belongings and threw them in on top of the comm.

Yodel was waiting for him when he got outside. Together, in silence, they walked through the tangled scrub towards the clearing.

Lurk heard the whine of the Cross-wing's engines as Arty brought it in to land. By the time they pushed aside the final clump of vegetation, the Cross-wing was waiting for them.

Lurk turned to the diminutive Jubbly master.

"Thank you, Master Yodel, for everything you have taught me. I won't let you down."

"Trust in the Source," said Yodel. "Save you, it can."

"I will, Master Yodel. And I promise I shall return." Lurk clambered up into the cockpit of his fighter. He ran a quick diagnostic to confirm that all systems were functioning properly, then flicked a few switches, starting the main engines.

He waved to Yodel. The Jubbly Master nodded gravely in return. "Remember your lessons, young Splitwhisker," he said."

"I will, Master Yodel!" Lurk hit the switch to close the cockpit canopy.

"Ready, Arty?" he asked.

Arty beeped in the affirmative.

Lurk pulled back on the stick, and the Cross-wing lifted slowly into the air. Once they were clear of the trees, Lurk angled skyward and accelerated away from Daggyboil.

Yodel stood watching the lights of Lurk's ship disappear into the cloud cover. He sighed.

"There goes our last hope," he said.

No, said a voice. The shimmering, ghostly figure of Bent K'nobby stepped into view. *There is another.*

“Labia?” said Yodel. “Perhaps. I do not think she has the power or the ability that her brother has. Let us hope it does not come to that.”

Bent sat down on a fallen log. *I have a question, Master Yodel. I never dared to ask while I was alive, but now...*

“A question, young K’nobby?” said Yodel. “Then ask it you must.”

Bent stared at his former master. *What’s with the convoluted speech patterns?* he asked at last. *Sometimes you slip out of them.*

Yodel shrugged, and chuckled. “You caught me. What can I say? It impresses the punters...”

In the middle of the ramshackle old settlement, an old man stood in the centre of the street, watching the lights of the ship lifting through the cloud cover until they finally were lost from view. He looked down at the rickety, rusty old buildings which surrounded him, then raised his eyes once more to the skies. There was no sign that the ship was going to come back down.

After a long moment, he sighed.

“Figures,” he said.

Chapter 17

As Far As You Can Throw Him

“What’s that tune you’re whistling?” asked Libby with a frown.

“What tune?” said Mal. He turned from the spellbinding view over the city, and looked over to where Libby sat on one of the plush couches.

“That tune. You know: *dun da dun daaa, dun da daa...*”

He raised one eyebrow. “Sorry, I didn’t realise I was whistling anything.”

“But it’s stuck in my head now,” she complained. “And the only thing worse than having a tune stuck in your head is having an *unidentified* tune stuck in your head!”

“Oh, come on,” he said, “I’m sure there are plenty of things that are much worse than that.”

“Well, perhaps,” she said. “But that’s not the point.”

Mal shrugged. “I’m sorry, but I really wasn’t aware I was whistling. Must have been some old ditty from a previous life, or something.”

Libby stood up and stretched. After a moment, she yawned. She walked to stand beside Mal, and looked out the broad window over the city. The sun was setting, and the sky blazed with orange light which reflected from the many domes and towers and...

She studied one building, and frowned. *Domes, and towers, and that.*

“What do you make of that?” she asked, pointing out the building.

“Make of what?”

“That building over there, almost behind the cluster of towers.”

Mal looked, and shrugged. “How would I know?” he asked. “Do I look like an archaeologist to you?”

Libby turned and stared at him. “What does archaeology have to do with anything?” she asked him.

Mal frowned. “Uh, architect, then. Do I look like an architect to you?”

She shook her head silently.

“Hey, what?” he said. “Archaeologist, architect; I wouldn’t know an archetype from an architrave.”

Libby blinked. “I really don’t know how to respond to that,” she said.

“Either way,” he continued, “I think I’ve made my point that I don’t know much about the subject matter.”

“True,” she said. “It’s just...”

“What?” Mal turned to look at her.

“It’s just that building. It looks like something I should recognise, something I’ve seen recently, but from an odd angle.”

Mal glanced out the window. “Just looks like one more orange building to me,” he said.

“Well...” began Libby.

The door to the room hissed open, and both of them turned to see Lardo lumbering towards them.

“Hello, my dear,” said the big man to Libby. “Can I invite you to a sumptuous meal, dinner at the top of the world?”

Shaggus grunted suspiciously.

“Oh,” said Lardo, “you’re all welcome, of course.” He swept his hand magnanimously around the room to include them all.

“Why thank you, sir,” said Seepy Weepy loudly. “I, of course, do not eat, but I would be very excited to take a look at your place settings. It is a little speciality of mine. Are you using the *DeGrabbiner* layout? Or perhaps the...”

“Sure, we’ll come,” said Mal loudly, interrupting the talkative ‘bot.

Yeah, bring on the food, whuffled Shaggus.

Lardo moved in beside Libby and, with his hand planted in the small of her back, he guided her towards the door. Mal followed closely, and Shaggus ambled along behind him.

Seepy stood in the empty room for a few seconds.

“Well, how rude,” he muttered at last. Since he had fallen in with Mal Single, that was rapidly becoming his new catchphrase. He tilted his metallic head as he rapidly replayed his conversations for the last couple of months through his memory banks. “That makes a total of seven hundred and five unfinished sentences,” he said to the empty room. “That is beyond a joke. They better watch out. As the old saying goes, *beware the wrath of a patient ‘bot!* I have my limits, you know!”

Needless to say, the empty room did not deign to reply. “And they haven’t even noticed I’m not following,” he muttered. “How typical.”

Seepy Weepy strode stiffly over to the door, and it hissed open. He stepped out into the hallway, and looked around. “I say,” he called, “wait for me!”

There was nobody in sight. The hallway was empty in both directions.

“Typical,” he muttered again. “Well, we’ll just see how they get on *without* me for a while, won’t we?”

Lardo glanced around, puzzled. “Is somebody missing?” he asked with a frown.

Libby looked around and did a quick head-count. “Uh, no,” she said. “I don’t think so.”

“We’re all here,” said Mal.

Lardo frowned. “What about your talkative bot?” he asked.

“He’s right, uh...” said Libby.

“He was right behind us,” said Mal.

Peace at last, whuffled Shaggus.

“I hear ya, pal,” said Mal quietly.

“Oh well,” said Libby, “he’ll be fine. I’m sure he’ll show up when we’re getting ready to leave.”

“Yeah,” said Mal. “He’s good at that. Last time we got separated, we spent hours being chased around this huge station by Imperial Troopers, got dunked in a sewage pit, barely escaped with our lives, and when we finally get back to the ship, there’s Seepy, casually wandering up the ramp.”

“At least that won’t happen again this time,” said Libby.

“No,” agreed Lardo. “It won’t. I mean, we don’t even have a sewage pit as such. Uh, this way please.”

He hurried onwards, propelling Libby forward.

Mal stared after him. “What do you mean, ‘no sewage pit’?” he said. “What about the rest of it?”

Lardo was opening quite a lead. Mal and Shaggus trotted after him. “Now wait just a minute, Lardo,” said Mal.

“In here,” said the big man. He ducked down a short side passage which ended in a doorway. “There’s somebody you have to meet.”

The door hissed open, and Lardo pushed Libby into the room and ran through the doorway himself. Libby stumbled, and barely caught herself against the table. “What the hell?” she muttered angrily.

Mal and Shaggus followed them into the room, and stopped short.

“Oh shit,” said Mal.

Standing at the head of the table, facing the door, was a short man with a large nose and big, bushy eyebrows. He looked harmless enough—his features almost made him seem comical—but the severe grey uniform that he wore was more than enough to wipe any possibility of a smile from Mal’s face.

Libby looked up. “Son of a bitch,” she said.

The short man was an Imperial Muff. Tucked under his arm he carried a short swagger stick.

Mal dropped his hand to the butt of his pistol, but fast as he was, the crimson-clad Imperial Shock Trooper waiting beside the doorway was faster. An armoured hand clamped over his before he managed to get his pistol clear of the leather holster, and a deadly blaster barrel pressed none too gently against his right cheekbone.

“Let’s not have any unpleasantness,” said the distorted voice of the Trooper through the speaker box of his helmet.

For just a second, Mal tensed, contemplating his chances. Then, with exaggerated care, he released the butt of his weapon, and a second Trooper slipped it from his holster.

He turned his head slightly, and saw Shaggus standing tensely, gripping his own blaster tightly. The barrel of a weapon was pressed under his chin, and a second was directed at his large stomach.

The walls of the banquet hall were lined with more armoured Troopers, all with their Gemini Mk-III Vaporisers unslung and pointed in the general direction of the small group of Rebels.

“Ease up, big guy,” said Mal calmly. “Now is not the time.”

Shaggus reluctantly relinquished his weapon.

“Smart move,” said the first Trooper.

Mal looked back at Libby. She hadn’t moved, and was still staring at the Muff at the head of the table.

“I’d like you all to join me for dinner,” said the Muff. “We have so much to talk about.”

Mal shot an angry glance at Lardo. The big man was staring at him nervously.

“I’m sorry, Mal old buddy,” said Lardo with a shrug. “They arrived right before you did. I had no choice.”

“Sure,” sneered Mal. “You had no choice but to trade your friends for, what? Thirty pieces of silver?”

“Peace of mind,” said Lardo. “Oh, and they said I could have your ship, too.”

“You little snake,” said Mal. His eyes were cold and hard. Libby heard the anger in his voice and turned towards him. She had never seen him so furious.

“I always thought you’d sell your own grandmother,” said Mal, “but this is crossing the line, even for you!”

“Enough,” said the Muff. “You, sit. You,” and here he pointed at Lardo, “leave. But don’t go too far.”

Libby took a seat at the far end of the table from the Muff. Mal sat on one side of her, and took her hand in his. She was trembling—memories of being interrogated

by Imperial Intelligence, by Barth Vapour, still haunted her dreams. He squeezed her hand lightly, and she squeezed back. Shaggus carefully lowered his huge frame into the chair the other side of her. Only when the two smugglers were safely clear of the doorway did Lardo sidle from the room.

The Muff seated himself, and smiled in what he probably thought was a pleasant, friendly manner. “Now,” he said, gesturing at the various dishes of food which were laid out on the table, “try the Carrandian lobster; it really is quite scrumptious.”

Seepy Weepy wandered around the endless corridors of the huge, labyrinthine city.

He was lost.

That was not entirely true, of course. Within the memory circuits of his mechanical brain he was mapping his progress as he went. He would be able to retrace his steps exactly, and eventually return to the landing pad where the *Serendipity Sparrow* awaited. But without human company, he felt useless, and purposeless, and lost.

There were humans everywhere, of course—this was, after all, a large industrial city; its corridors bustled with humans, ‘bots, and several alien species. But Seepy was—he had to admit, if only to himself—rather fond of *his* humans, even if they did tend to forget his existence at the drop of a hat.

“Perhaps they’re down here,” he said to himself as he turned down a narrow corridor he had not yet explored. The door at the end of the corridor hissed open, and he stepped into a large room which appeared to be some sort of food court. This looked promising; he distinctly remembered a meal being mentioned. Wandering into the

room, he looked in all directions, but could see nobody he recognised.

With his attention everywhere but on where he was actually walking, Seepy Weepy bumped into a table. There was a clatter and a startled curse, and the scrape of a chair being thrust backwards as somebody jumped to their feet. Seepy's first horrified thought was that he had spilled somebody's drink. "I'm terribly sorry," he said loudly. "I'm afraid I was looking for some friends of mine, and was not paying attention." He looked around the table, and an electronic sound which might have passed for a gasp escaped from his voicebox.

"Oh my," he said. "I'm, uh, sorry to intrude, I didn't mean to, uh, no, no, no, please don't get up." He took a step backwards, and raised his arms. "Shock Troopers? Here? Oh no. Please don't shoot!"

Apart from the standing woman, there were four other Troopers seated around the table; another woman and three men. All of them wore their dark grey battle armour, but had removed their face-masking helmets, which lay in a heap in the centre of the table.

The standing Trooper tilted her head quizzically. "Why in Hell's Handbasket would we shoot you?" she asked as she began mopping at the slowly expanding pool of spilled beer before it reached the edge of the table.

"Oh, well, I just, uh," said Seepy eloquently. He had a stray thought and, in his panic, ran with it. "These are not the 'bots you're looking for," he intoned.

"Why would we be looking for a 'bot?" said the Trooper. She dropped a soaked wad of paper into a pile on the table and grabbed another napkin. The other Troopers seated around the table seemed content to watch their comrade mop up the spill and exchange witty banter with the befuddled 'bot. "Oh, sure, we took part in a

massive planet-wide ‘bot hunt a couple of months back—well, *they* did, I missed it—but now we’re just having an off-duty drink!”

“I see, but, because, uh,” said Seepy. “I don’t know, but anyway, I’m not even owned by a Rebel or anything.”

Several of the Troopers laughed at this *non sequitur*. “You’re funny,” said the standing woman. “Why don’t you join us for a while?” She pointed to an empty chair.

“Well, I really can’t, uh, because I have to, uh...”

Seepy Weepy stopped. Here he was, busy running around looking for the people who had deserted him, and was about to pass up on a perfectly good invitation—from a group who, despite being Imperial Shock Troopers, seemed friendly enough—in order to continue that pointless search. *What is wrong with this picture?* he asked himself. *Screw them, they won’t miss me for five minutes. Besides,* he added as a salve to his conscience, *they probably already know the Imperium is here!*

“Actually,” he said, “I’d love to if you don’t mind.”

“Yeah, sure,” said the standing Trooper. She dropped another wad of sopping paper onto the pile. “Take a seat...”

Seepy Weepy sat down at the table of Imperial Shock Troopers.

“Thank you for the invitation,” he said. “I’m sorry if I was a little startled before, sirs, but, well, I’ve never really spoken to an Imperial Trooper before.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said the seated Trooper who had spoken before. He had piercing blue eyes, and a shock of hair which was just beginning to show specks of grey around the edges. “We’re used to it. The armour can be fairly intimidating at first, but underneath it we’re just like you and...” The Trooper frowned. “Well, perhaps not

like *you* specifically,” he continued, “but you know what I’m saying.”

“Oh yes, sir,” said Seepy.

“Nah, you don’t need to call *me* ‘sir’,” said the Trooper. “I’m just a dumb grunt. We *work* for a living!”

“Yes sir, sorry sir,” said Seepy quickly.

The Trooper sighed. “Well, I guess you’ve gotta do what makes you comfortable,” he said. “But my name’s Grunt.” He chuckled. “Grunt by name, grunt by profession! I’m the leader of this sorry squad of soldiers.”

“Oh sir, that is very amusing,” said Seepy. “A pun on your name and your duties. Nicely done! My name is CP...”

Seepy paused. These Troopers seemed friendly enough, but from what the standing one had said, there seemed a good chance that these were some of the very Troopers who had been scouring the city of Moss Iceberg—back on Ratatouille—in search of Arty Farty, and Seepy himself. His correct designation might be known to them.

“... *Fah-Q*”, he continued, selecting letters at random. Barely three microseconds had passed as he’d stopped to think; he doubted any of the humans would even notice the pause.

“CP-*Fah-Q*?” asked one of the others. He was of slight build, and had tousled blond hair. “That *is* an unfortunate designation.”

“Is it?” asked Seepy. He ran it through his mind, studying it from all perspectives. Finally—after another four milliseconds—he realised what the Trooper was talking about. “Well, yes,” he admitted, “I can see how ‘Seepy Farkyew’ could be misconstrued. But most of my friends call me Farkyew.”

There was a burst of laughter at this. “You need to get new friends,” said the blond Trooper. “Glad to meet you, Farkyew. I’m Bent. This handsome chappy beside me is Kumm; the lovely chappette beside *him* is Karrn.” Both Kumm and Karrn gave brief waves. “And the new girl, who gets clean-up duty, is Dorn.”

“Hello, Farkyew,” said Dorn, smiling. She finished wiping down the table, and took her seat.

“Team Daffodil,” Grunt informed him. “Keeping the galaxy safe for truth, justice, and the Coruscate way. One beer at a time. Cheers.” He lifted his glass and took a deep swallow. Not to be outdone, the remainder of Team Daffodil quaffed deeply from their own glasses—all except Dorn, whose spilled glass was now empty. She looked around for a server ‘bot, but there was none to be seen.

“Um,” said Seepy. “Cheers.”

“You know,” said Karrn thoughtfully, “I can’t say I’ve heard of the CP-*Fah* series ‘bots. You look an awful lot like one of the CP-*Oui* series to me.”

“And you would know,” grinned Kumm.

“*Oui!*” said Karrn, grinning back.

“They, uh, we are a new model,” said Seepy. He was starting to find it easy to lie; obviously he had been spending too much time around the wrong sort of people. “Based on the CP-*Oui* chassis, but with slightly upgraded operating system.”

“So can you do anything new that the old *Oui* series couldn’t?” asked Dorn with interest.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” said Seepy. “Personally I’m not sure why they changed the name. The *Fah* series was only a limited run, so not many people have heard of us. I don’t know the details, but I imagine it was a

marketing ploy more than anything. Probably with an annoying jingle.”

“Too true,” said Kumm, shaking his head.

“So,” said Seepy carefully, “can I ask what you guys are doing out here? Or is it top secret? Only we don’t get many...”

“We’re chasing someone, I think,” said Dorn.

“Nah,” said Grunt. “That’s what they always say. All the ‘rah-rah’ talk, all that crap about baiting a trap for—what was that silly name? Slitwhistle? As far as I’m concerned, the Little Fucker can...” He stopped suddenly and looked around guiltily. Talk like that could be dangerous. “Anyway, my guess is it’s just some sort of training exercise. Either way, nobody tells us squat!”

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” said Bent. “We just go where they send us, do what they tell us, and spend the rest of our time drinking!”

“I see,” said Seepy. “It sounds...”

“Dreadfully horribly boring?” asked Karrn.

“Well, yes, a little,” agreed Seepy. “Perhaps. But on the other hand, you do get to travel the galaxy and meet lots of interesting people.”

“And kill them,” muttered Kumm.

“Um,” said Seepy.

“Don’t mind him,” said Karrn. “Besides,” she added, leaning forward across the table, and allowing the pause to drag out. She looked from side to side, and then whispered loudly, “we only kill the ones we don’t like!”

“Oh, goodness,” said Seepy.

The Troopers laughed at Seepy’s response.

“Don’t worry,” said Dorn, putting a gloved hand on his shiny metallic forearm. “We like you!”

“Yeah, we do,” agreed Grunt. He downed the last of his drink. “But we’re gonna have to love you and leave

you, I'm afraid. Duty calls. We've got a very boring corridor to guard."

He slammed his empty glass down onto the table, and the others followed suit. Dorn even picked hers up and banged it down again. Armour clattering, they all jumped to their feet and grabbed their helmets from the table.

"Take care," said Bent to Seepy, before placing his helmet over his head and locking it into place with a click. "It was nice meeting you." That last emerged as an electrically modulated growl. The helmets, the masks, removed all trace of humanity and transformed the squad of Seepy's new friends into cold, dreadful killers—the feared Imperial Shock Troopers.

"Be careful out there," said Seepy, lifting one hand in a friendly wave.

"Later, Farkyew," said one of the anonymous Troopers—Dorn, although there was nothing now in the guttural voice emitting from the helmet to distinguish one from the other. The Troopers turned away, each lifting his or her gloved hand in a wave, and Team Daffodil set off across the food court, scattering civilians from their path.

Alone at the table, Seepy watched them go. After almost a second, he replayed the conversation he had just had with the Troopers. *Slitwhistle*, Grunt had said. Seepy didn't frown, because his sheet-metal face was eternally fixed in an expression of mild surprise, but he might have, had it been possible. "Slitwhistle," he mused. "Goodness, I wonder if he meant ... oh dear. Master Lurk!"

The 'bot stood up and began to retrace his steps. He paused in the doorway of the eating area and turned to look across the crowded space to where the members of Team Daffodil had filed out. "If Master Lurk is coming

here,” he said to himself, “I hope he doesn’t run in to those guys. I was starting to like them!”

Following the map in his head, Seepy headed for the landing pad where the *Serendipity Sparrow* waited. He was only a ‘bot—an ambulatory sex toy, at that—so any attempt on his part at rescuing Mistress Libby and her roguish friends was doomed to failure before it began. There was nothing he could do about the situation. With the city flooded with Imperials, it seemed to Seepy that the best course of action was to return to the *Sparrow*. Sooner or later, he knew, *somebody* would come back to the ship and rescue him.

Chapter 18

Resistance Is Fertile

Barth Vapour sat in his wheelchair on the bridge of the *USSS Ender's Prize*, gazing at the stars which streaked past on the front view screen. The technology worked differently here; from what he could discern, what Captain Pilchard referred to as 'flex speed' was entirely different from the standard hyperspace travel they used in his own reality. Its effects looked remarkably similar, though. Stars stretched from dots into lines, and intersystem travel took hours rather than the years, or even decades, that physics required. Light speed was an absolute limit, of course, and Vapour wondered how many other ways had been found to bypass that limit.

He called it the Narrative Principle.

Even before he had chosen to follow the path of the Stiff, Mannequin Splitwhisker had led an active life. Sitting and thinking was for other people. Now, however, having spent the last few days confined to this chair, he had had very little else to do but meditate upon a wide range of subjects. It had been while considering the nature of Fanny Marisu Brusher's powers that the Narrative Principle had occurred to him. Essentially, it was this: since both this universe and his own were merely virtual realities based upon a form of fiction, it followed that anything which was inherently

uninteresting should prove to be fleeting at best. By far the most boring thing of all was to travel through the deep void between the stars at sub-light speeds. Ergo, super-light speed *must* be possible, in some form or another.

He hoped to consider the Narrative Principle in greater depth at another time. He suspected there might be something implied by it that he could use to his advantage.

“Ah, Mister Splitwhisker,” said Captain Pilchard as he strode onto the bridge. “You’re up early. I trust you are sleeping well?”

“Quite well, thank you, Captain,” said Vapour. “Oh, and thank you for this, too.” He raised his right hand in a little wave. He had requested that he be given his mechanical arm back; Doctor Brusher had gone one better by suggesting that, with the assistance of Gordo von Seilon, she may be able to reattach it. They had carried out the three-hour procedure the previous evening.

The Captain waved off his thanks as he settled into his chair in the centre of the bridge. “It would have been very rude of us to deny you the use of your own limbs,” he said.

And that is their problem, mused Vapour. *Too damned polite for their own good!* He had been amazed when the Captain had granted him unlimited access to the bridge of the ship. Amazed, but not particularly surprised.

Vapour crossed his hands in his lap—wrapping them protectively around Boadicea, his one link to his home—and turned to look once more at the view screen. Idly, he stroked his thumb over the hidden panel in the back of his mechanical wrist. He tried not to think of the communicator hidden inside; Dee Dee would be on duty

soon. He did not know whether she was actually capable of reading his mind, but he did not want to take the chance.

Suddenly the ship lurched and shuddered, and the streaks shrank to dots as the flex drive failed. Several different alarms began sounding simultaneously.

Looking unruffled, with just the hint of a frown on his face, Captain Pilchard said, “Shields up, Mister Info, as a precaution. Report.”

“Sir,” said Info, turning in his seat to face the Captain, “it appears we have been pulled out of flex by a high gravity well, but nothing with sufficient mass appears on the charts in this sector. According to the graviton fluctuations I’m reading, it appears to be artificially generated.”

“Sir,” said the young Ensign on comms duty, “we are being paged, audio only.”

“On speakers, Ensign Quim,” said the Captain.

“Aye sir.”

The bridge of the *Ender’s Prize* was silent for a moment, save for the usual background of pings and beeps. Then a flat, unmodulated voice droned loudly from the speakers: “We are Droid. You will be integrated. Resistance is fertile.”

“Oh shit,” said the Captain.

Everybody on the bridge turned to look at him. He had gone quite pale, and was sitting forward on the edge of his chair, clutching the armrests tightly.

“Scanning,” said Info after a second, turning back to his console. “Captain, apart from the gravity source—into which we are slowly falling—I am detecting six, no, seven Droid dodecahedra.”

“Seven?” echoed the Captain incredulously. He must have noticed the tremor in his own voice, for he visibly

pulled himself together. “That is impossible,” he said strongly. “Droid ‘hedra travel alone. We have *never* seen more than one at a time. Are you sure the scanners are not being confused by our proximity to the gravity well?”

“It is possible, sir,” confirmed Info. “The gravity well appears to be an artificial singularity enclosed within a high-flux tachyon plasma field. Re-calibrating to compensate.”

The doors to the turbolift hiss-squeaked open and Commander Billy-Bob Piker strode onto the bridge, with Dee Dee McTroy at his side. “What’s happening, Captain?” he asked. “We’ve dropped out of flex.”

“Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded,” intoned the flat voice. “Resistance is fertile!”

“Oh,” said Billy-Bob, his confident step faltering.

“Cut that feed,” said Captain Pilchard, making a throat-cutting gesture across his neck with his left hand. “What have you got for me, Info?”

“Aye sir,” said the comms Ensign. He looked terrified.

“All sensors confirm seven ‘hedra, Captain,” said Info. “We are completely surrounded.”

“On screen,” said the Captain. “Let’s see the damn things!”

The front view screen flickered to star-speckled black. In the centre of the image, the Droid dodecahedron sat motionless. It got its name from its shape; it was a twelve-faced geometric solid. Each pentagonal face seemed to be made up of an interwoven mesh of piping and circuitry, and in shifting patches, from somewhere within the alien vessel, an intense green glow limned the convoluted detail. With nothing but the star field to measure against, there was nothing by which to judge the size of the ‘hedron.

“Sir, they are hailing us again,” said the Ensign.

“Very well, Ensign Quim, let’s hear it.”

“Aye sir,” said the Ensign.

“This is Captain Jon-Lurk Pilchard of the *USSS Ender’s Prize*,” said the Captain into the silence. “We have no quarrel with...”

This time there was a video signal as well as the audio. The image of a Droid drone appeared on the view screen. Dressed in tight black leather, pale skin studded with bio-mechanical devices, she—it—had once been an attractive human. Now it spoke for the mind of the Droid. “We know you, Pilchard,” intoned the Droid voice. Its voice was slightly muffled as it spoke around the gleaming steel fangs which protruded from beneath its upper lip. The fangs were hollow. The Droid infected their victims by injecting them with biomechanical nanobots which instantly began the integration process; once bitten, you had but a few seconds before your body began to change into a Droid from the inside out.

It was not a pleasant process.

Of course, once you had been integrated into the Droid collective, they had full possession of your memories and abilities. Anything that was different about you, anything they did not already know, went towards improving the efficiency of all.

“We remember you,” said the Droid. “But we do not want you. Your biological distinctiveness is already a part of us. Give us the Mary Sue and we shall allow you to leave. You have ten minutes. Resistance is...”

Pilchard made a ‘cut them off’ gesture to young Ensign Quim, and the voice was gone.

“Yeah, fertile, we know,” said Billy-Bob Piker dryly.

“Those things give me the creeps,” said Dee Dee quietly. “They’re like zombies, dead inside, no soul, no

empathy, just that horrible emptiness.” She shivered, and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Mmm,” said the Captain.

“What does that mean, exactly,” asked Barth Vapour into the temporary quiet. “‘Fertile’? Surely ‘futile’ would make more sense?”

“We believe it to be a joke,” said Info quietly.

“A joke?”

“Yeah,” explained Billy-Bob. “Droid humour is not particularly well developed. We believe they are saying ‘resistance is fertile’ in an effort to lighten the mood, to have a bit of a laugh with their intended victims.”

“Oh,” said Vapour. “But what does it *mean*?”

“Rough translation: if you fight, you’re fucked!” said Billy-Bob.

“Oh,” said Vapour.

“If we’re all finished,” interjected Captain Pilchard patiently, “perhaps we can attempt to answer the next question. What exactly do they want?”

“‘The Mary Sue’, sir,” quoted Info.

“Indeed. But what is ‘the Mary Sue’? I’m fairly sure I’d give them one if we had one, if I thought it would convince them to let us go, but it doesn’t ring any bells.”

The hiss-squeak of the turbolift doors punctuated the silence, and Fanny Marisu Brusher stepped out onto the bridge. “Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked.

“Just in time, Ms Brusher,” said Captain Pilchard. “Do you have any idea what a Mary Sue might be?”

Marisu shook her head. “It sounds vaguely familiar,” she said, “but no, I don’t recognise the name.”

“There are two matches of note in the data library,” said Info, looking up from his terminal. “The first is a rather derogatory literary term, the name of a particular character archetype. The second is Mary-Sue Rubenstein,

President of the Northern States Alliance from 2217AD to 2224AD.” He shrugged apologetically. “Neither of those seems to be particularly relevant.”

“Well, that settles that,” said Pilchard. “We can’t give them what we don’t have. So, hypothetically, Ms Brusher, how would you recommend we go about escaping from seven Droid ‘hedra?”

“Seven?” she asked. Vapour observed with interest that even her face—shining with her inner beauty as it was—paled a little upon hearing the number of enemy ships that faced them. “Um. As it happens, I had been working on developing a method for crippling a Droid dodecahedron in my spare time. It is almost complete, and according to my best calculations, it should work on *two* ‘hedra—but I’m really not sure if it is scalable beyond that.”

“What does your best guess tell you?” asked the Captain.

She shook her head. “Perhaps I will be able to extend the effect to more targets, but I’m afraid it really was a last-ditch desperation method that is non-repeatable. We will only have one shot at this, and I’ll need, uh, two hours to get it working. Assuming it *will* work, of course.”

“We have, uh...” Pilchard looked over at Info.

“Three minutes, Captain, Ms Brusher,” said Info.

“That *does* make things a little more tricky,” said Fanny thoughtfully.

“I’ll see if I can buy you some time,” said the Captain. “Ensign, page the Droid, if you please.”

“Aye sir,” said the Ensign. After a second he added, “Channel open, sir.”

Another Droid appeared on the view screen. This one had once been a Mowglian male.

Once, when they had first encountered the Droid, Pilchard and his crew had been confused by the ever-changing spokesperson used by the Droid. Now, though, they understood that the hive mind of the collective intelligence—what the Droid referred to, for reasons known only to themselves, as the *Plerd*—considered individual drones as interchangeable. It would commandeer whatever drone happened to be closest to a camera in order to communicate with the outside. All the drones of the *Plerd* knew everything that any of the drones knew, or said, or heard. There were no secrets in the *Plerd*.

“You have two minutes left to comply,” this one said. Its voice, like that of all Droid drones, was flat and without inflection.

“We are unable to comply,” said Pilchard firmly. “We do not have this ‘Mary Sue’ of which you speak. We cannot...”

“She is there,” said the Droid drone, interrupting. It raised one hand and pointed into the camera. “The Mary Sue is there. Give us Fanny Brusher. You have ninety seconds to comply. Resistance is fertile.”

The stunned silence which washed over the bridge was total; even the usual background of bleeps went silent. Everybody present turned to stare at Fanny Marisu Brusher. Fanny herself stared at the view screen, which had gone back to displaying the logo of the *USSS Ender's Prize*. Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Oh, I get it,” muttered a voice from the back of the group. “Mary Sue, as in Marisu. That makes...”

Shhh!

“Sorry!”

“They know my name,” said Fanny.

“They know your name,” said Captain Pilchard in agreement. “How do they know your name?”

“How do they know my name?” echoed Fanny in bewilderment.

“You’re not even listed on the crew register,” said Pilchard. “There are probably three confidential records back on Foundation which list your name, and only one of those connects you with this ship.”

“More disturbingly,” said Dee Dee, almost apologetically, “how did they know where we would be? That...” she waved her arms vaguely towards the front view screen, momentarily lost for words. “That *setup*,” she finally settled on, “out there is meant specifically for this ship, and it ain’t exactly portable.”

“She’s right,” added Gordo von Seilon excitedly. “An artificial gravity well massive enough to drag a ship out of flex travel is not the sort of thing you just happen to have with you at a moment’s notice. They must have needed at least, oh, six hours to get this set up.”

“Set up right in our flight path,” noted Pilchard. “They knew exactly where we were, and where we were headed. How is that possible? Any thoughts, Number One?”

“How do they know her name?” asked Billy-Bob Piker.

“Thank you, Number One. Any thoughts, Bork, while Mister Piker catches up?”

“Hurda gurda bork!” said Bork fiercely. “Gurda murda wurda bork bork!”

“True,” said Captain Pilchard. “True. But does it really get us anywhere?”

“Bork gurda turda bork!” insisted the Tactical Officer.

“Worth a try,” agreed Pilchard. “Your suggestion is duly noted.”

“Bork bork bork!” growled Bork.

At that moment the ship shuddered violently as several photogenic torpedoes impacted against her shields.

The view screen flickered back to life. Another Droid—once a Hephaestan—faced them. “You will hand over Fanny Brusher now,” it demanded. “Resistance is ...”

“You can take your resistance,” shouted the Captain, “and you can shove it up your arse!”

The Droid cocked its head, as though considering this request. It blinked. “Your statement is illogical,” it concluded.

“Don’t give me any of your Hephaestan logic, you pointy-eared fucker,” shouted the Captain. He could feel his blood boiling. Then Dee Dee placed a calming hand on his shoulder, and pressed one soft breast against his back as she whispered soothing nothings in his ear.

The Droid frowned. Displays of anger did not affect it; the Droid saw plenty of that in their travels. “Logic is not Hephaestan,” it corrected. “Nor is it Droid. Logic just is.”

“I believe what Captain Pilchard is attempting to say,” said Dee Dee McTroy carefully, “is that we request a further ten minutes to say our goodbyes.” She squeezed the Captain’s shoulder, and he nodded wordlessly.

The Droid cocked its head again as it consulted with the *Plerd* mind. “Very well,” it said after a moment. “You have ten minutes to comply.” It—perhaps wisely—chose not to mention resistance again for a little while.

The view screen went dead.

“Thank you, Dee Dee,” said the Captain. “I apologise for my unprofessional conduct. It’s just that...”

“We understand, Captain,” she reassured him. “If anybody can push your buttons, it is the Droid.”

“It’s just,” said the Captain, “that they take, and take, and take. They have taken too much from me. But no more. There comes a day when a man has to draw the line in the sand and dare them to step over it. I have to draw that line!”

“Perhaps, Captain,” interrupted Fanny Brusher. She placed her small hand lightly on his arm. “But not today.”

“What?” He frowned down at her. “You can’t mean what I think you mean?”

“It’s the only way, Captain Pilchard. Please, you must see that.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. “We can always...”

“Run?” Fanny shook her head. “They are faster than us. Fight? There are seven of them, and we’ve all seen the swathe of wreckage just one Droid ‘hedron carved through half the Fleet at the battle of *Lapdog 37*.”

Pilchard sighed. He knew she was right. *Lapdog 37* was a nebula that had once been a star system. The Fleet had made a stand there, once, against a lone invading Droid dodecahedron. To call it a “battle” was misleading; it had been a massacre. When it was over, more than one hundred Foundation ships drifted lifelessly in space, the planetary system itself had been turned to dust, and the Droid ‘hedron continued on its way. The whole conflict had taken seven minutes.

“But I can’t lose you,” he said. Tears suddenly flooded his eyes, and he let them run down his cheeks for all to see. “I love you,” he said, “like my own daughter.”

“I know,” she said. “And you have always been the father I never had. If there was another way, if we had more time...” He opened his mouth to speak, but she

touched her fingers to his lips. “Sometimes,” she said softly, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one. You know I’m right.”

“That sounds like a very Hephaestan thing to say,” he said.

She shrugged, and a grin flashed briefly across her face. “I’m sure I heard it in an old holo-drama once,” she told him.

His return smile was bittersweet, and it lasted only a moment. Suddenly he put his arms around her and hugged her closely to him.

“How did you get to be so wise?” he murmured against the top of her head.

“I learned from the best,” she said against his chest.

The turbolift doors hiss-squeaked open, and Doctor Cavity Brusher marched out onto the bridge. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “I’ve been paging for five minutes and...” Her voice trailed off as she took in the frozen tableau in the centre of the bridge. She asked again, “what’s going on?” but this time her voice quavered nervously.

“Mother,” said Fanny, “you’re just in time. We have to talk, in private.” Disengaging herself gently from the Captain’s embrace, she took her mother’s hand and led her into one of the meeting rooms off the bridge.

“Whew, talk about intense!”

Shhh!

“Sorry.”

Chapter 19

The Cheese Man Cometh

Two Imperial Shock Troopers half-dragged the stumbling, dazed Mal Single to his cell, and shoved him through the narrow doorway. He sprawled onto the bare floor, and lay there, gasping for breath. After his ordeal—and even the memory of it sent a horrified shudder through his pain-racked frame—the cold metal was a welcome reprieve.

They had been split up—how long ago? Mal had no idea. It could have been hours, or days. His perception of time was horribly skewed. But they had been split up. Mal had caught a last glimpse of Libby's despairing face before the Troopers dragged him away. They had taken him to an interrogation room.

After a short wait, the Muff had entered. He had grinned that hideous parody of a friendly grin, and then ... done things that Mal preferred to forget.

"He never even asked me any questions," he muttered, his lips moving weakly against the smooth metal floor. "The sadistic prick!"

Time passed. Possibly he dozed.

Imperial Muff Aleeto Farquhar patted his swagger stick rhythmically into the palm of his hand. He was attempting to look stern, but the effect was somewhat

spoiled by the big dopey grin which kept breaking out on his face. He had not had this much fun since his days in the Imperial Intelligence Officer's Academy. Possibly not even then.

The smuggler had been a fine appetiser, but his girlfriend was definitely the main course.

He stretched out his swagger stick and touched it against her cheek. She glared at him over the gag which filled her mouth, but he saw the fear in her eyes, the trembling anticipation in the way she twisted her head away from his touch. He slid the tip of his stick down to her bare neck, and she shivered uncontrollably.

"You *have* been interrogated before, haven't you?" he asked her. "Who was it, I wonder?" He tilted his head to one side and studied her, as though awaiting an answer. She could not speak, of course, even if she wanted to do so; the gag made sure of that. Farquhar had never enjoyed having a perfectly good interrogation ruined by allowing the prisoner to beg and babble and promise to tell everything.

He preferred them to scream.

"I consider myself quite the connoisseur," he informed her conversationally. "I pride myself on being able to identify your previous interrogator simply by observing your responses."

"Uch ooo!" she grunted around the gag.

"All in good time," he told her with a wink. "But first, we'll work on your manners." There was a soft click. He touched his swagger stick to her cheek again, and this time she jerked her head away from the stinging buzz which flickered across her skin. He touched her exposed earlobe, and she thrashed urgently in her bonds. Her wrists and ankles were strapped securely to the interrogation table, and the localised artificial high-

gravity field which gripped her torso ensured she wasn't going anywhere.

He had loosened her collar, but had not removed her clothes. Yet. Plenty of time for that later.

"Of course," he told her, "it may take me a few hours to tame that nasty tongue of yours."

Captain Pyotrovich stared through the observation window into the interrogation room. Watching the Muff work on the female was disturbingly unpleasant, and yet he found himself unable to tear his eyes away from what was happening.

Beside him stood Admiral Muzzel. The senior officer was frowning.

A harsh scream, muffled by the gag and by the thick plasteel of the window, echoed into the small room. Both officers winced.

"That's not right," said the Captain, unable to hold his tongue any longer.

"Captain?"

"Sir," said the Captain. "What he's doing to her. It's wrong."

"Explain yourself, Captain," said the Admiral, "and think very carefully before you do so."

The Captain finally turned away from the window to face his commanding officer. The Admiral's face was a carefully composed mask, giving away nothing. The Captain stared at him for a few seconds, then turned back to stare out the window. The woman was twisting frantically in her bonds, trying to escape the tip of the swagger stick which was being dragged lazily down her left side, across her jacket-clad ribs. Pyotrovich felt, somehow, that he owed it to her to keep watching, to bear witness to her ordeal.

“There are rules against his behaviour,” he said at last. “Rules against the mistreatment of prisoners. Aren’t there? Aren’t *we* the good guys, despite what they say about the Stiff?” The last word barely escaped his throat as a whisper.

“Are you suggesting, Captain Pyotrovich,” said the Admiral carefully, “that Muff Farquhar is in breach of Section Four, sub-section Delta of the Imperial Penal code? Specifically paragraphs seven, nine, and thirteen?”

The Captain blinked. He continued to stare through the window, but he was no longer focussed on what was happening in the other room. “I, uh, believe so, sir, yes.”

“You are aware, of course, that in times of war or extreme civil unrest—such as this Rebellion—Section Four of the Penal code is inapplicable?”

“Yes,” said the Captain, drawing the word out into a hiss. *Why mention it, then?* he wondered. “But...”

“But in times of war, of course, Section Twenty-three comes into effect?” the Admiral prompted.

“Does it? I mean yes, it does,” said the Captain. He winced as the woman screamed again. He stopped trying to remember what Section Twenty-three stated, and looked once more into the interrogation room. The prisoner was still shuddering from the after-effects of whatever the Muff had just done. As the Captain watched, the Muff laughed—although that sound did not penetrate the thick plasteel of the observation window—and began to unfasten the buttons along the front of the woman’s jacket. The Captain clenched his fingers into an angry fist.

“Captain?”

“Sorry, sir?”

“I asked, Captain, if you were suggesting that the Muff’s actions are in contravention of Section Twenty-three, sub-sections Gamma and Delta of the...”

“Oh yes, sir,” interrupted the Captain, struggling to keep his temper in check. “That is exactly what I am saying.”

“Very well,” said the Admiral. “Your official complaint is duly noted. Sign here, please.”

The Captain turned. The Admiral was holding out a small clipboard. The Captain took it from him and studied the top sheet of flexisteel. It was a standard Form C-1, an official complaint form. It was already filled out: *I, Captain Vladimir Ilyakin Pyotrovich, SN:304-72619-552, of the IPD Bermuda, do hereby register my disapproval of the actions of Imperial Muff Aleeto Bum Farquhar, SN:102-30721-666, during his interrogation of prisoners from the Rebel Coalition.* Captain Pyotrovich blinked. He scanned briefly over the rest of the sheet; it listed various paragraphs of the Imperial Penal Code, and exactly how the Muff had contravened them. This explained why the Admiral had strongly recommended he observe the woman’s interrogation.

He looked up. The Old Man’s face was impassive, but he gave the barest of nods. *Trust me*, that nod seemed to say.

The Captain lifted the stylus, signed his name on the dotted line, and handed the clipboard back to the Admiral. The sudden sick feeling in his stomach abated somewhat as the Admiral countersigned the form.

“Leave it to me, Captain,” said the Admiral. “I shall see what I can do.” The Captain snapped smartly to attention, and saluted. The Admiral returned his salute, far more formally than was usual for such a senior officer. Then he turned on his heel and marched from the

observation room. The door hissed closed behind him, leaving the Captain alone with his thoughts.

“Fucking politics,” he muttered. He turned back to watch the continuing interrogation.

Finally, Mal forced his eyes open. He was still groggy, but he felt strong enough to attempt to sit up.

He winced. The interrogation devices had left no permanent injury—on the flesh, at least—but Mal’s nerves were still cringing with the memory of what they had endured.

Suddenly there was a sound outside the heavy door of his cell. Mal frowned, but turned to stare at the door. If given the chance, he was prepared to kill the first Trooper to stick his head into the cell. He was vaguely aware that he was, at the moment, physically incapable of any such feat—but he was prepared, nonetheless.

The door to the cell hissed sideways into the wall, and the Trooper who had been leaning against it fell heavily into the room, armour clattering loudly. Mal eyed the body warily, and realised that somebody had already beaten him to it. This Trooper was dead, a curl of smoke rising from the blackened hole in the breastplate of the combat armour. The smell of scorched flesh filled the tiny cell.

Mal raised his eyes to the doorway.

An armoured, helmeted figure appeared there, silhouetted against the light from the hallway beyond. It was not a Trooper’s armour; whatever it was, it had obviously seen a great deal of combat, being dented and scratched in numerous places.

“Come on, Mal,” said the figure. Its voice was a harsh, electronic growl, distorted unrecognisably by the circuitry of the helmet. “We don’t have much time.”

“Who are you?” said Mal. “Is that you, Lurk?”

“Of course it’s me,” said the figure. “Come on, we don’t have time; those Imperial slugs will be on top of us any second now.”

Mal started to struggle to his feet. An arm slipped around his waist, and the figure—Lurk—helped him up. Leaning against the hard armour, Mal managed to hobble from the cell.

“Let’s go,” said Lurk.

“No, wait,” said Mal, “we’ve got to get Libby and Shaggy.”

“Way ahead of you,” said Lurk. “I’ve got them. They’re all in the ship. You were the last.”

“Is she okay?” asked Mal. “She told me once that she couldn’t stand to go through another Imperial interrogation.”

“She’s a little shaken,” said Lurk, “but she’ll be okay. Now stop talking and start walking; we can discuss everything once we’re away from here.”

Mal coughed, and nodded weakly.

Together they made slow progress out of the cell block. Mal looked around; they were still in Cloud City, and not on the Imperial ship. He did not know why this was, but he was grateful; if they had transferred him, a rescue might have been impossible.

An Imperial Shock Trooper suddenly appeared at the end of the corridor and raised his weapon. Lurk raised his blaster, and shot the Trooper twice in the chest. The Trooper fell, and lay writhing on the floor. As they drew level, Lurk shot him a third time, blasting through the weakened spot in the Trooper’s breastplate. He gurgled and slumped back to the floor, dead.

Mal frowned.

“So where did this armour come from?” he asked weakly.

“Just something I picked up in my travels,” said Lurk. “Keep quiet, we’re nearly there.”

They rounded a bend in the corridor, and a door hissed open. At the end of the walkway out to the landing pad, a strange ship awaited them. More than anything, its shape reminded Mal of a giant codpiece with fins.

“Where’s the *Sparrow*?” said Mal. “What’s this.”

“I couldn’t find your ship,” said Lurk. “This is just...”

“Something you picked up in your travels?” asked Mal. He pushed himself away from the armoured figure and stood unsteadily on his weak legs. “You’re not Lurk,” he accused.

“Correct,” said the figure. “I’m not. Although I was hoping the ruse would last all the way back to the ship. Out of idle curiosity, what gave me away?” The barrel of his gun drifted lazily upward until it was pointed at Mal’s chest.

“*That*, for a start,” said Mal, nodding wearily to the weapon in the armoured gauntlet. “Lurk couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with one of those things.”

The armoured figure shrugged. “You win some, you lose some. Now, into the ship.” He gestured minutely with the barrel of his gun.

“Who are you?” asked Mal.

“My name is not important,” said the other person.

“Humour me,” said Mal.

“Not that it matters,” said the armoured figure, “but my name is Bob Feta. You might have heard of me referred to as ‘The Cheese Man’—or you might not.” The figure—Bob Feta—gestured again. “Now walk.”

“But why?” said Mal. “I don’t know you. What’s the point of all this.”

The armoured figure shrugged again. "You'll see," he said. "Now, walk onto the ship, or be carried. Either way, you're going with me."

"What about Libby?" asked Mal.

"Just you," said the man. "And no matter how much you try to stall, nobody is coming to your rescue. There's only Imperials, and they're as likely to kill you as save you. So let's go!"

Mal shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not leaving without..."

"Yes," said the man. There was a bright flash, and the full-strength stun bolt scrambled Mal's nervous system and dropped him to the deck like a sack of root vegetables. "You are."

He put his weapon away, and hoisted Mal's semi-conscious body over his shoulder. "Why," he grunted to himself, "does nobody ever choose the 'walk' option? I try to be patient, I really do." Treading carefully, he carried the smuggler up the ramp into his ship, and lowered him none too gently into the coffin-like shell of a stasis field generator. He switched the device on, and time ceased to pass for Mal Single.

Chapter 20

The Best Laid Plans...

“Are you sure about this?” asked Doctor Cavity Brusher. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and the small amount of mascara she habitually wore now traced dark, watery streaks down her cheeks, but her voice was firm. She held a hypodermic injector in her hand. She had refused to allow anybody else to do this for her.

Fanny Marisu Brusher nodded bravely. “I don’t know why the Droid want me,” she said, “but it can’t be anything good.” She looked up at Captain Jon-Lurk Pilchard, who was the only other person present. The three of them were in the small teleporter room behind the Bridge. “You understand, don’t you, Captain? I don’t want to be integrated. I don’t want to be turned into a Droid.”

“I understand all too well,” he said softly. He did not entirely manage to suppress his shudder as an old memory flickered through his mind. “Nobody should have to go through that!”

“This concoction,” said Fanny, nodding towards the injector in her mother’s hand, “contains a potent mix of five different viral strains, any one of which would be lethal. It also contains nanobots of my own design. Together they will ward off the Droid integration procedure long enough for me to...” Her voice faltered for

a moment, and she had to lower her gaze to the floor before continuing. “Long enough for me to die. And they will ensure that I stay dead. And, with a bit of luck, the infection will spread and take them with me.”

“How long before it takes effect?” asked the Captain.

“About five minutes before it kicks in,” she said, “which should be long enough for you to get the *Ender’s Prize*, and your crew, away from here before the Droid realise what we have done.”

The Captain nodded. He still wanted to beg her not to go, to demand that she find another way, but they had already covered everything that could be said. Her sacrifice was their only chance of escape.

Fanny glanced at the chronometer on the wall. “It’s time,” she said simply. “Goodbye, Mother. Goodbye ... Father.” She smiled warmly at his surprised expression. “Oh Captain,” she said, “I’ve known that for, like, forever. You two didn’t think that I wouldn’t *know*, did you?”

Both her parents started to speak, but she shook her head. “You don’t need to say anything,” she told them. “I love you both dearly. But it’s time.” She held out her arm.

Her mother pressed the injector carefully against the smooth, pale skin of Fanny’s wrist. She looked into her daughter’s beautiful violet-blue eyes. She saw the steely resolve in them that she had inherited from her true father, Jon-Lurk Pilchard; she saw, also, the fear which danced in their depths. “I love you,” she whispered. She pressed the activator stud, and liquid death coursed into Fanny’s bloodstream.

“I will always be with you,” said Fanny. She stepped up onto the teleporter pad.

Her father checked the coordinates one more time. They had been provided by the Droid, and they specified a point deep within one of the dodecahedra which surrounded the *USSS Ender's Prize*.

"I'm ready," she said. He nodded.

"Coordinates confirmed," he said. "Bio-filters disabled." Ordinarily the filters built in to the teleporters would automatically remove any viral infection from the body or bloodstream of the person being teleported.

"Computer," he said, "inform the Droid that we are beaming the 'Mary Sue' to their supplied coordinates." His voice was strained, and the effort he exerted to keep his emotions in check left him trembling.

"Confirmed," said the computer's serene female voice. "Done."

"Lower the shields, and energise this teleporter, on my mark. Raise shields again the moment the teleporter sequence is completed."

"Confirmed."

He hesitated.

"Please, Captain," said Fanny, "don't stop now."

He nodded. "Mark," he said.

"Goodbye," said Fanny. The air around her shimmered and flickered as the teleporter powered up, scanned her body, then beamed it, particle by particle, to the designated location, where she was reassembled. It took only a second, but it seemed an eternity. Then she was gone.

With a sob, Cavity Brusher dropped to her knees on the deck. "What have I done?" she moaned.

Jon-Lurk Pilchard dropped to his knees beside her. Silently, he drew her into his arms and held her as she rocked back and forth, keening her anguish in a wordless cry.

Suddenly the ship lurched violently around them, sending them both sprawling awkwardly across the floor.

“What the...?” said Jon-Lurk.

“You go,” said Cavity. “The ship needs you. Don’t let our baby’s sacrifice be in vain.”

The Captain scrambled to his feet and trotted from the room. The door hiss-squeaked open, and he was on the bridge. The crew were picking themselves up off the deck.

“Report,” he said.

“Uh, sir,” said Info, “it is gone. Just gone.”

“What is gone?” demanded the Captain.

“The ‘hedron. The one that we, uh, that matched the coordinates they sent us. It blew up.”

“What?”

“Moments after the teleport sequence completed, it simply detonated. According to these readings, it was a fusion reaction triggered by an overload of their transflex drive.”

“How?” said the Captain. He felt like he should be asking more detailed questions, but the situation was so far beyond anything that made sense that he didn’t know where to begin. “Did Fanny...?”

“It appears to have been self-initiated,” said Info.

“They blew themselves up?” wondered Pilchard. “Fanny...”

Suddenly a klaxon sounded loudly, and the computer’s voice declared calmly, “Intruder alert. Multiple teleporter insertions.”

“Shields,” shouted the Captain automatically, even as a leather-clad Droid drone materialised on the bridge.

Bork reacted instantly to the intruder, drawing his sidearm and firing several short blasts at the intruder. The

Droid staggered and, without so much as a gasp, fell to the deck.

“Lurda gurda Bork!” declared Bork triumphantly.

“Shields are inoperative, Captain,” said Info apologetically. “They appear to have been disabled from within. I am receiving no response from Engineering; it would appear that several Droid warriors teleported directly there for the couple of seconds that our shields were down during Ms Brusher’s own teleportation across to the ‘hedron.”

As if on cue, three more Droid materialised upon the Bridge. Bork shot one down, but even as he did so, another materialised directly behind him. It clutched his shoulder, lurched forward, and clamped its mouth down hard over his exposed neck. Bork screamed in pain. He reached around, grabbed the head of the Droid, and twisted violently. There was a hollow crack, and the Droid staggered and toppled onto its back, its spine severed. It was too late, though. The Tactical officer clutched the wound in his neck—already it was burning as the invading nanobots began reconfiguring his flesh, devouring living tissue and breaking it down into the raw materials required to build mechanical replacements. He staggered weakly, then fell to his knees. Slowly he slumped forward onto the deck and lay there, twitching.

Lieutenant Commander Info shot down one of the other invaders. The second fell to the combined fire of Captain Pilchard and his First Officer.

“We need to get the shields back up,” said the Captain.

“Trying,” said Info. “I am rerouting power to the auxiliary generators ... but they are not responding.”

“This can’t be happening,” he said hopelessly. “We need...” He trailed off. Fanny could not help them now.

He heard a muffled scream from the back of the bridge. Cavity! He turned to go to her aid, but several more Droid drones materialised in his path. He fired blindly, but they were everywhere now. For every one that fell, two more shimmered into existence. The fighting was ferocious, but gradually, one by one, the bridge crew of the *USSS Ender's Prize* fell beneath the gleaming hypodermic fangs of the Droid.

Pilchard watched as Dee Dee collapsed, her hand clutched to the wound on her forearm. Piker screamed angrily and shot the Droid which had bitten her; then he, too, shuddered as fangs pierced the flesh of his shoulder.

"Computer," said the Captain in desperation, "initiate self destruct sequence, authorisation Pilchard Alpha Three Gammaaarrgh!" He did not complete the code; steel fangs tore into his leg, and he crumpled to the deck with a scream. "Gamma, Seven, Delta Ice-cream," he gasped.

The computer considered this for a second. "Authorisation rejected," it told him calmly. "Please try again."

But Captain Pilchard made no reply, other than a strangled gasp as the nanobots began their work. The *Ender's Prize* belonged to the Droid.

Throughout the entire brief attack, Barth Vapour had lain on the floor where he had fallen when his wheelchair had toppled over following the explosion of the Droid 'hedron. The sneering grin of triumph on his face had frozen when the first Droid had materialised in front of him; now it resembled a sickly leer of dismay. Now he alone remained uninfected.

He had the distinct feeling that he had made an awful mistake.

One of the Droid drones strode over to him and stood before him. Its skin was a pasty white, and its face was half-hidden behind a myriad of ugly black implants. Only the swell of breasts on its chest, beneath the black leather covering, told him that this creature had once been female.

“You are Vapour,” it intoned.

Vapour rolled around, and levered himself upright. He still clutched Boadicea tightly in his left hand; now he held the pink teddewok protectively to his chest. Whether he was protecting her, or using her as a shield, he could not have said.

“Yes,” he told the Droid. “This was not our deal!”

“The deal has been changed,” the Droid told him—pointing out the obvious. “You may, if you like, pray that we do not alter it further.”

“Will that help?” asked Vapour.

“No.”

“Why?” asked Vapour.

“We do not respond to prayer,” the Droid informed him.

“No. Why this?” he elucidated. “I gave you the Mary Sue; you did not need this ship, this crew. They were to be mine. All I wanted to do was go home!”

“The Mary Sue was...” the Droid hesitated.

“She was power,” said Vapour. “Had you integrated her into your collective, you could have taken this galaxy. Nothing could have stood in your way.”

“She was an unknown,” said the Droid. “Power, yes, but maybe too much power. Her integration could have gone ... poorly. We could not predict, could not control, her power. Safer to destroy her. The sacrifice of one dodecahedron was a small price to pay to remove her from this existence.”

“But why?” demanded Vapour. “What have you gained from this? Surely, from what I’ve read about your encounters with the Foundation Fleet, they have nothing you need?”

“One dodecahedron was a small price to pay to remove her from this existence,” the Droid repeated. “You say we could have had this galaxy? We already have it. Nothing stood in our way—except, perhaps, the Mary Sue.”

“Oh,” said Vapour weakly.

“And once we integrate you,” continued the Droid, “we can have *your* universe too!”

Vapour closed his eyes. *Obviously this plan had a few flaws*, he chided himself. He opened his eyes again, and looked up at the Droid standing over him.

“I can still stop you,” he said. He reached out with his mind and caressed the Source which flickered all around him. Even as he did so, though, he felt a sharp pain as stainless steel teeth slid into the back of his neck. Another Droid had approached him from behind while the talker had kept his attention.

“No,” the Droid told him, “you cannot.”

“Clever girl,” he muttered, his last words before he passed out. His twitching body slumped sideways, and the pink teddewok rolled from his fingers.

The Droid studied the plush pink form of Boadicea dispassionately. After a moment, it decided the teddewok was not a threat, and it turned away.

“Resistance is fertile,” said the Droid. It shimmered and faded from view, leaving the bridge of the *Ender’s Prize* scattered with the writhing, twitching bodies of the newly integrated Droid crew.

Chapter 21

... Of Muff and Men

Having allowed the Source to guide him from Daggyboil to Tibrogargan Gas Mine Epsilon, Lurk was weaving his Cross-wing fighter through the maze of buildings which studded the top surface of the huge Cloud City structure when Arty Farty bleeped and whistled urgently. Lurk glanced down to read her comment.

Imperial battle cruiser to starboard!

Without changing course or speed—doing his best to emulate what Mal Single referred to as ‘flying casual’—Lurk looked up quickly, and peered to starboard. He saw nothing. Then something about a particularly strangely shaped building caught his attention, and he looked closer. He tilted his head, and suddenly realised what he was looking at; it was an *Imperial Planetary Dominator*, docked with the city, but at such an angle that its distinctive wedge-shaped nose was pointed down towards the planet below, and mostly hidden behind the bulk of the city. If Arty hadn’t pointed it out to him, he might never have noticed it.

A large tower came between him and the battle cruiser, and Lurk abruptly changed course so as to remain out of further view of the enemy ship. He could only hope that they had not spotted him.

He spiralled downwards, venturing deeper into the shadows, looking for somewhere to set down.

Movement below him caught his eye. A battered old ship suddenly leaped from the landing pad on which it had been sitting. It was shaped bizarrely like a finned codpiece, and it was on a collision course for Lurk's fighter. He took evasive action, and heard a *swish* as the other ship cleared his with barely inches to spare.

"Damn Sunday drivers," muttered Lurk. Then he angled down to claim the landing pad for himself, before somebody else beat him to it.

The engines wound down, and Lurk—having learned his lesson from the castaways on Daggyboil—engaged the security lock.

"Wait here for me, Arty," he said. "If anybody shows undue interest in the ship, take off and find a nice safe hiding spot in the clouds. Listen for my comm signal."

Arty beeped confirmation.

Lurk clambered out of the cockpit and sealed the canopy. "Good luck," he said to the astrobot, and he slapped the side of the ship with the palm of his hand. "Hopefully I won't be long."

Arty whistled mournfully. Lurk walked away towards the doorway into the city, leaving his ship—ticking and pinging as it cooled—in Arty's capable care.

Lurk hadn't ventured far into the city before he ran into the first Imperial Shock Trooper. Much to Lurk's surprise, however, the Trooper appeared to be dead. Smoke still curled from the blaster burns in the armour. Whatever had happened here, Lurk had only just missed it.

Stepping cautiously over the body of the Trooper, Lurk moved swiftly through the twisting maze of

corridors. He did not think about where he was going, simply choosing his path as he walked, based upon what felt right. Before many minutes had passed, he found himself outside one of the city's many small brigs. He placed his hand on the hilt of the light rapier hanging from his belt, took a deep breath, and keyed the door.

The room beyond was empty. Lurk stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Not quite empty, he realised. Three more Imperial Troopers lay sprawled on the floor where they had fallen. The smell of burned flesh and scorched armour was strong in the small room, and a muffled, rhythmic *clunk* sound kept repeating distantly. Lurk looked around carefully at the carnage. This was very recent, and he suddenly had a bad feeling about it.

Stepping over one of the bodies, Lurk studied the console. There were only three prisoners listed: Mal, Libby, and Shaggus. "Jackpot," muttered Lurk, but he couldn't shake the feeling that things were not going to go smoothly. He noted their cell numbers and headed up the narrow hallway.

The first cell was Mal's. Another dead Shock Trooper lay in the doorway, and the room beyond was empty. Every few seconds, the door slid part-closed, hit the corpse, and hissed open again. Lurk stared at the scene in puzzlement. It made no sense. More than anything, it looked as though somebody had already broken Mal out—but who, and why? And where was Mal now?

An alarm sounded distantly. Somebody must have found the first Trooper, lying back there in the hallway. *Damn*, thought Lurk, *I'm out of time!* He moved on to the next cell. Libby's. It was empty too.

Lurk keyed open the third door, and leaped back as an enraged Woonky burst out of the cell, arms flailing, mouth parted in a particularly blood-chilling snarl. "It's

me,” he yelled frantically as he tripped over his own feet and fell to the floor of the narrow corridor. “Shaggus, it’s me!”

The Woonky roared down at the supine human, bared his teeth, then blinked in recognition. *Lurk?* he whuffled. *Where’s Mal? I think they took Libby.*

Lurk shook his head. “Sorry, big guy,” he said, “you know I don’t understand you. Help me up.” He held out his hand, and the Woonky pulled him effortlessly to his feet.

“We’ve got to be quick,” said Lurk. “The Imperials will be here any minute now. Mal and Libby are missing, and I’ve got to find them. Can you make your way back to the *Sparrow*?”

Shaggus whuffled and snarled extensively. Lurk sighed.

“Please, Shaggus, just do as I say.” Lurk placed his hand lightly on the towering Woonky’s woolly green forearm. “I have the best chance of finding our friends, and once I do, we’re gonna need a ship warmed up and ready to go.”

Shaggus started to argue again, then stopped and slumped his shoulders, defeated by the language barrier. Finally he nodded exaggeratedly.

They headed back down the corridor, Lurk in the lead.

As they passed what had once been Mal’s cell, the Woonky paused and sniffed the air. He growled something, and Lurk paused.

“Problem?” he asked.

Shaggus looked down at the young man, and shrugged his huge shoulders.

“Okay, then let’s go,” said Lurk.

Shaggus paused another second to relieve the dead Trooper of her blaster, then followed Lurk.

Lurk opened the door and peered out. Nothing moved. Perhaps the alarm had not been for them, or perhaps... Lurk shrugged. When the Imperials came, he would deal with them; until then, it wasn't worth worrying about what *may* happen.

He stepped through the door and looked around. "I'm going that way," he said, pointing. Shaggus sniffed the air again, growled softly, and pointed down a different corridor.

"Okay," said Lurk. "Be careful—and please, try to be discreet! I don't want to get back to the *Sparrow*, only to find the entire Imperial army camped outside her hatch!"

Shaggus snorted something. Lurk didn't understand the words but he recognised the tone. He'd heard it often enough from Mal. *Hey, it's me!*

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Lurk with a grin. He took a step down the corridor he had indicated, and was dragged backward by a great woolly arm, into an embrace. The Woonky snuffled something, and rubbed Lurk's head fondly.

Lurk patted the arm wrapped around his throat. "It's okay," he gasped. "Now let's go..."

The Woonky released him, and Lurk staggered away. With a last wave, the two parted company.

Lurk stood against the wall and peered cautiously around the corner. Two Troopers stood there, either side of a closed door. Their armour looked similar to that worn by standard Shock Troopers, except that it was bright red.

Elite guards of some sort? mused Lurk.

He was pretty sure he wanted to go through that door.

Reaching out for the Source, Lurk gently probed the minds of the two guards. Bent K'nobby had told him, once, that the Source could be used to manipulate those

with weak minds. *Walk away*, suggested Lurk to the guard on the left. *Leave now. You are off duty.*

If anything, the guard stiffened alertly and turned his head minutely towards Lurk's position.

I guess you don't get to be an elite guard by having a weak mind! Lurk told himself. *So now what?*

He was pondering the best approach when a ragged scream echoed into the corridor.

"Libby!" shouted Lurk. He had covered half the distance between the corner and the guarded doorway, his light rapier blazing to life in his hand, before he fully realised he had reacted. The crimson-armoured Troopers responded instantly to his yell. One stepped towards him, knelt, and raised his blaster, all in one smooth motion. The energy bolt, when it came, was aimed directly at Lurk's head; the Jubbly Patabum swept it aside with his light rapier, and it hissed into the ceiling with an explosion of sparks. He swung his blade around in an undisciplined but effective attack. The Trooper raised one arm to deflect the blow, and the hissing energy blade sliced through armour, and arm, and neck. Crimson-armoured body parts clattered to the floor, and the helmeted head rolled away.

There was another clatter, and Lurk turned to face the second guard. And frowned. The Trooper had discarded his blaster in favour of a short staff which he detached from its place on the back of his belt. It looked like a flashlight, which made Lurk instantly wary; he had initially mistaken the rapier he now held in his hands for a simple flashlight, and only blind luck had prevented him from putting its blade through his own skull when he'd activated it.

The Trooper clenched both his fists, and made a twisting gesture. An annoying hum suddenly emitted

from the suit of armour, and blue tongues of energy began to flicker and dance across the crimson. A second hum arose from the staff in the Trooper's gauntleted hand as flickering energy beams extended from each end.

Lurk took a step back and adopted a defensive stance. He knew he was in trouble. Swinging a light rapier was easy for a Jubbly; it was basically a matter of using the Source to remain aware of the position of your blade so you didn't inadvertently slice your own leg off. And so far, all he'd ever done was swing it. A duel against a trained opponent was something altogether out of his experience.

He wondered if the Trooper was Source-sensitive. For anybody who wasn't, wielding a light rapier could be dangerous.

The Trooper suddenly leaped forward. The weapon swung around, and Lurk barely managed to get his blade up in time to protect his left flank. No sooner had he blocked the blow, though, but the Trooper was swinging it the other way. Lurk threw himself backwards, but still the energy beam impacted his right elbow. It dealt a numbing blow—obviously the flickering blades were different from his own rapier blade—and only the fail-safes in his mechanical hand prevented him from losing the grip on his light rapier. He rolled backwards and, with a little assistance from the Source, bounded back to his feet. The Trooper had followed him, was right on top of him, and Lurk swung his light rapier wildly to push the Imperial back. The Trooper raised his arm, as the other had, but this time Lurk's blade skittered off of the energised armour.

Oh shit, thought Lurk as he staggered back a couple more steps and regained his original stance. These Troopers had been ready for him. They were outfitted

with armour and weapons that could stand up to direct attack from a light rapier. *I hope it's highly expensive*, mused Lurk idly, *otherwise they'll be giving it to every Trooper in the Imperium!*

Another scream sounded from behind the closed door, and Lurk launched himself forward again, swinging his blade blindly. His wild flurry of blows pushed the Trooper back several paces; then the energy staff flicked out and smashed into his hand. This time the blow shorted much of the electronics in his hand, and the hilt of his light rapier went flying through the air to clatter harmlessly to the floor behind the Trooper. He had no defence, now, as the staff smashed into his left shoulder, numbing his arm, and then around to clip his temple. Half-stunned, he staggered back, falling to the floor.

The Trooper stood over him, and raised the flickering staff to deliver the final blow. Lurk reached out desperately for the Source. He felt his light rapier in his hand, he imagined it there, and the discarded weapon suddenly leaped off of the floor where it lay, and flew through the air towards the armoured back of the Trooper. Lurk squeezed with his mind, and the rapier activated. Three feet of shimmering death extended—and bounced harmlessly off the Trooper's backplate.

The Trooper paused at the distraction, then cocked his head quizzically at the youth on the floor before him.

Lurk reached for the Source again. Time to stop messing around. Time to revert to what he knew. He *tweaked*, and the hideous helmet that protected the Trooper's head changed into a pumpkin.

The Trooper shuddered. He dropped the weapon he held—like Lurk's light rapier, it deactivated itself when released—and began to claw frantically at the hard rind

of the vegetable. He staggered blindly sideways, bumped into the wall, and fell over.

Lurk dragged himself to his feet, and stooped to pick up his light rapier. His head throbbed as he did so, and he became aware of a warm trickle running down the side of his face. He ignored it. His right hand was only partially working, but he managed to close his fingers around the hilt of his weapon. His left arm was still numb.

He straightened, and turned to look at where the fallen Trooper still scrabbled frantically at the pumpkin which enclosed his head. He wondered whether there was a void inside the pumpkin where the Trooper's head was, or whether head and pumpkin had merged into one inseparable whole—and with a shudder he pushed the thought aside. He knew from past experience it would come back to haunt his dreams later.

He staggered up to the door. Another wrenching scream sounded as he tapped the controls, and he winced. The door hissed open, and Lurk stepped through.

He took in the scene beyond in one swift glance, but his brain seemed to process each individual element in a series of flashes. Libby, strapped to a table. A very short Imperial officer. A gag. A stick. Sparks. Naked skin. Sweat.

Then the door hissed closed behind him.

“I thought I said I was not to be disturbed while I was working,” said the officer, clearly annoyed. His back was to the door, and he did not turn. He was standing beside Libby, whose thick jacket and sweat-soaked blouse had been peeled open. He had one hand cupped over one of her exposed breasts; with the other hand he swung the stick he held lightly across her bare skin. Sparks flew, and Libby's whole body jerked as another strangled scream was wrung from her throat.

“Get away from her, you prick!” spat Lurk.

The officer turned his head. “What?” he demanded. “Who are you? How did you get in...” His gaze slid down Lurk’s arm to the light rapier which hung limply from his fingers. “Oh,” he said. “The Jubbly.” Suddenly he dropped his hand from Libby’s breast to the pistol holstered on his hip; to his horror he discovered that his skin was damp with the woman’s sweat, and he fumbled the draw. Then Lurk gestured, and used the Source to tear the pistol from the officer’s grip. It clattered into a corner.

“You can’t hurt me,” said the officer. “I’m an Imperial Muff. You touch me and...”

“I don’t give a fuck who you are,” snarled Lurk. He took a step forward, and the Muff backed up a step. Willing his hand to behave, Lurk activated his rapier, and its blue blade hissed into existence beside his leg. “And anyway,” he added, “I’ve already got an entire station marked up against my name, not to mention the Imperator’s pet Stiff Lord; what’s one more Muff against all that?”

“You don’t scare me,” said the Muff, although the quaver in his voice revealed the statement to be a lie.

Lurk took another step forward, and another. The Muff took two steps back.

Lurk glanced away from the Imperial officer long enough to unfasten the straps that held Libby’s ankles, forcing the fingers of his left hand to work. As he fumbled with the buckle he felt the artificial gravity field tug at his arm.

He looked back. The Muff had not moved.

“Where are the controls for the restraint field?” demanded Lurk.

“I’ll never tell,” sneered the Muff bravely, but his eyes flickered towards a console. Lurk glanced at it. He

hit the switch, and the hum of the field generator died. Lurk hadn't even noticed it until it stopped.

Libby gasped in air through her nostrils, finally able to breathe without difficulty, without the weight of her ribs compressing her lungs.

Lurk moved forward another couple of paces, and the Muff backed away further, until he was pressed against the wall of the interrogation room. Lurk looked at Libby again. Tenderly he lifted one side of her blouse up, and then the other, covering her nakedness. He looked into her eyes, and she looked back wearily. He saw much in her eyes—love, hope, gratitude, pain—and he could hardly bear it.

The Muff made his move, darting forward, swagger stick raised high to strike. Without looking away from Libby, without making any outward move at all, Lurk used the Source to lift the officer off his feet and slam him hard against the wall. Holding him there, pinned, suspended above the deck, Lurk carefully unfastened the shackles around Libby's wrists. Once freed, she tried to move but he touched his hand lightly to her arm and shook his head.

"Don't," he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "Rest while you can. When we leave here, we'll be in a hurry."

Now he removed the gag from her mouth.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

She nodded, although the movement was barely perceptible. "Better," she hissed, her mouth sore and dry, "now you're here." The effort to speak left her exhausted, and she slumped back onto the table.

"Rest," he told her again. Then he turned away from her.

The Muff writhed and struggled uselessly against the invisible force which held him firmly against the wall. "You won't get away with this," he shouted angrily.

"Won't I?" asked Lurk. He released the Muff, and the short officer tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. "We'll see about that. We need to have a talk, you and I." He took another step closer to the Muff, and as he did so he raised his light rapier menacingly.

"You touch me, and I'll make you pay," said the Muff.

"Really?" said Lurk. "You and whose army?"

The door hissed open behind him, and Lurk spun around, lifting his rapier to readiness. Three grey-armoured Shock Troopers moved swiftly into the room, blasters drawn.

"I believe," said the Muff, "that answers your question."

Admiral Muzzel nudged the motionless corpse with his booted toe. It had once been an Imperial Honour Guard; now it had a pumpkin where its head should have been.

"What happened here, sir?" asked the Shock Trooper, the leader of this Team. He leaned over the dismembered corpse of the second Honour Guard. "These look almost like they've been inflicted by a light rapier."

"What do you know of light rapiers, Sergeant?" asked the Admiral.

"We've seen our fair share," said the Sergeant.

The Admiral nodded. "It would seem," he said, "that our Muff has a visitor."

"The Jubbly?" asked the Sergeant. "I believe I have a score or two to settle with him!" He lifted his gun, and swung toward the door to the interrogation room.

"Stand down, Sergeant," said the Admiral.

“But sir,” began the Sergeant. The Admiral merely held up his hand for silence.

“Sergeant ... Strong, is it not?”

“Yes sir,” said Sergeant Samson ‘Mauler’ Strong.

“Listen to me, Sergeant,” said the Admiral. “This situation could work to our advantage. Any score you might have can wait. Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir?” said Strong.

“Sergeant? Do I make myself clear?”

Strong snapped to attention. “Yes sir,” he said sharply.

“Good,” said the Admiral. “Now, we go in, you secure the room—and then you follow my lead.”

“Yes sir,” said Strong.

“Move out, Sergeant Strong,” said the Admiral.

“You heard the man,” said Strong. “Fib, you take point. Jenkins, Mikki, you follow him through that door. Cover everyone, but don’t fire unless your life depends on it. And Basski, you stick with me. The Admiral’s safety is in your hands.”

“Got it, Sarge,” growled Fib. Stepping over the remains of the headless Trooper, he keyed the door and moved smoothly through the doorway, stepping to one side the instant he was clear. Jenkins and Mikki followed him closely.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, sir,” growled Sergeant Strong to the Admiral. “These Jubbly are dangerous!”

“I hope so too, Sergeant,” said the Admiral. Then he followed the three Troopers through the doorway.

The Jubbly stood with his light rapier drawn and humming. *Ready to take on a whole army, by the look in his eye*, thought the Admiral. The woman lay on the table where the Muff had placed her, but her bonds had been

removed. At the appearance of the Imperials, she had started struggling to push herself upright. At the back of the room, the Muff lay on the floor against the wall. Now he, too, struggled to stand.

“Ah, Muff Farquhar, there you are,” said the Admiral in a conversational tone.

“Admiral,” said the Muff haughtily, “take this man away and lock him up.”

The Admiral turned towards Lurk and studied him as if only now seeing him. “Oh yes,” said the Admiral, “I see you have visitors. Please excuse me!”

“What?” said the Muff. “Don’t be silly, man, arrest this young upstart and be quick about it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” said the Admiral.

“What? You have your orders, Admiral. I don’t...”

“I’m afraid,” said the Admiral pleasantly, “that I no longer take orders from you. In fact, we are here to place you under house arrest—but I see you are busy, and I know how much you hate to be disturbed, so we’ll come back in ten minutes.” He turned to leave.

“No wait,” shrieked the Muff in sudden terror. “You can’t leave me with these terrorists. They’ll kill me!”

“I fail to see,” said the Admiral, with a smile, “how that is my problem.” He walked out of the room and, after a moment’s hesitation, the Troopers of Team Badger followed him.

The door hissed closed behind them.

“Sergeant,” said the Admiral, “be so good as to sound a general recall. I want all Imperial forces back on the *Bermuda*. We leave in fifteen minutes.”

“But sir,” said the Sergeant. “Won’t they kill him?”

“Probably,” said the Admiral.

The sergeant nodded his understanding. “But what if they don’t?”

“Either way,” the Admiral told him, “it won’t be a problem! Now, move out.”

Lurk deactivated his light rapier and returned it to his belt. Ignoring the whimpering Muff, he stepped to Libby’s side and helped her to sit up. She threw her arms around him, and he held her gently.

Finally, he stepped back. They stared at each other for a few seconds, and then she glanced down at her blouse. It clung damply to her skin, but the front gaped loosely.

“Would you, please?” she said. “My hands are too weak.” Her voice was harsh and hoarse. With a nod, he began to fasten the buttons up the front of her blouse.

“I knew you would come for me,” she said. “I knew you would find me.”

Lurk looked up, studying her face. He had no reply for her. He needed no reply.

“What about him?” he asked her, with a nod of his head toward where the Muff stood quietly in the corner.

“Maybe it’s wrong,” she said, “but I want him dead. I want to chop him into little bits, then incinerate what’s left, then spit on the ashes.”

“I can arrange that,” said Lurk. Libby looked into his eyes, and she saw a darkness there that frightened her. He was serious.

“Nah,” she said. “He’s not worth the effort. Besides...”

“Besides?” asked Lurk.

“I’m all out of spit,” she told him. She tried to smile, but could not quite manage to pull it off. “By the way,” she added, “you smell dreadful.”

He frowned. Then he glanced down at his flight suit. He was in the same clothes he had been wearing since leaving Hoff. Since then he had trained in them,

wallowed in brackish mud, even slept in them. After spending three weeks on Daggyboil, he could not smell them, but they looked dreadful.

“I guess I do,” he agreed.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “I love you anyway.”

Again, Lurk had no reply to that. Nothing that he wanted to say to her here, anyway.

“Can you walk?” he asked her.

“I think so,” she said, “if I can lean on you?”

“Any time,” he told her.

“Where’s Mal?” she asked him.

“Come on,” he said, “we have to go now.” With his arm supporting her, she lowered herself off the table and tested her legs. They didn’t seem inclined to buckle beneath her, so she put her weight on them. Leaning into Lurk, she took a step, then another.

When they reached the door, she stopped. Lurk pressed the switch, and the door hissed open.

“Where’s Mal?” she insisted.

Lurk turned to look into her eyes. “Not here,” he told her. “I don’t know. Somebody took him before I got here. But I promise you, we *will* find him!”

“Not here?” repeated Libby. She blinked? “And what about Shaggus? And Seepy?”

“I sent Shaggus back to the *Sparrow*,” said Lurk. “I haven’t seen Seepy, but knowing him...”

“... he’ll be on the *Sparrow* too,” finished Libby. “Okay, let’s go.” She stepped through the door.

Lurk followed her, but then it was his turn to hesitate. He leaned against the wall weakly.

“Lurk?” asked Libby with concern, “are you okay?”

“Just tired,” he told her. “Give me a second.” It was not a lie, not really. He *was* tired. Weary. But he felt a twinge of guilt at his deception. As he leaned against the

wall, he reached out for the Source, seeking, seeking... Then, with his mind, he squeezed.

In the room they had just left, the Muff's hands clawed desperately at his constricting throat. His eyes bugged, his mouth gaped, and after several long seconds there was a hollow crunch as the bones in his neck snapped under the pressure. Muff Aleeto Farquhar slumped to the floor, dead.

"Okay," said Lurk as he pushed himself away from the wall. "Let's go."

Chapter 22

A Single Clue

Lurk and Libby saw not a single Shock Trooper on their slow, stumbling walk back to the *Serendipity Sparrow*. What few civilians they saw soon hurried out of the path of the two Rebels. They were both asleep on their feet by the time they finally reached the landing pad, and Shaggus half-carried them both aboard. Lurk managed to stay awake long enough to contact Arty Farty in the cross-wing, to tell the stubby ‘bot that they were leaving. Then he passed out.

His dreams were troubled.

When he awoke, he was in the *Sparrow*’s sick bay with a bandage around his head. Libby was seated across from him, facing him but fast asleep.

Comforted, he drifted back into sleep.

The second time Lurk awoke, they were on a planet—Lurk could tell immediately; real gravity always felt different from the artificial variety. He was alone. He pushed back the cool sheet which covered him, and discovered that beneath it, he was naked. He looked around. On one of the chairs, a pile of clothes—from Mal’s wardrobe, judging by their colour—had been laid out for him.

Lurk picked up the brown trousers and stepped into them. They were a little loose, and a little short, but they would do. He shrugged into the brown shirt.

Barefoot, he left the small infirmary and headed for the cargo bay. The exit ramp was sealed tight, and when Lurk peered through the small porthole, he saw a dismal grey landscape. He also saw, a short distance beyond the *Sparrow*, the shape of his cross-wing fighter.

“We’re on Elimb,” said Libby from behind him, and he turned to face her. “How are you feeling?”

“Headache that won’t go away,” he told her, “but apart from that, pretty good. How are you?”

“Recovering.” She shrugged. “Trying to forget.” She moved over to a low crate and sat down on it, then patted the space beside her.

“What are we doing on ... where did you say? Elimb?” He sat himself down beside her.

She nodded. “Elimb is the second planet in Tibrogar’s system. Far enough from the gas giant that the Imperium probably won’t find us if it changes its mind; close enough that we could get here without a hyperdrive. That’s what we’re doing here: repairs.”

“Looks pretty dreary out there,” he said.

“More than dreary,” she said. “It’s toxic. Shaggus went out in it just long enough to pull the exotic energy focuser from your cross-wing to replace the *Sparrow*’s, and despite his breather mask, he was coughing for the next hour.”

“And Arty?”

“Yeah,” Libby reassured him with a gentle smile, “we brought her in as well.”

“How long till we’re able to leave?” asked Lurk.

“Couple of hours, perhaps,” said Libby. “Although, to be honest, I think I’d rather leave it for another day, to let Shaggus get some sleep too.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Lurk.

“We do have good news, though,” she said.

“Mal?” asked Lurk after a short pause.

“Mal.” said Libby. “Shaggus detected a scent he recognised when he was in Mal’s cell. He says it must be from whoever took him.”

“And?”

“He thinks he’s on Ratatouille,” said Libby.

“Ratatouille?” said Lurk with a puzzled frown. “Why would ... oh!”

“Yeah,” said Libby. “The bounty that Flabby the Butt put on his head. We think somebody has finally collected on it.”

“That’s my fault,” said Lurk miserably. “He was ready to leave weeks ago, to go pay her off, but I convinced him to stay.”

“You’re not the only one,” she said.

“So what’s the plan?” said Lurk. “I take it there’s a plan.”

“Sure there is,” said Libby. “We go get him back! Simple. The details will work themselves out.”

“I hope so,” said Lurk. “They say the devil is in the details.”

“Maybe,” said Libby. “But we *will* get him back!”

Lurk nodded. They sat in silence for a while. Finally, Lurk half-turned toward Libby.

“You love him, don’t you?” he asked her.

“Mal?” she asked. She bit her lip. After a moment, she closed her eyes.

Lurk waited patiently for her to reply.

Finally she drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I don't know what to do," she admitted. "I don't know what to think. I ... I love Mal, yes. But I love you too. I want him, but I feel a bond to you that I don't want to lose." She opened her eyes at last, and turned them towards Lurk.

"We *do* share a bond," he told her. He was still staring down at his hands. "And you will never lose me. But when we get Mal back, I won't stand in your way." He paused, licked his lips. "I have something to tell you," he told her, "and it won't be easy for you to hear."

"Perhaps you should speak up, then," said Libby.

Lurk grinned. He looked up at her, but his eyes were unfocussed as he examined the memory.

"I used that joke with Bent, once," he said. His smile faded. He blinked his eyes back into focus.

"So what do you have to tell me?" she asked. Her voice trembled nervously. "Are you married, is that it?"

"No," he said, "it's not like that. Libby..." He stared into her beautiful hazel eyes. "I'm your brother."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. Next you'll be telling me that Barth Vapour is our father!"

"Well, since you mention it," said Lurk, "he is. It's true, Libby. I didn't want to believe it at first, either, but it *is* true."

"Oh," she said. She blinked. "Eww," she added.

"Indeed," he said.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that," she said hurriedly.

"Don't worry," he told her, "I know how you meant it."

"But ... I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," he said. "Take your time. Sleep on it."

She nodded wordlessly. Silence fell over the cargo bay of the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

"Oh my gods," said Libby suddenly.

“What?” asked Lurk.

“I’ve just realised. This means...”

“What?”

“My full name is ‘Labia Orgasma Splitwhisker’!” she sobbed.

Epilogue

Swan Song of the *Fat Lady*

The *Imperial Science Vessel Fat Lady* cruised silently through deep space, far from the charted spaceways. The region through which they travelled was known by many names. Official Imperial records named it “Zone 51”, but its most common nickname amongst the crew of the *ISV Fat Lady* was “the Bramble Patch”. Here, space itself was twisted in upon itself, knotted into bizarre anomalies where the standard laws of physics did not apply. Standard space travel was hazardous in the Bramble Patch, and hyperlight travel was impossible. Hyperspace itself did not exist here.

While the scientific importance of Zone 51 could not be understated, the region held a far greater significance. It was the ideal place for the Imperium to develop their new planet-busting weapon.

Although close to the centre of the galaxy, Zone 51—almost fifteen light years across at its widest point—was devoid of stars. It was dark here.

Directly ahead of the *Fat Lady*, part of the darkness began to shimmer and sparkle with a sickly green glow. The shimmer grew larger, and larger still, and vague shapes began to form: walls, decks, humanoid figures moving within. Suddenly space itself flexed and rippled, and something huge popped into existence. For a

moment, the object seemed to be delineated in flickering columns of letters and digits; then the glow faded, and the object was solid. It was massive, and it was shaped like a dodecahedron.

“What in Hell’s Handbasket...?” began Captain Sondarombalom Dravisikhtar. He was a THIGH. Bred specifically to pilot THIGH Fighters, the THIGH—Transmogrified Hermetically Incubated Genetic Humans—were designed to withstand the stresses of high gravitational shifts. As such, they were ideal for duty in the shifting spatial wasteland of Zone 51. The *ISV Fat Lady* was crewed exclusively by THIGH.

“Evasive action, hard to port,” he yelled as the proximity alarm sounded.

The comm speakers crackled to life. “We are Droid,” rasped a harsh, mechanical voice. “You will be integrated. Resistance is futile.”

Captain Dravisikhtar stood up out of his seat.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he said.

**The End
of
Return of the Phantom Menace**

**Lurk Splitwhisker
and Friends**

**will return
in**

**Array Wars: Episode 3.0
Attack of the Stiff**

