

Prologue

SOL SECTOR, VEARRIER QUADRANT

PLANET PROMISE, SERAPH SYSTEM

2654.133

1830 HOURS LOCAL TIME

Lured by the sweet scent of *favaya* root carried on the evening's cool breeze, Joa Autumnsoul pried himself out his recliner and switched off the holoplayer. Nothing but bad news on the channel anyway. The Confederation blockade of all Pilgrim systems and enclaves remained in place, and at any moment the world as Joa knew it could blister away under great folds of fire and smoke. One rogue Pilgrim and her ship of followers had stirred up enough trouble to warrant the blockade, and in order to call her bluff, a Confederation admiral had threatened genocide.

Since then, most Pilgrims like Joa prepared through meditation for *gomuth*--death by murder. As his neighbors had so readily reminded him, Joa had led a worthy life and had kept true to his Pilgrim heritage for all of his eighty-seven years; he should resign to the inevitable and be thankful that he had had a good run. He should prepare for *gomuth*.

But Joa would resign to nothing and thank no one. He would shake a bony fist at the heavens as the planetary torpedoes fell.

Gathering his breath and shivering away the thought, Joa shuffled out of the den and onto the back porch of his durasteel hovel, one of thousands of glorified sheds doled out regularly by the local council to those unable to afford their own housing.

"Done watching the news, Grandfrotur?"

Joa gazed painfully at the boy whose contralto voice had broken the still night. The boy sat cross-legged on the porch's warped planks and chewed on a long stick of *favaya*. The second sun's dying light barely illumined the boy's face, though his *ko'a'ka* robe phosphoresced, edging him in silver. *He's only ten years old*, Joa thought. *Haven't those Confederation bastards considered the children?* He forced a smile. "Yes, Ravi, I've finished. I'll tell you that story now."

Ravi sprang to his feet with an ease that Joa envied. The boy shifted to the edge of the porch, where Joa joined him. They sat, their feet dangling over the matted, black canvas of *soso* grass that reached out toward the tan lines of the garden and the silhouettes of neighboring hovels. Rooftops reared up in sharp angles against a thin rind of sun.

On each Broturday, when Ravi had no school and could visit until Proturday, Joa and his grandsonur would come together. And always, in the evenings, under the watchful tarpaulin of stars, Joa would tell the boy stories of his youth, stories of travel aboard great sloships, and stories of the great anguish of war.

Reacting to the gloom of recent events, Joa decided to tell Ravi an uplifting story, a story he needed to hear as much as the boy. He scratched his bald, freckled pate and took in a deep breath. "The year was twenty-three eleven. That's over three hundred years ago. It was the time of Final Exodus. Our frotur, Ivar Chu McDaniel, gathered twelve hundred aboard an enormous sloship called the *Exodia* and led them on a journey to find the truth within themselves..."

Ivar Chu McDaniel stared for a long moment at the Hopper Drive's display, then rested a hand on Sostur Robinanne's shoulder as she brought up the status report of the drive's secondary containment field. "My two favorite words in the language: systems nominal," she said, then grinned back at him.

McDaniel could barely remain in his skin as he returned her smile, then drifted away, back toward command and control's forward viewport. In just a few moments, thirty-two days of interstellar travel and years of devotion to ecstatic visions

that had guided him to publish his words and had drawn others to his insights would reach a pinnacle. He and his broturs and sosturs would make the final hop to the Sirius system, where, according to the echoes and whispers of his dreams, Pilgrims would attain spiritual and genetic perfection. They would complete their salvation from the Hell of Terra and the purgatory of Sol system.

When he considered his goals in such simplistic terms, they seemed foolhardy, derived from an insane or corrupt mind. But he had no mental disorders or ulterior motives. In fact, he had not asked for any spiritual awakening to happen; the visions and sensations had come knocking on his door. He had been a simple organic chemist assigned to the Neptune Research Base and regarded by his peers as a shy, nondescript academic. Nothing in his appearance or actions had ever betrayed the charismatic pulpiteer he would become. Living on the fringe of human settlement had, he posited, gained him access to powers far greater than humanity knew and had transformed him into a spiritually receptive individual. Perhaps his transformation had been one great accident that now set into motion the ultimate deliverance of his people.

Yes, McDaniel's broturs and sosturs would truly become "The Elect" and escape the remnants of the apocalypse and the divine judgement now occurring in Sol system. They would be saved,

protected, connected to the universe in way more intimate and wonderful than they could ever imagine.

"Frotur, coordinates calculated," Executive Officer Solomon reported. He stood at *Exodia's* helm, stroked his closely-cropped beard, and scrutinized Sostur Oricka's course adjustments. "Gravitic interference decreasing. We'll reach safe hop zone in ten seconds. Sirius A-B standing at point-two-two light years away."

"Very good, brotur," said McDaniel. He cocked a brow at *Exodia's* captain, Sostur Hella Ti, a white-haired intellect as devout as she was efficient.

The broad-shouldered woman took McDaniel's cue and straightened in her captain's chair. "Brotur Solomon? Begin hop sequence on my mark."

"Aye, ma'am. On your mark."

"We're just about clear," Hella muttered, studying a navigation monitor mounted near her chair. "Mark."

"Hop sequence engaged," Solomon cried. "Hop in five, four, three, two..."

McDaniel had never made a hop before, and the experience tore his nerves into live wires, positive and negative and leads crossing in explosive flashes for a moment--

Then all sensation seeped away for a trillionth of a second or a trillion millennia. Every clock had spun back to that first day, that first hour, that first second of the universe...

Waiting. Darkness. Trying to see, to feel something.

And suddenly the bulkheads crashed like cymbals and blinding light shone through the viewport before polarizers compensated. To their starboard corner lay a large, blue-white globe roughly twice the diameter of Sol: Sirius A. Somewhere out there, in all of that glare, hid Sirius B, a dim, white dwarf star that orbited Sirius A.

"Brotur Solomon?" the captain called.

"Hop complete," the XO responded. "Nav analysis confirms system Sirius A-B."

A cheer crescendoed over the residual shuddering of bulkheads and instruments, and McDaniel added his whoop to the chorus.

Hella nodded at the XO. "Launch the scout."

"Aye, ma'am. Brotur Pandathy reports ready." Solomon turned to a monitor near the oval command and control's tactical station. "Scout is away."

McDaniel picked out the tiny gleam of thrusters coming from the single-pilot scout ship as it streaked well ahead of the *Exodia*. His gaze tracked the ship, but something else drove his attention to the portside, a powerful force that urged his head

there and caused his eyes to involuntarily focus on a glittering splotch of blue that rapidly expanded and grew thousands of ghostly tendrils from all sides.

"What is *that*?" the captain asked.

"Uncertain," answered the XO. "Doesn't appear on active scanners."

"Whatever it is," McDaniel said as a warm feeling crept over his neck, "it's beautiful."

The splotch had now become a swelling azure cloud more than five times the size of the sloop. Tendrils flailed against space, with ringlets of white-hot energy flashing along their lengths. For a moment, McDaniel thought he heard music, a lone flutist producing a siren's call in a great, high-ceilinged hall. Then his thirst suddenly felt quenched, and the other physical discomforts of being human--the slight backache, the heaviness of his eyes, the stiffness in his joints--disappeared. He thought he heard the crew reacting to the cloud's approach, but their voices rang pleasantly like wind chimes instead of curtly like a bridge crew facing a strange phenomenon. The cloud engulfed the *Exodia* in its soft, cerulean cotton, as though bracing it for some inexplicable journey.

"So they just disappeared, Grandfrotur?"

Joa lifted his gaze toward the sky. Stars fought against twilight's upstaging wash, and one victorious orb, no more than a crumb of light but more meaningful than any star in his sky, bore the name Sirius A.

"Grandfrotur?"

"Yes, Ravi." Joa raised his arm and pointed. "See that star?"

"That's Sirius?"

"It is. From there our frotur and the others were carried directly into a higher place. Now they guide and watch over us."

Ravi frowned at the star. "How did they get to the higher place? Did they fly? Did someone help them?"

"I don't know. But I know this: Someday, you and I will meet them."

Chapter 1

SOL SECTOR, TERRA QUADRANT

PLANET MARS

ALBOR THOLUS UNIVERSITY

PILGRIM SAFE CAMP (DESIGNATION 345Q)

2654.137

0900 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Sostur Karista Mullens paused at the window of her dorm room and scanned the courtyard four stories below. Two dozen heavily armed Confederation Marines had positioned themselves along the half dozen walkways to guard the district of student apartments. The Marines' crimson pressure suits glowed against a backdrop of walls and placards sandblasted to a dull copper by the relentless Martian wind.

"You're protecting me now," Karista whispered to them.
"But if the order comes, you won't think twice."

She reached out with extrakinetic senses to one of the guards, a young woman about her age. Boredom ruled the guard's thoughts, but the woman occasionally slipped into the memory of a tryst she had had with the woman positioned twenty yards to her left. Karista had already touched that Marine's mind and knew she hated Pilgrims more than any of the others. That one's

father had fought in the Pilgrim war, and that one would present the largest problem.

Karista broke the link and looked beyond the sloped roofs of the apartment buildings. A frozen sea of tawny foothills stretched into the dusty gloom. *I'm only here two days. It feels like two years. And we're so far away from everything...*

The university had been built near the Albor Tholus volcano, and not unlike several universities on Earth, it provided the only oasis in an otherwise remote, lifeless region. Confederation authorities had made a very wise decision in canceling classes here, evacuating students, faculty, and support staff, then converting the facility into an interment camp for nearly ten thousand Pilgrims. Even if some Pilgrims managed to steal pressure suits and escape on foot, they would not have enough oxygen to traverse the rugged terrain and reach the metroplex at Elysium Mons, where, of course, they would be arrested. Students joked about the university being a prison. Not a single Pilgrim in residence found that amusing now.

"Kari, Kari, for what we are waiting I do not know. We've the wings, the means. Shall we?" Brotur Dennet Dearborn gave an exaggerated bow, then turned back to the doorway, scowled, and waved for her to leave. Dennet's height had turned doorways into headaches by the time he had reached eighteen, and even now, at thirty, he seemed to keep growing, his rangy limbs and

neck seemingly too large for his thin pillow of a torso. And no, Karista would never get used to Dennet's syntax and formal deportment, products of being raised on the planet Faith, a planet founded by a fundamentalist sect of Pilgrims known as "The Carava." Their literal translations of the Book of Ivar Chu McDaniel made the protur as nervous as the Confederation's joint chiefs. Ironically enough, Caravans had not instigated the recent Pilgrim rebellion; Confederation officers of Pilgrim descent had seen to that. Admiral Bill Wilson had made his attempt to destroy Earth with the aid of the Kilrathi empire. His failure had set off Captain Amity Aristee, whose similar stratagem had also failed. But while Wilson had been killed, Aristee remained free, floating somewhere out there in her crippled supercruiser, plotting her next move. Until she could be brought in, the Confederation would continue to treat innocent Pilgrims like subversives. Going to "safe camps" had first been a suggestion, but the Confederation had since made internment mandatory for all people of Pilgrim descent. That order had, according to the Terran News people, split the Confederation senate along partisan lines.

"Again I say, Kari, for what are we waiting?" Dennet raked black hair wired with gray out of his eyes. His pageboy cut--distinctly Caravan--hardly became him, but the casting of a

mushroom-shaped shadow had been an important symbol of virility among male Caravans for at least a century.

It takes much more than a shadow, Karista thought as she raked her own blond hair behind her ears and went to him. "Did you do as I asked?"

He nodded. "I saw the kind doctor--and whatever else I could along the merry way. Clear-eyed, reasonably fed, mostly bored is how we look and feel. But a rumor met my ear and set off a shiver. The food? It's running out. The guards have no information about the next shipment. It seems that our captors have taken the university's generosity but will not foot any future bills. And so begins our slow torture."

"Which is why we're getting our asses out of here," said Sostur Fey Windmaiden as she limped into the room and drew up the collar of her robe with a shiver. She, like Karista, had been raised on McDaniel's World, but Fey hailed from a southern colony called Wickatti. There, the women and men submitted themselves to a sundry of physical "corrections" to become "more pleasing" to their spouses. Women enlarged their breasts, lightened their skin, bound their feet, starved themselves, and pierced their bodies according to their spouse's whims; men engaged in a number of painful piercing and stretching techniques as well as making "enhancements" to their hair, skin, eyes, and muscles.

For ten years, since the age of fifteen, Sostur Fey had undergone the corrections. Now, with a ghostly complexion, breasts unnaturally firm and too large for her wiry frame, earlobes and eyebrows drooping from too many earrings, and feet bound so much that she could barely place her weight on one of them, she seemed more mutilated than corrected. Since first meeting Fey two days ago, Karista found it more and more difficult to meet the woman's gaze, for Fey seemed so frail and pathetic that a wrong look might cause the poor woman to dwindle.

But out of Fey's stricken frame came a proud, strong voice that could be overcompensation for her appearance or simply the last vestige of her will. "C'mon, you fools. We're wasting time. Everything's set."

Karista shook her head. "We can't go."

Dennet rolled his eyes. "She puts on her necklace of guilt, and it chokes her."

"We can't go?" repeated Fey, hazel eyes seeming to levitate from the powdery valleys of her face. "Then we stay here and die--for nothing."

"Our broturs and sosturs... we can't leave so many behind," Karista said.

"You told us you'd come to terms with that," countered Fey through clenched teeth. "We don't have time to go through this

again. Preparations have been made, others will help, and we should leave now." Fey whirled to Dennet. "If she won't come, we go without her."

Dennet snorted. "On this planet, there's but one extrakinetic--her. Escape requires assistance. Death requires none."

"Come on, Karista. What will it take?" Fey asked. "If we die here, we achieve nothing. Maybe we can help them if we get off planet."

Karista's shoulders slumped under the burden of her decision. She faced the window and once more let her gaze wander to the horizon's gloom. Strange blue spheres dotted the other dust clouds, blossomed and bled into each other, then finally turned the horizon into a band of swirling sapphire. She tapped the window. "Do you see that?"

"See what?" Dennet asked.

"Karista, we're going," Fey said.

Like a raging tidal wave heaving up some sixty meters, the band of blue rolled toward the apartment buildings, its translucent innards spanned by white veins pulsating with ringlets of energy. Karista threw up her arms as the wave crashed soundlessly over the building--

And every sensation that troubled Karista, every itch and ache, seemed appeased by the blue wave. Even as she marveled

over that miracle, music sounded from somewhere far off, notes echoing from a flute player, a soft alluring tune not unlike a lullaby. She had never known such peace of mind and body. Even the air calmed her through a scent she could not fully identify, though it reminded her of *myrrata* oil, an element in perfume obtained from several trees and shrubs on her homeworld. She did not know how or why, but she sensed the need to reach extrakinetically into the blue, but an energy held her back and whispered, "Not yet..."

...but soon. You need to learn. You need to help."

Lieutenant Christopher Blair squinted into the blueness and listened to a voice whose sex he could not discern. "What do I have to learn? And how can I help? What's this about?"

Out of the blueness came the broad nose of the Drayman-class transport he had tagged.

"Blair! Twelve o' clock, dead on!" Lieutenant Todd "Maniac" Marshall cried. "What're you waiting for? Jinx!"

Before his wingman even finished speaking, Blair jerked the stick of his Rapier fighter to port, executing a high-G roll. A collision warning flashed on the Heads Up Display as he held his breath and swept along the transport's starboard side with all of a meter gap between ships.

Flashes from neutron fire lifted behind him as Maniac swept down and took on the hijacked transport himself. Blair wheeled back and watched as Maniac delivered an inspiring and cautionary sermon regarding the dangers of attempting to cross a Confederation no-fly zone. But the Pilgrims aboard the transport were probably too busy to be awed by Maniac's marksmanship. Their ship's engines split like pulpy fruit in successive explosions, and those fireballs quickly yielded to a rainbow of fluids spewing from the scores of breaches in the housing.

Well beyond the transport, the planet Netheryana glowed a hundred shades of brown broken by the occasional beige raft of clouds. To Blair's three o'clock hovered that gargantuan cylinder of durasteel that he called home: The Bengal-class strike carrier CS *Tiger Claw*. The ship had been ordered back to Netheryana to assist the destroyers *Mitchell-Hammock* and *Oregon* in maintaining the no-fly zone over the Pilgrim enclave Triune. And since arriving just a day prior, Lieutenants Blair and Marshall had suppressed a remarkable number of violations to the zone. Intell had reported that Pilgrims on planet had disrupted communications at the Confederation strike bases at Tung and Sylee, both of which provided atmospheric air support. Thus, in the diversion, several hundred Pilgrims had launched in Drayman- and Yllman-class transports and had successfully crossed the

atmospheric no-fly zone to head into *Tiger Claw* country. Big mistake.

"Troopship Whiskey Five?" Maniac hailed over the general frequency. "She's all yours and ready for boarding."

"Roger that, Maniac," came the pilot's response. "We'll tell 'em you said 'hey.'"

The wedge-shaped Marine troopship curved sharply past Maniac's *Rapier* and came up alongside the crippled *Pilgrim* transport. A docking umbilical extended from the troopship's starboard side, and the umbilical's hull cutters flamed on like the fiery teeth of a worm with a healthy appetite for durasteel.

"Lieutenant?"

Blair glanced to one of his Visual Display Unit's, where Lieutenant Commander Jeanette "Angel" Deveraux glared at him, her oxygen mask unclipped and dangling from her helmet. Even while wearing such a potent look, Angel could not camouflage the rich landscape of her eyes or the soft cream of her skin that rolled in delicate curves.

"Lieutenant Blair? Are you with us?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, ma'am."

"What happened?" she demanded, quite comfortable with her squadron commander's tone, despite what they shared off duty.

"You called that one, turned toward him, and did nothing."

"I don't know. I saw something, I think."

"Saw what?"

"I don't know. It was... blue."

"What he saw was a ship full of Pilgrims," Maniac interrupted. "And he choked up. Couldn't risk harming his own kind. Yeah, he helped us disable a few other transports, but I knew it would get to him sooner or later. Face it, Blair. You ain't fit for duty. At least not this one."

"I'll be the judge of that," Angel said. "Off the channel, Lieutenant. Return to base."

"Aye-aye," Maniac said half-heartedly.

As his wingman's Rapier leapt off on a heading toward the silhouette of the *Tiger Claw*, Blair brought his Rapier to a hover beside Angel's. He dialed up her private frequency. "I'm sorry. I really am."

"Sorry doesn't change a goddamned thing. You hesitated. Gerald will reach the same conclusion as Maniac. I want you out here, but I'm not going to argue on your behalf unless I know what happened."

"How can I tell you what happened when I don't know myself?"

She bit her lip and looked away. "Then you *did* hesitate."

"I saw something. Blue. Everything went blue. And there was a voice." Angel's expression grew more creased, and Blair sighed. "Maybe I am losing it."

"You're off the duty roster. You'll train in the SIRE for a few days to prove your reflexes. And I'm ordering a psyche eval."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Return to base."

Blair gritted his teeth and slapped the throttle, tearing away from her. He lined up with the distant strike carrier and flew absently toward her, thoughts replaying the experience with the blue cloud. Was he really having psychological problems? Were the vision and voice part of some subconscious manifestation? He had been through so much in the past few months, what with Paladin's disappearance and all.

Commodore James "Paladin" Taggart had quickly become an inspiration, a Pilgrim *and* Confederation officer to whom Blair had given his complete loyalty and utmost respect. He and Paladin had gone aboard the *Olympus* to try to persuade Amity Aristee to stand down. But in the end, Aristee had escaped with the ship, and it appeared that Paladin had helped her. Then again, maybe Paladin had not defected and had only allowed the Amity to escape to buy himself more time. Paladin loved her. They were naturally paired Pilgrims, perfect mates, and Blair felt certain that Paladin wanted to bring in Aristee alive.

Or maybe he knew nothing, and the pain of not knowing whether or not his mentor was a traitor had brought on the

visions and voices. He had always heard that the manifestations of stress were many and varied.

Now his thoughts suddenly took him back to his homeworld of Nephele, to his eighth birthday. His Aunt Jennifer had gone off to the metroplex before he had awakened that morning, and his uncle Samuel had, for some odd reason, shaven off his beard and had put on an expensive suit instead of his usual farmer's coveralls. Then he had asked that Blair stay home from school and put on his finest dress shirt and trousers. They had piled into the old hover and had driven for several hours over a dirt road that had taken them deep into the countryside. Fields of wild *sohoa* and *goborise* stood taller than the hover and had cowered in the hover's wash. Finally, the great field of green and violet had parted to reveal a cleared plain that extended as far as Blair could see. Huge, carved stones of varying shape and design stood in even rows like an immense military assembly of personnel.

"Is this a graveyard?" Blair had asked.

"Right. It's an old Earth tradition, brought back as land became more available on colonized worlds."

"How come I haven't heard of this one?"

"No one talks about it. Most of these people died in the Pilgrim war."

"Why are we here?"

"Come on."

Uncle Samuel had parked the hover, and they had ventured out across the dirt road and onto a Terran variety of blue-green grass. Blair had glanced at the names and dates carved into a few of the tombstones and had noticed that several had bouquets of flowers, long since wilted, resting beside them. They had walked for twenty or thirty minutes, Blair remembered, until they had come up behind a modest stone marker that had risen to Blair's waist. His uncle had crossed in front of the gravestone and had placed a hand over his mouth. Blair had joined the man and remembered shielding his eyes from the sun so he could read the inscription:

DEVI SOULSONG

DAUGHTER OF ABRAHAM TRUEPATH

WIFE OF ARNOLD BLAIR

2609-2634

Blair had looked accusingly at his uncle and had shaken his head. "You took me here because of that news-net story, right? Because now my friends at school won't talk to me because everyone knows my mother was a Pilgrim. They used to like me. My dad was a war hero. But none of that matters now."

"Don't believe anything you hear," Uncle Samuel had said, gripping Blair's shoulders. "Listen to me. Your mother was a

great woman, and your father loved her more than you could know."

"It doesn't matter. She was a Pilgrim. Everyone hates them. And now they hate me. I don't know why. Do you and Aunt Jennifer hate me now?"

"I can't make you understand what happened during the war. But I want you to know who you are and not be ashamed of it." His uncle had reached into his jacket and had produced something shinny, something made of silver and gold. His thick fingers had slid aside to reveal a cross, its top composed of a semicircle trimmed in gold. "This was your mother's."

As Blair had accepted the cross, he had felt--

I remember that day, don't I? I took the cross, threw it to the grass, and stomped on it. But now I remember something different. That's not what happened. I took the cross, and oh my God, the blue. I saw the blue and heard the voice: "Know who you are. Don't let her stop you. Trust blood." And the smell, that sweet smell...

But I've never remembered any of that.

Not until now.

"Lieutenant Blair, are you going to request landing clearance, or is it wing and prayer time?" Fight Boss Raznick asked, three seconds away from his own self-detonation.

Blair jolted to regard the beefy man, and for a moment, he thought he saw heat waves billowing from Raznick's shaven head.

"Sorry, Boss."

"You've ignored our hails. You got a malfunctioning temporal lobe or what?"

"I don't know, sir. I'll have my crew check out systems once I'm birthed."

"It's not an onboard system, you... ah, forget it. You've got your clearance. And wake up, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Raznick bit back expletives as Blair finally brought the Rapier down with a terrific, sparking thump.

That was the shittiest landing I've ever made. Blair closed his eyes, rested his head back on the seat, and braced himself for the boss's wrath.

"Lieutenant Blair? Report to flight control. Now!"

Chapter 2

SOL SECTOR, TERRA QUADRANT

PLANET EARTH

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.137

1300 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Commodore Richard Bellegarde extended his arms, scrutinized the *Concordia's* Olympic-sized swimming pool, then repressed a final shiver and drove his weight down onto the diving board. With a sharp rebound, he sailed into the air. The water became a blur, and his heart rang in his ears as he dropped four meters and split the waves. He shot toward the pool's bottom, feeling the tickle of escaping air bubbles across his cheeks, then curved up and paddled toward the surface.

He broke water to the sound of one man's applause.

Admiral Geoffrey Tolwyn sported a stiff-looking pair of neon blue swimming trunks that he had probably just bought from the quartermaster. He appeared markedly solid for a man who spent more time strategizing than exercising. Tolwyn tested the water with a big toe, held his nose, then stepped in with a mild splash. When he came up, he slicked back his gray hair into a widow's peak and blinked water out of his eyes. "Quite invigorating, Richard. I'm glad I joined you, though you didn't

have to close down the pool for an hour. Makes us seem snobbish and unwilling to swim with the enlisted."

"I agree, sir. But I didn't want to flap my gut around here and lower morale."

The admiral cocked a brow. "Very wise."

Bellegarde swam toward the shallow end of the pool and stood. "So when are getting under way?"

"We're still waiting on the space marshal." Considering what he had learned about the woman, Tolwyn's tone remained surprisingly neutral. He backstroked to the ledge, then extended his arms and hung on, kicking slowly, his expression conveying that he enjoyed the mild burn. "Apparently, she hasn't finished saving our careers."

"Ms. Gregarov allows Amity Aristee and her Pilgrim accomplices to build a hopper drive that can destroy a planet-- because she plans to steal it when they're done. Then Ms. Gregarov fails to do that, which results in the deaths of millions and situation we're in now. But it's *our* careers that need saving. Sir, that's more irony than I can savor in a lifetime."

"You're forgetting that we issued the threat to Aristee without the senate's blessing."

"There wasn't time for a vote."

"Which wouldn't have been in our favor. So we acted. The lack of time is our only defense. Without the space marshal's help, you and I would be awaiting our general court-martials."

"So the deal gets dirtier. She'll smooth things over with the senate if we keep silent about her botched operation. Sorry, but that's not good enough. She's responsible."

Tolwyn closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. "She'll never admit it, but I think she's been working for someone well above her, and I have a feeling she'll take the fall. She won't need our help."

"Someone well above her? One of the joint chiefs? The president, for God's sake?"

Two beeps resounded from the main entrance panel. The hatch yawned inward to admit the silver-haired harridan herself, ears probably ringing, lips curled in a smug little smile.

"Drowning our sorrows are we?"

Bellegarde barely contained his growl. "Not exactly, ma'am."

"Given the crisis, your records, and my recommendations, the senate and joint chiefs have allowed you to maintain your current active duty status so long as I maintain my field office here," she said, smoothing a wrinkle from her dress uniform to avoid facing them with the news.

"You have field marshals for that," Bellegarde said. "And more important duties than babysitting."

Gregarov showed her teeth. "Thank you for prioritizing my career, Richard. Without you--"

"Have the senate and joint chiefs given you their recommendations regarding Aristee?" Tolwyn asked impatiently.

"They have. We're to continue our search for the *Olympus*, utilizing the gravitic residuum trail. We've found two Pilgrims with extrakinetic senses to help."

"You mean you sent out your press gang and conscripted them," Tolwyn corrected with a sigh. "In any event, we're back to where we started, only this time Aristee has James Taggart to help her evade us. I suggest we proceed on schedule. If Aristee does not surrender that ship and its hopper drive to us by one-five-eight, we will destroy every Pilgrim system and enclave. The ship is heavily damaged. There's a chance that she might enlist the aid of the Kilrathi, particularly the emperor. We can't allow that to happen."

"But she fought the Kilrathi at Aloysius," Gregarov said. "What makes you think that she'll strike a deal with them?"

"Wilson's failure made the Kilrathi shy. But with the emperor losing his ground, the cats are now ripe for a deal. Mutual desperation breeds alliance. So we should maintain our threat and keep Aristee on a short fuse."

"And we can't maintain these no-fly zones forever," Bellegarde added. "We're tying up the fleet and already feeling the effects of a hollow navy."

"I agree with you there, Richard," the space marshal said. "Our presence is fueling rather than quelling the fires. I've brought some new holos for you." She withdrew a portable holoplayer from her hip pocket and aimed it over the pool.

A metroplex street shimmered into view, and a databar beneath the image read TAMAYO SYSTEM, PLANET SEVA, PILGRIM ENCLAVE DIVINITY. The image panned to reveal bodies strewn everywhere, men upon women upon children. Two, maybe three thousand corpses littered the road and extended far off into a wall of black smoke pouring from the shattered windows of a burning building. The tiny form of an infant caught Bellegarde's eye and lumped his throat.

"Mass suicide?" he asked.

Gregarov hesitated. "I wish it were."

"Christ," Tolwyn said. "What happened?"

"The Marine detachment fired the wrong ordnance into the rioters. It was supposed to be sylago gas. Somehow, they were armed with ferrilli. Over twelve hundred dead. The investigation is underway. News is reporting it as an accident."

"That was no accident," Tolwyn said. "I bet that CO fought in the Pilgrim war."

Gregarov nodded solemnly and switched off the player. "I could show you more, but suffice it to say that the rioting continues on Triune. Communications have been reestablished at the strike bases at Tung and Sylee, so stolen craft shouldn't get off planet. It's a bit more quiet at Spiritia, though we've actually had reports of seventy-one AWOLs and a number of abuses against the citizenry. Eighty-seven Marines have already been charged with rape and twenty-three more with unauthorized kills. These numbers seem small, given that we have nearly one hundred thousand people on planet, but consider how many violations have gone unreported. The data I'm receiving from Mythada and Commune is equally disturbing. The planets Faith, Promise, and McDaniel's World are faring much better since they're more autonomous than the enclaves, though maintaining martial law and the no-fly zones remain, as you stated, Richard, heavy burdens."

"Which is why we need to draw out Aristee quickly," Bellegarde argued.

"The senate will never endorse an order to destroy the systems and enclaves. But there may be a way around that. It's costing their constituents a fortune via new 'crisis taxes' to maintain the Pilgrim safe camps, and I've even received reports that cargo shipments have been delayed or even halted to some

because of payment disputes. I can argue that maintaining our threat may very well bring a swift and peaceful solution to this crisis." She turned a warning gaze on Tolwyn. "But I have to assure them that you will not destroy the systems and enclaves. Judging from your reaction to that holo, I don't think you could do it anyway, Geoff."

Tolwyn pulled himself out of the pool and searched for the towel he had forgotten to bring. "I'm willing to live with that act. And I'm certainly capable. Do I want to do it? Of course not." He folded arms over his chest and shuddered.

"Take mine, sir." Bellegarde gestured to the diving tower, where he had draped his towel over a railing.

The space marshal turned toward the hatch. "One more thing, Geoff. It seems we've intercepted several Kilrathi communiqués in reference to *the Shak'Ar'Roc*, a Snakeir-class superdreadnought that's been missing since one-two-eight CST. We believe it's the same cap ship that was pursuing Aristee in the Aloysius system. Interesting in that the Kilrathi don't know where she is, and neither do we. The only debris we recovered in that area is from her battle group. I wonder if that commander has already struck a deal with Aristee."

"God help us if that's true," Tolwyn said, wrapping the towel around his waist. "The task force I originally assigned to find the *Olympus* is still at it. Strange, though. I've

never known Kilrathi to act independently--unless that skipper is doing the emperor's bidding, which would account for the communiqués. A few of the clans have already withdrawn from or have refused to join the emperor's new alliance, so we can assume that he's withholding information from those clans. We'll cross reference our communiqués with intell on the clans who won't join the alliance."

Bellegarde swam to the steps at the pool's end and hauled himself out. "I'll see to that myself, sir."

"Very good, Richard. And sound the pre-jump alarm when you're ready. I'd like to be out of here within the hour."

Admiral Vukar nar Caxki sat in his meditation chair and stared blankly around his quarters aboard the KIS *Shak'ar'roc*.

How does it feel to be a renegade? he thought. How does it feel to break the precepts? All of your life you have obeyed without question. Now, for nine days, you have shunned the proper course and have been branded a ryha'kara, a heretic by your crew. You have driven a third of them to zu'kara because of your defiance of centuries-old principles. You have followed the heart of a young fighter whose thoughts intrigued and lured you onto this course. But where to go from here? Where to go?

Vukar reflected on the Confederation supercruiser that had eluded him for the final time. He thought of how its loss

should have driven him back home to Kilrah, where he should have atoned for his failure by spilling his blood before the clan elders. He thought of his decision to run from failure, to go on believing that they could somehow catch up with the supercruiser, that they would find it or die trying. But logic dictated that the supercruiser could be back in Confederation control or it could be anywhere in the galaxy, let alone sector. It could have been destroyed by the Terrans. Tactical Officer Makorshk, Vukar's inspiration in rebellion, had analyzed the ship's last jump residuum and had calculated that the supercruiser had jumped to the Sol system. For three days, Vukar had entertained the thought of jumping in pursuit, but he had reasoned that there would be more honor in *zu'kara* than in jumping into the enemy's hands. Since his people had learned of an avenue through space-time that would take them directly to Earth, the Terrans had reinforced defenses at the jump's exit point. Any ship coming through would be devastated before the crew realized a threat existed. Only a ship capable of producing its own gravity wells could make a covert jump and launch a successful attack. The Confederation supercruiser Vukar had been chasing represented such a ship.

What will my children think of me when they learn of what I have done? Have I ruined their futures? Those two have lived

but a third of their lives. Can they go on knowing what their own blood has done to them?

He dug deeper into the chair and stroked long whiskers. Nutrient gas burst from his nose, and he followed the swirling emerald serpents up toward the overhead, where a net of conduits reminded him of just how confined he had become.

Wincing a bit, he reached down into his lap and picked up the piece of dried and salted *ruxfra*. He wrenched off a piece with teeth sore from poor hygiene and chewed so loudly that he could hear his concubine back on Kilrah telling him to be more quiet. A library record glowed on his private comm display, a record he had been studying for several days now. There were no stories of rebels in Kilrathi history, no tales of a single warrior who changed the course of his people. The emperors of Kilrah had always acted on behalf of the clans. They had been born pack hunters, and the group had always been more important than the individual. But now clans had begun to break away from the alliance. Perhaps the natural order of things dictated that individuals should break away from their clans and decide their own fates. So it had always been with Terrans. Vukar had read of a concept called "peaceful protest." For centuries Terrans had sacrificed their lives to demonstrate their desire for change in their societies. The stories shocked him at first, but the more he had learned, the more he had realized that the

Terrans had always been free, while he had been born with shackles of imposition removed only by death.

So I failed. I am a disgrace. Why can I not learn from my mistakes and move on? Why must I die? Would Sivar want me to become a stronger warrior by learning from errors? Or should those who witness my death be the ones to learn?

Vukar jerked as the hatch slid open and Makorshk pounded excitedly into the narrow suite. His eyes radiated like ivory-yellow mountain flowers, and his whiskers stood on end.

"Kalralahr, I bring important news."

Though Vukar opened his mouth to reprimand his subordinate for barging in unannounced, the young warrior's expression and announcement made him overlook the gaffe. "Tell me."

"We've been monitoring all communications within the quadrant and have intercepted several text-only messages between Bokureath of the Kiranka clan and the emperor. But I believe that the emperor is communicating with the captain of the supercruiser we've been stalking. They've planned a rendezvous to discuss how they can benefit each other."

"Nonsense. No Pilgrim skipper would know our encryption and decryption codes."

"I thought the same. But if you remember, Bokureath's brother, Bokoth nar Kiranka, formed an alliance with a Pilgrim

named Bill Wilson. Bokoth might have shared that information with Wilson, who shared it with the supercruiser's captain."

"You assume a great deal, Makorshk."

"If the emperor is communicating with Bokureath, then why are they using text-only messages? You don't find that odd?"

Vukar cleared his throat, feeling the initial excitement slip away. "Not at all. The emperor's continuing failure to establish the new alliance explains his frustration *and* his secrecy. If the emperor is going to meet with anyone, it is Bokureath."

Makorshk's lips flared. "Then why would Bokureath claim to have a hopper drive?"

Vukar lifted his brow at that. "I want to read those messages."

"I wish you would, Kalralahr. And even if you're right and it is Bokureath who has recovered the hopper drive, then he will use it to bring power to the Kiranka clan--the emperor's clan--and our *hrai*, along with all others who have refused to join or have seceded from the alliance, will be terminated. If we're to save our honor and our clan, we must recover that hopper drive and use it to persuade the emperor to abandon his desire for alliance."

Grunting his agreement, Vukar swiveled toward the comm display. "Show me these messages."

Makorshk worked the touchpad to bring up the information. "I've already plotted our course to the rendezvous, which is here in Robert's Quadrant. We can be there with time to spare."

The characters of the Kilrathi language spilled across the display, and as Vukar read them, hunting instincts suddenly heated his blood and sent a rush of saliva into his mouth. "Alert the helm. Set new course." He bolted up from his chair. "We shall lie in wait like our forefathers, and when our prey draws near, we shall spring..."

Sostur Inanna Pandathy awakened suddenly. She sat up, and her bones cracked as she wiped grit from her pale blue eyes. The *quella* sleeping robe she donned each night had become too small and threadbare over the years, thus the cabin's cool, damp air sent gooseflesh fanning across her shoulders. She rose and shifted unsteadily toward the bedroom door, a mere silhouette in morning light that still struggled to find her window. With a creak she could mimic perfectly, the door yielded to her hand, and she padded into her narrow hall.

Still shaking off the dregs of sleep, she crossed into the shadows of a small living area cluttered with Pilgrim holoart, some of the framed pictures hanging on the walls and waiting to be turned on, some on easels, some leaning on the simple chair and sofa. During the past seven decades of living on McDaniel's

World, Inanna and her pair had collected a half dozen sculptures of the various Pilgrim proturs. The sculptures stood in a neat row near two glass doors that led to her yard. After her pair's passing, the stone proturs became companions to whom she confessed her most secret thoughts. She moved toward the representation of Protur Revca, a proud-faced bald man in formal robe. "Tell me, Protur, why am I awake so early?"

She smiled inwardly over the touch of madness that had her talking to statues, then felt drawn to the glass doors. She slid one aside, and the morning breeze set off the *aitora* chimes that hung from her low ceiling. Metal discs and seashells joined by threads of gold clanged into each other and produced hollow, flute-like notes. Inanna shivered as she stepped outside the cabin, seemingly announced by the chimes.

Her yard had become overrun by *govita* weeds, and the small fence that boxed in her meager plot had been sun-bleached, streaked black by fungus, and worn rickety by the wind. Her neighbors' cabins stood far off, pyramids of wood and stone reaching toward a sky flushed pink and veiled in the west by the sun's cortege of clouds. She ventured farther into the yard, toward the lone *veracia* tree that had been in her family for generations. The tree charged upward nearly twenty meters, and its light blue bark and thick limbs became more distinct--until something unprecedented and miraculous caught Inanna's eye.

With a trembling hand she reached up, plucked a thick, brown leaf, then rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger.

Inanna stepped back and realized that her tired eyes had failed her again. There was not just one leaf but thousands in half as many shades, a great chute of color that brought her to her knees.

She clutched the leaf to her heart and cried, for never in all its years had the tree bore leaves.

And now, overnight, it had.

Chapter 3

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.137

2230 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

After he had listened to Flight Boss Raznick's expected harangue regarding landing protocol, Blair left the flight deck in a daze and somehow found his way back to his quarters, where he had collapsed on his bunk. At least Maniac had not been present to taunt him; the lanky blond had gone with his new fling Zarya to see an original play written and performed by the jump and impulse drive crews. The day before, Maniac had invited Blair to go with them, but he had declined, a decision he thanked himself for now.

"Christopher, are you going to lie there all night and feel sorry for yourself?"

Merlin shimmered in the shadows at the foot of the cot, and Blair frowned over the old holograph's black silk robe, matching slippers, and the meerschaum tobacco pipe that dangled from the corner of his mouth. "Well?"

Blair sat up. "I'm not feeling sorry for myself."

"Really? I was just getting ready to retire, when your agitation triggered me on." Merlin flung his silver ponytail over his shoulder and narrowed his gaze. "But I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. I did not detect this cloud of blue that you insist was there, though I'm merely a Portable Personal Computer, and while my CPU is quite sophisticated and fits nicely within your wrist, I can only engage in first and second level particulate sweeps. Have you checked your Rapier's recordings yet?"

"My chief called. They ran them and found nothing, so I guess being ODR is a good thing. Can't afford to send out a pilot who's seeing things. Rapiers ain't cheap."

Merlin puffed contentedly on his pipe, his face quickly obscured by a cloud of holographic smoke. "I believe that you saw and heard something. But the only evidence we have is your memory."

"And it's not working very well, either. Today wasn't the first time I saw that thing. I had a similar experience years ago on the day I got my mother's cross. The blue. The voice. But I never remembered it until now. And just an hour or so ago, I was thinking of this rainy day when me and Uncle Samuel we're fighting over my joining the military. I remember yelling at him, cursing, saying things... oh, man. And he just walked away--into a blue fog. I remember standing there, listening to

the rain fall and trying to see beyond the blue, and this voice told me that he would be okay, that I would be okay, that a shield had been placed over us. But don't you get it, Merlin? I remember it that way now. But when I used to think back on that day, I would just see him walk away. There was no blue, no voice. So why am I remembering it like this?"

Merlin pulled the pipe from his lips and turned it toward Blair. "I don't know. Perhaps these experiences are the result of your extrakinetic training with Karista."

"When we were back on the *Olympus*, she never mentioned that my memories would be altered or that I would experience this blue cloud or the voices."

"That's because I didn't know about them until now," came a familiar voice.

Blair jerked his head and gasped. Merlin had vanished, and in his place sat Karista, her delicate features pulled taut in deep concern, her robe hanging too low off one shoulder, her eyes red from stress, lack of sleep, or both. She had stepped outside of her physical constraints and had reached out across interstellar space to find his thoughts. While it appeared as though she sat in the room with him, they actually conversed in the continuum. He had thought links over such long distances were impossible and had never attempted one himself. But now he realized that time and distance meant nothing in the continuum.

Their thoughts rode on the first waves of the universe and existed at both the dawn and end of everything.

"Where are you?" he asked nervously. "I mean I know we're together now, but where did they take you?"

"Mars. I'm at a safe camp. The food's running out here. Supplies aren't coming."

"No way. The Confederation would never do that."

"I don't think the Confed senate really knows what's going on. Anyway, I'm the only extrakinetic Pilgrim here. A few others know this, and they want me to help them escape. We can only get about twenty into a shuttle. Christopher, there are..." She swallowed and looked away in disgust. "There are nearly ten thousand of us here. I wish Amity could see what she's done."

He leaned forward and seized Karista's hand. She felt as warm and soft as he remembered. "Get out of there."

"I will. But I need to get food to our people."

"Don't be a martyr. Just go."

"Christopher, I reached out into the quilt and touched the others. We've had similar visions. Blue clouds, waves, and spheres that smell sweet, talk to us, and play music. Did you hear the music?"

"Yeah. And I've had memories."

"But you're remembering more clearly now. And you realize that you've been having these visions all of your life."

A chill coiled up his spine. "You, too?"

"All of us."

"So what do we do about it?"

"If I make it out of here, then I'm going to McDaniel. I'm going to talk to some women who might know more about this."

He squeezed her hand. "There's a Confed battle group in place at McDaniel. You'll never make it past their no-fly zone. Go anywhere but there. Go to the Border Worlds. Paladin told me that there are some of us there. Hide with them. Don't come back until this is over."

"Like I would do that. Guess you still don't know me. You just do your job. If you can. I know she took you off the flight roster. I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"Is there any way to shake off this vision when it comes on? The first time felt so overwhelming."

She lowered her gaze. "I don't know. Be polite? Ask it to leave?"

"Right. I'll just find a way to deal. And what about you? I can't imagine you taking on a whole garrison of Marines by yourself. Anything I can do from this end?"

"Just be here for me. Listen. Don't be too nice. I'm trying to fall out of love with you."

"Karista, I'm sorry about--"

Too late for apologies. Shadows draped over and consumed her as she broke the link. Blair sat there, staring through his incensed interface.

"It's one thing to be ignored," Merlin was saying. "But it is another when that person is staring directly at you and refuses to respond. Are you taking any prescription medication, Christopher?"

"What?"

"Never mind. I see you've returned. Would you like to--"

"No. Merlin off."

"Sleep," the holograph moaned. "*Finally.*"

William Santyana returned to his cabin aboard the supercruiser *Olympus*, where he found his wife Pris and three-year-old daughter Lacey wearing their Pilgrim robes and seated on the sofa. Pris read to the little girl from a leather-bound edition of the book of Ivar Chu McDaniel. Santyana took one look at the book and tore it from Pris's hands.

She made a face. "What're you doing?"

"I don't want you reading this to her."

"Why not? It's part of her heritage. She needs to learn those stories."

"She's only half Pilgrim. And she can grow up forgetting about that part of her. I did. It wasn't hard." He settled into a chair, unzipped his flight suit, then tossed the book to the floor. "We need to get off this ship."

"That's right. Just so you'll stop saying that."

"Do you realize how close we came to dying? If Taggart hadn't changed his mind and let the ship jump, that would've been it."

"I have a memory, Will." She crossed to him, hunkered down, and rested her cheek on his shoulder. "And I know you feel trapped. But there's nothing you can do. There's no way we can get off this ship unless Aristee lets us go."

"Daddy? I want you to read the book to me."

Lacey's brilliant eyes usually worked wonders on Santyana's moods, but his frustration had become a more powerful and controlling force. He had more than once been short with his daughter, and swore at himself for that. "Maybe later, honey. Daddy and Mommy have to talk now."

"But I want you to read me--"

"Go in the bedroom, Lacey. I'll be right there," Pris said. "We'll play on the terminal." She widened her eyes.

"Okay." The little girl pushed herself off the sofa and sprinted blithely away.

"She's doing pretty well, considering," Pris observed.

"But I am worried."

"Word has gone out. We have to get off this ship. And I mean soon. I think I've recruited a few more to my side. I've got a person on the bridge now, an important one. And he tells me that Aristee is going to make a deal with the Kilrathi."

Pris lifted her head and frowned. "But didn't they try to kill us back at Aloysius?"

"Yeah, but apparently she's going to deal with the Kilrathi emperor himself. Right now, we're headed toward a rendezvous point in Robert's Quadrant. If she makes a deal with the cats, we might move into Kilrathi space. We have to get off this ship before that happens. I'm working right now on getting us a troopship." He faced her, never more grave. "This time I'm going to get you and Lacey off this ship. Or I'll die trying."

"Hero? Asshole? What's the difference?"

"Come on, you can't--"

"It's really not that bad here. We have plenty to eat. The Sosturs treat us well. They're even concerned about us becoming bored. Yeah, what Aristee is doing is beyond wrong, but maybe we should wait. Maybe the Confederation will end this, and we'll be released."

"We can't wait for them. Besides, Aristee has Taggart working for her now. The guy's a goddamned commodore from

Intell. He can help her evade capture. But when it comes to the Kilrathi, there are no experts. Aristee's putting trust in them, but they'll double-cross her the same way they did at Aloysius. We have to get off this ship."

"You go," Pris said. "I won't risk my baby. You go. Then come back for us."

"I didn't leave the first time, and I won't leave you now. We're all going. I've made the decision."

"Oh, you've made a decision?"

"We can't just wait around!" he roared, then wrenched himself from the chair. "She's going to make a deal with the goddamned Kilrathi. You got a clue what that means? We have to get the hell off this ship. And we're going!"

"Daddy? Why are you yelling?" Lacey ran to Santyana and gripped his leg. "Would you read me the book?"

He took a long breath and waited until the tension had eased from his throat. "I'm sorry for yelling. Go back in the bedroom. Mommy will be there in a moment."

"Okay."

As Lacey scurried off once more to the bedroom, Pris looked after the child and said, "I won't let you do this."

"I have to go," he mumbled, then turned and hustled toward the door.

"Think about it, Will."

He keyed open the door and battled off the desire to face her, knowing her expression would change his mind.

Out in the corridor, the Marine guards who had once been posted at each end were gone. Most of them had evacuated back in Sol. Aristee could no longer keep close tabs on him, which made planning an escape all the more attractive. Santyana headed toward the lift, intent on scouting out a few prospects on the flight deck. The key would be in getting the ship to identify him as an authorized pilot. He wished Douglas Henrick had not escaped back at Aloysius. He could use that pilot's computer trickery. But Henrick wasn't the only one on board who knew how to blind an ID system.

And Santyana had already been given a name.

Amity Aristee held her breath and entered the protur's anteroom.

Protur Carver Tsu III held the Pilgrim theocracy's highest office, and while the Catholic religion's pope had in recent centuries become little more than a figurehead, the protur's authority remained well intact--even after the first Pilgrim war. While the alliance had been dismantled after the Pilgrims' surrender, the Confederation could not tear the convictions from hearts of its enemy. Although the alliance was no more, the theocracy stood quietly in the wings, with proturs succeeding

each other and tracing their roots back to Ivar Chu McDaniel's original followers. Every system and enclave received instructions from the protur, and most Pilgrims obeyed him without question.

Aristee finally remembered to breathe and inched a little farther into the subdued light of candles resting on brass pedestals. The anteroom itself had once been her executive officer's quarters. Bulkheads that divided room from room had been removed, and a hatch had been set into the rear to allow the protur entrance to his suite, formerly the lieutenant commander's bunk. Between the two rooms, the protur had a respectable living space larger than any other on board. Aristee had not visited the place in nearly a week, and the changes reassured her that the protur had thus far settled in sans the customary carping of the Pilgrim elite. His multihued tapestries depicting Pilgrim settlements had finally been hung to cover the drab walls; two small *veracia* trees stood in their pots near the hatch, their limbs sagging under the weight of so many leaves; the *hivicense* had been lit and now filled the room with its sweet aroma; and the standard-issue furniture had been covered in richly detailed quilts woven by the Sosturs of Faith. While it had been impossible to move the protur's extensive book collection from his rectory on McDaniel, Amity had created for him a modest library stocked with books donated by the crew.

She had contributed her own trioak bookcase, a three-meter-wide affair that nearly reached the overhead, and she noted that many of the texts had been pulled and examined, some jutting out from the others, some pulled from the stacks and lying on their sides. She hoped the protur had found distraction in the books and had kept her many failures to the wayside of his thoughts. She reached the open hatch and decided she would rather beckon him than step boldly into the adjoining room. "Protur?"

Sostur Ezbeth Marn suddenly appeared from the gloom beyond the hatch. "Sostur Aristee. Hello."

"I, uh, didn't realize that..."

Ezbeth grinned as she twirled a finger through a grove of black hair that splayed in curls over her firm breasts. She stood there, completely naked, unabashed, flaunting a body that was the envy of many sosturs on board. But the concubine's boldness and conceit only vexed Aristee, though she would never convey that feeling. The protur must have at least six concubines and was entitled to his indulgences. The Book Ivar Chu made this clear. Ezbeth had recently become the protur's favorite, and she had been the only woman he had taken with him from McDaniel. The other five lamented and waited for his return.

Grimacing, Aristee consulted her watchphone. "I didn't realize that the protur was busy. He did say he would give me an audience now."

"Oh, I'm sure that's fine." Ezbeth drew her legs together and winced. "We're finished. Come." She padded back into the room, her rump impossibly firm and rekindling Aristee's hatred.

As they walked, the gloom peeled back to expose the remarkable changes the protur had made to his bedroom, which now resembled an adytum in an ancient Pilgrim temple. Two standard bunks had been placed together and transformed into a stunningly lavish four-poster bed with a cotton canopy. Brilliant blue storicals, symbols that told the history of Ivar Chu, had been stitched into the canopy's hem, and for a second, Aristee found herself lost in Ivar Chu's first ecstatic vision. She was not sure where the protur had obtained the bed posts, but they, like her bookcase, were made of rare trioak and conveyed wealth, craftsmanship, and a healthy dose of ostentation.

The man himself sat up in bed, resting back on his red velvet pillow. A winter squall of white, curly hair raged across his bare and sagging breasts, then funneled down to a navel folded to a slit by his paunch. You could tell he had spent too many years in McDaniel's merciless sun and had had too many surgeries to compensate for its wizening effects. He smiled at Aristee, reptilian skin heavily grooved, large, round

eyes a fluorescent gray that had always been his most notable feature. He had often been accused of fanning a peculiar and dangerous fire in those eyes, and while Aristee had heretofore dismissed that superstition, the protur's recent requests seemed, in a word, incendiary.

"My dear, dear Sostur Amity. Come here into the better light," the protur said, adopting a regal if not sincere tone. He leaned forward, and long hair parted perfectly in the middle draped like glimmering ribbons of durasteel over his shoulders. "Oh, yes, you're a sight. A sight, indeed." He palmed sweat from his forehead, and only now did Aristee catch of whiff of his recent activities.

Repressing the urge to gag, she said, "Protur, thank you for seeing me."

He extended his hand, which she took and kissed.

"You've come again for advice, dear Amity."

She took a step, careful to always face him. "I've contacted the Kilrathi emperor as you asked, and we're en route to meet with him. But you still haven't told me how we can succeed through alliance with them. Bill Wilson did as you asked. And forgive me, protur, but he died."

After sliding himself to the edge of the bed, the protur bowed his head in deference to Wilson. "He gave his life for us, as he was meant to do. He succeeded."

"I don't see how."

"You succeeded back at Sol."

"I failed to destroy Earth. I lost many of my crew. And now we're hobbling around in a damaged ship. I must be blind."

"You're not blind, dear Amity. You just haven't seen the distance. But you will. You saw very clearly on the day we killed my predecessor. You saw that you needed the protur's blessing, and you saw how to get it. Now look beyond Sol, beyond the loss of your crew and your damaged ship. All of that you've done has inspired the Confederation."

"I killed millions on Mylon Three to make a statement. Oh, that inspired them, all right. They've set up no-fly zones and have denied our people supplies. They've killed many in accidents and continue to rape and abuse us."

"And the more they kill, the better."

Aristee stiffened in shock. "Protur..."

"Both you and Brotur Wilson wanted to make a rallying cry to our people."

"And we both failed."

"No, you've both already made that cry, a cry much louder than you could possibly know."

"But our people can't rebel if they're imprisoned and dying. And how can more deaths be better?"

He stood and, like Ezbeth, took no shame in his nudity. He leaned toward her. "Seeds of truth are planted, watered, nurtured. We often never know what they'll yield. And sometimes, like the seedlings of the *veracia* tree, they take many years to grow. It is a matter of patience."

More enigmatic metaphors instead of straightforward answers. And why? Because the protur delighted in knowing what others did not.

Dealing with him was also a matter of patience.

"So, we should bargain with the Kilrathi?" Aristee asked.

His lips hinted at a smile. "I think you'll be surprised at how agreeable they can be."

Chapter 4

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.142

1120 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Report relayed from CS *Altamonte* in Terra Quadrant," said Comm Officer Wilks, his boyish face lighting up the map room's comm terminal. "Message from Captain Winnagard, recorded on one-three-nine."

Bellegarde nodded. "Very good, Mr. Wilks. Transfer it here."

"Aye, sir. Transferring."

Bellegarde and Tolwyn had been sitting in the map room all morning and had already poured over holographs of Vega Sector and had sorted through reports from the ships positioned along the Kilrathi border and those searching for the *Olympus*. Now with a terse voice command, Bellegarde brought up a holographic map of Terra Quadrant. Sixteen star systems glimmered overhead, varicolored spheres with tiny, mottled planets rotating on their axes and orbiting their stars in real time. Yellow lines spanned the distances between stars and intersected flashing blue jump points. Bellegarde counted four clusters of green

dots in the quadrant, each cluster identifying a Confed battle group. He ordered the computer to zoom in on a cluster between Murphy and Sirius systems: the CS *Altamonte* battle group.

Tolwyn blinked hard to clear his eyes, then glanced up at the display. "What do you think, Richard?"

"Winnagard's gone out of her way to contact us. She'd turn in her own father for breaking regs, and she wouldn't report out of sector unless--"

"She has bad news," Tolwyn finished.

Bellegarde nodded, then turned to the comm terminal, where a data bar told him the transfer had completed. He tapped a key, and the message began.

Captain Heidi Winnagard's grave look added nearly a decade to her forty-five years, and her bloodshot eyes contributed a year or two. She smoothed back a few stray locks of her generally disheveled hair, then sighed and said, "Admiral, we've lost contact with the destroyer *Horatio Marx*. I sent her out on patrol after we jumped into Sirius on one-three-three. Ten hours later, I dispatched a fighter patrol for SAR. We've lost contact with them as well. I've pulled my battle group clear, notified Admiral Chigaha, and have initiated long range scans. We don't pick up anything, not even residuum from the destroyer and fighters. I don't know what's going on, but maybe the *Horatio Marx* stumbled into your renegade ship, the cats, or

something else, which is why I'm reporting out of sector. I'll continue my patrol here until I hear from you. Winnagard out."

"What would Aristee be doing near Sirius?" Bellegarde asked. "Were I her, I'd jump out as far away as I could to buy time for repairs. I might even head to a Border World. Or maybe that missing Kilrathi supercruiser is responsible, though Intell informs us that she's operated by the Caxki clan, which recently seceded from the emperor's new alliance. I doubt that ship is at the emperor's beck and call."

"What disturbs me more is the lack of evidence." Tolwyn brought his coffee mug to his lips, eyed the dregs, then thought better of finishing. "If Aristee took out the *Horatio Marx* with her hopper drive, there would still be gravitic residuum and traces of debris. And if the cats were responsible, we'd find a lot more."

"Something's interfering with Winnagard's scans."

"Maybe." Tolwyn set down his mug on the console and slid his chair a meter left to the comm monitor. "Space Marshal Gregarov's field office," he told the computer.

"Connecting."

"Yes, Admiral," the space marshal said, seated at her desk before a semicircle of palm-sized data displays.

"Where are those two extrakinetic Pilgrims you conscripted? I read your special order, but they're assignments hadn't been posted at the time."

"One is aboard the *Bristol Mary* in Roan Quadrant, the other is on the *Zhou Chen* in Petrov. Why do you ask?"

"Winnagard lost one of her destroyers near Sirius. Could be Aristee. I want to send a ship there with an extrakinetic Pilgrim on board."

"It'll take some time, but we can--"

"Those two Pilgrims are too far out. I think the *Mitchell Hammock* and *Oregon* can handle the situation at Triune for a while. Strike bases there have resumed full operations."

"I know what you're thinking, Geoff, but we agreed to hold Lieutenant Blair in reserve. His loyalty to Commodore Taggart makes him--"

"What? A traitor? Even if Paladin has defected, I'm confident that Blair will act in our best interests." Tolwyn looked askance at control panel. "Give me the map of Day Quadrant," he ordered the computer. "Plot travel time from Hell's Kitchen to Sirius."

"Displaying map. Plotting coordinates."

The representation of Terra dissolved into a string of jump lines between the aforementioned systems. Bellegarde skimmed

the data bar below. "The *Claw* can be there in nineteen point three hours, Admiral."

"Excellent."

Gregarov shook her head emphatically. "Not Blair. Not when we have--"

"Two others who can be trusted more? They're civilians, and you're basing their loyalty on Alhoulouza scans."

"And the jury's still out on that technology," she said through a wicked grin. "Which is why we've, well, I don't want to get into the details. Suffice it to say that we've taken measures to assure that they cooperate."

Bellegarde looked away in disgust, though he shouldn't be amazed that the old lady would resort to coercion. She had probably "taken measures" over breakfast while reading casualty reports.

Tolwyn drew up his shoulders and hemmed. "Ma'am, despite your assurances, I recommend that we order the *Tiger Claw* to Sirius. Mr. Blair will confirm whether Aristee is or was there. Or we can send in the *Altamonte* and her battle group, though we might lose them as well."

"Or you can wait, and we'll send in the *Bristol Mary* or the *Zhou Chen*."

"Either ship will take twice as long to get there," Bellegarde interjected, reading his map.

"You said it yourself, ma'am. We need a swift and peaceful solution to this crisis." Tolwyn dropped his voice to ominous depths. "Our resources are strained. We have to act now."

"All right then. Send the *Claw* to Sirius," she conceded with a snicker. "But I *will* log my reservations. And by the way, I presented my arguments to the senate regarding your order to destroy the systems and enclaves on one-five-eight. They agreed that maintaining the threat might bring about Aristee's surrender. She's got sixteen days. If she doesn't stand down by then, you *won't* be destroying anything. In fact, our no fly zones will come down, and we'll begin aiding those people in any way we can. The order comes from President Vasura herself, and it's already been endorsed by the senate."

Tolwyn nodded microscopically, and his voice sounded just shy of a whisper. "So we'll admit that threatening the Pilgrims was a grave error, issue an apology, give them aid, provide homes for refugees, and rebuild." He suddenly chuckled, rose, then wandered away from the terminal. "I fail to see how that will get you your hopper drive *and* Aristee's head on a spear. Our guard will be down. She'll strike again. And this time, she might have the Kilrathi in tow."

"Geoff, you and the Commodore have, with your no-fly zones and threats of Pilgrim genocide, created a public relations

nightmare for the Navy. It will all come to an end on one-five-eight."

Had Gregarov been in the room, Bellegarde may very have charged at her; instead, he opened his mouth--

But the admiral spoke faster. "Ma'am, we've done the best we could with the mess you handed us. The moment you learned that Aristee was planning on fitting her ship with a modified hopper drive, you should have moved in and arrested all concerned. You watched them build that drive. You gave her the means to kill six million people on Mylon Three, and thousands more have died since then. Don't talk to me about a public relations nightmare. I've a mind to testify before the senate and present hard evidence of everything that's transpired. I mean *everything*."

"You're free to jettison your career. But you won't touch mine. You have no idea, Geoff. You really don't."

"Then enlighten me," Tolwyn cried.

She averted her gaze to one of the monitors she had been reading. "Don't you have orders to record and a communications drone to dispatch? I suggest you get to that. Gregarov out."

"Goddamned bitch," Bellegarde muttered.

Tolwyn gazed vacantly at the terminal, then suddenly jerked toward him. "Richard, you make that recording for the *Tiger Claw*." He darted purposely for the hatch.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"To my quarters. I've got a hunch that won't wait."

"Sir, if I may ask--"

"You may not. But you'll be the first I tell."

The Synchronous Immersion Research Environment simulator (SIRE) represented a culmination of over six centuries of research and development and afforded Confederation fighter pilots with an experience that was, in every way, absolutely no different from actual combat. Though codes protected against it, any of the six SIRE units aboard the *Tiger Claw* could be programmed to actually hurt or even kill its pilot. And squadron commanders occasionally used that threat as a way to motivate lackadaisical rocket jocks.

The SIRE's composite design, one of its true beauties, allowed it to mimic the cockpit of any starfighter in the Confed's arsenal. And not only did the SIRE look and feel like the actual craft, but it also boasted the real-life Tempest targeting and navigational AI packages instead of replicas designed specifically for the simulator.

Christopher Blair, like any other pilot in the Confed Navy, knew that the key to a successful combat system is its ability to exchange information with its pilot and create a *simbology* between human and machine. The system must understand the pilot

by monitoring physical and mental workloads. The system must adapt to the pilot's condition and change the way it delivers and accepts information. Blair could throw a toggle, issue a voice command, or even think about what he wanted his Rapier to do, and the computer would initiate the command, though he hated the notion of having a combat computer worming through his thoughts and found the system too fast to allow for second-guessing, despite its ability to sort through and prioritize mental requests. Blair and many other pilots felt more comfortable taking the machine out of that loop. Jamming down a primary weapons trigger to cut loose a life-taking salvo provided the necessary and correct adrenaline rush that no cerebral interface could replace.

But during the Pilgrim war, space combat had barely yielded a raised pulse, let alone an adrenaline rush. High priority targets were usually attacked from great distances, and fighters rarely engaged each other in visual confrontations. It had all been done via reconnaissance and long-range ordnance. Wingmen would operate hundreds of kilometers apart from each other and trick attacking starfighters into believing that only a single target existed. Sure, Confed pilots sometimes went head-to-head with their Pilgrim adversaries, particularly during the battle for Peron, but more often than not, engagements had been highly impersonal. Then along came the Kilrathi, who took pride and

honor in facing their combatants, and their instincts drove them in close to taunt their enemy and douse themselves in the light of their enemy's destruction. Though most Confed pilots would never admit it, they secretly thanked the Kilrathi for returning their profession to its visceral roots.

Blair slid into the SIRE's Rapier cockpit, still boiling over the fact that after training for six hours per day for four straight days, he had been instructed by Angel to endure another six-hour marathon. She had told him he would train for "a few days" to test his reflexes--not a business week.

Thus far Blair had gone up against nearly every Kilrathi adversary the computer could muster. He took on Dralathi, Salthi, Krants, Grathas, and Jalthi. He flew with the other pilots in his squadron against Ralari-class destroyers and Fralthi-class cruisers. He swooped down and strafed Snakeir-class superdreadnoughts and even single-handedly took out a Kilrathi ConCom ship by tricking its captain into lowering shields. Everything about the simulations was as real to him as his own flesh and blood.

Which was why he now walked the fence between total exhaustion and collapse. Angel had been intentionally wearing him down. Why? He wasn't sure. Maybe she didn't want to show partiality to him since Captain Gerald and the rest of the squadron knew they were sleeping together. So she

overcompensated by torturing him and had even refused to see him for the past four days. According Shotglass, the *Claw's* resident bartender, she had rarely been seen outside of her quarters.

The cockpit suddenly glinted with an image of the flight deck. Rapiers and Broadswords lined both sides of the runway like a mechanical contingent welcoming a dignitary.

"Computer? Skip launch sequence. Mark for positive one minute into simulation."

"Skipping launch sequence is not recommend because--"

"Initiate command."

The view through the canopy immediately darkened into the star-specked void encompassing Netheranya. The fuel indicator bar glowed full overhead, and beside it, current speed stood at 178 KPS. Armor and shield indicators registered in the green, as did the neutron cannon and laser weapons systems. Missile systems read nominal. The words NO INTERNAL DAMAGE flashed in the left Visual Display Unit. Blair's radar scope showed a dozen Rapiers at his six o' clock, and IDs of each pilot scrolled up on his tactical display. He skimmed the roster to discover that Angel was not part of this exercise. *Guess I'm wing commander again. Should I be excited?*

Slumping a little and unable to suppress a loud yawn, he slid the Heads Up Display viewer over his right eye and waited

for the computer to throw something at him. What would it be today? A squadron of Dralhti? A corvette?

"Receiving short-range communication from Tirida-class civilian transport vessel," the computer said.

"Show me."

"...and we don't care what you do to us," a young woman with a dirty face and stringy brown hair pleaded. "Just come for us. We surrender." She sat at the transport's helm and coughed as smoke from the shattered console beneath her wafted into her face.

I've seen this woman before, back on the Olympus. Damned computer pulled her out of my thoughts. I was wondering when they'd get around to testing me against Pilgrims. Do they really think this is an adequate test of my loyalty when I know this is a simulation?

The right VDU spilt to show Maniac's masked face. "Got the skinny on our neighborhood fanatics. Stole that transport from a private pad on the west side of Triune. Looks like they took conventional fire on the way out. LSS is torn up pretty bad. They're venting atmosphere. Can't get a reading on their reactor, though. Shields up to full power in that quadrant."

"Copy that," Blair said, unable to lower his smile. The computer mimicked Maniac perfectly, peppering his voice with the exact amounts of conceit and sarcasm that reinforced his guard.

Blair switched to the squadron's general frequency. "Listen up. We got a stolen civilian transport in the AO, about twenty-thousands Ks out, bearing on your scopes. Maniac, Sinatra, and Cheddarboy? You'll come with me for a look. The rest of you break to flanks and set up a defensive sphere, one klick maximum. Bug eyes for an ambush. Questions?"

"Just one, mate," Captain Ian "Hunter" St. John said, his mask off, a cigar stub clenched in his teeth. "What's the delay?"

Blair smiled. The computer had the big Australian pegged. "Break and advance."

As he throttled up to 325 KPS, with Sinatra and Cheddarboy at his wings, the other fighters fanned out behind him. Blair switched to the transport's frequency. "Attention. You are in violation of a Confederation no-fly zone. Surrender your vessel immediately."

"What do you think we're doing?" the woman cried. "If we don't get some help in a couple of minutes, the children are going to die. We've only got three environment suits and about five minutes of air left. Of course we surrender. Help us!"

"Computer? Set nav point. ETA?"

"Twenty-one seconds."

"Initiate thermal and electromagnetic scans of transport and long-range sweep for other vessels."

"Initiating."

"Passenger count?"

"Sixteen adults, eleven children."

"Shit."

"Why are you swearing, Christopher? It's only a simulation."

Blair smirked at Merlin, who now lay back on a futon of air just above the right VDU, hands clasped behind his head. "Don't bother me now."

"You're going to fail this test, Christopher."

"There's a crack in your crystal ball. Now get out of here."

The old man shook his head sadly, then rolled over to vanish.

"Tallyho," Sinatra said in his usual monotone, a consequence of being demoted and reprimanded too many times to care anymore. Because he never held back a punch--even with superiors--he had taken more than his share of jabs, figuratively *and* literally. "Coming up on her now, Lieutenant."

Rectangular, with a hammerhead bow, stubby forward wings and a quad-wing tail assembly, the transport limped slowly toward them at a pathetic 22 KPS. The dark, jagged stitching of conventional cannon fire traced from amidships back to her ion engines. Opaque gas spewed in tiny jets from more than a dozen

breeches--way too many for Blair and company to affect an extravehicular repair in time.

"Uh, sir?" Cheddarboy began, gulping between words.

"There's uh, nothing we can do for them. By the time we tractor them back, all of them except the three in suits will be dead."

"Shuddup, nugget," Sinatra said evenly. "You got another year of this shit before you gain enough experience to have a decent and respected opinion." Then he hailed Blair on the private frequency. "Lieutenant? The kid's right. And there's no way we can get a troopship out here in time."

It took a moment for Blair's thoughts to catch up with his pulse. Why would Angel do this? Why would she program a no-win situation? Or maybe she hadn't.

Maybe the Pilgrims already knew they were dead.

Blair lunged for the comm control and punched up the general freak. "Everybody get the hell out of here! Light 'em and go, go, go!"

"What's happening, sir?" Cheddarboy asked.

"Just bug out!" Blair cried as he yanked his control yoke toward his chest, pulling in a high-G loop that rendered him inverted and in full retreat. He ignited his afterburners as--

"Aw, shit," Maniac shouted. "Reactor overload. Shields dropping. Scanning interior. They've got class-nine planetary

warhead in there. Trigger's routed directly to the reactor. Ladies? Gentlemen? It's been a pleasure."

"Shuddup and move it! Move it!" Blair ordered. "C'mon. Throttles up. Bring 'em to five hundred KPS. Push it. Push it!"

"Won't matter," Sinatra droned. "Shock wave will... here it comes."

Blair glanced over his shoulder, into a silvery-white flash that pierced his eyes and suddenly darkened into a screen of blue. The flute player spoke to him in four-four time, in whole notes, in a tremolo that suddenly made him forget about the simulation.

Until someone's hands unbuckled his harness, seized him by the collar, and wrenched him from the cockpit.

Chapter 5

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.142

1145 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Get up, you goddamned Pilgrim! Get the hell up!"

Blair had been thrown onto his back and his helmet had been torn off. His gruff-sounding assailant had kicked him in the ribs and now had a boot pressed squarely on his throat, yet the unfamiliar guy expected Blair to get up. Though he could feel and hear it all, the vision robbed Blair of seeing it, and he wondered why it hadn't absorbed his physical pain, as it had once before.

Reaching up, he scratched at the blueness, and it tore away like a gossamer to expose a tall, dark figure looming over him, framed by the sim room's blinding lights. Blair focused on the face and saw only the reflective slope of a class-two welder's mask and the navy blue jumpsuit worn by those techs.

The guy leaned more on his boot. "Get up!"

Blair considered using his extrakinetic senses to free himself, but he had vowed never to use them in front of anyone other than Maniac and Angel. He did not care to emphasize how

much different he was from the rest of the crew. So he seized the guy's boot, twisted hard, then drove it to his right as he rolled free. Once on his hands and knees, he launched himself at the tech--

And got tripped by someone behind him. He slammed onto his chest. Another boot dropped onto the small of his back with a breath-robbing thud.

The first assailant closed in. Blair gasped and threw all of his strength into his arms and legs. He tried to roll once more, but the boot on his back held fast. Whomever held him had to be using a gravitic weapon akin to a Pilgrim's extrakinetic strength, but there were no other Pilgrims on board the *Claw*, at least none that he knew of. And why would they attack one of their own?

"You're just waiting, aren't you, Pilgrim? Just biding your time until you can sabotage this ship," said the first tech as he came alongside Blair to kick him in the head. A muscle pulled in Blair's neck as his head snapped back. The pain came like a high-pitched tone that reverberated across his forehead.

"I'm Confed pilot," Blair managed.

"No, you're a mutation. We should have learned from your mistakes. But we forgave you, put you back in the mix. Now you're rotting us from the core."

The boot abruptly gave way, and Blair bolted to his feet. He leaned back on the smooth black surface of the SIRE's exterior and eyed the two attackers. The second one also wore a welder's mask. Both were about his height and build, and their jumpsuits made them appear like clones.

With his head now throbbing, Blair tensed and assumed his fighting stance.

The first tech burst into laughter.

Footsteps. From behind.

Even as Blair turned, a third welder brought down a short length of pipe across Blair's forehead. He reeled back to crash against the SIRE and slump to the floor.

More laughter. Swearing. Dizziness. An incredible burning sensation across his head.

"Do you know why we're doing this?" the one with the pipe asked.

Blair tried to nod. Tried. *Because you hate Pilgrims, you ignorant bastards.*

"We are here on behalf of our Lord and Savior to educate you. And when we are done, you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that your presence in this universe is wrong. It is unnatural. You are an abomination. A violation." He swung sideways with the pipe--

And Blair shrieked as he felt something crack in his head.

To hell with concealing his extrakinetiC senses. He closed his eyes, ready to step outside himself--

When the tech batted him again.

And he tumbled down an ice-capped mountain of darkness.

Maniac slid his tongue out of Zarya's mouth and caught his breath. A puddle of sweat had formed on her belly and now washed into his navel. They slid against each other, two parts of one writhing, purely instinctual animal. "Was that gratuitous enough for you?"

"No," she said breathlessly, her reddish brown hair spread like wet feathers across the pillow. "It almost seemed justified. This time, I want it to *really* seem gratuitous."

He took a deep breath and shrugged. "Okay."

As he took Lieutenant Elise "Zarya" Rolitov back into his arms, Maniac repressed a sudden and agonizing memory of Rosie Forbes. He wanted to believe that Zarya represented a new and fresh force in his life. She wasn't here to make him forget but to remind him of how good it was to be alive.

Or was he was just using her to get over Rosie's death? Had his relationship with Zarya come too closely on the heels of that loss? Was he just staving off the guilt with sex and companionship?

You goaded Rosie into attacking those Dralhti. You played chicken with them. And she lost. Your fault. Period.

"What's wrong?" Zarya asked, touching his cheek. "You just jumped out of here. Am I that forgettable?"

"Nah, it's uh..." He glanced at his watchphone. "Holy shit. Blair will be here any minute."

"Change the hatch code."

He pulled himself from her clutches, climbed off the bunk, then shambled toward the latrine.

"You *will* tell me," she called out.

"Oh, yeah?" he challenged, then found his target and relieved himself with a wince. He went to the sink, splashed water over his face, dried off, then turned to find her in the doorway. "You wanna shower?"

"Together?"

He thought a moment, then resigned himself to the suggestion. "All right."

"If you have to think about it, forget it." She pushed past him and padded into the stall.

By the time Maniac finished his own shower, Zarya had left. She could have at least talked to him. Maybe he would have explained how he felt.

Nah. That would never happen. She would have to figure it out alone. She already knows about me and Rosie. No secrets there.

He dressed quickly in off-duty utilities, then once more checked his watch. He had lied to Zarya about Blair's return. Angel had Blair working in the SIRE all day. He decided to go down there and see how the ship's second-best pilot fared against Angel's sadistic programming.

Four decks and three voluptuous ensigns later, Maniac arrived at the SIRE control room, a cramped station with terminals for programming each of the simulators on board. The SIRE control officer spun in his chair, lowered his coffee cup, then stroked his moustache as though it were a faithful pet. "Marshall, isn't it? I didn't see your name on the list." He gazed sidelong at a screen. "Nope. You're not on it. Were you scheduled to--"

"I'm not here to practice, Chief. Which one's Blair's?"

"Blair?" He checked the screen once more. "Four. But I wouldn't bother him. He's been at it for a couple of hours now. You know what it's like to break sim."

Maniac advanced to a terminal marked four, took a seat, then brought up an image from the SIRE's cockpit.

"Oh, shit! Haven't you been monitoring?"

"What?"

Springing from his chair, Maniac shoved the control officer out of his way and bounded out of the room. He turned left down a corridor and jogged past three hatches until he came to SIRE four. "Open this goddamned door!"

"Opening," the SCO said over the intercom.

The hatch slid right, and Maniac charged into the oval-shaped sim room. The SIRE itself, a black contraption that always reminded him of an antique race car constructed of a preschooler's building blocks, sat in the middle of the room, its gull-wing hatches sealed tight. Maniac triggered the port hatch, which lifted with a slight hiss, and only then did he notice the blood spattered on the floor and the SIRE itself. Not a whole lot of blood, but enough to steal his breath.

Blair lay unconscious in the seat, his head draped to one side, his mouth hanging open. Six, maybe seven purple welts had turned his face into a bloated Halloween mask, and blood had crusted under his nose, on his chin, and across his neck. Those were only the wounds Maniac could see. His eyes burned as he leaned over and grabbed Blair's wrists.

"Don't move him," cried the SCO, who leaned in from the hatch.

Maniac whirled, gritted his teeth, then took the man's neck in his hand. He drove the officer out of the SIRE, across the

room, then against the bulkhead. "The machine didn't do that. Somebody beat him. Where the hell were you?"

"I've been in the control room since this morning," the officer croaked as Maniac tightened his grip. "I didn't see anybody come in."

"You're in on this, you--"

Maniac's curse got lost as he struck a roundhouse to the officer's cheek. He swore again, drew back, and delivered another vicious blow. Then he closed his eyes, pictured Blair lying in the cockpit, and lashed out again.

And again.

The SCO gurgled.

"All right," came a soft, masculine voice. Arms slid under Maniac's, caught him in a headlock, then ripped him away from the SCO. He felt cold armor pressing on his neck. "Lieutenant, you are now in the custody of a Confederation Marine. Resist, and I will hurt you. Do you understand?"

So the control officer had called security. Great. "I get it," Maniac answered. "Just call the medics. We need 'em in here now!"

"The SCO already called them. They're on their way. Now why'd you go and hit him, Lieutenant?"

"For the same reason that I'm going to hit you."

The Marine chuckled under his breath. "Is that your imagination you're using? Pretty good."

Two other Marines hulked around in their crimson armor, rifles trained casually on him, one speaking quietly into a headset. A fourth jarhead went immediately to the SCO to examine the guy's face.

Three medics showed up a few seconds later and wasted no time lugging their gurney and trauma bags toward the SIRE.

"Can I let you go now?" the Marine asked.

"Yeah."

And the second he was free, Maniac spun to face the Marine and drew back his fist.

But the pistol jabbed in his neck gave him a moment's pause. He locked gazes with the Marine, who stared impassively, proving that he could kill and comment on the mess hall menu without missing a beat. Maniac huffed, then jerked away, heading for the SIRE.

"You're not going anywhere, Lieutenant."

"Shoot me." He tipped his head toward the medics as they lowered Blair onto a gurney. "Otherwise, I'm not leaving him."

News of the attack struck Angel into shocked silence. It took another few minutes for her to fully comprehend what had happened, and with the realization came a burst of tears.

Trembling, she left her office and sprinted all the way down to sickbay.

She took one look at Blair lying in the ICU, then had to shield her face with a hand. The tears came again, warm and fast. Her throat had nearly closed up, and her stomach felt as though it had been pulled inside out. She stood immobile before the Plexi partition, unable to go inside, to query about his condition, to do anything. It had happened all over again. She had fallen in love with someone--only to lose him. How could this happen?

"Angel?"

Captain Paul Gerald came up beside her, and she barely glanced at him. He lifted a hand, about to place it on her shoulder to comfort her, then withdrew. She and Gerald had a healthy respect for each other, but that hand would have taken their relationship to friendship, and friends they were not. He with his large pores and larger attitude and she with her overbearing commitment to duty... they sometimes complemented each other but remained divided on the issue of Pilgrims.

"I've already ordered a full investigation to be headed by Lieutenant Commander Jhinda, our liaison with the Judge Advocate General's office."

"I know who she is," Angel said sharply. "And I know she has no particular love for Pilgrims. Didn't she fight with you during the Pilgrim war before she got transferred?"

"Yes, she did, which is why I know that she'll do a thorough job. I wouldn't worry about her bias, Commander. She's a professional." He turned his gaze to Blair. "He's still unconscious, but neuro signs are positive. They've already quickmended his skull fracture. He'll be up and around in a couple of days. That pretty face will take a little longer to come back, though."

She hid her sigh. "Guess they didn't want to kill him. That's too easy. They're using him to send a message. And they'll do it again."

"Not on this ship. He'll be under guard. And commander?" His much softer tone drew her attention. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you, sir." Her gaze lingered on Blair, then she double-timed off, propelled by the desire to do some investigating of her own.

Squadron Commander Gary "Gunner" Berkholtz cocked his head toward the door as Angel entered his office, unannounced. Gunner stood a full two meters, with the thick neck, rock-hard pectorals, and ballooning biceps of a Marine rather than a Confed pilot. The fact that his father and three brothers were

Marines definitely had something to do with that. Though his gym fetish kept him amazingly fit, he ironically ignored his pug nose, bad skin, and scalp caked with dandruff. He regarded Angel with eyes like specks of coal encroached upon by a bushy brow, then tripped over one of a dozen or more shipping containers stacked all over the office. He laughed at himself, then extended his hand. "Ain't I the asshole. Gary 'Gunner' Berkholtz, Squadron Commander, what is it, Second Squadron now, I guess? And you're Lieutenant Commander Deveraux. Yeah, you really are." He took a moment to swallow his drool as he ogled her. Then he realized the she was not accepting his hand, his lustful expression turned grave. "You got a problem, Commander?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Gunner doesn't like that tone. And Gunner's wondering what happened to our welcome party. Figured you'd be throwing us one today since we got in so late last night. Figured you'd be glad to see us. You ain't had replacements for a long, long time. Me and my squadron? We figured we'd get a hero's welcome. So I say again, even more incredulously, you got a problem, Commander?"

"One of my pilots was beaten in his SIRE room this afternoon."

"Yeah, I read the datanet post. That's a goddamned shame. And we saw a lot of that on the *Mitchell Hammock*. Nuggets get mixed up in a lot of dangerous shit if you don't keep 'em on a short leash. Black market shit. Gambling, loan-sharking, the whole nine. What was it with your kid?"

"How do you feel about Pilgrims?"

"Where does that come from?"

"Just answer the question."

"Is this an interrogation? Because if it is--"

She took a step toward him. "How do you feel about Pilgrims?"

"How do I feel about 'em? I don't. I know my job, and I intend to do it. The Confed tells me that as of this calendar date Pilgrims should be kept out of our no-fly zones. Whether Pilgrims are the enemy or not is up to the politicians."

"I see. My pilot who was beaten is half Pilgrim. Did you know that?"

"So she finally tips her hand," he said, grinning in understanding. "My squadron comes aboard last night, your boy gets beaten. And you wanna know if we hate Pilgrims." He shook his head in mock disappointment. "You gotta be a little more subtle than that if you wanna play detective, honey." He closed the gap between them, forcing her to retreat a step, his hot breath blasting over her face. "Well this is some goddamned

welcome. And I won't even dignify your accusations with a defense. You think I give a rat's ass if your boy's half Pilgrim? That's your baggage, not mine. He does his job, I don't care." Gunner came at her again, in all of his pock-marked skin and crooked tooth glory. "But you know what really bothers me? You getting in my goddamned face. Unless you intend to shove a tongue or a nipple in my mouth, I suggest you get out and stay out. *Do you read me, Commander?*"

"Oh, I read you," Angel said, holding her ground but wondering if he might actually take a swing at her. "And I'll quote you in my report."

"You wanna make a report?" He jerked away and stormed back to the rear of the office, where he had been unpacking. He fished out a dataslate and threw it at her. "Use mine. And don't forget to mention how you came in here unannounced and insinuated that me or a member of my squadron had something to do with your pilot's beating."

Angel had caught the dataslate and now let it fall to the deck. "I'll find out what happened," she said, forcing a calm into her voice. "And if I learn that you or one your people had something to do with this, I'll shove something in your mouth-- but I guarantee it won't be a tongue or a nipple." She glowered at him a second, then started for the hatch. "Welcome aboard, Commander."

Chapter 6

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.142

1700 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Three days in the brig and a fine isn't so bad," Zarya told Maniac. "Gerald could've given you a week in solitary."

"Easy for you to say. You're standing on that side of the bars." Maniac turned away and lifted his arms as he took in the durasteel splendor of his new home. At two meters wide and four meters long, he could easily move a grand piano into his cell, divide the place up so that the servants would have their own quarters, and set aside some room from his private starfighter and antique motorcycle collections. And look at that, the place even came equipped with a fully functional toilet. He would have send grandma a postcard and tell her all about it.

Maniac's arms fell to his sides, and he leaned on the wall, then let himself slide to the deck. "When Blair and I were on the *Olympus*, we spent most of our time in the brig. You have no idea how hard this is."

"Could be worse. The SCO could've pressed the matter, and Blair could've been killed. As terrible as this all is, there's

still hope. And something good will come out of it. If we have people on board who would do something like this, then we need to get rid of them. And now we will."

"Maybe." He closed his eyes, and the image of Blair's battered face returned. "You know, I've sometimes been his friend, but mostly I've hated him because the son of bitch is so good. When I saw him in there all... I don't know... it's like I felt selfish or something. I didn't want to lose him because he makes me a better pilot. It was about me. And now I feel... ah, it's all bullshit anyway."

"We don't cry for the dead. We cry for ourselves, for our loss. I took class called Death and--"

"I'm not in the mood for this philosowhatever conversation. And he ain't dead. Why don't you go check on him?"

"Okay. Then after that, I'm on patrol."

"Come back and visit the old Maniac. And Zarya? Thanks for talking. Before, when we were--"

"Don't worry about it. Not now, at least."

Angel stood at parade rest in front of Captain Gerald's command chair on the bridge. The captain sat coolly as he made a spectacle of her before a bridge crew who shrank in their seats. "I've never done this before or served for a commanding officer who has, but I'm suspending one of my squadron

commanders for a period no less than three days. If you interfere with Lieutenant Commander Jhinda's investigation again, I'll have you brigged for a month. I'm sure that would displease you, Commander."

"Yes, it would, sir. I won't interfere again, sir."

"Very good. Dismissed."

She bounded away, heading toward the lift. Once inside, she closed her eyes, and the trembling overcame her.

"Easy there, Angel."

Commander Obutu's reassuring smile and warm gaze calmed her a little. Tall, black, muscular, and reticent, Obutu was a walking grocery list of admirable qualities, and he had the cleanest record on board, which made promoting him to ship's executive officer a mere formality. He seemed perfectly at home in his new duties and had already shown his mettle, though he never boasted and would rarely comment on anything but business. The mystery of his personal life often intrigued Angel.

"I didn't see you there," she said apologetically.

"After that, it's a wonder you found your way to the lift."

"Yeah." She mustered a wan smile. "He chewed off my ass, then did my legs like pork ribs. You like pork ribs, Commander?"

"No, ma'am. I'm a vegetarian." A secret revealed. "But I, uh, I wanted to say that I'm willing to help. I know Gunner

Berkholtz. Served with him on the *Palestine*. I'd be surprised if he wasn't responsible for Blair's beating. I'll keep my eyes open and do what I can."

"Thank you. And I'm curious, Commander. Why the sudden offer?"

"Well, ma'am, I understand what Lieutenant Blair is going through."

"Because you're a black man?"

"No, ma'am. Because I'm a Pilgrim."

The bridge of the *Olympus* resembled a forlorn desert of gray steel and cold instrumentation, and Commodore James "Paladin" Taggart wandered through it, in search of an oasis where he would find some meaning in his actions. But, as he always did, he asked too much of himself.

Paladin had asked too much of himself when he had fallen in love with Amity Aristee the first time, so many years ago. Or maybe he had asked too much of her--and that was why she had given him her Pilgrim cross and had let him go. Then, after she had made her rebellion clear at Mylon Three, he had caught up with her, but she would not abandon her attempt to start a new war. Once again, he had asked too much.

And now, with the ship just moments away from a rendezvous with the Kilrathi emperor himself, Paladin went to Amity and prepared to once more ask too much. "There's still time."

"That's very persuasive, James. You've convinced me. I'm going to turn the ship around right now." She stared intently at the viewport, denying him even a smirk.

"What if the protur is wrong?"

"Then we're all dead. But he doesn't strike me as suicidal." She smiled confidently. "Arguing till the end, eh? Of course, you are. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

He snatched her wrist. "You can't give them the hopper drive. Do you really believe a race of pack hunters can act responsibly with this kind of power? They don't see a difference between humans and Pilgrims. They'll use the drive against us."

She cocked a brow. "You don't think the protur has considered that?"

"I don't think you have."

"The protur knows what he's doing. We'll reach an agreement with the Kilrathi. And you forget that we're dealing with a desperate emperor. But don't worry. Once we reach the rendezvous, the ship will be ready to jump." She looked to the executive officer, who stood behind the helm, blond hair perfectly combed, gaze riveted to the viewport. "Brotur Vyson?"

The XO glanced to the helm display. "Nearing coordinates now, ma'am. ETA: thirty seconds. Shields are up. Scopes are clear. Guess we're early."

"Brotur?" called Sostur Charity from her radar station. "Kavaka-class scout coming through the jump point behind us. Accelerating on our heading."

"Target that ship," Aristee ordered Vyson.

"Aye, ma'am. Cannons coming to bear."

"If he's sent out a scout, then we'll be here a while," Paladin said. "They'll have to jump back and issue their report."

"No, they won't," Protur Carver Tsu III said as he exited the lift, his gold-trimmed robe fluttering so much that it threatened to carry him aloft. "That's not a scout. That's the emperor's ship."

"How do you know?" Paladin challenged.

"Because the extrakinetics we have on board are more efficient than all of this machinery," the protur said, gesticulating wildly. "They've been monitoring the emperor from the other side of the jump point."

"Be nice if you let us know beforehand," Paladin mumbled as he advanced to the telescopic imaging screen that showed the approaching scout. From the corner of his eye, he spotted the protur following.

"Now that we're bringing the Kilrathi into our little war, I'll be taking a much more active role than I have since coming up from McDaniel." The protur dropped a hand on Paladin's shoulder and squeezed. "I'm very aware of your concerns. But trust me. This is a small moment in the grand scheme. Find your patience and hang on to it. It's all a matter of patience."

Paladin did not answer the man, nor did he look up from the screen as the protur headed back to Amity's chair. He did, however, exchange a glance with Brotur Vyson, who flushed with fear. The rest of the bridge crew appeared equally nervous.

As the scout drew within a thousand kilometers of the *Olympus*, its pilot hailed them through the use of a tinny sounding translator. In a few moments, Aristee's personal comm screen lit with the emperor's face: an alarming collection of grooves; wrinkles; tufts of white hair; long, limp whiskers; and eyes like tawny stones on the bottom of a shallow pond. He had donned the ceremonial armor of the Kiranka clan, and his bronze-colored shoulder plates fired dazzles of reflected light. When he opened his mouth, strings of saliva snapped away from his worn, yellow teeth, and his voice came through the translator with a terrific hiss. "There are human cultures where being on time is not very important, or so I've read. I'm pleased that you Pilgrims regard time as seriously as we do. There is a word

in the Kilrathi language for being late, *va'ti'kah*, but there is little toleration for the act or the utterance of that word. I have seen more than my share of clan elders who have been put to death for such disrespect, and I am impressed that you show me this much."

"He's a talker," Paladin muttered to no one in particular.

"And an eccentric, as he should be," the protur said. "We shall get along famously."

Aristee cleared her throat. "You have permission to land, Emperor. We'll meet you on the flight deck."

"Our scans indicate that you are prepared to jump, and while your promptness is admirable, your threat of taking me hostage is not."

"I assure you, Emperor. We won't jump with you on board."

"I would prefer to remain on my ship. But there will be no bargain without our breath mingling."

"Standby." Aristee turned to the protur. "I don't want to go over there. He could take us hostage."

"And he feels the same, though our threat is much larger than his. I suggest you disengage the hopper drive. He has given by coming in a scout. So must you. And he had a battle group waiting for him on the other side of the jump point."

"And if they come through, we won't escape in time."

"He has planted the seeds. Water them. You'll like what grows."

Aristee looked to Paladin. He shook his head. Then her gaze favored Brotur Vyson. "XO? Contact Brotur Hawthorne. Disengage the hopper drive. Power down all systems."

"Aye, ma'am." Vyson repeated the command into his headset, then gave Paladin the slightest of nods.

"Emperor, we have shut down our hopper drive as a sign of good faith."

"I understand," the emperor replied. "We will land. I look forward to our discussion."

Aristee assembled a small but impressive showing of Pilgrim Marines who had exchanged their robes for standard issue Confederation combat suits. A platoon of about forty stood in a formation that led to the hatch on the emperor's scout, a hatch that clearly illustrated the meter difference in height between the average Kilrathi and the average human. Two Kilrathi Royal Marines exited first, their *dor-chak* laser rifles held tightly to their chests in ready position. When set for wide beam, the claw-like weapons could take down every assembled Marine in a few seconds. In fact, the word *dor-chak* had been loosely translated to mean "striking bird," but despite the weapons' formidable name, the cats using them would have to be faster

than the Pilgrim Marines, which they weren't. Four more Kilrathi Marines filed out of the scout, then the emperor emerged, his full three meters cut short by a slightly hunched back. He still looked imposing in his armor, and the clan and battle plumes clipped to his shoulders afforded him a bewinged and strangely angelic presence--if you could get past the huge snout, flared nostrils, and brow as thick as Paladin's thumb. The emperor's suit allowed him to breathe comfortably without the use of the standard tube worn by the Marines, and Paladin could already detect the sickly sweet, burning aroma of nutrient gas that occasionally leaked from his mouth and nose. A few of the assembled Marines closest the emperor fell victim to fits of gagging.

The obligatory greeting commenced, with the Paladin standing there, a brooding a fifth wheel. He cursed inwardly as Aristee actually shook the hulking thing's paw and the protur looked on, beaming.

As they headed back to the wardroom, where the actual negotiations would take place, Paladin drew himself into knots over Aristee's foolishness. Yes, the enemy of her enemy should be her friend, but Pilgrims and cats would never trust each other. Both parties now operated in a fog of denial.

But that no longer mattered. Paladin had already taken measures to ensure that a deal would never be reached.

Once in the wardroom, the emperor glared at a seat that would not support his weight. Aristee called down to the supply room and ordered a shipping container sent up, while the Kilrathi guards pounded in and formed a semicircle behind the emperor.

It was remarkable to see the cats on board a Confederation vessel, even one controlled by Pilgrims. The last time Paladin had been so close to so many Kilrathi, it had been as their prisoner. No doubt they would happily see to his confinement or execution again.

The container finally arrived, and Aristee offered it the emperor with an awkward apology.

Negotiations were ready to begin.

"Captain," Brotur Vyson called over the intercom. "Snakeir-class superdreadnought and Fralthi-class cruiser have just come through the jump point. We've IDed the dreadnought as the *Shak'Ar'Roc*. She's from the same battle group we fought at Aloysius, and she's launching fighters, ma'am."

"Son of a bitch," Aristee cried. In one deft motion, she yanked her Pilgrim cross from its chain, pressed the center symbol to activate the blade, then held the sharp steel to the emperor's throat.

A half dozen *dor-chaks* hummed to full power, and she stared into their muzzles.

"Contacts, designated Alpha Kilo nine five, Alpha Kilo nine six," shouted Brotur Vyson. "Inbound missiles, targeting starboard ion engine. They take it out and we'll lose all propulsion, ma'am."

Paladin bolted from his chair and raced for the hatch. "I'll leave you to kill each other. I've a ship to save."

CODE ACCEPTED. POWER UP IN PROGRESS.

William Santyana nearly shed a tear as the CF-337d Marine Corps troopship's cockpit instrumentation thrummed and flashed to full power. "We got it!" he called back to Pris and Lacey, both strapped tightly to their seats in the hold.

"Told you I'm the codeman. You doubted the codeman. Spoke badly about him. But now you know who he is. The codeman is your friend."

Santyana nodded at the codeman, who sat in the co-pilot's seat and brimmed with pride. The codeman had once been a third-class AI systems specialist named Roberto Umberto, a lanky, insecure twenty-year-old Pilgrim who had joined Aristee's rebellion because he was pissed at his Confed superiors for overlooking him for promotion. Once Aristee killed six million on Mylon Three, Umberto realized the magnitude of his commitment and mistake.

But those were the old days, the pre-codeman days. Although Umberto had not openly expressed his renewed loyalty to the Confederation, he had clearly and magnificently illustrated his desire to defect.

"Codeman got you in, does all kinds of tech--I mean anything you can give him--but he can't fly."

"Got it covered," Santyana said, bringing the maneuvering thrusters on line. He turned down the volume on his headset so the shouting deck and flight control officers wouldn't distract him. He steered the great wedge of the troopship over the runway, held his breath, then hit the throttles.

They hit the energy curtain five heartbeats later, streaked through the launch tube, then rumbled into space.

"False signatures are up," Umberto reported, staring at a radar screen that showed multiple images of the troopship arrowing away from the *Olympus's* bow. "Codeman does it again. AG and laser targeting systems cannot find a target."

"But the Kilrathi can," Santyana said grimly.

Four squadrons of Dralathi fighters cut toward the *Olympus*, and a half-dozen of the metallic claws broke formation to vector toward them. Trouble was, the entire attacking force stood between Santyana and the jump point. Although most of the fighters would concentrate on the supercruiser, it would only take a few Dralathi to thwart his exit.

"Kilrathi don't care about false signatures," Umberto said. "They'll come close. Ever see how big their eyes are?"

"Yup. And I don't plan on taking another look today. But what sucks is we can't outrun them."

As if to emphasize the point, laser fire struck in triplets along the aft quarter. Damage control reports showed a forty percent drop in shields as another salvo found them.

Wheeling around, Santyana flew headlong at the fighters and opened the gate on a pair of Friend or Foe missiles that made beelines for the lead Dralthi.

"Nice rockets," Umberto said, jaw agape. "Cats aren't broadcasting the code, so the missiles assume them for enemies."

Santyana did not need a lesson. He needed the two lead fighters to get intimate with his ordnance. The Dralthi to port turned on a wing to evade, but one of its talons gave Santyana's missile a love tap, triggering an all out, fiery display of affection. The Dralthi to starboard dove under the second missile, and for a second, it appeared as though it had escaped. But the missile's infatuation remained strong, and it curved back to plant a hot, wet kiss of death squarely on the Dralthi's canopy.

The troopship's afterburners thundered through the bulkheads as Santyana pried as much as she would give and held tight on a heading that would take them between the last two

pairs of Dralthi. Dozens of bolts from wing-mounted laser cannons struck the forward shields and dissipated in overlapping rings of crimson. Santyana snap-triggered a pair of Dumb-fire missiles, then set both of the ship's rotary-barrel neutron guns to autofire.

He came at the fighters like a snarling mad dog, superheated projectiles crossing paths with incoming bolts, missiles charging forward with fateful tidings. It all slowed down for a second, or at least his brain took it in more slowly. The pair of fighters off his starboard bow wagged drunkenly as neutron fire feasted on their fuselages. One cat suddenly pulled up, directly into the other, and the banquet came to a rude halt. Just fifty meters to port, both Dralthi peeled away from each other like the petals of a blooming metal rose, and the dumb-fire missiles streaked through their residuum, tracing the rose's stem in a point-blank miss. But Santyana's neutron cannons had little trouble finding the Dralthi, and even as the troopship swept well ahead of them, the cannons rolled back to continue fire. Shields finally succumbed, and the fighters blasted into pieces small enough to press in a book.

"Codeman is the codeman," Umberto said. "But you are *The Man of men*. Six for six."

"Yeah, my crack shooting's really gained their attention now." Santyana lifted his chin at the radar scope, where a

fourteen Dralhti branched off from the main force and were just now establishing visual contact.

In the meantime, the *Olympus's* four primary antimatter guns had already begun to hurtle an extraordinary firestorm at the encroaching fighters. Even Santyana, a hardened veteran, found himself awed as the troopship came within a half klick of the supercruiser's ferocious defense. Dozens of Dralhti fell under wave after wave of antimatter fire, while others collided with each other as the few remaining extrakinetic Pilgrims on board reached out and killed those pilots.

As he stole a final glance, Santyana wasn't sure which side he wanted to win the engagement. But then the *Olympus's* starboard ion engine emitted clouds of gray fumes and jets of glittering debris. With propulsion gone, Aristee couldn't maneuver into a gravity well.

"And thus she goes," he muttered, realizing the ante had just been upped. Jump or die. No prison ship left. He thought of Pris and Lacey back in the hold, then turned his attention to the fighters--

When a stray round of the *Olympus's* antimatter fire ripped through the aft shields and chewed into the troopship's engines. The sudden deceleration nearly sent Umberto through the viewport since his harness had been fastened too loosely.

Pris cried out from the hold, but her voice barely carried over the shrieking engines.

More laser fire pinged off the shields as Santyana tried to evade on only maneuvering jets.

A glance to the radar scope doused any hopes of escape. The Dralhti had strung themselves out and now stitched up the gap--ten seconds until feeding frenzy.

Santyana threw off his straps and jogged back to the hold, where Pris and Lacey huddled beside each other.

"What's happening?" Pris asked, her gaze darting frantically between the aft and the overhead.

He crouched beside them. "Just close your eyes."

"Oh god," Pris gasped.

Umberto stumbled into the hold. "Something's happening." He pointed toward the viewport.

And there, where the void had once been, hung a whirlpool ringed in a thousand shades of blue.

Chapter 7

VEGA SECTOR, ROBERT'S QUADRANT

CS *OLYMPUS*

KILRATHI RENDEZVOUS POINT

2654.142

1800 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Paladin watched with swelling resignation as ragged hordes of fighters from the Kilrathi superdreadnought broke through the clouds of antistarcraft fire thrown up by the *Olympus's* big guns. The fighters dove menacingly to strafe the now unshielded hull. Impacts from lasers and missile fire beat an unceasing and chaotic rhythm that crescendoed as they neared the bridge. Though most of Aristee's command staff had been recruited from seasoned Confederation personnel, Paladin assumed that none of them had served aboard a ship so close to defeat.

"Maneuvering thrusters offline," the XO reported.

"Propulsion will not answer to calls."

"James? What's our status?"

Amity Aristee strode across the bridge, gaping at the Kilrathi onslaught. The emperor, his guards, and the protur, trailed behind her in an improbable parade.

"Get them off the bridge," Paladin said from his position at the port observation station.

"The emperor claims he had nothing to do with this. The cat commanding that superdreadnought, Admiral Vukar nar Caxki, is acting independently. He was charged with finding this ship and bringing it back. He's been missing for a while now. Guess he finally caught up with us."

"That's correct," the emperor said through a growl that made the translator buzz. "Let me speak to Vukar." He cocked his seed-like head in search of the comm station.

"Over here," Aristee said, waving him toward her command chair. She keyed in the appropriate command, and a miniature camera mounted on the overhead swiveled to find the emperor. Aristee hailed the superdreadnought herself, and Admiral Vukar finally appeared, all hulking shoulders, wizened face, and dull, yellow eyes. He uttered but three words: "Surrender. Or die."

"Vukar, break off your attack," the emperor commanded.

Aristee noticed a definite reaction in the admiral's face--not a look of shock but more a curious gaze that deepened into puzzlement. "My Emperor, I know why you are there."

"Yes, I'm completing the task you failed. Together with the Pilgrims we will put an end to Confederation expansion and unite our clans under one house."

"No. If you wish to live, then our people will be united under two houses: the Kiranka *and* the Caxki. We will return to Kilrah with this ship, and you will proclaim that every warrior

in my charge is a hero. There will be two ruling clans. Together we will bring the others into our fold. This is Sivar's will."

The emperor snarled and broke into an untranslatable rant that drew hoots and howls from his royal guards.

"The ship is damaged," Vukar continued. "Even with Pilgrims trying to kill us with their minds, we still have enough warriors to destroy it. You cannot jump. You have no propulsion."

"I agree to your terms," the emperor said. "Break off your attack and prepare to tow us to the jump point. There, we will initiate a moored jump."

Paladin smiled to himself. The cats had become famous for docking with stranded vessels and adjusting their jump engines so that they could jump both ships out of a sector. While Confederation engineers continued to conduct experiments in two-ship jumps, they had been unable to get the jump drives to exceed structural and gravitic limitations. Paladin wished he could allow the cats to make that two-ship jump so he could examine how they programmed the jump drive to compensate.

But his nod to Brotur Vyson engaged a clock that could not be changed by any conventional being, a clock that now ticked down to doomsday. The computer's obligatory self-destruct warning boomed over the intercom, and Paladin took great

pleasure in seeing Aristee and the protur stare slack-jawed at the diagnostic panel on her command chair.

In fact, Paladin had never felt more sure of himself. He had finally come full circle and had realized that despite his heritage, he had the power to choose his own destiny. He believed in what the Confederation was doing, what it had done, and what it would do. He believed that he could respect his heritage and remain loyal to the institution that had taught him the tenets of an honest and decent life. He didn't love Aristee any less. And he didn't love the Confederation more. He simply knew that if the Kilrathi gained control of the *Olympus*, billions would die in the name of conquest. While he knew that stopping them was more important than trying to save one woman whom he loved, he couldn't help but want it both ways.

And that, of course, was asking too much.

"You," Aristee began, a heartbeat away from throttling him. "But you couldn't have done this. You're locked out. Only me and the XO--"

Brotur Vyson shifted away, his head lowered.

"Brotur?"

Vyson closed his eyes and held his ground. "Ma'am. The system is locked down. None of us can stop it now. This ship will explode."

It took Aristee all of three seconds to round her command chair and seize Vyson by his collar. "You'd better have a reason."

"We can't let them have the hopper drive."

"Have you forgotten who you are?"

"No, ma'am. That's why I've done this. We can't trust them. I did this for my family. I'm sorry."

With a snort, Aristee released him, then regarded Paladin. "You couldn't get to me, so you worked on my XO. That's so obvious, James. I should have seen it coming. Now, I hope you've planned our escape."

He drew in a long breath and eyed her with resolve. "No, I haven't."

Sostur Karista Mullens had argued with Brotur Dennet and Sostur Fey that they could not leave Albor Tholus University without getting food to the remaining ten thousand incarcerated Pilgrims. Dennet and Fey had insisted that they could never pull off such a stunt and that they should jam as many as they could aboard a troopship and leave. But the lanky giant of a man and the tiny stick figure of a woman had forgotten that Karista could use her extrakinetic senses to subtly suggest to the colonel in charge of the Marine detachment on Mars that if he did not bring in more food, there would be an uprising that

would ruin his flawless service record as well as his day. She had, in effect, made him paranoid. Very paranoid. And it had taken him nearly a week's worth of communiqués to procure enough foodstuffs to feed ten thousand. The food had come directly from the Confederation Navy--the entity who should have been feeding the Pilgrims in the first place. The Navy had relied upon supplies donated by the university, and Karista speculated that there were those among the joint chiefs who would rather see the Pilgrims on Mars starve than pay to feed them.

Now, with the transports on their way, Karista finished packing her duffel and felt a tad more comfortable leaving, though she vowed to return for these poor souls.

Dennet burst into the room, panting, his face slick with sweat. "I tell you, Kari, it's a decision no one should make. Be glad you weren't there to see them cry. They have chosen seventeen little ones to join us. They're lined up in Fey's dorm, looking for all the world like they're heading off to school." He took her hand in his own. "The burden falls on you, sostur."

Karista nodded, pulled away, then clipped her duffel closed and threw the bag over her shoulder. She dug her toes a little deeper into her sandals, making sure they were tight enough for running, then held up an index finger. "I want to tell someone we're leaving. Just a moment."

She reached out across the light years to Netheryana, to the *Tiger Claw*, to Lieutenant Christopher Blair's script.

And found only dull impressions, distant feelings of anguish, of reverberating pain, and images like reflections on water at dusk. She saw masked figures kicking, one swinging an object.

Christopher, where are you?

His reply sounded garbled and distant.

"Kari!"

Suddenly, she stared at Denet, his face a bony landscape of concern.

"You stopped breathing," he said. "What's wrong?"

She struggled for breath. "I don't know."

"You've glimpsed something, Kari. Do share."

"Not this time, Denet."

They caught the lift down to the main level, then stole their way along the hall, bound for the main entrance. Word had traveled quickly through the confined masses, and Karista noticed how more than one dorm room door creaked open to partially reveal residents eyeing their escape. Yes, her people knew she was leaving, and she felt proud that they had not rioted or turned her departure into a great debate. Sure, many had expressed their anger over not being able to leave, but she

had assured them that food was on its way. Some of the loudest dissenters had been quickly quelled by reminders from Dennet that Karista could kill any one of them with a single thought. She hated the threats, but they did preserve order.

Once they reached a corner that looked out on the dormitory's main airlock, Karista stepped outside of herself and got to work on the three guards posted there. From the Marines' point of view, a ghost came, seized their weapons, then slithered into their heads. They felt the pins and needles of blood loss forging a path up their spines, then a plate of darkness smashed over them. In point of fact, Karista had cut off the blood supply to their brains long enough for them to lose consciousness. She and Dennet stripped two out of their pressure suits and helmets, then fumbled with zippers and buckles as they put them on. She felt somewhat ridiculous in the big armor and disappointed in the tired idea of wearing the enemy's clothes to travel unnoticed, but she surrendered to the necessary evil.

Dennet chinned on the comm channel. "Crimson is not your color."

"At least mine fits," she said, observing how his suit was pulled taut to accommodate the altitude of his shoulders.

They double-checked each other, ran six-second diagnostics, then ventured into the airlock. She waited impatiently as

atmospheres slowly mixed. The outside hatch finally gave way, and they stepped into the ochre-edged shadows of twilight.

Once more, Karista left her corporeal form and took down each of the guards assigned to the courtyard--including the one she had thought would give her the most trouble. Her pulse increased under the strain, and she realized she would have to pace herself and select targets more carefully. If she expended too much energy too quickly, she would be too weak to get them past air and space defenses.

The shuttle pads lay about fifty meters north of the dormitory complex, and she and Dennet left behind the tall buildings of her dormitory district. They jogged into the swirling dust that all but swallowed a tortuous asphalt road leading down a ridge. Now and then she caught a glimpse of the dozens of pads below, positioned in a square acre plowed flat and girdled by rolling hills. Navigation lights mounted to the pads flashed in concentric circles, and Marines in a small, two-seater hopabout, which resembled a flying motorcycle with side car, rose off one of the pads in a vertical takeoff, then jetted forward to fly a security patrol. The university's small flight tower stood on the south side of the valley like a sandblasted pyramid twinkling against the rugged horizon. A three meter tall force fence marked the field's perimeter, its beams filled with an inexhaustible supply of shimmering dust motes. Standard

guardhouses had been positioned on the east and west sides.

Karista and Dennet headed for the nearest house. Just two pads away from that check-in stood the ominous triangular fuselage of a Marine Corps troopship, its hull seeming to rail against the dust.

"It's been too quiet," Dennet said gravely. "There's always a calm before and after the storm."

"About the time we reach the guardhouse, a dozen or so Marines will come down that hill, and the hopabouts will be just behind them," Karista predicted.

But strangely enough, it remained quiet for the rest of their trek downward, and Karista finally gave up looking over her shoulder.

Two Marines approached them as they neared the guardhouse. One asked for orders and ID, while the other dropped to his knees, then onto his stomach. By the time the first realized what was happening, he was already falling to the road. The Marine inside the house leaned back in his chair and went to sleep.

Karista felt lightheaded, put her foot down, and the ground seemed to vanish for a second before coming up to smack her in the faceplate. Just as quickly, Dennet hauled her up. With her breath coming in gasps, Karista strained to keep up with Dennet as they crossed the first pad and reached the troopship.

"Now the truth be told," Dennet said, tapping in an access code on the ship's hatch panel. The colonel had "volunteered" the code as well as several others that would gain them access to the ship's flight controls.

The hatch pressed inward, then slid away. They stepped up a half meter into the troopship's airlock. While Dennet sealed the hatch behind them, Karista fell back onto the bulkhead and closed her eyes. She swallowed several times and reached into herself to find that calm place of which protur Carver Tsu the Second had so often spoke. She thought of her childhood on McDaniel, of her father's warm embrace, of her mother's smile, of the day she had been chosen to be a dancer in the protur's private troupe. Rays of sunlight fueled by her parents' and the protur's love embraced her, kept her warm and safe, and whispered that she had the power to do anything.

"Kari. Please." Dennet shook her back to the moment, then guided her past the inner hatch and into troopship's hold.

They removed their helmets and hurried up a narrow aisle to arrive in the cockpit. Dennet dropped into the pilot's chair as Karista found the co-pilot's seat and reminded herself of the weapons procedures she had studied for the past few days. Dennet exhaled with glee as the computer accepted his code. Thrusters bellowed into their warm-up sequence.

"Shields powering up," he reported, sounding more like a military pilot than a fundamentalist Pilgrim. "And dear Kari, remember those Marines and hopabouts you said would come thundering down the hill?"

Karista brought up an external camera view on her monitor. A bullet-shaped Armored Personnel Carrier did most of the thundering as it rolled on tracks down the winding road. The barrel of the APC's hood-mounted neutron cannon swung toward them, and Karista saw the Marine behind the gunner's dome as he unleashed his first salvo. The troopship's portside shield thrummed loudly as it absorbed the impacts and deflected rounds.

Through Karista could reach out and stop the APC's driver, she had to conserve energy. Instead, she dialed up one of troopship's rotary barrel neutron guns and targeted the APC. She barely felt the vibration as the gun spewed out a steady bead of glowing projectiles. Then her head jerked back as Dennet slammed the thruster levers forward. The troopship's landing skids scraped along the pad for a moment before he gained altitude and folded them in.

Still under the APC's fire, Dennet managed to double back in a high G turn for the dormitory complex, now just a collection of columns in silhouette, barely visible through the dust and darkness.

The radar scope chirped a warning, and the screen beside it identified an oncoming ship as a Marine hopabout. Karista grabbed the co-pilot's control yoke, thumbed off the secondary weapons safety, then launched a heat-seeker. The rocket's fiery light vanished into the night, then a flaming bud dotted the sky off the starboard bow.

"All right, then. One down. And only Ivar knows how many to go," Denet said.

"I just killed two people."

"Two humans."

She shook her head. Most of her life she had been surrounded by Pilgrims. The brief time she had spent with Christopher Blair had allowed her to see past the prejudice so deeply rooted in her people. He represented a link between cultures, and she so desperately wanted to speak with him again.

"Let's see if Fey's on the channel," Denet said, sliding on a headset. "Sostur Fey, you miserable woman. Are you there? The bell has rung."

"Shut up, asshole, and get here," Fey snapped. "You got any idea what it's like to entertain seventeen children?"

"Just give me a moment, my dear," Denet said calmly. "And why not tell them the story of the two wise Caravans who turned dust to water."

"I see your long neck," Fey said in a dark sing-song. "And I'm digging my nails into it right--"

"She sounds well," Dennet observed, smiling and switching off the channel.

Still drawing fire from the APC, they swept down toward the four apartment buildings in Karista's district, then banked to port, coming around the high-rises to the northeast structure. Dennet brought the troopship into a parking hover outside Fey's dorm even as he extended the ship's umbilical. The tube met the apartment's eroded wall, and lasers cut easily through stone and durasteel. Karista unbuckled her harness, then shifted to the hold to help the children inside.

"Of course, they wouldn't forget a sendoff," Dennet cried as rifle fire from the ground chewed into the belly shields.

As she waited for the children to begin stepping into the umbilical, Karista reached out with her Pilgrim senses to note that a dozen Marines had, indeed, gathered below to fire up at them. The group grew steadily as pairs all over the district left their posts and hustled around the building, their weapons already blazing.

The APC had turned around and now rumbled up the ridge.
ETA: about a minute.

Four more hopabouts screamed in from the west perimeter, and their pilots would begin firing in just a few seconds. If

they struck the unshielded umbilical, the children inside would die immediately, and those in Fey's dorm would be sucked through the breeches, into a choking wind of carbon dioxide.

It only took a millisecond for Karista to find the first pilot's body and squeeze the arteries that carried blood to his brain. The hopabout plummeted. She found the second pilot, the third, and felt herself shrink to the deck as she hung on to the fourth's body and stopped his blood flow. Through a wave of dizziness, she watched as the first group of three children, two boys of about six and a girl of about four, walked tentatively through the umbilical and hopped onto the deck. More came behind them, and at the umbilical's end stood Fey, still inside her dorm. She lifted a blond boy up to the tube's rubberized floor.

"Fifty seconds on the belly shield before recharge," Dennet called back. "So, as Fey would so warmly put it, *move your asses!*"

Groaning, Karista pulled herself up and ordered children into the jump seats along the hull. She strapped in a little girl, then moved on to the first two boys she had spotted. The task so consumed her that she barely heard Fey's report that all of the children were on board.

Despite a half dozen kids still not buckled down, Dennet opted to seal off the umbilical and break the link since the

APC's incoming neutron rounds began striking direct hits. Leaving Fey to finish buckling in their passengers, Karista dragged herself to the cockpit.

"Oh my," Dennet said, glancing at her. "You can barely stand let alone knock out thirteen radar and defense system officers."

"So I'll sit and do it."

The colonel had supplied them with enough information regarding planetary defenses so that Karista knew exactly which people needed to "be sleeping on the job" when they escaped. Early Warning and Control Officers, Polar Defense System Specialists, and a sundry of other specialists all needed to ignore their squawking instruments so that the troopship could break atmosphere, clear the planet's gravitic distortion, and jump.

Everything depended upon Karista and her extrakinetic senses. She shivered as she acknowledged the full weight of her burden.

Dennet climbed at a seventy-five degree angle through a veil of dust that soon thinned to reveal the stars. As the acceleration dampeners engaged, Karista leaned back, shut her eyes, and thought only of her task.

One by one, officers stationed all over Mars and aboard orbiting stations slumped at their controls. Karista reserved

nothing this time. She welcomed the drain and the enfolding night of unconsciousness as the thirteenth and final officer in their way set down his coffee mug and succumbed to an unseen and unstoppable will.

Chapter 8

VEGA SECTOR, ROBERT'S QUADRANT

CS *OLYMPUS*

KILRATHI RENDEZVOUS POINT

2654.142

1810 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

On the *Olympus's* bridge, all hell had been pulling at its chains.

Finally, it broke free.

Dor-chaks buzzed as the emperor's guards opened fire on the bridge crew.

Broturs and sosturs fell to the deck, clutching wounds and choking from the stench of charred robes and seared flesh.

Paladin seized Amity's arm and dragged her down, behind the helm station. He crawled several meters to where Brotur Vyson had fallen on his stomach. Paladin rolled over the young Pilgrim and grimaced at what was left of Vyson's head.

Stray rounds continued to strike instrumentation, and one tore into the helm control a scant quarter meter from Paladin's head. The dying unit's hiss and snap punctuated Aristee's shouts for the Kilrathi to hold their fire.

Where the hell are the Marines? Paladin thought. There had been four posted on the bridge. He looked toward the lift and spotted two lying supine below the fog of dor-chak fire.

"Self-destruct in T-minus five minutes," the computer said evenly. "All personnel should immediately abandon ship."

Paladin had asked Vyson to give them fifteen minutes to escape, but the firefight--instigated by Aristee herself--had already wasted ten.

Robbed of his prize, the Kilrathi emperor had decided to take Aristee, the protur, and Paladin into custody. Perhaps he thought he could learn how to build a hopper drive himself, gain knowledge of Pilgrim extrakinetic senses from the protur, and acquire secrets about Confederation Intelligence from Paladin. He had reminded them that even if they did escape from the *Olympus*, their vessel would be surrounded by Admiral Vukar's fighters. The emperor had insisted that they depart in his shuttle, and that had brought Aristee to her breaking point. The blade of her Pilgrim cross had flashed. A Kilrathi guard had intervened, his dor-chak whining up to fire. Brotur Vyson had drawn his sidearm. A second guard had squeezed off a round. Sostur Charity at the radar station had found her own weapon and had taken down the guard nearest Aristee, but even as the cat had fallen, the second guard had answered Charity's round. As she had slumped to her death, everyone had begun firing.

"Hold," the emperor roared.

Only then did the Kilrathi Marines lower their weapons.

Paladin rose furtively to his feet, wary of the twitchy cats and straining to see through the clearing smoke that burned his eyes.

"We'll go with them," said the protur from behind.

"No, we won't," Paladin countered, glancing sidelong to smirk at his long-haired eminence, the royal murderer Carver Tsu the Third.

"Trust me, James," the protur said, drawing uncomfortably close to murmur in Paladin's ear. "And remember your patience."

"I think they've got us," Aristee said in a shivery tone. "But we can't let it end here."

"Oh, it won't," the protur said. "Our capture will only help."

Paladin stared incredulously at the man. "Help?"

The protur offered no more than an enigmatic grin.

Admiral Vukar stroked his whiskers in curiosity as the emperor's scout darted from the *Olympus's* aft flight deck. Once the spear-shaped vessel had climbed away from the supercruiser, Vukar swung to face Comm Officer Ta'kar'ki. "Hail the emperor's ship."

Ta'kar'ki drew back his head. "My Kalralahr, they're already hailing us."

Vukar bounded for his command chair, sat, and tugged the comm screen's swivel arm to glimpse the emperor, whose eyes glimmered with immense satisfaction. "Vukar, I leave you with the task of towing the *Olympus* home. I have her captain and several others aboard my scout. We'll all meet at Kilrah, and your clan will receive what Sivar has destined for you."

"Thank you, my emperor, but the honor should be--"

"No, Vukar. The honor is yours."

Overwhelmed, Vukar bowed, and when he looked up, the link had been broken and the emperor's ship had dwindled to a saffron speck against the void.

Tactical Officer Makorshk trudged before Vukar and stared with eyes that bore a ridiculous sheen, as though he were about to cry like a priestess whose children had been murdered. "The emperor lies."

Though Vukar had grown to tolerate Makorshk's rash and radical behavior and had even rewarded him for his bold ideas, accusing the emperor of such an act in front of the entire crew warranted a severe response. Vukar rose, his hand poised on the hilt of his *vorshaki* dueling blade. "Lies? The emperor lies?"

"Why do you think the hairless apes have abandoned the supercruiser?"

"They're trying to escape."

"Yes, they are--because that ship has been set to self-destruct. Come, my kalralahr. See for yourself."

Makorshk led him to the tactical station, where a combined emissions and infrared report indicated that the ship's reactor was about to reach critical mass and that the ship's ordnance, particularly its planetary torpedoes, had been set to explode in conjunction with the meltdown. A scan for biologics indicated that only a handful of Pilgrim apes remained on board.

"Helmsman! Full impulse to the jump point!" Vukar ordered.

"It's too late," Makorshk said, then lifted a crooked finger at the viewport.

Internal explosions blew gaping rifts in the supercruiser's hull. Debris carried on jets of escaping atmosphere spewed from the ruptures.

Vukar stumbled closer to the viewport, realizing that within a few seconds the great ship would burst in a reaction so violent that its shock wave would take out every vessel within a thousand kilometers--and the *Shak'ar'roc* hovered only a thousand meters off the *Olympus's* starboard bow.

With a quick screech of metal on metal, Vukar withdrew his *zu'kara* blade reserved for ritual suicide. Seeing the admiral raise his blade to his throat, the other warriors rose from their stations and freed their own knives.

"For the *hrai*," Vukar began.

"No," cried Makorshk. "Let us embrace, my kalralahr. Embrace for the *hrai* and ourselves."

The young warrior stood proudly before Vukar, blade clenched in his fist.

Vukar nodded.

With a pair of smooth, fluid jabs, they slid their blades between the seams in each other's armor and drove them deep to the heart.

All of his life Vukar had imagined what it would feel like to die. How many of his senses would register the final moment? Now he knew that the hot pain flaring in his chest, the blue cloud that seemed to envelope the *Olympus*, the bitter taste of bile rising in his throat, and the collective gurgling of the warriors dying behind him meant that he would know death with all of his senses. He had but one regret: leaving his children behind.

Pulling in a last breath, Vukar fell toward the viewport, and for a second, he thought he saw a magnificent vessel emerge from the blue cloud. No, it wasn't the *Olympus* but a ship that resembled an azure sheet pulled in the wind. He squinted at the slow-moving craft and thought he saw himself crucified on its hull.

He blinked.

Then roared his last breath at a white-hot wave of oblivion.

"You've been moping around in your underwear for five days," Maniac said. "You look like shit, but I'll bet you can fly. Why hasn't your sweetheart bumped you back on the roster?"

Blair stood at the mirror over his sink and tentatively touched the bruises on his forehead and face. Once a dark purple, they had turned yellow and slightly red. The medics had given him polisco to help the swelling and speed up the healing process, but the stuff stung like hell and Blair only used a dab each morning instead of the hourly applications recommended by the docs. He glanced at Maniac, who lingered near the hatch, about to head out on patrol. "Did I hear some noise come out of your mouth?" Blair asked.

"Listen to me, asshole. I asked why you're not on the duty roster."

"Because Gerald wants me on the bridge. A destroyer from the *Altamonte* battle group vanished here in Sirius, and they need a Pilgrim bloodhound." Blair tightened his gaze. "And don't call her my sweetheart. You *will* respect that woman."

"So you were listening. Tell me, does she point her toes?"

Blair frowned.

"You know, when you're having--"

"Get out."

"Zarya does. And I'll have her toes in the air by midnight."

"I'll mention that to her."

Maniac came forward, his cocky grin fading. "Hey, man, I'm just trying to... you know. If something like that had happened to me, I would--"

"*You don't know shit.*" Rage tightened every muscle in Blair's body.

"I know you want to pound the mothers who did this to you." He stormed to his bunk, lifted his pillow in one hand, then punched it with the other. "I'd like to get those bastards myself," he added, then delivered a roundhouse to his foamy opponent. "I'd make 'em choke on their broken teeth. I'd jam their noses into their skulls, make the cartilage rip through their brains. I'd beat 'em raw, burn 'em, then piss on their ashes. Then I'd move on to their relatives."

Blair realized that he clenched his own fists. He relaxed, turned on the faucet, and splashed water over his face. "Just go, man. I have to get ready."

"Chris, if you need anything--"

"God damn it, Todd, are *you* listening?"

"Shit. Sue me. Hope you're seeing your shrink today because your whining is starting to piss me off. They beat you.

You were helpless. Get over it." He opened the hatch and marched off.

Blair went to his bunk, hauled off the mattress, then threw it across the room. He opened his locker and frantically ripped everything out of it, tossing boots, belts, uniforms, and bottles of cologne over his shoulder and sending them skittering across the floor. He wedged his fingers behind the locker unit and tried to send it smashing to the deck, but the damned thing had been bolted to the bulkhead. He charged to the latrine and pounded a boot on his mirror until it shattered. He ran back to Maniac's bunk and tore off the mattress. He tugged Paladin's Pilgrim cross from his neck, activated the blade, then dropped to his knees and stabbed the mattress again and again and again until his arm grew hot with exertion. He collapsed onto his back and screamed a curse at the top of his lungs.

Ten minutes later, Angel found him. He had not answered the intercom. Truth was, he didn't give a shit about helping to find some ship or anything else. Well, maybe there was one thing. He thought of going down to maintenance himself and finding one of those welding masks to use as punching bag, but he figured that all of them would have already been confiscated by the JAG liaison who had asked him only a few question and had

yet to provide a line up so that Blair could identify his attackers by their voices, muffled though they had been.

"Oh my god," Angel gasped as she took in his redecorating.

"I tripped," he said, still gripping the Pilgrim cross with mattress stuffing ringing its blade.

She dropped to her knees and touched his cheek, trying valiantly to damn up her tears. "I'm sorry."

He ripped away from her and bolted to her feet. "I'm a goddamned Confederation pilot! And I'm a Pilgrim! Don't feel sorry for me! I got power. I'm not weak!" He closed his eyes and jerked outside of himself, fleeing human bonds as though they were a disease. With extrakinetic senses, he picked up one of his berets and threw it across the room.

And the effect of moving an inanimate object swept up his legs as though he had stepped on thin ice and now plunged into a wet, icy gloom. The sting drove him back to himself, to his world of helplessness and injustice.

Angel eyed him with an expression that seemed part fear, part pity. "You're needed on the bridge."

His gaze wandered over the freeway of uniforms, then he padded over to one and scooped it up. "I'll meet you there," he said darkly.

"I'll wait."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"You need another psych session."

"Tell me how you feel, my shrinks says. Express your feelings. And I want to get out of that goddamned chair and drop kick her head across the room. Is that expressive enough, lady?"

"Just get dressed," Angel said, heaving a sigh. "We can't do this without you."

Blair stood at the *Tiger Claw's* forward viewport, reaching out into what Paladin had called the Tanque Dimension, what Karista had called the quilt, and what he now dubbed a dreary stretch of void absent of Pilgrim scripts and of any other life save for the Confederation vessels. In fact, Blair had never felt a region more barren than this one. He didn't know why, but he sensed that someone did not want him there, that coming had been mistake, that he needed to learn patience.

"Anything yet, Mr. Blair?"

"Sir, you can't interrupt him while he's doing it," Angel reminded the captain.

Gerald released a faint snort, and he probably thought Blair had not heard it.

"There's nothing here," Blair called back. "Nothing at all, sir." He opened his eyes and faced Gerald with a bored expression.

"Well that destroyer went somewhere, Lieutenant."

"Yes, it did, sir."

"Admiral Tolwyn assured me that you could help us locate that ship," Gerald said, scrutinizing the viewport as though he thought he could spot the *Horatio Marx* himself. "What's your problem, Mr. Blair? You're supposed to have some kind of Pilgrim ability that allows you to feel things or something. Are you still too weak to sense--"

"No, sir! I'm fine. The ship is not here. I don't know where it is."

"Speculate on its destination."

He shrugged. "It could be anywhere, sir."

Gerald threw up his hands. "We jump across the sector for this." He cocked his head to Comm Officer Zabrowsky. "Mr. Z? Get me Captain Winnagard."

"Aye, sir," replied the lean redhead.

Then he directed his glower at Blair and added, "I have to tell her that we won't be any help in locating that destroyer."

Blair lifted his shoulders, ready to salute and be dismissed, but Gerald let him stew a moment before finally cutting him loose.

Angel slipped into the lift with Blair, and he swore under his breath. "I'd like to be alone."

"That's nice. But you won't be. Not until this over."

"So for the past week you've been my guard?"

"You wouldn't appreciate a Marine tagging along. We can't leave you. Not unless you're in your quarters."

"Why don't you just put me in a glass case? Mount it up on the bar. Have everybody come down to gawk at the freak."

She stopped the lift before it reached the pilots' quarters. The door opened, and she stepped out and into a corridor that would take them to the captain's suite and the XO's quarters. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I want you to become reacquainted with someone."

He rolled his eyes and followed. His curiosity piqued as they reached the XO's door.

"Commander?" Angel called.

Obutu's voice came crisply through the intercom. "Oh, it's you, finally."

The hatch opened, and Angel led him into a spacious but barely decorated living area. Obutu either did not have the time or the desire to loan his personality to the suite.

But something did catch Blair's eye and immediately summoned up an image of Paladin. On the bulkhead above Obutu's sofa hung a tattered and yellowed star chart, one that appeared amazingly similar to the maps Paladin had shown Blair during his first ride aboard the *Diligent*. Blair went immediately to the

chart and ran his fingers over the parchment. "This is Pilgrim."

"So's he," Angel said.

Blair craned his head as Obutu stepped into the living room. Then he looked to Angel, confused. "Ma'am?"

"You like that map, Lieutenant?" Obutu asked. "It was my grandfrotur's. I just hung it yesterday."

The revelation of Obutu's heritage left Blair feeling hollow and betrayed. He shook his head at the XO. "Why haven't you told anyone? And better yet, how did you manage to hide something like this from the Confederation?"

Obutu averted his gaze. "Hiding my roots was easy, but living with the secret? That's been something else."

"Aren't you proud of who you are?"

"Yes, I am. But the military hasn't learned to appreciate us yet. My father kept the secret, as did his father. I didn't know I was a Pilgrim until I entered the academy. My father was dying, and he thought I deserved to know. He told me not to worry. The records would never reveal anything."

"And you kept the secret because you thought being a Pilgrim might affect your career," Blair concluded. "So you've shielded yourself with lies."

"Blair," Angel warned.

"It's okay," Obutu assured her. "The lieutenant is right. It's taken an incident like this to make realize that I can't do this any more. Command means nothing if I keep lying."

"I always liked you," Blair said. "You seemed quiet and honest. But you're neither. The lies kept you quiet. And now you think the truth is going to set you free? It'll probably get your ass kicked. *Sir.*"

Angel stepped between them. "Lieutenant, I didn't bring you here so you could debate the commander's decision to reveal his heredity. We think we know who did this to you. And we're going to set them up for a fall."

"With me as bait," Obutu added. "But it'll take some time, and we could use your help."

"Who was it?"

Obutu looked to Angel, who pursed her lips. "We can't tell you," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you and Maniac will find them, return the beating, and get yourselves thrown in the brig."

"If you don't tell me, I won't help."

Obutu sighed and regarded Angel. "We'll do it without him. But it would be so much easier if--"

"When Mr. Blair realizes that the only way these scumbags will pay is through us, he'll come around. Isn't that right, Lieutenant?" She cocked her brow.

The discussion of his attackers already had Blair's pulse racing, and a surge of anger ripped up his spine and bolted into his arms. He stood there, wanting very badly to dismantle her argument but unable to ignore the simple fact that without the names, he could do nothing. Sure, he would help them set up his attackers, but once those bastards were in custody, he would see to it that they got everything they deserved.

"Isn't that right, Lieutenant?" Angel repeated.

He turned away and huffed. "What's the plan?"

Chapter 9

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.148

0900 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Commodore Richard Bellegarde had been craving a drink all morning, and he had something much stronger than orange juice or coffee in mind. He had been lounging in his quarters, watching previously recorded holos of the Terran News Channel and growing more incensed by the minute. The media had turned the Pilgrim crisis into a black comedy replete with fancy logos, computer animations, interviews with experts, and graphic images of the dead and dying. Bellegarde had little trouble believing that what he viewed was reality, but he knew that to the average Confederation citizen, it was all quite surreal and created by news moguls to earn greater ratings. Foreboding music would fade in, the title PILGRIM CRISIS--DAY: 70 would flash, and smartly attired anchors would speak with phony concern about the latest tragedies. Bellegarde rose and was about to switch off the circus when an alert from the local Confed News hub cut into the channel:

"We interrupt this recorded broadcast to bring you a special report from CNH, Vega and Sol sectors." The news hub emblem faded into the grim countenance of a young captain in dress blues. "This just confirmed from CNNH Sol sector: Three days ago CST, Pilgrim saboteurs gained access into the Hall of the Great Assembly, where they detonated a CF-three-two-seven-A explosive device, killing two hundred and twenty-nine senators, including the Assembly Master himself, Pequin Gydideron, and three representatives from the Pilgrim enclave Triune. The facility has been declared a disaster area by President Vasura, and as per the constitution, Vice-president Harold Rodham will assume the duties of Assembly Master until a new master is elected. Rodham has called for an emergency meeting of the surviving senators. Not since the first Pilgrim War have so many of our leaders been killed in one event." President Vasura appeared in the holograph, standing behind a podium before throngs of reporters. "The Confederation we will mete out punishment to those behind this act of cowardice. The saboteurs themselves were merely instruments and gave their lives for their cause. Believe me when I say that those who sent them will make the same sacrifice."

With the public outraged, Bellegarde expected that the surviving senators and interim senators would whole-heartedly

support the destroying of all Pilgrim systems and enclaves by one-five-eight. Anything to make their constituents happy.

The hatch bell chimed. "Richard?"

"Come."

Admiral Tolwyn hastened past the hatch, glimpsed the holograph glowing behind Bellegarde, then nodded. "Just caught a bit of that myself. There's absolutely no way that Pilgrim saboteurs could have gained entrance into the great hall without having help from inside."

"Meaning no disrespect, sir, but I think that's a given."

"Yes, but who gave them that help--and why?"

Bellegarde shrugged, then a wry smile tightened his lips. "Since we'll now get support to destroy the systems and enclaves, you and I would have reason to help those terrorists."

"Exactly. This could be an attempt to frame us or some of the surviving senators who happened to be out on the day the bomb exploded. Or maybe some of those senators are responsible. They endorsed our policy but couldn't get support from the others. Perhaps the saboteurs weren't even Pilgrims."

"The media's saying they are. What leaked?"

"Space Marshal Gregarov just told me that the terrorists made several vidcalls within sixty seconds of the explosion. They identified themselves as Pilgrims. Someone in the assembly master's office leaked the recordings."

"That still proves nothing."

"You're right. But they claimed the explosion in the name of Pilgrims. And that's all the public needs to hear."

"You said someone might be framing us. Who? The space marshal?"

"I threatened to go before the senate and expose her. Maybe this is her retaliation."

"But she doesn't want those systems and enclaves destroyed. Why would she come up with a plan that would ensure that?"

"I'm not sure that she cares anymore about saving those systems. And if she's responsible, she wasn't targeting the senators. President Vasura was scheduled to address the assembly during that time, but she broke the appointment that morning because her daughter was ill."

"You're telling me that Gregarov wants the president dead?" Bellegarde lifted his palms and stepped back. "Sir, I request an immediate transfer. This is way out of my league."

"Remember that hunch I told you about it? I don't have hard evidence yet, but I think that Gregarov and the president conspired to allow Aristee's people to build the hopper drive. I believe that the president covered her tracks and now wants Gregarov to take the fall. And maybe this bombing was Gregarov's way to get rid of the president and us."

"If you're right, then I bet Gregarov has had help forging communiqués and coming up with even more creative and complex ways to implicate us."

"I'll send off a comm drone to my friends at Intell within the hour," Tolwyn said, suddenly distracted as he worked through the problem. "And I'll speak with the president myself."

"Sir, we're too far out. The communications delay--"

"I know, Richard. I'll be leaving for Earth now."

"Gregarov won't let you go."

"Which is why we're not telling her until I'm gone."

"She'll report you AWOL."

Tolwyn beamed. "Of course."

"So you're leaving me to tame the lioness?"

The admiral steered himself toward the hatch. "You'll be fine, Richard. You'll piss her off so much that she'll do something rash--and that's just what I'm counting on."

"Then I guess you can count on us both. And something else before you go. We heard back from Winnagard and Gerald. Lieutenant Blair has failed to locate the *Horatio Marx*. Gregarov sent the *Bristol Mary* and *Zhou Chen* to Sirius. Should I order the *Tiger Claw* back to Netheranya?"

"Do that. But I doubt Gregarov's Pilgrims will find anything if Mr. Blair did not. God help us if the cats have a new weapon."

"And speaking of the Kilrathi, report just in this morning. Fleet reconnaissance picked up the emperor's battle group along the Kilrathi border of Robert's Quadrant. Projections put it en route to Kilrah. Six days ago ConComs from Naval Station Thor detected a massive disturbance several million kilometers behind it. They've sent a pair of destroyers to investigate, but the ships won't arrive until one-five-six."

"Very well. Keep me updated."

"Aye, sir. And sir? Good luck."

"More like good hunting. Take care of yourself, Richard."

Tolwyn had barely left the room when Comm Officer Wilks's voice sounded through the intercom. "Sir? The XO wants you on the bridge. A Marine Corps troopship just broke through our no-fly zone and landed on McDaniel."

"It did what?"

"It got through our zone, sir. Dunno how. You'd better get up here."

Bellegarde swore under his breath. "On my way."

For the past several weeks, thousand of fires had raged out of control on McDaniel's World, particularly in the capital city of Ivar. The sky, once a perfect, Earth-like azure, had become the dusty brown ceiling of a cave that slowly descended upon the citizenry.

As Karista, Dennet, and Fey picked their way up a deserted avenue that led straight toward the protur's temple and adjoining rectory, Marine Corps rifle fire echoed in the distance. The trio kept to the shaded walls of the many shops that aligned both sides of the street and carefully planned each break across intersections.

After landing, they had brought the children directly to the Sosturs of Nurture, who operated a small school located on the city limits. Karista had attended the school herself and knew every one of the fourteen sosturs who had lived and worked there for the past quarter century. The sosturs had welcomed the youthful refugees with open arms, and with that done, she, Dennet, and Fey had begun their trek toward the protur's rectory, where five of the protur's concubines still resided. Aristee felt compelled to speak with them, though she could not explain the feeling to Dennet and Fey. They came along, nonetheless, and Karista knew why.

"We leave one prison for another," Dennet remarked as he espied the pair of Marines posted at the black stone and durasteel gate of the protur's grounds. "It's not that they won't let people into the temple, although that's true; it's more that they won't let anyone out."

"I understand these bastards occupy all of our systems and enclaves," Fey said. "So every Pilgrim home's a prison. Want

to hear something funny? One of the sosturs told me that the Marines blame us for what happened to the city. They say we shouldn't have protested their occupation. I'd like to step on a Marine's neck and see if he protests my occupation of his neck. No difference."

"You're much too lithe for such an act," said Dennet with a frown. "He'd flick you away like a bug."

Fey grabbed Dennet's thumb and twisted it back until he moaned. "Why don't you lie down, and we'll test your theory."

With the street ahead clear of pedestrians and Marines trundling along in their APCs, Karista bolted ahead of the others and ran headlong at the temple guards. With helmets off and wearing only partial body armor, the Marines snapped back, dropped to their knees, then raised their rifles. One fell to the right, the other to the left as Karista tapped into the well of her extrakinetic senses. She reached the gate, and, panting, keyed the intercom as Dennet and Fey made an absurd attempt to cross the street without being noticed. Dennet hunched over, and Fey did likewise, prowling in his scarecrow's shadow.

"Yes?"

Karista faced the screen, where Sostur Elya's surprised expression turned the flawless curves of her young face into a bundle of circles lit by pale blue eyes. "Hello, Sostur Elya."

"Karista? What happened to the guards? And I thought you went off with Sostur Aristee and the protur?"

"I did," Karista answered impatiently. "Let us in. Please. I'll tell you everything."

"Come to the library."

The intercom beeped, and the gate lumbered aside.

They advanced up a cobblestone path overhung on both sides by ancient *gazia* trees whose knotty limbs mingled to form a dense, blue-green canopy. The path ended at the temple's foot, and Karista would never grow tired of marveling over the structure--a trioak masterpiece of spires and parapets whose architects had been heavily influenced by the designs of Terran medieval castles and cathedrals. A wooden and bejeweled portcullis creaked upward to permit them entrance into the temple's bailey, an open courtyard that rolled back some five hundred meters to the far wall. Once inside the bailey's confines, the ornate grating lowered behind them, and Karista led Dennet and Fey across the yard toward the rectory's main door. Like the rest of the temple, the door had been crafted of trioak and bore a carving of Ivar Chu McDaniel's journey to the Sirius system. A lone sloship hung in relief near the door's ancient brass handle, and far above it, a massive star radiated and half-eclipsed a much smaller star shyly glimpsing the Pilgrim travelers.

"Have you ever been here," Karista asked them.

Fey shook her head.

"Thank Ivar I haven't," Dennet said, pouting at the door.

"Ostentation run amuck. And the doorway is, of course, too short. We Caravans keep our architecture simple and functional. Nothing should stand between the elect and the continuum."

Karista gave Dennet a dismissive nod, then ventured inside the rectory. They stepped tentatively down a series of narrow, candlelit corridors until they reached the protur's oval-shaped library, where Carver Tsu the Second had always been fond of receiving his guests. His sudden death after Amity Aristee's arrival continued to gnaw at Karista. She didn't want to believe that Aristee had somehow murdered Carver Tsu the Second, but the timing seemed much more than coincidental, as did the fact that Carver Tsu the Third embraced Aristee's rebellion. Whether Carver Tsu the Second would have done the same, Karista did not know, for politics had been a subject they had rarely discussed. They had spoken mainly of dance, of music, and of art. She could still hear the warm tones of his voice echoing up to the library's domed ceiling.

Sostur Elya glided soundlessly into the room, wearing the black, unadorned robe of mourning, the hood pulled over her head. Sosturs Giya, Torya, Ploya, and Sheya trailed closely, they, too, dressed in the simple yet stunning black, heads

obscured behind cowls. The concubines were no older than Karista, yet their once beautiful faces had become drawn and sallow. Without a word, they fanned out and took seats in chairs or on the well-padded sofa, the imported leather worn down on the right side by the protur himself.

Elya, the tallest and most outspoken of the concubines, lowered her hood to reveal the stubble of newly growing hair. Karista closed her eyes and bowed, for Elya had shaven her head and had buried her dark locks with the protur, as had the others. No one could look upon a concubine's shaven head without bowing first. Karista's bow meant that she acknowledged and even shared in Elya's pain. Tradition aside, Karista truly felt that pain since Elya was an extrakinetic like herself. For a few seconds, their scripts touched, and Karista saw the horror of the day that Elya had found the protur's body. She pulled from Elya's script with a shudder--but not before sensing that Elya, too, had been having the visions of blue.

"She killed him, you know," Elya said abruptly. "Aristee killed our protur--with Carver Tsu the Third's help. I found the protur's script. And he couldn't hide the truth."

Karista exchanged a grave look with Dennet and Fey. "I wish there was something we could do."

"Maybe there is. You've had the visions. And your script tells me that they've brought you here. You're trying to find out what they are. I've been doing the same. Come with me."

Elya led them out of the library and down several more corridors. She apologized for the poor lighting but explained that Confederation Marines had turned off the power a few hours after martial law had been declared. Only the security remained operational on battery backup.

They reached a door, and behind it lay a staircase that wound its way down into the murk. Elya wielded a boxy portable light, while Dennet found a smaller one from a rack mounted just inside the stairwell. The stone felt slippery under Karista's sandals, and she braced herself on the wall, mindful of each step. Dennet and Fey mumbled their complaints, and Fey broke into several fits of sneezing before they finally reached the bottom. Elya's light revealed a trioak archway as well-crafted as the rectory door. Literally hundreds of hand-shaped leaves had been carved into the arch, and it welcomed them into a maze of tunnels that appeared very much like the hollowed out limbs supporting those leaves. Beyond lay the sacred catacombs.

"I'd like to see the protur," Karista said.

"You will," Elya answered with a nod. "But after."

Gifts had been piled along the tunnel walls, thousands upon thousands of gifts including pieces of art, sculpture, clothing,

and jewelry, as well as any other inanimate object that Pilgrims had deemed worthy of offering up to their deceased leader.

Within hours after the announcement, the gifts had begun pouring in, and when Karista had brought her own dancing shoes to bury with the man, she had been directed to the bailey, where the piles had stood taller than her.

"Here," Elya said, coming upon a metallic frame two meters square. The frame stood upright and leaned against the stone wall. A small panel in the frame's right corner flashed after Elya touched it.

"Laid our heads upon guillotines more than once. And each time we escaped before the fatal blades fell. But for what? To look at holoart," Denet said with a grimace.

"Shut up," Fey commanded, elbowing past him. "And you?" she called to Elya. "You show us what the hell that is."

The concubine snickered, then touched a second button. A black, undulating cloud grew swiftly in the frame's center and reached out with a dozen swollen appendages to spread across the frame. The thing grew darker, deeper, and specks of light burned through to unveil a brilliant field of stars. Suddenly, a tremendous sloship streaked out of the void and came head on, its hull awash in the powerful light of a nearby yet unseen sun.

"Watch now," Elya instructed, then turned and took Karista's hand.

An amorphous blue something swept over the sloship, and while it seemed somewhat different than the blue of Karista's visions, she sensed that it was the same. And with the abruptness of one of Ivar City's summer spates, the blue shied away into the night, carrying off the sloship.

Elya squeezed Karista's hand, then said, "Something drove me down here to find this. That same force that drove you here. Thousands of people gave us gifts when the protur died. I didn't know who gave us this until just a few days ago, when I read the note attached. The woman's name is Sostur Inanna Pandathy. One of her descendants made this. He claims to have been with Ivar Chu in Sirius. He says he was an eyewitness who flew alone in a scout ship. But his voice was stifled by the Alliance elders because they couldn't explain why he hadn't been carried to the higher plain. Some said he was just mad."

"Have you spoken to this sostur?"

"Not with the power down, but I've wandered her script. She's old and frail, and I didn't want to invade her privacy for more than a few seconds. But I think she knows something. And I can't tell you how much I've wanted to leave and go to her. But it's just too dangerous with the Marines everywhere. They're arresting people for the most trivial reasons."

"You're an extrakinetic like me. Why haven't you--"

"I can only bring down so many." She stared past Fey and Dennet to the other concubines. "And they need me. Especially now. But from here, I can help you get to Pandathy's."

"Where does she live?"

Elya's expression darkened. "In Ardentia."

"That's nearly five kilometers west," Dennet said with a severe frown. "Would it not be quicker to shoot ourselves?"

"No one asked you to come along," Karista snapped. "If you're here because you think you owe me, you don't."

"This is where we pretend to leave, then the guilt gets the best of us and we come back later on to save Karista when all seems lost," Fey told Dennet. "So would it not be quicker if we just shut our damned mouths and stuck with her?"

Dennet released an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose."

Karista held still a moment more as her anger slowly evaporated. Then she eyed Elya, never more sober. "Take me to see the protur."

"This way," the concubine said, tipping her head toward a tunnel on the right. "You've no idea how much we miss him."

Chapter 10

KILRAH SECTOR, KUR'U'KHAG QUADRANT

PLANET KILRAH

2654.148

1300 HOURS IMPERIAL STANDARD TIME

The emperor's palace stood on the border where one of Kilrah's biomes met another, where the sprawling grasslands that had been the birthplace of Kilrathi civilization abutted a range of great mesas crowned by swirling clouds of nutrient gas. Constructed on and rising several hundred meters above one of those flat-topped elevations, the palace resembled a collection of geometric shapes that had tumbled out of a giant sack. Uneven towers of copper-colored stone and plastisteel sprang up from unlikely locations. Tremendous gaps stood between guard walls that in places rose as high as a dozen meters and in others dropped as low as one. The barbaric principles that dictated much of Kilrathi culture had an equally strong influence on their architecture, and the imperial city that trickled back behind the palace and into the valleys exemplified this influence even more sharply; it appeared to the untrained eye as the smoldering ruins of a once thriving metroplex. In truth, the black smoke that coiled into the air originated from dozens of manufacturing facilities fiercely contributing to the

Kilrathi war effort. Boxy freighters assigned to those plants maintained an interminable cycle of liftoffs and landings, with thrusters burning avenues through the dust.

Despite having polluted and decimated most of their planet, the Kilrathi had ardently protected the land within a thousand kilometer radius of the palace. Paladin was not sure whether this was a ridiculous attempt to give the emperor something pretty to look at or simply the cats' guilt-inspired desire to preserve a scintilla of their own primeval past. In any event, as Paladin looked out through the triangular window of his cell and beyond the concentric energy domes that shielded the palace, he spotted a lone shuttle rising vertically from somewhere below and kicking up vortices of emerald gas. He imagined himself on that ride, stowed away in the hold, waiting to jump the two cats at the controls. At least the Kilrathi had not stolen his gift to dream. What had the poet Yeats written about dreams? "But I, being poor, have only my dreams; / I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

Believing he had heard his name called, Paladin ambled away from the window and glanced down at Aristee, who had assumed her usual spot on the stone floor. She suddenly rose, winced as she rubbed her rump, then straightened. "Are you satisfied with this? I mean, you got what you wanted. In eight days, Tolwyn will kill my people--unless he finds debris from the *Olympus*."

And now we're here with the cats, who will pick our brains for everything we know, then literally pick our brains, which, I've heard, they serve with a mild cream sauce."

"I'm very satisfied," he shot back. "And I'm not worried at all. I destroyed the ship and the hopper drive data, and I'm sure someone will find her before Tolwyn drops the bombs. Besides, our capture will only help everything. Isn't that right, Protur?"

The pot-bellied Pilgrim leader had sat in a corner, had tugged his knees toward his chest, and had fallen asleep. His breath now rang hollowly in the dank cell.

Paladin leaned down toward the man's ear. "Protur!"

"Yes, yes, yes," the man said, shuddering awake and squinting at Paladin. "You wish to sit for a *katores* so we may give thanks for our lives, yes?"

"You said our capture will only help," Aristee reminded him. "So, is it helping?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure it is. But there will be a problem if these animals don't bring us some food. They expect us to eat only once per day?" He cried out as he lowered his legs, then reached for Aristee's hand. She helped him to his feet, and he went to the cell's heavily scored bars for a peak at the murky tunnel beyond. He opened his mouth to shout, then thought better of it. The cats who guarded the cell block stood on the

other side of the air lock and would never hear him. And, since ordering them here two days ago, the emperor had not returned.

The protur turned away from the bars, then glared at a stone box in the corner of the cell. "That's disgusting. I can't relieve myself in that anymore."

"They're a spacefaring race, but indoor plumbing still eludes them," Aristee said. "Let's get our minds on something else--like a way to escape."

"Unless they move us or there's a long-haired old man in the next cell who has built a series of secret tunnels and wants to help us escape, that won't happen," Paladin said flatly.

Aristee blew a few locks of hair from her eyes. "Had this happened to me ten years ago, I'd be curled up into a ball and crying over how my rebellion has been quashed." She stared longingly through the window. "But I've done a lot of living since then, and after sitting in this hole for two days, I've figured that the rebellion is still in me. And as long as I'm alive, it's alive. So the next time someone opens the door on this cell, he's mine. I have to die trying to escape. That's the only way I'll feel good about this."

"Oh, my dear Amity," sang the Protur. "There's no need to throw away your life. Patience. That's all you need. *Patience.*"

"You keep using that word, but what does it really mean?" Paladin asked. "You pretend you know something that we don't. But I think you're just afraid that we'll be tortured and killed. You can't accept that. So you pretend that being patient will make it all go away. Well, I've got news for you, Protur: You're going to die here--whether you're patient or not. Better make your peace with Ivar, the continuum, the quilt, with all of it. Tell them to hang the banners 'cause Carver Tsu the Third will be riding a donkey into town."

"James, it's been so difficult getting used to your irreverence. But I've discovered that every time you insult me, you reinforce my own patience. I feel I should thank you for that. You've been placed here for a reason."

"We all have," Aristee chipped in. "To die."

"But not before you tell us everything you know," said the emperor, whose holographic form--reproduced to scale--shimmered in one corner. "Mr. Taggart. I understand that you've been a guest of my people once before. Let me assure that you there will be no endurance tests this time. We already know exactly what it takes to kill a human. But we've made significant progress in studies of the human brain. I'm sure you'll find our exercises quite engaging."

"I wasn't aware that Kilrathi like to gloat," Paladin retorted, biting off each word. "Why not just get to it?"

"Get to it? Why, we already have. Look--"

Aristee and the protur dematerialized, as did the stony confines of the cell. Paladin now found himself sitting cross-legged and naked in a cage identical to the one that had held him prisoner so many years prior, a box with glass walls on all four sides, the bottom three inches open and barred. Crimson spotlights positioned somewhere above illuminated his cell and the thousands of others that floated in an enormous chamber the size of a shuttle hangar. He expected to be wearing a helmet or find sensors taped to his head, but the interrogation system was obviously wireless. He glanced to his right and saw Aristee seated likewise and looking as though she had applied a phosphorescent war paint. A quick look to the left revealed the protur, glimmering in his own red puddle. Both had their eyes closed, and their heads and hands jerked spasmodically.

"You've ruined your experiment by revealing it," Paladin said, wondering if the emperor could hear him. "Whatever you show me is not real."

"Yes, you've touched upon the real power of our interrogation system," the emperor said with a mild chuckle. "We'll erase this memory and take you forward. Your reality is now in our hands. Admittedly, this is a very old idea, but getting the technology to work makes it all seem exciting and new. Ironically enough, we bought most of it from some of your

own Pilgrim friends living in the Border Worlds. It seems that humanity will always sell its soul to one devil or another. Now then, Mr. Taggart. Relax. And as your protur would say, be patient."

Dozens of replies flashed through Paladin's mind, but he forgot each of them as quickly. Then a familiar man pushed open a hatch marked: ARES 098 ORBITAL STATION, VENUS, and came into a small living room.

Paladin barely found his voice. "Father?"

For nearly a week, Blair had gone along with Obutu and Angel's plan to set up the people responsible for attacking him. He had requested and received a transfer to Second Squadron and was now under the direct supervision of one Gary "Gunner" Berkholtz, a sinewy Marine pretending to be a Navy flyer and squadron commander. Twice Gunner had questioned Blair's motivation for wanting to transfer out of First Squadron, and twice Blair had given him the same answer: "Sir, this is awkward to admit, but the squadron commander and I, well, sir, we've become too close. I think it would be unhealthy for us and the squadron if I remained."

Gunner had requested details regarding Blair's relationship with Angel, going so far as to ask the average number of times

per week that they had sex. Blair had smirked. "Don't you mean per day, sir?"

He had a few suspicions why Angel and Obutu had asked him to transfer. He knew that Second Squadron's arrival had come just prior to his beating, but he still wasn't convinced that any of them had committed the crime. First off, how had they learned that he was a Pilgrim? And could any of them really hate Pilgrims so much that they would risk their hard-fought careers on something so heinous and illogical? It just didn't make sense.

However, the exceedingly warm welcome he had received from Gunner's people did affect his judgement. They had heard about his jump through the Charybdis Quasar, which had thwarted a Kilrathi invasion of Earth. They had learned of his skip across the *Olympus's* gravity well, with his entire squadron linked via tractors. One night, a demure lieutenant who went by the mystery callsign of "R," came out of her shell at the bar and told him that she had never met a real hero before, that she wasn't flirting, and that she only wanted to shake his hand. Blair would have laughed at her if she had not sounded so sincere. And the others seemed to regard him with equal measures of respect and admiration. Blair felt nearly as comfortable with them as he did with his own squadron.

Then again, they could be putting on an excellent charade, directed by the infamous Gunner himself--a performance meant to steer suspicion away from them.

Now, as Blair assumed the duties of wing commander and flew a routine sweep of the Sirius system, continuing to scan with his Pilgrim senses for the missing ship, he felt more certain that his transfer merely represented a diversion for something more important carried on by Obutu and Angel. He sighed over Angel's lack of faith in him, then lined up his navigation crosshairs with the nav point marked on his Heads Up Display, adjusting course in slight increments until he found the bull's-eyes. The two Rapiers behind him, piloted by Mango and Loaf, held perfect formation. And a half million kilometers farther back hung the brilliant star of Sirius, throwing a sheer scarf over the encompassing void. Blair and his wingmen had maintained radio silence for the past hour, and he had repeatedly shaken off the urge to activate Merlin. He wanted the PPC to speculate on who had attacked him and why Karista had not contacted him for so long. While lying in the sick bay, he thought she had spoken to him, but he attributed that impression to the drugs. If he only knew how to reach out himself to find her. He had tried to do that several times in the past week. Whether his failure to reach her was a limitation of being only half-Pilgrim or simply his ineptness when wielding his

extrakinetic senses, he wasn't sure. He knew that if he didn't hear from Karista soon, he would spend every free moment trying to sharpen his senses to contact her.

"Oh, Christopher. You're all right."

This time she did not appear before him, but her voice sounded gentle and near. He shuddered over her timing, although she could have been waiting until his thoughts were on her.

"Where are you? What's happening?"

"I'm on McDaniel. I think we're getting close to learning what these visions are. I'm on my way to see a woman who may know something. But Christopher, I don't think we can stay here. Some people saw us land. I'm sure the Marines will question them, and I'm sure they already have the troopship we stole. I might need your help getting off planet. But how are your feeling? I sensed the beating. What happened?"

"It's over. And I'm all right. Been thinking about something, though. Since the attack, I haven't had a single vision."

"I have. Yours will return, especially now that you're in the Sirius system. You're close to where Ivar Chu McDaniel and his followers ascended to a higher plain."

"I'm here because the *Altamonte* battle group lost one of its destroyers." He grinned over a sudden and cynical

conclusion. "I hope it didn't ascend to a higher plain, too. Any ideas?"

"No. I don't sense anything."

"Neither do I, but I have a captain breathing down my neck and expecting results. And you said you might need help. I'm not sure how I can do anything from here."

"A comm drone is on its way to the *Tiger Claw*. You'll be ordered back to Netheryana, and you'll be only three jumps from McDaniel."

"Last I heard, the *Concordia* battle group was there."

"It is. Can you get yourself transferred?"

"Yeah, no problem. And I'll be there in six months when the approvals finally come in."

"I'll try to find another way out, but it won't be easy. Getting off of Mars worn me down like you wouldn't believe."

"Oh, no, here comes the guilt. I know you're my pair, and I know I need to help. But do you have any idea what you're asking?"

"I know you're worried about your career, but I have a feeling that it won't matter soon."

"Pilgrim, you're overshooting the nav point," Loaf said, his wide eyes beaming from Blair's Visual Display Unit.

"Holy shit," Blair muttered, returning to a more immediate and dangerous reality. He fired maneuvering thrusters while banking hard to get back on course.

"Didn't you hear the warning, sir?" Mango asked.

"Yeah," Blair managed, his ears still ringing with Karista's premonition. "But I'm having trouble with my Tempest," he lied. "Keep getting the eight-sixty error message."

"Better have 'em run a diaog," said Loaf. "Last time I got an eight-sixty, I lost all nav during a landing, and I know at least one better way to get a cardiovascular workout."

Blair smiled weakly as his computer confirmed that he had reached the nav point. He scanned his radar scope and found his next target. He continued going through the motions of the patrol, his thoughts light years away and on a lean blonde whose smile barely concealed the pain of not having him. Karista was his pair, and together they would make what Pilgrims deemed a perfect union. But he had denied her that. And she had accepted the fact. But every time they spoke, he was reminded of what he had done.

And before he knew it, the guilt became so tightly coiled around his heart that he envisioned himself making those three jumps to McDaniel.

But she didn't need a knight, just a cab driver. Maybe she could find someone else.

Son of a bitch. She's going to make me do it. But if I leave, won't that ruin Obutu and Angel's plan?

"Sir, you all right?" Mango asked. "You should be on auto to the next point, but you're manual, and begging your pardon, sir, but you're flying like you're goobered."

"Sorry, gentlemen. I'm auto. Let's get to it."

Still warding off the initial shock, Paladin rushed to his father and embraced him. "You didn't tell me you were coming home. I thought I'd only see Mom."

"But this could be your last leave for a long time."

Father pulled back, tightened his grip on Paladin's arms, and gave a mock frown. "What kind of dad do you think I am?" The old man's shoulder-length hair fell into his face, affording him the appearance of an obsessed researcher who had spent far too many years away from humanity so that he could roam the technological jungles of his own creation. However, everyone who knew Shamus Taggart knew that his terraforming studies took precedence over most things--but never his family.

The old man sighed and left Paladin, carrying himself to the sofa. He sat with a groan.

"Up all night again?" Paladin asked.

"Yeah. But it isn't research that's given me insomnia. Sit down."

Alarmed by his father's solemn tone, Paladin immediately took a seat. *Just don't tell me you're dying. Not now. You're still too young.*

"Have you heard the news? Last night the Confederation declared war on the Pilgrim Alliance." He snorted. "The year is twenty-six thirty-two, and we still haven't learned a damned thing about tolerance."

Whew. You're not dying. "Tolerance? I don't know if that's possible now. And I feel really bad about this, especially since we're Pilgrims, but the alliance is out of control. We offered to renegotiate. They destroyed our outpost on Celeste and wiped out a mining colony while they were at it. We lost nearly two million. You won't hear that on the news. Something has to be done. Personally, I think it's about time."

Father yanked himself to the edge of the sofa. "James, I've taught you that your true home is Earth. We descended from Terrans. We should never forget that. But the lines have been drawn. And there are too many in our family who have chosen to fight for the alliance."

"What are you saying?"

Closing his eyes and lifting his palms, Father paused a few heartbeats before speaking. "I'm saying that you'll go your own way. And I'll go mine."

"What?" Paladin bolted to his feet.

"My broturs and sosturs need me."

"Where is this coming from? You're not a soldier. You're a terraformer. They don't even need you. What the hell are you saying?"

"My work for the Confederation is finished. I can't stand by and watch them wipe out our people. I won't."

"What about Mom?"

"She's not coming. It seems her side of the family chose the Confederation."

Paladin stood there, rooted by shock. "I've been here all morning, and Mom hasn't said a word to me. She's been her cheerful self. And she's in there now, taking a nap like nothing's happened. Mom?" he shouted. "Mom?" He charged to the bedroom, ordered the lights on, and found his mother lying supine in bed, the covers tucked tightly under her arms.

She hemmed. "James?"

"Why didn't you tell me that he's joining the Pilgrim Alliance?"

After taking in a long breath, his mother shut her eyes and took the blanket into her fists. "He wanted to tell you."

"Move aside, James," said father from the doorway.

Paladin cocked his head--

And lost a heartbeat as he spotted the sidearm clutched in his father's hand. "What now?"

"Move aside," his father urged again, training the pistol on mother. "She's threatened to turn me in. We can't have that."

"I don't believe this. I don't--"

The pistol went off.

Mother shrieked, and the malodor of seared flesh poured into the small room. Her left arm had been blasted off at the elbow and now lay at an improbable angle near her hip.

Father grimaced. "Sorry, Delli. I've never fired one of these. Close your eyes. I'll try for a clean kill this time."

"No, you won't," Paladin said, stepping into his father's line of fire.

"Get out of the way, son."

"I don't think so, Dad."

"James, do you want to put an end to this? All you have to do is tell me about Confederation Intelligence. What do you know about Robert's Quadrant? I want the locations of every Confederation listening post in that region. You tell me, and this ends."

Paladin repressed a violent shudder. "I can't believe what you're asking."

"I'm asking you to save your mother's life."

Holding his breath, Paladin dove at his father. A nanosecond before he could wrap hands around the pistol, it went off. He seized the weapon, and they crashed to the floor.

Surprisingly, the old man wrenched himself free and came rolling back up with the gun like a Marine thirty years younger.

Paladin caught a glimpse of his mother. And wished he hadn't. She had no face.

A foot suddenly connected with Paladin's chin, and he found himself sprawled on his back. The foot came down on his chest, and he looked into his father's blazing eyes. "I am your father. You will obey. Tell me what I need to know."

The pressure on his chest increased, and Paladin felt his air being cut off. He gasped, and tears rolled down into his ears.

"Tell me!" Father screamed.

But his voice now echoed into gibberish and yield to the soft tones of a flute player. "Be brave, Brotur," came a disembodied voice resounding out of the notes. "You will not suffer long."

Chapter 11

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

2654.150

2200 HOURS LOCAL TIME

The protur's concubines had treated Karista, Dennet, and Fey to a meal of local vegetables, cheese, and sweet cider, which they had devoured as though it would be their last. Afterward, everyone had gathered into a circle for a *tyristee* session of meditation and prayer led by Dennet, whose fundamentalist shouts had made the rectory walls quake in ecstasy. Then, in the early evening, the trio had set out for Sostur Inanna Pandathy's cabin in Ardenta, some five kilometers due west.

That had been two evenings ago, and they had only come about three kilometers since, having lost countless hours hiding from the Marines whose relentless patrols had Fey swearing to the high heavens and Dennet trembling with the desire to jump one of them. They had taken refuge in a workshop where Pilgrim icons were manufactured. They had hid under the display racks of a clothing shop, its heavily bearded owner barely able to answer the Marines who questioned him. They had hiked along an embankment just off the main road and been severely bitten by

ghytis flies, who made homes near the stagnant ponds that paralleled their path. They had trudged through the dank, humid air of early morning and had winced over the blisters on their feet.

Now, with robes pulled tight against the evening chill, they skulked along a two-meter-high trioak fence that separated a residential zone from the factories of a small town called Credence. Dark warehouses stretched off to their right and abutted yet another residential zone, the faint light of cabins flickering in the damp air.

As he had from the beginning of their trek, Dennet took the lead. While Karista had argued that they should take turns walking point, Dennet had insisted that as a Caravan and a man he must assume the most vulnerable position. Karista and Fey had finally assented to his ego, but Karista kept within a few paces, and Fey followed equally close.

Which was why the four Marines who suddenly jumped the fence had little trouble surrounding them.

"Halt!" hollered the tallest soldier, his shoulder light beaming in Karista's eyes.

Even as she reached out of herself and brought him down, the second Marine swung to train his rifle on Fey, while the third and fourth jammed their muzzles into Dennet's abdomen as he reeled back toward the fence.

Fey dove for the fallen Marine's rifle.

Karista brought down the soldier tracking Fey just as he fired. The round missed Fey's head by a hairsbreadth.

But one of the Marine's guarding Dennet turned before Karista could get to him. The shot made her stiffen and stagger back, her ears ringing so loudly that she thought she had been shot herself.

With the barest of groans, Fey dropped into a clump of weeds.

The Marine who had shot her shifted his aim to Karista, his gaze darting between her and his fallen comrades. "Gosa? Jimenez?"

Karista immediately squeezed his innards until he joined his friends.

"Yontillo? Yontillo?" cried the last Marine, who retreated two steps from Dennet. "What did you do? Tell me!"

Knowing she could drop him faster than he could fire, Karista braced herself for a final surge of extrakinetic energy.

But as she stepped out of herself, pulling her senses taut, her arms and legs felt like tremendous columns of durasteel. She thought she saw the night sky tip on its side to reveal the underbellies of a billion stars before she crumpled to the dirt.

#

The shuffle of footsteps, the sun's heat pulsing down on her cheek, the agony of strained muscles in her arms, and the pungent scent of perspiration bid Karista a brutal good morning. She opened her eyes and found herself slung over Dennet's shoulders, a sheet of tan grass bobbing below and carrying her swiftly toward nausea. "Dennet?"

Sans one of his glib replies, her friend stopped, gasped with exertion, then slowly lowered her to the ground. She sat up and surveyed the landscape--a sparsely wooded area with stands of *taka* trees drifting back toward a dark brown ridgeline. She suddenly realized where they were: in Ardentia's Validity Park, a protected zone for wildlife and in this case, rogue citizens. They had traveled over a kilometer since their encounter with the Marines, and with the memories returning in a surge, Karista stared through the grass and thought of Fey.

"So..." Dennet began, hunkering down.

She finally regarded him, then flinched as she saw the dark worm of a bloodstain covering his right shoulder. "What happened?"

He noticed her stare and lifted his robe by the collar. "Single round. Conventional. It's not bad. And he paid dearly for it."

"You took down a Confederation Marine?"

"Who killed my friend," he finished through gritted teeth. "She's still back there. Wonder if they'll pick her up. So much woman packed into a tortured little frame. Ivar has a special place for her. I know that."

"Oh no," Karista said, her gaze shifting to his feet, which were now swollen and caked with blood. "You didn't have to carry me. You should've--"

"I needed to walk. So I did."

His abruptness startled her. "Are you all right."

He sighed, lowered himself onto his rump, then stretched out onto his back. "I've been an outsider all my life. Too tall, too thin, too outspoken. And along comes this war, giving me yet another reason to stand outside. I even had a dream that I was in a place like this, with a woman like you. I was in love with her. And we struggled that day for ways to be happy. We weren't. We created our own barriers and made them too high to hurdle. Isn't that what we always do?"

Karista pulled herself to her feet. "Come on. It's my turn to carry you."

"Ridiculous."

Though not fully recovered from the night's toll, Karista felt strong enough to reach out with extrakinetic senses and lift him into the air. She started for the ridgeline, with a squirming Dennet behind her.

"You're wasting your senses on me," he cried. "Put me down."

"Oh, shut up and enjoy the ride."

With the Hall of the Great Assembly destroyed by terrorists, the approximately twelve hundred senators and interim senators from Confederation-held worlds had gathered in one of Washington D.C.'s nearby sports complexes, in a zero G stadium now set for Earth standard so that the only thing floating around the room were vicious exchanges. The senate had lost two hundred and twenty-nine of its members, had lost its buildings, and had, as a result, lost something that threatened to undermine it even more than those losses. Without a sense of decorum, the senate would be doomed.

So it was with great trepidation that Geoffrey Tolwyn stepped up to the podium and addressed the raucous representatives, having indicated on his control panel that he would accept questions throughout and after his address from any member present. "Distinguished senators, colleagues, and friends. I've spent the last two days rushing here so that I could address you on a matter as dire as the Kilrathi War itself."

"Yes, a volatile situation created by your ill-conceived response," shouted a portly senator in the front row who wore a

Pilgrim robe and whose holo ID flashed in a three-meter-wide billboard: GORUNGA SYLBOONE, PILGRIM ENCLAVE OF SPIRITIA.

"Threats of Pilgrim genocide are not the way to deal with terrorists. And neither are no-fly zones. Hundreds of thousands have already died, Admiral. If nothing else, you've perfected a means of population control."

A roar lifted in the stadium.

But Sylboone had no time to enjoy the reaction, as he had already broken into a shoving match with two senators from the Lafayette system who fully supported Tolwyn's plan to bring Pilgrim doomsday on one-five-eight.

Vice-President Harold Rodham, who sat behind Tolwyn and appeared the epitome of smartly dressed Confederation blue blood--right down to his waxed cheeks and surgically defined jaw--rose and hustled to Tolwyn's side. Though not a tall man, his booming voice seemed to add several inches to his height. "As interim assembly master, I call for order!"

"I call for peace," replied Sylboone.

Rodham trained his index finger on the man. "Another word, senator, and I'll have you removed. Now, the Admiral's come a long way. He has the floor. Admiral?"

Tolwyn returned a polite nod. "Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Ladies and gentlemen, I've come here to ask for your endorsement of the ultimatum I originally issued to Aristee. I

know you've already voted to have the military stand down if she fails to comply with our terms. But consider what we will accomplish by doing that. I know Aristee. She'll regard that as sign of weakness and make another attack. The threat must remain real. I don't want to destroy those systems and enclaves, and I'm sure you agree with me on that count. I am willing to begin moving all those citizens to Pilgrim safe camps already established throughout the Confederation."

Sylboone rose. "So you don't want to kills us--just destroy our land and enslave us!"

That sent a ripple of hoots and guffaws through the assembly, and even before the commotion died, two security officers elbowed their way to Sylboone. One stunned the senator into flaccidity with his pistol, then both carried off the triple keg of a man amid a second round of hoots.

"Senators, our military resources are strained. I assure you that the Kilrathi will take advantage of our situation. There are eight days left. Aristee knows this. If she's still alive, she'll bring in that ship."

"But what if she's not?" asked the senator from North Mars, a tall, middle-aged blonde woman named Kendall Duparis, an influential member of the Armed Services Committee whom Tolwyn had pissed off on more than one occasion. "Will you destroy the systems and enclaves simply because you don't hear from her?"

"I've wrestled with that point for many days now," Tolwyn confessed. "I'm worried that if we do nothing and she's still out there, then she'll attack. I'm also worried that if we destroy the systems and enclaves, only to learn later that Aristee has been killed by us or the Kilrathi, then we'll never live that down. I seek your endorsement, but I'll take full responsibility for whatever happens. If you need a fall guy, I'm it. We issued the ultimatum. We should stand by it."

"Don't you mean that *you* issued the ultimatum?" Duparis asked. "Space Marshal Gregarov testified before us and tried to smooth things over for you, Admiral. You're lucky we're at war with the Kilrathi and need personnel. Nevertheless, you may have already made a decision that will end your career. Many here have already called for your resignation."

"I'm well aware of that, Senator. But I will not yield to terrorism. And anyone in this room who endorses such an action should study the events of the first Pilgrim War more closely. We tried to negotiate. We failed. A massive, concentrated strike on the systems and enclaves will not only send a clear message to Aristee but to the Kilrathi as well. We've eight days to move those people. If I may be so bold, I motion that you vote on this plan."

#

Forty minutes later, Tolwyn stood in the hoverlot outside the stadium, leaning on his ride and engrossed in a computer slate that showed the senator's votes as they came in. Finally, the polls closed. "I guess I should celebrate," he told his driver, a young ensign, second class, who repeatedly raked hands nervously through his hair and failed to meet his superior's gaze. "Winning by a two percent margin isn't that bad."

"No, sir. It isn't."

"I'm being sarcastic, son."

"Yes, sir."

"A lot of people are going to die."

"Yes, sir. This is a war, sir."

"Indeed it is--a fact that too many people forget."

Tolwyn's watchphone beeped: incoming message from Lieutenant Commander Vincent Chopra, JAG office. "Yes?"

"Hello, Admiral. We heard you were in Washington. Would you mind stopping by our office today? We have a few questions."

"That's very good," Tolwyn said with a wink. "You really do make it sound like a suggestion. I guess the space marshal warned you that sending MPs would just tick me off."

"Uh, yes, sir. She did. She said you wouldn't run."

"She's right. I'm on my way. And I suppose that once I arrive, I'll be under arrest?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"That's okay, Commander. Be sure to prepare the evidence against me and Commodore Bellegarde. I have a right to see it before you question me."

"Very well, sir."

"Tolwyn out."

"JAG office, then, sir?" the ensign asked.

"No," Tolwyn said, climbing into the hover. "Let's stop at a bar first. Have you ever sipped Scotch with an Admiral, son?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it's nothing to write home about, but I'm buying."

"Are you ordering me to drink while I'm on duty, sir?"

"Son, I'm about to brought up on charges of conspiracy, sabotage, and murder. Ordering you to drink, well, you get the idea."

The ensign cocked his head and eyed Tolwyn sympathetically.

"What happened, sir?"

"Oh, it all started with this silly idea I had of joining the Confederation Navy. Just drive. We'll talk on the way."

Blair stood at parade rest in Gunner's office. "Sir?"

Gunner sat in his chair, hands clasped behind his head, boots up on his desk, gaze riveted to a data screen.

"Lieutenant, I'm just reading here that the little honey who's

the JAG liaison had three welders arrested for your beating. No names have been released. Thought you should know."

"Sir, permission to leave so that I may speak with Lieutenant Commander Jhinda, sir."

"Request denied. And not by me. Says here that no one from this squadron--including me--shall consult with the Lieutenant Commander, which I gotta say really rubs me the wrong way." He slid his boots off the desk and leaned forward. "Let me get this straight. Three guys beat you up in the sim room. They're all wearing welders uniforms and masks, so you can only ID them by their voices, which sound kind of similar and muffled because of the masks. You told me yourself that she had you trying to ID over a hundred different voices and none of them sounded like your boys. So how the hell did Jhinda tag 'em?"

"I don't know, sir. But I'd like to ask."

"Me, too. Tell you what, Lieutenant. Let me do a little hunting myself. No one's ever managed to keep old Gunner in the dark for long. Pisses him off. And when Gunner's pissed, the whole parade goes to hell."

"Yes, sir." Blair snapped to attention.

"Dismissed."

Blair found Lieutenant Commander Obutu waiting for him in the corridor outside Gunner's office. "You got them?"

Obutu shook his head. "We brought in Jhinda to help. No one's been arrested. The report is fictitious and meant for our perpetrators." Obutu gestured that they walk to avoid being seen by Gunner.

"You think he's responsible," Blair asked, cocking a thumb over his shoulder.

"I would've bet everything on it. But no, he's not."

"Then I already know them," Blair said. "I've served with them. Maybe it's my own flight crew. Shit, why don't you just tell me?"

"Not possible."

"Then maybe you're lying. Maybe it was Gunner and his people. I thought you wanted me to transfer just to get me out of the way, but maybe you threw me into the den. And Maniac told me about your little drinking binge and confession to everyone at the bar that you're a Pilgrim. You really want to get your ass kicked, don't you."

"It's been a few days. The word has gone out that I'm a Pilgrim--and nothing's happened. The JAG investigation has our boys worried. We needed to put them at ease, so we arrested three others to build up their confidence. That's all I can tell you."

"And when they strike again, everyone will know that the real assholes are still on the loose. What academic thought up that part of the plan?"

"I did."

Blair winced.

"Do remember, Lieutenant, that we're not dealing with the brightest of individuals. They *will* seize another opportunity, especially after security returns to normal shifts."

"Yes, sir. And sorry for being rude, sir."

"Apology accepted."

They reached his hatch, and Blair gave Obutu a piercing stare. "Still won't tell me, sir?"

"If the same happened to me, I wouldn't trust myself."

"The same will happen to you."

"I hope so--because this time we'll be ready for them."

Chapter 12

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

2654.151

1900 HOURS LOCAL TIME

While the town of Ardenta had not been as thoroughly ravaged as Ivar City, the Confederation Marines garrisoned there had cordoned off all main roads, had built bunkers at every intersection, and had set up radar dishes that towered over the rural community living in about five hundred wood and stone cabins. Known as a refuge for artists, antique dealers, and retired folks, Ardenta seemed the last place on the planet that would require the military's presence, crisis or no. Dennet had speculated that the Marines had simply created outposts in every town surrounding Ivar City, assuming that the most fanatical Pilgrims lived near the capital. They could not be more wrong. The devout and militant Caravans made their home on the planet of Faith and were not particularly welcome among the more passive Pilgrims residing on McDaniel.

Karista ducked behind a cabin on the town's perimeter, then followed Dennet to a front door draped in the shadows of late day. He looked for an intercom, found none, then raped twice.

Seeing him wince and grip his wounded shoulder, Karista checked the extra robe sash she had tied over his wound; this time he yielded to the help without wrenching away.

The door opened slightly. A thin young man with a shaven head and a Pilgrim cross tattooed on his cheek scrutinized them for a second, then his face tightened into an ugly knot. "We can't help you."

"You've a mouth, a voice, and obviously a brain," Denet said. "I think you can. We want to see Sostur Inanna Pandathy."

"No."

"Who is it, Collab?" came an old woman's voice from somewhere inside.

"Are you Inanna Pandathy?" Karista called.

"Go away," Collab said, shutting the door.

But Denet pounded the wood with the bottom of his fist and forced himself inside. "Sostur? We must speak with you."

"I won't speak with soldiers," the woman cried. "Collab, send them off. They've no right to bother me. I've obeyed their orders."

"You heard her," Collab said, then slapped palms on Denet's chest and began a vain attempt to block him.

"Little man, we've come too far for this," said Dennet with a chilling calm. He wrapped his free hand around Collab's throat and drove him deeper into the cabin.

Karista slipped by them and crossed into a hall that would carry her to a small living area. She felt taken aback by the sheer number of holoart frames, sculptures, and souvenirs from dozens of different worlds that congested the passage and formed part of a burgeoning museum of Pandathy's life. As Karista emerged into the living area, she spotted the frames of more Pilgrim holoart strewn about, and she raised her brow over the sculptures of proturs that resembled wardens posted at the rear doors. Above them, *aitora* chimes wound down from the ceiling and shifted fractionally, awaiting inspiration from the next breeze. How anyone could live in such clutter eluded Karista, but the place held an unexplainable allure and familiarity. She felt something akin to *déjà vu*, a sense that she belonged there. Outside, beyond the glass doors, stood a the lone *veracia* tree, skirted by *govita* weeds and backlit magnificently by the sun. Karista had never seen a more uniform and colorful tree. The old woman had probably spent years nurturing it.

"What are you doing in my house?"

Karista whirled and found Pandathy seated in a white chair supporting a pile of blankets on one arm, holo art frames on the other, and a second stack of blankets on its back. The disarray

and the woman's white *quella* sleeping robe served as an effective if not planned camouflage. "Sostur. The protur's concubines suggested that I come. I'm Karista Mullens. I used to be a dancer in Carver Tsu the Second's private troupe."

"It was some years ago, but I believe I saw you perform." Pandathy's blue eyes seemed to warm as they focused. "You say the concubines sent you? Whatever for?"

"Sostur Pandathy!" Collab shouted. "Leave, sostur! Leave!"

"It's all right. They can stay."

"Let him go, Denet," Karista ordered.

Pandathy glanced toward the hall. "Collab comes to check on me now and then. He's a neighbor and a dear friend. He worries about the old lady with no family."

She had barely finished when the young man came charging into the room. "Are you okay, Sostur?"

"I'm fine. These two were sent by the protur's concubines," Pandathy said as Denet entered, looking ruffled and nursing his shoulder. "Did you hurt him?" she asked Collab. "Apologize."

Collab lowered his gaze. "Sorry. But he was already wounded. And Sostur, how do you know they're not lying?"

Pandathy widened her eyes and gave Karista a solemn nod. "I know. And you can leave, Collab. Thank you for coming."

"Are you sure?"

She took his hand. "I'll be fine."

"And I'll be just outside until they go--if you don't mind."

With a shrug, she released him, watched him amble toward the hall, then turned her attention to Dennet. "Well, now. You're a Caravan. And a big one at that. I've only a met a few of you over the years. Are you as literal and argumentative as the others?"

"Sostur, we did not come here to debate the validity of Caravan stereotypes. Then again"--he glared at Karista--"I'm not sure why we're here. Maybe we should have a good debate. But first I'd like to clean up. Have you a washbasin?"

She snorted. "I have pipeless plumbing--the expensive kind you won't find even in Ivar City. The bathroom's just around the corner. The field switch is on the wall. Streams of water will appear to float in midair. I'm sure you'll be entertained."

Karista felt relieved as Dennet returned only a weak smirk and headed out. A stronger look or a few more words from him, and Karista betted that Pandathy would be angered into silence.

"So then, young Karista, former dancer in the protur's private troupe, I take it that you've been experiencing ecstatic

visions of the Divine--the same ones that Ivar Chu himself experienced centuries ago."

"I'm not sure. I think so. I see blue. I hear something. I feel the pain leave my body. And afterward, I'm scared."

Pandathy struggled forward, and Karista quickly helped her out of the chair. "The me that's in this old body thinks young thoughts. Yes, our scripts transcend this time-bound existence. If only our flesh could..."

"Do you know what the visions mean?"

"Of course I do." She padded toward the glass doors. "They mean that a young man who lived three hundred years ago--a man who bore my surname, a man who was cast out and branded a heretic--was telling the truth." She placed a palm on the glass and squinted at the *veracia* tree.

"The concubines told me about him. You gave them a piece of holoart that he created. So Ivar Chu really did ascend to a higher plain."

"Most have never doubted that. But don't you get a sense that the visions mean something more?"

Unsettled by her insight, Karista joined Pandathy at the doors. "I do."

"Do you know about the return myth?"

"Just a little. I was taught that it contradicted the Book of Ivar Chu."

"Indeed, it does. It's more Christian than anything else. It's like a story from the Old Testament about a Hebrew prophet and lawgiver who delivered his people from bondage. They called him Moses."

Karista barely repressed her snicker. "So you're saying that the visions mean that Ivar Chu is coming back to deliver us from bondage?"

"I am."

And with that, Karista felt her hopes slip away and shatter across the floor. She had come so far just to listen to an old woman spin an absurd tale. "How do you know this? Or is it just a feeling you have?"

"See that *veracia* tree? It has never bore leaves until now." Pandathy's lip trembled, and a tear suddenly raced down her wizened cheek.

"I'm sorry, Sostur. But the tree proves nothing. Any combination of conditions could have..." Karista let herself drift off as Pandathy slid open a door and shambled outside.

They moved slowly across the yard, with Pandathy's gaze locked on the tree, her expression growing more awestruck. Once they reached a patchwork of shade that encircled the *veracia*, Pandathy reached up and plucked a crimson leaf. "Here is your proof." She proffered the leaf.

Karista shook her head. "Sostur, I'm sorry, but I--"

"Take it. Take it to someone who can look deep within its cells, and you'll know."

Accepting the leaf, Karista turned it over and stared dubiously at its veins, blades, and petiole. "Is there anyone in Ardentia who can analyze this?"

Pandathy shrugged.

"Then how do you know there's more in here?"

"Faith, child. Faith. But you're young, and I know you need more. Trust me. You'll have your proof."

Amity Aristee sprinted down the street, stitching a course between gaping holes in the asphalt and debris that had fallen from the bombed out buildings now rising like rotted teeth. The Confederation air attack had ended a few hours prior, and life had begun to emerge from the twisted and smoldering wreck of an enclave.

Aristee reached an intersection, turned left down an avenue--

And a soldier sprang from behind a fallen section of storefront. "Don't move, little girl."

"Okay." She lifted her hands into the air.

He flipped up a visor and looked disgusted as he climbed over a chunk of stone. "Christ, how old are you? Seven? Eight?"

"I'm nine. And I'm looking for my mom and dad."

As he reached out to seize her arm, Aristee ducked under him and bounded across the stone. She hoped he wouldn't fire, and his shout seemed to confirm that. She chanced a look back. He hustled after her.

Fighters screamed overhead as she ran down the street, with the soldier just a few steps behind. They neared another intersection, where a half dozen hovers had collided when the saturation bombing had begun. She took herself around the wreck and kept on until she heard the soldier holler a curse. She threw a quick look back and saw him lying in a crater, clutching his knee. She smiled inwardly, turned her attention forward--

And saw her parents kneeling on the sidewalk ahead, their hands clasped behind their head. Five other Pilgrims knelt with them before a quartet of Pilgrim Marines wielding large rifles.

"There's no room for traitors here," shouted one of the Marines. "This is a war now. And since you've chosen to join the Confederation, we've chosen to end your lives." He turned to his comrades. "Gentlemen. In Ivar's name!"

Although Amity increased her pace and shouted for the Marines to stop, the sidewalk grew longer as the Marines' rifles thundered. Even as her mother's sweet, dark face broke into a stiff look of horror and her father's defiance turned to a knot

of agony, Amity let out another cry, as did a few people who glimpsed the execution from across the street.

She continued to run but got no closer to the scene. Her senses diminished into the lone sound of her own labored breath. Then something caught her foot. She fell, but arms reached under hers to catch her fall.

"Are you all right, Motur Aristee?" A lithe woman with a pronounced jaw gazed wide-eyed and deeply concerned. The woman wore the ornate robe of a motur's attendant. With a slight turn of her head, Aristee realized that a second attendant stood with her, and beyond them lay a vast chamber whose ceiling rose so high that Aristee's vision blurred before she could see where it ended. She thought of asking them where she was, but the answer came just as quickly. All of her life she had imagined a room such as this, a great throne room where her people could come and speak directly with the protur, a room that would house the great collections of art acquired by the Alliance, and a room whose walls would echo with the wisdom of Ivar Chu.

"Yes, I'm all right," she told the attendant. She looked down and saw her toes peaking out from sandals encrusted with rare gems. Her gaze moved up her legs to the sheen of her motur's robe, a garment reserved for women who achieved the second highest rank among the Pilgrim elders. Seven moturs advised one protur, and since for the first time in history

there was no protur to succeed Carver Tsu the Third, one of the seven moturs would be chosen by him to assume the highest office upon his death. Aristee was now in line for that position.

As they strolled on, Aristee admired the pale blue floor made of a shiny, unfamiliar stone. Light fell from somewhere above and dotted the floor with hundreds of reflections. Within each reflection shimmered a holograph that told one piece of Pilgrim history. Planets were discovered, settled, and destroyed. Quasars were charted and jumped. Peron fell to the stalwarts of the Confederation.

Despite having imagined a great dais upon which would stand a massive throne of gold, Amity found herself led toward the center of the chamber, toward a small, nondescript desk of trioak and a simple, armless chair.

"Please be seated, Motur," said one of her attendants. "The Protur will see you in a moment."

Puzzled, Aristee pulled the chair away from the desk, sat, then looked up to find that the attendants had vanished. She took a deep breath, then, with nothing better to do, decided to rummage through the desk's single drawer. She tugged it open and found a computer slate, the screen active and flashing her name. She removed the slate, and a familiar schematic rippled across the display: a modified Pilgrim hopper drive.

"It's what they want, dear Amity. I suggest you give it to them. Otherwise, I'll be forced to kill you." The protur crossed in front of the desk, tapping the blade of his Pilgrim cross on his chin.

And with a chill that mounted from her feet, Aristee remembered everything. She now knew that the image of her parents' deaths was not real. Her parents had betrayed the Pilgrims and had gone to fight for the Confederation, but she had never witnessed their execution. The Kilrathi who were now holding her had generated that image. But why? What had they gained from it? And now did they really expect her to simply hand over everything she knew about the hopper drive? Or were they simply ripping it from her since the slate had turned her thoughts to the drive?

"You won't kill me, Protur. I'm your future."

He shifted to the desk and sat on the corner. "There are others who would carry on my work, but none so diligently. They'll get what they want. Be assured of that. All you can do now is beg them to stay out of your mind. They'll bring back the day you were raped, the day that Govar died, the day that Frotur McDaniel lost his life. They'll pour poison into your wounds, suck it out, then spit it back in. There's nothing you can do but comply. Make it all end quickly."

"I don't believe you."

"You rarely have. You used me to endorse your rebellion. But you've no idea how much you've been used. It began with Admiral Bill Wilson, and it will end with you. Yes, you've awakened the Confederation, and that, dear Amity, was you're only purpose. With that task completed, I've but one thing to do." He leaned toward her--

She never saw the blade coming. The punch drove her back hard into the chair. Hot fingers of pain groped out from her heart. She drew back her head and eyed the Pilgrim cross sticking from her chest.

I don't understand.

Losing control of her head, she fell back and searched for the ceiling as sweet, hot blood pooled in the back of her throat. *I'm not dying. I can't be. This isn't real. I didn't give them what they want, did I? What does this mean?*

A voice came to her and whispered between the gentle notes of a flute player. "Sostur, what is your truth? And why should you know it?"

Chapter 13

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.153

1300 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Been trying to avoid us, mate?"

Blair shot a quizzical look at Hunter, then started toward a seat at the far end of the *Tiger Claw's* bar. In a flurry of movement, the captain whirled on his chair, blocked Blair with his arm, then removed the cigar stub from his lips.

"Not so fast, mate."

"Just want to get a drink," Blair said, wearing the sweat and fatigue of his recent patrol of Netheranya's no-fly zone. He rolled his eyes and took a seat beside the burly Australian. Other than Shotglass, who stood behind the bar and raised his bushy brow over the adult magazine he was "reading," they were alone.

"Like flying for Gunner, do you?" Hunter asked, then popped the cigar into his mouth.

"Not exactly."

Hunter nodded. "Maniac says you ain't talking to him, either."

Shotglass arrived with Blair's usual, a greyhound, set down the drink, then left without a word.

"See? Even old Shot knows you're not talking," Hunter observed. "I thought you'd be happy. Didn't they tag those guys who whacked you?"

Blair traced the rim of his glass with an index finger. "Yeah, I guess they did." He abruptly downed half the glass, then leaned back. "It's all over now."

Lifting a crooked grin, Hunter leaned forward and dropped his voice. "Bullshit, mate. We know exactly what's going on. Angel and Obutu are trying to catch the guys who jumped you--but they won't because they're wrong about who did it."

"Really," Blair said, smirking. "So who do they think did it?"

"Three of Gunner's people. You already flew with two of them: Mango and Loaf. Third one's a female, callsign R."

"But Obutu told me that they had first thought Gunner's people were responsible. I think now they're focusing on another group."

"No, they're not. Obutu's lying. He and Angel think it was Gunner's people. They don't want you to do anything out of the ordinary. And Obutu coming out as a Pilgrim? Surprised the hell out of me, but it won't help."

"Great. Now I'm really confused. And maybe that's the plan, huh? Angel and Obutu ask me to transfer. Why? If they believed that Gunner and his people beat me, then why would they throw me to the wolves?"

Hunter folded his arms over his chest. "They didn't do that. You're being watched very closely. You think me being here is a coincidence?"

After a heavy sigh that nearly came out as growl, Blair tossed back the last of his drink. "Whatever. I just want to know who did this to me, and what we're going to do about it. You talking? Or are you like them: Full of bullshit and secrets?"

"The only thing Angel and Obutu did right is keep quiet. Probably what we should've done."

"You contact Commander Jhinda?"

Hunter cocked a brow. "I already gave 'em to Jhinda, but we didn't have enough evidence to indite them."

"How did you find out who did it in the first place? And what if you're wrong? I mean it's strange that a Lieutenant Commander trained in this kind of work came up with nothing, and a fighter pilot who doesn't know jack about criminal investigations suddenly solves the mystery. Are we talking right place and right time, or what?"

"That's good, Lieutenant. Actually, I wasn't the one with the timing. Your buddy Maniac overheard a conversation or two and put it together. But it was his word against theirs because we still have no hard evidence. Jhinda presumes that it was jettisoned during the standard dump."

"Maniac," Blair said darkly. "My buddy. He never told me a thing."

"Which wasn't easy for him, trust me. But now we got a problem." Hunter pushed his empty glass forward and stood. "C'mon. I'm going to show you something. Unfortunately, it'll answer all of your questions."

The door to the space marshal's temporary field office slid open, and Commodore Richard Bellegarde stepped cautiously inside. Though the space marshal had admitted him, the bitch failed to look up from her desk. Surprised? He wasn't. They wouldn't be getting married any time soon. Be nice to get through a simple conversation without him wanting to choke her blue. "Ma'am?"

"Just a second," she snapped, then switched off a data screen. "Well, they've arrested him, as I assured you they would. They've also asked me to place you under arrest and have you transported to Earth, where you and the good admiral will stand trial for the bombing of the great hall. I guess you

didn't care how many people you killed. You planned on destroying the Pilgrim systems and enclaves, so a couple hundred senators meant nothing. Oh, you stirred up anti-Pilgrim sentiment, all right. They've even voted to go ahead with the attack despite Tolwyn's arrest. My god, what a mess you two have created."

"We had inspiration." He smiled broadly. "I guess you'll be taking charge of the Fourteenth Fleet now?"

"That's right," she said, then tapped her watchphone. "Come in."

In exactly four seconds two Marines were standing at Bellegarde's side. "We won't need them," he said. "I suspect you'll go peacefully."

"What?"

"You heard me, ma'am."

She stood and bore her teeth. "Maybe you didn't hear me. You're under arrest, mister."

"And you're standing in an office on board the *Concordia*, the admiral's flagship, lest you forget that you're a guest here and that there isn't a person on board who wouldn't give his life for that man."

The Marines shifted away from Bellegarde and closed in on Gregarov.

"This is amusing." She tapped her watchphone once more.
"Simon? Come in here immediately." Her aide did not reply.
"Simon?"

"He's busy," Bellegarde said.

"Commodore, I relieve you of command."

"You're not up to commanding this fleet. The Kilrathi could attack at any time since the no-fly zones have put such a strain on us. They'll probably come in through Robert's Quadrant, and it's been a long time since you've been in combat. Maybe you should calm down, sleep it off in the brig. And that'll give Confed Intell more time to gather the evidence they need against you, evidence that will be handed over to President Vasura. Yes, it's kind of absurd for me to tip our hand, but it's worth the expression on your face--you goddamned bitch."

Gregarov abruptly demonstrated five examples of conduct unbecoming an officer, examples that included her charging at Bellegarde, with her fingers extended like talons. The Marines neutralized her efforts and led her away. Bellegarde massaged his weary eyes, then quickly assumed a place at her desk.

"Oh, shit," he muttered. *I've just arrested the space marshal. Then again, if the admiral and I don't succeed, we'll probably be sentenced to hang--so in the grand scheme of things, this infraction hardly matters. And it felt awfully good.*

He switched on the space marshal's tactical display, patched into the datanet, then skimmed through reports from vessels of the Fourteenth. Pilgrims continued to violate the no-fly zones, especially the one in place over the planet Faith. Marines on McDaniel had found the troopship that had violated the *Concordia's* own zone, and a platoon continued to search for its passengers. Since then, only two more violations had earned Bellegarde's attention. Otherwise, he kept a close watch on Robert's Quadrant, on the Kilrathi, and waited for a report from those destroyers sent out from Naval Station Thor to investigate that disturbance. They would reach their destination in about three days, and two days after, if Aristee did not surrender the *Olympus*, the Pilgrim holocaust would begin--no matter how many civilians still occupied the systems and enclaves.

Or maybe the holocaust would never come. He didn't want his descendants to find his name next to Hitler's or ZeTam's in the history books and datanets. With Tolwyn out of the loop, the responsibility fell on him. Could he give the order?

He shuddered off the thought and considered the admiral, who probably sat in a cell or in an interrogation room and listened to incessant questions from JAG lawyers. In an attempt to spare the admiral some of that, Bellegarde had sent off an encrypted message to the president: WE KNOW ABOUT HD DEAL WITH SMG. BOMB MEANT FOR YOU. FREE TOLWYN. WE WON'T TALK.

Trouble was, Vasura wouldn't receive the message for another three days--if Bellegarde was lucky. And he wondered how Gregarov's people would react once they had lost contact with her. Sure, he could have the XO make up some story about Gregarov being ill, but those who knew what was going would read through that or any other excuse. Better to just tell the truth. He activated his watchphone. "Bellegarde to con."

"Geranata here, sir."

"Route all incoming communications for the space marshal to my office please. The space marshal is presently incapacitated."

"Aye, sir. And sir, we picked up a Kilrathi Concom for a few minutes after she jumped into the sector. She probed us before she jumped back out. I'm sorry, sir, but we couldn't jam her in time."

"That's all right, XO. I'd be more worried if the cats weren't probing us. Bellegarde out." He tugged a hip flask from his pocket, opened it, cursed, then took a long pull of Scotch. *This is good excuse to drink*, he assured himself.

You fool. There's no good excuse.

Time bothered Paladin the most. He could deal with the fact that the Kilrathi had probably drugged him, had transported him to that clear interrogation cage, and had probably sifted

through his brain. But the time lost, the time he would never get back, that drove him up to the window for some indication of how long it had been since they had returned him here. He had had a similar problem when he had been captured the first time. But after a while, his body clock had sharpened, and he had been able to mark the passage of time by the duration of his sleeping periods, which lasted nearly eight hours each day. But on this occasion he felt far too disoriented. For all he knew, months could have passed, even years, though his hair felt the same length and his beard had only grown a bit more. Still, they could have trimmed his hair to trick him. And the first time he had been here, he had thought that Aristee and the protur were with him, but that, too, had been an illusion.

The cell door clanged open, and Paladin spun to confront two Kilrathi Marines who carried Aristee inside, then lowered her to the stone floor. She lay inert on her back, eyes closed. One of the cats snarled at Paladin, then lumbered after his comrade. The door banged shut after them, and Paladin gagged on the fumes of nutrient gas that swirled in their wake.

He knelt beside Aristee, put his ear to her nose, then sighed with relief as he heard her faint breath. He undid the sash on her robe and scanned her body for injuries. She looked all right. "Amity." He touched her cheek. *You're real. You have to be.* "Amity."

She coughed, coughed again, and he pulled her up to sit. She swallowed, opened her eyes and squinted at him, then suddenly clutched her chest and screamed.

"It's all right," he said, grabbing her wrists. "You're okay. There's nothing wrong."

Gasping and trembling, she looked down at her breast, then relaxed a little. "I remember dying."

"Well, if you're dead, then so am I, and I think I'd remember something like that."

"I guess we gave them what they wanted," she said, staring past the bars. "Between what we both know about the hopper drive, they might be able to engineer something similar. James, you were right about them. I'm--"

"Don't say it. You don't need to. Problem is that you and I have no luck." He grinned wearily. "We're paired yet polar opposites. The things we love most are at odds with each other."

"Oh, no. You're going to wax poetic." She gripped the floor, as though bracing herself for incoming fire.

He slid a meter away until his back rested on the wall. "Actually, I was gong to wax prophetic. If this whole thing has taught me anything, it's that you and I are forces that don't belong together."

She frowned then broke into a smile. "I told you that a long time ago."

"I should've listened." He pulled his knees into his chest, then a rumble from outside sent him to the window. "Damn," he whispered as ten, maybe twelve score of military transports flew overhead, gaining altitude. "They're mobilizing for a big one."

"I still love you, James. Even after all of this."

"There's a pill you can take for that."

"And you haven't stopped loving me."

He snorted. "Blame me for waxing poetic? Blame you for the melodrama. You're thinking we're going to die so we should, forgive the phrase, spill our guts to each other?"

She brought her lips together, thought a moment, then nodded. "You're right. We have no luck."

"Unless he wasn't lying," Paladin said, lifting his chin at the door, which now opened to expose the emperor and the protur. Old Carver Tsu the Third wore a look so bloated with self-satisfaction that Paladin swore the man's head would topple from his shoulders. Contrarily, the emperor's naturally pale face seemed even paler, and if Paladin didn't know better, he'd swear that the cat looked scared.

"Amity? James? Let's go," the protur said in his little sing-song. He tucked a colorful leaf into his robe's pocket,

then explained, "The emperor has so graciously provided us with a shuttle that will whisk us back to Confederation space."

"That's correct," the emperor said, and translator or no, there was no mistaking his anxiety. "We apologize for the misunderstanding."

Aristee's look said: What the hell?

Paladin's shouted that.

Still tingling with shock, Paladin stood and helped Aristee to her feet. They shuffled out of the cell as the emperor trudged ahead of them.

"What do you tell them?" Paladin asked the protur.

Carver Tsu winked. "The truth, my dear James. Only the truth."

Chapter 14

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.153

1400 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Hunter led Blair to the lower aft decks, to a storage room behind the repair bay. The techs working on the deck nodded to Hunter as though he regularly visited these parts. Blair glanced curiously at a few of the specialists, who quickly turned their attention elsewhere.

After keying in the hatch's access code, Hunter gazed askance at Blair and said, "I just want you to know that it wasn't our fault."

The hatch opened, and a shaft of light sliced into the otherwise dark room. Walls of storage compartments standing just taller than Blair arched off for about ten meters, and to the right sat an open area to park the four-wheeled deckscrubbers and decksealers that now hummed along throughout the *Claw's* lower decks.

Hunter advanced into the shadows.

As Blair watched him go, gooseflesh fanned across his shoulders. "Captain?"

"What are you standing there for, mate? C'mon." After a few seconds of looking puzzled, Hunter smiled, and the sun finally rose in his gaze. "Ah, you think I'm luring you into this out of the way place so I can kick your ass. Don't worry about me, Lieutenant. I still owe you for dragging me out of that gravity well. I'm not fond of Pilgrims, but anyone who puts down a Kilrathi invasion and saves my sorry ass is all right with me. Coming?"

Blair gritted his teeth over the decision, sighed, and moved on.

They traveled to the back of the storage room, turned left down a corridor running perpendicular to the walls of compartments, then took a right into a storage room nearly identical to the first.

The lights came on.

Maniac rounded a corner. "Hey, Blair," he said solemnly, scratching the crown of his blond crewcut. "Before you see 'em, I just want to tell you that, well, I guess I'm sorry."

Blair plowed past Maniac, his gaze sweeping the area. "See what? What are you talking about? And why the hell are you sorry?"

But before Maniac could answer, Blair spotted them sitting on the floor, arms bound behind their backs, legs shackled with durasteel binders, mouths taped shut. He didn't recognize the

three men. The fact that their cheeks bore purple welts and their eyes had swollen shut probably had something to do with that.

"Just three class-two welders whose parents fought in the first Pilgrim War," Hunter said. "Thought they'd make the crime so obvious that it would fall between our eyes. They had pretty good alibis, but Maniac kept on their sixes and learned the truth. We confronted them, and that individual threw the first punch." Hunter pointed at the nearest tech.

Blair hunkered down in front of the welder, who could not be more than twenty. The guy tried to stare at his visitor, but the effort caused him to whimper and tug against his bonds. Blair tossed a glance to Maniac. "What did you hear them say?"

"Heard 'em talking about how much they hate Pilgrims, how a couple of them lost their parents in the war, and how it was a goddamned shame that the Confederation had even allowed Pilgrims to enter the military."

"That's it? You're kidding me."

"They had the equipment and the motive. What more do you want?"

"You idiot. Someone could've set them up."

"You're reading way too much into this. No one would go to all that trouble just to kick your ass." Maniac's eyes bulged.

"This is a hate crime, and these three are definitely operating in the intelligence-free zone."

Blair returned a scowl, then yanked off the tape covering the first welder's mouth.

"You jocks'll go down for this, I swear it," said the battered young man.

"You didn't beat me, did you," Blair said.

"That's what I've been telling your friends."

"But what about *your* friends," Maniac interjected. "They confessed."

"They'd say anything to make you stop," Blair retorted, then looked to the welder. "How long have you been down here?"

"I dunno. A day, maybe. I'm thirsty and starving. They haven't fed us."

Blair stood. "Let 'em go."

"No way," Maniac said, then charged up to Blair. "I'm not going to back to the brig."

"Yeah, you are."

Maniac poked Blair with an index finger. "I did this for you. These bastards had it coming with interest. And don't believe anything they say. They did this. *They did it.*"

Blair eyed the three welders. "Nope."

"How do you know?" Maniac challenged.

"You weren't there." He regarded Hunter. "Question. Do Obutu or Angel know about this?"

The captain shook his head. "Techs outside have kept it quiet for us. But that won't last long." He frowned at Maniac. "Guess we'll be turning ourselves in, Lieutenant. Can't keep these guys here forever."

Maniac spun away and swore three times, lifting his voice from a whisper to a shout. He pointed at the welders. "They started it."

"This is so juvenile that I can't believe I'm standing here," Blair said. "And thanks for showing me this. Thanks for making me an accomplice. You guys are unbelievable. And I'm sorry, but if you don't turn yourselves in, then I will."

"We'll take care of that," Hunter said.

Blair glared at them. "I'm going to get some sleep. Maybe I'll catch an hour before this particular pile of shit hits the fan." He hustled off, muttering, "What else can happen?"

Even as the hatch to his quarters shut behind Blair, Karista's voice rose from the silence of his mind. Then she appeared to him, as she had before, though she looked more ragged, and something in her gaze set off alarms that he tried to dismiss so that the guilt wouldn't get the better of him. "Christopher, I've so much to tell you."

"Wish I were in the mood to listen." He dropped onto his rack and began furiously untying his boots. "Got my own problems now."

"I know, but to be honest, they're not very important. You have to start thinking much bigger than yourself because Ivar Chu and the other Pilgrims who set out for Sirius so long ago are coming to save us."

"That's nice. Tell 'em I said hey. And I don't really need any saving unless one of them feels like investigating a hate crime."

"I'm serious. It's taken me a couple of days, but now I have proof that they're coming. And I need to get it to that admiral who wants destroy our systems because if he goes ahead with his plans, the Confederation will be wiped out."

He snickered. "Wow, sounds serious."

"Christopher, you've been having the visions again. I know you have. Every morning when you wake up you see blue. You hear the music and sometimes even the voice that tells you to be patient and to help whenever you can."

"So you're reading my script. I'm underwhelmed. Maybe we're all just delusional." He toed off the boots, then rose and slid out of his flight suit. "I want to take a shower. You're not really here, but you kind of are, so you mind?"

"The *Concordia* is in orbit of McDaniel. I need to get my evidence to that ship."

"Here we go..."

"I don't think I have it in me to steal another ride and get it through the Confed's no-fly zone. I've grown so cold and tired. You know yourself what it's like. I need you."

"Can't you just carry the evidence to them extrakinetically?"

"Maybe. But once they have it, there would no one there to explain what it is. And carrying something that far might incapacitate me for a week. I need you to get me to that ship. I've done everything I can on this end."

Thoughts circled, charged, evaporated, and were born in the seconds that Blair stood there, considering what she was asking. Even if he agreed to help, how the hell would he get through the no-fly zone and get planetside? It wasn't as if he could fly his Rapier in, land, and tell her to hop in the backseat. Rapiers were not atmospheric craft nor did they have backseats. Then, of course, remained the "little" problem of getting permission to leave.

"Christopher. Please."

No, he couldn't turn down that face, those eyes. *I'm not supposed to be in love with you. Angel would remind me of that.*
"I'll see what I can do."

"Don't waste time. According to the news here, if Aristee doesn't stand down and return the *Olympus* by Confed day one-five-eight, the systems and enclaves will be destroyed. The order just came in for a massive evacuation. They want to ease their consciences by saving some of us before they destroy our land. They think they can do that with impunity, but they have no idea how powerful the Pilgrims are."

"Wait a minute. They're evacuating the populace? Can you get on one of those ships?"

Her expression brightened. "I think so."

"We'll have to time this just right. I'll calculate the jumps to get me there, but you'll need to stay in touch. Wait a minute. What am I doing? If I don't get permission--"

"Were I you, I wouldn't waste time asking."

"I can't go AWOL. I'll have to go to Gerald."

"Just get here. The admiral has to see what I have."

"What do you have?"

"Remember that woman I told you I was going to see? Suffice it to say that the trip really paid off."

"I'll need more than that to convince my captain."

"All right. Close your eyes. And I'll show you."

He held up a palm. "I'll need evidence I can share with him, otherwise we're back to just my word."

She sighed in frustration. "I can't give you more."

"Can you put whatever you want to show me in his mind?"

"He's not a Pilgrim."

The realization came slowly and fused with a chill.

"Gerald's no Pilgrim. But I know someone else on board who is."

The environment suits supplied by the Kilrathi were at least twenty years old, and Paladin feared that the life support batteries would not hold a charge for long. Since the two guards with them had not been wearing translators, Paladin had been forced to mime his request for newer suits. One of the cats had heaved an exaggerated snarl, then had thudded away.

Ten minutes had passed. No new suits.

Poised at an airlock that separated the cellblock from an octagonal corridor festooned by conduits and thick with pale green nutrient gas, Paladin checked his life support and comm units one last time, did likewise for Aristee and the protur, then waved to another guard standing inside the lock.

"He looks thrilled to let us go," Aristee said as the door hissed open.

"The word humility doesn't translate into their language," commented the protur. "But I've taught them what it means."

"Care to say how?" Paladin asked.

"Patience."

Paladin's expression soured. "I hear that word again, I'll be--"

"Sick?" Aristee finished.

"No. I'll be forced to cut off the protur's lips so that he can't pronounce it."

"Oh, James," the protur said. "If only you'd just listen. And be--"

Paladin raised an index finger and scowled.

"--patient."

About to launch into a tirade that would criticize every aspect of the protur, right down the sandals he wore beneath the e-suit's boots, Paladin took in a deep breath, then the guard distracted him with a shaking of his head and wagging of his chin in a comical attempt to urge them forward.

They slipped into the octagonal corridor, where two more guards met and led them toward the broad doors of an elevator. Once inside, the lift carried them swiftly up for twenty seconds. Aristee complained that her suit was getting hot, but Paladin's check of climate controls showed systems nominal.

The lift doors finally opened to reveal a modest-sized hangar shaped like a triangle with the top sheared off. Several Imperial shuttles floated in zero-G moorings about twenty meters ahead, their bronze-colored bows narrowing into a quartet of sharp prongs that housed their navigation and sensor packages.

Beside them sat an antique scouting vessel in remarkably good condition, considering that it had to be at least three centuries old. Fifty or so meters beyond it, a pair of hangar doors parted with a tremor that rose into Paladin's gut. One of the guards raised a massive arm and flicked out a long nail to indicate which of the ships was theirs. Then both Kilrathi turned away and slunk back toward the lift.

Aristee and the protur started for the shuttle.

"I'm not getting on board," Paladin said, standing behind them. "Not until you talk."

"It makes no difference to me whether you go or stay," answered the protur without turning back. "And I'd tell you if I could. But I can't. And that's that, isn't it?"

"Why can't you talk?"

"It's neither my place nor desire. And to be honest, I get a certain thrill from seeing you squirm. You, standing on your mountain of Confederation dung, believe that what you're doing is right. You and all the others. You're so lost. You, like the Kilrathi, will... be.... humbled."

"James, I, uh, I can't--" Aristee collapsed at the foot of the shuttle's loading ramp.

He bounded to her, rolled her onto her back, then popped open the life support control panel on her lift wrist. The data bar for climate control showed all systems nominal, but her

suit's temperature had suddenly risen twenty degrees and continued to climb. He switched control to manual and pressed a button to bring down the heat. Damned old suits. No response.

"What's wrong?" cried the protur, hovering over them.

"Get out the way," Paladin shouted, then dragged Aristee up the ramp and into the shuttle's wide hold. He set her down, then practically dove for the hatch control even as the protur hustled inside. As the ramp lifted to seal into the hull, Paladin sprinted to the cockpit, where he found a Kilrathi pilot and navigator in the middle of a preflight check.

"Seal the cockpit. Switch to Earth normal atmosphere in the hold."

"We don't like to do that," said the pilot through his translator. "Your air promotes the corrosion of our instruments."

"You were ordered to get us safely out of here. And this is a shuttle equipped for prisoner transport. If you don't do as I say, one of your passengers is going to die. You'll fail your duty. Where's the honor in that?"

The big cat exchanged an unreadable look with his navigator, then cocked his head back to Paladin. "Sealing cockpit. Hold to Earth normal, twenty degrees Celsius."

Paladin scissored by the cockpit hatch as it began to close. He felt a powerful wind tug at his shoulders and checked

his external sensor as the pilot vented the nutrient gas and flushed the hold with seventy-eight percent nitrogen, twenty-one percent oxygen, and trace elements of argon, carbon dioxide, hydrogen, neon, and helium. The moment external readings flashed in the green, he unclipped and screwed off Aristee's helmet. Her head fell slack. Perspiration soaked her hair. As he fumbled to open the collar of her suit, her eyelids fluttered open, and a strange look washed over her face. "James," she said. "I saw them. You won't believe it, but I saw them."

Fear surged into Commander Obutu's expression as Karista's likeness flickered before him and Blair. She stood in Obutu's quarters and looked quite comfortable with her surroundings, despite the fact that her flesh lay light years away. "Are you ready?"

"My God, I've never seen anything like this," Obutu rasped. "Is that what you call her script?"

"Yeah. And we look the same on her end. We could leave this place and go to what we call the quilt, though I'm not sure you could visit it. I think you have to be an extrakinetic to go there."

Entirely rapt by Karista's image, Obutu barely managed a nod. "I thought you were lying."

"Karista? Show us what you have," Blair said.

Without warning, her image peeled away into a field of stars that encompassed the entire room. Even Blair, someone who had experienced the continuum and the quilt firsthand, felt insignificant and utterly awed by the vastness of the image.

And from that sweeping tableau emerged a grand fleet of ships that stole Blair's breath. The vessels glowed a pale white that darkened to azure around their edges, and their fluctuating hulls resembled banners, pennons, or sheets driven through the wind. Some equaled the Confederation's largest supercruisers in breadth and width, while others appeared so huge that Blair had trouble comprehending their size. He found himself floating between the magnificent vessels and sensed that they numbered in the millions, for their formation stretched back as far as he could perceive.

"This is just one of many Pilgrim war fleets," Karista said. "It's headed from the Virgo Cluster toward Confederation space. It'll jump through the Sirius system and be here within five days. At least one other fleet is headed toward Kilrah."

"Where did you get this information?" Obutu asked.

"From a woman here on McDaniel. The data is stored in the cells of leaves from her *veracia* tree. There are other trees just like hers growing on Faith, Promise, and a few in the enclaves. These Pilgrims wanted to let their own know that they were coming. We had a leaf analyzed. The data is like a real

time link to them. When it's accessed, we can get this close to them but no closer. The admiral needs to see this before he gives the order to destroy our systems and enclaves. The only way I can show him this is to have a leaf analyzed on board the *Concordia*. I need Christopher's help to get there."

"We'll send word to the *Concordia* immediately," Obutu said. "We'll tell them that we have evidence they must see before ordering an attack."

"But sir, a comm drone would be too slow, and the admiral could choose to ignore it. We need to get Karista to the *Concordia* within five days," Blair pointed out. "I've already calculated the jumps. I can get in there in about four days using a LARP variant Rapier, extra oh-two, and cells. Admiral Tolwyn needs to have a leaf in hand to believe any of this. I've helped him before. I think he'll listen to me."

"I see. And you want to go now?"

"Yes, sir."

In a wash of motion that left Blair astounded, the star field collapsed into the form of Karista. She looked at them for a second, then lifted her chin, squinting at something unseen. "There's... there's someone else who's seen this."

"What do you mean?" Blair asked. "I assumed others would know--especially Pilgrims on McDaniel."

"I mean someone on board the *Tiger Claw*. There's another Pilgrim here who's accessed this. And he must be an extrakinetic because he's managed to hide from me. I couldn't see his face. But I felt him."

"Another Pilgrim?" Blair asked dubiously. "And an extrakinetic? What are you going to say next? That the admiral himself is really a Pilgrim?"

"I'm serious, Christopher. There's another Pilgrim on board this ship. And like I said, he must be an extrakinetic and doesn't want to be discovered. I think he sensed what I was showing and couldn't resist a look for himself."

Another Pilgrim. Maybe like Obutu this Pilgrim had refused to reveal his heritage, and the present Pilgrim crisis only reinforced his decision. But something else about this revelation gnawed at Blair. He couldn't put his finger on it.

Until he replayed the attack.

Now he remembered thinking that one of his assailants had to be using a gravitic weapon akin to a Pilgrim's extrakinetic strength. But he had assured himself that there were no other Pilgrims on board the *Claw*, and he had been unable to explain why they would attack one of their own.

"All right," Blair said, maintaining his disinterest, "So there's another Pilgrim. So what. Commander, do you think you could convince Gerald to let me go?"

The intercom beeped.

"Yes?" Obutu answered.

"XO, report to the wardroom," Gerald ordered.

"Speak of the devil," Obutu muttered. "Sir, I want Lieutenant Blair to accompany me. We have an important request."

"Good, I want to see the lieutenant, anyway. And so does Lieutenant Commander Jhinda. Seems a couple jocks from First Squadron took the law into their own hands. And it seems that Mr. Blair's an accessory after the fact."

Obutu's gaze reduced Blair to a quivering idiot. He looked away, swore, then glanced to Karista, who had dissolved into the half-light.

Chapter 15

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.153

1730 HOURS LOCAL TIME

When Blair and Obutu arrived in the wardroom, they found Angel, Gerald, Hunter, Maniac, Lieutenant Commander Jhinda, and two fully armored Marine security personnel waiting for them.

"Hey, we're still missing three," Maniac blurted out.

"Maybe we can have their cake and punch delivered to sick bay."

Angel's gaze practically reached out and strangled Maniac.

"Lieutenant," she warned.

"Sir," Blair began, eyeing Gerald tentatively. "Before I say anything, should I have a lawyer present?"

"You won't need one," Jhinda said. The stocky black woman glanced up from her data slate and spoke in an imperious baritone that had become her trademark. "Captain St. John and Lieutenant Marshall explained what happened. Besides, during the time of the beating, you were on patrol, as indicated by your flight recorder." She tapped a knuckle on her slate where she had just pulled up the data. "If you were involved, Lieutenant, you have a strong alibi."

"I wasn't involved." Blair looked to Obutu, who returned a look of equal impatience.

"Captain, Lieutenant Blair and I need to speak with you privately," Obutu said emphatically.

"If it concerns this case," Jhinda said, "then you'd better say it right here, right now."

"It doesn't concern the case," Obutu fired back.

Gerald regarded the Marines. "Confine Captain St. John to his quarters and escort Lieutenant Marshall to the brig. We'll conduct a formal hearing on this matter at nineteen hundred."

"Sir, you can confine me to quarters as well," Maniac said. "I won't make any trouble."

Ignoring the plead, Gerald widened his gaze on the guards, who quickly moved forward. One took Hunter's elbow, and the other slapped a gloved hand on Maniac's shoulder.

Grimacing, Maniac turned and let the guard escort him away.

Once the hatch had closed after them, Gerald crossed to the front of the wardroom, folded his arms over his chest, and turned his dark eyes on Angel. "It's also come to my attention that you and Commander Obutu have been conducting an investigation of your own."

Angel took a step forward. "Sir--"

"I warned you of the consequences."

"But sir--"

"I said that if you interfered with Lieutenant Commander Jhinda's investigation, I'd have you brigged for a month."

"Sir, you can't possibly--"

"I can. And I will. Effective immediately, you are suspended from duty for a period of no less than thirty days. You'll be confined to quarters and allowed out only for sim training. Your meals will be delivered. What's left of your squadron will be turned over to Captain Berkholtz. Now, will you return to your quarters willingly, or should I call for a guard?"

"Sir, you can't suspend her," said Blair, clenching his fists. "Not at a time like this. We need every--"

"We need officers who know how to obey orders," Gerald boomed. "Officers who do not question the chain of command."

Blair got the message loud and clear, though it took an extreme effort to hold back from cursing at the captain. He turned to Angel, who nodded slowly and did everything she could to bottle up her own anger. She pivoted smartly and left.

"Sir, I understand what you're doing, and I don't question it," Obutu told Gerald. "What I'd like to know is if the Lieutenant Commander Jhinda has come any closer to identifying the perpetrators. The reason I ask is because Angel and I believe we have."

"To be honest, Commander, it's none of your business what the Lieutenant Commander has discovered or not discovered. You're the executive officer of this ship, and your duties don't involve investigating hate crimes. I've a mind to suspend you for three days. Consider that a warning."

Jhinda shifted along the perimeter of the room, zeroing in on Obutu. "So, what do you think you've found, Commander?"

"We believe three members of Captain Gunner's squadron are responsible for this, three pilots who go by the call signs Loaf, Mango, and R. We can't account for their whereabouts during the commission of the crime, and their officer profiles reveal that two of them, Loaf and R, descended from Confederation officers who fought and died in the Pilgrim War. We haven't confronted them. We've been trying to bait them into striking again."

"Which accounts for your sudden coming out as a Pilgrim," Jhinda concluded.

Obutu's expression tightened. "I believe that's something I would've revealed anyway, ma'am."

"Really?"

"Ma'am, I--"

"Enough," Gerald ordered, waving a hand. "Commander Jhinda, I assure that no one else will interfere with your investigation. You have my word."

"I hope so, Captain. Obstruction of justice is a serious offense. Suffice it to say that if any of your officers are convicted of such charge, they won't be returning to this carrier any time soon."

Even as Jhinda delivered her threat, Blair shook his head at Obutu and mouthed the words, "You lied to me."

The commander looked away.

So Obutu and Angel had thrown him to the sharks. And for what? To stir up trouble? To get his ass kicked again? He would have appreciated at least knowing that they had jammed a hook into his spine and had dangled him before the enemy. He suddenly felt no more affection for Obutu than he did for Gerald.

After thanking Jhinda for her attendance, Gerald pulled out a seat, sat, and thumped his elbows on the wardroom table. "Do you gentlemen realize how thin the ice is? That woman has the authority to indite and remove any one of us from duty." He sighed disgustedly.

Great. Now that we've got you all buttered up, you'll definitely let me go after Karista, Blair thought darkly.

"Sir, we need to send Lieutenant Blair to McDaniel's World. He needs to transport a woman named Karista Mullens to the *Concordia*. She has evidence that could affect Admiral Tolwyn's decision to bomb the Pilgrim systems and enclaves."

Gerald sat there for a moment, just breathing, his face registering no more than his discontent. "XO, I'm still waiting for the punch line."

"I'm serious, sir. We need to send the lieutenant there immediately. As he earlier pointed out, a comm drone would be too slow. I'm asking for permission to dispatch him to McDaniel. He will arrive there in about four days."

"Let's see now. Lieutenant Blair is needed here to help reinforce the no-fly zone. He's also part of an investigation to bring in three criminals who beat him and will be needed by Lieutenant Commander Jhinda if and when the time comes. And let's see now, you haven't produced any hard evidence to convince me that what you're saying is true, never mind the fact that you're both Pilgrims. In all, XO, I'd say that your audacity is exceeded only by the amount of bullshit coming out your mouth. You're wasting my time." Gerald smote fists on the table, then pushed himself up. "You're dismissed."

"Sir, I know you don't believe us, but you have to--" Blair cut himself off as the captain rounded the table and came within a quarter meter to stare him down.

"Let's go, Lieutenant," Obutu called.

"Captain, maybe we can't prove anything, but at least hear us out," Blair said, softening his tone. "Karista has evidence that a Pilgrim fleet is approaching Confederation space."

They'll come in through Sirius on one-five-eight. We might've lost that destroyer to a Pilgrim scouting party. If Tolwyn attacks the systems and enclaves, he'll provoke that fleet. And sir, you have no idea how many ships we're talking about. No idea."

"Admiral Tolwyn won't be issuing any orders, Lieutenant. Guess you haven't been paying attention to the news. The admiral's on Earth, and he's been arrested for that bombing in Washington. Space Marshal Gregarov is now commanding the fleet, and she won't be bombing anything. So this whole little mission of yours is pointless. Now, let me issue that order again. We'll call it a hearing test. *You're dismissed!*"

After the XO and Blair had left, Gerald went to the wardroom's comm terminal and contacted Marine Corps Lieutenant Tori Andover, head of ship's security.

"Lieutenant, I'd like you to continue your surveillance of Commander Obutu and Lieutenant Blair."

"Aye-aye, sir. Got a hunch, sir?"

"Yes, I do. Don't let them out of your sight."

"My people are on it, sir."

A mere fifteen minutes after Blair had returned to his quarters to do little more than curse and sulk, Commander

Obutu's voice piped in from the hatch's intercom. "Open up, Lieutenant."

Puzzled, Blair ordered the hatch open, and Obutu stepped inside. The ship's executive officer wore an olive drab flight suit that had to be at least fifteen years old. The patches on his sleeves indicated that he had belonged to 128th Fighter Wing, 54th Squadron, the "Phantoms," and the ghostly image of a Rapier streaked across one the largest emblems. He gripped the rim of his flight helmet, and though his call sign was upside down, Blair managed to read it: "Mystery Man." Obutu's reticence had obviously been recognized by his fellow pilots. Blair had suspected that the commander had been a pilot, though Obutu had only said that he had had some experience.

"Suit up, Mr. Blair."

He nodded and hustled to his locker.

Remarkable. He and the ship's XO were about to go AWOL.

"What the captain didn't tell us," Obutu went on, "is that the Confederation Senate voted to endorse Tolwyn's plan to destroy all systems and enclaves *before* he was arrested. As far as I know, they haven't changed their minds. So it doesn't matter who's in control of the Fourteenth. The vote has been cast, and if Aristee doesn't stand down and return the *Olympus* by one-five-eight, the attack will commence."

"Sir, we could be court-martialed for this."

"No, we *will* be court-martialed for this. But I saw those ships."

"I can do this alone," Blair said. "You have a lot more at stake than me. Why don't you stay here? Just help me get out."

"I'm coming for two reasons. We'll need clearance to get Karista back to the *Concordia*, otherwise we'll find ourselves in a furball. The space marshal might have an easier time believing me than you. I know you didn't score any points with her during the investigation into Paladin's defection."

"And what's the second reason?" Blair asked, zipping up his flight suit.

"I'm a Pilgrim."

Blair shrugged. "That doesn't mean anything, sir."

"It means *everything*." Obutu looked to Blair's locker. "Get your sidearm. You'll need it. The captain has had us watched for a while. We can bullshit our way into a couple of Rapiers, but our tails will tip-off Gerald before we're done preflighting."

"Why don't I just call down to flight control now and have a couple of fighters standing by?"

"Why don't you just call Gerald and tell him what we're planning to do--because Raznick will need authorization, and I can give it, but the moment I do, our names pop up on the roster and all Gerald has to do is glance at the board." He shifted

back toward the hatch. "Just trust me. Our rides will be ready."

Trembling like a cadet during his first training flight, Blair followed Obutu into the lift, and they headed down to the flight deck. As the doors opened on the flight control room, Blair tensed, hesitated a moment under Obutu's silent insistence, then kept after the man as they crossed quickly through the room, eliciting curious glances from the officers and non-comms on duty. At least old man Raznick was too busy supervising the landing of a patrol to look up from his terminal.

They double-timed down the stairs to the flight deck, checked in at Peterson's desk with a story from Obutu that he and Blair had classified business to attend to, then jogged along the bulkhead until they found the ample cover of Rapiers and Broadswords parked in their berths.

Weaving stealthily through the bewinged obstacle course, they finally reached two CF-117b-L Rapiers, variants of the standard utility fighter. The 117b-Ls had been outfitted with enhanced sensor packages and, Obutu explained, upgraded from seventy-two hours of life support to one hundred. They would, however, pay for that extra cruise time by losing the rotary

barrel neutron cannon. In it's place hung a blunt cone jammed to the gills with enhanced scanners and extra fuel tanks.

Surprisingly enough, Obutu had already ordered the ships preflighted, loaded with rations, and had asked the crews to remain quiet and leave when they had finished, lest they become involved in any wrong-doing. He quickly mounted a cockpit ladder rolled up to the starfighter nearest him.

Blair turned to mount his own ladder and nearly walked into the muzzle of a C-244 pistol gripped by a Marine whose battered face seemed assembled by a three-year-old. Stick the nose a little crooked here, the eyes a little crooked there. "Where you are, sir."

"Yeah," Blair sighed. "Where I am." He slowly raised his palms.

"And you, too, Commander."

Turning his head ever so slightly, Blair caught sight Obutu on the ladder. The XO showed his palms.

"Lieutenant, this is Nana. I have the Commander and Lieutenant Blair in custody. Request assistance."

"Private," Obutu said quietly. "If you don't lower that weapon, I'm going to come down this ladder. You don't want me to come down this ladder."

"That's right, sir. Remain where you are."

Obutu started down the ladder.

"Sir, I said to--"

Blair slapped his hands on the Marine's pistol, expecting the guy to fire in the struggle. But the Marine had kept the safety on, and even as Blair jerked the soldier toward him, then whirled to drive the guy into the cockpit ladder, someone else shoved him aside and jammed a stunstick into the Marine's neck. The jarhead fell slack, and Blair glanced up to find--of all people--Gunner Berkholtz holding the stick. "Uh, thank you, sir," Blair said, still reeling in shock.

"Mount up," Gunner said tersely, then he favored Obutu with a quick nod and saluted. "Can't buy you more time."

Blair opened his mouth to ask at least one of the half dozen questions that had him frowning until it hurt, but he saw that Obutu had already settled into his cockpit. He charged up the ladder and lowered himself into the Rapier.

He rushed through the identification and activation sequences so that he could establish a private comm link with Obutu. He finally found the channel as the Rapier's turbines issued their whine in the warm-up sequence.

"Sir, why did Gunner help us? What's in it for him? And don't you and Angel think three of his jocks are the ones who beat me? Or did you lie again?"

"We still think Gunner's people are responsible--but Gunner isn't. There's no love lost between us, but I've known him for

a while. And suffice it to say that this isn't the only favor he owes me. Besides, he'd like nothing more than to see me get court-martialed."

"Yeah, but he just took that same risk by helping us."

"His choice. His style. Now let's get the hell out of here. Andover's people are on their way."

Boss Raznick suddenly broke into their private channel. "Commander Obutu? The deck boss informs me that you and Lieutenant Blair are headed out on classified business, but classified or not, I don't have an authorization number to cross reference with the datanet."

"That's right, Boss," Obutu said coolly. "It's going to take a while for that number to appear. It's coming in via decrypt seven. Just give it a few minutes."

Blair had to hand it to Obutu; the man could shovel bullshit with the best of them.

"Very well, Commander. But I can't issue clearance until I cross reference," Raznick insisted.

"Understood."

The canopy lowered, seals locked, and pressurization began in Blair's cockpit. He clipped on his oxygen mask and felt a slight sting on his face even though his bruises had all but vanished. The life support clock began ticking: 1845 hours on calendar date 153. He would have oxygen until 2245 on 157.

After that, he had better be anywhere other than his cockpit. He glanced over at the XO, who shook a thumbs up. Blair returned the signal, took in a very long breath, and watched as Obutu dialed up the thrust and fired maneuvering thrusters, taking his Rapier into a three-meter hover. The XO advanced out of the berth, triggering a volley of questions from Boss Raznick.

"Merlin? Activate," Blair ordered.

The holograph flashed across the dash, then ignited into the semblance of the old man. Merlin sat on the dash and scowled at Blair. "What is it, you pain in the ass?"

Blair recoiled in surprise. "Merlin, I want you to monitor incoming traffic. The XO and I need to launch."

"Screw you."

"Merlin!"

"Treat me like shit, I treat you like shit. How do you like it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're not my friend. You just use me."

"You're a computer, for god's sake. Now do what computers do and assist me."

"Yeah, right."

"Fine. I'll use the ship's Tempest. Switch off."

"No."

Blair slapped his wrist, as though he could somehow fix Merlin's microprocessor embedded in his skin. "Switch off."

"You're go for launch, asshole. See you." The incensed old man shimmered away.

"We're clear," Blair told Obutu, still shaking his head over Merlin's insurgence. He would have to limit the computer's access to the datanet. Merlin had been surfing in waters of data way out of his league.

Blair switched off the general frequency so that he wouldn't have to listen to Boss Raznick's swearing. He throttled up and rose into his own parking hover, then waited as Obutu lined up, ran the red light for launch, and blasted through the energy curtain.

Flight crews began gathering near the runway to see what all the commotion was about, and as Blair lined up for his own takeoff, he lifted his thumb. Confused, a few offered nods while others looked up to the Plexi window of flight control. Boss Raznick stood behind the glass, pointed a finger at Blair, and strained his jaw muscles in a grand philippic of curses and threats.

One day Blair would get to know the man. As it was, Raznick represented the stereotypical, pilot-hating flight boss whose only pleasure came in disciplining jocks. But what caused him to be so argumentative?

Well, unauthorized takeoffs for one thing.

Blair thought of waving cockily to the boss, then decided not to turn the knife in Raznick's back. He rolled on the thrust and swept over the runway. The energy curtain now stood as the line between a court-martial and a severe reprimand.

Three, two, one, and Blair welcomed himself to Court-Martial City, home of the insubordinate and famous for its liberal judges and fast-food justice. Then again, he was being lenient with himself. As Angel had once pointed out to Maniac, the penalty for disobeying a direct order was, during wartime, considered treason and punishable by death.

It's not like you're putting any pressure on yourself, Blair thought. *And it's not like you don't have company in your misery.*

"Lieutenant," Obutu called. "Raznick's ordering three Rapiers from Third to break off from the no-fly zone and pursue us. Two more from Second are launching early to assist."

Blair scanned his radar scope, then looked over his shoulder. Behind them lay the patchy brown orb of Netheryana and the ever-shrinking cylinder of the *Tiger Claw*. Another glance to the scope revealed three blue blips closing in from the six o' clock perimeter. Two more would soon follow.

"We'll light the pipes on my mark," Obutu cried. "Ready, ready... mark!"

Chapter 16

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.153

1910 HOURS LOCAL TIME

After you fly Rapiers for a while, you realize that the afterburners, like drug pushers, condemn you as they supply that necessary and urgent fix of speed. While the self-contained fuel-oxidizer systems create all the punch you need for any given sortie, they inspire your fuel gauge into its own ballet of acceleration as your tank plunges toward empty. You want a boost in velocity? It'll cost you.

Now, when deploying on a long-range mission that, say, involves jumping across three systems to deliver a particular young woman to a particular supercruiser, you tend to think a whole lot more about fuel rationing than punching a continuous, four-hundred-and-fifty-kilometer-per-second hole in the vacuum.

Unless, of course, you have four bandits trying to ride the apex of your wash so that they can get missile lock on your AWOL butt and reduce you into a piece of vacuum-sealed jerky in the name of Confederation justice. Yes, that's when you realize

that there is a time and a place for everything, including speed.

With one hand locked on the control yoke, Blair eyed the velocity gauge at the top of his dash: 447 KPS. The set speed indicator beside it showed that he had selected 450 as the target acceleration. And yes, he feared looking at the fuel gauge. Instead, he reached forward and switched the left VDU to display the active weapon delivery system, praying that this variant of Rapier still packed the full array of missile ordnance. He sighed. It did.

Then his relief tightened into anxiety as he accidentally caught sight of the fuel gauge. "Sir? We can't hold this burn any longer."

"Got my Tempest on it," Obutu answered. "We have twenty-two seconds more. Eighteen seconds. Mark."

"Yes, sir. But once we throttle down, they'll get the lock."

"They're not shooting to kill, Lieutenant."

"Better remind them," Blair said as a spate of glistening neutron fire rented the vacuum just meters above his Rapier. He checked his Radar scope. One of the pilots had redlined his thrusters and now came in at nearly 460 KPS, though he couldn't do that for long. Then again, it didn't take long or much effort to press a secondary weapons trigger.

Another wave of neutron fire charged beneath Blair's Rapier, and several rounds struck glancing blows to the shields. The reverberation found his boots. He flicked his gaze to the tactical display, to the radar scope, then to the armor and shield indicator. Armor still in the green. Belly shield rebuilding.

Sudden movement on the scope drew his attention. A second Rapier pilot redlined himself alongside the first. The pilot opened up with wing-mounted laser cannons, delivering twin streams of bolts meant to lasso his target. As Blair broke into a thirty-degree dive, the incoming lit up his canopy and cut within a meter of the shields.

Though Blair could pop open a rear station and dump off a few Porcupine mines that would humble these two, no way in hell would he kill a comrade.

"Three seconds to burnout," Obutu cried. "Mark!"

Blair punched the burner control. The Rapier wrenched him forward, and the burners' characteristic howl faded. Velocity plunged below four hundred kilometers per second. He spotted Obutu's Rapier off his port bow and adjusted course to form on the XO's wing. White crosshairs winked on Blair's Heads Up Display, and he aligned them with the jump point coordinates. ETA to point: six minutes, with three minutes remaining until

they could fire their jump drives and reach near-light-speed velocities.

The two Rapiers pursuing him and the three who had targeted Obutu began consuming the gap since they could care less about rationing fuel. Rounds from neutron and laser cannons scissored through each other's wakes, carrying their gluttony for shields and armor even closer to Blair and Obutu.

Swearing under his breath, Blair realized that he needed to turn on the comm and distract the ordnance delivery guys tailgating his ass. "Pilgrim to pursuing craft, copy?"

"Blair? It's me and Mango," Loaf said. "C'mon, man. You don't want to do this."

The neutron and laser fire suddenly ceased.

"Guys, listen to me. I could tell you that the XO and I are trying to save the entire Confederation, but you'd think that's bullshit."

"Sir, you're ordered to return to base," announced Mango in a stoic tone. "If you fail to do so, we have orders to shoot to kill, roger."

"C'mon, Blair," Loaf pleaded. "Man, this is like desertion. I don't care how important you think this is. You know what they'll do to you?"

"Actually, I do. Don't feel bad about it, guys. I mean, we hardly know each other."

"Ninety seconds to drive fire," Obutu interjected.

Blair glanced at the XO on his display. "Copy that, sir. Initiating pre-jump sequence." He cocked his head toward the jump drive display panel at his elbow. "I'm warm and nominal. Establishing intership drive and navigation links." Blair worked the panel's touchpad, synchronizing his jump drive to Obutu's so that they would simultaneously plunge into the stable gravity well that lay ahead. Their Tempest AIs would account for each other's mass displacement and keep them at distances sufficient to avoid antigraviton interference.

"Sir, we won't permit you to jump," Mango said, the ice in his voice beginning to crack. "You're either goobered or got a death wish. I'm telling you, we *will* fire."

Blair snickered. "You don't have to convince me, Lieutenant."

"Sir, we're ordering you to stand down," Loaf said, now adopting his wingman's grave tone.

Twenty seconds to jump drive fire.

The tactical display chirped and flashed a warning that both Rapiers had locked on to Blair. Glowing red lines extended from the two blips behind him and penetrated a three-dimensional simulacrum of the Rapier.

"Stand down now," Mango shouted. "Last warning.

Fifteen seconds to drive fire.

Blair switched the comm channel to the frequency Obutu and his pursuers were using. No surprise. Their conversation mirrored the one he was having with his own shadows.

Ten seconds.

Alarms drummed rapidly in the cockpit as Mango and Loaf-- the two jocks who Obutu and Angel believed had beaten him--now had the opportunity to finish job without penalty.

Or maybe they weren't responsible. They simply acted on orders now. In any event, the missiles would reach Blair's Rapier two seconds before he could fire the jump drive and outrun them. If he fired the drive too early, the computer would have to recalculate the entire jump, which would mean pulling away from the gravity well to allow it the half dozen or more minutes needed. Sure, Blair could feel his way through the well, but he wasn't sure about Obutu's abilities. He had to fire the jump drive on schedule, yet divert the missiles.

Though Blair had a solution to the problem, he feared it more than the oncoming missiles. If he only had choice... He closed his eyes and reached deeply into himself, finding the continuum and forcing himself up and away from the Rapier. He materialized beside the first pair of missiles and willed them into each other, then glided unharmed through the white-hot orb of their collision. Before the flash faded, Blair found the next two rockets and drew them together as though he were

connecting the leads of live wires. The Dumb-Fire missiles swallowed each other in a burst that crowned Blair's incorporeal form.

At once, the consequential cold from using his extrakinetic ability on inanimate objects coursed through him so fiercely that he found it hard to breathe. He forced himself to Obutu's Rapier, spotted the three missiles punching into the XO's exhaust, then shrieked as he sent an impulse to each rocket's triggering system. A trio of short-lived suns birthed in Obutu's wash.

Three seconds to jump drive fire.

Blair willed himself back to his Rapier and simultaneously reached out to engage the jump drive.

Something held him above Obutu's fighter.

He pushed against the familiar energy and turned back to watch both Rapiers fire jump engines and suddenly stretch into points of light that held a moment, a moment more, then winked out.

Though Blair had successfully engaged his jump drive while still outside of himself, he still could not return to his starfighter. The energy gripped his wrists, and as he struggled to free himself, the energy took form.

With bulb-shaped eyes that regarded him unblinkingly and a torso shaped like the front bumper of a delivery hover,

Lieutenant Victor "Mango" O'Brien jerked Blair's arms apart as though he were about to pin Blair to a crucifix.

Just then, the three Rapiers that had been hunting Obutu streaked directly through them, and as they did, Blair rolled his wrist inward and slipped out of Mango's grasp.

"So you're the Pilgrim Karista felt," Blair said. "Then you saw the ships. You saw them. And you know why we're leaving. You know we have to."

"I can kill you in here, Blair. Did Karista teach you that?" Mango lunged forward to seize Blair's throat.

Blair forced himself deeper into Mango's script, realizing that, indeed, the lieutenant was one of the "welders" who had beaten him, the one who had not spoken. Mango had held him down with an extrakinetic force. Now if Blair could penetrate deeply enough into Mango's thoughts, he would learn the identities of the others.

But he had another desire at moment: to breathe. As Mango choked him here, his body seated in the Rapier gasped for air. He dug fingers into Mango's wrists until the jock groaned and suddenly fell back.

"You're a Pilgrim," Blair screamed. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm a cursed man, Blair. It's my goddamned blood." Mango hunched over, arms outstretched as he searched for an opening in Blair's own defenses.

"You can't deny who you are," Blair said through clenched teeth. "And you can't deal with it by beating other Pilgrims."

"Our XO should be glad he's not an extrakinetic. He would've gone down first. Then you. Don't you get it? I hate who I am. I *hate* it."

"So that gives you a license to beat up other Pilgrims?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah. You have no idea how many fanatics I've shoved back down Ivar's throat. I can't serve with Pilgrims. I won't. And the fleet that's coming? Bring 'em on! The Confederation will kick their asses."

Another force tugged on Blair's shoulders, and he realized that his Rapier was about to reach Point of No Return velocity for the gravity well. He had to leave.

And Mango sensed that. He sprang on Blair, who ducked and turned past the man, then swept himself away to find his Rapier. He descended, and, with a horrific shiver, returned to his body.

"Point of No Return velocity achieved," said the onboard computer. "System lock activated. Pilot, you are committed to the jump."

"Blair, you with me?" Obutu hailed. "Blair?"

"Copy, sir."

"I've been hailing you. Got a comm problem?"

"No, sir. But I found our other Pilgrim. It's Mango, from Gunner's squadron."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. But we don't have any evidence against him, and I don't know anyone who will take us seriously--especially now."

"You're probably right. But there are other ways to go about this... Now then, we're thirty-three seconds off the jump. Systems nominal."

Even as Obutu finished, the G forces drove Blair hard into his seat.

But then he realized that something else had added its presence to the G force and dwelled within, trying to conceal itself. Blair lifted himself up and into the continuum, where he found Mango in the cockpit, shifting in open air and passing through instrumentation as though it were incorporeal instead of him. The pilot stared intently at Blair's jump drive control, and his fingers drummed on the touchpad.

Realizing that Blair had entered the continuum, Mango looked up from the console and flashed his teeth. "You ain't going anywhere." In a movement so quick that Blair could hardly react, Mango drove his forearm against Blair's chest and used his free hand to continue working the jump drive control panel.

Blair seized Mango's wrist and forced him back, if only a little. Mango applied more pressure, and the pilot's arm felt like a slab of concrete pinning Blair to his seat.

"Warning: jump drive deactivation sequence not possible," the computer said. "Jump drive lockout in progress."

"Guess I am going somewhere," Blair said, then groaned as he forced Mango away from the panel.

"You got me locked out of the drive but not life support," Mango said, then ripped himself free and whirled to a panel on the pit's starboard side.

Blair allowed himself a whole second to gasp before he slapped gloved hands on Mango's shoulder and jerked him back.

In the meantime, the Heads Up Display switched to show a glowing, cone-shaped glide path funneling toward the gravity well ahead. Coordinates appeared nominal as the autopilot adjusted for gravitic and other temporal disturbances.

And the report remained that way for another two seconds until Mango switched off the autopilot and the Rapier suddenly veered off course amid a duet of rapidly beeping alarms. Then the pilot turned his attention back to the life support panel.

Yes, Karista had clearly explained how in the continuum extrakinetic strength equals physical strength, which simply meant that both in and outside of the continuum, Mango had the advantage.

Blair bolted out of the continuum. "Merlin. Activate."

"What is it?" the hologram groaned as he quavered on and paced a winding path of air.

"Switch ship back to autopilot. And if there's any tampering with life support, order systems back to nominal."

"Who the f--"

"Merlin! I order you to obey."

"--do you think you are?"

"Warning: life support system disengaged. Oh-two flow will shut down in five seconds."

"I'm going to die here, Merlin! And when I go--"

"I hear you," the old man said through a sigh. "I'll get to work."

The Rapier shimmied as the jump drive fired another burst. Blair cocked his head to the panel and watched the seconds to jump flash down from nine, eight--

"Life support system engaged."

--seven, six, five--

Blair glimpsed into the continuum for a millisecond and found Mango beating his fist violently on the life support panel. No, the pilot could not work as quickly as Merlin did. Each override that he tapped in was as quickly overridden by Blair's PPC.

--four, three, two--

The wavering sea of darkness that pooled before the Rapier and suddenly streaked into great glowing paws that cupped the fighter for... a moment? A week? A year? An eternity?

With his senses shutdown and residing purely in the continuum, Blair watched them come, all of them, the Pilgrims from the *Olympus*, the ones who had joined with him to battle the Kilrathi that last time. He saw the pudgy boy, the woman who had held his hand, and the rest all coming forward to rip Mango from the cockpit.

And there was Karista at the front of the group, staring at him with an expression daubed heavily with sadness. "There are too many like him," she said, tipping her head toward Mango. "I wish he wasn't so ashamed."

"Don't hurt him," Blair said.

"But he--"

"Just get him away."

They vanished, along with Mango, as an utter darkness and silence smothered Blair. Even his thoughts felt crushed under the unrecognizable power.

After a time that he could not judge, music rose from the omnipresent silence, and as the darkness bled off into a sheet of blue, Blair recognized the music. The flute player of his visions had returned to lull him with a new melody.

As he stared deeper into the blue, he saw his mother come forward and nod. "It's okay, now Christopher. They're coming. And it's finally time for you know who you are."

"You once said that if I did, I would fall like others. I tried. I fell. But Karista saved me. What about now? Why are they coming? What will they tell me about who I am?"

"The truth, Christopher. Only the truth."

"Which is?"

A triple crack of thunder resounded in his ears, and a jerk from braking thrusters sent Blair slamming into his harness. A billion streaks of light rolled back into pinpoints as the jump engines announced with a decrescendo that he had returned to normal space.

The VDU snapped on with an image of Obutu. "Blair, you copy?"

"I'm here, sir."

"We're tight on the beacon and about twenty-two-point-two-one hours from the Blackmane jump point. That'll take us to Alliance, then another jump to McDaniel."

Blair pulled up his own navigation map and confirmed Obutu's assessment. "Sir, if we follow the shipping lanes, we can shave a couple hours off our time."

"I don't want to risk contact with any other ships. But the LSR looks clear for now. We'll follow the lanes until first contact."

"Aye, sir. And sir? Sorry I got you into this."

"I did the getting myself, Lieutenant. Just set for auto and keep your eyes bugged. I'll take second watch in four hours."

Breathing a long sigh of relief, Blair complied, then he unclipped his mask and palmed sweat from his brow. He glimpsed course ahead, and for a second he saw a flash of blue far off to port. When he looked again, only the icy void stared back.

Chapter 17

SOL SECTOR, TERRA QUADRANT

PLANET EARTH

WASHINGTON NAVAL HEADQUARTERS

JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL'S OFFICE

2654.155

0800 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

For the past four days, Admiral Geoffrey Tolwyn had been under the constant scrutiny of three Marine guards. In deference to Tolwyn's long, distinguished record, Lieutenant Commander Vincent Chopra of the JAG office had not ordered Tolwyn transferred to the nearest brig but had allowed him to return to his hotel room after each day's questioning. However, Tolwyn's request for a private meeting with President Vasura had been denied.

The interrogation had been arduous and had reached a stalemate because Tolwyn would not give up his contacts in Confed Naval Intelligence. These contacts had provided Tolwyn with evidence that established Space Marshal Gregarov's involvement in a conspiracy to allow Amity Aristee to construct a hopper drive on board the *Olympus*. Tolwyn's contacts had further revealed that the space marshal and President Vasura had been exchanging a suspiciously large number of encrypted

communiqués during the past several months. Unfortunately, that fact wasn't enough to prove that Vasura and Gregarov had schemed together and that Gregarov now wanted Vasura dead. Tolwyn had been forced to turn over a particular communiqué that his contacts had decrypted, a communiqué that he had thought would provide incontrovertible evidence against Vasura and Gregarov.

But JAG communications investigators had already proven that Tolwyn could have tampered with the evidence. The admiral would need corroborating witnesses from Intell to strengthen his case. Despite his lawyer's pressing, Tolwyn refused to produce those witnesses.

Now the situation had grown worse. As predicted, Gregarov had provided the JAG with falsified transmissions indicating that Tolwyn and Bellegarde had hired a group of Pilgrim saboteurs to bomb the Great Hall of Assembly. While Lieutenant Commander Chopra had trouble understanding the motivation behind such an act, he had even more trouble trying to discount the evidence because Gregarov's contacts at Intell were more than willing to testify to the validity of the transmissions.

As Tolwyn, his lawyer, and his Marine escort stepped into the hearing room, Tolwyn immediately noticed that a tribunal comprised of two other admirals, four field marshals, two vice-admirals, and Admiral Zeyhe and Lieutenant Commander Chopra of the JAG had been assembled. Grim faces suggested that Tolwyn

had stumbled into his own auto-da-fé in which he would be led to a dais and shouted toward execution by his peers. In truth, they would formally indict him here, then schedule his court-martial for a much later date, dragging it all out for his extreme displeasure. He guessed that Richard had already been arrested and would be transported to Earth. And while all of this went on, somewhere out there lay Amity Aristee, waiting to strike. While the tribunal toiled over this indictment, Aristee would take a million more lives.

"Good morning, Admiral," Chopra said.

During their long hours spent together, Tolwyn had become an expert in reading the tall, gray-haired man's tone. And at the moment, he disliked what he read. "Good morning." Tolwyn saluted the group, then took a seat beside his attorney.

"I suspect you know why we're here," said Admiral Zeyhe. "And it's good to see you again, Geoff. Wish the circumstances were better. And I would have been here sooner, but I was out in Centauri."

"That's all right, Jaza," Tolwyn said sadly, reflecting on the twenty years he had known Zeyhe. "You'll still catch the grand finale."

Even as Zeyhe nodded and turned his gaze down to the reports before him, the door suddenly opened and in walked a young man dressed in a black suit that broadcast his job as a

Confederation Secret Service agent. Not much secret about his appearance. Then a second agent appeared, a short-haired woman whose gaze probed the corners of the room as though she were inspecting the cleaning person's supposed removal of the cobwebs. Finally, President Vasura herself strutted into the room and brought the tribunal to their feet. Fifty and fit, with modest good looks and the prerequisite poise of a president, Vasura swept herself forward, and though no one stood in her way, any one within that path would have been trampled.

Tolwyn rose as the president came to him and gave a curt nod. "Commodore Bellegarde contacted me," she said softly, then turned and advanced toward the tribunal. She removed a data disc from the leather binder she held under an arm, then handed it Zeyhe. For a few minutes they spoke too softly for Tolwyn to hear.

Then, duplicating the swiftness of her entrance, the president spun on her heel and departed, twin flashes of black cotton riding her wake.

Members of the tribunal conferred a moment more, and Tolwyn's lawyer, Commander Sahara Solz, a sixty year old defense counsel with a record nearly as long and remarkable as Tolwyn's, leaned toward him and whispered, "What did she tell you?"

"Richard got to her."

"This is great," Solz said through a broad grin. "I'll bet she gave them evidence against Gregarov."

"Don't be so certain. If Richard got to her, then he probably used a threat. She'll retaliate. Somehow."

Zeyhe suddenly announced that the hearing would reconvene at 1300 hours after lunch. Solz cocked her brow at Tolwyn, who simply shrugged. He would not allow his spirits to rise over what could be the exact opposite of his expectations. He decided to return to his nearby hotel room. There, he would meditate on the situation while Solz would ramble on about the endless possibilities now before them.

Tolwyn's watchphone beeped at 1130 hours. He answered as he watched Solz, who had taken a seat at the hotel room's desk, begin working her data slate as through it were a piano.

Only a voice came through the watchphone channel, a familiar female voice rising slightly above the static created by a decryption wave. "Sir, we just received word that President Vasura is dead. Cause still unknown."

After letting that sink in, Tolwyn closed his eyes. "Thank you." He cut the channel with his contact at Intell.

"Who was that?" Solz asked.

"I guess it'll take a while before the news people get it," he began, opening his eyes. "Gregarov got to Vasura. Or at least her people did. The president is dead."

The evacuation of Pilgrim systems and enclaves had turned into a nightmarish exodus, as Commodore Richard Bellegarde predicted it would. Capital ships of the Fourteenth Fleet had been charged with maintaining no-fly zones over the systems and enclaves, which quite simply meant that no unauthorized ships could travel into or depart from those designations. But the order had come in two days prior, only hours after Bellegarde had ordered Space Marshal Gregarov confined to the brig. Now, each evacuating transport had to be verified, given an evacuation authorization number, and directed to another system.

In Bellegarde's Area of Operations over McDaniel's World, finding homes for the refugees had quickly become an exercise in futility. He could not send them on to Tamayo, since that system already had a Pilgrim enclave called Divinity whose residents had evacuated to the nearby and over-populated world of Baldis-Ingram. He could not send them on to the Alliance system, since millions from the worlds of Faith and Promise were en route there. He had already sent tens of thousands on to the Acrux system, despite the refusal he had received from the ambassadors of the two inhabited planets there. Thus, a

flotilla of nearly seven thousand civilian scouts, shuttles, and transports had quickly gathered behind the *Concordia* and her battle group, turning the Sphere of Operations into a precarious obstacle course that swelled by the hour.

Bellegarde gave an exaggerated sigh as he took another look at Radar Officer Abrams's scope and contemplated the traffic jam astern.

"Thirteen collisions already, sir. Marines have had to evac two of those ships and transfer the civvies to others. We took fourteen wounded on board," Abrams reported.

"Collisions? For Pilgrims, they sure can't navigate. What happened to that perfect sense of direction?"

"I don't know, sir."

With another sigh of frustration, Bellegarde moved forward to the *Concordia's* command chair and grimaced. True, he had always wanted a command of his own, but give him a straight-out war with clearly defined lines and enemies. His "us against them" philosophy had reared its ugly head again. He sat and waited for the next fire to put out.

"Sir?"

And the flames rage on. He cocked his head toward Comm Officer Wilks. "Yes?"

"That Marine troopship from the *Carraway* is still dogging us, sir. The lieutenant says that if you don't surrender the *Concordia*, he will, as he put it, shoot his way in."

"Inform Lieutenant Xao that if a single bolt touches my shields, I'll blow him and his crew back to Tripoli. Understood?"

"Aye, sir."

The space marshal's sudden "incapacitation" had obviously aroused suspicions. Bellegarde had been ordered to surrender the vessel and battle group to Gregarov. Since Bellegarde had yet to do so, the brass had turned elements of his own battle group against him. The destroyer *CS Carraway* was commanded by a woman named Boonesta who had been the only captain to disagree with Bellegarde's plan to maintain control of the battle group. He could not blame her, though. Career management and preservation remained her top priority. Contrarily, Bellegarde lived a gambler's life, which might get him into a shooting war with one of his own ships. As always, he would play his hand until the bitter or victorious end.

"Message conveyed to Lieutenant Xao, sir," Wilks said. "He demands to speak with you."

Bellegarde swiveled violently and bounded out of the chair. He crossed to the comm station as Wilks shifted aside so that

Bellegarde could lock gazes with the stone-faced Marine on the viewer. "Stand down, Xao."

"I can't do that, sir. Captain Boonesta has ordered me and my people to board your ship. If you continue upon this course of action and fail to let us approach and board, we have the authority under Confederation Naval regulations to do so by force."

"Lieutenant, you know what will happen if you try that."

"I do, sir. But I have my orders."

"Standby." Bellegarde thumbed the pause button. "Get me Boonesta."

Wilks nodded, contacted the comm officer aboard the *Carraway*, then established a direct link to the captain's quarters. Boonesta spun her desk chair toward the camera and shook her head. "You can't be serious, Richard."

"Neither can you."

She swore under her breath, then drew her gray-and-blond hair into a ponytail. "What do you expect me to do? We have to come aboard."

"Won't happen."

"Where's the space marshal?"

"Incapacitated."

Boonesta bit her lip, averted her gaze for a second, then her face flushed. "Cut the bullshit, Richard. You got her in the brig or what?"

"Just listen to me. We put her in command, and this whole thing goes to hell. She'll go against the senate and order a stand down. This is the right thing to do. We both know that. The other skippers know that. We received orders that we have deemed unsound. The regs permit us--"

"Don't come at me with regs. You're breaking the chain of command, Richard. And you've arrested someone without evidence, without the authority, without good sense. I can and will not condone this course of action. My troops will board your vessel. No question about it."

"In a few days the order will come in for us to start bombing McDaniel's World. That's our job here. If we place Gregarov back in command, she will interfere with our duty, and anyone who obstructs me from obeying my orders is removed."

"Well put, Richard--and that's exactly why I need to remove you. I'm going to order my troopship to approach your aft bay. If you fire upon it, I'll be forced to fire upon the *Concordia*. Think about it, Richard. Take a breath. Think about it. Boonesta out."

Bellegarde stiffened and turned away from the screen. His bridge officers shifted uncomfortably in their seats, and a few

gazes met his. Earlier, he had announced his intentions to the crew, and not one officer had openly protested his decision to remain in command, though he knew the scuttlebutt continued to circulate. How far would he let this go?

He placed a consoling hand on Wilks's shoulder. "Contact Boss Raznick. Tell him to issue clearance to Lieutenant Xao."

Wilks frowned. "Aye, sir."

"Then tell Lieutenant Davey that I want a Marine security force to detain Xao's people in the landing bay. Tell them to exercise extreme caution. I want those Marines detained--not injured."

"Aye-aye, sir."

Executive officer Geranata left the port observation station and met Bellegarde back at the command chair. Olive-skinned, with tightly-curled hair and a gaze that seemed continually glazed by the responsibilities of his rank, Geranata held himself a moment, then finally spoke. "Sir, you're only delaying the inevitable. Once Boonesta loses contact--"

"I know, Eric. She might send another troopship, and right now she's lobbying for help from the rest of the battle group. She'll try to turn the rest of those skippers against us. We need a conference. I have tell them everything that's going on. I mean all of it."

"You think that's wise, sir?"

"My grandfather once told me that there's no wisdom without truth. Let's see if he was right."

In recent days, Lieutenant Todd "Maniac" Marshall had spent more time pummeling Confederation personnel than piloting his Rapier and skinning Kilrathi with his neutron gun. He had taken out his fury on the complexion of a SIRE control officer whom he had assumed played a role in Blair's beating. That had earned him three days in the brig and a stiff fine. Then he and Hunter had fought with three class-two welders whom they believed were responsible for beating Blair. The hearing on that case had resulted in an even stiffer fine and ten days in the brig. Still, Lieutenant Commander Jhinda of the JAG considered the punishment much too lenient. Captain Gerald had assured her--and Hunter and Maniac--that one more incident would impel him to do everything within his power to boot the two pilots off of his ship with a recommendation for their dishonorable discharges. It was not in Gerald's nature to make idle threats.

Just ask Angel, Maniac thought as his gaze swam lazily across the overhead of his cell. He lay on his bunk, glad that at least his confinement would only last another eight days, while Angel had been relieved of her command and confined to her quarters for over three times as long.

Yeah, only another eight days, but every day I sit in here doing nothing, I'm getting weaker--while the enemy is out there, getting stronger. Don't these pogues understand that? Nah. Fact is, they don't care. It's all about saving your own ass. But they forget that the ball's going to drop on one-five-eight. Where will old Maniac be? Right here in my little metal box. Brilliant use of personnel. Let's see, now. I'm captain of this sad excuse for a strike carrier. The fleet's tied up, and the cats could attack. Hmmm. Think I'll lock up all of my best pilots. Yeah, life's overrated anyway.

Footsteps. It's 1800. Probably the guards with dinner. They try to feed me that soup again and somebody's going to make a hot, wet fashion statement.

"Hey."

Maniac shuddered at the sound of her voice. She carried his dinner tray and seemed uncertain of whether she wanted to smile or gaze pitifully at him. "They let you come?" he asked.

Zarya nodded. "I dug through the regs, and there's a loophole in visitation rights for those serving time under a captain's direct disciplinary action."

"Whatever. Glad you're here." He slid to the edge of the bunk and accepted the tray through a slot in the bars. Damned soup again. Cream-based. No, it just wouldn't look good on

her, and she probably wouldn't visit again. "I miss you," he said, dropping a spoon in his meal and stirring out the steam.

"No, you don't."

"Come over here, and I'll prove it." He set the tray aside, rose, and went to the bars.

She retreated. "I've been thinking."

"Really?" He threw up his hands. "I'm making that a career."

"You know, we got together, and I really admired the way you handled yourself," she began in a little song that hinted at the venerable, the inevitable I-don't-think-we-should-see-each-other-anymore ending. "I thought I'd finally found someone who, I don't know, someone who had a *real* spirit."

"So how do you like flying with Gunner's squadron?" he suddenly interjected.

"We're not talking about that."

He gripped the bars and squeezed. "I know it's hard for you. If you just--"

"This was a mistake. We jumped into this way too soon." She looked to the floor for solace. "And you and I, we're just, I don't know... We can't do this anymore."

"Of course it ain't working for you. It ain't working for me, either! For god's sake, I sat in a cell on board the

Olympus, then I'm locked up for three days for hitting that SCO, now I'm in for another ten for whacking those welders."

"Don't you get it, Todd? You're proving my point. You're whole life is about looking before you leap. It was a fun ride for a while. But now it's just... old."

Squeezing the bars even tighter, Maniac stood there, just breathing and realizing that words were bullshit. He looked at her until she felt so uncomfortable that she had to turn away.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, then shambled off.

He snickered. "I'm sure you are." Then, swearing under his breath, he fell back onto his cot and slapped an arm over his eyes. A few years ago, being dumped would have driven him into another woman's bed before the day's end. He had never spent long periods of time grieving for a relationship; there had always been someone else to help mend the wounds.

But for once he didn't want someone else. He looked around the cell and knew that if didn't grow up soon, his relationships and his career would all wind up here. Knowing about it was one thing, but nothing would change unless he acted. That was the hard part...

Why couldn't life come as naturally as flying?

Chapter 18

VEGA SECTOR, ROBERT'S QUADRANT

CS *HARBINGER* AND CS *FEYT-TANG*

DISPATCHED FROM NAVAL STATION THOR

2654.156

0215 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Long range spectral report coming in, ma'am," reported James Ki, the *Harbinger's* tactical officer. "Better have a look."

Captain Chrystina Alsa lifted her brows, nodded at the comm screen, then hustled out of the destroyer's ready room. She passed through a narrow hall made even more narrow by the thick conduits bolted to its walls. Once in command and control, she double-timed for Ki's station. "Let's see it."

One of Ki's six screens revealed a cloud of debris several thousand kilometers in diameter and expanding by the minute. Thermal images indicated that hundreds of pieces still retained some heat, which was remarkable given the extreme cold of interstellar space and symptomatic of a terrifically hot explosion. Two other screens came to life with data bars that reported on the debris's composition: mostly durasteel and plastisteel, the primary materials of Confederation and Kilrathi ships, respectively. The scanners had also identified fragments

of Kilrathi and human corpses among the flotsam, and the death toll steadily increased.

The largest of Ki's screens divided into three displays. Telescopic imagers zoomed on each element of debris, identified it, then turned it over to another computer that would create a simulacrum of the object destroyed. There, before Alsa's eyes, three capital ships were slowly reassembled. As the system continued that process, a third computer compared those images to a database of known Kilrathi and Confederation capital ships.

"What do you think?" Alsa asked.

Ki skimmed his screens. "Analysis is still incomplete, and we're comparing scans with the *Feyt-Tang*, but it's a safe bet that two Kilrathi cap ships went up against at least one of ours. I've inputted the *Olympus's* footprint and pasted it at the top of the list." A pulsing alarm drove Ki's attention to his touchpad. "Got it, ma'am." His gaze lit. "Positive ID on the *Olympus*. Second ship was the Kilrathi superdreadnought KIS *Shak'Ar'Roc*. Third vessel definitely Kilrathi. Awaiting ID."

"So the cats did our work for us," Alsa said. "Mr. Ki, the second you have a complete analysis, I want it encrypted and downloaded to a comm drone. Better yet, make that two comm drones. Send one back to Thor and send the other directly to the *Concordia*. We may have just saved millions of lives, be they Pilgrim or otherwise."

"Maybe not, ma'am. At best speed, our comm drone won't reach the *Concordia* for another forty-seven-point-nine-eight hours. Relays through Thor will take even longer. Tolwyn's clock runs out on one-five-eight. We got here about three hours too late."

Karista and Dennet had left Sostur Inanna Pandathy's cabin in Ardentia and had spent the last five days living on the rooftops and in the alleyways of small businesses of Ivar City. They had noticed a sharp increase in Confederation Marine activity and had resisted the temptation to venture down to I-CAS, the city's air and spaceport, to see if they could evacuate before the official order came in. Being wanted criminals who had stolen a Marine Corps troopship from a Pilgrim safe camp on Mars, they would have been apprehended by Marines during the check-in process. They had planned to wait until the evacuation had reached a fever pitch, since the chaos would offer good cover.

Karista had contacted Blair and had learned that he and Commander Obutu were en route and would arrive at approximately 1845 hours on 157. Now, keeping her head low and remaining close to Dennet as they shoved their way through the masses that had been pouring into the spaceport since the official order had come in, she glanced at her watch and converted local time to

Confed Standard Time: 1750 hours, 156. She had just over a day until Blair arrived. She and Dennet had heard that most of the evacuating ships had remained in orbit with the *Concordia* battle group, thus getting off planet early would help. Blair would come, she would simply guide him to their ship, and he would escort them on to the *Concordia*. Of course, Karista might have to "persuade" the shuttle's pilot. No problem. She had been conserving energy for the past five days and felt up to the task.

Word had filtered down through the crowd that the Marines stationed at the port's one hundred and twenty-seven gates had been so overwhelmed with the extra precaution of manually checking-in Pilgrims that they had given up and now asked individuals to pass through the weapons scanner. Trouble was, that scanner might also be equipped with a retina ID. Karista would have to disable that unit before she and Dennet moved through the gate.

They reached a hub of sorts, with lines of people forming the spokes of a colossal wheel. Babies cried. People shouted and elbowed past her, jockeying for a better position on line. Fights broke out. Marine gunfire thundered in great echoes up to the high-ceilinged terminal. Surprisingly, the line they had chosen moved swiftly forward.

Dennet tugged at the hem of the Pilgrim robe he had borrowed from Pandathy's neighbor, a robe much too short but nonetheless clean. "If they fail to recognize me as a criminal, I'm certain they'll arrest me for wearing this abomination."

"Don't worry," Karista said, smiling weakly. "We all look alike to them. Fanatics in white robes."

"As opposed to fanatics in red armor?"

"Exactly."

He tightened his lips and, being a head taller than the crowd, peered to the front of their line. "At this rate, we should be up there in about an hour. I see light at the end of tunnel, of course it's night now and it's taken us all day to see the light."

"Some people have waited on longer lines just to catch a glimpse of the protur."

"Not me." Dennet turned his gaze floorward. "Kari, I've a confession. I'm not sure if I believe any of this. I mean a leaf of all things, a leaf from an old woman who wants more than anything to believe. What if she's wrong? What if all of this is for nothing?"

"I saw it myself."

"And that's why I've come. I believe in you. But I don't want you to get hurt if this turns out to be nothing more than delusion and superstition. If they destroy our worlds, I don't

know how we'll get over something like that. Perhaps knowing that we tried to stop it will help, if just a little."

"I'm not worried about our worlds, Dennet. The original Pilgrims are coming, and if they find us under attack, the Confederation as we know it will cease to exist. I wouldn't want to live knowing that we failed to bring peace to both sides."

"Oh, how nice it would be if for once you were selfish. Refreshing. Yes. A sostur without a mission. Where is that woman?"

Karista contemplated his question for a moment before a heavy-set man came toppling toward her. She shifted out of the way, even as he collapsed onto his back. A teenaged boy in a dingy robe leapt over the fallen man and knifed between Karista and Dennet. A few seconds later, a Marine parted the crowd with the muzzle of his rifle as he charged in pursuit.

"Probably stole a troopship on Mars," Dennet quipped, staring after the boy.

"Come on," said Karista as she dropped to her knees to help the heavy-set man to his feet. She took an arm, Dennet the other, and they hoisted the Pilgrim to his feet.

"Brotur, sostur," the man gasped. "Thank you." Then his expression of gratitude abruptly morphed into one of fearful

recognition. "They were showing holos of you two and another woman. Very short, thin girl. They said--"

Dennet gripped the man's elbow. "They've spread a plague of half-truths that we won't discuss or defend here, eh brotur?"

The man shook his head. "We won't. In fact, don't talk to me." He faced forward and pressed himself closer to the three women in front of him.

"Alone in a crowd," Dennet said, just loud enough for Karista to hear. "The woeful tale of my existence."

Karista inched closer to Dennet. She wrapped an arm around his back. "We'll be all right." Then she closed her eyes and reached out to Christopher, or, more precisely, to a location nearby so that she could observe his progress without distracting him. He and Obutu weren't far from the Alliance jump point. Good. They would be on time.

Without warning, a force beckoned her away and whisked her on blue wings to a gravity well that opened up on the Sirius system. She plunged through the jump point and found herself stretched out across the great Pilgrim fleet.

"You are faith, and you are peace," came a strong, masculine voice. "The meek inherited the Earth. You shall inherit the stars."

"Kari? We're almost there. Are you all right?"

Karista craned her head and found Dennet's gaze. The juxtaposition between the real world and the continuum rendered her cold and confused. "What?"

"You haven't said a word for nearly an hour. I thought you just wanted to be quiet."

An hour? Were had the time gone? She blinked hard and surveyed the terminal. Perhaps only twenty Pilgrims stood in front of them now, with a pair up front being urged through the weapons scanner's black, durasteel arch.

"C'mon, Kari. You with me?"

She nodded. "They're close. They're very close."

"We're very close, and I need you now."

"Okay."

Dreading the chill to come, Karista wound her way through the internal components of the weapons scanner and found the retina ID unit's power source. With her target pinpointed, she slipped back into herself as she and Dennet came to the head of the line.

A Marine who looked far too young to wear the uniform gave them a weary once-over, waved them on, then turned her attention to the Pilgrims behind them.

"Wait a minute," shouted a second Marine who stood on the other side of the weapons scanner. The jarhead spoke quickly into his headset as he scrutinized them.

"We're in trouble," Dennet muttered.

"I can take them," Karista said. "We'll have to run."

"Got room for one more," cried the Marine with the headset.

The other Marine stepped in front of them. "You heard the man, got room for one. Which of you is going? You want to stay together? You got to wait for another shuttle."

Karista thought a curse. "How long?"

"Don't know," the Marine said. "Could be an hour. Could be a day."

Dennet broke into muffled, ironic laughter, then craned his head back. "Ivar, you son of a bitch."

Before Karista could say another word, Dennet shoved her forward, and, taking the cue, the Marine finished the job by leading Karista through the weapons scanner--even as Karista caused a power surge to the retina ID unit.

"Hey, we just got a bad readout," said a tech from behind a nearby console. "Make her walk through again."

"My shuttle's leaving," Karista blurted out, then stared emphatically at the tech.

"We don't have time for this," said the Marine at the scanner. He cocked a thumb over his shoulder. "Go."

Shivering from more than the effort of tricking the ID unit, Karista gazed longingly at Dennet, who simply bowed his head. She wanted to reassure him that she would come back for

him, and together they would go back to Mars to help the Pilgrims still interned there. But until she could act on those good intentions, they meant nothing. She broke her gaze and left him standing there, framed by thousands trying to flee, looking for all the world like an overgrown lost boy who needed more than friendship to lead him home. She reached out and rubbed his shoulders, then whispered, "You'll never be alone."

"Orders just came in from the joint chiefs," Tolwyn's lawyer said. "They want you back on the *Concordia* and back in command of the Fourteenth. All charges have been dropped."

"Well isn't that convenient," Tolwyn said. He set down his glass of Scotch, rose from the hotel room's easy chair, then went to the window to take in the city's lights and calm his sudden pulse over his equally sudden exoneration.

"The data that President Vasura turned over to the tribunal confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that she and Gregarov were responsible for allowing the hopper drive to be constructed. The records date back over four years, to the time they first discovered that Pilgrims were doing covert research on the system, and it seems that the Pilgrims had been working on the thing for over ten years. The president exposed a massive conspiracy."

Tolwyn's mouth fell open. He faced Solz, then went for his Scotch. After downing half a glass, he rode the burn, then shook his head. "Gregarov's people didn't get to the president. In fact, Gregarov wouldn't have been reckless enough to make another attempt on Vasura's life. She'd be risking exposure. And maybe the president knew that she couldn't expose Gregarov without exposing herself."

"Or maybe she tried to do that and realized it was impossible," Solz ventured.

"And that's why the president's cause of death hasn't come out yet."

"You're saying--"

"Suicide, Commander. Plain and simple. Millions have already died because of what she and Gregarov did. Could you live with that guilt? It's all unsurprising and very sad."

"And I really liked the woman," Solz said. "She was the first president this century who knew how to handle the senate. We won't find another like her."

"I believe you're more right than you know." Tolwyn consulted his watchphone and cursed. "I'll be in transit at zero hour. And Commodore Bellegarde might be on his way here. If Gregarov is still in command of the fleet, she'll dispatch a stand down order that will invite Amity Aristee's attack." He went to the closet and pulled out his travel bag.

"So what now?"

"Even if I arrived on time and ordered the attack on one-five-eight, the systems and enclaves would still fall in secession based on the arrival of comm drones. McDaniel's World would be the first. The bombing would spread outward from there. It could take as long as a week for final order to be received."

"Which gives Aristee a little more time to surrender before all of the worlds are wiped out."

"That's true, but I believe that if she hasn't surrendered by now, she won't. Let's pray that when I arrive onboard the *Concordia*, it's to the news that she has, indeed, stood down."

Even the Kilrathi piloting the Imperial shuttle voiced their surprise as thousands of the quavering ships lumbered by, heading for Kilrathi space. Paladin had never seen craft of their design, nor did he have an inkling of what propelled them. Bordered in blue and pushing through the vacuum like fluttering banderoles, the ships paid them no heed as they came within a thousand meters.

"And they will return in the night for their children," said the protur, staring awestruck through a viewport.

"It's them, James," Aristee said, pointing over the protur's shoulder. "I saw them in my head. And I keep hearing

this voice asking what is my truth and why should I know it. They're Pilgrims. And just look at them. You see? You chose the right side after all."

"If they come any closer, in the name of Sivar I will fire upon them," warned the pilot, whose agitation came through his translator and was then piped into the intercom. The cat and his co-pilot sat in the cockpit, breathing in nutrient gas and sealed off from the hold's Earth-standard atmosphere. Paladin had hardly minded the barrier between them until now.

He crossed to the cockpit hatch and thumbed the intercom. "Don't fire."

"Shut your hole, you hairless ape. They will draw no closer to an Imperial ship without suffering our wrath!"

With his head resting back on an oversized seat meant for Kilrathi passengers, the protur smiled broadly and waved Paladin away from the intercom.

"They'll fire at them," Paladin said, heading toward the protur. "And I don't know who they are, but--"

"Why James, they're your broturs and sosturs," the protur cut in, narrowing his gaze over the insult. "Amity already told you that. Here they are. And you still don't believe?"

"They're Pilgrims? I don't think so. Not with technology like that. I can't even tell what material those ships are made

of. And you heard the cats. They don't even show up on spectral, thermal, or any other scan."

The protur winked and spoke in a commanding baritone. "Be brave, Brotur. You will not suffer long."

Paladin jolted as the protur's words echoed in his ears and took him back to Kilrah, to the interrogation the cats had performed on him. A voice had come with reassurance, a voice that the protur somehow knew.

"They've come to deliver us, James. And they won't allow interference. Not from the Kilrathi. Not from anyone."

"Listen to me," Paladin began, seizing the protur's collar and hissing out his words. "I won't listen to your cryptic bullshit anymore. What's going on? Tell me!"

"Ohmygod," Aristee cried as a thunderous reverberation swept across the hold.

"Shit! They're firing their cannons," Paladin shouted. He released the protur, sprinted for the intercom, then punched open the channel. "What are you doing?"

"No more taunts!" shouted the pilot.

"You were supposed to get us to the shipping lane, then send us off in the launch. If we don't make it, you fail your mission and die in disgrace."

No reply.

"Pilot! Listen to me! If you..." Paladin's voice fell away as he spotted something through the cockpit hatch's window. He had clean view over the pilot's shoulder and out past the canopy. One of the alien craft streaked toward them, its pointed bow opening to form a gloomy orifice.

Paladin thought that the ship would swallow them as a ball of blue light exploded from the orifice and enveloped the shuttle. He blinked hard against the flash, trying to focus before he realized that he controlled only his thoughts.

The rest belonged to the light.

Chapter 19

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.157

0700 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Marines from the CS *Carraway* had landed their troopship and had been accosted by a detachment of their comrades from the *Concordia*. The standoff had not lasted long, much to Bellegarde's surprise. Lieutenant Xao had determined that he and his troops were outnumbered and that the game was all about politics and had little to do with saving lives. His group had stood down without firing a shot.

In the meantime, Bellegarde had called for a vidconference of the skippers from each of his escorts, including the two supply ships. He had explained to those skippers exactly what had transpired between Space Marshal Gregarov and the president. He had staunchly defended Admiral Tolwyn and himself and had expressed his unyielding commitment to the course had had chosen. The skippers had not been a difficult audience to convince; if only Captain Boonesta had been among them. Communications from her ship indicated that she had sought assistance in dealing with "this second renegade." Though her

destroyer presented only a marginal threat to the *Concordia*, she had shifted her vessel out of its usual flanking position and had brought the *Carraway* in close, threatening a point-blank torpedo barrage.

To suppress that threat, Bellegarde had dispatched a score of Rapiers that had been buzzing over the destroyer for the past twenty-four hours. If Boonesta so much as opened a tube, Bellegarde had assured her that his fighters would initiate a surgical strike from which the destroyer would not recover.

Thus, the standoff continued, with hundreds of Pilgrim pilots expressing their fear and outrage over what appeared to them as a civil war between those who stood on the brink of annihilating their world. Although the motley fleet of refugee ships hovered well off the supercruiser's stern, any powerful explosion from it or the destroyer would send shock waves surging their way. Those small ships were not equipped to handle forces of that magnitude and would tumble into each other like leaves in a gale.

"Sir?" Executive officer Geranata called as he left the communications station and approached the command chair. "She's raising the stakes. We just patched into a comm drone from the Promise system. Boonesta's convinced Captain Lyndestal of the supercruiser *Semoran* to divert to McDaniel. The *Semoran* should be here by eighteen-twenty hours."

Bellegarde breathed a curse. "So this is how it feels to be a renegade."

"Sir, the XO respectfully suggests that we abandon this course of action and stand down upon the *Semoran's* arrival."

"Afraid of going head-to-head with another supercruiser? I thought you were anxious to get back into combat."

"Not that anxious. Besides, sir, we're too evenly matched for--"

"Don't worry, XO. We won't have to fight because we know what they want, and we'll give it to them."

"Surrender, sir?"

Bellegarde cocked a brow. "Not exactly..."

Blair and Obutu had successfully jumped at the Alliance system and now flew at ninety percent thrust on a vector that took them twenty thousand Ks off the shipping lanes. Blair's Tempest AI reported that they would reach McDaniel's World a few minutes early, at 1841 hours. The onboard clock read 1710, and Blair fidgeted in his seat as he anticipated meeting up with Karista and getting the hell out of his cockpit.

Most non-pilots had no idea of what it was like to fly a long-range op that confined you to a cockpit for four days. Besides the obvious discomforts of having to use catheters to alleviate bodily fluids and other waste (the gentleman's way of

putting it), you didn't have much room to stretch or exercise your muscles. Yes, the seat did recline quite a bit, and you could roll over, but muscle spasms, cramps, and headaches remained unavoidable and had been Blair's close personal enemies during most of the ride.

"Just over an hour, Mr. Blair," Obutu said, beaming from the Visual Display Unit. "That sun up ahead sure looks sweet. Been a long haul. Do we have a target?"

"Not yet, sir. I've been waiting for Karista to contact me. I hope she got off planet. That was the plan."

"Well, if she didn't, we got a serious problem. Our life support's good until twenty-two forty-five, then we have to ditch. And we can't go down and get her, unless we sweet talk the space marshal out of a troopship. I'm good, Lieutenant, but sweet talk? That's not me. Can you contact Karista?"

Blair twisted his lip. "I'm good, Commander, but you know the rest. I think I might've contacted someone once, guy named Frotur McDaniel. He died back on the *Olympus*. But I'm not sure." Blair shrugged. "I'll give it try."

Just look out there. I mean really look out there.

Those words had belonged to Paladin, and they had made a complex task sound effortless and natural. *I'll try it again*, he thought, then squinted at the field of stars seemingly shed from the brilliant sun called McDaniel.

He thought her name. Then he slammed his head against the seat and gave up.

I've tried so hard to figure out who am I. And if I say I'm Pilgrim and an extrakinetic, then I should be able to do this. But I can't. So maybe I am just a half-breed freak, and my bag of tricks has a hole in it.

Karista? Where the hell are you?

The stench inside the evacuation shuttle had Karista occasionally gagging with the rest of the passengers. Nine hundred and twenty five Pilgrims had piled into a passenger liner designed to accommodate eight hundred. The Marines had simply filled the ship based on weight. Of course, those Marines had failed to consider what the living conditions might be like with so much overcrowding. The bathroom facilities had broken down. Dozens of children sat in soiled clothing. The air recyclers could barely handle the extra load, and the cabin's temperature seemed to increase several degrees each hour. As for food, you had what you brought with you. Karista had not eaten in the past day, nor had she asked for a handout.

As was her nature, she had stepped gingerly around the cabin, offering to help those in need. She had spoon fed an elderly woman whose caregiver had become space sick. She had done her best to clean up two little girls and a boy whose

mother had struggled to keep them near. She had led a group of frightened teenagers in a prayer session and had danced one of her *storesas* for them in an attempt to lighten the mood.

But all the while, her thoughts had been on Dennet and Christopher. Dennet had yet to get off the planet. He stood near the front of a line that ran the length of the entire terminal. He, too, had not eaten and would not speak to those around him. Karista felt responsible for his brooding. And though she knew she could not have Christopher, her perfect pair in the continuum, she could not quiet that voice inside that told her to make him fall in love with her. But why should she pursue a doomed relationship when she had Dennet more than willing to comfort, protect, and love her?

Because she didn't need comforting, protecting, or loving. What did she need?

"Sostur, they tell me that you were a dancer in the protur's private troupe," said a furry-eared old man who had come up to Karista's seat. "My daughter was a dancer, too. Maybe you know her, Sostur Tidell Iella?"

Karista nodded politely. "I know her well. But I haven't seen her since the protur's death. How is she?"

The old man rubbed his burning eyes, and his voice cracked. "We don't know. Rumor has it that you're an extrakinetic. We were wondering if you--"

She shook her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't. It's isn't you. It's just... me."

After glowering at her a moment, the old abandoned his argument and waddled back to his seat.

Stricken by guilt and resigning herself to the strain it would place on her, Karista surrendered to the continuum and navigated through thousands of scripts, searching for Sostur Tidell. As she found Tidell's script and shivered over the horror that had befallen the woman, a distant and familiar voice beckoned her away. She shot across the heavens and found him. "Christopher? You called to me," she said excitedly as she stared at him seated in his fighter. "I'm on this transport. See it?"

"Yeah, but you have to get off. We'll never get landing clearance for a civilian liner. You'll have to jettison in one of the dinghies. I'll tractor you in. Can you do that?"

"You can bet I'll try."

"Good. I'll be there at eighteen forty-one. Contact me. I'm not so good at this Pilgrim stuff."

She tried to smile. Couldn't. "You're not so bad either."

"I know you were out there," interjected someone else.

Karista turned toward the voice. The old man had returned and now shook a gnarled index finger at her. "You did look for

her. I know you did. You're not the first extrakinetic I've known. Did you find her? Please, we have to know."

"I found her. And I'm sorry."

The man grabbed her shoulders. "She's not..."

"I saw her. The Marines, they--"

"No, you're lying."

Karista forced herself deeper into the chair. "I wish I could do something, but I can't."

"Ohmygod." The old man turned away and bumped into seats as he left.

As Karista sat there, with the man's stricken face flashing through her mind's eye, she turned her thoughts to her own loss, to Fey. She pictured the frail woman's smile and heard Fey's thundering voice. It took only moment more for the tears to come.

"Drone in from the admiral," Comm Officer Wilks cried.

"Message decrypted."

Bellegarde swiveled his chair toward a viewer. "Show me."

Although somewhat bedraggled, Admiral Geoffrey Tolwyn wore a smile so tight that only God could pry it from his lips.

"Richard, I've just learned about the little renegade party you've been having. Carry on. All charges have been dropped against us. The president is dead. It hasn't been confirmed,

but I believe she committed suicide. Space Marshal Gregarov has been indicted. Sorry to be so curt, but time, as always, is an issue. Now then, I've been apprised of our evacuation efforts. Nevertheless, you will begin your bombing of McDaniel's World at zero hour, at which time you will also dispatch comm drones to our ships in each of the Pilgrim systems and enclaves. Set drones with long-range self-destruct in the event that Aristee stands down." He looked off camera to a display. "I should be there by oh-three-twenty. We *will* carry out the senate's order. And may God help us all. Tolwyn out."

With a fresh rush of adrenaline, Bellegarde consulted his watchphone: 1818 hours. He cocked his head to Radar Officer Abrams. "How 'bout it, Mister?"

"Got her now, sir. Two minutes out and closing. She's hailing us."

"Do not respond." Bellegarde regarded his executive officer with a nod. The XO hustled off the bridge, only to return a moment later with the dear, sweet space marshal in tow. A Marine guard towered just behind the seething woman.

"Hello, Sandra," Bellegarde said.

"Don't Sandra me, you mutinous bastard."

"In about a minute, the CS *Semoran* will be here. If you're not in command, she and the *Carraway* will take this ship by

force or destroy her if necessary. We need you to pretend that you're in command."

Gregarov's face flushed with incredulity, then she broke into laughter. "You're pathetic."

He tapped a button on the comm screen and played for her the message from Tolwyn. He increased the volume as Tolwyn mentioned that the president was dead and that Gregarov had been indicted. "They find you guilty, you'll be sentenced to death. You help us now, they might let you live."

Gregarov wanted to remain strong; Bellegarde sensed that. But as she further considered the situation, her smile faded and her eyes narrowed to hold off the tears. "I lose either way. Why don't you just show them Tolwyn's message?"

"Could be a fake. I need you on this bridge and transmitting live."

She cursed him, then bolted for the lift.

The Marine stood like a crimson pylon in her path.

"Let me go," she snapped.

Bellegarde shook his head. "Consider me your attorney. I'm just looking out for your best interests. I need you to contact the *Semorán* and lie. That won't be a stretch for you."

"I won't do it."

"Then welcome to a shooting war. If we survive, we can look back and say that it could've been prevented if Gregarov

had simply complied. You're going to draw even more than a death sentence. Confederation citizens will be spitting on your grave for centuries."

"This is supposed to persuade me?"

"Enough people have died. It's your call."

"Sir? Hails continuing from the *Semoran*. If we don't answer, they've threatened to open fire," said Comm Officer Wilks. "Now receiving second transmission from Commander Corey Obutu of the *Tiger Claw*. He wants to speak to the space marshal. Says it's urgent."

"The *Claw's* stationed at Netheranya," Bellegarde said, frowning his brow. "Where is the commander?"

"The transmission originates from a *Rapier* about twenty minutes out, sir. He has a wingman. Pilot identified as Lieutenant Christopher Blair."

Bellegarde rose. "Let me talk to the commander."

"He wants to talk to me," Gregarov spat, then steered herself to the comm station and glared at Wilks. "Put him through." She paused a second, then eyed the monitor. "This is Space Marshal Gregarov."

"Ma'am, Lieutenant Blair and I need a favor. There's a woman on one of those civilian liners behind you. In her possession is hard evidence that you *must* see before you order the attack. She's going to jettison in one of the liner's

dinghies. The lieutenant and I want to bring her aboard. Please trust us. We wouldn't have come all this way for nothing."

Gregarov craned her head to Bellegarde. "I'm assuming command of this ship." Then she gazed intently at the monitor. "Permission granted, Commander. Get that woman here--"

"Sir!" shouted Radar Officer Abrams. "The *Semoran* has opened her tubes! The *Carraway* is moving off."

"Get me Captain Lyndestal," Gregarov ordered.

"Evasive maneuvers," Bellegarde cried to the helmsman. "XO? Shields up. Rig the ship for impact!"

Geranata bolted for the starboard observation station. "Aye-aye, sir. Shields up. Rigging the ship for impact."

"They're jamming all but ultra low emergency frequency," Wilks told the space marshal.

"Torpedoes fired," said Abrams. "First contact bearing three-three-four by five-zero-nine. Designate Alpha one-one, Tyx-class ship-to-ship missile. Range: one-nine-one-five Ks. Velocity: three-seven-nine KPS and holding."

As Abrams continued his report, designating the other three incoming torpedoes, Bellegarde rattled off orders to weapons control officers, instructing them to target and shoot down the incoming ordnance--though he suspected that their efforts would be in vain.

Three seconds later, his suspicions became fact as the first torpedo wove through a trellis of antimatter fire and delivered a mace-like blow to the port bow. The impact nearly knocked Bellegarde off his feet.

The second denotation brought him to his knees.

And the third slammed him onto his gut.

"Sir? Rapiers shadowing the *Carraway* request permission to fire," said Wilks.

"Fourth contact destroyed," Abrams announced. "But the *Carraway* is opening her tubes, sir. And Civilian vessels report incoming shock wave."

"Send out the distress call. Broadcast our surrender on ultra low emergency frequency," boomed Gregarov, who had also been thrown to the deck.

As the explosions peeled off to uncover the stars, Bellegarde gripped the arm of his command chair and tugged himself up. A glimmering speck stood far off the starboard bow. "There she is," he muttered. "Coming in for the kill. And we can't answer her attack."

Blair squirmed in his seat as he watched the firefight raging against the bluish green aura of McDaniel's World. "Sir, why are they--"

"They're keeping their promise," Obutu cut in. "I reviewed a few transmissions. Bellegarde apparently assumed command of the fleet, and they want him to surrender."

"But you talked to the space marshal. She sounded like she was in command."

"Or had just assumed command. I don't pretend to understand this. I'm picking up a DAS signal from the *Concordia*."

"They're surrendering?"

"Seems so. But we got bigger worries. Shock waves are moving through that civilian flotilla. Time to light 'em, Lieutenant. Burn it all but maneuvering thrust for landing. Has Karista jettisoned?"

"I don't know."

"Hope she hasn't. Contact her."

"Aye-aye, sir."

Obutu issued the request as though asking for a cup of coffee. Blair ground his teeth. *I can do this...*

"Afterburners on my mark," Obutu said tersely. "Mark!"

Karista had thought she would have a difficult time opening the hatch to the dinghy ports. She had assumed that she would have to call upon her extrakinetic senses to either bypass the lock or to persuade one of the liner's midshipmen to open it for

her. But as fate would have it, the hatch had been left open. She had found her way into one of the dinghies, had suited up, and had strapped herself into the pilot's seat. One touch on the main control pad had engaged the sleek, boomerang-shaped craft's AI launch system. She had felt only the brief changeover from the liner's artificial gravity to the dinghy's, otherwise the jettison had gone off so smoothly that it made her tingle with the notion that something would go wrong.

Her premonition had not gone unanswered.

"Computer, can't you adjust course?" she asked frantically as the dinghy, buffeted by the shock wave, banked suddenly hard to starboard and rocketed toward the liner.

"Course correction ineffective," the computer reported flatly. "Force of shock wave too great for jets. Recommend abandoning ship."

"This *is* a lifeboat," she shouted, then slammed a fist on the console. Her gaze widened as the liner's heavily scored hull became much too distinct.

Then she sensed something distant, faint, familiar. There it was again, the barest sense of Christopher calling to her. She answered with a cry for his help as the dinghy sideswiped the liner and began dragging along its hull. Showers of sparks and gray chutes of smoke erupted from the cockpit instrumentation as durasteel scraped horribly against durasteel.

Multiple alarms resounded and gathered into a deafening clamor as shutters of flames suddenly closed across the canopy.

"Breach in oxygen lines," the computer said. "Detect fire in cockpit. Engaging fire system. Fire system not operative. Recommend abandoning ship."

Caught squarely in the inferno, Karista fumbled for the latches on her harness, but the dinghy jostled too violently for her to get a firm grip. She guessed that the flight suit was flame retardant, and maybe it was, but the suit's internal computer suddenly alerted her of a breach. She breathed in a horrid stench. Gasp. Gasp again.

Then her air supply suddenly cleared as automatic systems filtered out the toxins. One, two, and her harness latches popped. She rolled out of the pilot's seat, collapsed to the deck, then crawled out of the cockpit and down the aisle between a dozen or so seats. She caught a glimpse of her arms and shuddered. The flight suit had been blackened, and embers still glowed along her forearms. Artificial gravity suddenly went off line, and she drifted up to collide with a bank of viewports.

Sensing something ahead, she cocked her head and saw that the dinghy had cleared the liner, but, like a stone skipping off a pond, it now arrowed straight for *Concordia's* aft antimatter cannon. She pushed her way to one of two escape hatches, touched a release button on the panel, and waited. Nothing.

She pushed off the bulkhead and floated toward the other hatch. Two taps. Dead panel. A thick manual release lever held no more promise; it wouldn't budge.

She glanced again to the cockpit as a gleaming round of antimatter fire left the *Concordia's* cannon. Weapons operators had, of course, figured her for a target. She closed her eyes and felt the impact's muffled thudding before an even greater force tore her out of the hold. She clambered in a cloud of ragged hunks of seat, hull, and hatch, staring beyond to a smeared canvas of stars.

Chapter 20

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

2654.157

1841 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Blair wrenched the control stick toward his chest and ripped into a sixty-degree climb until he cleared a trio of shuttles at the rear of the ragtag flotilla. He leveled off and thundered his way over hundreds civilian of vessels, coming within a mere ten meters of some and slicing his way through the dissipating but still dangerous waves of torpedo impacts.

He had heard Karista's cry for help, had seen her get blasted from the dinghy, and now had a distinct sense of her location.

"Lieutenant, you're burning too much fuel," Obutu said, having fallen eight hundred meters behind.

"I know, sir. But we're out of time."

The plan had been to cut burners in synch and conserve fuel for landing by riding inertia until they reached Karista. But she now drifted just off the *Concordia's* stern, and a dozen meters away, gleaming antimatter fire unloosed from the supercruiser's big gun tore through the night. The slightest nudge from an impact wave would send her into the unforgiving

bead. Blair figured that he would get her out of the fire zone, and Obutu could bring her in--if the battle between the *Concordia* and the *Semoran* ever reached a cease fire.

"Hey, Merlin? Little help," Blair called to his PPC.

A rotating sphere of white light blossomed just above Blair's console. The old man stepped regally from the sphere, and Blair did a double take at Merlin's sandals and white Pilgrim robe. "I'm here for you, brotur."

"I don't get the... never mind. Network with the Tempest and the retrieval system. Karista's out there. Calculate maximum distance for retrieval. Brake ship at coordinates and fire beam."

"I saw it, brotur. It took a while to get into my system, but I saw the blue, and I heard those sweet notes. It was so beautiful."

"Great," Blair barked as he squinted at a hundred flashing specks of debris superimposed over the raging crossfire between cap ships. "Can you do what I said?"

"Of course, brotur. And I can do it much more efficiently than your onboard systems."

The *Concordia* had pulled out of her standard high-orbit and into a series of evasive maneuvers that put her about three thousand meters ahead and about fifty degrees above the civilian craft. Her battle group had pulled well away from the fray, and

Blair wondered why they had not come to her aid. Maybe Bellegarde held them in reserve.

After a rapid beeping, the Tempest AI fired retroes and slowed the Rapiers to 100 KPS, 75, 50, 20, and Blair fell forward into his harness as the fighter stopped on the proverbial dime. Thrusters emitted small blasts to sustain the hover.

"Coordinates for maximum retrieval distance reached," Merlin said. "Tractor retrieval system on line. Target acquired. Firing beam."

Blair imagined the system's invisible hand reaching out and taking Karista into its palm.

According to the Tempest, she was unconscious and breathing normally. Her suit had been damaged but still functioned, and the O₂ supply would hold out for another eighty-six minutes.

As Blair squinted at the rubble, trying to catch sight of her, he realized that the *Semoran* and *Concordia* had ceased fire. He scanned his radar scope. Rapiers flying near the CS *Carraway* had regrouped to resume escort positions, though he could tell from their configuration that they could easily resume the attack. The *Semoran* had turned tack on a course parallel to and about kilometer away from the *Concordia*, keeping the admiral's flagship in her sights. Commander Obutu continued along Blair's original vector and had twice called for a report.

"I got her, sir," Blair finally answered, switching off the comm's mute mode. "Retrieving now. Mark my position, and I'll turn her over to you. My fuel's nearly out."

"You did it the hard way, Lieutenant. But you got results. How is she?"

"Unconscious. Probably got space sick and passed out. Her suit indicates that she had breach, but it's been sealed. Oh-two's not a problem."

"Good. Now tell me she didn't stow her evidence in a travel bag, one that got burned up or one that's floating out there, somewhere."

"Doubt that, sir. If I know Karista, she took dozens of leaves. Probably tucked them in every pocket she's got. She'd keep them close."

"Then let's hope you know her. Contacting the *Concordia* now. Will request permission to land, OBP tractor crew for Karista, and assistance for you. Standby."

"Copy that, sir."

Within five minutes, Blair had brought Karista within two meters of his Rapier. Obutu arrived, they engaged in the switchover, and the commander took Karista toward the *Concordia*, where the OBP tractor crew fired another beam to bring her into a heavily padded airlock designed to recover overboard

personnel. Blair had contacted the OBP team to make sure that Karista's clothing was not burned during decontamination. They could quarantine it and her, yes, but coming this far only to have the evidence destroyed would confirm the existence of a malevolent god.

Obutu landed, and Blair waited for another twenty minutes until a Hauley-Class tanker launched from the *Concordia* and passed overhead, its refueling line wagging like a durasteel tail. Blair rushed through the procedure, anxious to get aboard the *Concordia* and see Karista. With his fuel gauge reading only a quarter full, he broke away and sped toward the supercruiser's aft bay. His thoughts focused so intently on Karista that before he knew it, his canopy slid open. He shivered, wondering how the hell he had pulled off the complex task of landing without thinking about it. He climbed out of the *Rapier*, hit the deck, and collapsed as though he had no legs.

"Same thing happened to your XO," said the *Concordia's* deck boss, a middle-aged woman with snake-like eyes and a flat nose. She came up to Blair, shoved arms under his, and effortlessly dragged him up as two medics arrived with a gurney.

"I can walk," Blair said, embarrassed over all the attention.

"No you can't," corrected the boss. "Four days in a pit will do that to you. Your XO's in sickbay. You're headed there yourself."

"What about Karista? I mean the woman we brought in? The OBP team got her."

"She's down there, too. Don't know her condition. She looked pretty burned up, though. You'll find out."

The boss helped him onto the gurney, and, refusing to lie back, Blair held fast to the durasteel railing as one medic rushed him toward the lift while the other waved her scanners and asked a long list of boring questions that all began with "Are you feeling..."

Once in sickbay, the medic rolled Blair past Obutu, who sat up in a bed and spoke with space marshal Gregarov and another man Blair identified as the supercruiser's XO. Two Marines shadowed Gregarov and drew Blair's frown. Was the space marshal so important that she required guards wherever she went?

The medics slid him into a small medical station partially walled in by monitoring devices mounted to rolling carts. Blair scanned the long, narrow room and caught the gazes of a half dozen unfamiliar patients lying in beds. "What about Karista?" he asked.

"She's in ICU, next bay," said the woman who had questioned him. "I'll check on her."

"Thanks."

As the one medic hustled off, the other jabbed a syringe in Blair's forearm. He swore over the pain as the medic shushed him. "You're slightly dehydrated. This'll take care of that."

"Lieutenant Blair?" the space marshal called, striding toward his gurney.

Blair despised the woman because she believed that Paladin had defected to the Pilgrims. He tried to hold back his contempt for her--

"You don't look too happy to see me, son."

--and failed. "I'm just tired, ma'am. It was long flight."

"Commander Obutu told us about the leaves. We already recovered about twenty from Karista's robe and flight suit. They're being analyzed now. God willing they contain those images your XO told us about."

"So you believe they're coming? Just like that, you already believe?"

"What I do believe is that we can't bomb these people. And if this evidence will ensure that, then I fully support it."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but aren't you the one who's supposed to issue the bombing order? And hasn't the senate

already endorsed that order?" He looked to the Marines. "Or am I not understanding this? And what happened with the *Semoran*?"

"Talk to your XO." She turned to leave, then whirled back, gripped by a thought. "Once we have the data analyzed, I'd like you there when we show it to Commodore Bellegarde."

Blair glimpsed his watchphone: 1915 hours. "You'd better hurry. If you begin bombing McDaniel's World, that Pilgrim fleet will attack. And you won't believe how many ships they have. Billions, I think."

She snorted a little, then left with her escorts. The XO gave Blair and Obutu a terse nod and caught the hatch before it closed.

Once they were out of earshot, Obutu called to Blair from across the bay. "We flew out of one mess right into another."

"What do you mean?"

The XO rolled onto his side. "I spoke to the Commodore during my landing. It's quite a story. Let's just say that the space marshal is under arrest, though don't tell that to the *Semoran's* skipper, and Admiral Tolwyn will be here at about oh-three-twenty."

"But the order to bomb or stand down has to be issued at zero hour."

"Which means that the commodore is the one we have to convince. And right now he has every intention of carrying out the senate's order."

"So the space marshal--who's under arrest--is our ally?"

"Don't act so surprised," Obutu said with a twisted grin. "We're criminals ourselves."

The medic who had gone to check on Karista abruptly returned. Blair struggled to read her expression, but her occupation had taught her a coolness most poker players would envy. "How is she?"

"Stable. Conscious now. Mild case of smoke inhalation. I'm afraid she suffered a near-fatal suit breach. Lost a leg from the knee down. She's lucky to be alive. Good news is that she has a common blond type and a solid pattern. She's a good candidate for regrowth."

"Can you take me to see here?"

"In a little bit." The medic checked a monitor that emitted an irritating beep every half minute or so. "You have to rest yourself."

"Okay."

He closed his eyes and opened a door to the continuum. With mental legs unaffected by the rigors of his flight, he walked out of the sickbay, into the corridor, then entered the adjoining ICU. He found Karista's bed and glided toward it.

She lay on her back, eyes closed, a white sheet pulled up to her neck. Sweat darkened the roots of her blond hair, and her face seemed much more tan than he remembered. He reached down and stroked her cheek.

"You," she whispered, opening her eyes. She took his hand in her own and held it to her cheek. "This was supposed to be easy. I should've remembered that it's always difficult. At least with me."

He half-shrugged. "Either way, we made it. They have the evidence, and the space marshal is already predisposed to believing us. She doesn't want to bomb anyone."

"That's... good." Karista stared down her chin to where the sheet grew terribly flat, just beyond her right knee. "No dancing today. They say they can grow me a new one. Why bother if there won't be anyone left to see me dance?"

"Don't talk like that. This is going to work."

"I don't think so, Christopher. I reached out to the bridge and observed. The commodore won't believe us."

"What?"

"He'll say that the leaves are just a Pilgrim trick."

"If that's what you think, then why did we waste our time coming here? I went AWOL for you!"

"I had a really good feeling about Admiral Tolwyn. He's had more experience with Pilgrims than Bellegarde has. I

thought we could convince him. But Bellegarde? He'll begin the bombing. And the Pilgrim fleet is almost here. They'll come out of nowhere and wipe out the Confederation."

"What about Aristee? Can you find her in the continuum? I'm thinking that even if the Pilgrims wipe out the Confederation, a lot of our people will still die. That might persuade her to help us."

"Strange thing. I've already searched for her. I can't find anything. The last impression I had was of her aboard the *Olympus*, somewhere near the Kilrathi border. After that, I haven't sensed anything."

"Do you think she's dead?"

"Wouldn't matter. I'd still be able to find her script. It's as though something or someone is blocking me."

"Maybe it's the Pilgrim fleet. Maybe they don't want Aristee to stand down. Maybe they really want to attack."

"I don't believe that. Maybe it's Carver Tsu the Third who's behind this. Maybe he's the one promoting the attack. He has extrakinetics working for him; they could be blocking me."

"Well, can you contact the Pilgrim fleet? There might be someone in control who's reasonable."

"I've tried that, too. I can't get inside their ships. But I know that they'll contact us. I wish I knew when."

The continuum took a sudden dip, and Blair reached to the bed for support. "Whoa. I guess I'm--"

"Yes, you are. Go back. Rest. They'll call you when it's time. I wish I could be there."

"It's okay. We'll handle it. I'm... we haven't had any time to talk."

She put an index finger to her lips, then released his hand.

He found himself back on his own gurney, driven there by a gentle, unyielding force. He fell back on the bed, and like warm bath water, the exhaustion crept up his legs, reached his chest, and finally took him.

"Lieutenant?"

That voice. It's not part of the dream. Or maybe it is. Maybe I'm dreaming that I'm having a dream. Maybe--

"Out of your rack," Commander Obutu ordered, shaking Blair's shoulder.

Eyes open. Thick, black face knotted by frustration.

"Sorry, sir. I'm just so tired. What time--"

"It's nineteen fifty-five. Got about four hours. Nothing like cutting it close."

Blair's gaze finally focused. Obutu sat in a narrow powerchair operated by a small touchpad near his right hand. A second chair sat beside his.

Obutu tipped his head toward the ride. "First class all the way, Lieutenant."

The XO hustled into the sickbay and shifted up behind Obutu. "Gentlemen, are we ready?"

The two medics who had initially helped Blair returned to get him out of the gurney and into the chair. He still felt too stiff to walk though significantly better than he had forty-five minutes prior. It took a moment to sample the powerchair's controls, then he drew a winding course behind Obutu. Only twice did he crash into the XO during their trip to the *Concordia's* map room.

Commodore Bellegarde, Space Marshal Gregarov, and the two Marines stood like specters in the shadowy map room. As Bellegarde crossed into the better light of dozens of glowing viewers, Blair and Obutu snapped to and saluted.

"At ease, gentlemen."

"Sir, we appreciate you seeing us," Obutu began. "I assume your analysis of the leaves is complete?"

"It is, Commander. And yes, there is data recorded within their cells." He reached over to a holoplayer control panel and tapped his finger on the pad.

The image Karista had shown Blair and Obutu came to life in the center of the room, swirled at about knee-height, then rose and swelled from bulkhead to bulkhead. Blair sat in the middle of interstellar space as Pilgrim warships passed through him and his powerchair.

"This is but a small representation of the fleet that's headed our way," Space Marshal Gregarov said, coming forward to gaze threateningly at Bellegarde. "If we begin the bombing, then it's safe to assume that we'll awaken this sleeping giant."

"That's right, sir," Obutu added. "As a Confederation officer with nearly twenty years of loyal service, I can say with confidence that this fleet does exist and that it is headed our way."

Bellegarde made a face. "The leaves come from McDaniel's World. And while we were waiting for them to be analyzed, I did a little research on my own. It's true that those trees rarely bear leaves. It's also true that Ivar Chu McDaniel disappeared somewhere near the Sirius system. And it's also true that we recently lost a ship there. What troubles me is who put this data into the leaves and for what purpose. You would have me believe that it was these Pilgrims who performed some kind of

biotech miracle. You would have me believe that these are the descendants of the original Pilgrims who were lost over three hundred years ago. Their technology now exceeds ours, and they're coming back to save their people. It's quite a story. Almost biblical."

"When the time comes, sir, all you have to do is stand down," Blair said, unable to stave off his attack on Bellegarde's cynicism. "If you don't, you'll start a war that we can't win."

"You're right about one thing, Mr. Blair. Standing down is easy. Too bad Amity Aristee couldn't realize that. We won't yield to terrorists. Our evacuation efforts have been fairly successful. The death toll will be far less than it would have been. But we will render Pilgrim soil lifeless for a thousand years. I'm not a fanatic or a murderer. I'm a soldier. Just like you. And this is my duty. And I can't dismiss that based on what you've presented here. Besides, this could be ploy designed by Aristee so that we lower our guard. She might be using you without your knowledge."

"What about that destroyer in Sirius? Don't you think it's too much of a coincidence to lose it in the same system where Ivar Chu disappeared? You can't ignore that, sir."

"Mr. Blair, unless my radar officer can show me a Pilgrim fleet on his scope, I'm afraid that the bombing will proceed on schedule."

Blair tried to push himself out of the powerchair, but his knees buckled. "Problem is, they don't want to be seen, sir. And they have the tech to conceal themselves. They'll be on us before we know it."

"The Fourteenth is already on full alert," Bellegarde retorted, then switched off the holoplayer. "If these Pilgrims do show up, will be ready for them."

"With all due respect, sir, we'll be dead."

"Richard, listen to him," cried Gregarov. "The kid's right. And it won't be my grave they're spitting on."

Bellegarde pursed his lips, and for a second his expression softened before the iron mask returned. "I have my orders."

Chapter 21

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.157

2355 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Torpedo room, conn," Bellegarde snapped. "Status on planetary torpedoes one through thirty-six?"

"Conditions set for AXQ firing, sir," answered Spaceman Second Class Oberson, a brown-haired boy of twenty with a glacier of a complexion and a voice like a squeaky wheel.

"Torpedoes one through thirty-six loaded and spun up.

Diagnostic almost complete. AXQ firing on your command. Zero hour in four minutes, twenty-two seconds. Mark."

"Very well. Standby." Bellegarde steeled himself as he eyed McDaniel's World through the forward viewport. All of those blues and greens would soon turn to gray and black. "Mr. Wilks? Status on comm drones?"

"Data uploaded and sealed, sir. Fueling almost complete. Jump drive diagnostics found one anomaly. Drone replaced. Ready to launch in one minute, forty-five seconds. Mark."

"Excellent. Recall our fighters from the *Carraway*. Standby to send message to Captains Boonesta and Lyndestal."

Bellegarde thumbed a switch on the ship-wide intercom.

"Attention, this is Commodore Richard Bellegarde. By order of the Confederation Senate, Space Marshal Gregarov is hereby empowered to carry out a strategic planetary torpedo strike on planet ATZ seven-one-niner-three, AKA McDaniel's World. At zero hour, comm drones will be dispatched to convey this order to our counterparts in the other systems and enclaves. This is a dark day for us all. Nevertheless, I expect every crew member to behave professionally. Your continued commitment will yield nothing short of victory. Bellegarde out."

"Sir, comm transferred to ready room," Wilks said.

"Very good," Bellegarde replied, then slid out of his command chair. He crossed to the ready room, opened the hatch, and slipped furtively inside.

Gregarov sat cuffed to a chair at the comm monitor. Despite all she had been through, she carried herself with remarkable calm. Every hair remained in place, and her makeup appeared morning fresh. "I'm shocked and amazed, Richard. Not over how I've been treated but because you think I'll help you."

He fetched his sidearm from a shelf above the comm monitor, tugged it from the black leather holster, then focused the laser sight on her hip. "You'll help."

Though he had set the weapon for silent mode, it still issued a distinctive whir that made him flinch as much as she

did. The round blasted through her leg, through the chair, then ricocheted off the deck and imbedded itself in the small oak conference table behind them.

"Shit," she moaned, then tugged at her cuffs, wanting to nurse the bleeding wound.

Crossing behind her, Bellegarde pressed the pistol's warm muzzle through her hair and onto the nape of her neck. She cried out as skin burned. "Order Lyndestal back to the Promise system, where he'll begin bombing. Then you'll tell Boonesta to resume her support position as we initiate our own strike. I know you'd like to curse me right now, tell me to go to hell or whatever other cliché you can muster. But let me save you some time and thought. I've already worked this out. I can blow your head off right now, wash my hands, have a cup of tea, bomb this planet, and go home--no questions asked. You're fighting for your life right now, Sandra." He removed the pistol and retreated to the hatch.

"Open channel to the *Semoran*," she ordered the computer.

"Channel open."

"This is Space Marshal Gregarov," she told the *Semoran's* comm officer, grimacing over the fire raging in her leg. "Get me Captain Lyndestal."

As Bellegarde held his breath, Gregarov stiffened herself into composure and ordered Lyndestal back to Promise, then she

contacted Boonesta and once more followed Bellegarde's instructions to the letter. By the time she finished, a puddle of blood had spread beneath her chair. She ordered off the comm, then sneered at him. "Satisfied?"

Before he could answer, she began to convulse. After a few seconds of that, her eyes rolled back into her head, and she stopped moving.

Bellegarde cycled open the hatch and raised his chin to Comm Officer Wilks, on the opposite end of the bridge. "Mr. Wilks? Get me a med team in here ASAP."

"Aye, sir."

"The *Semorán* is pulling away," Radar Officer Abrams reported. "Heading back for the jump point."

"And the *Carraway*?" Bellegarde asked, aiming for the command chair.

"Shifting to starboard flank defense, sir."

"Very well. Alert the battle group, Mr. Wilks. Standby." He checked his watchphone. "Bombing will commence in T minus forty seconds." He cocked his head toward the comm viewer. "Torpedo room, conn."

"Conn, torpedo room. Oberson here, sir."

"Are my birds ready to fly?"

Oberson read the status from one of his displays.

"Conditions still set for AXQ firing, sir. All diagnostics run

and complete. Targets designated and locked in. Torpedoes one through thirty-six ready to launch on your command. Warheads will be ready to arm at launch plus thirty. Arming codes ready to send." The boy lifted a tentative thumbs up. "We're good to go down here, sir."

"Very well. Comm drones, Mr. Wilks?"

"Fueling complete. Navigation and jump drive systems programmed and locked. Just give the word, sir."

"Anything on long-range comm sweeps?"

"Standard skipchatter, sir. We have not received contact from Amity Aristee or from anyone else aboard the CS *Olympus*. Lack of contact has been duly logged."

Bellegarde nodded, then took in a long breath. He narrowed his gaze on McDaniel's World and sat there, trembling for his bottle of Scotch.

"T minus three, two, one. Zero hour," reported the XO from the port observation station. "Sir, it is now zero, zero, zero, zero on Confederation calendar date one-five-eight."

"I concur, XO." Bellegarde faced the viewer. "Conn, torpedo room. Launch first salvo. This is commodore."

"Conn, torpedo room," the XO repeated. "Launch first salvo. This is the XO."

"Audio prints identified and matched. Authorization complete," cried Oberson, his face washed in the green light of his monitors. "Launching first salvo."

"Mr. Wilks? Launch comm drones."

"Launch comm drones, aye-aye, sir."

Though Bellegarde had never felt the preamble to a massive earthquake, the simultaneous launch of twelve planetary torpedoes and half as many comm drones came pretty damned close. The rumble woke in the lower decks, resounding slowly, then it matured into a powerful reverberation that slipped up the bulkheads and divided into a thousand tentacles of vibration.

"Torpedoes one through twelve away, sir," shouted Abrams.

"Torpedo room, conn," Bellegarde snapped. "Launch second salvo. This is the commodore."

"Torpedo room, conn. Launch second salvo. This is the XO."

"Launch second salvo, aye-aye," hollered Oberson.

"Firing!"

Abrams reported on the torpedoes' progress, and Bellegarde went through the process a final time, silently asking for God's forgiveness as the final tubes opened and torpedoes twenty-five through thirty-six blasted away, bearing Armageddon in their bowels.

"All torpedoes away," Oberson announced. "Systems nominal. Guidance programs initiating target locks. Warheads arming in five, four, three, two, one." He paused. "Warheads armed, sir. First detonation in approximately four minutes, thirty seconds. Mark."

"Sir, several of the Pilgrim transports have begun firing on our escorts," said Abrams, staring intently at one of his scopes. "It's mostly low-level laser fire. No major threat to shields."

"Mr. Wilks? Tell our skippers to hold their fire unless the threat becomes more significant. Even so, they're to return only low-level fire."

"Aye, sir."

Bellegarde left his chair, staggered to the viewport, and gasped.

Thirty-six gray exhaust trails unfurled beneath the supercruiser and wandered out toward the planet, some veering to port or to starboard, some shooting up toward the north pole or diving toward the south, all preparing to tie the innocent-looking orb in a knot of devastation. You could talk about launching a planetary torpedo strike as much as you liked, but until you actually saw the raw power you had released, you would never fully understand. Commodore Richard Bellegarde understood

very well now as he covered his mouth with a hand and waited for the first explosion.

Blair and Obutu watched from the *Concordia's* aft observation bubble as the tawny glow of torpedo engines grew dimmer.

"Son of a bitch. He did it. He really did it," Blair said.

"You thought he'd change his mind?" Obutu asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I thought he wouldn't have the guts to go through with it. He had four hours to think it over. I figured the guilt would set in."

"Four hours, four millennia. No difference. He had his orders."

"How many people you think are down there?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

An icy sensation of awareness passed through Blair's spine, a sensation so strong that it made him clutch the arms of his powerchair.

"Do you hear that?" Obutu asked.

Born from the hum of the *Concordia's* ion engines and carried inexplicably through the vacuum of space, the notes of that familiar yet strange flute player echoed loudly through the bubble as a veil of blue haze descended upon the supercruiser.

"Look at that," Obutu hollered, pointing at globes of dark blue light that fell like meteors toward the planet.

One by one, the torpedoes chewing their way toward McDaniel's atmosphere were struck by the Pilgrim globes. Multi-hued explosions blossomed in a perfectly timed and overwhelming display of power so unfamiliar and deadly that it left them rapt. As the last of the explosions faded, a series of secondary flashes drove their gazes skyward.

Hundreds of dark, undulating circles momentarily blotted out the stars until Pilgrim warships coruscated through them and sealed off the gravity wells in their wakes. The flashes worked their way down the sides of the night sky, then connected far below them like two swarms of fireflies clashing in battle.

In another blink, thousands of ships glided through the Sphere of Operations, some spreading out toward strategic positions to defend the planet, others darting in toward the battle group.

Obutu forced himself out of his chair, went to the thick Plexi, and raised his palms. "We're sorry," he said. "My god, we're sorry."

Grimacing, Blair wrestled himself out of his own chair to stand beside the XO. "They don't hear you. But they have to."

"Look down there," Obutu said, pointing. "Bellegarde's already launching fighters. Everything we got is pouring into

the vac. He's bringing the antimatter guns on line. You hear them?"

Blair nodded, then turned back for his chair. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"If anyone can get through to them, it's us. I mean, they are us. I say we go out there and give it a shot. We die, we die. But at least we go out in our fighters."

Obutu cocked a brow. "We'll never get on the roster. Not in our condition."

"Like we need approval?"

Over two hundred Pilgrim warships now orbited Kilrah and exchanged torrents of fire with battle groups from each of the noble clans. A seemingly endless stream of combat reports flooded into the emperor's meditation chamber at the apex of the imperial palace's highest tower. The emperor had cloistered himself in the meditation chamber since the attack had begun, and clan elders demanded to speak with him because he had mobilized their forces *before* the Pilgrim attack--as though he had known it was coming.

Indeed, he had known. The Pilgrim protur Carver Tsu the Third had shown him the leaf, the fleet, all of it. The emperor had initially dismissed the evidence. But during Carver Tsu's interrogation, he had learned that the protur whole-heartedly

believed in the fleet and that he had no intentions of deceiving the Kilrathi; rather, he wanted to warn them that the Pilgrims were returning to collect their people within both Confederation and Kilrathi territory. Though the Kilrathi held only a few thousand Pilgrims as slaves and test subjects, the Pilgrims wanted to make sure that those people had the option to leave and that the Kilrathi would not interfere. The protur had said that these Pilgrims would, if provoked, neutralize the entire Kilrathi empire in one fell swoop.

But even the protur's convictions had not fully convinced the emperor. It was not until an ancient Kilrathi ship had arrived on Kilrah, a ship that forced the emperor to consult the ancient journals of Sivar, that he finally understood. About three hundred years prior, a long-range Kilrathi scouting vessel had vanished in the Sirius system. That vessel now sat in emperor's hangar, looking as new as the day it had been manufactured. The original crew of that ship had joined the emperor and Carver Tsu for a remarkable and unsettling meeting that had ended with the emperor's decision to release the protur, James Taggart, and Amity Aristee. The emperor had done this as a sign of good faith, promising that his people would not resist the Pilgrim presence and that all slaves and test subjects would have the choice to leave.

However, when it came to making promises that involved the clan elders, the emperor knew that those clans who had not joined his new alliance or had broken away from it would view the Pilgrims as invaders and launch unauthorized attacks. Those attacks would rally the others, and soon every clan would be involved. He had tried in vain prevent that from happening.

Another report came in, and the warrior who delivered it could barely get the words out of his mouth. Pilgrim troopships with hulls that resembled blue liquid were landing on the savanna and dispatching thousands of troops wearing translucent environment suits and firing weapons that immobilized Kilrathi warriors where they stood. Outer defenses had already fallen. Imperial guards could not hold out for much longer. The emperor's own retinue, along with his personal guards, had reluctantly abandoned the palace without him because, as he had argued, a feeling rooted him to the place, a feeling he could not ignore. Now he leaned back on his hand-carved cathedra near the window, steepled his long fingers, and waited.

Footsteps echoed. *Dor-chak* rifles buzzed and faded. The sound of raindrops striking the stone floor drew closer, and music, human music, rose from the hall outside. He looked to the plastisteel door as azure light sliced through the cracks, outlining the barrier in a stunning glow. Then, with an inexplicable rush of steam, the door blew inward.

Five Pilgrim soldiers darted into the room. They carried semitransparent rifles with muzzles that yawned open as they were pointed at him.

I could have escaped, he thought. *Why did I obey this feeling? Tell me, Sivar, have I shamed my people?*

A woman with broad shoulders and straight, white hair rounded the corner and entered the chamber. "Stand down," she ordered in perfect Kilrathi.

The soldiers brought their weapons to their chests and retreated two steps, creating a path for her. She came toward the emperor, her expression strangely soft. Her practiced Kilrathi bow startled him, and she even kept her head lowered until he released her.

"Who are you?"

She looked up, eyes widening. "I'm Sostur Hella Ti. We've come for you, Emperor."

"Come to kill me? Then do it now. I'd prefer to die on my own world."

"You tried to keep your promise. This isn't your fault."

"Who are you? You can't be Pilgrims"--he pointed at one of the rifles--"not with this kind of technology."

"You met with some of your people who've been with us. They didn't lie. We are Pilgrims. And we've returned for our own."

"Then take your people and go."

"Were it only that easy." She glanced to the ceiling.

"Your kalralahrs have put our people in the middle of the firing zone."

"I had no control over that."

"Let us return control to you."

He issued a long growl of contemplation. "You have my world. And from what I've seen, you'll soon conquer the rest of our holdings. You suggest that I rule an occupied empire?"

"No." She raised her brows. "Simply help us to help our people. Now, if you'll come, there's someone who wants to meet you."

The emperor nodded, slid forward on his cathedra, then groaned as he straightened his old warrior's frame. It took but the slightest effort to withdraw his *zu'kara* knife from its waist sheath. The old and sacred blade felt warm and smooth in his shaking paw.

No, I will no longer yield to this feeling. You say you will give me control, but you--and only you--have the power to give. I have nothing. And I will no longer shame myself, my people, or Sivar.

Knowing that further thought would undo his courage, the emperor jerked the blade toward his throat.

In the name of the noblest hari, the Kiranka, I give my life to you...

As the sharp plastisteel brushed the pale folds of his neck, a flash accompanied by an odd plop stole the weapon from his grip.

"I'm sorry, Emperor, but you still don't understand," said the woman, now holding his blade. "Come with us."

"I won't."

"We offer you a chance to save your people, to prevent anymore bloodshed--including your own."

She extended her index finger and flicked it at each corner of the room. Magnificently detailed holographs ignited and slowly rotated to show different battles within Kilrathi territory:

Kalralahrs fired upon each other as they argued over how they should handle the Pilgrim threat.

Missiles slashed across the sheet of space.

Warriors choked on their own blood seconds before their fighters vaporized.

The sheer numbers of dying Kilrathi left the emperor feeling angered, manipulated. Were it not for the Pilgrim invasion, his warriors might still be alive. He whirled to the window, slapped a thumb on the control panel, and the hemisphere

of protective energy winked out. A gale blew in, backed by the deafening roar of troopship thrusters.

Squinting against the force, the emperor stepped onto his cathedra and launched himself out of the tower, praying that he would meet Sivar on the merciless pavement below.

A flash. A plop. And he found himself standing upright in the courtyard. It took a moment to orient himself, then he gazed out past the low palace wall to the hundreds of ships that had landed on the savanna. His eyes began to burn, and a deep, full-throated chuckle rose from his gut.

The Pilgrims had stripped him of everything, including the power to take his own life. Was this a lesson in what they called humility? Had they forgotten that he was anything but human?

As he backhanded the tears from his eyes, he heard the clatter of approaching soldiers. He spotted them, then looked up to the tower window, where Sostur Hella Ti leaned over and shook her head at him.

He answered her with a roar that echoed up to the war-streaked heavens.

"Grandfrotur!"

Joa Autumnsoul opened one eye as Ravi bounded into the den, the back porch door slamming behind him.

"Grandfrotur," the boy panted again. "Come outside. You have to."

The recliner felt especially comfortable this evening, and Joa's old bones presented a convincing argument that he should remain exactly where he was. He had fallen asleep while watching the news, and he tried to remember why turning on the program had seemed so important. Suddenly, it came to him. He sat up, focused on the boy, and braced himself. "What do you see?"

"I don't know. Come on." Ravi grabbed his wrists and yanked him from the chair.

Wincing, Joa tugged one arm free as the boy led him out into the frigid night air.

"There," Ravi said, pointing at a dense band of quavering blue dots that arced across the sky. "What are they?"

Joa opened his mouth, about to express his ignorance, but the longer he stared at the sky, the more familiar those radiant specks became. He heard the sad, lonely notes of a flutist, then gasped and fell to his knees.

"Grandfrotur, what's wrong?"

"It's some day," Joa muttered. "It's some day."

"What?"

Joa lifted his hands and spread his fingers. "Those, Ravi, are Pilgrims."

"The ones you told me about?"

He nodded.

"How do you know?"

He seized the boy and hugged him tightly. "Close your eyes... and listen."

Chapter 22

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.158

0048 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"I don't care who they are," Angel shouted. "Just shoot the bastards! They didn't let us out to talk."

Maniac rolled up the throttle and banked sharply to port, wheeling over the *Tiger Claw* and slashing straight for a squadron of sixteen weird-looking fighters about the size of his Rapier. "Computer? Can you ID targets yet?"

"Negative. There are no targets in designated Sphere of Operations."

"You piece of shit. I'm looking at 'em right now!"

"No targets in designated Sphere of Operations. Would you like to try another sweep?"

"Shut up." He scowled at the blank radar scope, then eyed the oncoming squadron and heaved a shivery sigh.

With cone-like fuselages that flapped in the nonexistent breeze and radiated ever-changing shades of blue, the fighters seemed more like creatures than machines, and Maniac wondered if

maybe they were. He tensed as the squadron suddenly dispersed, as though they were parts of a single entity.

"Shit, shit, shit," he mumbled and slid the Heads Up Viewer over his eye. The smart-targeting system's green reticle would not appear because there were, of course, no designated targets in the zone. "Weps manual!" he cried, then backhanded the viewer away.

The Tempest computer's failure to ID the targets meant that any fighter could play pin the missile on the Maniac. The trick now would be to keep turning, climbing, diving. Holding any one position for more than a few seconds would prove lethal.

Angel's fighter arrowed across his field of view, her neutron cannon's rotary barrel spinning wildly and rolling out a lightning-licked carpet beneath her target. She couldn't get a bead on the bastard. Maniac watched her for a few more seconds, then slid down his visor and picked out a fighter at his two o'clock low. He jerked the stick right, lit the burners, and scaled an invisible incline, piloting the fighter as though it were a nuclear-powered amusement park ride screaming toward a meltdown. He guided the crosshairs over the ship and cut free his first salvo of neutron fire while snapping off a pair of Friend or Foe missiles. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

The neutron fire needled ineffectually along the fighter's hull, rounds plunging out of sight and wreaking about as much

havoc as an old man hurling birdseed. As the two missiles homed in, twin globules erupted from the fighter's nose and swallowed both rockets sans explosions or traces of debris. The missiles were just gone. Out of there.

Realizing that he had held the same vector for too long, Maniac broke into a ninety degree climb relative to the squadron. He glanced at the scope and spotted Angel's fighter, about a half K below. "Commander, you copy?"

"Here, Lieutenant. Just picked out two more of those warships coming around Netheryana."

"The fighters have engaged. Why haven't the cap ships targeted the *Claw*? We got like, what? Ten in the sphere now?"

"At least. And look--the *Claw's* opening up on them. Dammit. Those ships are just neutralizing our fire."

Maniac throttled up and mapped out another roller coaster course, occasionally glimpsing the strike carrier as her eight turreted lasers struck up wasted conversations with the enemy. The destroyers *Mitchell Hammock* and *Oregon* fared no better. Enemy fighters swarmed both capital ships, allowing laser and missile fire to travel no more than a few meters before each fighter lifted a spumous blue wall that absorbed the ordnance. One squadron began strafing the destroyers' turrets with their lethal globules, and like Maniac's missiles, the turrets simply vaporized. Maniac figured that within a few minutes both

destroyers would be neutered. The *Claw's* roar might take a little longer to stifle, but she would fall. The numbers painted picture. The numbers didn't lie.

Blair, you asshole. Could use you now. You had to go AWOL, you sick bastard. When are you going to learn?

Turning his thoughts to more immediate help, Maniac dialed up Zarya's frequency. "Hey, it's your community convict, set free to kick ass before the cell door slams on his."

Static filtered through the channel.

"Zarya, you copy?"

He abruptly lost his breath as he brought up the widest image possible on his radar scope. About a dozen Rapiers still operated within the zone, but blips summarily winked out.

"Zarya, you copy?"

Five blips. Four. Three. Two. Last one.

"Forget it, Lieutenant. Second Squadron is long gone," Angel said, appearing on his Visual Display Unit. "And so are the others."

He punched the scope. "No. Bullshit. This is... no."

"We're it, Lieutenant. Me and you."

"And we're gonna die," he shouted, grinding his teeth.

"Yup."

"I ain't a coward. But I ain't stupid. Let's jump."

"Can't. They've blockaded the jump point and set up strategic defense positions over Triune. They're protecting the enclave."

"Protecting it? I figured these bastards for Kilrathi sympathizers."

"No. They're Pilgrims or at least aliens who sympathize with them."

"Know what?" he cried, his gaze traveling frantically from port to starboard to overhead. "I don't give a shit who they are. They killed Zarya. They killed Second squadron. They killed everybody."

"You want payback? Won't happen. News flash: we return to base, we'll die with everyone left on the *Claw*. If we stay out here, we'll eventually get picked off by these fighters."

"We ain't going back. And we ain't staying here. You see that big one at one-one-five by two-three-eight? Probably a flagship."

"Got it," she said, understanding. "Form on my wing. We go together."

Maniac wrapped himself in a cloak of G forces as he plunged toward her position. He hazarded a look over his shoulder.

"Shit!"

So many fighters now tore into Maniac's wash that if stars lay beyond them, their presence was a matter of faith.

His thumb glided over the control stick to a button just below the secondary weapons trigger. He squeezed three times, dumping off a trio of irregularly shaped spheres that some weapons engineer had dubbed Porcupine mines.

Something flashed at his shoulders. He glanced back. The mines were gone. The bows of a half-dozen fighters opened like the maws of great white sharks, a heartbeat shy of chomping.

"Todd," Angel shouted. "They got me boxed in. I can't tell if they got a lock, but I think they're--"

The VDU washed with static. He checked the scope. Her dot had vanished. He squinted ahead, saw only a horde of fighters climbing away in unison. Beyond them, the cap ship light show had ceased. The *Mitchell Hammock*, the *Oregon*, and the *Tiger Claw* now orbited within nets of fighters. Maniac brought up the general frequency and listened to Captain Gerald's voice crackle through the comm:

"...I repeat, this Captain Paul Gerald of the Confederation strike carrier *Tiger Claw*. We request an audience with you to discuss the terms of our surrender."

"No," Maniac whispered. "Bad dream."

Something delivered a wrecking ball's blow to his Rapier, threw him hard against harness. He chanced a look back--

Blue. Nothing but. And where was his body? He couldn't feel a damned thing.

#

"Still no response to our hails," said Comm officer Wilks.

"Well keep hailing," Bellegarde shot back, then dragged an arm across his forehead, wiping off the sweat.

For nearly an hour since the missile launch, Bellegarde had stood on the *Concordia's* bridge and had watched the Pilgrim fleet lumber into the McDaniel system like a great Roman army stretching off into the darkness. Full flush scrambles had been ordered, and every fighter and bomber in their arsenal now engaged the enemy. Even Commander Obutu and Lieutenant Blair had ventured into the fray. Those two had attempted to launch without permission but had been caught. Still, they had convinced Bellegarde that maybe they could persuade the fleet to stand down since they were Pilgrims themselves. With nothing to lose, Bellegarde had permitted them to launch. Thirty minutes had passed. Still no word from them.

"Sir? Pilgrim fighters continue to reinforce their positions around the civilian flotilla," Radar Officer Abrams reported. "They've just added another seventy-five to that force. I count four hundred and forty-one warships in polar positions. Fighters launching now. Count is telescopic and imprecise, but I estimate over one thousand fighters in the AO. Number is still increasing."

"Commodore," the XO called gravely.

Bellegarde faced the man, who now stood at the port observation station. Behind him, hundreds of fierce dogfights embroidered the stars. "Report."

The XO's gaze lowered to the deck. "They've already cut our force in half. Tactical analysis indicates that we can hold out for another two, maybe three hours."

"Report on enemy losses."

After exchanging a look with Radar Officer Abrams, the XO pursed his lips, swallowed, then turned back to face the viewport. "None, sir."

"What do you mean none?" Bellegarde shouted.

"No damage to enemy craft, sir. Our weapons have had no effect. Antimatter rounds weakened some of the warships and drew fire, but the enemy has increased shield strength. Point defense systems are keeping the fighters at bay, but our squadrons report neutron and missile fire ineffective. Targeting systems ineffective. Pilots fully manually, with no warning of enemy locks."

"Sir? Contact entering the system," Abrams warned.

"Designate Victor Five Nine, military personnel carrier. ETA: oh-three-one-eight hours."

"That'll be the admiral. Direct one of our telescopic imagers to those coordinates and report."

"Aye-aye, sir. Coordinates transferred. Directing imager." Abrams glanced at his screen and frowned. "Sir, if Five Nine continues on her vector, she'll be intercepted a battle group en route to the jump point."

"Mr. Wilks? Can we get a link?"

"Attempting to establish, sir. Patching through to your viewer."

Bellegarde climbed back into his command chair and swiveled the monitor toward him. An image of the transport's pilot finally materialized. "Captain Dylla here, Commodore. We're en route with Admiral Tolwyn. What can I do for you?"

"Turn around and jump the hell out of there."

"Sir?"

"Captain, you're heading straight for a Pilgrim battle group."

"Excuse me, sir, but did you say *Pilgrim*?"

Bellegarde opened his mouth, then he spotted Tolwyn muscling his way into the cockpit and leaning over the pilot's shoulder. "Hello, sir."

"Richard. Report on planetary bombing."

"We launched, but our torpedoes were taken out by an invading Pilgrim fleet. I don't know if Aristee is a part of this, but Commander Obutu and Lieutenant Blair of the *Tiger Claw* came to warn us of the attack. They claim this fleet belongs to

the original Pilgrims who vanished in the Sirius system three hundred years ago."

"Ridiculous. Aristee probably enlisted the aide of an alien force. What's your status?"

"Uploading tactical report now. We can hold out for another three hours at best."

"Get the battle group out of there. Best speed for the jump point."

"As I informed the captain, there's a battle group standing between us and the point. Those ships are headed your way."

Tolwyn glanced off camera. "Our scope's clear, Richard."

"You'll pick them up with telescopic imagers. You're on an intercept course. Suggest you divert back for the jump point."

"And abandon my ship and the rest of the fleet?" Tolwyn dropped a palm on the pilot's shoulder. "Captain Dylla, stealth mode, low emissions. See if you can take us around that battle group. We're just one ship. Maybe they won't waste their time."

Bellegarde shook his head vigorously. "Sir, may I--"

"Sorry, Richard. Back to your duties. Protect the *Concordia* and her battle group at all costs. If you can't head back to the jump point, then set course for the shipping lane. We'll catch up with you. Go now. Tolwyn out."

The Pilgrim fighters could have easily blown Obutu and Blair out of the sky but instead maintained escort positions and fired warning shots. Exploiting the fact that these jocks obviously wanted them alive, Blair had twice gone into the continuum and had tried to contact anyone aboard any ship. But, as Karista had noted earlier, he could not penetrate a single vessel. He reached out to her in sickbay, and she has insisted that he keep trying.

"Lieutenant? I won't watch any more die," Obutu said. "Right now, my Pilgrim blood doesn't mean a damned thing. I know what side I'm on. It's time to get in the fight."

"Thought we came out here to stop this."

"You've failed to make contact. Or they're just not listening. We're wasting time."

Blair focused his attention on the nearest Pilgrim warship, a tremendous craft over three times the length of the *Tiger Claw* and resembling a submerged cetacean whose skin writhed as it swam through space. "Just give me a few more minutes."

"Mr. Blair. Form on my wing."

"Give me one more shot at that warship. I'm not asking for much."

"Yes, you are. Check your scope. Our numbers are dwindling by the second. Form on my wing."

Swearing to himself, Blair swooped down sixty-degrees toward Obutu's position. Knowing he would hold that course for a few seconds before coming up behind the XO, he slipped out of himself and shot back toward the warship--

To smack head-on into an invisible and impenetrable shield.

We have to stop this. You can't kill anymore. No one wants this.

"Blair! You're coming up too hard on me," Obutu hollered.

It took a mere second for Blair to return to the cockpit and assess the situation. As the proximity alarm wailed of the obvious, he tugged the control yoke toward his chest, but not before a murderous *bang* resounded and the belly of his Rapier dragged sickeningly across Obutu's starboard thruster and tail wing. The left VDU flashed a damage report even as three of his missiles were blown from their mounts. Portside hydraulic pressure fell to fifty-two percent as the port thruster flamed out. The stars spun as the loss of power kicked him into a corkscrew. He fired maneuvering jets to compensate for the loss, but it took a dozen dizzying seconds for the fighter to level off.

"Mr. Blair?"

He remembered to breathe as he looked askance, spotting Obutu's Rapier at his three o'clock low. "Down three Dumb-fires

and a thruster. She won't re-ignite. But I'm not out of it yet, sir."

"We haven't been in it," Obutu corrected. "And since you're incapable of forming on my wing, I'll form on yours. Standby."

Blair sighed over the barb, then checked the scope, observing Obutu's progress. Within ten seconds, the XO had climbed into view on Blair's portside.

"You're venting CZ ninety," Obutu said. "See if you can re-route."

After ordering the computer to perform a full diagnostic and re-route any leaking lines, Blair skimmed a schematic of the thruster on his VDU. The image zoomed in on the leaking line. RE-ROUTE IN PROGRESS flashed along the bottom of the display.

"Third Squadron from the *Carraway* is taking heavy losses, Lieutenant. Let's help 'em out."

Issuing a half-hearted "aye-aye, sir," Blair dropped in behind Obutu's fighter as the XO cut himself a long, lazy arc toward a furball that would freeze the marrow of most Confederation pilots. So many enemy fighters intersected the sphere that you could probably fire blindly and strike a few-- that is, if you could even find an entrance to the labyrinth. Trouble was, finding that entrance resulted in collisions that killed more Confed jocks than did enemy fire.

"Sir? I think your Pilgrim blood means a whole lot now," Blair said as they reached the fringe of the battle. Without their perfect senses of navigation, they would quickly wind up with others.

"Break and attack!" Obutu ordered.

The remaining thruster rumbled as Blair lit the burner, rolled the Rapier onto its port wing, then felt his way into the furball to pick up a half dozen fighters surfing their own breaker. Five of the gleaming craft suddenly peeled off, leaving a single fighter in Blair's sights. He glanced back to watch the others sail far behind him, guessing that they would return to watch him chase the carrot.

Ignoring the bait, Blair went ballistic for one, two, three seconds, then rolled back himself to target one of the five just now pulling out of a bank. The primary weapons trigger felt taut, ready, and he jammed it down to draw a dotted tow line of neutron fire between himself and the quavering bandit.

But the damned line held for no more than a blink before the fighter rolled onto its back and plummeted.

Out of the corner of his eye, Blair caught the other four fighters knifing toward him from his four o'clock high. He rolled the throttle back, fired retros, and yanked himself into a sit-'n'-spin, with his neutron cannon booming like a jackhammer as the fighters rolled into his cone fire. Six or

seven rounds caught the fighters squarely in their pointed bows. He cocked his head. No effect.

He lit the pipe. Blasted out of the spin. Called upon every standard evasive maneuver he had been taught. He calculated a new heading along an intersecting plain to starboard, turned one-hundred-and-eighty degrees off that heading, then doubled back toward an open cove in the furball, praying that he would lose his pursuers.

Nope. They mirrored his movements as though they had read his mind. Maybe they had...

Cursing his own pulse, he tried forty-five degree maneuvers, your standard zigzag, and that only gave the sixth fighter time to fall in with the others. He streaked to starboard, braked, then feinted to port a moment before corkscrewing down, down, down, and away.

Until now Blair had resisted the temptation to call to Obutu, but enemy gang-bangs had the effect of tempering one's ego. "Little help, Commander."

He waited.

Checked the scope.

No Obutu.

The panic came on suddenly and threatened to turn his thoughts to liquid, his muscles to putty. He called out to his

pursuers, told them that he was half Pilgrim, but as Obutu had said, they weren't listening.

Reflected light from McDaniel's World hiked across Blair's canopy as he vectored toward the planet. The aura lured him closer, and he wondered if it wouldn't be better to simply close his eyes and fly into her atmosphere. Maybe someone on the planet would see and remember the blazing ribbon of his death.

Suicide? Screw that. These people might be Pilgrims, but they don't give a shit about me now. He thought of something Paladin had once said to Maniac: "You're a Confederation fighter pilot and that's what you do and that's what's in your blood."

Blair braked hard, slammed the stick toward his chest, and flipped the Rapier onto its back.

Now inverted relative to his pursuers, he resolved to empty his neutron cannon, to drain his laser batteries, to launch every missile. He squeezed the primary and secondary triggers. The Rapier quaked as rockets ripped from their mounts and razored off. Crimson laser bolts spat from wing-mounted cannons and lacerated the vac.

"Christopher," Merlin cried from a seat atop the left VDU. "It's time to go home."

"Yes, it is."

Undaunted by Blair's fire, the six fighters charged toward him, their bows swelling into wine-dark throats suddenly lit as

globules jetted from them. A latticework of blue lightening expanded before Blair's Rapier.

Merlin stood, his eyes glowing. "Never weather-beaten sail more willing bent to shore." He raised his hands as the blue enveloped him, enveloped everything.

Chapter 23

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

CS *CONCORDIA*

2654.158

0315 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

"Sir, comm drone was dispatched from the CS *Harbinger* on one-five-six. Decryption in progress. Will transfer to your screen," said Comm Officer Wilks.

Bellegarde nodded. "Any response from our captors yet?"

"None yet, sir."

"Very well. Keep sending."

As he waited for the message, Bellegarde lowered his head and massaged his bloodshot eyes. Three, maybe four times in the past two hours he had slipped off the bridge and into the ready room, where he sought the escape of his bottle. He had fallen back against the bulkhead, trembling as the Scotch had flamed down his throat.

The *Concordia's* behemoth antimatter guns had been sheared off, her tubes melted shut, her point-defense systems blasted into heaps of blistering durasteel. The *Carraway* and the rest of the battle group reported similar damage. As for fighters and bombers, over five hundred had been launched.

Not a single one had returned.

Although the Pilgrims had destroyed the smaller craft, they had left the capital vessels in tact, which told Bellegarde that they intended to take some prisoners. He felt the need to remind the crew of the Confederation code of conduct: "If you become a prisoner of war, you will keep faith with your fellow prisoners. You will give no information nor take part in any action which might be harmful to fellow Confederation citizens. If you are senior, you will take command. If not, you will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over you and will uphold them in every way. Should you conclude that the enemy has the means and the will to purge information from your mind, it is your sworn duty to take your own life in order to protect that information."

A beep jarred him. He focused on the comm screen and tapped a data bar to play. The CS *Harbinger's* comm officer had hastily recorded the message, and Bellegarde barely paid attention to the officer's report. He glanced beyond the screen to the viewport, where Pilgrim warships had strung themselves out across McDaniel's World like blue baguettes ornamenting the larger jewel of the planet. Thousands of specks--reflected light from fighter craft--interposed the warships in a great veil of traffic. Though he had tried to repress his awe and let his anger diminish the staggering display of Pilgrim power, he

simply could not help himself. They had beaten him so thoroughly, so efficiently, that before he died he wanted to know exactly how they had done it. That was the officer in him, always striving for better ways to do the job. Fighting the cats had always been such a sloppy affair. These Pilgrims simultaneously maintained multiple offensive and defensive operations within a single Sphere of Operations. Bellegarde would like to see any Confederation battle group pull off a stunt like that without suffering a communications breakdown.

"Holy shit," the XO mumbled, now standing at Bellegarde's shoulder. "Sorry, sir. I just don't believe it." He pointed at a computer composite of the CS *Olympus* on the comm screen. "Cats took her out. It's confirmed."

Bellegarde leaned forward and tapped a button, skipping back through the message until he saw the comm officer. "Debris is from the CS *Olympus*, cross-checked and confirmed." Bellegarde stopped the recording and threw back his head. He chuckled under his breath a moment, then leaned forward. "Jesus Christ. When was she destroyed?"

"Analysis indicates on or about one-four-two," the XO said. "And sir? Are you all right?"

"I'm just thinking how all of this might have been prevented, if only--"

"Can't think about the if onlys, sir. Just the way it is."

"Sir? We have a contact, bearing one-one-nine by three-zero-four," alerted Radar Officer Abrams. "She's only a few clicks out, running slow and low; just picked her up now. ID coming through. It's the admiral's transport."

Bellegarde swiveled to face the comm station. "Mr. Wilks?"

"Link established, sir."

"Richard, good to find you still there," Tolwyn said from the comm screen.

"And you there, sir."

"Son of a bitches let us fly right through. No doubt they detected us."

"From what I've observed, they're quite deliberate."

Tolwyn nodded. "What's your status?"

After providing the admiral with a capsule summary of their situation, Bellegarde sighed and folded his arms over his chest. "I'm sorry, sir."

"I didn't realize I'd be returning to negotiate the terms of our surrender," Tolwyn said, his voice growing thin.

"I'm not sure, sir, but I think that they've been waiting for you..."

Kalralahr Dax'tri nar Ragitagha buried his dueling blade in his first fang's neck, then turned the blade forty-five degrees, unlocking a door to *fa'ka'tra* for the insolent warrior. The

first fang dropped to his knees, gurgled, then fell onto his stomach as Dax'tri withdrew the blade.

"Who will be next for eternal damnation?" Dax'tri eyed his bridge officers, nearly singeing them with his gaze. "Meet Sivar? Go to *fa'ka'tra*? The choice is simple. Did you doubt me? Did you think I was weak or indecisive like Kalralahr Vukar? I will kill each who fails to obey."

"We're with you, Kalralahr," cried Comm Officer Rogta. "We die together as warriors." Rogta lowered his head, and as he did so, the act trickled through the other officers until every head had bowed in compliance.

"For the *hrai*!" Dax'tri shouted. He swung around, threw his dueling blade to the deck, and scowled at the hundreds of enemy ships invading Kilrathi space, *his* space. It no longer mattered that they had destroyed his battle group's weapons. It no longer mattered that they outnumbered his force twenty-to-one. He knew what Sivar expected. And he would deliver nothing less. "Set the reactor to overload. We have a gift for them."

Sostur Inanna Pandathy stood in her backyard, shading her eyes from the glare and staring beyond the *veracia* tree to the twinkling dots that shone even in broad daylight.

Collab joined her, his shaven head glistening, the Pilgrim cross tattooed on his cheek bending as he squinted against the sun. "I guess I owe you an apology," he said softly.

"For what? Thinking that I was some crazed old lady prophesying the second coming of the Pilgrims?"

"No. For coming over late to fetch your laundry."

She turned to him, smiled, then seized his cheek between her thumb and forefinger. "I told you they would come."

"Yes, you did. And I guess that girl wasn't able to warn the Confederation. I wonder if her friend ever got off planet."

Pandathy shrugged. "Help me inside. I wish to pray for him, for both of them."

Dennet Dearborn clenched his fists but held them wisely at his sides. He had been trying for the past half hour to explain to the Marine at the air and spaceport gate that the Confederation no longer held any power over the people of McDaniel's World and that he and his comrades should retreat to their troopships before Pilgrim ground forces arrived. According to the news people, Pilgrim troops were already on their way. The Marine and his buddies had about an hour to evacuate the area.

No, Dennet did not harbor any special affection for the Marines; he simply wanted them to abandon their posts so that he

could jog across the tarmac to a small moonskipper, a two-seater that could whisk him up to the *Concordia*.

After Karista had left, Dennet had waited another ten hours for a transport, but the mythical machine had never come. After twelve hours, he had given up and had spent the night in a waiting area crowded with other stranded souls.

The following morning, he had left the terminal, intent on finding someone who could get him off planet. He had wandered the rental hover district, encountering dozens of fast-talking opportunists who demanded small fortunes to get people into orbit. Unable to pay that kind of money, he had journeyed back to Ardentia to speak with Sostur Pandathy, hoping that she knew someone who could help. Ten minutes into the trek, he had thought the entire idea quiet foolish--if Pandathy had the means to get off world, wouldn't she use them herself? Then again, she whole-heartedly believed that the Pilgrims would save everyone and that there was no need to abandon one's home.

Thanks be to Ivar that he found Pandathy in her cabin. And to his great annoyance he discovered that she owned a small moonskipper and took it out once or twice per year to visit relatives. He and Karista could have used the skipper in the first place. Why hadn't Pandathy told them about it? "Well, young Caravan, *I'm* not young," she had said, then with a long-winded apology had given Dennet the codes and access card. He

had left, part of him grumbling over the irony, the other part thrilled at the prospect of departure.

But a damned Marine now stood between Dennet and his ticket out. Dozens of thick scabs had formed on the guard's neck and face, telltale markers of the visimoxitalid rash that some offworlders contracted during their first month on McDaniel.

Dennet stole a look at his watch, then faced the Marine. "Sir, have you listened to a word I've said?"

The Marine stared through him.

"Sir? One of us will die here. I promise you." Dennet turned his head slightly and looked out through the Plexi to the moonskipper parked on the tarmac--

Then he dashed by the Marine, whom he expected would whirl and fire at him. He started into the tunnel that led outside, hugging the right wall for a second until he heard the Marine shout. Siphoning all of his energy into his legs, he sprinted to the left wall as the guard fired. With a nerve-shattering *clang*, the round ricocheted off the right wall and streaked ahead.

Seeing that he had just ten or twelve more steps to an intersecting tunnel, Dennet held his breath and sprang toward the corner. The guard's rifle went off again as Dennet reached the intersection and turned right to face a pair of automatic doors that parted as he approached. Something pinched his

shoulder. He glanced down, winced. His robe was soaked with blood. *Don't panic.*

But it hurts so bad. I can't stop the trembling...

As he cleared the automatic doors and passed into the bright, warm sunlight, he felt blood dripping off his wrist and gripped his shoulder with his free hand.

The moonskipper sat fifty meters to his right, a sleek though dusty little transport parked among a dozen other heaps. Her twin dorsal fins and forward-swept wings loaned her an angelic aura that quickened Dennet's pace.

He came within twenty meters of the ship when a powerful roar tore across the sky. A great flock of troopships with hulls that fluctuated like whitecaps on a windswept sea swooped down on the air and spaceport, a few detaching themselves from the group to aim for Dennet's tarmac.

Exploiting the diversion, Dennet drove himself another ten meters.

"Pilgrim!"

The guard probably had a clean, laser-guided shot.

Make a decision... you have to.... freeze. He kept his back to the guard, then regarded three of the Pilgrim troopships as they slowed into vertical landings. He suddenly felt safe and realized that the guard meant nothing in lieu of the invading force. He reminded himself that all of his doubting

had been for naught. Karista had been right about everything, and he just wanted to be with her now and apologize for, well, everything.

He pivoted back and raised his palms to the guard as thrusters churned up a dust storm. Blinking hard against the wind, Denet took a step forward. "I surrender."

The guard fired. Hot pain raged in Denet's abdomen.

Bang! A second shot punched a hole in Denet's neck and sent him staggering backward.

Shot number three burrowed into Denet's heart and slammed him onto his back. Warm, sweet blood flooded the back of his throat as he fought for air. Gooseflesh scaled his shoulders, and the sky darkened around the edges.

He cursed the guard, cursed Ivar, and sensed that he simply wasn't supposed to die like this; his death had been scheduled for much later in life. Certain tasks had yet to be accomplished. A grievous clerical error had been made. Someone needed to go back and check the paperwork, damn it!

More gunfire rattled in his ears. Boots pounded on the pavement. He shivered. Someone yelled, "Brotur!" and then...

Confederation President Harold Rodham sat in the joint chiefs' war room and slumped in his chair as he listened to reports from each highly decorated officer. A massive fleet of

unidentified warships had invaded the Sol system, despite the score of capital ships that had moved to intercept them. While nearly all fighters had been lost, the aliens had quite deliberately suppressed each cap ship's fighting capabilities without destroying the ship. Were they a merciful enemy? Perhaps. Rodham had demanded to know more, but all his "experts" could tell him was that the enemy had superior maneuvering and weapons capability and that reports were just coming in from other systems within the sector, where similar invasions had occurred.

General Jon Linta, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, rose from the opposite end of the table. "Mr. President, I respectfully suggest that we contact this force to discuss terms for our surrender. Maybe that's the one hail they'll answer. And maybe we can stall negotiations long enough for reinforcements to arrive from Vega. We've already dispatched over a thousand comm drones."

Rodham stiffened as he imagined going through with the jarhead's plan. "General, I think you've failed to consider my position. My first major act as president will be to surrender the Sol system. You call it a stalling maneuver; I call it political suicide." Rodham paused, gripped the arms of his chair, and concentrated on his breathing. "I'll be holding a press conference later today. I'm going to assure our tax-

paying citizens that their military will be doing everything in its power to repress and defeat this invading force. Our people have already suffered through enough with the bombing of the senate and Vasura's suicide."

The General twice opened his mouth, hesitated a third time, then finally mustered words. "Sir, we've already done everything in our power." His gaze crept toward the holograph glowing above the table. Enemy warships hovered around Earth like the protruding spikes of a mace, and while the remaining automated platforms continued to unloose missile, laser, and neutron fire, tactical analysis reported that within the hour all defense system would offline. "Unless we get help from Vega, Sol will fall. Nothing can prevent that."

"Sir?" Space Marshal Susan Jayhefsa rose from her seat, then stole a glance at her computer slate. "Latest intell indicates that invading forces are even more widespread than first anticipated. They may very well have seized control of Confederation worlds within Vega. There's little doubt that Amity Aristee is behind this counterattack to our bombing of the Pilgrim systems and enclaves--which, by the way, has yet to be confirmed. Make no mistake, this invasion is no coincidence."

"I never said it was," Rodham retorted. "And frankly, I don't give a damn whether Aristee, the Kilrathi, or another force is behind it. What are your plans to stop it."

General Linta hemmed. "Again, Mr. President, we told--"

"I know what you've told me," Rodham spat, slamming his fist on the table, "and that's not good enough."

"Sir, there are victories worse than defeat."

"I'm sure you read that somewhere. And maybe it gives you comfort, but it does absolutely nothing for our citizens."

Linta shook his head, his face glowing with anger. "The enemy has gone easy on us. If we fail to stand down, they'll destroy this planet and kill all of our taxpayers."

Rodham snickered, averted his gaze, then scanned the holograph as another automated platform fell under enemy fire. "We still have two operational battle groups near Saturn. I want them recalled and brought in to join the fight."

"Against a force like this?" Jayhefsa said, gesticulating at the holograph.

"You heard me."

"Sir, those are good people out there. You're sentencing them to death."

"Those good people have been trained to fight. And that's just what they'll do." He stood. "Recall the ships."

Chapter 24

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

PILGRIM FLAGSHIP *EXODIA CHU*

2654.158

0330 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

White. Too much white. The walls. The floor. The overhead. People dressed in white robes casting shadows that seemed frosty. A face now. Dark, rugged features. Hair slicked back. The trace of a smile.

"You're okay, Lieutenant. You're on board the Pilgrim Flagship *Exodia Chu*. This place is a kind of sick bay, but other than these resting surfaces there isn't much else. We're orbiting McDaniel's World. I know there's a tingle in your spine and your vision is still a little cloudy. It takes a few hours for the field to wear off. They say the younger you are, the faster you recover--which is why it took me so long."

Though he failed to focus on the man's face, the voice that came half whisper, half rasp belonged to none other than Commodore James "Paladin" Taggart, and his presence struck Blair into contemplative silence. Was Paladin a traitor to the Confederation? Had he aided and abetted Amity Aristee because she was his perfect pair and he was in love with her? Had he

put those feelings before his sworn duty to defend the Confederation?

Or had he allowed Aristee to escape because he just needed more time to convince her to stand down? And had he known from the beginning about the Pilgrim fleet?

Admiral Tolwyn's words echoed back from the past:

"Lieutenant, according to your own report, Commodore Taggart was the only one who could've programmed that hopper drive. He had locked everyone else out of the system. His orders were to seize control of that vessel and return it to the Confederation. By feeding in those jump coordinates, the commodore committed an act of treason--one for which he will be executed."

"What's the matter, Mr. Blair? It's only been a month. Forgotten me already?"

No, Blair had certainly not forgotten the man. He had often thought back to their last good-bye:

"I'll meet you on the flight deck," Paladin answered a little too quickly. "But here..." He removed his Pilgrim cross, then turned and proffered it to Blair. "In case I don't make it back."

"I can't."

Paladin tossed the cross, and Blair could not help but catch it. "You're my anchor, Mr. Blair."

"That why you took me along?"

"You've been pressing me about Pilgrim culture and history. So you got a look." He glanced to Karista. "And you met your pair. Now evacuate this area. That's an order." The commodore suddenly looked very old, very lost, sure of nothing.

Blair hoisted a painful salute and mumbled, "Aye-aye, sir."

"Guess you think I'm traitor," Paladin said, jarring Blair into the present. "Maybe they'll kill me for what I did, but I want you to know the truth. For a while, I just wasn't sure where I belonged. Then I thought I knew. Now I'm confused."

"They should have killed me out there," Blair said disgustedly. "Would've spared me this." He reached up to his chest, fumbling for Paladin's Pilgrim Cross; he intended to throw it in the man's face.

"There's a footlocker sort of thing over there with your gear in it. I already took back my cross, if that's what you're looking for. Thanks for holding it."

Throwing his weight into his arms, Blair sat up, and the clay-like surface gave a little. He rode out a wave of dizziness, then blinked hard against the filmy flashes. "They spare me because of you? Feeling pretty good about yourself right now? Do you know how many people died out there?"

"There were a few accidental deaths on both sides. I think the last count was nineteen."

"But I saw--"

"You saw the field. And you rode one yourself."

"Then Commander Obutu--"

"Is just over there. Oh, you can't see. He's about twenty meters to your right. Sleeping now."

"I don't understand. Are they just trying to scare the Confederation? Is Aristee part of this?"

"No, she's not. Honestly, I don't know where she is. I finally destroyed the *Olympus*. The rest is long a story better told over drinks. In the end, we were taken like you. I woke up here. I've been looking for her and the protur ever since. And I don't know about you, but being here gives me this strong sense of--I'm not sure what it is--home, maybe. Never weather-beaten sail more willing bent to shore."

"I've heard that. Merlin said that when--"

"That was me. Or more precisely, that was me quoting an old poet named Thomas Campion. I wanted to tell you more, but we got cut off. I'm not an extrakinetic, Mr. Blair. But being here somehow heightens that ability. It's remarkable, really."

Paladin's new-found senses hardly impressed Blair. "Maybe these people aren't killing us, but they're taking us prisoner. And they have the numbers and the technology to defeat the Confederation. So now, Pilgrims or not, we might be their slaves. I don't know, bang me in the head or something, I just

can't find the positive here. And there are still way too many unanswered questions."

"Then let me answer some for you," came another voice.

The air suddenly felt warmer, and the walls, blurry though they had been, now yielded to the stars. Nearly able to focus, Blair saw that he and Paladin had, in a heartbeat, been transferred to another part of the ship, the bridge perhaps. Patterns of blue light and shadow swirled on walls that swept toward an oval pane of stars resembling a viewport, but the Plexi appeared too clear and unreflective. No form of instrumentation met his gaze, nor could he find a bridge crew. He immediately concluded that this either wasn't the bridge, or if it was, then comprehending this kind of the technology would take longer than his meager life span.

"Gentlemen, my name is Ivar Chu McDaniel. Some just call me Frotur."

Blair whirled back to face the man, a somewhat amorphous individual that the eye tended to dismiss. He stood a little shorter than Blair, and his wrinkled Pilgrim robe hung loosely about his shoulders. He looked like a late twentieth century software geek and billionaire who had just emerged from being locked in a sauna for two days. *This* was the leader of the Pilgrims, a man who should have died two and a half centuries ago?

"You're Ivar Chu?" Paladin asked with a snort.

"Impossible."

The man smiled. "Of course. From your point of view."

"I've seen pictures of Ivar Chu McDaniel," Blair said.

"You do look like him. So what are you people, time dilation junkies? You spend most of your time traveling at near-light speeds to create your own fountain of youth?"

McDaniel sighed. "I knew this would be difficult. Where to begin... and how to explain?"

"Rumor had it that you disappeared in the Sirius system," said Paladin. "So what happened?"

He gestured around the ship. "This did."

"They said you and the others ascended to a higher plain of existence. This it?"

"It is."

Paladin shook his head. "I don't feel like I ascended."

"Neither do I," Blair added.

"Gentlemen, this ship, the fleet, everything you see, *is* us. It's all created and controlled by us. These aren't walls, they're thoughts. Mr. Blair, you've drawn on your extrakinetic senses. We've taken those beyond the quilt, beyond the cone of thought."

"Why? So you can probe our thoughts and take us prisoner?"

"You're not prisoners. Anyone who wants to stay behind can do so--including yourselves."

Paladin gave an exaggerated sigh. "Mr. McDaniel, we come from a school that teaches us that power corrupts. I'm looking around, and I'm seeing a whole lot of power."

"Yes, the frailties of being human. Unavoidable, but in this case, inconsequential."

That triggered a lopsided grin from Paladin. "An eloquent blow off. But tell me, if you are McDaniel and you've managed to survive all of these years, then what really happened to you out there?"

"Yeah, and how did you go beyond the quilt and the cone?" Blair asked.

"There are some questions that I'm not permitted to answer, but I can tell you this much... we had help."

The communications link defied conventional physics, and while Confed scientists struggled to figure out how the invaders had accomplished the feat of establishing instantaneous connections with every Confederation and Kilrathi system, President Harold Rodham stood on the tarmac at Washington Dulles Air and Space Port, waiting to receive one Ivar Chu McDaniel, purported leader of the Pilgrims.

One of the invaders' more nondescript troopships landed. An orifice appeared in the quavering fuselage, and out stepped a kindred spirit, a man who, like Rodham, carried himself too timidly to suggest that he led billions. Surprisingly enough, he came unarmed, without guards, and seemed unfazed by the Marines who hustled up beside him. "Mr. President," he called in a thin lilt, then advanced and extended his hand.

Rodham took it. "If you'll follow me?"

"I was disappointed that you called in those two battle groups from Saturn. Still, I admire your fortitude."

Jerking his hand away, Rodham glowered at the wiry man. "We won't go down easily."

"You won't go down at all, sir. Has the senate convened? I'm looking forward to explaining everything."

"They're waiting for you." Rodham said, *and you've made it all too easy, you bastard.* "This way." He led McDaniel back toward the waiting hover.

"They call me Maniac."

"We know."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes."

"What else do you know about me?"

"Everything. Sorry."

Three painfully gorgeous blondes sat beside Maniac's bed, cot, or whatever the flat thing was. The one who liked to talk had the brightest eyes and the longest hair, though the neckline of her robe could plunge a tad more dramatically. He would talk to her tailor about that. And legs... God, did all three have legs.

"Is that all you think about?" Ms. Bright Eyes asked.

"You mean sex? Yeah. I'm a guy. *Duh.*"

"What about the spirit?" the one with curly hair asked.

"You should work on that."

"Why? I mean, I'm dead, right? Who cares. You three are in my head or whatever, so let's get down to business. Old Maniac hasn't lit the pipe in a while." He undid his sash, then let his robe slide open.

In unison, the three blondes crinkled their noses and dematerialized as Zarya walked through them. She glanced at his crotch and snickered. "That pipe's not up to spec."

He slapped the robe over himself and bolted from the resting surface. "I thought--"

"Me, too. But instead of lusting after these people, I asked questions. Everybody from First and Second made it. They didn't want to kill anyone. And they say that they'll eventually release us. And get this, they say they're Pilgrims."

"So where have they been hiding?" He eyed the shifting blue walls. "Is this one of their ships? Where the hell are we?"

"See, instead of drooling over those women, you should've been--"

"I know. So what now? Have you seen anyone else? How 'bout Angel? She was with me when, well, I guess when we got taken here." He grinned as the reality of his situation finally hit home. "Shit. I've been abducted by beautiful blonde aliens. No one will ever believe me."

"Oh, God, I made the right decision."

His expression soured. "To dump me?"

"I mean, think about it, Todd. For all intents and purposes we're POWs. I'm over here trying to learn as much about our situation as possible, while you want to get laid. I used to think that your priorities were just screwed up, but now I realize that you only have two: flying and f--"

He put a finger over her mouth. "I know I got problems. And I know I have to do something about 'em. I just feel like if buy into all this seriousness, I'm going to lose something, and I'll never get it back."

"You've already lost me, Todd. You working on your career next? I'm sure it won't take long to ruin that. Blair tried to

warn me about you. I said I'd take my chances. And I guess it wasn't so bad. I only lost time."

Maniac looked away, then dragged himself back to the bed. "When we first got together, you were talking about a soft monkey or something and trying to tell me that I was just on the rebound from Rosie. I kind of thought that was true. But then I just started thinking about you and being with you and learning everything I could about you. And that was it. And then when you came to the brig... I don't know, I usually don't get hurt. I'm pretty good about that. You know, just call up the next one, right? But for the first time in my life, I didn't call."

"You were locked up."

He frowned. "You know what I mean. I just want it to work with you."

"It's too late. I can't change you. That's not my job. And you know what, Todd? You'll get over me faster than I'll get over you."

"You don't have to get over me."

"Sorry. I've already stepped off the ride. Now if we somehow get out of this, we'll still have to work together, so I'll give you the professional courtesy you really don't deserve, if you'll return the same."

"I won't let you go, Zarya."

But as he turned and gaped at the empty room, he realized that he already had. *Shit.*

"Ladies and gentlemen of the senate, over three centuries ago twelve hundred of us ventured out to the Sirius system, much like the original Pilgrims who packed up their ships and sailed across this world's Atlantic Ocean. We've always been religious separatists, and that hasn't changed. We reside now in a system that would take the sentient races of this galaxy a hundred billion millennia to reach. How did we accomplish this? I can only say that we did not do it alone and that we are no threat to you."

If Rodham had a Confederation dollar for every hoot and guffaw that now met his ears, his wealth would span the aforementioned galaxy. The protests echoed throughout the stadium, and he waited a moment for them die off. But they didn't. In fact, fifteen or twenty senators tried to push their way past the wall of Marines that separated the podium from the stands. "Order!" Rodham cried from his position behind Ivar Chu McDaniel. "Let him speak."

"Senators," McDaniel shouted, his voice rising so loudly above the racket that Rodham knew that the stadium's sound system was not responsible. "We have no intentions of ruling

the Confederation or the Kilrathi Empire. We've come for our people, for all those who are willing to come home with us."

"What about the people you killed?" shouted a twenty-year-old woman whose holo ID read NYLATTA FAVOR, NEPHELE. Favor had the distinction of being the youngest woman ever elected from that world.

McDaniel raised a palm and produced a huge holograph of his own, a patchwork of thousands of real-time images of Confederation military personnel aboard Pilgrim warships. If he had used a device to create the image, Rodham didn't see one. A hush fell over the stadium as some senators viewed the pictures with awe, others with expressions knotted by mistrust.

"A few did die," McDaniel went on. "A few on both sides. But the majority of your people are safe and will be returned, along with their vehicles. We were forced to take a ship in the Sirius system that strayed too close to our master jump point. That vessel is already heading home." The holograph switched to show a Confederation destroyer washed in the intense light of Sirius A as it sailed toward its battle group. "We've returned ships to the Kilrathi as well. And soon as we have our people, we'll return the rest of yours and be gone."

"An exchange of hostages, eh?" asked Favor. "Why should we trust you?"

"Contrary to the belief of the Pilgrims who live here, these stars are not ours--they're yours. Destroy them if you wish. We've found our own."

Rodham shifted beside McDaniel to pose a question of his own. "So you came to save your people from the bombing. Why didn't you come during the first Pilgrim war? Don't you realize how many of your people died back then?"

McDaniel pursed his lips, and his eyes glazed over. "Our people started that war alone. And they had to finish it alone. It was a grave error, an act of hubris, and they paid dearly for it. But now they shouldn't pay for one rebel's ambition, a rebel who is, by the way, in our custody and will be returned to you for punishment."

Once again, the holograph transformed into a three-dimensional image of Amity Aristee sitting in a blue room and speaking with an older man whom Rodham recognized as the Pilgrim protur Carver Tsu III.

"What's to stop you from taking your people, then destroying us?" Fabor challenged.

"I can show you holographs. I can take some of you to the battlefields, where you can witness for yourself that our word is truth. But even after seeing it with your own eyes, there will always be doubt. That's why your president has decided to

hold me hostage until all of your people are returned."

McDaniel whirled to face Rodham--

Who looked suddenly to the Marine colonel. After a shout, several of the soldiers turned their weapons on McDaniel.

A hush fell over the senators.

"I came here unarmed and in good faith. And I understand your trepidation. You may keep me as a hostage. We estimate that it will take about a standard month for us to evacuate our people. In the mean time, I will live here with you and try to answer as many of your questions as I can. And do know that it is impossible to kill me, since my presence here is a subjective experience for each one of you." With that, he vanished.

Rodham blinked.

And now a half dozen Ivar Chu McDaniel's stood on the dais. Then a dozen, two dozen, and suddenly scores of Ivar Chu McDaniels appeared in the gap between the podium and the Marines. They lingered another moment, then dematerialized back into the single McDaniel, who nodded and said, "Yes, it's quite subjective."

"Somehow, someone will get to him," Bellegarde said, turning away from the comm monitor.

Admiral Tolwyn thought a moment, then nodded. "He's a fool. Or he's so powerful that he has nothing to fear." Tolwyn

glanced over his shoulder at the Pilgrim warship captain behind him. "Which is it Brotur Solomon?"

The man scratched at his beard as he smiled. "I was the executive officer aboard the *Exodia*, which is to say I've served under the Frotur for a very long time. The only fools are those who fail to listen."

Tolwyn swiveled the command chair to face the robed captain. "All right, then. Your story matches his. But I'd rather a simultaneous exchange. The distinguished senator from Nephele has, shall we say, a sharp eye for the obvious. We'll allow our civilian flotilla to land on your warships as you return our people."

"Interesting how you so convincingly pretend that you're still in a position to bargain," Solomon said. "But we agree to your terms."

"Excellent," Tolwyn said, then rose. "Now get the hell off my bridge."

Chapter 25

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

MCDANIEL'S WORLD

PILGRIM FLAGSHIP *EXODIA CHU*

2654.158

0400 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

The holograph of Ivar Chu McDaniel addressing the Confederation senate faded, and Blair gazed over at the Ivar Chu standing across from him on the warship's bridge. "If that's McDaniel on Earth, then who are you?"

"I understand your frustration," said the Pilgrim leader with a weak smile. "We're not clones. Think of us as parts of the whole. You've seen this ability before. You just didn't recognize it."

Blair glanced sidelong at Paladin, who simply shrugged.

"Now you gentlemen have a decision to make. You are Pilgrims, and I invite you to come with us. In truth, we're all human beings with a burning desire to explore. And there's so much out there."

"I'm tempted," said Paladin, squinting in thought. "Sounds better than a court-martial."

"I hope you make the right choice. Maybe it's time that your life became your own."

They shook hands, then McDaniel cocked his brow at Blair.

"What about you, brotur?"

"He said, I mean you said, that it would take a month or so to evacuate everyone. So I guess I have some time. But I swore an oath to the Confederation, both of us did. If we leave, we'll break that oath. Most of my friends would say I'm nuts. But from the day I learned I was a Pilgrim, I've been trying to figure out whether I'm a human, Pilgrim, or what. Maybe it's no big revelation. Maybe I'm just both."

McDaniel nodded. "You'll be an inspiration to those who remain." He proffered a hand, which Blair took. "If you'd like, you can head back to the *Concordia*. An exchange is in progress now. I'll leave you on our flight deck."

Suddenly, the ceiling rose fifty meters and blossomed into a dome. The bulkheads stretched back twice that distance. The harsh but wonderfully familiar scents of hydraulic fluids and burning thrusters wafted toward Blair as he gazed across a hangar the size of a small metroplex, a hangar configured for Confederation craft. Before he could take in all of the magnificent facility, he spotted a familiar pilot weaving past Pilgrim and Confederation personnel, ducking under loading ramps, and leaping over fuel lines. "Sons of bitches," cried William Santyana.

"Thought you went up with the *Olympus*," Paladin said. "Or were taken out by the cats."

"We got out on a troopship before the *Olympus* blew. The cats were closing to pounce--"

"And you woke up here," Paladin finished. "Just like us." Santyana nodded. "Thought we had died."

"I'm sorry I couldn't wait for you," Blair said, remembering the pain of launching in the *Diligent* without Santyana and his family.

The ex-test pilot grabbed Blair's shoulder and squeezed. "Forget it, Mr. Blair. You did your job. That's all anyone could've asked. Are Karista and Maniac here?"

"No, she's on the *Concordia*. I don't know where he is."

"So what're you doing now? Leaving?"

Blair looked to Paladin, who only sighed.

"What?" Santyana asked. "You can't tell me you're going back? Not with an offer like this."

"What about you?" Blair asked. "Thought you hated Pilgrims."

"I settled on Mylon Three to get away from this bullshit. I've already done my time with the service--and then some. Just wanted to raise my family on a little farm. Now I can do that and never have to worry about the Confederation guilt-tripping me into coming back."

"So you believe everything these Pilgrims say?" Blair shook his head. "They're very humble for people with this kind of tech. That bothers me. What if they're lying? What if the reason they came back has nothing to do with saving us. What if you go, and it turns into a nightmare?"

"You think they've come to enslave us or that they're cannibals in search of a food source? This ain't a bad holo. I've felt what they feel, and I know what they know. I've never come this close to feeling right about my life. You should come. It's the only way you'll know what I mean. I don't want to sound like a mystic, but it's the truth."

Paladin shifted restlessly, then abruptly extended his hand. "Good luck, Mr. Santyana. Godspeed to you and your family."

"Thank you, sir." Santyana regarded Blair, his expression as sober as they came. "Think about it." He snapped off a salute, turned, and strode away.

"At least someone around here is sure of himself," Paladin said.

Blair crossed in front of his mentor. "So, what're you going to do?"

"Talk to her," Paladin said, his gaze riveted to a group on the opposite side of the hangar. He bolted off.

And Blair bounded into his wake.

Amity Aristee, an older man in protur's robe, and four Pilgrim soldiers marched toward a Confederation troopship that had just landed.

Paladin shouted for them to hold, and the soldiers regarded him with scowls that faded as he drew closer. The group paused, and Paladin arrived, gasping for breath.

Blair came up hard behind Paladin and realized that he had just run headlong into a bittersweet reunion sure to become a bitter good-bye.

"James," the older man said with a wry smile. "Come to see us off, eh? Now you've no reason to gloat. Yes, I'm sure that the Confederation will find a way to execute us, despite the long and costly litigation. I would've loved to have gone with these Pilgrims, but they don't understand that radical behavior can only be suppressed through the same. They think they're punishing us, but they're not. We'll die martyrs. Wasn't the whole point to draw them here and save our people? Bill Wilson's death means something now--as will ours."

"Still love to hear yourself talk," Paladin said with a groan.

"You'll die with us," Aristee said, her eyes burning. "It's too late for us and the Confederation."

Paladin reached under his robe and freed the Pilgrim cross she had given him. He turned it over and read the inscription:

"To James. Remember love across the distance. Remember me. Amity." He thrust the cross toward her. "I don't need this to remember," he said, grimacing. "How could I ever forget?"

Aristee retreated a step and would not accept the cross.

Bearing his teeth, Paladin threw it at her feet, then hustled away.

"No, you won't forget, you bastard," Amity cried. "You think this will make you feel better? It won't. We're paired, James. That'll never change."

Blair gazed after Paladin, then soured his expression as he faced Aristee. "You just wanted to save your people, but they didn't need saving. Most of them were pretty happy where they were. Some of them will go now; some of them won't. And all you've done is make life rougher for those who stay."

"You still don't get it," she rasped. "Maybe when you're old, lying in your death bed, it'll come to you, and you'll regret those words." With a snort, she drove herself past the guards and toward the troopship.

As Blair turned to catch up with Paladin, he suddenly found himself staring in a mirror. His hair had thinned and grown white. Age spots dotted his wizened forehead. His shoulders slumped and his chest sagged. The mirror shattered, and the pieces hurled back across a scarred and blackened landscape that he recognized as Washington D.C., Earth. Pilgrim fighters and

bombers streaked overhead, dropping unceasing salvos. Fires raged. Pillars of smoke supported a dusty blanket of sky.

A hand slid across his neck, and he found his mother standing beside him on a mountain of rubble. "You won't be able to stop this, Christopher. Nor will you remember this vision until the day it comes to pass. You'll have your life to live. And one day, people will think that you're dead. But you won't be. You'll live to see this. And I want you to know that it wasn't your fault. *It wasn't your fault...*"

"Lieutenant?"

Commander Obutu shook Blair's shoulder.

"Yes, sir."

"Damn, I'd like to visit that world you go to. Must be a nice place. Anyway, I got word that you and the commodore were leaving. They sent me down here. Where's our ride?"

"I don't know," Blair said, repressing a chill and trying to remember what had just happened. Amity had said something, and then... oh, well. Weird.

"Hey, there we are." Obutu pointed to a Confed Marine posted at the foot of a troopship twenty meters to their left. The Marine waved them over. "When we get back, Lieutenant, let me do all the talking. We're AWOL, remember?"

"Yeah, and the commodore's a traitor. Guess there'll be a line of screw-ups waiting to see the admiral."

#

Commodore Richard Bellegarde dug his fingernails into his palms as the ship carrying Amity Aristee and Protur Carver Tsu III set down in the *Concordia's* aft flight deck. The hatch slid open, but no one appeared.

Finally, a Marine sergeant trudged down the ramp and met Tolwyn and Bellegarde. "Sir? I'm sorry, sir."

"Where are they?" Tolwyn demanded.

"Still in the hold. We didn't think the leaves were poisonous. They must've eaten some on the ride over. We tried to revive them, sir. We did everything we could."

As the sergeant finished, two Marine's carried Amity Aristee's body down the loading ramp and placed it on the flight deck. They headed back inside, presumably for the protur.

"The Kilrathi call it *zu'kara*," Tolwyn muttered.

"I call it justice," Bellegarde said coldly. "Just wish we had a chance to interrogate her first. Really wanted to see what makes her tick."

"She did get the last word, though, didn't she. And she'll certainly be remembered--especially by you."

"Sir?"

"You owe her a great debt, Richard."

"Sir?"

"She gave you the chance to demonstrate that you can handle a fleet. I have a feeling that our days together are numbered. And I mean that in the best possible way."

"Don't think I'll get that fleet, sir. My actions here have been, at best, questionable. I disobeyed direct orders from the space marshal. Then there was that little incident where I, well, shot her."

"Language is a wonderful tool for, shall we say, designing the truth. I'm sure we can work it out."

"Next ship's coming in now," Bellegarde said as the warning lights near the energy curtain flashed. "Paladin, Blair, and Obutu are on board."

"Very well. When they're ready, send them up to the ward room."

Karista welcomed Blair into the sick bay with a smile that made him feel too warm. "I thought you were going up for a meeting with the admiral," she said.

"Just finished."

"Already? I thought you said that Paladin might be court-martialed and that you and Obutu would be charged with going AWOL. I figured that would take a while."

"Obutu and I will probably pay a fine and serve out a suspension to make Gerald happy. Paladin's still up there, and

I don't know how he's remaining calm considering that he just found out about Aristee. Gives me the chills. I just talked to her. Thing is, with her dead, he can make up any story he wants because there are no witnesses left to disprove it."

"But he won't do that, will he."

"No. He'll just tell them the truth and let them sort it out. I don't think they'll court-martial him. But you never know." Blair sat on the edge of her bed and took one of her hands in his own. "You and I, we should--"

"Christopher, there's not much to say. We both know what'll happen now."

"But you don't have to go," he said, tightening his grip on her hand.

"You don't have to stay."

"But I have to because--"

"And so do I because... you see what I mean?"

He held back a curse. "I just don't understand why you have to go."

"I'm confused about you staying. It's just what we have to do. And yes, this is good-bye, but just for a little while. I'll contact you, somehow, and tell you all about it."

"No, you won't."

"You'll be surprised. Now hug me, say you'll miss me, then leave and don't look back."

#

Karista buried her face in the pillow and wept for a few minutes after Blair had gone. Then she lay for another hour, just staring at the stump of her leg until muffled voices from just beyond the hatch broke the trance. A tall flash of white caught her attention, and she suddenly felt rejuvenated as Dennet crossed tentatively into the room. "You made it," she uttered through sigh.

"Obviously. Now Kari, I--" He spotted her leg. "They've quite a defense set up here. Took me nearly an hour from the time I was brought aboard." He looked away from her stump.

"It's okay," she said. "You can look at it. And they say they can grow me a new one."

"Who says? Confed doctors. Forget them." He hovered over her, then seized her shoulders. "Kari, you wouldn't believe what these Pilgrims can do. I tried to get off McDaniel, but I got shot by a pigheaded Marine. I mean, I was dying, Kari. *Dying*. The wounds have almost healed." He pulled back his robe to expose a finger-nail-sized scab. "They saved my life."

"Wish I been there," she said. "I still owe you."

"You owe me nothing, except, well, I was hoping for some company. I hear it'll be a long ride."

"Don't worry. I'm going with you. There's a park out there somewhere. We can struggle for ways to be happy. And maybe happiness is in the struggle."

"I know you don't love me. That's okay."

"Ah, yes, another poor fool with delusions of what lies in a woman's heart," she said, mimicking his accent. "Thought you were smarter than that." She rose on her elbows, and he helped her up. "See that powerchair? Get me to it."

"Kari, are you sure about this?"

"Are you?"

"Not really."

"Neither am I."

"It's settled, then."

She grinned. "I guess it is."

Epilogue

VEGA SECTOR, DAY QUADRANT

CS *TIGER CLAW*

HIGH ORBIT, NETHERANYA

2654.163

0900 HOURS CONFEDERATION STANDARD TIME

Once they had received permission to return to the *Tiger Claw*, Blair and Obutu had taken one look at their Rapiers and had sworn that no way in hell would they spend another four days in those cockpits. With the admiral's help, they had arranged for the fighters to be hauled back to the *Claw* via a CF-229d spacecraft ferry, while they would catch a lift back to Netheryana on the admiral's transport. The trip had still taken four days, but at the least the accommodations had been decent. Blair and Obutu had discussed how they would handle the case of Blair's beating, now that Blair had identified at least one of the perpetrators. Trouble was, it would still be Blair's word against Mango's, assuming that the Mango had made it out of the Pilgrim battle. Given the jock's extrakinetic abilities, Blair had to expect that he had--meaning that once Blair returned to the *Claw*, he would need to watch his back.

Now, as he dragged himself down the corridor toward his quarters, with just ten minutes to clean up before Gerald wanted

to see him in the wardroom, Blair couldn't help but to scrutinize every corner, every shadow. He pulled a muscle in his neck from glancing over his shoulder so many times.

He paused at his hatch panel, drawing a blank over the code. Finally, the numbers came back to him. The hatch slid aside.

Angel looked up from her seat on his rack.

He smiled.

She didn't.

"Thought you might be on the flight deck," he said matter-of-factly, then crossed to his locker.

He only made it half way there before she came up behind him, swung him around, and dove for the kiss. He felt her tremble as she wrapped her arms around him.

After a few seconds of lightheaded bliss, she broke the kiss. "AWOL? You stupid bastard."

"I know. Didn't change a damned thing. Couldn't have known that going in."

"At least they let us live," she said, drawing in a long breath before she pulled away to glance out the viewport. Dozens of Pilgrim warships, fighters, bombers, and troop carriers unfurled from the *Tiger Claw* in a floating parade of power. "Maniac and I were taken aboard one of their ships. So was everyone else."

"What about one of Gunner's people, guy named Mango? He come back?"

"Funny you should ask," she said, facing him. "He's the only one who didn't. He's still MIA. The Pilgrims think he was shot down, but we can't confirm that. You know something about him?"

"He's the guy who beat me."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. He admitted it."

"Something to be said for Karma. One down, two to go. We'll interrogate Gunner until we get an answer."

"Don't bother." Blair opened his locker, dropped his rucksack, then removed his tags and watchphone. "I think it's over."

"What do you mean? We have to find the others. Jhinda hasn't closed her investigation."

"I'll tell her that she should."

"You think you'll be safe after these Pilgrims go? You think this has made it better? It's going to get worse, much worse, even with the threat of these Pilgrims coming back."

"That might be true. But not on this ship. Mango was the only one who beat me."

"I thought you said there were three."

"I did. But I had a lot of time to think on the way back and a lot of time to practice something. Watch..."

As Karista had taught him, Blair reached outside of himself and stepped into his quarters as an extrakinetic entity. Then he stepped out of that entity to produce another. He tensed and forced all that he was into making those entities come alive before Angel's eyes.

Her reaction told him enough.

"I used to step outside of myself, but no one else could see me except for other extrakinetics. Now I've done it twice, and what do you see?"

"My god, I see three of you, but only one is talking."

"I can make us talk in unison," he and the other Blairs said. "Or I can talk alone. I can make each of us do different things. And this is exactly how Mango attacked me. But he was much stronger than me. I can only do this for..."

The deck came up hard and fast.

He felt her grab his wrists and haul him back to his feet. He stood there a second, blinking hard and realizing that he had stepped back into himself. He gasped and looked to his rack. "I have to sit down."

She helped him there, then held herself, looking chilled over what she had seen. "Maybe that's what really happened, but

it's still just a theory. And you'll have to do that again for Jhinda--if you expect her to listen to you."

"I know. I will. I'm supposed to see Gerald now. But I'm so tired. I have to sleep."

"I'll call him and say you're still lagging from the trip."

"Thanks. And hey, where's Maniac?"

"Rumor has it that Zarya dumped him. He's been following her around like a stray dog. They're on patrol."

"I'm amazed. Sounds like the old Maniac is growing up."

"Wouldn't take that bet."

He lay back on the rack and stretched out. "So, are you back on suspension?"

"Nope. First Squadron is back at it, though all we can do is monitor a force that can kick our asses from here to the end of Vega."

"I got a feeling that pretty soon, it'll all be back to normal. The Kilrathi will try to expand their empire and we'll force them back... the Border Worlds will hassle us... a few more traitors will pop up and have to be dealt with... just business as usual."

"But not for us."

"What do you mean?"

She tipped her head toward the viewport. "You still have a chance to go with them."

He laughed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"And Karista?"

"She's leaving." He scrutinized her for a second. "Was that a sigh you just made?"

She recoiled. "Absolutely not."

"That was a sigh." He pulled her on top of him, their faces just inches apart.

She furrowed her brow. "That was *not* a sigh."

"Whatever. Come here."

As he took her into his arms, the last of his doubts evaporated. The decision he had made was the right one, the only one, the one that gave definition to his life. He imagined himself years from the moment, approached by a naïve nugget who asked who he was. Without hesitation he answered:

"I'm Lieutenant Christopher Blair. Your Wing Commander."