

**Meddlers In Time**  
**Wayne Watson**

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*All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or otherwise able to take legal action against me, is purely coincidental.*

*All the names were pulled out of my memory and applied more or less at random. You ain't that character just because you share a first name and a trade.*

*That's my story and I'm sticking to it.*

**Mission:** Deep Cover Agent Provocateur

Infiltrate the Imperium in the 35th century and facilitate a state of total war with Hegemony forces.

No local assets.

No retrieval.

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### **Meddlers in Time Out of the frying pan, into the fire**

I hate getting killed.

It rates right up there as some of my very worst experiences. No matter how or how often it happens I will never get used to it- and I do all I can to avoid it.

Which is not always easy in the more interesting parts of the Empire..

Getting to where I am now has cost me three lives- at about 1.2 million adjusted Imperials a time.

Sometimes I wish my crew wouldn't try so hard to recover the running backup with the nasty bits on it, but I know there is usually some valuable lesson there- like how I screwed up and got slotted.

But the more 'valuable' the lesson I get to learn, the more I would rather be restored from the last full backup.

Still, it could be worse- after all- I am only one of a very few that get to die another day- in this time and place...

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### **Helzin Loyalist Bloc Special Operations Group**

"I don't like this operation at all Commander, but I have no other choices. The Imperials are demanding we get the last separatist stronghold cleaned out," said Admiral Haverston. "They can't get the cruisers over the continent to land their Marines until that PA cannon emplacement is taken out. So your company has to kill those guns- your mission is a go."

Commander Jamieson gave a dry grin. "I had best get the troops moving then, sir."

"Good luck Commander", said the Admiral, as Jamieson strode out of his office. "I hope you can do this or I will have to nuke that Continent bare- of 284 million souls..."

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**Recon Company  
3rd Expeditionary Force  
Helzin Colonial Marines.**

“The area is tight- signal Cranston and inform him that Breaker is a go. As of now, nobody enters, nobody leaves this base and all communications are cut off after you call Cranston. We load and move at 2530. Make it happen.”

“Aye Sir” said Andrea, the company clerk, who immediately sent the pre-prepared signal and shut down communications on her tablet.

Wayne turned to his 2IC, Tom Phillips. “Tom, it’s a go- get the troops ready to load up. The advance party moves in 90 minutes.”

Tom gave a casual salute and doubled off towards the company HQ.

Six months of training had just come to a head.

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Commander Jamieson was one of the first swimmers to reach land. Pulling himself out of the heavy surf onto the rocks at the base of the cliff, he attached a chemical piton to the rocks and waited. As soon as the anchor had cured, he attached the winch and started to wind in his spider line. Waiting for the 5-kilometer monomolecular line to wind in, he flipped down his image intensifier goggles and started to scan the cliff face, looking for the best line.

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Jamieson’s alpha team landed, securing the submersible raft and unloading equipment. With the belay anchor for the first leg set, he started the climb, first up a small chimney, then following a crack. As he climbed, he left a trail of hex and cam locks. Climbing may have been a lost art on Helzin, but not to Wayne, who was now exploiting the belief that these cliffs were unscalable. As he climbed, he paused to hammer in plastic pitons for the following climbers to use as hand and footholds. There were plenty of cracks for these- they would not be strong enough to arrest a fall, but would dramatically speed up the climb for the others that would have the benefit of a top-rope.

At the 150-meter mark, Jamieson paused on a small ledge, while a chemical piton cured.

Just nine short months ago, he was a- THE leading privateer, commanding the vessel ‘Wotan’s Fury’. Thirty years of operating in the Empire, working up the ranks- from ordinary spacer to shareholder officer, then his own small command and now commander of the premier Free Company aligned to the empire...

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**Helzin  
9 Months Earlier**

Dropping out of Subspace into high orbit about Helzin, Captain Jamieson passed his compliments to the Sailing Master for her usual perfect approach. As the sectors reported in secure, he gave permission for the lighters to approach, to carry their loot down to the markets of Helzin's Southern bloc. The end of another tour, keeping the Hegemony out of the way while the Helzin civil war ran its course. Taking the Captain's gig, Wayne and party descended to the surface to meet with Admiral Haverston- CIC of the Southern Bloc.

Haverston opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of genuine New Islay Scotch.

"That was an impressive feat of arms, taking an outie cruiser intact" said Haverston.

"You wanted an intact Crow warship, now you have one, sir. I believe the fee was agreed upon?"

"10 Million, now in your account. Now I know this is a bad time, but we need to talk about the conditions of your warrant"

"My Letters of Marque are in order- what do you mean?"

"Under the terms, we can second you into our Navy- we are currently under such a condition as making this necessary. Our negotiations with the Empire require that we take control of all nations of our world, for a Class One admission to the Empire. You are now officially in the Helzin navy with the rank of Commander.

We need you, to help us take the Northern bloc. And we are invoking the conditions on your Letters of Marque."

"I suppose you have me then", said Wayne. "I signed the papers and a deal is a deal."

"Good Man .I had hoped you would see it that way- We are prepared to reimburse you at the standard rates for a private command- we need all the vessels we can get."

"Good luck Haverston- I signed ownership over to Commander Hendrick before I dropped. As we speak, he will be underway for New Hamburg. You have me- but not my ship or crew.

Haverston's face turned crimson at that news and he roared- "You bloody pirate."

"Privateer- Sir."

As quick as he had turned to anger, Haverston started to laugh- "It would appear I indeed have my man- you slippery bugger."

Uninvited, Wayne walked over to the sideboard and filled his glass to the brim with whiskey. "I need a good researcher, a procurements officer and command of your best recon team. Now before you blow a blood vessel, I brought my Marine 2IC with me. Let us have a look at your plan to break the Northern Wall.

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“It won’t work and it wouldn’t have worked with my ships either- but I think I see a hole- give me a week and I will have a workable plan- it’s going to cost you, mind.”

“Just get those defenses down, so that the Imperials can land- damn them- they don’t want losses.- and the cost will be met.”

“I need Cranston’s air wing too.”

“Who the hell is the Admiral here.”

“Just do what the Commander wants and you will stay an Admiral.- Sir.”

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“Ok Sergeant, they say you are the one for procurements- here is a list- I want to see that lot in my stores before the end of the week. Here is another one. This lot needs to be in our mess before the end of work today. If it ain’t- well, I’m not making threats. Let’s see what you can do sarge.

Sergeant Carl Robinson looked at the list and started making calls. This would be easy, but no doubt the boss would have harder tasks before long.

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The anchor firm, he fed the top rope through the crab, for the climbers following, hauled up another bag of gear and resumed his climb.

The rock was better here and the second leg of the climb went much faster. Behind, the next party was already on the ledge below, bringing up the winch and fibre optic comms line. At 320 meters, I had reached a chimney near the top of the vertical face. There was no need for the rope now, so I placed a sling around a boulder and gave a series of tugs on the rope, to let the team below know I had arrived. Again, I sent the rope back down below until a tug told me they had the end. I shot up the chimney, scouting around for the spot I had seen on the reconnaissance photos. Having located the wide ledge, I set my last chemical anchors and backtracked to meet the climbers behind me. Along the way, I set the last of my hexs and slings as handholds.

The first of the team was already at the top with the winch, so we returned to set that up while the others brought the rest of our gear up the cliff. As we connected the winch to the anchors, Andrea arrived with the commlink. Once she had that operating, her job was to traverse the top of the cliff and make contact with the second climb- Tom’s lead, 300 meters away. This fiber optic link was the only communications we would have, with us not daring to break radio silence until the attack was under way. Now I could talk to the rest of my team and had connectivity to the submerged weapons platforms not far offshore.

We now had 40 troops at the bottom of the climb, with another seven on or heading up the cliff- plus about five thousand kilos of equipment. I checked my watch-

0135hrs. We were a few minutes ahead of schedule and I hoped to gain some time when we started winching. With the arrival of the carbon-fiber booms and the power pack, that would be happening in a few minutes.

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Andrea stopped at the sound of a quiet hiss. She had reached the perimeter of the next beachhead. The sentry passed her through and pointed the direction of their CP. "Good to see you, Corporal." said the platoon commander, as she hooked up the cable. This middle position had the easiest climb and was already winching troops and equipment up.

"Anything from Gold?" Andrea asked .

"Nothing so far- they may not have been able to traverse"

She switched on the comms set. "Looks like you were right Sir- they had to send a swimmer with a line around to your landing. They report setting up the winch now."

"Thanks Corporal- you can head back to your team now- good luck."

It would be a lot quicker going back now that she had found a path- which was a good thing- it got lonely up here on your own.

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With the last of the climbers up, we started winching up the others. The winch could lift 1000 kg up the 350 meters in five minutes. We would attach a padded pole, which four troops would clip onto, and then we would walk them up the cliff face. Once we had most of them up here, we would start lifting cargo. We had done this in 90 minutes in training.

I left the Carl in charge of the winch and started the next part of the operation, sending the scouts out to mark paths through the boulders and low scrub that made up the cliff tops. I now had voice and video from the other two CP's. Gold was behind schedule, but Omaha and ourselves were well ahead of time. The plan would work with two positions operational, in any case.

The most critical part of the mission, the ability to initiate the three submerged weapons platforms launch sequence was now all go.

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Andrea stopped behind a three-meter high boulder and listened for a couple of minutes. Hearing nothing but the wind, she slowly pushed a thin, gray plastic tube into and along a crack in the stone and taped it to the boulder. With the guide tube in place, she slid the whisker of the sensor above the top of the boulder. Invisible to radar or even the eye of someone a meter away, this allowed her to see what was beyond. Satisfied she had a good field of view, she connected the pickup to the CP and crept away to deploy her second probe.

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We were getting some good imagery now and had been able to pick out six of the eight point defense turrets and all four of the longer-range heavy lasers. There was also a foot patrol at section strength out there. Heading away from us, but they will still be out there when we would assault the command bunker. Something else to deal with.

0345hrs- Everyone is in place and we are ready to go. The attack starts at 0415 as soon as the air defense system engages the missile attack by Cranston's aircraft.

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As soon as they were painted, the two light fighters launched their probes and broke away from the threatening lasers. Predictably, the heavy laser turrets on the peninsular soon shot down the missiles.

However, the fleeing fighters now had the coordinates of the laser emplacements.

Four squadrons of GS-19 ground attack aircraft closed rapidly on the emplacements. As they approached the effective range of the lasers, they simultaneously launched a mixture of decoys and missiles, attempting to overload the defenses and then broke off sharply.

At the first sound of crackling, superheated air that marked the lasers firing, Jamieson flipped the switch cover and initiated the three batteries launch sequence. On the seabed, the barges fired their gas generators, blowing water from the ballast tanks. As soon as the barges surfaced, the batteries of mortars fired salvos milliseconds apart. From each barge, 300 100mm RAM bombs flew over the cliff tops on a high trajectory and started their free-fall downwards. From here, their seeker heads locked onto targets and a secondary rocket motor propelled them downwards.

Now all the laser turrets were fully engaged, 900 incoming rockets overloaded the deadly point defense system (which also worked against troops on the ground.). We were now free to engage the main turrets. Throughout the rocks of the cliff top, guided missiles- explosive and kinetic- flashed out at the laser tubes. Heavy anti-material rifles added to the point defense system's problems- DU needles tearing through the turrets, wrecking delicate components.

Within 5 seconds, the defenses were effectively down and the remaining missiles screamed overhead, headed towards the heavily armored particle accelerator. The rest of the aircraft would not be far behind them.

The raiders moved forward to assault the command bunker, following the fleeing patrol, which were now fleeing to cover. They had made their last mistake, that of not looking back.

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## **Imperial Cruiser ‘Tobruk’ Helzin low orbit**

“Gunner- you have command” said the pilot. Jenny edged the 180,000 tonne cruiser forward, making minute adjustments to its attitude, as she lined up the spinal mount of the ion cannon with the surface emplacement. This was a devastating weapon, but was a clumsy one to use, requiring the whole ship to be pointed at the target. This would be like an old time gunfight between two men with pistols. A balancing act between speed and accuracy.

As the simulations of the last week had shown, Ensign Jenny DeVries was both fast and shot straight. So good that the captain had given her the gun ahead of his more experienced officers. She was young- in the final year of the Imperial Academy officers training, but no one questioned her nerve- certainly none that had been on a boarding party with her.

Now they were at extreme range- she had a firing solution but it was not optimal. The bridge was unusually hushed with the only sound the hum of the ventilation fans, when the Chief Yeoman broke the silence. “Sir- local forces have successfully engaged the emplacement. Main gun is now being engaged- blast doors are closed, I say again, blast doors are closed.”

“There is your opening Miss- go get him.” said Captain Rodgers.

Jenny moved the cruiser forward at full power, rapidly closing the distance, her fingertips making minute adjustments, and then fired, taking the whole bridge by surprise with her speed.

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“What a fuckin’ trip!” said Andrea, passing the handset and codesheet. The shock wave had knocked everyone down and only their NV goggles had saved them from flash-burnt eyes. Further inland, flashes over the horizon showed that the Imperial navy has not wasted any time attacking the capital’s defenses.

“Sword is gone- I say again Sword is GONE.- authenticate 2wzp96- damn fine shooting Tobruk.”

Jamieson shook himself off. “OK people- enough lying around- we have a command bunker to take.”

A short firefight broke out from the left flank, as Tom’s platoon made contact with the remainder of the security patrol. Two minutes later came a call “We have the back door to Utah open.”

In a stroke of luck, Tom had caught the patrol entering one of the hidden doors to the command bunker complex. As we arrived, he was already preparing to assault.



We would distract the command crew by detonating a breaching charge at the main airlock door, with a feinting attack there.

This was the sort of work Tom and I had specialized in as privateers- fighting with blade and pistol in confined spaces. Nasty, messy stuff.

We shrugged off our harness and packs and started pulling on body armour, while the specialists got ready for the assault.

### **Imperial Cruiser ‘Tobruk’ Helzin low orbit**

“Ground forces report target quote ‘gone’ Sir”

Jenny safed the gun and immediately started lining up with the next target.

“Signal from OBS ‘Monitor’, Sir.”

“On-screen Chief.”

Admiral Hamersley appeared on the screen. “Compliments to your gunner Captain- that was the best bloody shooting I have ever seen. Now- can the ‘Monitor’ be of assistance here?”

“Sir, you picked a very good time to get in the fight- your target data is on the way now.” said Captain Rodgers.

The whole bridge breathed a sigh of relief. They were previously taking on planetary defenses on an even basis. Now- well, an Orbital Bombardment Station was the equivalent of taking on a pistol shooter with a heavy machine cannon.

Rodgers wondered how the ‘Monitor’ happened to be here, when he should be in the Tigris system, battling defensive satellites. The empire only had a hand-full of these super-heavy stations. But he was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

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“These doors ain’t too hard.” said Sergeant Anson, as he hooked up the detonator.

“That’s what I thought Sarn’t” said Tom. “ I don’t think they were expecting visitors.”

“FIRING” cried the engineer, as he detonated the charges. Even while the smoke was billowing out, the assault team headed into the bunker.

“FUCK.- another one- get Anson back in here.”

“Here, sir- I thought there would be a real one behind that”

“The other door was an airlock too.”, said Andrea.

“OK, get it ready Sarge and give this one hell”

“Aye aye boss.”

“Signal from ‘Tobruk’ boss- do you need help with this hardpoint?”

“Signal to ‘Tobruk’- wait five mike. If we breach, signal them to stand down.”

“Sir- I’m coming in too.”

“Negative Corporal- I need you to talk to Tobruk and keep them from toasting us all.”

“Aye Sir”

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“Sir- Ground forces request hold- they are assaulting now.”

“Gunnery- hold- Chief- get us some video on the assault.”

“Aye Sir.”

“Sir- ‘Monitor’ signals. Flag requests your attendance with the gunner responsible for the ground attack, at your first convenience.”

“Acknowledged.”

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Anson must have used all of his demo kit on that door. Viscid black smoke billowed out of the opening and ejecta pattered down behind them. Then the secondary concussion charge detonated- hopefully killing or incapacitating the occupants of the bunker. The marines rolled over the revetment and charged inwards again.

The second door lead into the C&C. The lead assaulters carried short-barreled assault shotguns and started hosing the room with automatic fire. Immediately behind them, Commander Jamieson and Lieutenant Phillips unleashed a more precise and equally deadly barrage of 10mm pistol fire, as the body of the assaulters charged in stabbing, slashing and hacking.

In a very long two minutes, it was over and the bunker was secure. The defenders were wiped out before they could fight or surrender.

An assault on a confined space- a bunker or a ship was always a fast and bloody affair, with no time for quarter given. This assault was no different. The control room stunk of explosives fumes and blood. Jamieson looked about at his men- only one walking wounded with a badly cut arm, which was being bandaged by one of the medics. The floor was awash with blood, littered with the dead, and dying.

“Signaler?- that was quick- I hope you weren’t in that fight- stand Tobruk down from

a ground strike and signal 'Utah is open'"

"Aye Sir."

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"Acknowledged- order those troops to their extraction point and advise them their relief is inbound"

"Ensign DeVries- meet me at my gig in 10 minutes"

"Aye Sir."

'I hope he brings Wayne up' thought Jenny. 'It has been five years since I saw him last...'

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"Signal from 'Tobruk', Sir- as soon as you have been debriefed, lift on the first available craft and rendezvous with 'Monitor'"

"Acknowledge signal" said Jamieson. "I guess that means our transport is on the way."

The operation had cost 10 wounded and six dead- five of the dead from when a laser hit their missile just out of its tube.

As they looked seaward, the first aircraft could be seen approaching. As the waves of landing craft rushed overhead, several broke off to land at the designated extraction point- just to seaward of a wrecked laser turret.

Imperial marines accompanied with light tanks poured out, taking up position to secure a perimeter. A small group approached from the nearest transport.

"Sir- I have orders to lift your command back to the mainland- do you need help with your wounded?"

"No- my crew will do it, but some help with our equipment would be good- OK Marines- mount up."

As we loaded the transport, a wheeled scout vehicle pulled up and three men climbed out- one an Imperial three-star general.

"You would be Jamieson".

"Yes sir."

"Damned fine work today- if you want to transfer over, be sure to mention my name" he said, handing over a card. "That goes for everyone in your outfit too."

Hell-this is 'Bloodbucket' Benson himself. This operation really must have some push behind it.

General Benson strode over to edge of the cliffs and looked down, shaking his head. Turning about, he took in the scene of shattered laser turrets burning, the still glowing molten rock in the distance where the cannon emplacement used to be and the waves of landing craft headed inland. “That operation is going to find its way into the academy textbooks.”

The Loadmaster appeared again. “Sir- we have a thirty minute delay on liftoff- there is a fire mission coming in oblique across our route.”

“Thanks Chief- we’ve dodged enough fire today.” said Jamieson.

The General asked “Can you use some help with your wounded?”.

“Well taken care of already Sir.”

“Best you get those hands dressed Commander- there will be a few wanting to shake them soon.”

Jamieson held his hands up- in the heat of the battle; he had not noticed that they were a collection of abrasions with a bit of skin between them. He had hand-jammed up a 90 meter fissure in the rock. “Damn. I thought that was the other guy’s.”

Another vehicle pulled up and the General’s G2 joined them. It was only when she raised her visor that Jamieson recognized her- Sonja. Fighting to keep any expression off his face, he nodded to her in acknowledgement.

“Sir- Engineers report the bunker clear and the techs have salvaged an intact data core.” She turned to Wayne “Quite a fight in there Commander.”

“Yes- I’m pleased with the way the troops handled that one. I hope they didn’t smash the place up too badly for you.”

“Not as badly as ‘Tobruk’ would have done.”

The General glanced significantly at his chrono. “I would like to talk to your men before you retire” he said. That almost sounded like a request- not a statement.

“Of course Sir.” said Jamieson and General Benson strode off towards the transport accompanied by Tom.

Alone with Sonja, we could now talk for the first time in three years.

“You’re in.- Haverston wants you, Tom and all your officers off-planet and fast- the rebels have a price on your heads. The best place to hide you is the academy. Apart from that you are considered too damned dangerous to have around here.”

“All to plan then. I have a few good troops for our crew once this mission is over.”

“That’s a bonus. Now- your contact at the academy will be Jane- she is the head civil

administrator on Earth. Don't look for her- she will contact you. Now- the important news- in 408 hours-check your chronometer- you will be in the Franz Josef Hotel on Taupo. At 2300 local, a gate will open in your bathroom, taking you back to Transit. From there we will have more details on your next few years. The boss is coming back now, so good luck." We shook hands and my old friend left.

I exchanged salutes with the General and ran for the ramp as the ship's engines powered up. The Loadmaster signaled 'all aboard' and I felt the momentary surge as the gravity drive engaged.

The heavy ship was already in the air and headed for home as the loadmaster started to raise the ramp. With the local and Imperial air cover they could now relax and exhausted troopers slumped on plies of equipment and such seating as there was, some even falling asleep on the deck. The cargo handlers moved amongst them passing out ration packs and bottled water.

With everyone settled, I found the Loadmaster and had him ask the flight deck for permission to come forward. This being promptly granted, the Loadmaster opened the bulkhead door and pointed the way forward through the engineering spaces to a ladder. I climbed the ladder and the flight engineer was waiting at the top to take him to the bridge.

On the bridge, there was the reassuring sight of two Warrant Officers in their fifties flying the transport. Wayne was always happier when it wasn't some Ensign or middie at the controls.

"Coffee, Sir?" asked the flight engineer, already starting to pour from a flask.

"You read my mind Chief."

The pilots glanced over, taking in my bloody uniform and bandaged hands. "I take back everything I ever said about colonial forces." said the senior of the two. "That would have been one bitch of an opposed landing."

The co-pilot interrupted. "Shit.- 'Tobruk' just got another emplacement- that's five now- their gunner is really on fire today."

"Their master gunner is really wired", said Jamieson.

"That master gunner is a cadet on her final year cruise and- she is severely fuckable."

"If you want to stick your pride & joy into a goddamn tigress." said the pilot.

Another brilliant flash lit the sky.

"That was a full charge."

The flight engineer remained busy at his station. After a short while, he announced "That one was a full charge and landed right in the capital- vicinity of the assembly hall."

A few minutes passed. “Flash traffic- that was a direct on the rebel’s government- looks like most were in there at an emergency session.” said the co-pilot. “More coming in- there is an air exclusion zone... we are well out of it. “Tobruk’ is moving into provide close support.’

“Panning cameras aft” said the flight engineer. “Watch this Commander- this should be something else.”

We looked at the viewplate. After a few minutes, filaments of incandescent light appeared in the sky, all pointing to a point in space.

“Some serious misery for the ground-pounders.”

“Better them than us.”

### **Cruiser ‘Tobruk’ Helzin Low Orbit**

“Stand down master gunner.” said the captain. “Pilot- you have the ship- take position for close support.”

Jenny released the controls and stretched back in her chair. She had been in the chair for less than three hours but it felt like a full day.

“Ensign- you are dismissed. Report to my day cabin in three hours, prior to reporting to the Admiral.”

“Aye aye Sir”, said Jenny and headed off to her cabin and the showers.

As she left the bridge, Captain Rodgers turned to his XO. “You ever see anything like that, Joan?”

“No, and I doubt I ever will again Sir.”

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“Coast coming up in minutes ten” advised the pilot. “ETA 0947 local- medical services are standing by and no doubt you will have brass on-site.”

“Thanks Chief- I had best get below- thanks for a smooth ride”

“Hell, thanks for an unopposed landing Sir.”

Wayne went below and opened the bulkhead hatch. In the hanger deck, troops were cleaning their weapons, ordering the crates of equipment and had even cleaned up uniforms as best they could. ‘Damn.’ he thought. ‘That is one great crew.’

“OK troop- we are nearly home and no doubt the brass will be waiting. First priority-

get the casualties off and don't let anyone get in your way, short of shooting the fuckers. Next- see to your gear- platoon commander's inspection at 1400.

Before long was that familiar sensation as the artificial gravity was switched off.

"Thanks for a good ride Chief"

"My pleasure to have a quiet flight Sir." said the loadmaster.

As soon as the ramp was sufficiently lowered, the wounded were carried out on stretchers to the awaiting ambulances, while the body bags were loaded onto a military hearse. The remainder of the troops marched out of the transport, while the transport crew helped our loaders remove the equipment. As soon as the craft was empty, it lifted off, headed back into orbit.

Admiral Haverston and Wing Commander Cranston were the only two waiting on the edge of the LZ. Cranston was still dressed in a flight suit, his head covered in sweat from too long in a helmet.

"Cranston- your fly-boys did a great job today," said Wayne.

"Let's say we all saved our collective arses." said Cranston.

Admiral Haverston's eyes swept over Wayne's torn and blood splattered uniform. "Move sharp and get cleaned up- we are off to meet with the Governor-General in thirty minutes.

With a casual salute, Wayne doubled off his nearby quarters. Once out of sight, he opened his comm and called Tom. "Looks like we are off this rock ASAP- get packing our gear while I'm off to see the brass- and check that Andrea and Carl still want to come along. I'm guessing we will be on the way before tomorrow."

Discarding his uniform and harness, Wayne had a quick shower to clean the blood off his hands and face and pulled on the new uniform already laid out on his bed. He quickly filled his pockets with their usual contents, fastening his pistol belt as he left his room for the last time.

Haverston made no comment as Wayne returned seven minutes later. A quick change was just one of the many things he expected of his officers. Within the minute, they were sealed into a jumpbug and on their way at speed to the Capital and Haverston's offices.

"You have probably figured this out already- You have to get off-planet immediately" said the Admiral. "Intelligence already has word that the die-hard Northern Bloc has a price on your head."

"My bags are already packed, success is an occupational hazard."

"OK- Have you figured out where we intend to hide you?"

“If I wanted to make somebody disappear for a few years until things quieted down, I would send them to Old Earth. That would be the tightest planet in the Empire- that’s one bitchin’ blockade to run.”

Haverston’s face flashed and he barked “You ran the....”-then cut off as he realized that Wayne was baiting him. “You are right-, anyway, you are officially posted to the Imperial Academy Commander.” he continued, his snarl turned into a grim smile. “As a cadet.”

Wayne was totally unfazed by this. “Can I take a couple of my old crew along?”

“I should send the whole damned company. Yes, take them.”

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The jumpbug settled atop the Admiralty building in downtown Ferrum, the Helzin capital city. As soon as the group alighted, they were whisked inside by a collection of aides and civil-service flunkies. Wayne could tell that this looked like more than a meeting with the planetary governor-general- no doubt the local aristos had heard the news and wanted to share in the success.

Governor-General Reeves met them in the conference room. He knew Wayne well, having signed his letters of marquee and given ‘Wotan’s Fury’ what covert support he could. “Sorry it has to be like this Commander.”

“No problem Sir- I would as soon slip quietly away and leave the publicity to those who want it.”

A herald shouted “All rise for his Lordship, Duke William of Helzin.”

All in the room rose, military personal saluting, as the new Duke of Helzin entered the room.

William returned the salute and addressed the room.

“I have several decorations and citations to present today. Firstly here, then followed by a brief ceremony at the marine barracks. We will honour the fallen at a state funeral in five days time.”

From the way several aides slipped away in a panic, the Duke was making this up as he went.

He continued. “Commander Jamieson, please step forward and receive this unit citation- The Imperial Award to Colonial Forces. As you know, an award that is not given lightly. By command of his Imperial Majesty, I present this award to 1st Reconnaissance Company, Helzin marines.

“Wing Commander Cranston, please step forward. By command of his Imperial Majesty, I present you with this bar to your Air Warfare Star, for the planning of the



successful raid on the Northern Defenses. It is also my pleasure to announce your promotion to Air Marshal, Commander of local atmospheric defense forces.”

“Governor-General Reeves, it is my pleasure to pass you to the Tenth grade of the Imperial Civil Service and to formally confirm your governorship over the planet of Helzin.”

“There is one more honour to confirm here- Commander Jamieson, please step forward. By command of his Imperial Majesty, I present you with the Victoria Medal of Honour.”

As he leaned forward to pin the decoration on, William whispered “All your troops that lead a climb up that bloody awful rock are up for a gong.”

“That concludes this ceremony,” said the Duke and on cue, stewards carried trays of glasses into the room. Before we could be interrupted, Duke William said to Admiral Haverston “I need to use your rooms for a quick chat with the Commander, before the Civil Service get onto us.”

“This way, my Lord” said Haverston, leading us to a side door.

With the soundproofed door shut, Duke William took a small device from his pocket and activated it. He knew Wayne would not be surprised at his using technology from...elsewhere. In any case, Wayne was already busy picking the lock to the Admiral’s liquor cabinet.

“Here is the real stuff, Will” said Wayne, pouring two glasses of 30-year old New Islay whiskey.

“Thank you, Wayne”, he said , taking the glass, “and very well done indeed on that mission.” he said, shaking Wayne’s now repaired hand warmly- “I was thinking that this would be a posthumous award the first time I saw a holo of that nightmare cliff and defenses.”

“The cliff wasn’t at all bad- not compared with some I have climbed. As for the defenses-, they put all their faith in technology and not in their men- our gain. Anyway, time is short- I take it you have a job for me at the academy?”

“I do indeed- there are tales of cadets buying their way into and through the academy. Investigate and report to Governor Somers.”

“You want them removed?”

“Report first and you will be advised. I foresee a few training accidents.”

“As always, discretion assured.”

“Good man. By the way- next birthday there will be a St. Andrew for you to go with that VMH. We all know that you were the planner of the Paradise Satellite capture and the success of that campaign.”

“What I really want is for one of my officers to be posted to the academy and two NCOs to go to the cadre school. Haverston has OK’d the transfer.”

“Consider it done- any officer of yours is a worthy candidate, unlike some they have had lately. The Emperor will consider the Helzin troop levy obligations met for this year now.”

“I’m sure Haverston will appreciate that.”

“The Emperor certainly appreciates your efforts here and elsewhere- he has commanded me to take a personal interest in your activities and I will be calling in on you during your tour at the academy.”

The Duke then made one of his snap decisions and said. “The worst storms always throw up items of interest.”

Wayne said “And the opportunities go to the first beachcombers who let the storm pass.”

William’s intuition seldom failed him- Wayne had just given the response phrase verbatim.

“I should have known you were in league with, if not one of, the Travelers- you knew exactly what that privacy device was.” The slight stressing of the word ‘first’ told William that Wayne was almost certainly a Traveler, not just one of their agents.

The Travelers were a near mythical group of smugglers and spies that could move at will and even through time- if you believed the stories. Officially, they did not exist, but they were well-known at the highest levels of court- if never spoken about directly. Not all were friendly to the Empire.

William had long had suspicions regarding the unprecedented successes of ‘Wotan’s Fury’ and her master- although it could not be denied they were a fighting company second to none- even the Imperial Elite.

“I have a few connections” Wayne said. “What good smuggler doesn’t?”

“We definitely need a long talk and I have just moved my schedule up. Right- time marches on- 23 minutes of mingling and we are off to your barracks and the hospital- I have a bucket full of tin to hand out.”

“Hopefully they won’t be too drunk yet.

“If so, the base is still a secure zone and the hangers-on will have to cool their heels outside.” said William, opening the door.

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Right on schedule, we were back in the jumpbug, headed back to the barracks. A few

quick phone calls ahead and Tom, Andrea and Carl were told to be packed and ready to move. The troops were expecting us and by the time we got there, they should be tidied up.

Sure enough, as our aircraft landed, Tom already had the company formed up to receive dignitaries. All but two of the more seriously wounded had even rejoined us.

Duke William was a soldier himself and knew that the last thing these troops needed was a long-winded speech. He simply told them that today they had written a new chapter in military history and that the war was as good as won, thanks to them. He awarded the unit citation, then the decorations for actions on the day.

Andrea received a St. Michael –a non-combat award- for her research and planning, promotion to sergeant and a bronze Star for her traverse of the cliff to link the two platoons.

The parade culminated in the award of the Gold Star to Tom and Gunny Anderson for their roles in swimming ashore and scaling the cliffs.

The short presentation done, the duke said, “I’m off to visit your comrades who can’t be with us and to pay my respects to the fallen. Lieutenant- you have my leave to dismiss the parade, but first- all drinks are on the Emperor for the next three days.”

Tom ordered a royal salute as the Duke’s jumpbug and escorts took off, and then dismissed the parade.

Haverston turned to Wayne and said, “You have four hours with your troops. A shuttle will pick you up here. That was a hell of a job of work today.” He turned and strode off to his jumpbug.

The troops were already queuing up with questions.

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Later in the evening at the Governor-General’s residence, Duke William, the Governor-General and Admiral Haverston had met for a late supper.

“Helzin is going to miss that pirate,” said Haverston. “His crew brought a hell of a lot of credit here- and kept a lot of undesirables away”

“His old company are to disband- they are too high-profile after the taking of the Paradise orbital defenses.” said William. “They have a lot of accumulated credit and most want to retire while they are at the top of their game. But after a while, a few will come back for the excitement of their old life- mark my words.”

“He was just too dangerous to have out here” said Governor Reeves. “Such men attract followers and if he could train a free company to a standard as good as the Imperial Forces- there is only one safe place for him- from the Empire’s perspective.”

“Perceptive as usual, Anthony- men that dangerous need to be under the direct control of the Empire,” said Duke William.

“I think that one is under control only as far as he wants to be.” said Admiral Haverston.

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The first available transport turned out to be a courier shuttle- rather crowded with four of us plus the shuttle’s pilots, but it was only a thirty-minute boost to the ‘Monitor’.

As we neared the battle platform, its huge size started to become apparent. “No wonder they don’t have too many of these.” said Tom.

Wayne had to bite his tongue and refrain from making any comments about ‘Death Stars’. That movie had not made it through the millennium and a half as a household name and was only known to a few serious vid buffs. It is funny what material had stood the test of time and was still around from the 20th century. There was a considerable following of classic 2-D movies here. ‘Lord of the Rings’ was still big in the original as well as it’s 3-D remakes and unlike so many others of its genre, ‘Blade Runner’ had made it too.

The view screens now showed an open docking bay, which we entered and waited while the airlock tube connected onto us.

With the usual wobble, the shuttles gravity was switched off and we unclipped our harness and gathered our few possessions.

At the other side of the airlock, a small reception was waiting, consisting of a Midshipman and two stewards.

“Welcome aboard the ‘Monitor’” said the middie, clicking her heels together in a shipboard salute. “The stewards will place your luggage aboard your transport- if you will please follow me; the Admiral is ready to receive you”.

The docking bay must have been very close to the bridge, as we at the door of the Admiral’s day cabin within a few minutes. The middie pressed her thumb to the identoplate, the armoured door slid open and we were ushered in.

“Welcome to the ‘Monitor’ and congratulations on your decorations- well deserved.” said Admiral Hamersley. “Commander- stay a few moments- Miss- kindly escort our visitors through to my lounge while we talk.”

The middie led the others away and the Admiral waited until the door was secure before speaking. “Seeing as I’m here, you may have guessed that Commander Hendrick pulled your stunt off.”

“I thought as much Sir, although I would have preferred your assistance a day earlier.”

“And stole your glory- I think not” said the admiral with a chuckle. “No- we still had a hard fight of it, but with the Paradise orbital out of the battle, it was a set-piece

engagement. You have taught Hendrick well- he SOLD us that defensive station for thirty million, the damned pirate.”

Wayne laughed, “Hendrick was a very competent XO.”

“Seriously though, Wayne- that was a brilliant bit of undercover and infiltration work. Of course, with you on Helzin, ‘Fury’ wasn’t taken as such a threat.

The Empire recognizes your work- right from the very top. There is another gong in it for you- in a couple of years, when all the heat dies down. You can start thinking about a house coat of arms if you survive the academy.”

“Well, never say that this old pirate didn’t do his bit for the Empire.”

Admiral Hamersley continued, “Now, unfortunately, ‘Fury’ has attracted far too much attention- from the outies- and the court. It would be a real good idea if your crew were to go into retirement. They have been one fine cat’s paw for the empire, but now they are just too damned dangerous.”

“Taking ‘Allah’s Sword’ was our swan-song, Sir. That was agreed by all my shareholder officers a year ago- hell, every one of my crew are stinkin’ rich after our last dozen or so prizes. They deserve to live to spend that credit,” said Wayne.

“If you need help finding new identities for any of your crew, the Empire owes a few favours.”

“All taken care of Sir.”

“I thought your affairs would be in order- let’s go aft and have a drink before your transport heads out.”

Wayne stepped through the hatchway into the Flag lounge- this was a luxurious room, fit to receive members of the court- as often it did. Rich wood paneling adorned with battle honors, leather upholstered furniture and mirrors strategically placed to make the room seem much larger than it was. However, what drew his eye was the Ensign in the uniform of the Imperial Navy- Jenny.

It took the discipline all of his many years of working undercover not to give himself away, even so it was obvious to all there that there was some kind of attraction here. It had been five years since they had last met and though neither would admit it freely, both missed each other dreadfully.

“Commander- I have a couple of people that have been wanting to buy you and your troops a drink- Captain Rodgers, Master of ‘Tobruk’ and Ensign DeVries, the master gunner who was dueling that Particle Accelerator.”

“Sir, Miss- may I compliment you on your gunnery. I’ve never seen a strike from an ion cannon from so close up.”

“And our thanks for keeping that gun’s attention elsewhere while Ensign DeVries snuck in and potted it, Commander.” said Captain Rodgers, shaking Wayne’s hand.

Jenny was as cool and collected as ever, as she took his hand.

“I hear you are headed for the academy, Sir”, Jenny said. “You should do well- and congratulations on your VMH. Hopefully our paths will cross again at the academy.”

The admiral cleared his throat and the room went silent. “While we are all here, this is a splendid time for a small ceremony.” A steward brought over a small case on this cue.

“Ensign DeVries- this is unusual but not without precedent. For numerous actions carried out in the best traditions of the Imperial Navy, you are hereby promoted to the rank of acting First Lieutenant, subject to your successful completion of your final cadet year.”

He opened the case and took out the badges of rank. “These were my bars - wear them well Miss.”

An Old-Earth Champagne was offered from an iridium tray, as the Admiral and Captain fitted Jenny’s new rank badges.

“I’m impressed.” said Wayne. “That is a vintage not often seen outside of Court.”

The Admiral gave a snort. “You know your wines- as a good rum-runner should- Captain Hendrick gave me a case when he handed over that orbital- claimed he got it from the station commandant’s larder.”

Wayne just chuckled and raised his glass. “You probably don’t even want to know the black market price. Here’s to Lieutenant DeVries- who when we meet at the academy will be ranking me.”

Jenny replied to the toast. “I believe you now have the challenge of catching up- and from what I hear, you usually catch your prize.”

Hammersley and Rodgers found this hilarious and even the stewards were trying to hide a grin or two.

Before we knew it, we had emptied a couple of bottles and it was time to board ship for the leg to Taupo. We all said our goodbyes, three of us knowing we would be back together in a matter of days.

“Now there goes one that might just be a match for you, Lieutenant.” said Captain Rodgers, with a champagne-induced twinkle in his eye.

“I will keep that thought in mind, Sir.” said Jenny. ‘Indeed I will.’ she thought to herself...

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The next leg of the journey was to be the Corvette 'Percales' and promised to be more comfortable than our last transport. The skipper was a Lieutenant (JG) Davis, not long out of the academy. He welcomed us aboard personally and then left to take charge of getting under way.

These Corvettes were a dual-role system patrol craft/armed courier vessels. Made to run down smugglers and pirates, they were relatively lightly armed and very fast, but of limited endurance needing a resupply after a few weeks in subspace, limiting them to about a 10 parsec hop- unless they were loaded up with the dreaded krats (a food-like substance, the name based on the mid-20th century K- rations). Nothing that a Frigate could not do and better, but they were a fraction of the cost.

This one would have us at the Taupo orbital in twelve days.

Wasting no time, the subspace tractors were engaged before we had finished stowing even our meager possessions. Corvettes being what they are, it was as well that we traveled light- a 'stateroom' was about the size of an officers bathroom on 'Wotan's Fury' and the showers and heads were communal- even for the skipper. We could see where the old stories of navy spacers with unclean habits being thrown to vacuum came from.

The Wardroom was almost as crowded, with three middies deadheading to Earth. They had completed their two-year combat tours and had now qualified for the academy- Carl and Andrea were much more comfortable in the larger crew's facilities. The wardroom soon emptied as the XO- a colonial Ensign (attached) handed out assignment packs and sent the middies off to get studying.

"That will keep them from underfoot," he said with a chuckle. "Now we can open the bar- self-serve here gentlemen."

"I came prepared", said Wayne, pulling a bottle of New Islay whiskey from his shipsuit.

Tom's eyes widened "270 credits a bottle back on Helzin. That's your idea of traveling light."

"It's Haverston's" Wayne said. "Always watch a man with leg pockets very carefully."

Lieutenant Davis joined us just after we had the first round poured. His eyebrows raised at the sight of the bottle- "A promising start to this trip."

"I grabbed it on the way out" said Wayne "I'm sure Carl managed to grab a few other passable bottles before we left- I told him to only bring the essentials"

"If you had given him much more time, we would have needed a bigger transport." said Tom. "He got the keys to the Officer's Mess off me, so I don't think we will be disappointed- unlike the remaining officers."

“They will be all right- I distinctly heard the Duke say that the Emperor was buying- if they can’t figure out how to order some supplies in without the chief clerk or the QM- tough luck. In any case, they will be scattered off-planet in a few days,” said Wayne.

A knock at the hatch turned out to be Carl and a petty officer with several crates on a trolley. “Some supplies for the trip Sir.”

I opened one and took out two large bottles of rather passable Helzin Gin. “Captain, with your permission, my troops have promotions to toast.”

“Granted Sir- Imperial traditions allow for these occasions.”

Wayne passed the two bottles back to Carl “There you go Staff, it’s now officially sanctioned.” No doubt, he had already put a few bottles aside for the occasion.

“Things are a bit looser on these small craft,” said Lt Davis. “On the larger ships you will find the old tradition of spirits for the officers and beer for the ratings still the norm. We mostly only have the bar open when in subspace, as well.”

“My old command was much the same,” said Wayne. “Contrary to what the entertainers would have you believe, privateers and even pirates all run very tight ships. We may have done a bit of rum–running but drank very little of it.”

“I didn’t realize that you had a ship's command,” said Lt Davis. “All that my brief mentioned was that you and your men were ground troops.”

“Lt Phillips and I got ourselves drafted into the local forces when they tried to grab my ship- they didn’t get ‘Fury’, though.”

The realization of exactly who his passengers were now dawned- and why there was such a hurry to get them out of the system.

“Well, Sir- I will need to reshuffle my training schedule for the flight. I was planning to give you a few introductory lectures on matters naval, but may I now impose on you to take a few classes.”

“I would be pleased to.”

Every naval and civilian vessel ran all manner of classes during the long drags through subspace. It kept the minds busy and productively occupied. In the 35th century, most academics were retired spacers who had spent most of their spare time shipboard studying. The larger capital ships even had their own universities- all staffed by petty officers.

This is a very different place to the 21st century.

The short hop was a welcome change to the frenzied pace of the months leading up to the raid. Tom and Wayne sang for their supper by giving talks on privateering operations, while Andrea and Carl gave presentations on the world of Helzin- its brief



history, vast mineral wealth and life there before and during the civil war.

Everybody took turns working out in the ships tiny gym, did isometrics with the crew and trained at shipboard assaults with the section of marines. In the rest breaks, we continued to work our way through the crates of 'supplies' that Carl had fetched along.

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Twelve days later, they were docked at the Taupo orbital and saying their farewells. Its a peculiarity of service life that everybody gives farewells as if they are just popping out for a few moments and will be back shortly. The reality is that you will often never see the person again- or at least for many years.

Some things have changed little in the last 1500 years. One of them was airports- and orbital transit facilities were the same thing, at five times the price.

As soon as they had cleared customs-, a formality for passengers of a naval vessel- Wayne was at a public terminal arranging transport and accommodation down on Taupo, as they had a ten day wait until the next leg of the journey.

"Docking bay 14, troops- no luggage- 3 down and a quarter to spinward. I have got us a ride down with the local navy. Lets move- they drop in 12 minutes."

This was only a small station, so we were on board the shuttle with five minutes to spare.

The pilot- a warrant officer- did not bother to see if his passengers were secure, he just called 'freefall' and decoupled from the bay. The shuttle drifted clear of the station for a minute, then a momentary push of the maneuvering jets took them out of the safety zone and he engaged the gravity drive.

"You folks have about ten minutes to make any calls groundside before we start getting a bit of hull ionization."

"All taken care of, thanks." said Wayne.

"It's snowing down there," said the co-pilot, looking significantly at our lightweight shipsuits.

"Appreciate the heads-up," said Tom. "We already heard from a friend down there- he's meeting us at the terminal with transport."

"Where are you staying?" asked the pilot.

"Franz Josef Hotel."

The pilot gave a low whistle. "The empire must be taxing us too much."

"The empire pays the bill. Yeah- good one chief. No- I know the hotelier of the Franz and the cards have been kind to us."

“Kind.- friggin’ in love with you, more like. Tell Guiardio that Jack says hello.”

It occurred to Wayne and Tom at the same time. Their ex-head steward would be using these shuttles to smuggle in supplies he would rather not pay import duties on.

Half an hour later, they were at the port terminal, their only baggage a courier pouch with their orders. Guiardio had indeed arranged transport- a luxury groundcar, and had come along to greet us personally.

“Captain Jamieson- Lieutenant Phillips- This is a pleasure. May I enquire if your two companions are of the ‘Fury’s’ company?”

“A pleasure for us too, Guiardio- our two companions are to join our irregulars. We met after Tom and I got ourselves drafted on Helzin.”

“We have much to talk about then- perhaps dinner in your suite. I reserved you the Imperial suite, of course. As soon as we have your luggage...”

“No luggage, we shipped out in a hurry.”

“I see sir,” said Guiardio, raising his eyes. “Do you wish me to arrange clothing for your stay?”

“Yes, thank you Guiardio”

Guiardio had not been the head steward on ‘Wotan’s Fury’ for nothing. Within minutes of arriving, a tailor and his assistants had arrived at the Imperial suite to measure us and show us catalogues.

Before we had finished exploring the numerous luxuries of the suite- the complete top floor, maids had arrived and were unpacking and hanging new clothes in our rooms.

This was all a great novelty to Andrea and Carl who had never experienced the decadence and service of a seven-star hotel before. Most people never would.

“While we are alone here, I would like to further discuss your futures with our company. Not tonight or tomorrow- business, but in two days time. For now, just sample a taste of things to come.” said Wayne.

Tomorrow night Tom and I would be 1500 years away.

Tonight’s menu was already available for viewing in what was modestly called ‘The Dining Room’. This suite had what was a small banquet hall in formal Imperial style. No windows to distract from the dining experience. (or offer a target.) Stonework finish, wood paneling (genuine Oak from old Earth.) and wall hangings with the crests and colours of the noble houses. It even had a fireplace and a suit of (probably replica) plate armour.

While Andrea took in the setting and Carl mentally appraised the value of the

silverware, Wayne and Tom studied the menu.

Taupo is one of the four 'New Zealand' worlds, that being the origin of most of its early settlers. As the name might imply, it was a sea world, with only 15% of its surface land mass. Aquaculture was a major part of its economy and the menu well reflected that with salmon, lobster and oysters featured tonight. In keeping with the traditions of their home of origin, the folk of this planet produced some of the finest luxury foods in the empire, much of which found its way to court.

Taupo is a premier tourist destination for those preferring outdoors activities to the sophistication of the more metropolitan worlds. Skiing- fishing- hunting- mountaineering- water sports and then afterwards- luxurious evenings in rustic, but well-equipped lodges. It was a favorite hideaway for many of the aristocracy, with many owning holiday mansions here.

This meant a strong naval presence overhead. That and a small but very competent and well-equipped local force made this a very secure world.

As well as the best food, they also produced a disproportionately high number of the Imperial forces senior officers.

Our penthouse suite had a small tower and dome from where a panoramic view could be had. This was about the size of an average hotel suite. From here, Tom was pointing out some of the town's features to the others. "It's a shame that it's winter now- this place is magnificent in the summer."

"It's so different to Helzin," said Andrea. "There is so much greenery and trees are growing everywhere- just growing wild. All of that fertile land available and there is nobody cropping it."

Classic Imperial style severely restricted the building of structures more than three stories high, with only one per town being allowed to go higher- in this case our hotel. The norm was to go down, not up. Can't spoil the view for a passing aristos. Learning lessons from some very destructive wars, large population centers were equally discouraged also. Cheap gravatic-propelled transport had made this decentralized living work- and much better than our 21st century living. Freight moved by air, while tube trains and trams moved people about the towns.

Here, public transport was something that worked and everybody happily used. It was fast, cheap and clean- about the direct opposite of old earth. A monthly pass card could be purchased for just a few credits and allowed the user to travel anywhere within a designated distance of specific hub. Longer trips would usually be on a jumpbug bus or taxi. Few bothered with private transport, although it was freely available and affordable.

On a world like Taupo, settlement populations seldom exceeded 50,000 and typically consisted of towns of about 25,000 acting as a hub for a number of satellite towns of from 1000 to 5000.

By its nature, the Franz Josef hotel was located on the edge of one of the largest settlements, Brunner- a tourist town of 30,000. Its 12-story pyramid structure stood on a terrace overlooking Lake Brunner, a geothermal-heated water sports paradise. Behind were forests full of introduced species- Deer and upland game birds. A quick flight by jumpbug and you were on the upper slopes of the Craigburn ski fields.

‘More New Zealand than Old Earth’s New Zealand’ said the tourist flashes.

“I guess you want to get out and explore,” said Wayne. He took two envelopes from his pocket and handed them to Andrea and Carl. “The cards just need your thumbprints to activate them- consider yourselves on the payroll. Have fun and don’t get arrested. It costs me more to bail you out here.”

With the other two gone, Wayne said, “I think we will send them off somewhere tomorrow night before we attend our meeting.”

“How about sending them over to Queenstown– the nightlife there should keep them busy for the evening.” said Tom.

“OK” said Wayne. “I will tell them we have business here so that they don’t get any ideas on coming back early or picking someone up and bringing them here- they just don’t need to know what our business is yet.”

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“Bunker’s clear ma’m- no lifesigns bigger than a roach.”

“OK Corporal- Get your team clear. What I’m looking for, you don’t want to know about.” said Sonja. She waited a couple of minutes, then unpacked her equipment and opened a gate and stepped through.

On the other side, Jane and Sharon were waiting with the items she had requested. Quickly she stripped off her clothes and the others dressed the cloned body- a previous model Sonja had inhabited. Sonja quickly checked for detail, then carried the still-warm body back through the gate, and dragged through a box containing a sizable explosive charge. Dropping the body and activating the timer, she darted back through the gate, which Jane immediately closed.

Despite the hot Transit day, Sonja was shivering as she dressed. “I’ve done some strange stuff over the years, but that was seriously creepy.” she exclaimed.

Her life in the 35th century- 15 years of service- was now over, with her ‘death’ in a command bunker on Helzin.

Jane set up the next gate and Jenny walked through dressed in an Imperial Navy uniform. As soon as she was through, she sat down and started writing up her return cues- notes that would tell her what she was doing, wearing and feeling for when she was to return. That done, she stripped off her clothing, carefully storing it in a locker, before changing into casual clothes.

“Wayne and Tom are next,” said Jane, before Jenny could ask. “Can you see how Sonja is? Dumping her clone seems to have shaken her a bit- she has probably gone for a shower.”

“Will do,” said Jenny, heading off to the shower block. “That is a weird thing for anyone to have to do- the first couple of times, anyway.”

Jane reset the co-ordinates and Wayne and Tom were home. Protocol was never to speak to a jumper until they had completed their TEMPORAL checklist and stowed their gear. Once they were finished, Jane packed up the generator, got up, and hugged them. “It’s been a long time.”

Jane’s mission was the longest- so far, she had been away from us for forty years on her timeline.

“You will have some company soon, we are headed your way now. I even have a letter of introduction from Governor Reeves and Duke William IX.” said Wayne.

“You will find cadets don’t have a lot of free time- I have only seen Jenny four times in five years,” said Jane. “But it will be nice having you near me.”

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“Now that we are all here, let’s get the meeting underway,” said Jane. “Any new recruits upcoming?”

“Tom and I have two likely contenders,” said Wayne. I will be putting a proposal to them immediately after our return.”

“Slim pickings at the academy” said Jenny. “Too many boy scouts. You might want to follow up on the boys at the armoury though- especially Gunny Martin. He is a real wildcard.”

“He is a bit of a character- his service record makes for very interesting reading indeed.”

“I wish to propose a nomination,” said Jane. “My Aide-de-camp, Joanne Chambers. Imperial Civil service- Grade VI. Just your type too, Tom. She is a loyalist while being easy about it and is a aficionado of pre-empire fiction. Including some extremely rare original Heinlein.”

“That gets her my vote.” said Wayne. “I second your nomination.”

“In favour?”

“Unanimous- she is accepted as a provisional member, subject to accepting our offer- I shall return after this meeting ends” said Jane. “Now that that is concluded, I propose the gavel be handed to Sonja”

“Seconded” said Jenny

“All in favour- passed” Jane handed Sonja the gavel.

“The next item- mission duration changes.” said Sonja.

“None” said Jenny- “I return two years after I make Captain.”

“No changes to the plan” said Wayne.

“First opportunity after graduating” said Tom.

“I don't know,” said Jane. “My departure is- complicated. It certainly can't happen until Wayne and Tom graduate.”

“Talk to me then” said Jenny. “I will be free and can arrange something for you and your candidate.”

“Is there any other business?” said Sonja

“Yes- Jane- can you bring the candidate down now?” said Wayne.

“We were close to a proposal immediately prior to the jump” said Jane.

“Then let us conclude this business immediately” said Jane. “ Before we start drinking- attend to the portal. With this matter underway, I declare the meeting closed- Ladies and Gentlemen- to our profit and pleasure.”

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A plump curvy blonde of 30 (apparent 21st century years) lay on the ground and vomited. Jane and Sonja picked her up and Wayne passed her a bottle of Perrier. “Trust me, it gets easier.” he said.

She took the bottle, rinsed her mouth and spat- then drank the rest of the bottle. As she regained her senses, she looked about. Unlike with our first experience of Transit, Joanne had been on quite a few different planets and knew she was on a new one.

“Damn. - subspace is slower but less painful.”

“Welcome to Transit” said Wayne. “It's not much, but its home- one of them, anyway. Now- introductions- I'm Wayne Jamieson.”

The round of introductions went on and a round of drinks was fetched. “A new member- Champagne is called for.” said Jenny producing a bottle of 1990 Nautilus.

“I know this label,” said Joanne. “But the date...”

“Quite a few of us come from New Zealand,” said Jane. “From the late 20th century. This place is on the same time line as Old Earth- currently 2002 AD on the old calendar. ”

“Just roll with it.” said Sharon. “We have all been there.”

“Fill your glass and let's go for a walk,” said Jane.

There wasn't too much to see at that stage- just the hall, the shower & toilet block and the caravan that Sharon had brought down in anticipation of us recruiting a new one. Behind the container park, a caterpillar generator chugged away and a line of assorted plant and trucks stood idle. Nothing to impress a person qualified to govern a country the size of Australia. Fortunately, Imperial Civil service types were very far removed from the civil servants of our time. Whatever impact our modest camp had had was well overshadowed by our instantaneous transportation.

The grand tour of our planet only took about an hour. There had been a few changes since I was last here- about a month on the Transit timeline. Will had lined the hall with varnished plywood sheets and built an outdoors fireplace. Quite a bit of decorating had been completed, with shrubs, dwarf fruit trees and flowers in pots all about the living areas. Footpaths now connected the portable cabins and the shower/toilet block had been painted and tiled. This is the first camping ground ablutions block ever seen with a polished marble floor.

The container park had trebled in size- Geoff must have been doing at least three or four trips a day. There were a few additions in the vehicle park- a Caterpillar D6 bulldozer and five new Winnebago's- top of the line, too. Geoff had an answer to several of the girls complaining about our basic facilities here. These should keep them happy for a while. The rains were due very soon and these had showers and toilets on- board.

Leaving the new owners with Geoff, to learn how to use the features on these motor homes, the rest made their back to the marquee for a drink. Along the way, Will pointed out three new cabins.

“I wasn't sure how many new people would be along, so we made up three new cabins- just take your pick Joanne. By the way- Jane arranged clothes and things for you, when she thought you might join- they are in the cabin closet to the stream.”

“Then that cabin will do.” said Joanne.

“We usually shut the generator down at about 2200 local,” said Wayne. “The cabins have battery power for lights, but that's about it. With a bit of a crowd here, we will probably leave the generator running. No nice silent fusion packs here- yet.”

“I grew up on a high country station down Tekapo way,” said Joanne. “This will be fine.”

“Ah- Jane hadn't told us you were a native of NZ. I thought most of the population was from off-planet,” said Wayne.

“Most think that Old Earth- meaning NZ- is just the Academy and some support, but

there are close to a half a million locals living there. Most of the country is a big open-range farm. You never hear about NZ produce because it is all reserved for the Imperial court and upper-echelon aristos. I have seen a few labels around this camp already- I guess now you are sourcing your products from my distant past. Most of the produce has held onto the ancient names, where possible. Some of the vineyards have even been in production since before the crash or were re-established in the same locations.”

“Our baseline time is currently 2002,” said Wayne. “It’s actually quite a thrill to know that there is that continuity there. I am really looking forward to living in New Zealand, in the 35th century. Perhaps now we can get you acquainted with some of the products of our time.”

“That- I’m looking forward to. I will join you as soon as I have changed- this place is a bit warmer than Canterbury in the winter.”

Will and Sharon were already at the tent, setting out a smorgasbord meal, when Wayne arrived. “I thought you two would have gotten one of those new wagons.” he stated.

“We are just about to start building a house,” said Will. “If we get too comfortable, that might not happen.”

“Fair enough”, said Wayne. “What’s the plan for the first real house here?”

“I have a log cabin kit coming down after the rains, the site is about three k’s away, up by the digger on the small rise, behind the diesel tanks.”

“Log mansion, more like” said Sharon. “Seven bedrooms and three bathrooms- it will be bigger than your farmhouse.”

“The first of many.”

Joanne returned, now dressed in casual clothes more suited to our climate. Clothing was minimal around here- overalls for work, shorts and light cotton shirts with sports shoes or sandals being the usual attire. The sound of a Detroit diesel told everyone that the first of the Winnebago’s was on the move- probably closer to the camp. Now we knew why Sharon had graded such a wide track down to the meadow by the stream.

Jane parked the bus and walked across to the picnic area, taking a cold bottle from the ice chest. She took a chair next to Joanne “Just give Sonja a list of whatever you want and it will be here for you next time we return. We will be visiting here about twice a year from now.”

“So- what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Just enjoy the odd trip here, for now,” said Jane. “We have another six to seven years left up in the 35th. Then it is back here- and from here- to everywhere, although I do intend to put you to work. I need a top administrator to help run our 21st century



moneymaker, as well as keep this place organized as we expand. Of course with time travel there is always time for a bit of fun. And our anti-geriatric treatments are much more advanced than yours, so you get the time you need.”

“In your time, the average lifespan of an Imperial citizen is 175 years- in our time it is about 80 years or less,” said Wayne. “But we have access to therapies way in advance of yours- lifespan is open-ended with us.”

“I guess another seven years won’t hurt,” said Joanne. “I’m just coming up to fifty soon- that’s considered about the right time for a girl to settle down and start thinking about having a family.”

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The rest of the mobile homes were parked up now and everybody had gathered for dinner and drinks. This would be a quiet night, as most of the time-traveler’s had jumped in the evening, their local times. As the sky darkened, they lit a fire, drew up chairs around it, and looked to the night sky. People slowly drifted off to bed. As the second moon rose, only Wayne and Sonja remained. He had sensed that she wanted to talk- that first time you killed yourself off often hit people hard.

Sonja stood up. “Come and have a look at my new quarters and I will make us some coffee.”

Wayne rose and they walked off towards her new home- the one parked well beyond the rest. “This is very nice,” said Wayne. “I hope this will do until we can build you something five-star.”

“It was a lovely surprise,” said Sonja. “I’m planning to spend a few years down- time studying architecture, so I can plan us that five-star that you mentioned.”

“An excellent idea, just the thing you need to get the military out of your system. It’s been a long time away for you- fifteen years alone.”

“That’s what I asked you here for- I really don’t want to spend tonight on my own- would you...” tears started to well in her eyes. She had been holding herself together well and now was the time to let go.

“Of course, Sonja- I can make an exception for you.” Wayne took her hand and led her to the bedroom. “The coffee can wait until morning.”

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For most of the night, Sonja talked about the people she had known and left behind, never to see again- the things they had done and her life for the last twenty years. In the hours before the dawn, she finally fell asleep in Wayne’s arms. When the dawn broke, they awoke from habit and made love for the first time.

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Jenny parked the Land Cruiser and got out to inspect the building site, where Will &

Sharon's house was to be built. The floor slab and services were completed – they were now awaiting the shipment of material, which would be delayed until after the rains had been. This area had a six week wet season, which was just about to start.

“Good location” said Sonja, looking about. The site was atop a small rise several kilometers from the main camp and overlooking it. All around, olive trees had been planted.

“So- did you manage to break through the armour?” said Jenny.

“I did. What man can hold out to tears- especially when they were real? – it's all in the timing.”

“Well done. That will make it a lot easier for him to take Jane as a lover- which needs to happen before they go back.”

“Shame-I wouldn't mind keeping him for a while- but there is always time. In fact- YOU should have jumped him last night.”

“My turn will come, you were the right one for last night. Jane needs his strength now- she is going to find it the hardest to break away from her life in the empire- forty years of it. I need Wayne close to stop her thinking about 'going native'- although her bringing Joanne in is a positive sign.”

“I agree- Jane is one person we must keep at all costs, who else could make the kind of money we need?”

“She was never meant to spend so long away- but that's Jane for you. She had to reach for the top. Now, as planetary Governor-General, she is too high-profile to just disappear. I want her back as soon as Wayne and Tom leave the academy. She is the only one with the experience to run a very large and invisible corporate- which our business interests need. After all, that was the reason for her getting into the Imperial Civil Service.”

“Yes, Jane needs to work. “She just can't flit about playing the rich bitch like we can.”

“I haven't done much of that lately. “Practicing being a rich bitch will just have to wait today- I have to help Wayne wire up the hydro plant. The new generator is a vast improvement, but I will be glad when the engine noises finally stop.”

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The campsite had been specifically selected for having a good-sized stream coming out of the hills that could feed a micro hydro plant. With a whole planet to choose from, it was not hard to find a good site. While this plant would only produce 15 kW, the power needs were not high. For peak loads, we would still use the generators, but at least most of the day and more importantly- the nights would now be quiet.

“Let's try a remote startup now,” said Jenny. She thumbed the 'talk' switch on the radio and spoke- “Will- you can shut down the generator now.”

The LCD display immediately showed a switch to battery backup and the control valve started to slowly open. The turbine started to whine and the display showed 'Hydro on-line'. Back at the shower block, the hot water tank started to warm up, as surplus current was dumped through its heating elements.

"I'm glad to see all those years of electrical engineering are getting some use," said Wayne, as he finished labeling the circuit breakers.

"Speaking of skills going to waste- we could have a bit of a problem," said Jenny.

"What's that?"

"I'm getting a bit concerned about Jane going native- she is already twenty years overdue to come home. I'm thinking that she may view Joanne as her replacement"

"Looks like I will have to spend a bit of time with her- as I can."

"That's what I was hoping- you won't get a lot of free time, but it's only a few minutes from camp to Canterbury by tube. There is something more I want you to do for her."

"What's that?"

"Take her as your lover before you leave here. You will not have any difficulty, going by what she has told me. Please do this- we need Jane."

"Well..."

"Don't worry about Sonja- that was a one-off- she won't hold you to any commitment. You were just what she needed then and there," said Jenny, kissing Wayne on the cheek.

"I will give it a try, but..."

"It won't be as difficult as swimming 5 k's and climbing a cliff."

"How about..."

"No, it has to be you- you know the empire and their unwritten social structure. You are a senior enough officer- and more importantly, decorated enough to pass muster as a Governor's lover. That VMH counts for about three rank grades. Apart from all that, Jane has always wanted to have you- she is just like you though, afraid of making some kind of social faux pas by making a play for you."

Wayne was lost for words- something that did not often happen.

"Poor dear" said Jenny. "You want all of us but don't want to upset any of us girls by choosing her. Just remember- we have plenty of time for everybody. Now head on down to the tent and start paying some attention to Jane"

Wayne raised his hands signing surrender and rolled his eyes up.

“Move yourself Cadet.” snapped Jenny, grinning at him. “I will finish up here.”

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Jane was finishing placing the last few polished granite tiles in the new toilet block. This one had been built by popular request near the swimming hole and picnic area, where much of their drinking went on. “Looking good” said Sonja, who had just finished painting the outside.

“These 35th century adhesives make the job a piece of cake.” said Jane, spraying a curing catalyst onto the grouting. “This is mostly done by machine up-time, but even by hand I’m getting a far better result than with using 20th century materials. I wish I had had this stuff when I did my bathroom in New York.”

“I’m glad you are going to be at Canterbury while Wayne & Tom do their training- it gets awful lonely on your own,” said Sonja.

“I know.”

“I get a bit worried that Wayne fits into the 35th Century life a bit well. The more time he can spend with you the better- you know, being his lover would be the perfect cover for a lowly commander spending time with a dignitary such as yourself.”

“You’re kidding- I’m not his type.”

“Don’t bet on that, Jane- I have heard him speak of you in a most flattering way.”

“That would be the perfect cover- and he has rank and decorations to be socially acceptable- would you listen to me. I’m turning into an aristo.”

“Just ask Jenny- she will tell you the same thing. It’s always the same with men of action- they haven’t got a bloody clue when it comes to romance.” Sonja privately thought to herself that this was much the case with Jane too.

Now to sit back and watch them- and give the odd little push.

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“Living like this just can’t be good for a girl’s waistline.” said Joanne, as the snack trolley was wheeled in.

“That is another fringe benefit of joining our little group,” said Sharon. With a few adjustments, you can control your metabolism and be whatever shape you desire. I suppose that nobody told you about calorie blockers or aldetox either.”

“No, I got a bottle of the little magic pills this morning- but the others are news.”

“Just enjoy yourself- the side effects can be dealt with - at least after you leave the

empire,” said Will.

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The arrival of food soon brought the rest of the group, who had been swimming, over to the bar. Jenny finished toweling off her close-cropped blonde hair and looked up. “Look at those clouds- the rains are on the way.” A few insignificant-looking wisps of cloud were blowing past at speed.

“The barometer started dropping this morning,” said Sharon. “We will have rain tomorrow morning- for six weeks.”

Jenny took a cold chicken leg from the buffet. “Six weeks in the hall or shall we relocate to the farm? We have a good window.”

It was unanimous that we traveled to Wayne’s farm. It was isolated and more importantly- it was summer there.

“Let’s have lunch and pack up- Joanne- you may want to skip lunch.”

There wasn’t much to do. The coolers were on pallets and were carried away by a cross-country forklift. The furniture was stacked into a small shipping container and also taken away by forklift. With the tent dropped and stowed away, all that remained was to drive the mobile homes back to the vehicle park. With the fresh food packed into coolers and a few personal effects gathered up, we were ready for the jump by about 1400 local time.

This time Joanne was prepared for what to expect, but to her surprise, she found the effects of the jump not nearly as severe. “Where are we now?” she asked.

“New Zealand, February 2002- near the Wairarapa Coast. This spot is about 20 k’s from Sir Harrington’s manor,” said Jane.

“Ah- yes ‘Hermit’ Harrington. He owns the big Wairarapa station- about 350,000 sheep and some beef and dairy,” said Joanne. “As the name implies, he doesn’t encourage visitors.”

“Sounds familiar” said Jenny. “I know another owner a bit like that.”

“Systems show clear,” said Wayne. The barn that they had gated to also contained the control panel of a very sophisticated surveillance system.

Working as a well-practiced team, they opened up the house and the cottages for an airing- they had been shut for some weeks since the last visitors. An order for fresh food and supplies was emailed off, while the food and drink from Transit was stored away.

“This is the earth end of our operation,” Jenny explained to Joanne. “Not far from here is the farmhouse- a much smaller and older one- where all our travels began. That’s a story that can wait for now.”

“Would it be possible for me to get a look at some 21st century life while I’m here?” Joanne asked.

“I don’t see why not- Jane- shall we take Joanne shopping tomorrow? She will need a few outfits to leave here.”

“I was born to shop,” said Jane. “Anyone else for a trip to town?”

“I could use a 21st century refresher,” said Wayne. “It’s about time the rest of you learned how to find the fish without me.”

Work being concluded, it was time for afternoon tea on the deck.

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This was another first for Joanne- road transport. Normally for her, a trip like this would be done by jumpbug. There were no roads between towns in the empire.

“It’s very similar in some ways, yet quite different in others. There are fences everywhere here. In my time, they are only around crops or houses. We are all self-contained for power, so do not have these awful wires hanging everywhere. The housing in the town we passed through was at a much higher density too.”

“Here, most of those houses are privately owned, as is the land they are on. Land is expensive, thus the plots are small. Of course in the 35th, the local aristo would own all the land and most of the houses would be for his tenants- this was how things would have been several centuries ago here.” said Jenny.

“Private land- who can buy land?”

“Anyone with money or credit” said Jane. “That is ‘missing’ from the Imperial history books, but that’s how it was for us.”

Joanne was quiet for some time. The fact that the empire has removed the concept of private property for all was disturbing to her. Like most, she had just accepted that only aristos owned land- even a high-ranking civil servant, like Jane, could not own land. She wondered if this was why 20-21st century literature was so hard to find- and only then on the black market.

Soon she put aside these thoughts, as they crested a hill overlooking the Hutt Valley. If she had thought before the houses were too tightly packed- these were much worse. The lowest farm laborer lived much better than this. Then, as they approached the capital of Wellington, it dawned upon her that this valley was empty in her time. This was all just wild forest- with just a couple of hunting and fishing lodges. All this-gone. Unlike some of the cities of Europe or America, there were no ruins in her time.

Jane saw the puzzled look on her face. “This is on a major fault line- the whole area was totally destroyed in 2457. There are remains, but the bush has swallowed them up. You would never see anything from the air. The restoration crews never went near

this valley. It was left as an unofficial memorial to the half million or so who perished here. That too had passed out of the history books- having happened during the time of the big Diaspora.”

“I’m looking forward to doing some private research on your time,” said Joanne. “This is the period known as ‘the second dark age’ where most of the information and records were lost in the post-Diaspora fighting and eventual collapse of old earth.”

“The information isn’t all missing,” said Jane. “It’s restricted. Flag rank, Grade Ten ICS and Aristos ranking above Baron only.”

“Which would explain why the only material I could find came from black-market books.”

“Those books of yours are why I took a chance and invited you in.”

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30 minutes later, they were pulling into the driveway of Jenny’s town house, an apartment block on the edge of the central business district. While the outside appeared modest, inside told a different story. The apartment block had been gutted out and refitted into one residence of a size that could accommodate our entire group in perfect comfort. It contained all the features that Jenny considered essential for good living, such as a small swimming pool and full spa facilities- sauna, steam and sun beds. It wasn’t used very often, but was a handy place to stay when in town- the restaurant and bar district being just five minutes walk under cover.

Wayne shut off the engine and thumbed the door control, closing the garage behind them. As soon as Jenny climbed out of the Land Cruiser, she reached under a shelf, taking out a life scanner to sweep the building above. “All clear. A quick comfort stop here first- Joanne- Grab your overnight bag and I will show you to your bedroom. Then we shop.”

One of Jenny’s famous ‘Power Shopping’ trips took up the next three hours. Her and Jane would descend on a shop, firing clothing at the assistants, and then finally finished, would leave with Joanne in tow, while Wayne settled the bill and arranged for the purchases to be couriered to his pickup at nearby Martinborough. That done he would head to the next shop- having done this more than a few times, he knew fairly well where they would have headed.

Twenty-five thousand dollars later, they were done- for now and Jenny suggested lunch. “One more job first,” said Jane. “Wayne needs some new clothes”

“No I don’t.” said Wayne.

“You do if you are taking me out tonight.” said Jane.

“Taking you out tonight?”

“Thank you, I accept your dinner invitation.” said Jane.

Jenny quickly added “Good idea- I need to go over some contract and medical matters with Joanne tonight. You two might as well have a night on the town.”

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Jane rubbed the sleep from her eyes and, starting to remember the events of the night before, looked to the other side of the bed to find it empty.

As her eyes cleared, she saw on the bedside table a bottle of mineral water and a silver tray with a single small white pill on it. Somebody- she was not sure quite who- had planned ahead. She opened the bottle, took a small mouthful of water and swallowed the Aldetox pill.

Jenny tapped on the door and entered carrying a tray with fresh-squeezed orange juice and coffee. “So how is the party girl this morning?”

“I don’t know what is the worse- Aldetox or the hangover,” groaned Jane.

The effects of Aldetox are not pleasant, but at least only last for a few minutes.

“I thought you may have had company this morning,” said Jenny. “Things were looking like that at about 0200.”

Jane took a glass of orange juice “I got taken to bed all right, but he just tucked me in and left. I don’t know whether to be disappointed or pleased that he was a perfect gentleman.”

Jenny rolled her eyes up “I know what you mean- but I think tonight will be right- if you stay off the bubbles.”

“I should have listened to Wayne and took the Aldetox when we got home- I’ve been near teetotal up in the 35th.”

“Well, grab your robe and come and have a sauna with me- sweat the last of that Moet out”

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“I will be back in a couple of days,” said Jenny. “I want to catch up with Ashley while I’m back here.”

Wayne loaded the last of the bags and suitcases. “Better luck than last time.”

Jenny grinned, “She should be a bit happier than the last visit- I put a second-division winner in the last card I sent her.”

“That should help. See you soon.”

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With the rear of the Landcruiser full of bags and packages as well as crates of wine, they finally arrived back at the farm, after having had a leisurely lunch in the nearby town of Martinborough. Only Sonja remained at the house- the rest having gone to the coast for fishing and surfing, where they would camp out for the night.

“Back to work already?” said Wayne, looking about Sonja’s study.

“A few sketches- ideas I had for homes on Transit. The real work will be drafting them up in plan form- once you return, I’m off down–time for a few years to continue studying architecture.” said Sonja.

“This sketch looks like it is in that valley about 18k’s north.”

“It is- just inside the exclusion zone,” said Sonja. “I’m going to try some seeding experiments and get some trees established a couple of centuries back.”

“Like Jenny did with the Linden,” said Jane, who had just entered the study.

“Not quite”, said Sonja. “I’m going to scatter seed from the air and see what happens. There is no chance of getting looped doing it that way.”

“That all sounds good,” said Jane, “But I’m on holiday- who wants to join me for a swim?”

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Jane suggested dinner in town, and then promptly changed her mind. “I keep forgetting that we have to drive- I’m used to everything being just a few minutes away by jump-bug.”

Sonja laughed, “What we need is to get that hotel built and install a first-class chef out here.”

“I thought about that and I will do it someday,” said Wayne, “But then we have to be on our guard about blowing our cover in front of the help.”

“Then the chef needs to be one of us.” said Sonja.

“Or we keep servants down at Transit” said Jane. “Rescue a few or cure them of terminal diseases- much like you recruited me. They can do the ten-year payback plan. Jenny mentioned something like this many years ago.”

“No need” said Wayne. “You already make a passable serving wench.”

Jane took a can of beer from the cooler “May I serve you beer, Master?” As he took the offered can, she hooked her foot behind his ankle and pushed him into the pool, then jumped in after him.

Sonja looked over to Joanne and rolled her eyes up. “I think those two need to find a room.”

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At the nearby coast, the others were sitting around a bonfire, relaxing after a hard day's fishing and surfing.

"Helzin- what's to tell?" said Tom in reply to Sharon's question. "It's a big burnt rock- where here is green, there is grey and brown. The only native life is in the sea and the pinnacle of evolution is a creature like a small trilobite. I really can't tell you too much about the geology, other than that it was once extremely volcanic and is a treasure trove of assorted minerals.

The only nice parts are the bits that have been terraformed and all the towns are like mining camps. It's a great place to go and earn money and having done that- most leave to spend their money elsewhere. We have two natives that we plan to bring in- I'm sure that they will be able to tell you quite a bit more. You will only have to wait another seven years."

"Just a few months on our timeline" said Sharon. "These extended missions are really getting weird- Jane goes off looking like she is just out of her teens and comes back a month later looking in her thirties and had been away forty years."

"I've done forty years of travel and I'm still trying to come to terms with it" said Tom. "Jen reckons that after about 100 years of jumping around, one starts to just accept it."

"By my diary that makes me about 90 years short." said Sharon.

"You may be doing a bit more compressed time soon," said Will. "Sonja was telling me that she hopes to have some parts of Transit cleared for exploration within the month."

"Hell, I haven't done hardly any time-shifting at all," said Geoff. "I'm just too damn busy rolling these rigs across the galaxy."

They all laughed at Geoff's remark. He liked to come across as a simple trucker, but was anything but. Back in Milwaukee, Geoff's freighting operation moved thousands of tons of cargo to Transit under tight security, while giving the illusion of being a small and moderately successful carrier.

"You will be getting even busier for a while," said Will. "We have a whole lot more storage buildings to put up in the next couple of years- as well as the building kits we are going to be needing a lot of concrete."

"I need to talk to Sonja about that," said Geoff "I have a few ideas for gateing bulk materials such as aggregate, without trucking it."

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The sun had now disappeared behind the coastal hills, but the midsummer evening remained warm. The remains of a meal of fish and baked potatoes was being watched by a pair of wary seagulls.

“This is the life.” said Will, opening another bottle of lager.

“Tell us about life in the Empire,” said Sharon, passing another bottle over to Tom. “Not about in the services or for the aristocracy- what’s it like for the ordinary citizens?”

Tom took out his pipe and started packing it with tobacco. “Life in the Empire for the commonality” he mused. “I haven’t spent a lot of time in the empire proper. We mostly operated on the fringes, where the action was, but I know what most colonials know. If you want more detail, you will need to talk to Joanne- especially on the Imperial Civil Service. This is a very different civil service to the ones we know.”

He continued. “Life is very similar to now in some ways and so very different in others.” He struck a match and puffed away at his pipe, then took a deep swig of Bock from his stein.

“The standard of living is much like our so-called ‘upper middle class’. They earn enough to live comfortably, take an annual vacation at a pleasant resort- or if they saved for a year or two- take a trip off-planet. They have no mortgage worries, as only aristos can own land, thus they lease- at the very reasonable rate of 10% of the tenant’s salary.

They enjoy good health, illness being rare and have excellent medical care for accidents and injuries. As you know, they live about twice as long as on 20th century Earth.

This makes for a very different society than ours, as childbearing is there usually deferred until the fourth decade and they remain fertile until the eighth. This allows women to rise to the top of their professions then raise a family. From all that I have seen this deferment of marriage and childbearing makes for happier, more stable families. In addition, at this age they have completed their civil duties- usually a term of military service in the local defense forces and the full privileges of citizenship are available. These are considerable and allow further education, career changes and the opportunity to start a business.”

“So- they are forbidden to have children until they reach a particular age?”

“Not at all” Tom answered. “Its not like things are forbidden, *per se*, but life is made difficult for the non-compliant. If you have a child which you decide to keep at, say, 20- you will not be able to do your military service, so will not get full citizenship. The upshot of this is that you will only be able to get a scut job and will miss out full medical privileges. The Empire won’t let you starve- but you certainly won’t live nearly as comfortably as a citizen. You are also unashamedly discriminated against for not ‘Living the Empire Way.’ - Not officially, but by society in general. In addition, they do have a qualification that you must attain in order to access the full benefits available to families. This is often referred to as ‘The Baby License’.”

“Interesting” said Will. “What of those not physically up to military service?” Tom continued. “There are other ways for the few that don’t meet the physical

requirements or even those who are not suited to military life. A successful tour with another organization deemed suitable will meet one's obligations. Four years- a standard tour- with the Corp of Terraformers, the Ambulancers or the Frontier Scouts are a few of the options available. One is required to make an effort to gain citizenship, but it is achievable for almost everyone with a bit of drive and determination.

For the very few who suffer serious mental or physical disabilities that exclude them from citizenship, first-rate facilities are provided allowing for them to live out their lives in as much comfort and dignity as can be provided. The Empire really puts us to shame in this aspect. The same is true of how they look after their crippled veterans."

"What was the deal with property?"

"Only Aristocrats may own land." Tom clarified. "Even those at the very top of the Civil Service- such as our Jane- may only lease, although with their position goes quarters that are nothing short of luxurious. Jane has a palace that used to be the Christchurch Park Royal and a couple of country cottages- little 12-bedroom cottages. I think this is why she has stayed there for forty years.

With a planet, most of and the best land is owned by a Duke, the rest being split amongst lesser nobles who all answer to him. The aristos tend to be very 'hands off', giving guidelines but leaving production and infrastructure to the civil service. The local aristo is also in charge of the militia for that region, again answering to the Duke, who is commander-in-chief for the planet and supplies troop levies to the Imperial Service. Volunteers usually fill this though. There is a lot of prestige and- you guessed it- privilege given to veterans. There is even the chance of being raised to the aristocracy.

Getting back to ownership, while the property is leased, tenure is a lot more secure than in our time, as there is no property speculation. While in theory the local aristo can evict you, this is almost unheard of. It would take a serious criminal act committed before this occurred. The sort of 'neighbors from hell' we get here would be dealt to by the citizen's posse."

"I hear there is far less crime there," said Will.

"For sure- crime is rare, repeat offenders even rarer. They run the 'Three Strikes' program for non-capital crimes. First offense gets you a year in a penal work battalion. Second offense gets five years at hard labor. The third offense- they figure you cannot learn so its permanent incarceration in a recidivist's colony or execution. For capital crimes, they get more creative, with executions carried out in the local coliseum. The last one I saw was two years ago on Helzin- a rape/murder. They had a Blademaster slice the scum up with a foil, over the course of an hour.

I should mention that everyone, but everyone is armed there. Every citizen has a service weapon in the home and almost everybody is in the reserve and gets plenty of range time in. Did I mention that burglary is practically unheard of?"

"Sounds like they have learned from us."

“Its part of what makes the whole thing work” continued Tom. “The aristo’s know they rule with the cooperation of the citizenry and have to lead, not herd- as they do here and now.”

“So tell us more about home life- the day-to-day routine,” said Sharon, passing another bottle of beer across to Tom.

Tom refilled his stein. “Home life- let’s see- working hours are shorter- about 6 hours a day and a four day working week would be average. Four weeks annual holiday is normal and all aspiring citizens are required to do two weeks militia training each year, to keep their skills current. They are required to do this for 18 years after their four-year tour, which is done after turning 18 years old- most continue to remain active with their militia units well after completing their mandatory term, though.

Anyway, back to home life- they have a lot of leisure time, but this tends to be rather structured. Not by mandate, but by the mores of their society. A major part of family life revolves around *Gymnasium*. These facilities are found everywhere and can be very elaborate affairs. Exercise is taken at least 3-4 times a week, but there the gymnasium is much more than an exercise facility. The more basic will have a crèche, a commissary, a spa and is a community center and a place for neighborhoods to gather. The main towns will have a much large one with a stadium, an aquatic center, medical facilities and specialized sports arenas for popular games as tubeball.

These are as important as the church was in the early 20th century. All ages are catered for and many families chose to dine in the well-appointed commissaries. I should mention that there are almost no bars in the empire- this is a custom that has passed with time. They are not dry though and you can have a beer or a bottle of wine at a commissary or a café, so don’t look so shocked.

People do what they are told, are well-mannered, disciplined, hard working and contented. Nobody goes hungry or cold and they don’t bother to lock their doors. Life is orderly, predictable and comfortable. It’s a nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t choose to live there, personally.”

“This is all very interesting,” said Sharon. “It sounds very pleasant, but at the same time, I agree with you Tom- it’s not for me.”

“I will take choices any day,” said Will. “It sounds too much like cozy serfdom”

“On a lighter note- what about this Tubeball?” asked Geoff, passing over another beer, as Tom refilled his pipe.

“A game I suspect you would like” said Tom. “Imagine combining basketball, American football and throw in some acrobatics. The field is a 25-meter diameter tube 75 meters long with artificial gravity. The quarters alternate- zero gravity one quarter, the next quarter with the tubes inner surface being ‘down’. It is very fast and there are only a few rules.

Soldiers being what they are, there is also an armed forces variant called ‘Crash’- that

is the full contact version of the game and played in armour. Its considered good training for space combat, although zero-gee combat is very rare- the ship being boarded is at just as much of a disadvantage should they kill their AG. More so, if trained marines are assaulting.

There are a few other high-tech sports not seen here. Holographic games mostly and they are all adaptations of training simulations, minus the full shock suits that really let you know when you take a hit. A popular trainer is where two opponents fight holos of each other with sword or knife. It's a real-time fight with the two duelers in separate rooms. Spacecraft don't react well to gunfire- projectile or energy- so blade combat has risen to a fine art, the top of their field known as Blademasters. Jen has recently been raised to this rank- something very few cadets manage, I hear."

"Hell- she was quick enough with that Fairburn-Sykes before," said Will.

"That's what all this is about," said Tom "so we can have the best training available."

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"I'm hoping to get out of this early rising habit," said Sonja, as Wayne joined her on the deck for morning coffee.

"I must say- watching the sun rise is more pleasant than morning watch on the bridge, staring at view plates," said Wayne. "I think I'm about done with space travel- certainly with sub-space drive."

"Any signs of life in there?"

"Joanne was up until about 0400, working her way through the library, so I wouldn't expect to see her for a few hours yet. Jane was going to get up, but seems to have gone back to sleep."

"I must say I wasn't expecting to see you so early," said Sonja, raising her eyebrows and grinning.

"I only need about 90 minutes sleep a night and often go a couple of days without sleeping at all," said Wayne. "That's on the light side even for an E5, but I have never needed a lot of sleep. Some genetic anomaly, according to our friend's up-time in the 52nd. My crew reckoned I had vampire genes."

That remark would turn out to be prophetic.

Sounds of movement in the kitchen indicated that somebody else was out of bed and a few minutes later; Jane arrived with a tray laden with orange juice, croissants and the coffee pot. "What a treat not to have to dress for breakfast" she announced.

"And you practically a member of the aristocracy" said Sonia, in mock horror. "We must have Standards, my dear gal."

"That is a silk dressing gown." said Wayne, in Jane's defense. Jane poked her tongue

out at Sonja and poured a glass of juice.

Just as Sonja was about to retort, her tablet beeped. “Visitors.” she said, opening up the tablet and activating the holographic display. The display showed a group of eight surfers in two vehicles, at the southern perimeter gate.

“Trespassers.” said Wayne. “Only Jimmy’s boys have a key to the coast road and that’s not them.”

Wayne’s neighbors shared the same distaste for trespassers. This was an area for those who loved their privacy. The intruders had found the boundary gate too hard to break and were climbing over, ignoring the warning signs.

Wayne took out his phone “Jimmy- how’s it going? Yep- a van and a ute full. They had to park up at my gate, so you should have plenty of time to get Woody out of bed.- no problem Jim.- see you down the club on Friday?”

“Jimmy’s pissed- he’s going to block the road and call the local cop- those arseholes have smashed two of his gates.”

The group was now headed up the costal track loaded down with surfboards and bags. By the time we had finished the croissants and the orange juice, they were at the last warning sign, which stated ‘Marine mammals may be dangerous.’

“The Kraken awakes,” said Sonja, activating the holographic projector. The camera angle changed to follow the group from behind. As they reached a point 25 meters past the sign, a massive head- five metres long and full of teeth- appeared over the top of a mound of boulders and a baleful eye transfixed them.

From our vantage point, we watched the terrified surfers abandon their gear and flee for their lives, as the beast roared and lurched in their direction.

“Now that’s a burglar alarm.” said Sonja.

“Another horror story from the killer coast.” said Wayne.

“That was priceless, but what happens when they stop running, change their underwear and report a sea monster?”

“It’s well known to the locals that about where we set up that holo, is a favorite spot for Blossom- an Elephant Seal that has been visiting these parts for the last twenty years. Our local constable has little time for trespassers who complain about the local Taniwha. It helps that that part of the property is designated an endangered species sanctuary, as a few examples of wildlife that were thought extinct were found there. They are probably going to get turned over on ‘probable cause’ for drugs now- if they are lucky.”

“What if the aren’t lucky?”

“Jimmy and his farmhands will get them first.”

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Jenny pulled up by the front door, got out of her Beemer and stretched. She had just been on the road six hours and this was the first time she had driven a car in ten years. Looking around, she saw that there seemed to be nobody about. As it was a Friday, she thought, they are probably all at the club. Sharon appeared at the open door and came out to help her unload the car. "The club?" said Jenny.

"Where else" said Sharon. "They have had another successful frightening on the coast and have gone into town to have a laugh with the local constabulary and friends. They plan to stay the night, so it should be quiet here."

Jenny smiled. "The Kraken strikes again." They carried Jenny's bags to her room and moved several cases of wine to the pantry.

"Are you going into town to join them?"

"No- I will stay in tonight" said Jenny. "I have had a couple of tiresome days. A shower and a few drinks will do me for tonight."

"Drinks in ten minutes then" said Sharon.

Jenny was showered and in the lounge in five minutes. As it was late afternoon, the air-conditioned homestead was the most comfortable place to relax, with the temperature outside in the high thirties. She leaned back into the leather recliner as Sharon handed her a tall glass of one of her rum-based potions. She drained half the glass. "Whew. That must be Wayne's rum- and lots of it- just what I needed." She finished the glass and held it out for a refill.

"One of those trips?"

"Children." Said Jenny. "Children and ex-husbands. Both trying to be as obnoxious as possible, I'm sure."

"I thought the ex was out of the picture," said Sharon.

"For me, not for Ashley. He has a new trophy wife and Ashley has taken a dislike to her- but at least now he is now the object of her scorn, so it's not all bad. Her 'stepmother'-who is all of eight years older than Ashley- has replaced Wayne as the villain of the hour."

"So- is there any chance of getting her to visit now?"

"Yes- she has agreed to visit at Easter- so that will be the next time we get together."

"Are you planning to bring her in then?"

"No- she needs to find her own way first. After she has finished her studies, Jane will have one of her people contact Ashley with a job offer- leading to here."



“Of course, on her visit- Wayne and Jane will hopefully still be paired up, which will prove what you have been telling Ashley all along.”

Jenny grinned. “There is that- although she will still blame him for the way events turned out. She knows how to hold a grudge.”

“Sounds like a couple of folk I know- are you sure she isn’t Wayne’s child?”

“He wasn’t there at the time- unfortunately.” laughed Jenny, pouring another glass. “Still- in time we will have a family and all that goes with it. When we are both ready- there is always time.”

“Oh dear- I hope I haven’t gone anywhere too painful.” said Sharon.

“No.” Jenny reassured her. “After the first century you start to really understand the meaning of patience. Jane needs his strength now and their relationship will almost certainly wind down once they are out of the Empire and back here. What I want, we are not ready for yet. We need to make Transit a real home- not just a camp. Another 5-10 years, I think. Even with another 10 years stretched time in between, that’s not very long to me. I want a great big farmhouse- a real country manor complete with servants.

And now that the jug is empty- you have to show me how to make- whatever that is.”

They adjourned to the kitchen where Sharon loaded up a large blender with ice, Navy Rum, Galliano, Southern Comfort, coconut liqueur, vodka, orange juice, pineapple juice, lime and coconut cream.

“Wayne taught me the recipe- ‘Privateer’s Gold’ he calls it. The damned stuff is lethal.”

“So I had noticed.”

With another jug of Sharon’s concoction mixed, they returned to the lounge.

“Piano bar” said Jenny and the entertainment system started playing background music. There were quite a few carefully hidden features in this house. These would not be available elsewhere in this time on Earth, for a few years yet. Jenny took a Benson & Hedges from a gold case and lit it, inhaling deeply.

“I thought you had given that away,” said Sharon.

“I had. It was a case of having to for my tour in the Empire and I don’t think I will start up again, but I still enjoy the occasional ciggie.”

“At least you can buy new lungs now. Has tobacco gone out of use in the Empire?”

“It’s still around as a luxury item, but it’s not a common vice there. You will find the odd cigar and pipe but not cigarettes. The price is enough to keep it from the masses-

especially for genuine Terran stock. Like with everything, the Empire doesn't outright ban what it doesn't approve of. It just makes life difficult for those who would produce or sell it through tariffs and licensing. Wayne made more of his money smuggling such goods than by actual Privateering."

"It sounds like you are all doing really well up-time," said Sharon. "Have you considered locating our operation there?"

"No. The empire is a great place, but we are all agreed that it's not for us. We are there to learn, then play our end games and get out" said Jenny. "I can see why it was hard for Sonja – and it will be much worse for Jane- to walk away from so many years work, from what would have been a lifetime of experiences."

"So why not live out your lives in the empire? You can leave, and then return and step back into your lives there any time you wish."

"It's not quite as easy as that. But with a bit of planning and memory banking, the double life should be possible. At least we could have that on option. I hate to leave a job half done."

"Tell me- who staffs the Imperial War College?" a

"The best of their veterans usually finish up their careers there."

"Of course. So some years along that timeline, we could well have our people in senior positions- military and civil"

"I think I see where this is going. As we expand, we can put our new recruits through the system much more easily. They won't have to go through the prolonged dramas that Wayne, Sonja and I had to, in order to get in. In fact, getting them through the regular Army or Marine training will be a piece of cake. Not everyone needs or wants a commission..."

"Not all of us want to take the military option either. I'm quite happy to leave it at the level of your training done on Transit. I would like to spend some time studying up-time- especially learning more about earthquake prediction and management."

"Quite right. Check with Sonja- she can probably arrange something on her return. Then you can try leading a double life."

Sharon laughed- "Isn't that something all superheroes do."

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"The rains are over, so I'm planning to move back tomorrow morning," said Jenny. "We still have ten days in this window before we jump back up-time. Is anyone planning to stay here?"

"I am" said Sonja. "I will be on compressed time for a few weeks before I jump down-time to 1948, so I will spend a week here and organize the housekeeping while

I work on my terraforming project.”

“Thanks Sonja” said Wayne. “If you take care of that, I can spend a couple more days and help get the house built.”

“I will see you in seven days time then,” said Sonja “Make sure you leave any orders with me before you jump tomorrow.”

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The rains had not done any real damage- there was no flooding this season, now that a few drains had been dug and most of the next week was spent assembling the kitset log house. With eight of us working, the shell of the house was soon completed, just leaving the finishing for Will and Sharon to complete while we were back up-time. Sonja would be arranging fittings and appliances from the 52nd century and as these all contained their own power source there would be no need for electrical wiring.

With the roof now on, tradition dictated that the builder must supply drinks for the workers, this duty falling to our carpenter, Will, who wheeled in an ice chest on a trolley.

“Shout’s on.” he said, passing out frosty bottles to the thirsty laborers.

“So much for a holiday” Jenny said to Joanne. Not being in training - or having an enhanced body- Joanne had felt the strain of unaccustomed heavy physical work more than any of us.

“I have definitely been spending too much time at a desk” said Joanne, “I haven’t done anything like this since I did my service tour.”

“The next four days will be a whole lot easier,” said Will. “That is all of the heavy work done- although some help getting the double-glazed windows fitted would be good.”

“They are still making houses just like this in the 35th century, you know,” said Jane, “most go for robotic construction- strong, good quality and durable- but a hand-made home fetches a premium price.

“We may have to get hold of some of those construction robots,” said Wayne. “We are going to need a lot of warehousing and storage here and elsewhere. I like hand built myself, but robots built great utility buildings- especially those big Quonset style hangers.”

“Sonja is doing some preliminary work on future planning now,” said Jenny. “She will have some plans to show you all in two days time and is looking for more input- so drink up and do a little thinking about how you would like YOUR piece of the world to be- plenty of space of every taste here.”

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“A ColPack Seven will do the job in no time,” said Joanne, looking over the plans. “This plant is completely autonomous and I can program the build for you in half a day- on my next visit here. We send these out three months ahead of a colony on an autopacket-, which should not be too hard to you to reroute here and return using your

time gates. I would suggest stockpiling silicates at the site- this will speed up the build by about 30%”

“Nothing hard about intercepting an autopacket” said Wayne with a grin. “Especially when somebody well-place in the ICS gives you co-ordinates and timings.”

“I assume you have a ship here,” said Joanne.

“I might have one hidden about here somewhere.”

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“Time to get in character folks.” said Sonja.

“I will arrange a meeting three days after you ship gets in- YOU then have the job of seducing me.” said Jane as they made their farewells.

Jane and Joanne disappeared through the gate leaving Wayne and Tom the last two to go.

“Best you get some dancing practice in- and buy some new clothes.” said Sonja, as they stepped through the gate back to their hotel on Taupo.

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Jenny removed her uniform tunic and stretched out on her bunk. Her next watch was another four hours away. This was the best part of her promotion and being on a cruiser, she thought- her own cabin and no more bunking in ‘the stinky’.

As always, jump timings were arranged so that the traveler arrived back well rested, so with no need for sleep her thoughts turned to the Wardroom and coffee. As she arose from her hard bunk, the comm sounded- “Lieutenant DeVries to the number four ready room- Lieutenant DeVries to the number four ready room.” She punched the ‘acknowledged’ button, pulled on her tunic and was on her way.

Jenny instantly sized up the situation once at the ready room- the room was rapidly filling up with the best and most experienced assaulters on ‘Tobruk’- This had to be a boarding party.

The view plate lit up and Admiral Hamersley’s face appeared. “Time is of the essence here, so listen up- grab your assault kits and double to docking bay seven. Your orders are there and you can view them when underway. Move out, people.” The screen blinked out and they were on their way.

All the regular assault teams kept a spare kit at the nearest dock, so they were assembled and formed up to board within a few minutes.

A Yeoman ran up to Jenny, saluted and handed her a tablet. “Captain’s compliments, M’am- you are detail IC and Godspeed.”

She returned her salute and took the tablet, sliding it into a leg pocket. This must

really have some heat on it for the old man not to have time to come down himself, she thought.

The loadmaster called out “Embark in two.” and stood ready at the airlock controls. As soon the lock opened, the troops filed in, some pushing cargo trolleys and the ship's lock snapped shut as soon as they were onboard. A warning klaxon sounded and the local gravity briefly cut out, while the ship thrust to the bare minimum safe range before engaging tractors. Looking about, Jenny saw that they were in the small hold of a courier ship. Their living space would be this twelve by six meter space. Hopefully, this would be a short trip. Glancing around, she identified the senior NCO, Master Sergeant Jorgensen. “Get them squared away Top” she said and pulled out their orders as Jorgensen started barking at the troops.

She was interrupted by an ensign- the co-pilot. “Excuse me M'am- the skipper needs to set a course.”

She powered up the tablet. This was unusual- security was very tight on this job. “Taupo orbital at best emergency speed- I had best come forward and talk to the Captain.”

“This way M'am” said the Ensign- as if you could get lost in one of these ships.

As soon as they entered the cabin, the Ensign started entering the destination into the nav computer and immediately the stars or the view plate started to move as the ship started to align its self for the entry to subspace.

“Where's the fire?” said the ships captain, a young sub-Lieutenant.

“Taupo. Full emergency speed- and now you know as much as I do. Let's see what we have here.” She placed the tablet on a docking port and a view plate lit up.

\*Destination- Taupo Orbital Station- full emergency speed\*

\*Total Communications blackout immediately\*

The captain reached up and started flicking switches. As soon as he had done this Admiral Hamersley's face appeared.

\*Video\*

“I have just received information from naval intelligence, from the captured Paradise station. There is to be an attack on the highliner ‘Aegean Seas’. Opforce will be Blessed elite troops in probable company strength. Their mission is to seize control and take passengers hostage. High-ranking aristocrats are on this vessel.

Your orders are to make rendezvous with ‘Aegean Seas at the Taupo orbital. Another 20 marines are on-route from ‘Monitor’. You will present these orders to the ship's captain and take command of the defense of this vessel until relieved.

I authorize full Imperial emergency powers of requisition and secondment to

Lieutenant J. DeVries, on my authority.

Hamersley, Admiral.”

[Authorizations attached]

\*Ends\*

“Short and sweet” said Jenny. “ETA?”

“127 hours, 17 minutes and 34 seconds- and we have two heads and one shower.”

“Ho-rah.”

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“Officer on deck.” roared Master Sergeant Jorgensen, in a voice more suited for vast carrier hanger decks.

“Thank you Top” said Jenny, returning his salute. “Stand easy for the rest of the voyage.

This is what I have got- it’s not much. We have a five-day drag to the Taupo orbital, where we transfer to the luxury highliner ‘Aegean Sea’. Don’t get too excited- we will be out of sight in the engineering spaces acting like deck apes.

Here is the good part- we expect a full assault by Blessed elite troops in company strength. We and twenty others from ‘Monitor’, on another courier ship, are going to turn the surprise attack around. Now I’m hopeful we will be reinforced by the ship’s security team and some of the aristo’s house guards. They ain’t Fleet Marines but those boys have all done their time on the line. Questions?”

“No questions, M’am, but a bunch of troops from Helzin are headed our way, on route to Earth” said Jorgensen. “Those boys will fight. Some of them were on the raid that took down the Northern Bloc defenses.”

“That would be Captain Jamieson of the Free Company ‘Wotan’s Fury’ said Gunny Meyer. “I’ll fight with them.”

Shipboards assaults were a relatively rare affair and usually involved marines storming a crippled vessel badly mauled in a fleet action. Boarding an undamaged vessel on a regular basis was the domain of the free companies- they wanted their prizes intact.

The aft hatchway swung open and the third member of the ship’s crew appeared. An older man than the others, he was obviously the flight engineer. He casually saluted Jenny. “In subspace, tractors at full military power Lieutenant- welcome aboard the ‘Badik’ and if you care to come aft at your convenience, I’ve rigged a stateroom for you.”

“Badik, eh.” said Jenny, pulling her fighting knife from its scabbard and holding the

blade with its hooked handle up. “Seems more than a co-incidence Chief.- now let’s have a look at this ‘stateroom’”

The ‘Stateroom’ turned out to be an empty stores locker with a folding cot, a water container and a glowpanel- which was as good as could be expected on a ‘Knife’ class courier ship.

“We do a few fast drags for special forces, so we keep this locker rigged for ventilation and light” said the engineer, “although we never had two sticks on board before. At least it’s a short drag- A few years back we had to haul a stick of Rangers up to Epsilon- 36 days and they was ready to eat their young by the time they dropped. Anyway, you know it ain’t good for the officers to spend the whole trip with the troops, so here you are.”

“Much appreciated Chief,” said Jenny “So I can keep out of the troop’s faces, would you mind if I got a little makee-learnie on those Perkins impellers?”

“Be a pleasure m’am- I’m going to be tweaking them the whole way- try and gain you a couple of hours. Right now I got to wind up the water reclamation before we start getting rain in here.”

While the Marines secured their stores and assembled racks, Jenny made her way forward to the tiny wardroom for an update on the flight plan.

“At our current speed, we will dock 36 hours ahead of the ‘Aegean Sea’, which has a 60 hour blow at Taupo,” said the co-pilot/sailing master. “Our course has us entering normal space one hour out from the orbit- minimum safe distance.”

Jenny thought for a moment. “We won’t dock at the station. Make a course for a landing at Camp Helwan. We will need clearance ASAP on clearing subspace.

I plan to ‘lose’ these Marines there. All the orbit crew is going to see are forty deck apes, headed to work on the liner. Nothing unusual there- or in a courier ship landing a few troops at a base.

Now that’s about as much planning as I can do until we are out of subspace- what do you have to drink on-board?”

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The intercom buzzed “General quarters- normal space in ten minutes.”

Good to his word, Chief Wilkins had shaved four hours of the original estimate and Jenny had learnt much about subspace tractors in the past days. A series of signal were coded and queued in the comms computer, to be forwarded as soon as the ship broke subspace.

The dispatches sent, all that remained was to wait for 45 minutes- the minimum time it would take for a reply. Right on time, the first response was from the spaceport at Helwan giving clearance to land. The second was a reply in high-end Imperial code acknowledging Wayne's presence in the capital city and that a direct voice link would

be available in 25 minutes.

Jenny allowed herself a brief smile as she received the message. Wayne's presence would throw the odds way into her favor.

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All the comms in the Imperial suite were encrypted to M246 minimum. Wayne took the handset and answered, "Of course- I have three good troops and there are 12 recruits on the orbital on-route to the Academy. What hardware do you need?"

Wayne jotted down a few notes then broke the connection and picked up his own handset "Carl- I have a job for you"

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"What's the drill, LT?" said Master Sergeant Jorgensen.

"We drop into Helwan; the troops go into the reeple-deeple and reappear as deck apes for the Aegean Sea. All kit is sent up as cargo and we hook up with our other troops. Good new is that we have Jamieson and three of his company on that ship- along with 12 prospects for the academy."

Jorgensen nodded "Good- Taupo is one of his haunts and the old pirate will have lots of useful contacts there. Another stick of wannabes won't hurt either- especially if the house guards won't come play. You might want to have a talk to the boss of the 'Franz Josef' hotel- Guardiola was one of Wayne's troops. He's got one hell of a lot of push on that rock. More than most of your Imperial contacts."

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The jumpbug neatly landed in the parking dock of the Franz Joseph Hotel, were Jenny was meet by a concierge, who handed her a passkey and directed her to the VIP elevator. A few seconds later, she was at the reception lobby of the VIP suite. Her professional eye took in the floor layout. This part of the hotel was obviously a high security area and this lobby would make an efficient trap for any intruders. The internal door- more like a wood panel disguised airlock- slid open. A young woman in her thirties met Jenny; dark haired and solidly built- this had to be the Helzin Marine that Wayne had told them about back on old earth- Andrea.

"Please come through m'am" said Andrea, leading the way. "Isn't this place something else."

"Yes, it's a long way away from my pay grade." said Jenny.

Andrea paused at another door while her retina was scanned. Another vault-like door swung open to a large room- an informal hall. Wayne and Tom were at the bar discussing the merits of the extensive whiskey selection. On the bar, Jenny could see the welcome presence of a 'speak-easy' device.

"Yep, I brought along a bit more soundproofing- not that this Imperial suite lacks for



it's own" said Wayne, who had followed the direction of her gaze. Seven-star meant fit for the Emperor himself.

"Andrea, Carl- this is Lieutenant Jenny DeVries and she is one of us- so we don't need to be formal in this suite."

"Thought so," said Andrea "I recognized the ring." Jenny was wearing the 'Wotan's Fury' signet- anyone not entitled to wear this was taking his or her life out over very thin ice.

"Anyway, I didn't expect to see you so soon," said Wayne "I presume its business."

"No pleasure for Imperial Cadets- so you got that right" said Jenny. "To cut to the chase, I have been given a bad one and would like your help- all of your help."

"So what's the drama?"

"Your transport is going to get jumped somewhere between here and Sheffield" She had their full attention now.

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"I would guess at the next stopover- Yalumba is about close to the outer rim as we will get on that route." said Jenny.

Wayne and Tom nodded in agreement. Andrea projected a holo of the Yalumba system. "Course shows the liner doing a fly-by the gas giant Opal. That is one of the 'must-see' sights of the grand tour- the light show of a planet with a vast magnetic field." Jenny continued. "This is my pick for an ambush- Opal has a large fleet of rare-gas miners and the magnetic fields will degrade a civilian ship's sensors significantly."

"That is where I would do it" said Wayne. "A mining ship in distress- which happens all the time, the way miners treat their craft. Now what does intelligence guess we will be hit with?"

"A reinforced company of Blessed special forces" said Jenny.

"This is an all or nothing," said Wayne. "I would use a block 17 gas miner- that's the most common type and pack it with the best I could find- you are looking at no less than two reinforced companies- about 300 troops and I would have a couple of undercovers on the liner."

"Well we have you a platoon to deal with them. I would rather ensure surprise and keep the house guards and ships security out of the loop- so we have to cut the odds down. Do you have a supply depot here?"

"I do- and more importantly- the contacts to get what I believe you want aboard and hull-stowed."

"Good, here is my list. Now let's get a holo of the ship up and run a few scenarios-

you are the assaulting team- I defend.”

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After three days, the plans for the defense of the ‘Aegean Sea’ had been determined- as well as any battle plans ever could and a couple of hundred kilos of non-descript crates were stored on the Taupo orbital. Jenny had rejoined her command out in one of the wilderness training areas- they were there under the guise of training with local special forces- a common practice. Tom had taken Carl and Andrea out to their local logistics and training center- this was nominally an off-planet aristo’s hunting & fishing camp. There they would train for their parts in the upcoming action. Wayne remained at the Franz Josef, spending the remaining time pouring over schematics, manifests, crew and passenger list and holos of the ‘Aegean Sea’, using the secure imperial database.

The plan was a simple one and essentially the same as their attackers- total surprise against superior numbers. The assaulters needed it to succeed and they now no longer had it.

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Boarding the liner was uneventful. Jenny’s troops were easily lost in the huge numbers of tourist class passengers this ship- bigger than most Imperial cities- carried. Wayne had changed Jenny’s original plan for the Marines to board as crew, figuring they would be easier to spread about as passengers and they would not have to maintain the cover of working. Once in the security of subspace, Wayne called Jenny and asked her to meet him in his cabin- time to pay a visit to his contacts in the crew.

Wayne opened his notebook. “Guiardio gave me a few numbers that you won’t find listed in the passenger’s information- time to call the Captain direct.” A scowling face appeared on the screen and growled “What?”- Then saw who was at the other end of the connection. “Jamieson. - wait right where you are and I will send an orderly up to get you through security.”

“Permission to bring a friend along?” said Wayne, gesturing for Jenny to move into view of the pickup.

“Of course” said Captain ‘Haddock’ Harrison, sending a steward off to fetch them.

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“How very convenient that you know the ships captain.”

“Thirty-odd years in space, you get to know the main players- and you don’t get second-raters put in command of a of a megatonne class highliner.” said Wayne with a grin.

Captain Harrison must have called ahead, as there was a polite tap at the stateroom door several minutes later. From their studies of the ships blueprints, they knew that the real control room was nearly half a kilometer away. Following the steward, they were passed through a security station leading from the passenger area to the crew

decks and then onwards to the operations center and the captain's day room- a large and well-appointed room paneled in real wood complete with the smell of good pipe tobacco.

"It's been a while." said the captain. "It's not like you to take passage on somebody else's command- or are you on business here?" he asked eyeing Jenny, who was wearing an Imperial semi-dress uniform.

"Business, Sir, I'm afraid" said Jenny, who set her tablet down on the teak desk and activated the holographic display. Wayne reached into his pocket, placed a 'speak-easy' on the return and switched it on.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "And trouble I'll be bound"

"Big trouble" said Wayne. "You are about to get hit- Jenny, run the sim and start with your credentials and authorization. Jim- it's a bad one and the only way we are going to pull this off is with complete secrecy- that's our edge." The brief sim of the anticipated attack began.

Captain Harrison sat silently for a time puffing at his pipe, before he spoke. "So you have forty troops on board- I'm assuming they know their stuff."

"Twelve blademasters and the rest are the best of the seventeenth assault fleet. We couldn't bring numbers but we have the very best here" said Jenny.

"I have Tom Phillips and two good marines plus we can count on the ten recruits headed to the academy- I don't know them well but as we know outies have to be pretty damned good to get a scholarship to the war college" said Wayne.

Harrison continued puffing away. "I have some good men in security, but we can't call on them until the fight is engaged- still- they will back up your troops and hold the line. Are you sure the snakes have spies aboard?"

"I would have, if it were me trying to take your ship," said Wayne.

"Well, if we have spies, let's get out of here and find a reason for you to be spending your time in crew country. First day in subspace is my walkabout day and a tour of the crew decks would be in order for you- it's not the same perspective as viewing a holo."

Stepping through to the main control room, Harrison called for his head of security. "Get our distinguished visitors full access ID- they are here on authorized Imperial business," he ordered.

"Aye Sir" he said, unclipping his terminal to take Wayne & Jenny's retina and fingerprint scans. "Access in five minutes and one of my men will bring you your passcards ASAP." He passed the terminal to the captain for his authorization thumbprint scan.

"The cooks tour starts here" said the captain. "This is the actual control room, not the

pretty-boys lounge topside that they show on the vids. Through that window is ops- they are mainly overseeing first class security- making sure the aristos never run out of lavender-scented towels or see a lowly deckhand delivering the champagne. As you both know, unlike a navy vessel, this great white whale mostly runs itself and almost all of the crew is here to attend to the creature comforts of the gibbering freight.”

As Harrison said, the room was quite unimpressive- about 12 meters square, plain and full of banks of screens; five officers moved about checking the displays, occasionally sending a text or voice message to other parts of the ship.

Moving through to the operations room, they saw more of the same- but here most of the activity was opening and closing accessways, dispatching work details, security personnel or moving stores to the galleys, shops and workstations. A highliner needed more logistics management than that of a city of equivalent size, as it was always in festival mode- at least for the passengers.

The passageways and rooms of the crew areas were much more utilitarian than those in passenger country, with the traditional colours of light grey, pale green and white predominant- no marble or wood paneling here. One main corridor ran the length of the ship- the ‘highway’- along this a steady stream of crew moved to their stations, with freight traveling on trolleys or a conveyer system which ran up the middle separating ‘for’ad’ and ‘aft’ traffic. This expressway would be the main concern for Jenny’s marines, as the assaulters could easily run powered equipment, such as high capacity cutters, through here. Speed was everything in a boarding- the most probable plan would be to seize the auxiliary control rooms, situated between the aft transom and the shuttle bays in the middle of the ship. Wayne was sure that the attack would be at these points, with three teams driving to Aux.

Turning off at an unmarked side passage, Captain Harrison led them another 200 meters to an unmarked hatchway. Pressing his ID into the lock, he opened the heavy airlock. Once they were all inside, he swung the hatch shut and secured it. Wayne took his cue and switched the ‘speak-easy’ on.

“This is Aux one- there is a duplicate on the port side and they both have full command and engineering control- I’m guessing these are your worry” said the captain.

“One of the main ones” said Wayne. “Now that we can talk more freely, I can tell you that I plan to cut the odds down before they get to the ship. I have five shoulder-launch portable tubes on your hull in the hazmat store. I want to get one of my troops topside and deploy them tomorrow.”

“Topside in subspace. Better them than me.”

“I didn’t train my marines to be pussies,” said Wayne with a grin. “I will be going out too.”

Sailors never ventured outside the hull while in subspace except in the direst emergencies, but that was more superstition than based on any real risk. It’s impossible to describe the sight of subspace although a few poets have tried. Trouble

is, there is literally no context to describe nothingness by and the experience is said to affect individuals quite differently. More than a few have suffered from extreme agoraphobia and had even gone suicidal. Time travelers are made of sterner stuff, fortunately.

“Speaking of the troops, I will have crew ID set up for them today- I take it you want to get them down here to familiarize. I recommend using the cover of having them on as trainee security and will put them under the security 2IC- I can vouch for him to be discrete- he lost his family to the crows as a boy.”

“You are almost making this easy for us,” said Jenny. “I had been dreading having to pull rank.”

The captain gave a rare grin. “You have enough on your hands with the fight, Lieutenant- and there is one more thing I can do. Arrange a meeting with the top aristos- you may be able to get them to release a few house guards to your command. I believe Jamieson here knows a few from his... exporting activities”

Many of the aristocracy were long standing customers for Wayne’s extremely expensive rarities and items brought in from worlds not on speaking terms with the empire.

“Now there is something else you need to know” he continued, “you may have read the passenger lists on the imperial database, but that does not mean you know exactly on the ship. We are carrying the crown princess Helen- third in line to the throne- incognito.”

Both Jenny and Wayne cast their eyes to the ceiling and exclaimed, "Fuck!" as one.

“Who is she traveling with?” .

“The Grand Duchess Fiona Haverston” said Harrison. “The original old battle-axe herself.”

“That’s OK,” said Wayne. “I know the old girl quite well- I used to supply her with a few lines that were not available on the Imperial market. The good news is that she will put her house guards under our command- and you can bet she has more than a few undercover guards on-board.- especially with her niece along.”

“We can use the help,” said Jenny, “but I don’t want any support notified until we have a contact. I cannot stress the need for surprise enough. Now Captain, we have taken up quite enough of your time- I suggest we meet again tomorrow and I will bring my senior NCOs.”

“Here tomorrow at 1600 local then”, said the Captain. “By then I will come up with a reason for your party going outside.”

“Agreed sir.” said Jenny.

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“That went better than I had thought it might,” said Jenny. “He took the bad news in his stride.”

“Haddock is one of the best,” said Wayne. “The line would never have placed him in the job if he were anything less.”

“Right, I’m going get the troops out of the bars and brothels and get them to work,” said Jenny, striding off in the direction of passenger country, leaving Wayne to explore the ship- a task that would occupy him for much of the next week. He had a feeling as to what part Jenny would have him play in the battle to come...

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Wayne and Andrea finished checking each other’s pressure suits and equipment, while Carl tested the comms units.

The engineering officer the captain had assigned to them then gave the suits a final check over and clearance to exit the ship. “Be careful out there and remember to focus on the ship- try not to look up.”

They both nodded in acknowledgement and entered the service airlock on the transom. Carl cycled the lock and they stepped out onto the transom- an area the size of several sports fields. This was the most likely point for a forced landing and entry. Wayne pointed to a service lift where they would travel up to the hazmat external store- an area reserved for carrying biohazard, toxic and dangerous goods. Wayne reached over and fastened a comms cable to Andrea’s suit, so that they could have a secure conversation. “This is your first time out in subspace, so keep looking at the ship. Don’t look away until I order you to” Wayne said as they rode the lift up about 150 meters. “When you have to do this next it will be in normal space and much easier.” The lift stopped and they opened the cage door, stepping out onto the dorsal aspect of the hull and snapping on safety lines. The Hazmat store was only 20 meters away and of light construction- they are designed to blow out, if need be.

“Ok,” said Wayne. “Look out to aft- you will engage your targets at less than 100 meters- that way you will be out of sight to their pilots.”

Andrea took her first full look at nothingness. “Oh crap.”

“Just let it roll over you Sergeant- it’s just- well- nothing.”

“Sir- there is one hell of a lot of it.”

“Well, now you have seen it, so back to the job in hand.”

They removed the crates and carried them to near the edge, picking a spot in cover, behind a communications tower. A quick tack with a cold-welder and they were there to stay. Two launchers and five reload tubes- a light unguided ‘bunker buster’ type designed to penetrate, then detonate, over-pressurizing their target. The unarmored improvised shuttles should- Wayne hoped- burst as a shaken beer can hit by a bullet. They each loaded a launcher and secured them back in the storage crates.

Wayne pointed to the communications tower. "If you get the urge to climb that, remember that there will be no gravity plates up there- a couple of meters up and you will be in microgravity."

"Sir, I'm planning to pop my tubes then get my arse down until you give the 'all clear'."

"If you take out those two ships, I will consider that a job of work well-done" said Wayne. "Just remember to let them come right in- those craft will possibly have a mining laser rigged, so don't let them see you. You have plenty of time to hit them, even after then have landed. I don't think an improvised craft will have the means for a hot breach and they will have to force or override the main airlock."

"It looks easier than those cliff top laser emplacements, sir- apart from the view."

Wayne unclipped the comm line. "Ahoy the airlock. - coming aboard in five minutes."

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### **Auxiliary control room one**

Now that all the team had been issued ID and uniforms, Jenny assembled all the senior troops for their first joint briefing.

"Commander Jamieson's team will be on roving internal security, with one on the hull to engage with ASM's, then to spot. Commander, I am sure you have guessed, but you are battle director- you are the most experienced man in that position. Sorry- you do not get in the actual fight; we need you on the bridge.

Captain- on my authority, the commander will fight the ship with you as his XO." Captain Harrison nodded in agreement "Commander Jamieson will have the full support of the crew and me."

Jenny continued. "Captain, Commander- I want you to hold off on deploying your ship's security and house guards until we engage those landing craft. That is going to be rough on them, but the need for secrecy is paramount.

Marines- we will cover the two midline docks, assuming for now that there will be an assault on both. If we get lucky, we reinforce accordingly. I will deploy the academy recruits aft for a blocking action, should the missiles not do the job. The good news is that the Commander has smuggled a load of combat rig- weapons and armour- on board, so we are fully equipped for the job.

Top- you and I will lead the Blademaster's spearhead and take port. Heavy infantry will deploy starboard and refuse.

That's as structured as I want to get- we need to stay fluid on this op. Commander- any comments?"

“Not much to add” said Wayne. “I anticipate a covert attack on C&C and the aft port control. The last thing we need is to look as if we are guarding them, so try to steer clear of these areas. If I can offer a suggestion to the troops guarding the docks, I noticed some heavy winching gear there. Now some years ago when I was crewing on the ‘Antares Conveyer’ we were boarded by pirates...”

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A chime at the cabin terminal told Wayne he had a visitor. He looked at the screen and told the door to open, admitting Jenny. She looked about the room. “Much nicer than tourist class- enjoy it while you can.”

Wayne had upgraded to a business class suite- a quarter the price of first class and almost as good. “Yes, no more Captain’s quarters for me- so as you say- I’m making the most of it. Drink?”

“Thanks.”

Wayne poured three fingers of Kentucky whiskey into two glasses and handed one to her. “Cheers.”

They took a seat in the small lounge and drank.

“Do you feel like going out for dinner tonight, or would you like to order room service?” Wayne asked.

“I wouldn’t mind going out” said Jenny. “That will at least force me to stop talking shop for a couple of hours.”

“Service.” said Wayne and the view screen lit up. “Dining- casual.”

A selection of restaurants and cafes appeared on screen. Wayne studied the screen for a few minutes. “Pizza” he added, remembering one of her favorites and the menu changed to a smaller selection.

“That one looks good” said Jenny, pointing. “Service- reservations- Giovanni’s Pizzeria for two- 2000 hours.”

The screen blinked ‘query’ and then promptly replied ‘selection confirmed’

“You can get almost anything on this ship,” said Wayne, opening a drawer and passing Jenny a cigar box with a cutter and lighter. Wayne activated his speak-easy and then clipped the cigars, passing them to Jenny to singe the ends.

“Not a bad smoke” said Jenny. “These are not the easiest items to come by- certainly not at the Academy.”

“You know the empire- they don’t forbid much but they do make it hard to obtain. In other words- tax the crap out of it.”

“Speaking of the forbidden- did you bring anything else up from Taupo that I haven’t



seen yet?”

“A couple of items that may be useful- nothing that would set off the ship’s detectors- clandestine blades, some super-slick lubricant, military motion detectors and a camera network- stuff we will deploy when we come up from subspace. I brought a bomb safe too.”

“You still think we have a rat on board?”

“Rats, plural-and yes, I’m quite sure. It’s my belief that they will attempt an attack on C&C and operations.”

“That’s quite a big ask for an undercover operation.”

“They don’t have to hold the areas- just cause havoc at the critical moment. If they could gain control, that would be a major advantage. A chemical attack would be the most likely scenario.”

Jenny placed her cigar on the ashtray and took a sip of her drink. “A bit of up-time intel would be useful about now.”

“How do you think naval intelligence came to know of the attack?”

“The information came from the captured Paradise station mainframe... that your company took...”

“Correct- we planted it.”

Jenny frowned “So you know how all this worked out- obviously this is a divergence event.”

“I don’t know much, but I know how it played out without our intervention. A flight 93 scenario. The Crows crash her into Opal with total loss of life.”

“Failure is not an option.” said Jenny.

“It never is and we will not.”

“Yes, knowing changes nothing.” Jenny looked at the terminal screen. “Plenty of time for another drink. My Top Sergeant is taking care of business tonight- turns out he knows a few of the ships security team.”

“Same with my troops- Tom is of having dinner with the head of security tonight. We plan to leak the information that we are here on Imperial orders to boost security numbers- quite reasonable, given the rank of our unlisted passenger. Tom will smooth over any inter-force rivalries that may come up- you know what security can be like.”

“I’m sure Master Sergeant Jorgensen will be doing the same- in his own way- not that anyone will give one of the navy’s top Blademasters any grief.”

“I believe you have eleven Blademasters plus yourself- that’s an event you don’t see too often- it’s normally one fight- one Blademaster.”

“And don’t you even think about getting in on that fight.”said Jenny. “Seriously, though- we need you directing- *and* watching for that predicted attack on C&C.”

“That’s enough shop talk for now,” said Wayne “Time to eat- let’s get in character.”

He reached across and deactivated the speak-easy.

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Wayne was by now one of the usual faces in C&C and operations, under the cover of being an operations consultant from the shipping lines main office- this was a common occurrence on a large- and expensive- civilian vessel. The ships officers and crew soon picked up that he was obviously on good terms with their captain (unlike most company ‘suits’) and treated him accordingly. It helped that he was standing watches, thus relieving the crew of their workload.

The atmosphere on the bridge of the ‘Aegean Seas’ was not unlike that of the ‘Fury’ when in subspace- businesslike, but relaxed and friendly, while always maintaining a well disciplined air. Captain ‘Haddock’ Harrison was the consummate skipper- a firm disciplinarian, without being a marionette and an excellent tutor to the junior officers. He liked to portray himself as a simple spacer and was anything but. With over 150 year experience in space, he was at the top of his game as a civilian skipper and as such he knew when he was out of his depth- he was thankful that with the upcoming troubles he had an officer like Wayne aboard- and if he vouched for Lieutenant DeVries- that was good enough for the Haddock.

The stewards arrived with the morning coffee and snacks- the trolley loaded with the usual temptations. The same unobtrusive but excellent service the passengers received was the standard for the bridge as well. Wayne accepted a mug of black coffee, but declined the cake or donuts- he was not a fan of sweet things. On the ‘Fury’, his usual breakfast was navy coffee (aka carbon remover) and a stick of biltong- to the disgust of various chefs and stewards.

As usual, Wayne and the Captain retired to the day cabin.

“How long have you had those stewards aboard?” Wayne asked.

“Since the ship was commissioned,” said the Captain “Do you suspect them?”

“They are ideally placed to bring in a small bomb or chemical device.

“Which would be why that bomb safe disguised as a toolbox is now under the central console?”

“You never miss a thing, do you?”

“I try not to- and before you ask, we did a ‘vent to vacuum drill’ two weeks before

you boarded.”

“Good.”

“Now for other business- I have had a ‘request’ come through the back door. You have a private meeting organized for tonight at 2230 with the Grand Duchess herself.” The Captain slid over a data stick. “This has the directions to the location- we have an area specifically set up for clandestine meetings between aristos and commoners- off the ships normal records, of course. Usually one of them looking for a bit of rough from the tourist decks. Now- the good Lieutenant was also mentioned- you are to bring her along”

“She contacted you, right?”

“Correct”

“Interesting...”

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Wayne and Jenny found the room easily enough- civilian ships were easy to anyone used to the tight warrens of naval craft. At the hatchway, they identified themselves to a pair of competent-looking house guards and were passed through.

“Come in old friend.” said the Grand Duchess Fiona Haverston. “At ease, Lieutenant- please- this is a strictly informal meeting- we can dispense with the normal protocols here.” She gestured towards a set of overstuffed armchairs and set about pouring drinks. Fiona continued, “I wanted to talk to you while we were still in subspace.”

Without saying more, she took a speak-easy from a decorative wooden box and activated it.

“I will be to the point. I received a top-level signal at Taupo advising me of a threat to this vessel. I trust that is why you are here.”

“That is correct, we anticipate an assault shortly after we exit subspace in the Yalumba system. Naval Intelligence estimates one company, but my opinion is that we can expect at least twice that. In addition, I am convinced they will have agents on the crew.” said Wayne.

“I see- What may I do to assist? My house guards are at your command, of course.”

“What we really need is secrecy- we will carry the day if our defense is a complete surprise- and we have a few for the Crows. Apart from our troops, there are only four others including yourself that know of our plans- and I want to keep it that way. Your house troops will be best kept close to yourself- and any other high-rankers in your party. If we have a sizable fifth-column force on boards, they may try for a high value hostage.

If we fail, the captain and senior crew may be presumed dead and you are next in the chain of command. At least we will have weakened the Crows and brought you time

to rally the other house guards and the passengers”

“Lieutenant- may I ask the disposition of your force”

“Of course, M’am- Forty marines of the 17th assault group, plus Commander Jamieson’s party and 12 well-seasoned academy recruits we briefed just prior to entering subspace.” said Jenny.

“I should add that Lieutenant Jenny has not mentioned that she and eleven of those marines are Blademasters” said Wayne.

‘If it were anyone other than the Crows, I might be tempted towards sympathy.’ quipped the Duchess. “Now that you have reassured an old woman, might I tempt you with a passable glass of wine?” She deactivated the speak-easy and placed it back in its box, then paged her butler, who brought in the wine- An old-earth 3535 vintage Te Mata Estate Coleraine.- 7.8 kilobucks a bottle.

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“Sound the five minute alarm,” said Captain Harrison, as they prepared to come up from subspace. This was the most dangerous time for a ship, despite strict adherence to the timing and navigation protocols designed to avoid collision between ships. Until an emerging vessel built up a sensor picture of its immediate volume of space, it would be vulnerable to collision with space debris- although this was an extremely rare occurrence.

The only sensor arrays capable of detecting matter from subspace were aboard Wayne’s old command ‘Wotan’s Fury’- a secret that had been promised to the empire- but not yet delivered.

The intercom sounded- a klaxon followed by “Five minutes to normal space- general quarters.” The ships damage control teams would stand by to repair any hull breaches- in the thousands to one chance that one might occur and not be immediately sealed by the automatics.

As a civilian vessel, they came up to n-space at a low relative velocity. The first report came from nav- “Course and position confirmed- alignment for a fly-by of Opal- closest approach in two hours.”

Wayne stared intently at his screen, watching the data start to appear. As he thought, there was nothing in their immediate sector, with a clear path to the gas giant of Opal soon shown. After a few minutes, it was clear that there were no ships positioned to approach or on the same path- as would be expected in this relatively backwater system and he sent out prerecorded signals to the teams to that effect. It would be another twelve minutes before they received last known ship positions from the Opal traffic buoys.

The ‘All Clear’ tone sounded and the tension visibly eased. For most of the crew.

The ship’s senior officers filed into the Captain’s day cabin, for the usual morning

briefing. With the door shut, Wayne activated his speak-easy- something most there had only heard rumors of. The Captain spoke: "That device is what you think it is. We are in imminent danger of attack- probably as we approach Opal for the fly-by. You need to keep this STRICTLY to yourselves- we have spies on board." He waited a few moments for this to sink in.

"For those who don't know him- this is Captain Jamieson, of Free Company 'Wotan's Fury' - he will fight our ship, on Imperial orders."

Wayne stood up. "This is an all-out attack by the Crows- they want this ship and they want your VIP's as hostages. You will be for the slave markets or medical research labs; I suspect the latter. However, that is not going to happen.

My apologies, but I won't give any details on how I intend to defend the ship. The only edge you are going to have is in knowing an attack will go down yourself- and a few minutes warning to rally your people. My troops will buy you the time you need. Now, I have some people in very exposed positions- if the Crow spooks know we are onto them, they won't have much of a chance- and we are all depending on these people doing their jobs- do I make myself quite clear?" Heads nodded around the table.

"Can we expect a strike on C&C?" said the XO.

"I would think so," said Wayne. "Watch for anything out of the ordinary and be ready to act instantly on my cue."

"I want Captain Jamieson's orders obeyed as if they were my own." Captain Harrison stressed. There would be no problems here, with most of the liner's officers holding commissions in the naval reserve.

Captain Harrison stood up and crossed to a cupboard, which he unlocked, removing several packages. He slid one across the table to Wayne and another to the security chief. The ships officers looked shocked to see a pair of small handguns- it was unheard of to use firearms on board ship- most things on board did not react well to gunfire and pistols considered low-powered enough to not breach hulls or panels covering delicate components would be useless against body armor. Ships explosives sniffers prevented firearms- or at least their ammunition- from being smuggled aboard.

"Desperate circumstances require desperate measures- shoot straight."

"No guns' has always been more of a guideline with me," said Wayne, checking the pistol carefully and pocketing it, "They are little use on a military ship, but can be very useful assaulting a civilian craft- not that I would like that information made public knowledge."

As they approached the light show of the huge gas giant and its magnetic fields, Wayne saw a gas mining ship- one of a dozen gathering the valuable noble gases of which Opal had a high concentration- on a vector that would come close to their path. Not close enough for the helm office to be concerned- under normal circumstances-

but this was exactly what he was watching for. Clicking on 'detail' showed that it was a block 17 type gas miner- the most common craft used in this type of operation. Not wanting to alert the ship, he could only use the passive sensors and was unsure how to gain more information- then he had an idea. Placing the optical tracker into narrow-field infrared, he tracked the miner, carefully moving the scan to the tankage section- there. The storage tanks were radiating heat- they should have been at cryogenic temperatures.

The detachable storage tanks were disguised shuttles.

Wayne caught the Captains eye. He wandered over and casually looked at Wayne's screen. He nodded, as if in agreement and quietly said "Yes" as if replying to some minor piece of data.

Wayne tapped his wrist terminal and sent the 'stand by' signal. As he continued to monitor the miner, the Captain moved about C&C and ops handing handwritten notes to the senior officers who were in on the secret- a simple message- ship with anomalous heat signature on approach- caution.

At 0955 local time, the signaler reported, "Captain- a Block 17 gas mining craft at 200 km has declared an emergency and requests permission to come alongside, Sir."

"Permission granted- advise to hold station at five kilometers off our port stern and enquire the nature of the emergency."

"Sir- Vessel reports a fire and crew injuries."

At this moment, the stewards arrived with the morning coffee and snacks- following ship's tradition making a flyby of Opal, a large cake was the centerpiece on the sweet trolley. The stewards left the larger trolleys in the operations room for the crew to help themselves, while they wheeled a smaller trolley into C&C to serve the Captain and senior officers. This was nothing new and was just part of the routine of every watch, but Wayne was watching very closely- with all his augmented senses.

He dropped a stylus and kneeled down to pick it up from under of a workstation. A quick glance confirmed what he thought he had seen. He drew his throwing knife from its wrist scabbard and in one fluid motion, flung it with all his strength.

The steward went down as if he was pole-axed, the knife driving up to its hilt in his eye socket. Before the stunned crew could move, Wayne was onto the second steward, driving a savage punch to the side of his neck, snapping the vertebrae with an audible crack. Not slow to take his lead, the captain and XO had piled onto the remaining steward and knocked him to the deck, the security chief snapping restraints on him. Wayne sent the signal 'Under attack' through his terminal as he searched the trolley. Unscrewing the tops of the coffee flasks, he found what he had suspected- a gas canister, which was promptly secured in the bomb safe.

The security chief was already racing towards the ops room trolley yelling, "Stand clear and don't eat any of that food."

“Secure the bridge NOW. All station- we are under attack and I expect that miner will shortly try to board. Under order of the Emperor, I now hand this command to Captain Jamieson who will fight the ship.” shouted the Captain.

Wayne pulled on a comms headset and addressed the operations room and C&C “We have a couple of minutes and we are going to give the impression that the attack worked- Comm- send a microburst distress call, then total external communications silence. Traffic- wait four minutes, then turn on beacons and landing lights to the transom and both midsection docking bays.”

“Sir- Contact aspect change- the miner is breaking up.”

“No, those tanks are fakes- get me a track ASAP. The rest of you- use these seconds and start preparing to run your hostile boarder SOP’s.”

They retired to C&C and sealed the hatchway from the ops room. Wayne took his place in the Captain’s chair and started calling up video links that he had installed covertly over the last week. He switched his com set to the military channels, as the crew removed the dead and secured the unconscious prisoner in a storage locker- they had tried the mini-doser they found on him. “Heads up people, we just had an attempt on C&C- expect hostiles inbound now- and watch for trouble on board.” Jenny’s First Sergeant looked towards the camera and gave a ‘thumbs up’- a very reassuring sight to the C&C team.

“How did you know?” asked the XO.

“I saw his nose filters in the reflection of the cream jug, bent down to get a better look and that was enough for me.” A more thorough search had revealed knives and a mini-doser- no doubt the crew were to be further drugged and probably murdered later- a fact that had not escaped them. Wayne turned to another screen “That flight profile looks like they are going to hit us at all landing bays simultaneously- eta seven minutes and twenty seconds. Security- on contact, sound ‘To Arms’. Operations- on contact you will initiate ship’s lockdown procedures. Good hunting people.”

\*\*\*

Andrea powered up the missile launchers and continued to wait in the closed locker. She had to stay hidden until the two ships headed here way were all but docked, not wanting to attract the attention of a laser. After what felt like hours, the signal came. “Andrea- on final now- stand by, stand by.” This was the most critical part of the defense and had Wayne’s full attention.

“Decel on- 200 meters, 150, 100, 75, 50, - engage at will.”

Andrea swung the door open and carefully walked forward until she could see the rear half of the two ships. Placing one launcher down, she took up the other, sighted on the middle of the hull and fired. The light armour-piercing missile flashed the short gap and its penetrator charge detonated, breaching the hull. The main body of the missile flew through the hole and released its payload- a mix of fuel, explosive and powdered exotic metals into the ship. Milliseconds later, the intitator charge detonated, creating a massive overpressure and bursting the ship’s hull. She jumped back and took up the

second tube, then counted to ten- there is no blast wave in space, but she did not want to walk into a hail of debris. Ignoring the secondary explosions in the mortally wounded ship, she sighted on the far craft and fired her second tube...

“Well done. Now get to cover- your job is done.” came over her comm, Andrea had other ideas; returning to the locker, she reloaded one of the launchers and slung that and a reload over her shoulder. Exiting the locker, she headed to the aft comms array tower and started to climb.

\*\*\*

Four crewmembers dressed in maintenance uniforms strode towards the Auxiliary control room. As they approached the auxiliary control room, a tune could be heard from within. They knew a cleaner would be attending to this station and as the team leader peered through the open hatch, he saw a general hand mopping the floor with an static duster, whistling while he lazily pushed his 'idiot stick' about.

The team leader signaled the others through and they spread out in a combat approach. The cleaner finally noticed them and after a couple of seconds saidd- “You shouldn't be here.”

One of the terrorists replied, “I believe he is threatening us.” and another added “I think we should kill him for that.”

The team leader barked, “Stop fucking around and kill him- then get on station.”

The cleaner stood looking blankly at the over-confident troopers, all the time holding his mop at the high port. As the nearest approached, he pulled the shaft out of the mop head and slashed at the closest one. The duralloy shaft snapped his neck and before the others could react, he had backhanded the second, catching him in the side of the head. The 'cleaner' recovered the shaft and heaved it as a javelin, skewering the third man. The team leader had his blade out and was closing fast. Tom neatly sidestepped and plunged his Arkansas toothpick through the enemies head. As the final body lay twitching he called “Aux one secure”, as he dogged the hatch shut.

\*\*\*

“Looking for someone- assholes?” said Gunnery Sergeant Meyers. As the assault troops looked towards him, he detonated the small cutting charge.

A 50mm hawser under near breaking strain tension has a lot of kinetic energy-as the Crows just found out, when Gunny Meyers blew the cutting charge. The hawser whipped across the bay, tearing through the ranks like a 10mm laser. A few were sharp enough to jump at the right time- they were soon fully engaged by Meyer's Marines, supported by the academy recruits.

\*\*\*

Jenny's detail had waited for the shuttle to fully board. As soon as they were clear, the outer hatch closed. With the ship's cutter in this bay, they could not try the cable trick- they would use the time-tried method of Marine aggression and proven tactics.



Back at the C&C, Wayne and the command team had a rare view of the empire's best in combat. The spearhead of Jenny, Top Sergeant Jorgensen and the supporting Blademasters apparently walked through the opposition, killing as they went. The desperate fighting was not seen here; as they moved people died, seemingly without great effort. They now knew exactly why the Blademasters had such a reputation- something most citizens would never see. While they were watching this, a message came in. "Gunner to Actual- engaging craft on approach to bulkhead 139"

\*\*\*

Andrea had climbed  $\frac{3}{4}$  the way up the comm array- about 500 metres off the hull. Stopping to rest, she saw the miner headed to the forward section of 'Aegean Seas'- they were headed for the first class garage. Rather than waste time, she snapped off a shot at the leading edge of the ship and then called in her report, as she started to reload the launcher.

On board the miner, the third officer called 'Missile inbound.' The gunner immediately identified the launch site as the comms tower and slewed his laser about, firing before getting on target. The missile smashed home as he fired, causing the beam to go low. The laser severed the com tower and its stays. Andrea spiraled off, drawn slowly but surely into the gravity well of Opal.

"Hold tight." said Wayne. "We have a good lock on you."

"FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK..."

"TROOP. Set your visor to maximum polarize and talk to me."

"OK boss- reloading now."

"What is happening out there?"

"Mother ship is headed to passenger country- I will attempt to re-engage."

"Acknowledge- good hunting."

\*\*\*

"Security- house troops- attack on prime underway- stand to."

"Troop Haverston- hard landing at bulkhead 28- stand by- pressure drop."

"Command- marines are on the way- fight to hold."

"Haverston- we have fires from A458 to A 462- we are locked down- that was a crash- or a real hard landing."

"Damage control on the way."

\*\*\*

Remembering Tom's lectures on the subject, Andrea threw a line around the mast and pulled it taut. The laser had missed her by two meters and now that she was over her initial fright, she was seriously pissed. Clipping the reload tube in, she sighted on the ship, compensating for her spiraling trajectory away from the ship.

“Die you goat-fucking Crow pieces of pig-shit”, she whispered, sighting on the hot laser tube and firing again. The hyperbaric missile hit midsection, blowing the crew section of the ship apart. It was not a fatal hit- this ship was too big- but she had hurt it badly.

\*\*\*

Back at C& C, another of Wayne's cameras had picked up activity in the second auxiliary control, where Tom was now headed. Another four-man team entered unopposed and closed the hatch.

“Damage control- Initiate manual fire suppression, aux two.”

'Let's see who brought their rebreather' Wayne thought to himself, as aux two started flooding with halon gas. He called Tom and said “Fire suppression on in aux two.” Only the most critical areas of a civilian ship had active fire suppression equipment and Wayne was counting on general hands not being familiar with it. As the drama unfolded on his screen, it was apparent he was correct- the team leader tried to rally his men, but two of them panicked when the oxygen-robbing gas flooded the room and they dashed for the hatch, desperately clamoring at the lock and throwing it open, staggering out into the path of a fast-moving duralloy staff...

\*\*\*

Close quarter combat is a game of paper, scissors and rock with each side trying to guess the optimum weapons and armour to use against their opponents. The boarders had planned on their opposition being unarmored ships security and crew with nothing more than batons and knives. On this assumption, they went with light armour, knives and short swords, as speed was the key to their mission. They needed just enough gear to have a definite edge.

Which it would have done had their cover had held. What they actually met in the hanger bays were heavily armoured Imperial marines- they did not have to run about the ship- just hold their ground. Instead of scattering ships crew, here stood elite troops well-prepared and armed with all the weaponry that could be used in the confines or more open spaces on a ship- knives, swords, axes, staffs, pole-arms, slow-pellet throwers and snare-guns.

While outnumbered at over two to one, Jenny's troops silently advanced in a wedge formation. The Crow troop commander yelled out a command and two squads broke away to flank the marines. The two snare-gunners fired, entangling several of the flanking troops each, while the rest broke away, intent on getting clear while the main body engaged. Now the fight was on.

The top sergeant at the apex of the wedge advanced on the Crow shouting orders, his

great battle-axe slashing in short arcs- causing terrible injuries amongst the lightly armoured Crows. Guarding his left side, Jenny's knives darted out- she favored the style called 'pricking'- stabbing in short jabs, slipping under armour or into exposed flesh, her knives going just deep enough to sever arteries or ligaments- no more. Jorgenson hit another on the backswing and as the stunned trooper staggered past Jenny, her triangular-sectioned Batik shot out like a piston, piercing the side of his skull. She jerked the knife free, using the advantage of the curved handgrip. Another one down.

The unlucky men caught in the snare had been killed or disabled by the lancers, who were now protecting the knifemen's flanks. The snare-guns had been discarded and the gunners were using their slow-pellet throwers to great effect. This weapon was similar to a sports paintball gun, but threw a heavy sintered lead ball at a similar velocity. These would not usually kill, but would not fly through a switchboard cabinet, either. Their main purpose was to distract- a hit in the goggles or unprotected body would do that. That split second of distraction was all it took for a good knife-hand to slip through their opponent's guard- and these marines were the best- now the battle was even numbers and the Imperials were rapidly gaining the advantage.

\*\*\*

“Security- ten leakers from port hanger deck. Tracking access C47, headed to Aux one.”

“Echo three- responding.”

“Tom, get back into Aux one and lock down- you have a squad headed your way.”

“Copy Actual- Aux one secure and locked.”

Wayne's eyes scanned the screens- The fight was going as well as could be expected. Jenny's troops would have the port hanger situation controlled enough to let local security- who were on the way now- mop up and secure, from there the Marines would head across to the starboard bay 300 meters away- should they be needed. By the look of the way Meyer's team was going, they would not be required. That hawser had put half of the Crows out of the fight with broken limbs and assorted injuries- lots of prisoners for navy intelligence to mind-pick. They would be pleased.

“Sir- the bomb safe is displaying a warning.” said one of the C&C crew. “Two orange lights and a red flashing at two per second.”

“Looks like those canisters were on a timer as well- two orange and a red at a half-second interval is for a type three Agent Incapacitating- that's the kind that kills 10% of those getting a dose. As soon as we are secure, get it the hell out of an airlock.” Wayne informed the rating that had spotted the status change indicator.

Another call came through on the ships comms- A senior house guard with blood splatters across his face and uniform. “Sir- we have driven them back into their ship and hold on your orders. Request passage cleared to medical- I have eight wounded needing urgent treatment.”

“Security- make a passage and advise medical of incoming casualties.”

“Aye Sir”

“Continue your report, Major.”

“Sir, Blessed elite marines in medium armour. We drove them back too easy- their command was not effective. I have 24 effectives and 45 reinforcements on the way from the other houses- with your clearance, sir.”

“Security- clear passage to breach area for house guards.”

“Aye Sir”

“Clearance granted Major- we are getting the ship under control and will have some relief up to you soon- just keep them bottled up. One of my troops hit that ship with two missiles and it sounds like she got the crew compartment. Command Out.”

The major gave a tired smile. “My compliments to your gunner- we hope to buy her a drink or two- House Haverston out.”

If she survives, thought Wayne.

\*\*\*

The fighting was now in open formation, the marines separating into their fighting pairs. Jenny had sheathed her dagger and batik and pulled a stabbing spear from the scabbard on her back, This weapon was based on an Assegai, with the spearhead made from 10mm hull plate, hollow ground and razor sharp, on a duralloy shaft 600mm long, with a 40mm round knob at the end. Like the original namesake, it was mainly used to stab, but was also useful in a slashing attack. The weight would allow it to tear through light armour or act as a kinetic weapon against heavier armour. Used two-handed with Jenny's enhanced strength it was devastating in close combat. She had just severed a hand from an opponent attacking Jorgenson, who flicked the haft of his axe up to catch the handless fighter in the head. Momentarily without any opposition, they quickly sized up the fight and changed position to attack another pair engaged with the marines.

The battle had turned to a rout- the Crows had nowhere to go, but would not surrender. Now outnumbered, the Imperials took just a couple of minutes to disable the rest of the opposition.

“Corporal- Take two section and clear the ship” said Jenny. “Marines to Actual-Hanger secure, clearing the landing craft now. Clear to move security in five.”

“Send one squad to assist mop-up in starboard bay, you will move the rest up to deployment area November and await vacuum armour and an engineer detail. Prepare for an opposed assault onto a damaged block 17 gas miner. Great work down there. C&C out.”

\*\*\*

“Sergeant- Sergeant. I need your helmet camera on that gas miner- good. Zoom in- looks like you hit a big capacitor- switch to thermal. OK, I have seen enough. Now I need you to just hang tight, try to slow your breathing- you have plenty of time,” said Wayne, looking at her vitals readout on the screen. As soon as we can clear that wreck, we will bring you in.” He did not mention that both hangers and the transom were fouled.

“Sir. Another vessel just jumped in. Hell- its right on top of us.”

“Comms- break exterior silence and get a sitrep off to the local navy.”

“Aye Sir”

“Sir- Imperial code coming through.” A cheer went up throughout the bridge and ops room. “Frigate 'Sheffield' signals 'Do you require assistance?’” The frigates sensors would have already determined that the Aegean Seas had been attacked.

“Sheffield, Aegean Seas Actual- attack repelled- we have a block 17 gas miners tug on our hull with an unknown number of hostile aboard. Out”

“Hold your course Aegean Seas, we will come in close and shift that barnacle for you.”

“I have a marine out there drifting on a comms mast, she needs a rescue after you are done. Good hunting Sheffield. Out”

“Acknowledge Aegean Seas- we will bring her in. Out.”

Good news for the marines and house guards.

“House Haverston- pull back two hatchways, we have naval gunfire inbound. Marines- belay my last- one section to Aux one- security need an assist with six hostiles, the others to Aux two- We have seven Crows locked inside.”

\*\*\*

“Ship clear, Lt.”

“Take your squad to Aux one- security have six for you to take down- good hunting.”- everyone else, we move to Aux two for a forced entry- lets roll.”

The two sections headed off at a brisk trot. The assault on the miner’s tractor section had been cancelled- now the main task was to be to force entry into the secure auxiliary control room. As they doubled along the corridor, Jenny started reviewing her studies of the blueprint in her head.

\*\*\*

With the hanger cleared, a pair of medics arrived to ready the wounded for a move to medical, while engineers were moved in to clear the improvised landing craft and. Not trusting its systems, the captain had ordered it pushed out the airlock to drift free.

The first of the crew looked about the hanger- the floor was awash with blood, body parts and corpses. Abandoned equipment was strewn about. The crew chief ordered his engineers to assist the medics in moving the wounded past the airlock. They would have to suit up and go to vacuum, using a tractor to push the craft free. At least the vacuum would dry up the blood.

\*\*\*

The 'Sheffield' drew alongside 'Aegean Seas' and matched velocity. Scanning the damaged miner, the fire control officer soon had her targets designated- any section that could contain life. "Targets locked," she confirmed.

"Ahead 1m/s" ordered the Captain, Lieutenant Commander Sandra Taylor. "Gunnery-independent fire when ready." As the frigate slowly flew past at a range of 500 meters, her CIWS lasers carefully tore the ships compartments apart. As they engaged the flight deck a brief burst of radio traffic was received, but promptly cut off. "A bit late to surrender now" stated the commander. "Helm, reverse vector 2m/s- scan-sweep the ship as we pass and continue to monitor."

"Aye Ma'm- initial scan shows no life- all atmosphere venting to vacuum."

"Helm, when the flyby is complete, move off to one kilometer and hold station." The captain then called the aft hanger, "Ensign Dante, you are clear to commence rescue operations. That marine can't have a lot of air."

"Aye Ma'm, cutter away- clearing hanger doors now."

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"Sergeant. Andrea. - Don't fade on me now- a cutter is on the way. I need you to loose your line and cast off from the mast- push towards the fires on the ship- that is the right direction- and make sure you beacon is pinging- good- that's it." She was now drifting slowly away from the mast, in about the right direction.

"Andrea- set your visor to max- we are going to illuminate you with a signaling laser-confirm"

"OK sir, it's done- and I'm down to 45 minutes air here."

"That's 30 minutes more air than you need- we used to do this drill in about ten minutes and looking at how those imperials cut that Crow ship up, you can assume they know what they are doing."

"This is Ensign Dante- I have our target on visual- 'Aegean Seas' and you can cut the illuminating laser now- thank you. Can you tell your Marine that we will be using a snare-gun to bring her in?"

"I have you patched through Ensign, you can talk direct now."

"Copy Aegean Seas- what's your name marine?"

"Andrea, Sir- Glad to see you."

"Andrea, I have a crewman about to fire a snare at you. What you need to do is just let the net wrap around you- you will see four illuminated weights at the corners of the net, once those have whipped around you a couple of times, we have you. Now the net is real lightweight, so try not to struggle- grab a couple of handfuls if you can and hang on- we have to reel you in slow or you bounce off our cutter. Have you ever done this drill before?"

"Got all that sir- I worked up on one of the Helzin orbitals for a while, as a rigger. I haven't been in the snare, but I know the drill."

"Good on you- we will have you on board in no time- I hear there a few people on 'Aegean Seas' that want to fill you up with the best drink on board."

"I see the strobes now- all spreading out away from me."

"That means the snare is on target. You probably won't feel it contact you- once the strobes go out of view you will see a shift in the stars if you stay still. Once the strobes reappear, you will know the snare is wrapped around you."

"OK Sir, we have her- reeling in- hold still, sergeant- don't want you tearing loose."

"I see my range to your cutter dropping- thanks- looks like eta in 300 seconds."

\*\*\*

Wayne switched displays, with Andrea's rescue all but completed. His attention turned to the Sheffield's attempts to dislodge the now dead miner with her tractors.

"Cut tractors, Sheffield- I will send an engineering team into the skin to inspect- I suspect they have used barbs along their spine and even if you had the power, you would tear out our structural members," advised Captain Harrison.

"Acknowledged 'Aegean Seas', advise a heavy wrecker is on route from Taz, eta four hours, along with a local destroyer."

Wayne stood up and stretched "Sir- I believe that damage control of the Aegean Seas is your domain, thus I relinquish my command to you."

"Sir, I relieve you" said Captain Harrison, "And my congratulations for a battle well-fought- to you and all your company."

"Then with your permission Sir, I would retire from the bridge to assist in clearing your auxiliary bridges- I have a blade that is still clean."

"Sir, you have my leave and good hunting."

Leaving the bridge, Wayne passed through the operations room, which was still fully engaged with damage control and ships security. At the hatchway, he was passed by a

security detail, swords and pole-arms in their hands. "I will escort you to the auxiliary control room" said a young constable.

"Lead on then, I don't want to miss out on killing more Crows- those Imperials are quite selfish that way."

The guards chuckled as we trotted off. They would be a bit less amused later, when they found out how many of their comrades had died doing their duty.

\*\*\*

"Glad you could make it" said Jenny, who was directing an engineering section who was setting up a 6mm laser cutter.

"I'm done back there. I take it we are going in through the life support spaces?"

"The ships engineer's are- to shut down their independent life support and fit an exhaust pump into the air circulation line. I have had enough of my people killed today."

Wayne nodded in approval. "Fair enough- do you intend to take prisoners?"

"I do- they don't get off easy by dying. Yes- set up that screen over there and patch me through to our visitors." The rating unfolded a screen and camera and stuck them on a bulkhead, then connected the receiver.

"Ready to start cutting m'am- 'ware eyes all." The 6mm laser made short work of the double skinned bulkhead and they were through to the Auxiliary control room's life support spaces, where the fitters quickly tack-welded the access panel to the control room, to make sure the Crows stayed on the other side. A coupler was welded into the air supply line and connected to a hose leading outside to a vacuum pump. The lead engineer gave Jenny a 'thumbs up' and she gave the order to shut down the air scrubber. Shutting off an air supply is to a spacer the same as making someone walk the plank in the days of old, but their pride and joy-the 'Aegean Seas' had been attacked and damaged and somebody must pay.

"Audio to simplex mode-TX" said Jenny to the rating and turned to face the screen. "Imperial Navy- I have shut of your air scrubbers- You have five minutes to strip naked, open the hatch and file out at 2 minute intervals. Forget your rebreathers, in five minutes I pump your room to vacuum. No terms, no negotiations. Now this pump will take a while to get you into vacuum, so you will get to appreciate the full range of symptoms leading to death from decompression. Five minutes, on my mark- MARK." Reaching to the controller, she switched to RX.

At four minutes, a knife from behind overrode the team leader's argument for no surrender. His killer dropped the knife, said, "We are coming out", and started to strip. The marines gave a growl of disapproval- they were hoping that they would get to see at least a partial decompression.

"Alright ladies and gents- time to start earning your pay- get ready to receive prisoners and remember the LT wants them ALIVE," barked the Top. The ships



security had brought along restraints and portable scanners and a medic stood by with a minidoser- Wayne had advised them to get the prisoners unconscious as soon as possible- Crows were prone to destroying themselves- even if they were a bit reluctant to try vacuum as a means to their end.

\*\*\*

"Sheffield to Cutter- prepare for turnaround- you will be transporting an intel. team to the wrecked hull"

"Cutter, aye."

Rather than wait to repressurize the hanger, the landing party boarded suited up and Andrea was escorted to the airlock by two ratings. Before the lock could cycle, the cutter had departed on its way to obtain any information from the now wrecked miner, before being towed away for closer examination.

The lock completed its cycle and the inner hatch opened to a reception of two marines, a physician and a surgeon's mate. "Welcome aboard" said the doctor. "I suppose you know the drill?"

"Medical and psych assessment after drifting free- yes, I lived and worked as a fitter on an orbital before I got drafted" said Andrea.

The group started off towards sick bay. "The last four rescues I saw were brought in restrained on a gurney, so I have a feeling this will be a formality- you marines don't seem to suffer from normal fears."

This brought a chuckle from Andrea and their escorts.

"Let's say that when you have served with the Wolfman, fear takes on a new perspective."

The doctor stopped. "That was JAMIESON directing that battle."

"With an Imperial Lieutenant that could be his little sister."

"The captain is going to be real keen to talk to you- she wants a word in her cabin once I check you out, by the way."

\*\*\*

"The primitive bastards have used a prong & barb capture along their belly- we are stuck fast- tractors will pull out at least seven structural members. I will need to cut 12 of these god-accursed contraptions out to shift that bucket of pox." said the 'Aegean Seas' chief engineer.

"Get started," said Captain Harrison. "The good news is that our stuffed shirt cruise captain put out a request for assistance amongst the passengers and we have 20 volunteer engineers with naval experience- they will relieve your men."

“That’s something- the lads are willing, but too many hours working in vac costs lives.”

“Sheffield’s engineers will have a status report on the outer works in three hours and that wrecker is six hours away. Captain Taylor has offered her engineers and damage control, once the local destroyer is on station.”

“They will be gladly received, skipper- the lady has taken a bit of a beating today- Sinclair out.”

Captain Harrison refilled his pipe and lit it. Bulkheads and structural members were easily replaced- unlike the 42 crewmembers that had lost their lives today. However, that was better than over 50,000 souls lost to the Crows.

\*\*\*

The last of the prisoners carried off, Wayne’s work was finished. “Lieutenant- if you have no further use for me, this ship now needs engineers and medics.”

“Sir, you go and help where you see fit- I will see to my wounded and start my report,” Jenny said with a grimace. “I imagine the brass will be following that frigate.”

Wayne headed back to C&C. That one department would not accept any assistance from willing passengers- as engineering and medical no doubt would.

The door guards saluted and paged the officer of the watch who replied, “You will pass Captain Jamieson.” Wayne was admitted to the operations room and from there to C&C.

“All concluded.” stated the Captain.

“Yes, our Imperial friend convinced them to come out under their own power,” answered Wayne.

“Most unusual, by all accounts.”

“The superstitious fools have a dread of dying in vacuum-they think that their souls won’t find their way to paradise. Young Jennifer seems to be a bit of a scholar- that isn’t common knowledge.”

“She is going to be a high-flier- I would stake my command on that.”

“For sure- She would have done well on the Fury.”

“Now that you mention that- she wears the ring of your free company- yet she is too young to have served. May I ask the association?”

“My 2IC, now Captain, Hendrick rescued her from a slaver 22 years ago- the rest of

the story you should ask her. I'm sure that you will get a chance between here and Yalumba- her adopted home planet.”

“Damn bugger and blast. - HER.” exclaimed Harrison, his memory having been sufficiently jogged to make the connection most would have missed.

The Captains desktop chimed; “Alert Sir- another ship just broke space and is hailing in Imperial code.”

“Patch through to my day cabin” said the Captain.

“Hamersley to ‘Aegean Seas’- send immediate sitrep- over.”

“Attack repelled by Imperial and irregular forces- over”

“Thank God for that ‘Aegean Seas’ -permission to come alongside and board?”

“Willingly granted Sir- I will now transmit our report as to date, and an encoded communication from a senior member of the aristocracy. Aegean Seas out.”

\*\*\*

Captain Taylor skimmed through her transcribed preliminary report. It was immediately apparent that the marine her crew had rescued had caused the majority of the damage to two landing craft and the tractor. “Orderly- a signal to Admiral Hamersley- [damage report file attached] Sergeant Andrea [Helzin Marines on Imperial attachment] recommended for the Victoria Medal of Honour- she personally and at great risk destroyed 50% of the attacking force and required rescue on being cast into local space near to a large gravity well. On her rescue, she was in good sprits and requested immediate transport to her unit. [Detailed account attached]”

‘Sandy’ Taylor neglected to mention that Andrea was now drunk as a groundhog, in the senior petty officers mess.

\*\*\*

The Imperial Destroyer pulled alongside the ‘Aegean Seas’ at the same time the Yalumba sentinel arrived on station. Now the command crew could relax- although their engineers would remain busy for some time to come.

The combat teams were finished and now it was the intelligence services turn to get busy. To the misfortune of the prisoners, there was a prominent forensic neurologist amongst the passengers, who was more than happy to volunteer his services on a five-for one time exchange, as offered by the cruise captain to all passengers assisting the ships crew.

After a brief rest, the commanders met on ‘Aegean Seas’ for a debriefing and preliminary board of inquiry.

Admiral Hamersley, as the senior military member of the board, took the floor.

“Firstly, my congratulations to Lieutenant DeVries and Commander Jamieson and my sincere thanks to Captain Harrison for his unhesitant support. Speaking for the Navy- and the Aristocracy (bowing to Duchess Fiona) - we owe you all a debt of gratitude for heading off this hijacking. Navy intel guessed the same as you- that the attack would be here- and I wish we could have gotten here earlier. You lost some good men holding the line and I wish we could have spared you that. Captain Harrison- your men paid the highest price there- I wish it could have been otherwise.”

Duchess Fiona Haverston rose. “Admiral, we know why secrecy was paramount. The Family and I thank you for the manner of your handling of this incident. What you did not know was that the crown princess and I had freely volunteered to be the bait in the trap. We were most relieved to know that you had set the tightest spring in that trap.”

"Alright, now let's get down to the real reason for this meeting- this is how the public story is going to be.

Captain Harrison takes credit for spotting an anomalous signal on that Trojan miner, thus having the time to raise a defense.

DeVries and company were on-route to a joint training exercise on Yalumba.

There were NO MISSILES.- Jamieson's troops used improvised pyrotechnic fireworks display rockets to hit those landing craft. Not that they were Jamieson's troops because I want his name right out of the record."

Haverston sighed, "Of course the true events will be reported to flag and Emperor- we always pay our dues and everyone here should know why it's done this way. Commander Taylor- you have a recommendation for me?"

"Here Sir", she said, sending the citation from her tablet.

"Approved" said Haverston. "That's one we can acknowledge- colonial trooper does good- and well deserved.

Now to your orders. DeVries and Jamieson- you will land at Yalumba with all the other cadets to await the 'Antares Conveyer' for passage to the academy. Consider yourselves on leave.

Commander Taylor- you will escort the Aegean Seas back to the New Sheffield docks.

Captain Harrison, I will escort you to the Yalumba docks and my engineers are at your disposal.

Lieutenant Yardley- please circulate the flash release you have prepared now. If everyone here would take a few moments to read the official release so that we don't compromise ourselves, then we can conclude this preliminary hearing.

The Empire thanks you all."

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**Captain's Lounge**  
**Aegean Seas**

"So- it's back home," said Wayne.

"Yes- time to put some old ghosts to rest."

As the planet of Yalumba loomed close in the viewer, she took his hand and moved closer...