



**WAR
AMONG THE STARS**

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to LOST AMONG THE STARS and is the fourth novel in the JOVIAN UPRISING Series. It continues the adventures in space of the giant cargo ship KOSTROMA and of its captain, Tina Forster.

Other novels by this author

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CHAPTER 1 – DISHONOR

15:18 (Drakan City Time, Ross 128b)

Tuesday, November 02, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Disciplinary Court, Drazt Navy Headquarters

Drakan City (Capital of the Drazt Empire), Ross 128b

Ross 128 System, 11 light-years from Earth

“GUARDS, ESCORT THE ACCUSED IN!”

Grand Admiral Tok Tharn kept an impassive expression on his face as the accused, wearing the uniform of a shipmaster of the Drazt Navy and closely escorted by two armed guards, entered the courtroom at a lively step, then stopped at attention once inside the accused’ dock. Four other high-ranking Drazt Navy officers were assisting Tok Tharn today as judges for this court-martial, as the offences pursued today were of a grave nature indeed. The accused, a mature and solidly-built Drazt male, in turn kept a neutral expression, but Tharn could still feel his apprehension. In that, Shipmaster Lem Doz had good reasons to be nervous, as the charges against him were most serious. Measuring some 192 centimeters and with his two pairs of long arms bulging with muscles, Doz was the typical image of an adult Drazt male, with a large torso, brown skin sparsely covered by short body hair, a short but powerful pair of legs, a square, strong jaw with two rows of large teeth and two black eyes visible under a prominent brow ridge and flanking a large, flat nose. Tharn looked at his four assistant judges, getting nods from them, then banged twice his gavel.

“This session of the Navy’s Disciplinary Court is now opened! The prosecutor will now read the charges against the accused.”

The prosecutor, a commander from the Legal Department of the Navy, raised his electronic pad in front of him and started reading from it in a strong, steady voice.

“The accused, Shipmaster Lem Doz, previously in command of the space cruiser MURKAN, is charged with gross incompetence and negligent performance of duties that led to the loss of a large quantity of highly classified and sensitive data at the hands of an alien spaceship which intruded into Drazt space on the fifth of the month of Rotha of this deca-rotation. Shipmaster Lem Doz is further accused of letting through inaction

that said alien spaceship escape after it copied and stole all the classified data stored in the MURKAN's central computer.”

Tharn, like the four other judges, stared coldly at Lem Doz as the prosecutor fell silent.

“How does the accused plea about these charges?”

“I plea ‘innocent’ to all charges, Admiral.”

“A plea of ‘innocent’ will thus be recorded into the proceedings of this court. The prosecutor may now detail the circumstances in which the alleged offenses were committed.”

“Thank you, Admiral!” said the prosecutor before activating a large viewing screen set to one side of the courtroom, where everybody could watch it. A video file showing some kind of alien spaceship then started playing as the commander spoke.

“Honorable judges, what you see now is a video recording taken by the cruiser MURKAN as it closed in on an alien spaceship which had entered Drazt space and was approaching our star system on a direct course. Later data and analysis told us that this alien ship was an interstellar ship which originated from the home world of a race we know as the ‘Koorivar’, situated some 676 jokten from our star system. That ship had apparently traveled for many decades at sub-light speed and was under automated control, while its crew and passengers were hibernating during their long space trip. When that Koorivar ship neither reacted nor responded to the calls from the MURKAN, Shipmaster Lem Doz then ordered his crew to board that ship and enter it. However, before his crew could do so, a second alien ship approached the MURKAN and interposed itself. I am now going to show a video recording of that second alien ship, which identified itself as a Human ship named ‘KOSTROMA’. As you can now see, that Human ship was truly enormous and approached quite close to the MURKAN before stopping.”

While Tok Tharn stayed impassive as he looked at the pictures of the Human spaceship, having seen that video a number of times in the past days and weeks, the four assistant judges stiffened as they examined the space behemoth. One of them then asked a question to the prosecutor.

“How big exactly was this Human ship, Commander?”

“It measured a good 2,900 drachs in length, Vice-Admiral Komosh. While huge, our experts however determined that it used an inferior kind of propulsion technology, as it was propelled by a type of nuclear rocket rather than by a directed gravity drive.”

"And how could a Human ship with such a said 'inferior propulsion technology' come all the way from the Humans' star system to our own system, Commander?" replied caustically another judge, making the prosecutor smirk in embarrassment.

"That we don't know, Vice-Admiral Hanh. It however possessed as well some kind of unknown star drive that made it disappear in a flash after it attacked the MURKAN."

That response only made Hanh frown.

"You do realize for how long we have been trying to invent such a star drive, right, Commander?"

"Er, I do, Vice-Admiral. The charge of negligent performance of duties partially resulted from the failure of Shipmaster Doz to immobilize and capture such a prize when he had the occasion to do so."

"Very well! Continue presenting your case, Commander."

"Thank you, Admiral. You will next see the video exchange of communications between the MURKAN and the said KOSTROMA as a standoff developed. The first alien to speak with Shipmaster Doz was actually a Koorivar, who said that the Koorivar ship intercepted by our cruiser was an automated ship full of Koorivar refugees trying to find a new home planet after their own star system had been devastated by the passage of a wandering brown dwarf¹. The Koorivar alien then forbade the crew of the MURKAN from entering the automated ship, saying that this could endanger some of the Koorivars sleeping in hibernation inside it. When Shipmaster Doz insisted on inspecting the automated ship, the Human captain of the KOSTROMA then cut in and insulted him just before a computer virus introduced aboard the MURKAN during the course of the conversation took control of our cruiser, plunging it into chaos. The MURKAN went through quick alternances of chaos and normal operations for hours before the alien computer virus finally erased itself, returning our cruiser to normal. That was when the science officer of the MURKAN was able to ascertain that all the ship's data files had been copied by the alien virus and then transmitted to the Human ship."

The five judges watched carefully the lengthy video before Tharn asked another question to the prosecutor.

"And what did the Human ship do then?"

¹ Brown dwarf: A gas giant celestial body whose mass was not enough to ignite a spontaneous thermonuclear fusion reaction and turn it into a star. Such brown dwarves are known to be either part of a star system, or can roam space as a wandering, solitary celestial body.

"It was already gone, along with the Koorivar automated ship, Admiral."

Tok Tharn, like the four other judges, switched their eyes to Lem Doz, eyeing him coldly.

"Shipmaster Doz, what did you do or attempted to do to neutralize and capture that KOSTROMA? How could it infiltrate a computer virus aboard your ship without you being aware of it?"

Lem Doz, who had to defend himself without the benefit of a legal advisor, braced himself before answering: his Navy career and possibly more now rested on how effective his defense would be.

"Admiral, when it became apparent that those aliens would continue to refuse to obey my demands, I discretely ordered my electronic operations officer to send a computer virus to the Human ship, which he did. Then, as we believed that our virus had been able to infect the computers aboard that KOSTROMA, the Human captain, a female, threw an insult at me just before we lost control of our ship. Apparently, the Humans were able to detect and neutralize our computer virus, then sent to us their own virus. My deduction from this is that the Human computer technology may well be superior to our own."

"Superior to our own?" nearly exploded Vice-Admiral Hanh. "Those Humans were still living in caves when we were already roaming through our star system, if we believe the intercepted radio and video signals emanating from their Solar System. How could they be superior to us in any respect?"

"I frankly don't know, Admiral. Maybe those Koorivars helped them in improving their technology."

Tharn nodded slowly his head at that.

"That very well may be the case. However, what I don't understand is why you took so long before trying to neutralize that Human ship. That delay only gave time to the Koorivars and Humans to infect your cruiser with their own computer virus. Why the delay?"

Now having beads of cold sweat rolling down on his high forehead, Lem Doz spoke in as firm a voice as he could.

"Admiral, I was hoping to resolve that dispute without having to resort to hostile acts. The tone was at least polite until that female Human captain interjected herself into the exchange, just before the enemy virus took control of my ship."

His argument unfortunately seemed to leave his judges cold, with Tok Tharn's tone of voice hardening.

“You were hoping? That hoping of yours resulted in nearly all our military and ship technology being copied and stolen by that Human ship! Those barbaric Humans, who are so fond of war, can now use our own technology to attack us, especially now that they have proved to possess a working interstellar drive. This court will now deliberate in private about all this. Guards, escort the accused out of this courtroom and return with him only when I will signal you to do so.”

Tharn watched the guards leave with Lem Doz, then looked at his four assistant judges.

“What do you think, my friends? Could Lem Doz have acted both faster and more effectively than he did, in your opinion?”

“He certainly could have, Admiral!” responded Vice-Admiral Komosh. “My own reaction to these alien ships, especially to that giant KOSTROMA, would have been to shoot first and ask questions later once it became clear that it would not obey our directives.”

“I concur with Komosh, Admiral.” said Hanh, immediately supported by the two remaining assistant judges. While Tharn agreed with them, he still brought forward a point that had been worrying him deeply for a few days already.

“We may be dealing with Doz’ case today, but this leaves all of us with a scary situation: that we have still not managed to develop a working interstellar drive despite over six millenniums of efforts, while those Human barbarians now have one and can travel to our star system at will. This could well translate into a disaster for us in the short to medium term. At the least, we will now have to significantly boost our space defenses, and this quickly!”

“The more reasons to make an example of this Lem Doz, so that our other shipmasters show more vigilance and resolve.” said Komosh forcefully. Tharn had to hide his distaste for what he believes to be an unjust opinion: to simply make that unfortunate shipmaster the official scapegoat in this crisis would do nothing to counter the new threat represented by the Humans of the Solar System. While a strict officer, Tharn also believed in treating his subordinates in a fair manner. However, he knew that Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh was closely following this court-martial and that showing too much leniency towards Doz could well cost him his own position as Grand Admiral of the Drazt Navy.

“Very well, comrades. Let’s call back the accused to announce to him our verdict and sentence.”

19:58 (Drakan City Time)

Married officers’ quarters, Navy District

Capital city of Drakan, Ross 128b

Zar Doz had been reduced to a nervous wreck as she had been waiting at the family suite for the results of her husband’s court-martial. Due to strict Navy rules, no spectators were allowed to watch the proceedings of such court-martials, with the families of the accused in particular told to stay home until the verdict was officially announced. The noise of the entrance door to their suite being opened made Zar jump on her feet and run to the door. She however nearly bounced on a severe-looking Navy security guard who was preceding her husband Lem, with a second security guard behind him. Zar then noticed that Lem was not wearing his navy uniform anymore, instead wearing a nondescript brown coverall. That, and the downcast expression on her husband’s face brought tears to Zar’s eyes. Going to Lem, she shared with him a desperate hug. Himself in tears, Lem spoke in her right ear as they embraced each other.

“I am sorry, Zar: I was found guilty and booted out of the Navy. We now have to vacate our family suite and leave the Navy District...immediately.”

“Now?” asked Zar, shocked, making Lem sadly nod his head.

“Yes, now! A navy cargo platform is waiting outside and will carry our belongings and us to our new residence.”

“But, where will we live?”

“I don’t know yet, Zar. I...I hope to find some friend in this city who will accept to receive us for at least a while, time for me to find a new job and a new residence. If not, we will have to ask our relatives back in the Khangar Province to accept us. At least I was not given any jail time.”

Those last words finished to break Zar’s spirits and she started crying openly, her head still resting on Lem’s chest. One of the Navy security guards, while keeping a cold, unsympathetic expression, felt bad for Zar as he watched the couple: that officer’s wife had done nothing wrong by herself after all.

CHAPTER 2 – DEALING WITH A CRISIS

11h03 (Central Africa Time)

Tuesday, November 23, 2320

Headquarters of the African Union Intelligence Department

Kinshasa, Congo, African Union

A long scream of pain partially muffled by the concrete walls of the basement made John Markham stop and pause for a moment as he was following the new head of the African Union's Intelligence Department. From what he had seen from the air as his shuttle was about to land in Kinshasa, the senior intelligence agent from the Northern Alliance already realized that the situation in the Congolese capital was verging on the chaotic. However, that had not come as a surprise to him: after all, their new President, Mamadou Kajeje, along with the head of the African Union's armed forces, had been assassinated just yesterday, along with President d'Arcy of the North American Union, who had also been the chairperson of the Northern Alliance. Now, the forces that had been led by General Odierno and who had thrown out of power and killed President Makambo were engaged in a struggle to stay in control, facing the remaining military units and armed partisans who had been loyal to President Makambo. For John Markham, this was typical of a classic African military coup, very few of which ended quietly or quickly. He however still needed to learn who exactly had sent the small armed team that had destroyed with a missile President d'Arcy's shuttle as President Kajeje and General Odierno were boarding it.

Another long, piercing scream of pain was heard as John Markham's guide was arriving at a strong steel door. Bracing himself, Markham stepped inside a nearly bare concrete room at the invitation of Colonel Nbare, finding three men in green uniforms surrounding a naked man suspended by his wrists from a steel ring embedded in the concrete ceiling. The Northern Alliance agent couldn't help cringe when he examined the bruised and bloodied body of the prisoner being tortured: apart from dozens of whip marks and deep burns clearly visible, electrodes were also attached to the man's genitals. The prisoner, who was presently unconscious, appeared to be young and fit,

being in his early twenties. Nbare approached the prisoner and examined him for a second before looking at one of the three interrogators.

“Did he say anything of interest yet?”

“No, Colonel! He is still refusing to answer our questions, even though we have tried about everything already.”

Nbare’s face reflected frustration for a short moment before he spoke again to the interrogator.

“Well, whether he talks or not, I am pretty sure about who sent him and the rest of his team: General Seko, the head of the rebel forces, had the most reasons to assassinate President Kajeje and to sabotage the reconciliation meeting between us and the Northern Alliance.”

“So, what do we do with this man, Colonel?”

“Continue to question him, until he either talks or dies from the tortures. If you haven’t used a blowtorch yet, do it!”

“Understood, Colonel.”

“Good! Mister Markham, if you may follow me.”

John Markham was too happy to leave the interrogation room with Nbare before the tortures resumed. Once back in the concrete hallway and with the steel door closed, he discretely blew out air in relief, then looked at Nbare. While he was no beginner at intelligence work and had seen many unsavory things during his career, torture chambers were still places he loathed.

“This General Seko, how much military forces is he controlling at the present, Colonel?”

“Too many, unfortunately. While nearly all the units of the African Union’s Air Force and a majority of the Army have joined our cause, Seko still can count on at least nine Army divisions, mainly located around the Congo borders, inside neighboring countries like Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and the Central African Republic. We are presently fighting hard in the Katanga Province to expel some of Seko’s forces, which have invaded the province in the hope of seizing the rich mineral deposits there.”

“And how is that fighting going presently, Colonel?”

Nbare hesitated for a moment, loathe to tell the whole truth to the Northern Alliance agent. He however realized that the Northern Alliance had the technological means to quickly ascertain the true situation in and around the Congo and decided to be candid with Markham.

“Right now, the situation in the Katanga Province is unstable. General Seko is continuously pouring more troops across the border and our units there are having a hard time to hold on to their present positions. Unfortunately, with hostile forces attacking us on multiple fronts, we are unable to send reinforcements to the Katanga Province at this time. We definitely could use some help from the Northern Alliance right now.”

That last sentence brought a frown on Markham’s face.

“Colonel, you must realize that the arrival of Northern Alliance military units in the Congo would play directly into the propaganda of General Seko and his allies, who are justifying their rebellion by claiming that President Kajeje and General Odierno were ready to sell the African Union to its enemies. While my government would certainly like to help the new government of the African Union, I am afraid that any help from us will have to be discreet in nature.”

Nbare lowered his head in discouragement at that answer: while he had hoped for a lot more than that, the Northern Alliance’s man was correct in his assessment, as what was fueling the rebellion was mostly raw, xenophobic nationalism.

“Well, could you still pass the word to your superiors that we could use all the help that they could give us? If not, they may end up having to face an African Union led by men even worse than President Makambo, men with little regard for the good of our citizens or for peace in the region.”

“I will certainly pass on your request to my government, Colonel, along with the severity and urgency of the situation.” replied Markham, already mentally worrying about what his superiors were going to say about Nbare’s request.

09:36 (Vancouver Time)

Wednesday, November 24, 2320

Government hangar, Vancouver International Airport

Vancouver, West Coast of Canada

North American Union

The moment that the coffin containing the remains of President Claudia d’Arcy started being carried out of the Northern Alliance shuttle’s aft access ramp, a waiting band started playing the North American Union’s anthem, making the dignitaries present in the hangar either salute or raise their right hand to their heart. Vice-President

Gerhardt Strauss, who was temporarily assuming the charge of President of the Northern Alliance and who had travelled aboard the shuttle, also stood at attention at the foot of the ramp. He and his six-person retinue waited for the coffin to be loaded on a hearse before walking to the vice-president of the North American Union, Thomas Smith, who greeted them with a solemn handshake.

“Vice-President Strauss, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Vancouver on this sad day. You will be welcome to attend President d’Arcy’s state funerals, which will take place in two days, but I believe that we now have some most urgent matters to discuss.”

“I believe so as well, Vice-President Smith.” replied Strauss while shaking hands with the black man with graying hair. “I have brought with me a briefing paper concerning the latest information about the situation inside the African Union. Unfortunately, things are not looking good.”

“I guessed so, Herr Strauss. If you and your delegation will follow me, we will go take place in waiting air limousines which will then bring us to the government’s executive building.”

“We are ready to follow you, Vice-President Smith.”

A few minutes later, with their luggage loaded in the trunks of the air limousines, the Northern Alliance officials were on their way to the local executive building in downtown Vancouver. A moderate rain and low, dark gray clouds greeted the vehicles the moment they left the hangar. Strauss then couldn’t help think that the weather well reflected today’s general mood. The ride under the rain, with a number of escorting police air cars, took about twelve minutes, the limousines finally landing under a large porch covering the main entrance of the government executive building. From there, Strauss and his small retinue followed Thomas Smith and other North American officials up to the top floor of the building, where they entered a windowless conference room and were offered places around a large oval table.

“Please sit down, ladies and gentlemen: we have some grave business to discuss. This room is proof against electronic eavesdropping devices, so feel free to talk about classified matters.”

Thomas Smith took place at the head of the table, while Strauss sat immediately to his right. The other Northern Alliance officials sat facing their North American counterparts around the table’s sides. Once everybody was seated, Thomas Smith looked at Strauss, his expression somber.

“You may now brief us on the latest news about the situation inside the African Union, Herr Strauss.”

“Thank you!” replied Strauss before taking out a data chip and plugging it to the computer station which was facing his seat and was integral to the conference table. A color map of the African continent bearing symbols and words then appeared on the giant wall screens of the room and on the displays of each individual computer position.

“Ladies and gentlemen, what you now see is the rough disposition of the respective forces and units of the new African Union government and of those of the nationalist rebels still loyal to the old Makambo regime, which are led by a General Seko. I said ‘nationalist rebels’ because many members of those rebel units are motivated by African pride and by the refusal to see the African Union allying itself with the Northern Alliance, which for them represents the hated old colonial powers which exploited Africa for centuries. Right now, the forces of the new government of the African Union, with General Lumumba at their head, are fighting on multiple fronts against rebel forces that are at least equal in numbers to them. Even though the forces of General Lumumba mostly enjoy air superiority over Africa, the final outcome is still far from certain. General Seko and his political advisers are using a highly effective propaganda campaign that paints the new government as a puppet kowtowing to the old colonial powers, meaning us. That campaign is succeeding in gaining for Seko many new recruits every day and has even started to cause some defections within the forces of General Lumumba. My military advisors have told me that, if things continue as they are going now, then General Seko may well be able to eliminate the new government and take its place at the head of the African Union. If that ever happens, then we will find ourselves facing again a hostile African Union, while we may expect our borders to be taken by assault by a multitude of refugees fleeing the rebels. At the minimum, we will be obliged to quickly expand and reinforce our defenses, while at the same time having to deal with a new, massive wave of refugees from Africa. On top of that, if Seko wins, we can then expect the resumption of a large-scale campaign of terror attacks and acts of sabotage by clandestine African agents around our territories and in space.”

That last sentence from Strauss made more than one person present in the room raise an eyebrow: a number of terrorist attacks by African agents during recent years had resulted in significant numbers of casualties, while a few attempts that could have caused thousands of deaths had been thwarted in-extremis. The attempt to ram and

shatter to pieces an asteroid built-up into a space resort, using a hijacked heavy space ore carrier, was only the most notorious of such attempted attacks.

“This General Lumumba, who took over from President Kajeje after his assassination, can we at the least consider him as a worthy partner in peace, or is he in this only for his personal power?” asked one of Smith’s ministers present. The head of the Northern Alliance’s intelligence services, Margaret Hurley, took on her to answer that.

“We believe Lumumba to be a progressive-thinking, honest officer, Minister Desjardins. He was a good personal friend of President Kajeje and supported from the start General Odierno’s coup against President Makambo. Furthermore, Lumumba has a long-standing reputation as being incorruptible, something that is unfortunately too rare in that region. He would be well worth supporting, in my opinion.”

“But do we want to get involved in that civil war?” cut in the foreign minister of the Northern Alliance, Alexander Ponomarev, who was in sharp disagreement with Gerhardt Strauss on that point. He was quickly supported then by the defense minister of the North American Union, James Merriweather.

“That is indeed a pertinent question, in my opinion. If we throw our military support behind Lumumba, then we would only reinforce Seko’s propaganda about Lumumba being the puppet of the Northern Alliance, something that would further boost Seko’s popularity with the African masses and help his recruitment campaign. I believe that it would be wiser to simply keep our distances from that civil war while establishing a security cordon around Africa, to prevent the infiltration of hostile agents and saboteurs. We should also remember that we recently found a potential threat to the whole of Humanity when the KOSTROMA encountered the Drazt in the Ross 128 System. We should not divert all our means towards Africa while we are not sure of the Drazt’ intentions towards us.”

“Wait a second!” objected at once Valery Hobbs, the minister of sciences and technologies of the North American Union. “Your argument doesn’t make sense, James! The Drazt are eleven light-years away from us and don’t possess an interstellar drive yet, while Africa is only a continent away. Clearly, Africa should be our highest priority right now.”

The arguments for or against getting implicated in the African civil war, along with how to react to that crisis, were exchanged in an often-heated debate that went on for a

good two hours. Seeing that lunch hour was now well past, Vice-President Smith then proposed to suspend the discussion for an hour, time to eat and to cool down a bit the spirits around the table. That later turned out to be about the only point on which everybody agreed to that day.

19:08 (Universal Time)

Thursday, November 25, 2320

Residence of the Governor of the Jupiter System

Callisto Prime, Callisto

Jupiter System

Gerald Holmes-Robeson heard from the kitchen the main entrance door open and close and shouted enthusiastically to his arriving wife.

“GOOD TIMING, JANET: YOU ARE JUST IN TIME TO TASTE MY VEAL MARENGO.”

“AAH, FINALLY: ONE GOOD NEWS TODAY!” replied Janet Robeson, who first took off her jacket and dropped her briefcase in the entrance lobby before walking to the kitchen, where she exchanged a quick kiss with her husband.

“It is nice to be back home with you, Gerald. My day has been quite a frustrating one.”

“Exactly the main reason why I chose cooking over politics, dear.”

Janet then bent forward to smell the aroma coming from a simmering pan.

“Hmmm! You were always the king of Veal Marengo. I can’t wait to taste it.”

“Then, make yourself comfortable and sit at the table, Janet. I have a nice old red wine that will help you relax and forget your day’s frustrations.”

With Janet, a strongly-built woman in her sixties, sitting down at their dining table, Gerald poured a bit of red wine in her glass and waited for her to taste and approve it before filling her glass and returning into the kitchen. Less than three minutes later, he put a full plate in front of Janet and also served himself before sitting down next to her.

“So, what frustrated you so much today, if I may ask without breaking some top-secret regulation?”

Janet took the time to take a first bite of her veal and savor it before answering him.

“The crisis and civil war in Africa. The Northern Alliance, along with the North American Union, have decided to keep their distances from that conflict and to instead

reinforce their borders to prevent hostile agent infiltrations and to stop cold any mass wave of immigrants from the African Continent. However, as a direct consequence of that decision, the budgets planned by the Northern Alliance to support our space defense program have been cut by half, in order to fund more equipment for the Alliance's ground and maritime border forces."

"Ouch! I suppose that this will impact rather severely on our program."

"It certainly will, Gerald. We will thus have to prepare alone to face a possible Drazt threat and will have to fully shoulder the cost of reequipping our ships with the newly acquired Drazt technologies, all this while embarking on a large-scale space exploration program. The one good news I got on that front is that Captain Tina Forster, with the financial and technical support of the Koorivars, is assuming by herself the costs of reequipping and refitting her KOSTROMA. Her secondary batteries of rail guns have already been converted to disintegrator cannons, while shield generators are in the process of being installed aboard her ship. Also, she told me that she passed an order for two dozen space fighters of a new class incorporating Drazt technology, to be built at the Avalon Space Yards. She also provided Mister Gustav Shomberg with the blueprints for that new class of space fighters."

"Wow! That woman certainly doesn't waste any time. Talking about our space exploration program, how many habitable planets available for occupation have we found to date, Janet?"

His wife took the time to mentally review what she knew about that before answering him.

"As of now, we have found and explored eight planets or moons suitable for settlement, plus one planet, three moons and two asteroid belts which contain valuable mineral, chemical or hydrocarbon deposits worthy of mass exploitation. However, two of those habitable worlds already are the homes to sentient alien species, namely the Hoshis of Hyanesu and the marine telepaths of Oceana. They only allowed to us a limited use of their worlds, so we can't do as we please on those worlds. Furthermore, two more of those eight worlds, New Shouria and New Haven, are now legally controlled by persons other than this government. Thankfully, Captain Tina Forster, who is the owner of the moon New Haven, and the Koorivars, who own and operate the planet of New Shouria, both of which are in the Wolf 1061 System, are building vacation and tourism resorts which will be open to our citizens and those from Earth."

“Aaah, that will make many people happy. For our Spacers who have been living all their lives in space installations or in cities buried under ice, like this one, the prospect of being able to spend a vacation on the surface of a hospitable planet will be sweet indeed.”

“Indeed! I myself wouldn’t mind taking a couple of weeks of vacation on one of those two worlds.”

“And are we expecting to find more such habitable worlds, dear?”

“Oh yes! However, we still have a grand total of only five ships equipped with the Koomak Interstellar Drive, not counting the KOSTROMA and the three converted Koorivarese refugee ships. Unfortunately, the conversion of more ships will be significantly slowed down now, thanks to those cuts to the Northern Alliance’s contribution to our space program. To make things worse, we still have to keep an eye on those damn paranoid busybodies in the Ross 128 System.”

Gerald sighed with frustration at that last sentence. He had been on the bridge of the KOSTROMA when that Drazt space cruiser had interposed itself and tried to commandeer the Koorivarese refugee ship SHANIZAR. Gerald believed that Tina Forster had then acted with marked restraint even though she would have had good reasons to play a lot rougher with those Drazts. Personally, the thought that an intelligent alien race like those Drazts could have purposely hidden their existence from Humanity for over three centuries by masking their radio and other electronic signals, all the while listening to everything radiating out of the Solar System, truly pissed him off. The only adequate words he had for such a conduct were ‘cowardice’, ‘paranoia’ and ‘xenophobia’. He then decided to change the subject of the conversation.

“When will the state funeral for Claudia d’Arcy be conducted, Janet? Would I be able to attend? I truly admired her.”

“I know!” replied Janet, temporarily putting down her fork and lowering her head. “The ceremony is to be held tomorrow afternoon in Vancouver. We will take a jump-equipped shuttle for that trip.”

CHAPTER 3 – LIVING ON A NEW WORLD

07:16 (New Hope Time)

Friday, November 26, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Gebres' family house, Number 12, Farmer's Lane

Village of New Hope, New Haven (moon of planet New Shouria)

Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

“DAWIT! BEZA! STOP PLAYING WITH THAT BIKO AND GET READY TO GO TO SCHOOL!”

The nine-year-old boy and seven-year-old girl sighed in regret at that command from their mother and started getting back on their feet. However, before returning inside their dome house to get their school bags, Beza gave a last piece of bread to the tiny quadruped they had been watching and feeding. That quadruped, called a biko, was a small and very cute alien lookalike of a squirrel, but with a blue-green fur.

“Here you go, Diri! Sorry, but we have to go now.”

The biko quickly grabbed the piece of bread with its two four-fingered forward legs and, sitting on its ass, started munching the bread with gusto as Beza ran inside the family home. Going to the kitchen, the ex-Ethiopian refugee girl put on her school backpack before getting a quick kiss from her mother.

“Have a good day at school, my little treasure.”

“Thanks, Mother!”

Going down the stairs from the family lounge to the main entrance and taking her bicycle out of its rack, situated in a small storage space on the ground floor of the dome house, Beza rolled it out and got on it, pedaling to join up with her brother, who had been waiting for her. As a world where ecology-friendly, non-polluting solutions were mandatory, bicycles were highly encouraged as a means of individual transportation. Allied with the warm, generally sunny climate and the short distances within the village of New Hope, that meant that bicycles were indeed an ideal local mode of transportation. Since only two more villages like New Hope, plus the capital city of Camelot, all grouped around the western shores of Lake Avalon, had been mostly completed and had some population, the need for longer range mass transit was still not evident. Construction

and installation of facilities on the large moon had after all been going on for barely over a month and there was still only a grand total of some 7,800 persons now living on New Haven, of which less than 1,400 lived in New Hope. However, things were happening at a dizzying speed, especially in the eyes of the thousands of ex-refugees from many poor areas on Earth who had been selected and accepted to come live a new life on New Haven. Beza's family was part of those refugees, having arrived here only a little more than two weeks ago from their refugee camp in Kenya, near the border with Ethiopia. Now, Beza was able to go to a normal school and ate to her content, like the rest of her family. More importantly, they could now live normal lives away from violence, war, ethnic strife and privations.

Back at the family house, their father, Solomon Gebre, was also ready to leave home to head to one of the huge, multi-level hydroponics gardens where he worked. A tall but thin 33-year-old man with dark black skin, Solomon didn't have to grab a lunch box before kissing goodbye to his wife: like in the school frequented by his two older children, meals were provided to all at noontime at his place of work. Even his supervisors and the manager of the hydroponics gardens ate the same menu as him for lunch. This, along with other social measures and facilities, reflected the ideal that directed about everything on New Haven: to build a mostly agrarian, ecologically-friendly society where disenfranchised and dispossessed unfortunate innocents could find a new, simple life where basic human needs would be provided free to all, irrespective of social rank or personal fortune, as long as you were ready to participate in the development of the society and do some honest work. At first, right after their arrival from their old refugee camp in Kenya, Solomon had been a bit skeptical about those promises, his past life experience having accustomed him to abusive employers, corrupt officials and brutal local thugs. However, he had quickly found out that his fears were groundless.

Since his dome house sat a mere 200 meters from the hydroponics building where he worked, Solomon didn't even have to use his bicycle and he started walking down the paved pedestrian trail that passed by the first row of five multi-level garden buildings of the village. As he walked, he was able to see some 500 meters away the gleaming surface of Lake Avalon, partially visible through the trees and buildings of the village. Solomon had been dumbstruck to see a lake that looked so normal and Earth-

like on a world so distant from his native planet, but one of the supervisors at his place of work had told him that many more new worlds had been found where conditions and vistas were very similar to Earth. He had already led his happy family a couple of times to the recreational beach area of the village, where they had found a pristine beach with fine, clean sand and equally clean sweet water.

Arriving at the garden building where he worked, Solomon entered it and simply walked to his work section after going through the staff's cafeteria room, situated next to the entrance. Here, everything worked on an honor system, so he had no need to punch in his time of arrival. Seven other coworkers, five men and two women, had already arrived at his section, which grew fresh lettuce in long, narrow and shallow hydroponics basins stacked four-high. Despite the fact that his section had been allotted only 3,000 square meters of floor surface, that was more than sufficient to produce enough fresh lettuce to provide for the needs of the village and still have a sizeable surplus that could be exported to the nearby town of Camelot. However, since the gardens had been completed and equipped only weeks ago, the first crop was still growing up, like most of the other crops cultivated in New Hope. That temporary gap had however been covered by the importation of fresh foodstuff from Spacer worlds in the Solar System, where similar hydroponics techniques were widely employed.

With two more employees joining them in the next few minutes, Solomon quickly got to work, verifying the levels of nutrient solutions in the basins, along with their temperature and acidity level, or Ph, which had to be maintained at 5.9,. In maybe three weeks they were going to be able to harvest their first crop of big, crispy and fresh lettuces, which came in three varieties. Then, they would plant new seeds and would start a new, eight-week growing cycle, producing more bio-clean lettuces. Such hydroponics techniques had proved their worth on Earth for a good three centuries now and Solomon, who held a professional diploma in hydroponics he had gained while still living in Ethiopia, was most familiar with them. Happy to practice again his old profession, he worked methodically and efficiently for four hours, along with his coworkers, before a small bell chime called the lunch hour. Another ex-refugee, this one originally from the Kashmir region of Earth, smiled to him as they walked together towards the cafeteria.

"I wonder what will be on the menu for lunch today, Solomon. They keep surprising us every day."

"Well, the menu should stabilize in a month or two, when the first crops of this village will be ready. But we truly can't complain about the present food we eat, right, Rahul?"

That made Rahul Duwal, a solid young man with a short beard and long moustache, grin.

"Complain? How could we in all justice complain about the food here? We eat to our content, which is a lot more than what my family was experiencing back in the Kashmir."

"Too true!" replied Solomon. They soon arrived in the cafeteria, where some sixty workers and supervisors were already lined up at the service counter. Solomon glanced at the old-fashioned chalkboard on which the day's menu had been scribbled.

"Hum, they have curried chicken with Basmati rice, along with Italian spaghetti Bolognese."

"Curried chicken and Basmati rice?" exclaimed happily Rahul Duwal. "Hell, I'm going to stuff myself with that. I hope that their curry is a decent one."

One of the two women who were helping to serve the workers, a graying and feisty Indian woman, heard him and shook her large service spoon in front of Rahul's face.

"I prepared that curry dish, Rahul, so don't come complaining about it!"

"Then, it should be good. Please excuse me, Indira."

"I'll accept your excuses...this time."

A few other workers, including Solomon, laughed at that exchange. Deciding to test the curry dish, he asked for a portion of it and smelled it quickly after being served.

"Hmmm! It certainly smells good, Rahul."

"Then, let's go find a table, so we can sit down and eat."

They ended up sitting at a nearly empty table after asking the permission of the young teenage girl already eating at the table. Solomon knew her as being an orphan and ex-refugee from the Kashmir named Priyanka. Despite being quite thin from years of poverty, the fifteen-year-old could easily be said to be very pretty.

"So, Priyanka, how is the curried chicken?" asked Rahul while sitting down at the table with his food tray. The teenager smiled to him in response.

"It is truly excellent, Rahul. Indira did a good job on it and the curry spice she used is the real deal, not some kind of approximation produced outside of India."

"Good!" simply said Rahul before starting to eat his food with gusto. Solomon did so as well, but at a more measured pace than his comrade, while discretely eyeing pretty Priyanka a couple of times. Orphaned teenagers and even orphaned children were common around New Hope, as they had formed a sizeable minority of the population of the refugee camps on Earth from where they all came from. Such orphaned teenagers had been assigned on arrival on New Haven a tiny but still comfortable studio in an apartment block, along with other orphaned teenagers of the same sex. Those teenagers, most of them with little or no formal prior education except for some basic reading and writing courses received in their refugee camps, had still proven to be willing, hard-working persons able to fill the simpler, non-technical jobs around New Hope. In the case of Priyanka, she had been assigned to the section in charge of keeping the hydroponics complex clean, with part of her day also spent in a local class for adults, where she could gradually catch up with her deficit in formal education. That was another aspect in which New Haven was fulfilling its vocation as a resettlement world for destitute refugees from Earth. As Solomon thought about that while eating and enjoying his curry dish, he mentally thanked his good fortune for being here with his family, free to build a new life for themselves.

CHAPTER 4 – THE TROUBLE WITH ROSS 128

09:54 (Universal Time)

Thursday, December 16, 2320

Spacers League Conference Center

Callisto Prime, Callisto, Jupiter System

Solar System

“I still can’t believe how fast we travel across the system, now that we have this Koomak Drive.” said Governor Charles Watts of Mars as he entered the conference room with Jacobus Stein, the CEO of Pallas Mining Industries.

“Indeed! The trick now will be to keep a tight control of who will have access to this new technology. Can you imagine what a bunch of space pirates could do with a ship equipped with an interstellar drive?”

Charles Watts rolled his eyes at that hypothetical question.

“Please, don’t even mention that possibility, Jacob.”

Watts’ eyes then caught a number of alien silhouettes present in the room, along with a number of Humans.

“The Hoshi Ambassador is here? I can also see Administrator Sheraz, from the Koorivar Colony.”

“It seems that this meeting will be about interstellar affairs after all.” said Stein before walking to the two pony-sized centaurs standing on their four legs around the table. He then bowed politely to them.

“Ambassador Noshia, Advisor Ibi, I am surprised but pleased to see you here for this meeting. Governor Robeson invited you, I presume?”

“Actually, it was Fleet Captain Forster who asked Governor Robeson to let us attend this meeting, Mister Stein.” answered the female Hoshi and native from Hyanesu, a large moon in the Gliese 581 System. Glancing quickly around the room, Stein effectively saw Tina Forster, engaged in a private, low voice conversation with Janet Robeson. He then returned his attention to the female alien centaur, whose torso, head and pair of arms looked very much human-like, except for a tiny, fine nose and a long blond mane running down from the top of her head to the middle of her back. The two

Hoshis wore a combination of a sort of skirt over their lower bodies, supplemented by a sleeveless blouse made of embroidered silk. Overall, they made for visually attractive creatures.

“And would you by chance know the goal of this meeting, Ambassador Noshia?”

“I do, Mister Stein: it is concerning the Drazt of the Ross 128 System.”

“Ah yes: our indiscrete, paranoid neighbors some eleven light-years away. Well, I hope that we will be able to talk further together later on, Ambassador.”

“The same here, Mister Stein.”

Bowing again, Stein then walked back towards Charles Watts, who was standing behind his designated chair, and whispered in his ear.

“This meeting will be about the Drazt.”

“Ha! That makes sense.”

A loud call from Janet Robeson then made all the attendants take their seats.

Janet Robeson took the time to look in turn at everybody around the table before starting to speak.

“Thank you all for coming on such a short notice, ladies and gentlemen. I know that you are all very busy people, like me, and that the present crisis around Africa only added to our various preoccupations. With this said, I asked you to come in order to discuss another problem: our neighbors in the Ross 128 System.”

Janet then made a schematic picture of a star system appear on the giant viewing screens hooked to the walls of the conference room.

“This is a representation of the Ross 128 star system as we knew it before the KOSTROMA had an encounter with a Drazt cruiser just outside of the system, when it was attempting to save the Koorivarese refugee ship SHANIZAR. We then knew it to contain a red dwarf star and at least one planet, the latter situated inside the habitable zone of its star. Now, this is what we know about Ross 128, thanks to the data files copied from the Drazt cruiser MURKAN.”

The participants to the meeting all stared at the new image now appearing on the screens as Janet went on.

“According to that captured date, which included detailed space charts and even space traffic control charts, we now know that the system contains two planets: Ross 128b, which is inside the habitable zone and is a bit larger than Earth, and a much smaller planet, an icy planetoid really, turning at a much greater distance from its star

than Ross 128b. There is also a large asteroid belt between the two planets, plus two small moons around Ross 128b. We also know that Ross 128b is the home world of the Drazt, a technological, highly-advanced race which looks a bit like big gorillas with two pairs of arms. Don't let their ape-like appearance fool you, though: the Drazt are highly intelligent beings with complex emotions and a long history as a technological society. They in fact experimented with a prototype of an interstellar drive as long ago as 6,000 years or more, which will give you an idea of how advanced scientifically and technology the Drazt are. However, their test program was apparently a failure, as proved by the 6,000-year-old crash site found by the KOSTROMA on Gliese 625, and by the fact that the Drazt cruiser encountered recently by the KOSTROMA did not possess an interstellar drive. Still, the lack of such a star drive did not stop the Drazt from spreading out around their own star system, establishing numerous space mining centers and orbital facilities. However, we now know from the captured data that the Ross 128 System is approaching saturation point and is also slowly running out of resources for the Drazt, whose population now counts over eight billion individuals."

That figure made many participants exchange worried glances around: The War of 2315 had mostly resulted from an Earth government, the late Terran Federation, trying to squeeze more and more resources from the Spacers worlds around the Solar System, in order to feed and maintain Earth's massive population. The Spacers had balked at that one-way trade and had revolted, forming the present Spacers League and fighting off the attempts by the Terran Federation to break their resistance. The situation inside the Ross 128 System sounded a bit too much to their taste to the one found in 2315 inside the Solar System.

"Are there any indications that those Drazt could possibly fall into a civil war scenario because of that lack of resources, Governor Robeson?" asked Vladimir Gasparov, the new chairman of the Sverdlovsk Group, which controlled the large asteroid Hygiea and its surrounding, smaller asteroids in the Main Asteroid Belt. Janet shook her head in response.

"No! The Drazt appear to be a well-cemented society with a largely equitable sharing of resources and a strong sense of racial pride. The idea of a civil war would probably be an unthinkable one for the Drazt. In that aspect, along with most of their technology, the Drazt appear to be superior to us."

“Most of their technology?” replied Governor Juan Perez, the leader of the Saturn System and of the other, outlying planets and planetoids of the Solar System. “In what technologies are they inferior to us, apart from not having a star drive?”

“Simply said: war-related technologies and tactics. While their computer systems are highly advanced, their attempt at hacking the computer systems of the KOSTROMA proved amateurish, something that blew back into their faces. I know that this kind of superiority on our part is not something we should be proud of, but the fact is that it did save the KOSTROMA and the SHANIZAR from being seized by the Drazt. However, our mastery of warfare technologies and our long history of wars are precisely what make the Drazt nervous about us. The data files we captured told us that the Drazt have been aware of our existence since the first years Humanity started emitting radio and video waves in an uncontrolled manner. The Drazt then studied us from afar through our electronic emissions, and this for the last 300 years or so. What they heard apparently made them very leery about us and they in turn instigated an electronic blanket program to mask from us their own electronic emissions, notably by using only directional waves, rather than omnidirectional ones. That is why, despite over 260 years of radio-astronomy studies by us, we were still unaware of the Drazt’s existence until the encounter between the KOSTROMA and the MURKAN.”

“I get it that those Drazt are worried about us, and for some good reasons,” said Toru Tomonaga, the CEO of the Ceres Consortium, based on the planetoid Ceres, in the Main Asteroid Belt, “but why do we need to worry about them? They don’t have an interstellar drive, thus can’t touch us.”

“True! However, two things give us reasons to worry about the Drazt in the medium to long term. The first one is the fact that an interstellar drive is actually feasible, as demonstrated by the KOSTROMA’s passage near their system. That passage may well push them into resuscitating their old interstellar drive project, which they had abandoned some six millenniums ago. With a much more advanced computer technology than they had then, the Drazt may be able to find rather quickly a solution via a series of computer simulations, to test new theories. The second point is the growing lack of resources and population saturation inside the Ross 128 System. The Drazt must be getting anxious about possibly reaching a crisis point and would understandably want to find a way to expand through the star systems around them in order to find both new resources and more living space. Eventually, may it be in years, decades or

centuries, the Drazt will find how to travel through the stars. Then, it will be our turn to worry.”

Janet’s response left the other participants silent for a moment as they mulled her arguments and found nothing wrong with them. Karl Langemann, the CEO of the Vesta Consortium and a highly competitive industrialist and geological engineer who knew well the value of space real estate, finally broke the silence.

“So, what do you propose that we do about the Drazt, Janet? I hope that you are not advocating that we quote preempt that problem unquote.”

“You know that I would never push for such a monstrous act as to attack the Drazt without real provocation on their part, Karl.” replied Janet, her expression somber. “We could and should certainly reinforce our defenses and space forces around the Solar System. Unfortunately, the recent preoccupations about the situation in Africa has pushed the Northern Alliance into substantially cutting their financial support for the building of a joint space fleet. In fact, we lost sixteen billion credits in funding for new ships because of those cuts, a very painful blow to our spaceship building program. That program will now have to proceed at a snail’s pace, unless we put up more of our own money to compensate for the cuts by the Northern Alliance.”

Many of the participants frowned at those words as they saw the implications for their own planetary budgets, with Toru Tomunaga being the first to put up an objection.

“Janet, you should know that, while our economies are doing well, we don’t have a wide margin available to increase significantly our shipbuilding budgets. My citizens, for one, would want to see some positive return for themselves out of such extra expenses before accepting to shoulder higher taxes.”

“The same here.” added Charles Watts. “Martian citizens have already sacrificed much and are still shouldering significant expenditures in order to sustain the Mars Terramorphing Project, which will still need decades before it could be completed. To raise more taxes in order to build warships meant to shield us from a hypothetical future alien threat is not a pill that they will swallow easily. As unfortunate as that is, us Humans were never very good at looking much beyond our collective noses. Just look at the 21st Century Climate Warming Crisis as an example of our myopia.”

Janet Robeson felt some discouragement then: the objections raised by Gasparov and Watts were both logical and factual. Worse, they probably reflected the opinions of most, if not all, of the other High Council members.

"Then, if we can't build up rapidly a fleet of interstellar-capable warships to protect us from the Drazt, what is our alternative solution to that? Do nothing and hope that the Drazt will never be capable of developing an interstellar drive of their own?"

"Why not use diplomacy rather than military measures, ladies and gentlemen?" suddenly said Tina Forster, attracting all eyes on her. "We could go talk face to face with the Drazt and convince them that we wish them no harm."

"Great!" exploded Gasparov, using a sarcastic tone. "Let's send an emissary to the Drazt aboard an interstellar-capable ship! How long do you think it will take before the Drazt would simply seize that ship and then copy our Koomak Drive, while getting rid of our envoy? If I would be in their place, that is exactly what I would do myself. We would end up making a Drazt threat possible, all by our own fault. A brilliant idea indeed, Fleet Captain Forster!"

"Please, let's keep this discussion civil!" said Janet Robeson, raising her voice, as Tina Forster and Vladimir Gasparov exchanged hard looks. "Captain Forster, do you wish to respond to Chairman Gasparov's objection?"

"I certainly do, Madam Governor. First, I am no naïve peacenik and fully understand the risks involved in attempting to initiate diplomacy with the Drazt. Second, I believe that there are ways to prevent the Drazt from getting their hands on an interstellar ship. Third, I volunteer myself and my ship to conduct such a diplomatic mission."

"You, the one who insulted and ridiculed one of their ships?" shot back Gasparov. "They will most probably grab you on arrival and torture you to get out of you everything you know about the Koomak Drive."

Tina's expression was most somber as she replied to the Hygiean leader.

"I perfectly know the risks I would be taking personally, Chairman Gasparov, but the risks of doing nothing are much bigger in the long run. It will certainly be a dangerous mission for me, but I am more than willing to at least try some diplomacy, in order to prevent a war with the Drazt."

"And what would you propose to the Drazt in exchange for peace, Tina?" asked Juan Perez.

"Apart from offering a pledge of non-aggression to the Drazt, I am not sure. That would in fact be something that this council would have to decide, in my opinion."

The High Council members, watched intently by the Koorivars and Hoshis present, looked at each other in indecision for a moment. It took a good fifteen seconds before the first idea was raised, starting a passionate debate around the conference table.

CHAPTER 5 – TAKING A HUGE RISK

13:22 (Vancouver Time)

Friday, December 17, 2320

Astroport of Vancouver, Canada

North American Union

Earth, Solar System

Accompanied by Rose Tillman, the tall brunette in her early forties who was the chief engineer aboard the KOSTROMA, and by four other engineers and technicians from her ship, Tina Forster stopped briefly to look up at the name and logo displayed above the big sliding doors of the hangar she was about to walk into.

“Hum, ‘Vancouver Used Ships and Boats’. What do you know about this enterprise, Rose?”

“Not much, Frankly. I heard or read its name a couple of times, but I don’t remember seeing any negative comments about it.”

“Well, that’s at least one good point about it. Let’s go in and kick a few tires.” Her engineers and technicians smiled in amusement at her allusion about old used car dealers and followed her through a pedestrian door of the hangar. They then found themselves inside a medium-sized business office where a young receptionist smiled to them.

“Welcome to ‘Vancouver Used Ships and Boats’! What may we do for you, ladies and gentlemen?”

“I am looking for a small, used but reliable space craft I could use for interplanetary trips. These five people are engineers and technicians working for me who will be inspecting any craft that I would be interested in buying, miss. Your online catalog was showing in particular a small private yacht that was said to be in very good state.”

“Ah yes: the ‘Mayflower’. If you will wait a bit here, I will call in our main salesman, Mister Norton.”

“No problem, miss.”

Tina then walked slowly to a large window that gave an internal view of the hangar proper, where seven small shuttles and boats were parked.

"Hum, I never realized before that there was such a thriving market for used spacecraft."

"It is actually quite understandable, in view of the high prices of new craft and boats, Tina." replied Rose Tillman before pointing at a particular craft inside the hangar. "There is the Mayflower! It does look in good shape...from afar."

Tina looked for a long moment at the shiny blue and white space yacht, detailing it with interest. It was maybe 25-meter-long and had the shape of a fat triangle with rounded edges. A portly man in his fifties and with a balding head then came to her, presenting his right hand for a shake.

"Good afternoon, miss! I am Frank Norton, head salesman at 'Vancouver Used Ships and Boats'. So, you are interested in buying a small, dependable interplanetary craft, miss..."

"Tina Forster! I am indeed. Your 'Mayflower' looks like an interesting candidate for me. What can you tell me about it before we go inspect it?"

"Well, it is a Kitimat-Class private yacht, designed and built here in British-Columbia some 29 years ago. It was then considered the top of the line in private yachts and was noted for its ease of piloting, performant but also reliable engine and comfortable accommodations. A single person can pilot and navigate it, as it has a very capable navigation and flight control computer. Essentially, someone could board it, punch in the destination in the navigation computer and then sit down and relax while the boat pilots itself."

"Sounds like a nice little craft indeed, Mister Norton. If it was so good, then why did its previous owner sell it to you?"

"For the simple reason that the previous owner, a rich industrialist, just bought a new, more modern top of the line yacht. We inspected it from end to end on acquiring it and I can vouch that the 'Mayflower' is still in excellent shape, Miss Forster."

"Very well! Can I go inspect it with my engineers?"

"Of course, miss! This way, please!"

Entering the hangar proper via a door linking it with the sales office, Norton led Tina and her group to the blue and white yacht and used a remote-control unit to open one of the two side access doors.

"Here you are, Miss Forster. You may look around and inside it to your content. If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them to the best of my technical knowledge."

"Thank you! Let's go in, Rose."

Followed by the anxious salesman, who stood to get a sizeable commission from this possible sale, Tina, Rose and one more engineer went inside, while the three other persons of their team started inspecting the exterior of the yacht. They found an interior that indeed looked nearly pristine despite its age. The crew lounge, situated just behind the cockpit and to which connected a number of bedrooms and facilities, actually looked quite luxurious, with posh sofas and varnished wood paneling around it. The cockpit was next to be visited, drawing a satisfied nod from Tina, who was an experienced and highly competent space pilot and navigator.

"Not bad at all, Mister Norton. It seems that your description was quite correct."

"Thank you, Miss Forster. Would you like to go check the engine room now?"

"Definitely! Please show me the way."

Going up one level from the lounge and then aft, the small group soon entered a fairly large engine room that must have been filling over a third of the yacht's internal volume.

"Here you are, miss. This yacht is equipped with a Shomberg Mark II thermonuclear drive, supplemented by gravity sail plates. This yacht has more than enough range and speed to make a return trip between Earth and Saturn in 35 days and still have a comfortable reserve of cryogenic deuterium-tritium fuel."

"Impressive! Do you mind if my engineers take some time to look around this engine room?"

"Not at all, miss! Maybe we could discuss the price together in the meantime?"

"A good idea, Mister Norton. Let's go down to the lounge for that."

Going back to the lounge with the salesman, Tina sat in one of the comfortable sofas furnishing it and looked at Frank Norton.

"Up to now, this used yacht looks very promising to me, Mister Norton. What price are you asking for it?"

"We are offering it for a very reasonable 5.4 million credits, miss, plus of course the sales tax and registration fees."

Tina thought that price over for a moment as Norton, hiding his anxiety, looked on. She finally smiled to the salesman and spoke up.

“That sounds like a fair price, in view of what I saw of this yacht. I will however wait until my engineers will have reported back to me after their inspection before taking a final decision.”

“Fair enough, miss.”

They then chatted about a few anodyne subjects for about fifteen minutes before Rose Tillman came to the lounge with her engineers and technicians and went to Tina, whispering into her ear.

“Everything seems well maintained and in good order, with no vices found. You can buy it without worries about it, Tina.”

“Excellent!” replied Tina before looking back at the salesman. “I will take this yacht as is, Mister Norton.”

The salesman grinned in contentment and took out of one jacket pocket an electronic notepad.

“You won’t regret it, miss. What kind of payment plan would you prefer? A five, ten- or twenty-year plan?”

“Make it a one-shot payment, Mister Norton. Here is my debit card.”

Norton took the small card handed to him by Tina and looked with bemusement at it: it was a black and gold debit card of the type used by persons with fortunes of at least fifty million credits. His mind then fully clicked in on her name and he looked back at Tina with a bit of shock.

“Uh, are you Fleet Captain Forster, the owner of the mega cargo ship KOSTROMA?”

“I am! As you can see, I can easily pay for this yacht. Could we go back to your sales office, in order to finalize this deal?”

“Of course, Captain Forster!” said the overjoyed salesman while getting up from his sofa.

Signing the sales contract and registering it took only some twenty minutes, after which Tina went back to her new yacht and took place in the cockpit, along with Rose Tillman. The main drive fired up without any hesitation or problem and the yacht soon emerged from the hangar and under the gray Winter sky of Vancouver. Watching her

go, Norton then realized that she had come into a shuttle equipped with an interstellar drive, a type of ship that was still quite rare around, and which was now taking off to follow the yacht. The salesman scratched his head then, as he wondered why such a woman would want to buy an old, outdated yacht. Still, that sale represented a 35,000 credits sales commission for him, so he didn't waste much time wondering about Tina's motives and walked back inside the hangar.

17:52 (Universal Time)

Captain's suite, Level 24, Core Section

A.M.S. KOSTROMA, in low Earth orbit

When she entered her Captain's suite, Tina found her husband, Michel Koniev, busy feeding supper to their fifteen-month-old son Misha, who was sitting in a high chair. Tina had expected Michel to greet her with his customary evening kiss but, this time, got only a resentful look from him. That made her stop cold at the entrance to their dining room.

"What? Why do you look at me this way, Michel?"

"Because I am mad at you taking again insane risks without even discussing with me. Do you realize how low your chances of coming back from your planned diplomatic mission to Ross 128b are? Did you think about the impact of your possible loss on our son Misha...or on me?"

"But, that mission HAS to be attempted, for the sake of keeping peace between us and the Drazt."

"Really? What is wrong about ignoring the Drazt during the next few years, while we build up our war fleet to defend the Solar System? It may take decades before the Drazt could develop a star drive of their own, decades during which we will have ample time to build dozens of new warships incorporating the Drazt technologies we copied from them. So, why risk to see our Misha lose her mother just to conduct a mission that is both needless and near-suicidal?"

Tina was shaken by Michel's resentful tone and by the fact that he spoke like this simply out of love and care for her. Still, she believed strongly that what she was planning of doing was both necessary and vital for the future of Humanity.

"How could you say that my mission will be a needless one? What assures you that the Drazt, now that they know that a star drive can be built, will not actually break its

secret and produce a working system in mere years? Are you ready to run the risks of such an outcome happening quickly? You know too well, like me, that if the Drazt managed to send a combat fleet to the Solar System within a year or two, that we would in all probability be crushed and overwhelmed. We simply don't have yet enough ships capable of resisting the Drazt weapons. Hell, we in fact have only a total of two ships armed with disintegrator cannons and force shield generators: us and the cruiser CENTURION!"

Michel was about to fire back at her when little Misha, sensing the anger in his parents' voices, started crying in his chair. That prompted Tina into nearly running to his high chair and to lift him up and out of it before holding him and caressing gently his back.

"I am sorry, Misha. I didn't want to upset you like this."

She then looked up at Michel and spoke while keeping her tone down.

"Please wait until Misha is sleeping before continuing this discussion. You really believe that I didn't think about the possible impact of my mission on you and Misha? I am not suicidal and I love you both immensely. It is just that some things have to be done...at any cost, for the greater good of all."

Calming down somewhat, Michel lowered his head for a moment.

"Very well, Tina. But you really should discuss such things with me before you make your mind about doing something dangerous."

"I will, I promise. Now, let me take over Misha's supper: I really missed him today."

On Callisto Prime, in the Jupiter System, Gerald Holmes-Robeson was checking on his slowly simmering dish of Duck à L'orange when his wife Janet came back from work, prompting out his customary welcome.

"HELLO, DEAR! HOW WAS YOUR DAY?"

"FAIR, BUT I NEED TO ASK YOU SOMETHING."

Gerald waited until Janet entered their kitchen before speaking again.

"Okay, what did you want to ask me, honey?"

"Would you be ready to volunteer to go back as my personal observer to the Ross 128 System, as part of an important diplomatic mission?"

That shocked Gerald into silence for a few seconds before he could reply to Janet.

"Gee! Was my last Veal Marsala dish that bad?"

“No! Actually, I loved it. If this could help convince you to go, you would stay aboard the KOSTROMA all the time and would only observe and monitor the events while Tina Forster takes on the truly dangerous part of the mission. Ibi, the advisor of the Hoshi ambassador, will also be on that trip, along with Administrator Sheraz.”

“Hum, some nice, distinguished company to die with.” said Gerald in a facetious tone, hiding his sudden apprehension. “Alright, I will go. Now, I want you to get ready to eat the best Duck à L’orange you will ever taste. Go change while I check on the duck.”

CHAPTER 6 – A SHOT AT DIPLOMACY

06:15 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 24, 2320

Hangar Deck of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Drifting at the outer edge of the Ross 128 System

Tina, near tears and watched by her husband Michel, gently pressed her son Misha in her arms while speaking softly to him.

“I will be back soon, my little treasure, I promise. Be nice with your father.”

She then gave her toddler son a last kiss before handing him to Michel, who also got a last kiss from her.

“I should be back within five or six days, seven at the most. Have faith and believe in my legendary luck.”

“I will, Tina.” replied Michel, his voice nearly strangled with emotions. He then watched her as she boarded her used yacht, now renamed ‘FRIENDSHIP’. Hoshi Advisor Ibi, Koorivar Administrator Sheraz and Gerald Holmes-Robeson were also on deck to watch, along with a number of crewmembers of the KOSTROMA. They observed from a pressurized gallery as the yacht cycled through an airlock, then was launched into space.

“There goes a damn brave girl.” said softly Gerald Holmes-Robeson while following the departure of the yacht on a video display screen connected to an outside camera.

15:33 (Universal Time) / 08:11 (Drakan City Time)

Saturday, December 25, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Main Asteroid Belt region, Ross 128 System

“Shipmaster, we are detecting an unidentified echo at maximum radar detection range, in the Venora Sector. It is seemingly heading towards Kadosh.”

Shipmaster Dozna Wiss was immediately alarmed by that report: the Venora Sector was the one in line with the distant but troublesome Sol System, which was the home world of the Humans, while Kadosh was the Drazt home world. She thus gave at once a series of orders.

"Pilot, adopt an intercept course to that unidentified contact and go to maximum acceleration. Master Gunner, man our batteries and place them on combat alert. Electronic Officer, do you detect any emissions from that contact?"

"Not yet, Shipmaster."

"Still, keep an ear out for anything from that contact. Sensors officer, how fast is that contact going? Is it maneuvering?"

"It is on a straight, steady course towards Kadosh and is coasting along rather than accelerating constantly, Shipmaster. Its speed is presently 0.6 percent of the speed of light."

"Hum, not exactly what I would call 'rushing forward'. We will still intercept and identify while being ready for anything. Communicator, send a message to Navy Headquarters to advise them that we are going to identify an unidentified contact in the Venora Sector."

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

As her cruiser changed course and accelerated, Dozna Wiss thought about what that contact could be. It still could be a simple, natural object, like a comet or a wandering asteroid, but the probabilities for that were low, as such objects would normally approach Kadosh in an elliptical trajectory. This unidentified contact behaved much more like a spaceship...or a missile. That last thought made her tense up in her command seat, as she remembered what had happened to her old Naval Academy classmate Lem Doz, who had been the first one to face a ship from Earth.

"Sensors and Electronics Officers, whatever happens next, do not record any electronic message or transmission from that unidentified object. If this is a Human ship, then it could try to infect our computers with a virus. Stay in passive listening mode."

"Yes, Shipmaster!" replied the two bridge officers, who knew too well what had happened to the bridge crew of the MURKAN after its catastrophic encounter with a Human ship: Shipmaster Lem Doz had been far from being the only one to have been severely disciplined following that incident.

Some two hours later, the sensors officer reported again to Dozna.

"Shipmaster, I can now start to distinguish the size and shape of the unknown contact: it is definitely a ship of a small size. It is also of alien construction."

"How small is it actually?"

"About the size of one of our shuttles, Shipmaster. It could most probably fit through our craft airlock."

"Very well! Communicator, send another message to our Navy Headquarters: tell them that the unknown contact is a small alien ship of approximate shuttle size. Send also the present position, course and speed of that alien ship."

"Right away, Shipmaster!"

"Pilot, how long still for interception to occur?"

"About seven chu, Shipmaster." answered the pilot, quoting the Drazt equivalent to 140 minutes.

"Good! To all the crew: go to combat stations now! Make sure that you are wearing your spacesuits, in case of a sudden decompression from battle damage."

The sinister blare of the combat horn followed her words, prompting her crew into running to their combat stations and donning their spacesuits. Dozna herself put on her spacesuit as soon as the rest of the bridge crew had suited up. Now equipped and ready for combat, she nervously waited while her cruiser approached steadily the alien craft.

Six chu later, Dozna was finally able to visually examine the alien craft as her cruiser took a cautious station to the left of it while keeping some distance.

"Sensors Officer, I can't see any visible weapons on that craft. Does your sensors detect anything of the sort?"

"Negative, Shipmaster. Even if it has some kind of laser battery, which is still a possibility, it would have to be of quite a small size, judging from the modest dimensions of this craft. I however can confirm it as being a Human spacecraft: there is a name painted on the bow in Human symbols."

"Can you read and translate that name?"

"Our translation program makes it out to mean 'friendship' in the Human language named 'English'."

"Friendship, eh? Communicator, retransmit the image of this craft to Headquarters and request permission for us to board and capture this craft."

"Right away, Shipmaster."

A few minutes later, as Dozna was still waiting for an answer from Kadosh, her communicator suddenly spoke up, alarm in his voice.

"Shipmaster, the alien craft is transmitting a video signal. I believe that it is trying to communicate with us."

"Do not answer that signal and do not record it!" shouted at once Dozna. "Stay in passive listening mode! Electronics Officer: make sure that our computers and systems are kept isolated from any signal from that craft."

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

Dozna then switched her command chair viewing screen so that she could watch and listen to the Human transmission while avoiding a direct signal exchange. What she saw was the head and torso of the same Human female who had been in command of the huge ship that had attacked and disabled the MURKAN. A Navy-wide advisory had disseminated a warning about that Human ship and its captain shortly after that incident.

"HER? HERE? WHAT KIND OF FUCKING GAME IS SHE TRYING TO PLAY? COMMUNICATOR, ADVISE HEADQUARTERS THAT THE CAPTAIN OF THE HUMAN SHIP KOSTROMA IS ABOARD THAT ALIEN CRAFT, AND MAKE IT QUICK! SENSORS OFFICER, DO YOU DETECT ANY OTHER SHIP NEARBY?"

"Negative, Shipmaster! We are alone with this craft in this sector."

Now more cautious than ever, Dozna listened to the video message from the craft, which was in English. Since she had ordered that her ship's computer systems be kept isolated from that signal, she could not use her computer translation software. Then, the Human female repeated her message, this time in Drazt language, using her own translation software.

"Drazt cruiser, this is Fleet Captain Tina Forster, sent on a peaceful diplomatic mission to discuss our mutual relations. My craft is unarmed and I mean no harm to anybody. Please respond."

Dozna was left stunned for a moment by that message. However, she still did not reply to it, fearful of collecting a software virus in exchange. Instead, she looked at her systems operations officer.

"Koban, grab that craft with a tractor beam and pull it inside our shuttle hangar. Any discussion with that Human will be done face to face, without using electronic means in order to prevent a software virus infection."

"Right away, Shipmaster!"

As Koban started operating their tractor beams, pulling the craft towards the TARASK, Dozna spoke on her intercom system.

“Security, send at once ten armed guards to our shuttle hangar, ready to board, search and secure a Human craft with at least one occupant on board.”

Dozna then returned her attention to the Human female, who was repeating her message on her viewing screen. She couldn't help admire her courage in having come this way to the Drazt system: it took lots of guts to make such a move, considering her involvement with the MURKAN. But again, such audacity and resolve were precisely parts of what made these Humans so potentially dangerous to Dozna's race.

Squad Master Kosh Tar was entering the shuttle hangar of the TARASK with his squad as the Human craft was being cycled through the shuttle airlock.

“DEPLOY IN A SEMI-CIRCLE AROUND THE LANDING PAD! HOLD YOUR FIRE FOR THE MOMENT, UNLESS WE ARE ATTACKED.”

With his own disintegrator rifle at the ready, held by his two upper arms, Kosh Tar took position on one side of the landing bay and made sure that his Drazt guards were deployed correctly before speaking in his radio microphone.

“Squad Master Kosh Tar to Bridge! Armed squad ready and in position in the shuttle hangar.”

“Excellent, Squad Master!” replied the voice of the shipmaster. “We want that Human alive as much as possible, so do not fire unless you are attacked. Also, do not record any electronic signal or data from that Human craft: it could then transmit a computer virus to our systems. Make sure that there is only one occupant in that craft and search her for weapons. I am going to come down to the hangar to manage the situation in person.”

“Understood, Shipmaster!” replied Kosh Tar before returning his attention to the Human craft, which was now being pulled inside the hangar proper by tractor beams. Examining its hull visually, Kosh didn't see any sort of weapon on the craft, something that reassured him a bit. Still, he kept his guard up as the craft was finally put down in the middle of the landing bay. He tensed up at once when a sort of access door with integrated steps started opening and lowering, revealing one alien silhouette inside.

“REMEMBER, SOLDIERS: HOLD YOUR FIRE UNLESS ATTACKED. WE WANT THAT ALIEN ALIVE.”

As Kosh Tar started slowly advancing towards the now fully lowered access staircase, the alien raised both of her hands high, showing that she was not holding any weapons, while starting to slowly come out of her craft. Kosh couldn't help detail with interest what was for him the first alien creature he had ever seen. The curve of her breasts under the sort of blue coverall she was wearing distinctly made her to be female. However, she had only one pair of arms, contrary to the Drazt, who had two superimposed pairs attached to their torso. The pair of legs of the Human was proportionally much longer than those of a Drazt but were also much less muscular. As for her face, her pale skin and thick, long hair flowing down to her shoulder made her distinctly alien to a Drazt. Still, Kosh Tar had to concede that this Human female had some graceful shapes to her body and had a smooth face. She then spoke a few words in her own language, with her words translated at once in Drazt language by a small box suspended to her neck by a cordon.

"I am unarmed and I come in peace. I will ask you not to remove the box I carry around my neck: it is a portable translation unit and I will need it to talk with your leaders."

"Stop once on the deck and then stand still with your arms up, Human. We are going to search you. Is there anybody else inside your craft?"

No! I came alone."

To Kosh Tar's satisfaction, the Human female did as told and stopped two paces in front of the access stairs of her craft, her hands held high, then stayed immobile as Kosh and his three of his soldiers cautiously approached her with rifles at the ready. Once close to her, it became evident to Kosh that she was much shorter than himself, while being leaner and less muscular. Physically, she was not very dangerous-looking for a Drazt male like himself but he still stayed two paces away from her and gave orders to his guards.

"Kren, Dook, you stay here with me to watch her. The rest, enter that craft and make sure that nobody else is hiding inside."

Kosh waited until seven of his soldiers had entered the craft, then made a motion with his pointed disintegrator rifle.

"You, take off your clothes: we will need to search you."

The Human female frowned at that demand but, after a short hesitation, obeyed and started to slowly take off her coverall and boots, ending with a set of underclothes covering her breasts and groin area, plus socks around her feet.

"Remove your underclothes as well, Human."

This time, irritation showed up on the alien's face.

"Is that really necessary? I would like to preserve some dignity here."

"DO AS YOU ARE TOLD, OR WE WILL GET ROUGH?"

Clearly displeased, the Human female took off one by one her underclothes, ending fully naked in front of Kosh Tar and his two soldiers.

"Kren, check her clothes for any hidden weapons or electronic devices."

"Yes, Squad Master!"

Taking a couple of steps forward, the guard grabbed the clothes now lying on the deck and pulled them away from the Human before starting to carefully search and feel them. Kren soon looked up at Kosh.

"I found nothing except some sort of small leather holder with a number of papers and plastic cards in it."

"Then hand me that leather holder, Kren."

Kosh was grabbing the wallet handed to him by Kren when his shipmaster entered the shuttle hangar, two of her officers following behind her. Kosh immediately came to attention and saluted his commander the Drazt way, by tapping one hand to his chest.

"The Human said that she was alone and unarmed, Shipmaster. We searched her and effectively found no weapons or electronic devices except for the translation unit she is wearing around her neck. The rest of my squad is inside the craft, searching for any possible hidden occupant. Here is a leather pouch we found on her."

"Well done, Squad Master Tar." said Dozna, taking the offered wallet before looking at Tina, examining her body with interest. Anatomically, she was not that much different from a Drazt female, if you excepted the single pair of arms, and could even be said to be physically pretty. However, that Human would definitely stand out in any Drazt crowd.

"You may now put your clothes back on, Fleet Captain Forster."

"Thank you!"

As Tina slowly dressed up, Dozna sifted through the leather wallet, which contained what looked like some kind of thin plastic film currency and a few plastic cards with photos, plus a small color picture. Dozna couldn't help smile on looking at the apparently happy and smiling tiny Human shown on the picture.

"Your offspring, I suppose?"

"Correct! My son is now fifteen-months-old and his name is Misha."

Dozna nodded her head at that. Somehow, to send a mother of a very young child on a sabotage or spying mission seemed improbable to her. Still, that Human female had proved in the recent past that she could be quite dangerous, especially when aboard her giant ship.

"I am Shipmaster Dozna Wiss and you are now aboard the patrol cruiser TARASK. What is the precise goal of your trip to this system, Captain Forster?"

"I came as a diplomatic representative of my government and wish to speak to your Supreme Conductor about establishing peaceful relations between our two people. As a proof of my good faith, I brought in my shuttle a relic that will most probably prove very precious to your people."

"A relic? What do you mean exactly?" said Dozna, her interest suddenly boosted further. Tina then explained herself in a calm voice.

"A few months ago, while my ship was searching for two lost Koorivar refugee ships, we visited the Gliese 625 System, situated some 23 light-years away from your own system, to the Galactic Southeast of here. There, we found an ancient crash site dating some 6,000 of our years. While digging down in the impact crater, we found the remains of an alien astronaut and of its spacesuit. It was a Drazt spacesuit."

Dozna, like her three soldiers and two officers present, was stunned speechless by that last sentence. Her mind now in turmoil, she stared at Tina and spoke firmly to her.

"Where exactly is that relic inside your craft?"

"It is contained in a large carrying crate sitting in the middle of the crew lounge. Before you ask, I can assure you that the corpse inside it was treated with the utmost respect by us."

"By the stars!" said softly to herself Dozna before looking at Kosh Tar. "Squad Master, find and bring out that crate she is talking about."

"At once, Shipmaster!"

As Kosh Tar ran inside the craft with one of his soldiers, Tina spoke up again, addressing Dozna.

"Shipmaster Wiss, please understand that we could have easily hidden that discovery on Gliese 625 from your people. In turn, we fully understand that revealing that relic to you may well help you find more quickly your own way to travel through the stars, something that would in turn put my own star system within easy reach of the Drazt Empire. The political decision to reveal that relic to your people was a hotly debated one, but I was finally able to convince my government to let me carry it for this

diplomatic mission. Please believe me when I say that my government wishes only for peace with your people.”

Dozna could only stare in silence at Tina at first, overwhelmed by her words. This could indeed be considered a strong argument in support of Forster’s claim to come in peace, as any Human government bent on hostilities with the Drazt would have done everything to keep the news of such a relic’s existence most secret. If this was a calculated move to make the Drazt lower their guard, then it was a most dumb move indeed. She then heard a brief call on the radio, coming from Squad Master Tar.

“Shipmaster, we found the crate and are now carrying it out.”

“Good job, Squad Master!”

Dozna then turned to look at her sciences officer.

“Vorn, use your data pad and start searching through our classified archives concerning our past projects for an interstellar drive. I want to be able to quickly vet that ‘relic’ this Human brought with her.”

“Understood, Shipmaster!”

Dozna’s attention was then caught by Squad Master Tar’s exit from the Human craft: he was holding one end of a large container, with one of his soldiers holding the other end as they went down the access stairs. The crate was then put down on the deck, in front of Dozna. With her two officers looking on with intense curiosity, she slowly undid the latches holding the crate closed and opened the lid. Her heart made a jump in her chest when she was able to see the evidently ancient remains of a spacesuit with two pairs of arms. Falling to her knees, she had to contain a wave of emotions while examining the remains.

“By the stars! You were saying the truth, Captain Forster.”

“And I am honored to be able to bring back to his people the remains of this brave astronaut.”

The science officer, on a signal from Dozna, then approached the crate and scanned it with a portable sensor device.

“These are definitely the remains of a Drazt, Shipmaster. Their preliminary dating also corresponds with the time period of one of our last attempted tests for a prototype interstellar drive. I can now identify a patch on that spacesuit: it is identifying it as being the spacesuit of the late Squadron Master Bar Lov, one of the test pilots assigned to our old program.”

With a big lump now blocking her throat, Dozna got back on her feet and stood at attention while shouting an order.

“ATTEN...TION! SALUTE TO SQUADRON MASTER BAR LOV!”

All the Drazt present stood at rigid attention and saluted the remains inside the crate. Dozna noticed that Tina Forster also came to attention and saluted in the human fashion, something she felt grateful for.

“AT EASE! Squad Master, have this crate moved with all the respect due to it to our medical section, where these remains will be autopsied.”

“Yes, Shipmaster!” replied at once Kosh Tar before ordering two of his soldiers to close and carry away the crate. As the crate was leaving the hangar, Dozna looked at Tina Forster with a new outlook.

“Thank you for bringing Squadron Master Bar Lov back to his people, Captain Forster. Know that, personally, I consider this a significant gesture of good will on your part.”

“And I was pleased to do so, Shipmaster Wiss. What will happen next?”

“I will probably be ordered to bring you to Kadosh at best speed, so that my commanders can interview you in person. You will however have to excuse me for still showing caution towards you. Squad Master Tar, escort Fleet Captain Forster to a holding cell, but avoid any brutality and make sure that she is properly treated.”

“Yes, Shipmaster!”

Tar, along with two of his soldiers, then led Forster out of the hangar, closely watching her. Once the group was out, Dozna turned towards her two officers.

“Vorn, Mat, I want you to go inside that craft and examine it in detail. Find its interstellar drive, but be also leery about possible computer viruses lying as traps. In the meantime, I will return on the bridge: I now have a very important message to send to our Navy Headquarters.”

Some two hours later, as the TARASK was heading towards Kadosh at maximum acceleration, Dozna got a piece of news that she didn't appreciate one bit.

“What do you mean, you didn't find an interstellar drive in that Human craft?”

“I am sorry, Shipmaster, but we examined carefully the systems of that craft and found only a low-power thermonuclear rocket engine, a sort of primitive directed gravity drive meant as a secondary propulsion system, plus an artificial gravity system. However, the crew accommodations are quite comfortable and were visibly designed for

long trips in space. That craft is strictly an interplanetary one, Shipmaster. It must have been dropped off at the edge of our system by a Human ship equipped with an interstellar drive, with Captain Forster probably planning to rendezvous back with that ship for her return trip to Earth.”

Dozna sighed in frustration, guessing easily which ship was going to pick Forster back.

“Her ship, the KOSTROMA. It will most probably be the one waiting to pick her back.”

“I concur, Shipmaster. I must say that Captain Forster planned rather well her mission.”

“Too well to my taste, actually. I have to give her that: she is no fool, on top of being brave.”

“Uh, there is one last thing, Shipmaster. While searching her craft, we found a personal effect bags in the main cabin of the craft, a bag that contained some spare clothes and what must be personal hygiene items. Should we bring that bag out of the craft?”

“Please do that. However, have its content carefully checked and analyzed, in case it contains some nasty surprise for us.”

“Will do, Shipmaster.”

Closing her intercom link, Dozna sighed again before giving an order out loud.

“Communicator, we have to send another high priority message to Navy Headquarters...”

09:56 (Drakan City Time) / 16:38 (Earth Universal Time)

Sunday, December 26, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Tarmac of the Drazt Navy astroport, Drakan City

Kadosh (Ross 128b)

Dozna Wiss chose to accompany Tina Forster out of the TARASK and down to the concrete tarmac of the Navy’s astroport, where an aircar was waiting near the foot of the cruiser’s access ramp. Tina was not handcuffed but two Drazt soldiers followed her closely. Dozna looked down at Tina with mixed feelings: she should consider and treat her as a potentially dangerous enemy of the Drazt race, yet had demonstrated a level of courage, resolve and strength of character that she could only admire.

"As you can see by yourself, Fleet Captain Forster, your yacht is being offloaded on the tarmac as we speak. It will be left on the tarmac until your departure back to Earth. As for you, this vehicle will bring you to an office where some of our top leaders will meet you and discuss with you. I sincerely hope that we will have peace between our two races."

"I hope so as well, Shipmaster Wiss. War is a horrible thing and should be avoided at all cost, unless one acts purely in self-defense."

"Yet, your race seems to have a very long, intimate experience of war, if we can judge from the radio and video signals emanating from your home world."

"True! That is in fact something I am not proud of. However, as much as we had warmongering people in our history, we also had plenty of peace-seeking individuals. Let's hope that peace-seekers will win their case today."

"Indeed! Good luck with your peace talks, Fleet Captain Forster."

"Thank you! I hope that we will be able to meet again in the future...in a peaceful manner."

Tina then offered her right hand for a shake. Dozna, not familiar with that alien gesture, hesitated a bit before taking her hand and pressing it lightly. Once that was done, Tina picked up her travel bag from the tarmac and walked to the waiting aircar, where an armed officer opened one of the doors for her and invited her to sit inside. Dozna watched the aircar lift off and fly away for a moment, then went to supervise the unloading of Tina's yacht. While two of her officers had already examined it closely, she was sure that a crowd of navy engineers was going to soon descend on it, to learn all they could about the present state of Human space technology.

In the aircar, Tina observed with intense interest the astroport and city she was overflying. To do that, though, she had to climb on the huge, deep rear bench seat and kneel on it in order to be able to see well past the lower sill of the door's window. The average Drazt was proving to be much bigger than an average Human and they were certainly more powerful in terms of pure physical strength, thanks partly to the 1.1 G gravity felt on this planet. Thankfully, the atmosphere of Ross 128b, or Kadosh in local parlance, was perfectly breathable and even had a higher oxygen content than on Earth. The one thing that instantly reminded Tina that she was on an alien world was the red sun in the sky. The officer escorting her had not said a single word to her yet, only passing directives to the driver of the aircar. Thankfully, Tina had been allowed to keep

her portable translation unit, after it had been carefully examined for any trace of a possible computer virus, so she could understand what was being said around her. Her flying trip actually proved quite short, with the aircar landing on top of one of the tall skyscrapers built around the astroport. There, four armed Drazt soldiers were waiting for her and boxed her in as her escort officer led her to a roof access hut. The few Drazt they met on their way, all wearing naval uniforms, threw looks of mixed curiosity, hostility and suspicion at Tina, who responded to them with a friendly smile. Her group met more Drazt once out of the elevator cabin they had used, walking down a wide hallway with multiple doors on both sides. Tina finally arrived at a set of large double doors guarded by two soldiers, who opened them and let her and her escorting officer in. The latter made ten steps, then stopped at rigid attention in front of a long bench behind which sat four male Drazt, saluting them.

“Sirs, this is Fleet Captain Tina Forster, who claims to have come to hold peace talks with us.”

“Thank you, Unit Master Kort. You may now leave and wait outside this room.” replied one of the sitting Drazt. That Drazt waited until the escorting officer was gone, with the doors closing behind him, before addressing Tina.

“Fleet Captain Forster, I am Grand Admiral Tok Tharn, commander of the Drazt Navy. To my left are Security Minister Buk Mon and Defense Minister Muron Kha. To my right is seated Chief Advisor Gorat Vorka, principal advisor to His Majesty, Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh. First off, I must warmly thank you for returning to us the remains of Squadron Master Bar Lov. Your gesture was most appreciated by the Supreme Conductor, who is a distant descendant of Squadron Master Bar Lov.”

“I did it as a simple gesture of good will and compassion, Grand Admiral. All heroes deserve to eventually rest in their home place.”

Tok Tharn nodded his head at that, liking her words. The three other officials however stayed mostly impassive then. Security Minister Buk Mon was next to speak, staring rather coldly at Tina, who had not been given a chair and had to stand in front of the bench, some five paces away from it.

“You said that you came to discuss peace, Captain Forster. Yet, in your first encounter with one of our ships, you attacked and disabled our cruiser. Why would we believe your claimed wish of coming in peace?”

“Because I acted strictly in self-defense during that first encounter outside of your star system. Your own cruiser tried to infect our computers with a software virus and I

simply replied in kind. Also, your cruiser was about to break inside a Koorivar refugee ship full of hibernating Koorivars, and this against the objections of a Koorivar officer traveling aboard my ship with the mission to rescue that derelict refugee ship. Everything would have stayed peaceful and civil if your cruiser's captain would have listened to us and left alone the SHANIZAR, which was in effect sovereign Koorivar territory."

"Talking of the Koorivars," cut in Gorat Vorka, "how come that your race is now working with the Koorivars? How did you get to meet at first, despite the distance between your system and their system?"

"Easy!" replied Tina, smiling. "Just before Shouria was destroyed by a wandering brown dwarf hundreds of our years ago, the Koorivar sent out three spaceships filled with Koorivarese citizens kept in cryogenic sleep, with each ship heading towards different star systems close to Shouria and deemed to have potential as resettlement worlds. Those spaceships were however subluminal ships with trips planned to last centuries. One of those ships flew towards our Solar System but arrived in it with partly failing control systems. That ship, the VEON SHOURIA, landed in one of the icy planetoids orbiting our outer system and was then encased in ice for decades. My own ship, which had come to explore that icy planetoid, found the VEON SHOURIA, dug it out of its ice tomb and helped the Koorivars inside to wake up and come out. That happened a mere three years ago, so you could not know that from the Earth signals you have been listening to for centuries. Since then, Humans and Koorivars have forged a solid bond of friendship together."

The four Drazt looked at each other while nodding their heads: Tina's story explained many things, on top of being quite plausible. However, Gorat Vorka was not yet completely satisfied and bent forward a bit while staring hard at Tina.

"That may well be, but it still doesn't excuse your act of aggression against the MURKAN."

"An act of aggression?" shot back Tina, some irritation showing in her voice. "Know that, on another Koorivar refugee ship we went to rescue before coming to the edge of Ross 128, that ship was already in an advanced state of dereliction, with a number of cryogenic sleep pods having failed, killing their occupants. We found on that ship, the SHUNDAR, that 391 of the Koorivars aboard had already died following their pods' failure. As for the SHANIZAR, we found out after rescuing it that a number of cryogenic sleep pods aboard it had partially failed already and were on emergency

backup systems. If your cruiser's crew would have breached the SHANIZAR's hull, it would have most probably caused a complete failure of those pods, potentially causing the deaths of hundreds of Koorivars. The Koorivar officer traveling on my ship repeatedly warned your cruiser about that danger, but your cruiser commander did not listen to him and in turn tried to insert a computer virus into my ship's computers. That in turn forced me to retaliate in a non-lethal way, both to defend my ship and to protect the Koorivars in cryogenic sleep aboard the SHANIZAR. So, excuse me if I reject your accusations about that incident, Chief Advisor Vorka."

Vorka did a doubletake, taken a bit aback by her forceful reply. Grand Admiral Tharn grabbed that chance to reinsert himself in the discussion.

"On that point, I am ready to give you the benefit of the doubt, Fleet Captain Forster. I..."

"The benefit of the doubt?" interrupted Tina. "Grand Admiral, know that, in the space traditions of the Solar System, interfering with the rescue of a ship in danger, wherever it may happen, is considered as a criminal act. By all rights, the Koorivars would be justified in pursuing a legal claim against your government. Despite what you may say or claim, the SHANIZAR was still well outside your star system when we caught up with it to rescue it."

Defense Minister Muron Kha then slammed two of his fists on top of the bench.

"WE DECIDE THE BOUNDARIES OF OUR STAR SYSTEM, CAPTAIN FORSTER, NOT YOU OR YOUR KOORIVARS! BE RESPECTFUL AND WATCH YOUR WORDS, OR I WILL HAVE YOU PUNISHED FOR YOUR INSOLENTCE."

The look he got in return from Tina was icy, without a trace of fear on her face.

"Minister Kha, let me make myself very clear about one point. If I don't return to my ship free and in good health within a set number of days, then my government will consider that my peace mission will have been rejected by your government and will then consider itself at war with your government. We truly don't wish for war, but consider the possible consequences before you continue with your grandstanding. Do I need to remind you all that we Humans can travel through the stars, while you can't?"

That deflated Kha in a hurry, while dismay and alarm showed on Tharn's face.

"Are you truly threatening war on us, Fleet Captain Forster?"

"No, Grand Admiral! I am simply reminding you and your government about the possible consequences of rejecting our peace offer and of threatening me, who came under a flag of peace."

"And what exactly is the peace offer from your government?"

"A simple one indeed, Grand Admiral: we sign a mutual non-aggression treaty and possibly exchange embassies. If that happens, we could eventually establish a commercial exchange counter in your system, which would give you the possibility to buy or exchange goods with us. As one would say, 'peace is good for business'."

"And since you would be the only ones to possess interstellar ships, you could charge us about whatever you want and rob us blind in the process, is that it?" replied Gorat Vorka. Tina made a smirk on hearing that.

"I suppose that we could do that. We also could act like a fair business partner and do honest trade, Chief Advisor Vorka. Why are you so sure that we wish ill to the Drazi? My government showed good faith by sending me and by returning the remains of Squadron Commander Bar Lov. We simply ask in return for some good faith on your part."

"Because your race has a long, continuous history of wars and atrocities. Because of that history of violence, we simply have no confidence in your government's promises of peace."

"Then, should I assume from your answer that you are rejecting my government's peace offer, Chief Advisor Vorka?"

Grand Admiral Tok Tharn winced on hearing Tina's rhetorical question. He personally had been ready to favorably consider her offer of peace. Unfortunately, his word counted for less than that of Vorka, Mon or Kha, who had the ear of the Supreme Conductor. Still, he tried one last thing.

"Please, let's not take such a weighty decision harshly. I propose that Fleet Captain Forster go wait outside for a moment while I and my colleagues confer together."

"Suit yourselves, gentlemen!" replied Tina. "I can wait. If you will now excuse me."

She then turned around and walked to the double door, opening partly one side of it and slipping out before closing back the door. Vorka couldn't help bang his fists in repressed anger once she was gone.

"What an insolent female! How could she expect us to bend to her government's demands?"

“And you truly find her demands excessive, Chief Advisor?” asked Tharn. “Signing a treaty of mutual non-aggression and exchanging embassies sounds to me like reasonable things.”

“I simply can’t trust these Humans: it’s that simple! These barbarians know only war, violence and exploitation. The only thing I am interested in them is their interstellar drive. Once we have it, we will then be able to dictate peace with the Humans on our own terms. We already discussed a plan to get that interstellar drive. I say: let’s execute that plan!”

“I agree with Chief Advisor Vorka.” cut in Defense Minister Muron Kha. “We know from masses of intercepted data that the Humans’ main space weapons are lasers, missiles and kinetic energy cannons and that their ships are slower and less maneuverable than our ships. Our force shield generators can stop their missiles and kinetic projectiles, leaving the Humans with only their lasers as weapons that can hurt our ships. Right now, our ships would easily win a fight with Human ships, especially if we have surprise on our side. We would then be able to retrieve parts and data of their star drive and copy that technology.”

“Have you forgotten that those Humans stole the secrets of our own weapons and propulsion systems when they hacked the MURKAN?” objected Tharn, trying desperately to inject back some common sense in the discussion. His objection was however waved away at once by his defense minister, who was his direct superior.

“That happened only a short time ago. The Humans will never have had enough time to study our technology, let alone copy it and install it aboard their ships. I say: go with Operation Storm!”

“I say go as well.” said Security Minister Buk Mon. A grinning Gorat Vorka nodded his head in approval.

“As I do! Let’s call the Supreme Conductor to seek his approval on this plan.”

When Tina was readmitted in the interview room some fifteen minutes later, she found the four Drazt officials sitting behind their bench and with benevolent smiles painted on their face. Tina, who was a good judge of personalities and moods, still detected Grand Admiral Tok Tharn’s smile to be somewhat forced and went on full mental alert as she stopped in front of the bench. Chief Advisor Gorat Vorka was the one to speak first.

“Good news, Fleet Captain Forster: Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh has decided to accept the peace offer of your government and will soon start to select an ambassador to be sent to Earth. You will now be able to return to your ship and will ask you to return to this system in three of your weeks, with an ambassadorial team of your own and firm commercial exchange proposals.”

Tina did her best to hid her instant skepticism at those words: this ‘good’ turn of event was truly too good to be true and smelled of a trap. Still, she bowed her head politely to the four Drazt.

“I am pleased to hear that, Chief Advisor Vorka. I will thus certainly return to this system in three weeks, with an ambassadorial party and a trade commission panel. I would however have one request to present before I leave for my ship.”

“And what would that request be, Fleet Captain Forster?”

“To meet with the shipmaster of the MURKAN, so that I could present to him my sorriest excuses for the way I handled his cruiser.”

That totally unexpected demand left all four Drazt positively stunned. However, Grand Admiral Tok Tharn felt more than simple surprise: he also felt instant remorse at being forced to lie to that Human, who had just offered a gesture of pure contrition. He thus hurried to reply to her before the three other officials could turn her down.

“Shipmaster Lem Doz is not part of our navy anymore, Fleet Captain Forster: he was court-martialed and booted out of the Navy shortly after the incident with your ship.” The genuine look of hurt and indignation that then flashed on Tina’s face only made Tharn feel even worse about himself.

“But, but he couldn’t possibly have done better, considering the odds against him. He was not at fault.”

“He failed in his duties and was punished for that, Captain Forster.” replied Muron Kha, who only succeeded in making Tina more vehement.

“Shipmaster Lem Doz did not fail in his duties! It was your computer technology that failed him!”

“Why do you wish to defend ex-Shipmaster Lem Doz like this, Fleet Captain Forster?” asked softly Grand Admiral Tok Tharn, genuinely touched by her reaction.

“Because I am a ship captain and know what it means for a captain to lose his or her command. I had nothing personally against your shipmaster and still don’t. I thus reiterate my request to be able to meet with him so that I could present my excuses to him.”

"He could very well fall into a rage at your sight, rather than accept your excuses, Fleet Captain Forster."

"I am ready to run that risk, Grand Admiral." said softly Tina. Something then broke inside Tharn, who nodded his head once.

"Very well! Give me a moment and I will arrange a meeting between you and Lem Doz. If you will please go wait outside in the meantime."

Tina agreed to that at once and left the room for a second time. Tharn then got up from his chair, watched by his surprised colleagues.

"You really are going to make her meet our ex-shipmaster, Grand Admiral?" asked a bemused Gorat Vorka.

"I will, yes. Such a request of hers cannot hurt our plan, right?"

Tharn then left the room as well, using a backdoor so that he would not encounter Tina in the hallway.

10:48 (Drakan City Time) / 18:08 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Tarmac of the Navy Headquarters Astroport

Drakan City

Having been told on arrival in Drakan City to be on standby to escort back Tina's craft out of the system, Dozna Wiss, on receiving a call from Grand Admiral Tharn, was expecting to be told that Tina Forster would soon depart. Tharn's opening question to her thus left her more than a bit confused and surprised.

"Uh, yes, Grand Admiral: Lem Doz was effectively a good friend of mine at the Naval Academy."

"And do you still consider him a friend, Shipmaster Wiss?"

"We met on occasions until he was court-martialed and booted out of the Navy, sir. However, I have not seen him since his departure from the Navy. May I ask why you are asking me this, sir?"

"You may, Shipmaster Wiss. Fleet Captain Forster is about to return to the astroport, but she had a special request for us before departing the planet: she wants to meet with Lem Doz, in order to present to him her most sincere regrets for manhandling his MURKAN. I believe her to be sincere about this, so I want you to escort Forster into town, so that she could meet with Lem Doz."

Dozna was left speechless for long seconds before she could reply to that.

"Knowing Lem Doz the way I do, sir, I suspect that he may well shred that Captain Forster to pieces the moment that he will see her."

"Captain Forster acknowledged that risk but still wants to meet him. Are you ready to escort her around town, Shipmaster Wiss?"

"I am, Grand Admiral! Do you know where we could find Lem Doz these days, sir?"

"I was able to get his present home address, plus the address of his place of employment. I am now sending you those two addresses via text. Fleet Captain Forster should arrive back at the astroport in about one chu. Be ready to meet her and then use the aircar she will be in to carry her into town."

"Yes, Grand Admiral!"

The video link proper was then cut, followed by the arrival of a short text message. Dozna was dismayed when she read the two addresses sent to her by Grand Admiral Tharn: one was a public residential block in the poorest, most crime-ridden district of Drakan City, while Lem Doz' place of employment was a garbage recycling plant! Dozna felt sad on seeing how low her old friend and comrade had now sunk. She then debated whether she should be armed during her escort mission. She finally decided to take a stun pistol with her, not to protect herself from Forster but rather to be able to face any of the numerous thugs infesting the District of Vesna.

As promised, an aircar wearing the livery of the Drazt Navy landed at the announced time near the TARASK. Dozna, who had been waiting for it on the tarmac, immediately got inside, sitting next to Tina on the rear bench seat and smiling to her.

"So, Fleet Captain Forster, how did your peace mission go?"

"Reasonably well," lied Tina. "I was told to return to this system in three weeks' time, Earth time that is, and to bring an ambassadorial party and a commercial trade commission along."

"But, that's good news!" replied Dozna, sincere, before looking at the driver and giving him a small printout. "Could you please drive us to the second address, the industrial one? You will then wait while we go inside."

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

The aircar then took off and started flying at a low altitude, mingling with other aircars flying around under a centralized air traffic control system. As Tina watched with interest the city panorama they were overflying, Dozna couldn't help ask her a question.

"May I ask why you insisted on meeting with Lem Doz, Fleet Captain?"

"Because I am a deeply compassionate person at heart and also because I am a ship captain and fully understand how devastating it is for any captain to lose his command. Lem Doz did not deserve to be court-martialed, but he was apparently made a scapegoat for the incident involving his ship, my ship and the SHANIZAR."

"And you don't consider him like an enemy, for trying to oppose your ship?"

Tina gave Dozna a sober look at that question.

"No! He was doing his duty, while I was doing my own duty. I have no reasons to hate him at a personal level. What I hate instead are the policies that forced him to attack my ship."

Those words struck Dozna, who also noticed that her driver had twitched slightly, probably from simple surprise. The driver was however a well-disciplined male who continued to fly the aircar without further ado. Still, as an extra precaution, Dozna closed off the transparent partition between her rear bench and the forward driving section, on top of disactivating the intercom system.

"I thought that you Humans were more hateful than this during your various wars."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Shipmaster Wiss: most of our past wars have been marked by collective interethnic hatred and violence, seasoned with massacres, mass genocides and mass destructions. However, I believe that we Humans have started to turn the page on such senseless violence and destruction. Even in some of our biggest past wars, especially those involving whole nations against other nations, individual soldiers did not hate per say enemy soldiers, unless some racial factor worsened things. It is not uncommon in our history to see ex-enemies reconcile in peace at the end of a war, to then become good friends. Take me and my ship, for example. We fought in a war a few years ago, yet am now in very good terms with some of the men and women I fought against."

"You, in a war? You look quite young to have been in one."

Tina then remembered something and smiled to Dozna.

“You forgot that you get all your news about us with a delay of eleven of our years, thanks to the distance between our two stars, so you still would not be aware yet that a large-scale war was fought in the Solar System a mere five of our years ago.”

“So, your KOSTROMA must be a well-armed ship, no?”

Tina nearly answered her but, instead, pointed an index at Dozna while grinning.

“Nice try, Shipmaster Wiss.”

Tina then concentrated back on watching the city below her, leaving Dozna wondering what Tina was hiding from her.

11:06 (Drakan City Time)

Metal triage section, Municipal Recycling Plant # 8

District of Vesna, Drakan City

Lem Doz was getting both hungry and tired as he used a pair of hand electro-magnets to catch the metallic objects mixed with the other solid waste going by him on a rolling carpet. Each time he saw what appeared to be a metallic piece of domestic garbage, he simply approached one of his electro-magnets to it and pressed a button on the handle of the magnet, catching the piece of garbage before dumping it into a large container beside him. It was a dirty, smelly and disgusting job which he hated with a passion, but at least it paid enough to barely sustain his family above the poverty line. Since he had been booted out of the Navy, most of the prospective employers he had visited or applied to online had treated him like a pariah. That was what he had effectively become now, the dishonor of his court-martial making others look at him with disdain or even plain revulsion. He had finally been accepted in this job for the simple reason that no self-respecting Drazt would normally accept to do such work. Lem had read years ago in some documentary paper that the Humans of the Solar System were using robots and machines to do this kind of dirty work. However, robots were not favored on Kadosh, with many specific types of robots having been banned a long time ago by an Imperial decree, following an attempt by a would-be usurper to program robots into supporting his failed coup. Thus, here he was, wearing a work coverall, a mask and gloves, sweating and hungry. His attention was then grabbed by a loud announcement via the speaker system of the plant that resonated around his section.

“WORKER LEM DOZ, PLEASE REPORT TO THE METAL SECTION MANAGER’S OFFICE. WORKER LEM DOZ, PLEASE REPORT TO THE METAL SECTION MANAGER’S OFFICE.”

“Aw, what now? Don’t tell me that they are going to fire me!”

Putting down his electro-magnets, Lem then left his station and walked towards a lift that would bring him up to the overhead observation gallery containing the offices of the managers and supervisors of the plant. A couple of his co-workers threw at him looks of commiseration as he passed by them: the firing of employees was a frequent and often unexplained affair at this plant. With dread growing into him as he got closer to his manager’s office, he finally knocked on its door. A muffled answer came through the door.

“ENTER!”

Already resigned to what was possibly awaiting him inside, Lem entered the office and was about to close the door behind him when he froze: his old friend and comrade, Dozna Wiss, was in the office, standing next to the sitting manager’s desk. Then, his eyes caught on another person standing a few paces to the side of Dozna Wiss and instant rage filled him.

“YOU? HERE?”

Lem was taking his first furious step towards the female Human present in the office when Dozna quickly stepped in front of him to block his charge.

“No, wait, Lem! She came to apologize to you.”

It took a second for him to comprehend that and froze in both disbelief and confusion.

“Her? Apologize to me? And she came all the way from Earth to do that?”

“Please listen to her, Lem. She came to Kadosh on a diplomatic mission, to offer peace between us and her race. When she heard about your court-martial and demise, she asked to see you, so that she could apologize to you.”

As the metal section manager watched and listened on with utter disbelief, Lem eyed Tina Forster, who had stood her ground and was looking at him. Lem thought that he was having visions when he saw what appeared to be tears forming into her brown eyes as she examined his dirty work coverall.

“You, you truly wish to apologize to me? For what, exactly?”

“For having indirectly caused you to lose your command, even though you were not at fault. For having to handle roughly your cruiser in that past encounter between our two ships. It pains me to see a fellow ship captain reduced to this.”

She then slowly went down on both knees and spoke softly while looking up into Lem's eyes.

"I am truly sorry for what happened to you and wish that we never needed to fight each other, Shipmaster Lem Doz. Please accept my sorriest excuses for causing you such personal grief."

As Dozna Wiss looked on while swallowing a big lump in her throat, Lem's rage vaporized nearly as fast as it had appeared. Staring down at the kneeling Tina for a moment, he then took four slow steps towards her and stopped directly in front of her before offering one of his right hands to her.

"Please get up, Captain Forster. I accept your apologies."

Taking Lem's offered hand, Tina got back on her feet and looked softly into Lem's eyes.

"Please believe me when I say that I regret having to fight your MURKAN. However, we were both doing our respective duties as ship captains and I won, while you lost. That does not mean that we have to stay enemies of each other. I came to this system to bring a message of peace from my government. Hopefully, things will go better between our two races from now on. I have one thing left that I would wish to do now."

"What is it?"

"To go to your home to visit your family and to apologize to them as well."

On hearing that, Dozna looked at the section manager.

"Can you spare Worker Lem Doz for the rest of the day, mister?"

"Uh, no problem, Shipmaster Wiss. I can make sure that his pay won't be docked for the missed hours this afternoon."

"Thank you, mister. Lem, I have a Navy aircar waiting on the roof landing pad. I can fly you and Fleet Captain Forster to your home and wait there."

"Thank you very much, Dozna. You were always a good friend. I accept your offer with pleasure."

The trio then left the office, leaving the section manager still stunned with disbelief.

The air trip to Lem Doz' residence was actually a short one, the recycling plant being close to the group of tall residential towers in which Lem lived. However, 'tall' did not translate into 'nice' in this case: the six 22-storey buildings had evidently been built on the cheap, on top of being quite old. Dozna took the time to describe them to Tina as their aircar approached one of the towers to land on its roof pad.

"These public residential towers are part of the Vesna District, the poorest one in Drakan City. They are occupied by low-class citizens working at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and who can't afford better. Let's say that this neighborhood can become rough at times."

"I have seen my share of similar neighborhoods on Earth, Shipmaster Wiss. Now that I possess a new world of my own in another star system, I have started building it up as a resettlement place for refugees and destitute people from wars and disaster-stricken regions on Earth. My world is now called 'New Haven' and I am very proud of what it represents."

Both Dozna and Lem, who were sandwiching Tina on the rear bench seat, looked down at her with disbelief.

"You own a world of your own?" asked Lem. "How did you manage that?"

"By helping the Koorivars find and rescue their two lost refugee ships and by discovering and exploring at the same time a number of habitable planets and moon among the region's star systems. I was then rewarded by the grant of a large, habitable moon with a good climate and perfectly breathable atmosphere."

"And how many such habitable new worlds has your race found to date?" asked Dozna.

"Seven, up to now, but we are liable to find many more in the near future alone. However, not all of those worlds were up for the taking by us: you are actually the ninth sentient race that Humanity has already encountered within a radius of forty light-years from Earth. Along with all the non-sentient species and varied flora that I have encountered during the last year, I can tell you with assurance that the Universe is full of life."

"And Gliese 625, where you said that you found the remains of Squadron Master Bar Lov, was it a habitable world?" asked Dozna, making Lem's head snap around in shock.

"She found what?"

Tina took on her to tell Lem about that discovery, also telling him that she had brought back those ancient relics to Kadosh as part of her diplomatic visit. At the end, Lem was looking at Tina with a new set of eyes.

"You decidedly are nothing like what I thought of you before, Fleet Captain Forster."

“Thank you! To answer Dozna’s question, Gliese 625b is not what I would call a nice planet. It is hellishly hot, with a barely breathable atmosphere, is as dry as a rock and is populated by some nasty bugs.”

“Damn! When I think how crowded this planet is becoming...” said Dozna in return, making Tina nod her head.

“I know the feeling. However, if peace can be formally achieved between our two races, you may then gain access to some of those habitable worlds and profit from trading with us.”

That left the two Drazts quiet until their aircar touched down on the roof landing pad of one of the dilapidated residential towers.

Leaving the aircar under the guard of its driver, Lem led Dozna and Tina into the roof access hut, where they took place in an elevator cabin that had seen better times. Lem then punched the button for Level 16, where his apartment was. When the doors of their cabin opened on Level 16, two Drazt females who were about to step in in backpedaled at once on seeing Tina, with one of them screaming in near panic.

“THERE’S AN ALIEN IN THE ELEVATOR!”

Resigned to having the mere presence of Tina cause a public commotion wherever they went, Dozna slapped one hand over the mouth of the screaming female, staring hard at her.

“This alien is being escorted around by me, on orders from the Navy, so shut up and calm down.”

The female Drazt did shut up but still looked fearfully at Tina as she followed Lem down a corridor. The trio soon arrived at an apartment door, which Lem opened with his electronic access card. He nearly immediately encountered his wife Zar inside, who gave him a look mixing surprise and dread.

“Lem? Why are you back from work so soon? Please don’t tell me that you lost your job.”

Her tone changed radically and she took a step back when she was able to see Tina, who had been hidden from her by the massive hulk of Lem.

“An alien?”

“A Human female actually, Zar. She asked me to visit our home after she came to my workplace to apologize to me. Zar, this is Fleet Captain Tina Forster, the captain

of the Human ship with which my old MURKAN clashed recently. She came to Kadosh on a diplomatic mission. Captain Forster, this is my wife Zar.”

“Pleased to meet you!” said Tina before looking quickly around her. The apartment looked tiny and was sparsely furnished with second-hand items and a few personal souvenirs. “Do you have children, Lem?”

“Yes: a small daughter. Where is Riza, Zar?”

“Sleeping in her corner.”

“Good! We will be careful not to wake her up. Please follow me, Captain Forster.”

Following Lem to a small room, Tina was shown a sleeping Drazt infant wearing only a sort of diaper. She eyed for a few seconds with intense interest the infant while keeping quiet. Drazt infants, with their two pairs of arms, flat nose, squarish jaws and short hair, were not exactly beautiful by Human standards but, as many said, ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. If anything, little Riza was still quite cute while sleeping peacefully in her padded sleep corner. Tina took the time to take a picture of the infant with her data pad.

“She is really cute. You are lucky to have her, Lem.”

“Thank you, Captain Forster.”

The group then backed out of the child’s room, so that their talking would not wake up little Riza. Lem looked questioningly at Dozna while keeping his voice low.

“What now, Dozna?”

“I bring back Fleet Captain Forster to the Navy’s astroport, where she will board back her craft and depart Kadosh. We are actually on a rather tight schedule, as the Navy wants her to depart as soon as possible, so that she could come back in a few cycles with an ambassadorial party.”

“I wish that I could have stayed longer, so I could talk more with you and your wife and, possibly, playing with your little Riza, but my mission is a most important one.” further explained Tina to Lem. “Maybe there will be a next time for that.”

“I hope so, Captain Forster. Meeting you in person was a pleasure. Have a safe trip back to your home.”

“Thank you! It was a pleasure to meet you, Zar, and to look at your cute Riza.”

“You are welcome, Captain Forster.”

Tina then left the apartment with Dozna, leaving Lem with his wife, who looked up at her husband.

"A truly intriguing person, that Captain Forster. Somehow, I imagined Humans as being more fearsome and barbaric than this."

"Me too! However, it seems that appearances did not correspond to reality in her case. If most Humans are like her, then peace has a real chance of happening between our two races."

11:41 (Drakan City Time) / 19:01 (Earth Universal Time)

Tarmac of the Navy's astroport, Drakan City

Once out of the aircar, Tina offered her right hand to Dozna, who took and shook it.

"Thank you for escorting me so that I could meet Lem Doz, Shipmaster Wiss. I sincerely hope that we will be able to meet again...in a peaceful setting."

"I wish so too, Fleet Captain Forster. You are a truly remarkable person and I admire your sense of compassion."

"Compassion is in my nature, I guess. So, how do we proceed now for my return trip?"

"You will take off first in your small ship, then I will follow you and escort you into deep space, until you can reach your waiting ship."

Tina threw a cautious look at Dozna on hearing her last words.

"Then, I would strongly counsel you to stop following me closely after we pass the outer limits of your system's asteroid belt: if you come too close from my waiting ship, it could consider that as a hostile act. Once out of the asteroid belt, I will ask you to keep a distance of at least two light-seconds between my craft and your ship. That is approximately twice the distance between this planet and your nearest moon."

"If you wish so. Have a good trip, Fleet Captain Forster."

"And have a good life, Shipmaster Wiss."

The Human and the Drazt then parted, each walking to their respective ship. Walking up the lowered access ramp of her patrol cruiser, Dozna soon entered the bridge of the TARASK. There, she found a senior officer from Navy Headquarters waiting for her. Before she could ask why he was aboard her ship, the male Division Master handed her an old-fashioned paper envelope.

“Shipmaster Wiss, I came aboard to bring you a set of special orders pertaining to your escort mission. Please read them carefully and then acknowledge their content to me.”

Somewhat surprised by this procedure, as Navy orders were normally transmitted electronically, Dozna took and opened the envelope offered to her, extracting and unfolding two sheets of paper attached together. After only a few seconds of reading, Dozna snapped her head up to look at the division master, shock on her face.

“But, those orders...”

“Are to be followed to the letter, without deviations. If not, there will be severe consequences for you, Shipmaster Wiss.” replied the division master, his voice cold and firm.

CHAPTER 7 – THE BATTLE OF ROSS 128

07:50 (Earth Universal Time)

Monday, December 27, 2320

Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

At the edge of the Ross 128 System

“We just got a radio message from Tina, Dana: her yacht has just cleared the outer edge of the system’s asteroid belt. Her message included the codeword ‘Trojan’.”

“Thank you, Amin.” replied Dana ‘DD’ Durning from the command chair on the bridge of the KOSTROMA. Dana’s normal function was as the ship’s navigator but she also had the informal position of first officer, so she was in command of the KOSTROMA during Tina’s absence. As for her normal navigator’s station, it was presently manned by Captain Shanandar, who had been a formal crewmember and officer aboard the ship for the last three years or so. Dana then sat back straight in her command chair as her body tensed up. A number of different codewords that would mean nothing to the Drazt had been agreed to before her departure for Ross 128b, each covering a possible end scenario. As for the codeword ‘Trojan’, it meant that Tina was being followed by the Drazt and that an attack against the KOSTROMA was a possibility. Thankfully, she and her crew still had some time available to prepare for anything. They also had a few hidden assets which were now going to prove very useful.

“Patricia, what is the latest data sent via directional maser by our stealth probes hidden within the asteroid belt?”

Patricia O’Neil, a beautiful, 31-years-old redhead with green eyes who was presently manning one of the sensors and communications stations of the bridge, answered her after a quick review of the data on her screens.

“Our probes have detected and triangulated via passive means a lone Drazt ship following Tina’s yacht from a distance of 2.3 light-seconds. I believe it to be acting simply as an escort to Tina’s yacht. If there are any other Drazt ships in the region, they are still too far for passive detection.”

“Very well! We will still take the maximum precautions possible. Spirit, activate all our internal and external defense systems. Any Drazt entering this ship will be

considered a hostile and will be neutralized on sight, without warning. Be prepared to engage multiple targets at maximum range.”

“Activating all our internal and external defense systems now.” replied on the intercom the soft female voice of the KOSTROMA’s central artificial intelligence computer. Dana felt better on hearing that: Spirit had proved many times in the past to be an important key to the defense of the KOSTROMA against various forms of attack, being both extremely fast to react to unexpected threats and being able to take judicious tactical decisions of its own while handling the targeting of multiple targets. Next, Dana raised a plate covering a red button on one of her command chair’s armrests and pushed the button, starting a loud alarm blare across the ship.

“Attention to all crewmembers! Go to battle stations! Close all the airtight doors and hatches and switch to local power and life support systems. All non-combat crew and family members are to don their emergency spacesuits and to withdraw to the main cafeterias in the ship’s armored central core section.”

Dana then looked around her and shouted another order.

“BRIDGE CREW, START PUTTING ON YOUR SPACESUITS, HALF A PAIR AT A TIME. LEAVE YOUR VISORS OPENED ONCE YOU ARE SUITED UP BUT BE READY TO SEAL THEM ON MY COMMAND OR IF THE BRIDGE DEPRESSURIZES.”

Dana herself waited a couple of minutes before going to put on her own spacesuit, kept close at hand in a locker room directly adjacent to the bridge. Once suited up, she sat back in her command chair and looked down at Patricia O’Neil, whose work station was situated on the bridge platform immediately down from the command platform.

“Patricia, how far from us is Tina’s yacht?”

“She is now about 1.1 light-seconds² from us and coasting along at 140,000 kilometers per hour.”

“Damn! I wish that her second-hand yacht would have been a bit faster than that. Let’s...”

That was when Amin Jamilian, manning a second sensors station next to Patricia’s station, spoke up out loud in alarm.

“Dana, our stealth probes are now starting to detect a large group of unidentified ships following far behind the escort Drazt cruiser.”

“How many ships are there?”

² One light-second is equal to roughly 300,000 kilometers.

“Uh, more ships keep being detected, but there are already 32 contacts located some three light seconds behind the Drazt escort cruiser.”

“SHIT! IT’S A TRAP! Patricia, send the following message to Tina via directional maser: Roadrunner, Roadrunner! Frida, engage our gravity sails at maximum power and rush towards Tina’s yacht: we must recuperate her before those Drazt ships could rush in and attack us.”

“Going to full gravity sails acceleration.” replied Frida Skarsgard, the first pilot of the KOSTROMA. The giant cargo ship, having been emptied of cargo for this risky mission, bolted forward at an acceleration of 2.8 Gs, a stunning performance without using its main thermonuclear drive for such a huge ship. However, Dana knew that Drazt ships could accelerate much faster even: this race could become a very close one indeed.

08:05 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the TARASK

“Shipmaster, the Human craft has just lit up its thermonuclear engines and is accelerating away from us.”

At first, that news did not alarm Dozna Wiss: Tina Forster could simply have decided to increase her speed once out of the dense asteroid belt. Still, she gave an order to one of her bridge officers.

“Communicator, send the following to the fleet flagship: Forster’s yacht has lit up its main drive and is accelerating away.”

“Aye, Shipmaster!”

The male officer was still transmitting that message when a sensors operator spoke up urgently.

“Shipmaster, we are now detecting at the edge of our radar range a ship on approach. It is accelerating towards us and the yacht.”

“Forster’s waiting ship.” said to herself Dozna. “Can you identify it, Sensors Officer?”

“Not yet, Shipmaster, but it is a big one, judging from its radar echo.”

“Damn, that must be Forster’s KOSTROMA. I suppose that we should have expected that. Communicator, alert the flagship about this approaching vessel. Pilot, cut our speed down and adopt a holding position.”

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

Somehow, that order made Dozna feel a bit better about herself: her orders had specified that she had to stay away from the incoming battle, so that she could act as a relay ship and observe the battle, in case things soured up. At least, this would allow her to avoid participating into what she considered as pure dishonor for the Drazt race.

08:08 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

"Dana, the Drazt fleet is now accelerating at a rate of 21 Gs and is about to overrun the lone Drazt escort ship."

"Is that escort ship accelerating as well?"

"Negative! In fact, it is slowing down quickly. It seems to be taking a rearguard position."

"Then mark it as to be avoided by our weapons. How far is Tina's yacht from us now?"

"It is now some 0.9 light-seconds from us, Dana. This is going to be a tight race indeed."

"The hell with this! Those Drazt asked for it! LAUNCH AND DEPLOY OUR ELECTRONIC DECOYS AND ACTIVATE THEM AT FULL POWER IN TEN SECONDS. ONCE OUR DECOYS WILL BE EMITTING, FIRE ONE FULL MISSILE SALVO AT THAT APPROACHING DRAZT FLEET. SET THEIR WARHEADS TO MAXIMUM YIELD AND PROXIMITY DETONATION."

Renée Dargenteuil, who was manning the bridge's weapons master station, couldn't help glance briefly at Dana on hearing her order: the firepower that was going to be unleashed was downright terrifying. Still, her fingers played on her command console's keyboard and various buttons.

"Missile warhead yield and detonators set! Targeting plan initiated and missiles ready for immediate launch."

As Renée spoke, Ingrid Holtz, manning one of the sensors stations, was launching a total of twelve compact but powerful stealth jamming emitters, which then dispersed ahead of the KOSTROMA, forming a loose but carefully calculated pattern in space. Then, on command, the emitters started sending powerful directional multispectral jamming noises towards the approaching Drazt fleet. Two seconds after that, a total of

150 heavy missiles, each some fourteen meters-long and with a diameter of 1.6 meters, rocketed out of their box launchers, located in the forward cones of the six giant landing leg pods of the KOSTROMA. After boosting out of their launchers via simple but reliable solid propellant rocket engines, these missiles, of a recent design far superior to their predecessors, switched after a second to anti-matter rocket engines derived from Koorivar ship engines. With only fuel, a guidance package and a warhead to accelerate, the huge thrust from the mutual annihilation of thin streams of vaporized matter and anti-matter injected in their magnetic containment burning chambers accelerated the missiles at a fantastic rate of 56 Gs. Guided by an array of both active and passive sensors and loaded with prepared fire commands, the 150 missiles veered as one towards the approaching Drazt fleet, speeding up at a rate even Drazt ships could not approach, while adopting erratic zigzag trajectories meant to make them more difficult to avoid.

08:10 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the ADMIRAL DRAX (flagship of the Drazt Navy)

“Grand Admiral, our sensors screens just filled with tens of thousands of false radar and thermal echoes. We can’t pinpoint the Human ship or the yacht anymore through all that noise.”

Tok Tharn’s jaws tightened in irritation at those words: he had expected the Human ship to prove to be a tough target, in view of the Humans’ long experience at war. In contrast, the Drazt’s last experience of war had been centuries ago and had not involved space battles, only ground fighting in a low scale. However, that KOSTROMA seemed to have even more tricks in its bag than he had expected.

“Keep pushing the fleet forward at maximum acceleration: once close enough, no amount of jamming will be able to hide that damn KOSTROMA.”

His fleet operations officer snapped his head to give him a cautionary look.

“We will still have to decelerate sharply once near the KOSTROMA, Grand Admiral, so that our assault barges could be launched. That will be a very risky phase of our attack and we still know next to nothing about the weaponry of the KOSTROMA.”

“We know that only their lasers could penetrate our force shields. Seizing this KOSTROMA and its interstellar drive is well worth taking some risks, Operations Master. Make sure that our troops are ready for action and that our assault barges are ready to be launched quickly on my command.”

“Yes, Grand Admiral!” replied the operations officer, hiding his misgivings.

If anything, the Human jamming kept getting worse, contrary to Tharn’s hope. Then, one sensors officer yelled a nearly panicky warning.

“MULTIPLE MISSILES APPROACHING FAST!”

“IGNORE THEM! OUR FORCE SHIELDS CAN HANDLE THE HUMANS’ WARHEADS.”

Tharn knew from studying the extensive data banks of intercepted Human signals that his enemy used either chemical explosives, nuclear devices or purely kinetic warheads in their missile designs. Drazt force shields could easily handle chemical explosive and kinetic warheads, while they could soak up small nuclear warheads typical of ship missiles, so he kept a façade of assurance as over a hundred missiles rushed at his fleet of 42 cruisers. Seeing that each Drazt ship was going to face an average of three missiles each, the weapons officer of the flagship nervously looked at Tharn: that officer, like all the crewmembers of the fleet, never had to face hostile fire before.

“Grand Admiral, those missiles are now zigzagging in unpredictable random patterns and will be very difficult to shoot down. I counsel that we use our disintegrator batteries in order to at least cut down on their number.”

“Very well, Weapons Master. Start engaging those missiles now.”

“Yes, Grand Admiral!”

The lack of war experience of the Drazt then again played against them. Not having to engage in space combat for centuries, the standard Drazt space patrol cruiser’s armament had been kept to a mere four medium disintegrator cannons mounted in 3-axis turrets, enough to cover every sector around the cruiser while leaving more space and power for the propulsion systems and shield generators. Any Human admiral or warship captain would have laughed at such a puny armament for cruisers with a diameter of 260 meters and a height of 200 meters and would have told the ship designers to return to their drawing boards. With the missiles still accelerating at a rate of 56 Gs and zigzagging wildly, the few Drazt disintegrator cannons which could fire in their direction were completely overwhelmed, managing to hit and destroy only a mere tenth of the missiles. Then, the remaining 133 missiles reached the Drazt fleet, either impacting directly against the frontal shields of the cruisers or passing in close proximity to them. In each case, the missile warheads detonated in hug balls of exploding plasma. The problem for the Drazt was that those warheads were no mere chemical explosive or

low nuclear yield ones. Rather, they were anti-matter warheads with selectable yields between fifteen and ninety megatons. In this case, they all had been set to their maximum yields of ninety megatons. Those cruisers hit directly by a missile saw their protective force shield generators buckle and fail at once against such powerful blows, with the cruisers utterly destroyed by gigantic anti-matter blasts. Those cruisers who suffered multiple near detonations along their flanks survived, but with their force shield generators overloading and shutting down, becoming irremediably inoperable. Their outer hulls also suffered serious damage or were even breached, causing catastrophic compartment decompressions. In the space of only a few seconds, 23 Drazt cruisers ceased to exist, while another ten were rendered next to useless for combat. The Drazt flagship, situated at the rear of the formation, was lucky enough to escape the missile swarm unscathed, but a shocked Grand Admiral Tharn then found himself left with only nine ships still combat capable, including his flagship, and with the intimidating KOSTROMA still approaching.

Way behind the now decimated Drazt fleet, Dozna Wiss and her crew could only watch with horror the blinding show made by dozens of anti-matter warheads detonating into huge balls of plasma among the fleet of cruisers.

“By the stars, this is nothing but a pure massacre! Sensors Officer, how many of our ships are still intact?”

“Uh, one moment, Shipmaster.” replied the poor officer, near panic. “I now read nineteen remaining radar echoes, but the identification signals of some of them aren’t detectable anymore. Those cruisers may have been significantly damaged by near blasts.”

“Talking of blasts, how could the Humans possess such powerful warheads? Sciences Officer, can you answer that question for me?”

“Give me a moment to analyze the spectral signature of those explosions, Shipmaster.”

A few seconds later, the sciences officer looked back at Dozna, shock on his face.

“Shipmaster, the radiation signature of those blasts corresponds to that of matter/anti-matter explosions, massive ones.”

“Anti-matter warheads?” said Dozna, horrified. “How could Humans manufacture so much anti-matter? We ourselves can only produce infinitesimal quantities and at the cost of huge energy consumption.”

"I don't know, Shipmaster. However, the Humans seem to have a significant advance over us in that domain."

"Damn! In what other domains could they also be in advance over us?" Dozna asked herself in a low voice.

On the ADMIRAL DRAX, Grand Admiral Tharn, temporarily overwhelmed by the disaster that had struck his fleet, then reacted in a way many Human military leader of the past with more aristocratic rank than military competence had reacted to setbacks: he decided to push on at all cost.

"TO ALL OUR SHIPS: LAUNCH OUR ASSAULT BOATS AND COVER THEM WITH DISINTEGRATOR FIRE AS SOON AS THEY ARE WITHIN EFFECTIVE RANGE."

The last part of his order was necessitated by the fact that, while devastating in their effects, disintegrator weapons had energy beams that gradually lost their focus with distance. In the case of infantry weapons, meant to be used at ranges of a few hundred meters at the most, that factor was negligible. However, as ship weapons, disintegrator cannons saw their destructive power diminish considerably within mere hundreds of kilometers, to the point where they could only damage ships hulls to depths of only a few millimeters, enough to still damage seriously or destroy a small craft but wholly insufficient to seriously worry a behemoth like the KOSTROMA. In contrast, the huge gigawatt-class laser batteries of the giant cargo ship, which were still without equal even within the Solar System, could be used effectively over tens of thousands of kilometers, something Dana Durning started using to good effect.

08:11 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser SHAKRA

"Our last assault barge has now been launched and is on its way to the KOSTROMA. Our barges should get to it nearly at the same time as the fleeing Human yacht, Shipmaster."

"Let's hope that our troops will be able to board that damn Human ship and capture it quickly." replied the shipmaster, who nearly added 'before we are all dead'. He suddenly saw on his external viewing screens big showers of sparks explode on two different parts of his cruiser's outer hull.

“What the...”

Before he could finish his sentence, one of two 1.2-gigawatt laser beams, tuned to a frequency invisible to the naked eye, burned through the cruiser all the way to the bridge section, while the other beam started melting the main drive generator of the ship. The intrusion of the laser beam inside the bridge section was signaled by a sudden explosion of sparks along one bulkhead, with one Drazt bridge officer having his whole head incinerated by the invisible beam. That laser beam then continued dancing around the bridge for a second, killing the shipmaster and four more of his crewmembers in the process before burning its way out of the hull. The surviving crewmembers of the patrol cruiser then had to battle multiple explosive decompressions, with many Drazt being ripped to pieces as they were sucked out of the ship through the jagged edges of the perforated hull. What was left of the SHAKRA then started drifting through space, now turned into a near lifeless hulk.

On the ADMIRAL DRAX, Grand Admiral Tharn could only watch as the cruiser positioned ahead of his flagship was shredded to ribbons by laser fire. Then, a second cruiser's hull started producing explosions of sparks. The terrified fleet operations officer on the flagship's bridge couldn't stand it anymore and nearly yelled at Tharn.

“ADMIRAL, WE HAVE TO WITHDRAW NOW, BEFORE WE LOSE ALL OF OUR SHIPS!”

“SHUT UP, YOU COWARD! OUR ASSAULT BARGES ARE NOW ABOUT TO GET TO THE KOSTROMA. THAT SHIP WILL SOON BE OURS. TO ALL SHIPS, OPEN MAXIMUM FIRE NOW!”

Unfortunately for him, the words ‘all ships’ now meant only six surviving and combat effective cruisers. That number went down to three within two seconds, when a deluge of concentrated disintegrator cannon fire erupted out of the KOSTROMA.

“GRAND ADMIRAL, THE KOSTROMA IS APPARENTLY ARMED WITH OVER FIFTY MEDIUM DISINTEGRATOR CANNONS!” shouted a sensors officer. “OUR ASSAULT BARGES ARE BEING DECIMATED!”

“CONTINUE THE ASSAULT AT ALL COST! WE MUST TAKE THAT KOSTROMA!”

The sensors officer swallowed the words he had for his grand admiral but then saw on his optical telescope the muzzle of a gigantic sort of cannon on the KOSTROMA which was now directly pointing at the flagship.

"Oh shit!" the officer had time to say before the projectile fired by one of the four 200-megawatt, 150-meters-long electro-magnetic rail guns of the KOSTROMA hit the flagship head-on, its anti-matter warhead combining with its massive kinetic energy to overwhelm the ship's force shield generators and vaporize the ADMIRAL DRAX.

08:12 (Earth Universal Time)

Cockpit of Drazt Assault Barge # 245

800 meters from the KOSTROMA

Any sane and honest combat-experienced soldier would tell you that about everybody experiencing for the first time hostile fire in combat is bound to freeze from sheer terror during at least the first seconds of such an awful experience, with some never really recovering completely from it afterwards. In this case, the Drazt Navy crewmembers and combat troopers in Assault Barge # 245 were being served a royal portion of fear as they faced a thick barrage of blue disintegrator cannon beams. The pilot of the barge then did about the only thing that could save him and his craft.

"I'M GOING TO FOLLOW IN THAT HUMAN CRAFT ABOUT TO ENTER THAT AIRLOCK. WITH SOME LUCK, THEY WON'T DARE SHOOT AT US IN FEAR OF HITTING THEIR OWN CRAFT."

"SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN!" replied between clenched teeth his copilot, who was hyperventilating because of fear.

"EMBARKED TROOPERS, BE READY TO JUMP OUT: WE ARE ABOUT TO ENTER THE ENEMY SHIP." shouted the pilot in his intercom as he saw the nearest other assault barge disappear in a blue flash of light, hit by the crossfire from five disintegrator cannons firing furiously. Controlling as best he could his trajectory and speed, the barge pilot managed to follow the Human yacht into the opened craft airlock on one side of the KOSTROMA's hull and actually rear-ended it in the process, projecting it violently against the aft bulkhead of the airlock just as the armored outer doors were starting to close behind it. The shock of the collision left the 45 Drazt inside the assault barge temporarily stunned and disoriented, until the pilot regained enough of his senses to shout in his intercom.

"TROOPERS, JUMP OUT NOW AND PROCEED INSIDE THE ENEMY SHIP."
He then twisted his head to look at his cockpit crewmembers.

“Seal your spacesuits and make sure that you have a weapon with you, then evacuate the craft. I’m afraid that our poor barge is now a goner.”

Following his own directive, Droz Mak first checked that he still had his disintegrator pistol in his belt holster before undoing his seat harness and looking at his female copilot.

“Follow me, Vara!”

Most of the forty troopers carried by the spherical-shaped assault barge were already out of the craft when Droz and Vara jumped down from the left side cockpit access door, landing on the steel deck of the airlock. Droz was then able to see that the door between the inner and outer airlocks had been left opened to permit a faster landing by the Human yacht, something that had turned out to Droz’ benefit, as it had let both the yacht and the assault barge able to fit into the still limited volume of the craft airlock system. However, the armored outer doors of the airlock were now firmly closed, which meant that the Drazt had no way to go but further inside. Seeing the commander of the troopers near what appeared to be the door of an inner personnel airlock situated at the deeper end of the craft airlock, Droz went to join him, crouching against a bulkhead.

“So, what’s the plan for the assault, Group Master?”

The big Drazt trooper gave him a nearly disgusted look in response.

“The plan? What plan? We have no idea about the internal configuration of this ship, which is ten times bigger than anything I have seen before, on top of having being built by aliens we know little about. For all we know, we could run inside and head straight to their sewage plant rather than to their engine control room.”

“You mean that this assault was doomed from the start?” asked the young Drazt pilot, making the more mature trooper officer sneer in disdain.

“You only figured that out now, Barge Master? I could have said so out loud before but the consequences for me would not have been pretty.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“How about quietly surrendering, gentlemen?” said in Drazt language a female human voice that came from an overhead speaker. The trooper officer was pricked by those words and pointed his disintegrator rifle at one of the steel walls of the airlock while shouting an order to his soldiers.

“LIKE FUCK WE ARE, HUMANS! BE READY TO FOLLOW ME INSIDE, TROOPERS: I’M GOING TO BLAST A HOLE THROUGH THAT BULKHEAD.”

The trooper officer then followed his words with action, firing a long burst of disintegrator energy and creating a large hole with red-hot edges in the bulkhead. Since the airlock system had been pressurized after their entry, that hole did not create some explosive decompression, to Droz’ relief. The forty Drazt troopers then rushed inside the giant ship while screaming ferociously, only to be greeted by dense, murderous disintegrator fire coming from multiple points of the hangar situated beyond the airlock. Droz and Vara, following behind the troopers, saw a good dozen of them being hit by disintegrator beams and crumbling to the deck, gaping holes in their assault armors or even with their heads vaporized. In response, the troopers fired back with the energy of despair, managing to take out a few of what appeared to be remotely-controlled internal defensive turrets. Blasting away the remaining turrets cost another ten troopers, with the surviving Drazt taking cover behind piled crates. As the Group Master was running towards what looked like a central circulation column and was about to get to a steel door, a white jet of vapor suddenly blew out of a seemingly inoffensive-looking box fixed to the wall, enveloping the officer. Droz could only watch with incomprehension at first as the group master fell like a log on the deck, frozen stiff. Then Droz understood what had happened.

“WATCH THOSE WALL BOXES, TROOPERS: THEY CONTAIN GUNS THAT SPRAY CRYOGENIC VAPORS WHICH WILL FREEZE YOU SOLID.”

“Those sneaky Human bastards!” exclaimed a trooper before disintegrating that box. He then ran to his officer and examined him quickly.

“He still has a regular pulse, but he is indeed frozen stiff.”

Before Droz could say something about that, the same female human voice resonated again around the hangar.

“Warning! This is your last chance to surrender before I unlock our internal defensive batteries into free-fire mode. You have ten seconds to either surrender or die.”

“How long are ten human seconds?” asked a young Drazt trooper, prompting a spontaneous answer from Vara, the barge’s copilot.

“Most probably not long enough for us. This is hopeless! From what I saw while still outside in space, we are probably the only assault barge that was able to make it all the way to this ship.”

"I concur!" said Droz before looking at the seventeen surviving troopers. "It's your choice, guys: you surrender or you continue fighting and will die, probably all for nothing judging from the catastrophic situation of our fleet. Decide quickly!"

The Squad Master who had destroyed the cryogenic gun hesitated for a moment, then swore in disgust before putting down his disintegrator rifle, soon imitated by the rest of the troopers and by the crewmembers of the barge.

"WE SURRENDER!" shouted out Droz for good measure. Less than a minute later, six Humans armed with disintegrator rifles quite similar to the weapons of the Drazt appeared, coming from three different directions and surrounding the Drazt.

"HANDS UP AND KEEP THEM THERE!" shouted a Human in English, with his words translated at once in Drazt by the translation unit he carried. The Drazt obeyed and let the Humans take their weapons away, then were searched one by one in a manner Droz found quite professional. He then remembered that the Humans had a reputation for being hardened and experienced warmongers, something that this situation seemed to prove. To the surprise of the Drazt, a lone female Human came out of the same craft airlock from which they had broken out, prompting an exclamation from a trooper.

"Fuck! Where is this female coming from?"

The female in question grinned in response.

"Your barge sodomized my poor yacht, remember? I am Fleet Captain Tina Forster and you are now prisoners of war. Don't worry: we won't torture or brutalize you. That's not our style. Behave and you will be treated well and with respect."

She then turned towards one of the male Humans holding guns.

"Ahmed, please bring those Drazt to the detention cells. Once there, have them remove their spacesuits and search them thoroughly. Get some extra guards right now to help you."

"Yes, Captain!"

Before Ahmed Jibril could form up the prisoners into a double file, Tina nodded to the Drazt, her expression most serious.

"I must salute your courage and resolve for having been able to push this far and get inside my ship. Know that I will do my best to return you as soon as possible to your home planet. Alright, Ahmed: you can move them now."

09:06 (Earth Universal Time)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Dozna Wiss was nearly catatonic in her command chair as she reviewed what could only be called an epic disaster for the Drazt Empire. None of the 42 ships that had composed the assault fleet had survived the battle, none! The only thing she could do now was to keep her position, her ship being the only one able to even attempt to block the KOSTROMA from going to Kadosh and devastate the planet with its terrifying anti-matter weapons. As a result of what could more accurately be described as a one-sided massacre, the Drazt Navy was now left with a grand total of six patrol cruisers, including the TARASK. If that battle had confirmed something, it was that Humans were truly masters of warfare. Her attention was then attracted by a strangled call from her communicator.

“Shipmaster, I have a video call for you...from the KOSTROMA.”

That actually did not surprise Dozna much, not after seeing the kind of person Tina Forster was. Still, she looked coldly at her screen as the communicator transferred the video link to her command chair. As expected, the face of Tina Forster appeared on the screen. However, she was not gloating or triumphant. Rather, her expression was that of deep regret.

“Shipmaster Wiss, let me say first that I didn’t want that battle to happen. I was fully ready to peacefully go back to Earth, then to return in three weeks with a diplomatic party. However, the treacherous attack by your fleet gave my ship no other choice but to defend itself. I regret the deaths of so many Drazt, but those deaths are on your government, not on me.”

“What do you want exactly, Captain Forster?” said brusquely Dozna.

“What I want is to tell you that my ship is about to leave your system and that you will then be free to start rescue operations around the battle zone. If you agree to send a lone barge to my ship right now, I will also let you recuperate the 22 brave Drazt who managed to enter my ship and survived the following fight inside it.”

Dozna only had to think for a second before nodding her head at that.

“Very well! A barge will soon leave my ship to meet with your KOSTROMA. Anything else?”

“Yes! Tell your government that, despite its act of treachery, I have no intention to attack Kadosh in response, even though this was nothing short of an act of war. I will simply return to the Solar System and counsel my government to place the Ross 128

System under quarantine. If you ever develop a star drive of your own, then don't approach the Solar System, on pain of being fired upon without warning. Believe me that I deeply regret such an outcome and that I fervently wish that we could have avoided this. I will now wait for your barge, so that I could offload my prisoners of war. Fleet Captain Forster, out!"

Dozna stared at the now blank screen for long seconds, then looked at her operations officer.

"Operations Master, send a barge to the KOSTROMA, to collect 22 Drazt who have been taken prisoners there. Tell the crew of the barge to keep calm and to avoid any provocations. Then we will commence search and rescue operations to find and save as many of our surviving people as we will be able to find in the debris field."

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

19:34 (Drakan City Time)

Wednesday, December 29, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Apartment of the Doz family, Vesna District

Drakan City, Kadosh (Ross 128b)

Lem Doz had just finished eating a meager supper with his wife Zar and little daughter Riza and was collecting the dirty dishes so that he could wash them when someone rang their door buzzer.

"Were you expecting someone, Lem?" asked Zar, who had Riza in her arms.

"Uh, no! Let me go see who this is."

Walking to the door and looking first at the display screen of the camera watching the outside of his door, Lem was not a little surprised and also worried to see that two uniformed members of the Navy, one a group master, were standing in front of it. Bracing himself for any possible scenario, Lem opened his door and looked into the eyes of the group master.

"Yes! What could I do for you, Group Master?"

"Are you Lem Doz, ex-shipmaster of the cruiser MURKAN?"

"Yes, I am. What is it?"

In response, the officer presented a sealed paper envelope to Lem while speaking in a very official tone.

"Shipmaster Lem Doz, you are hereby reinstated back into the Navy at your old rank. Know that the verdict of the court-martial that you were subjected to has now been erased from your personnel file."

At first, Lem couldn't believe that this was happening and fixed the letter now in his hand for long seconds. He finally looked back up at the officer.

"I don't understand, Group Master. What happened to cause your visit here?"

"I can't talk about such details here, Shipmaster Doz. Suffice to say that the Navy has now an acute personnel shortage crisis. You are expected to report to Navy Headquarters tomorrow morning and to present yourself to Division Master Irkan, the head of the personnel services. Do you still have your old shipmaster's uniform?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Then wear it tomorrow morning. Have a good evening, Shipmaster Doz."

The group master and his accompanying armed escort then turned away and went to the nearest bank of elevators. After watching them leave, Lem closed back the door of his apartment, then broke into tears, unable to believe his new good fortune.

CHAPTER 8 – A SPREADING FIRE

10:10 (Universal Time)

Thursday, December 30, 2320

Chief designer's office, Avalon Space Yards

Low Earth orbit, Solar System

Gustav Shomberg grinned the moment the image of Tina Forster, sitting in her ship's command chair, appeared on his work computer.

"Hello, Tina! How are you these days?"

"It could be worse. Have you received my request for a space in your Number One Dry Dock?"

"Of course I did! You can come in any time now. What is it for? More design twitching? Extra ship features?"

Tina made a pinched smile in answer.

"More like repairing some minor battle damage, Gustav. My ship has not been truly affected by these damages, but my KOSTROMA definitely needs your loving touch."

The grin on Gustav's face instantly disappeared, to be replaced by a concerned look.

"Battle damage? I hope that you didn't suffer casualties."

"None, thank God!"

"May I ask how you got those battle damages, Tina? Have you knocked head with some of those tin-pot would-be dictators down in Africa? The situation there is said to be becoming worse by the day."

"It wasn't Africa, Gustav. Remember the race from which I obtained those new disintegrator weapons and directed gravity drive, the Drazt from the Ross 128 System?"

"How could I not remember them? My shipyard is presently busy designing for the Spacers League a new type of space cruiser based on Drazt technologies, while you already took delivery of 36 fighters of the new MAMBA-Class, based on the same technologies."

"Well, acting on behalf of the Spacers League, I went back to the Ross 128 System to try some diplomacy and attempt to avoid a possible future war with the Drazt.

Unfortunately, it did not exactly go as I wished. The first part went well and the Drazt officials I met were mostly polite, but they then tried to set a trap for my KOSTROMA, with the obvious goal of capturing it and thus obtain a working copy of our Koomak Drive. While completely inexperienced at war and using a failed tactic, those Drazt still showed a lot of bravery in battle and one of their assault barges even managed to enter my ship and deliver a whole platoon of troopers. Thankfully, my new internal defense systems worked perfectly and neutralized half of those troopers before the rest had to surrender. As for the fleet of 42 Drazt cruisers that attacked the KOSTROMA, it got completely wiped out, mostly thanks to our missiles with anti-matter warheads and to our laser batteries. In exchange, I received some damage from disintegrator fire, but that damage was thankfully limited mostly to my bow shield, which soaked up disintegrator beams quite nicely.”

“And...what happened after that battle, Tina?”

“I told a surviving, rearguard Drazt cruiser that it was free to search for survivors in the debris field. I also told that cruiser captain to tell her government that we will now put the Ross 128 System under quarantine and that any Drazt ship approaching the Solar System in the future, if they ever manage to produce an interstellar drive of their own that is, would be shot at without warning. I have already briefed Governor Robeson and the Spacers League’s High Council about what happened during my diplomatic mission and they have endorsed my recommendation to quarantine the Ross 128 System. You may be happy to learn that, as a result of my little misadventure over there, the Spacers League’s High Council finally shook off its indecision and dancing around and decided to boost substantially its space defense budget. You can thus expect large future orders once your new cruiser design will be ready.”

“That definitely does make me happy, Tina.” replied Gustav, a smile reappearing on his face. “About your ship, while you are free to enter my Number One Dry Dock, most of my staff and workers have already left for the New Year leave period. Apart from examining and listing the damage to be repaired, we won’t be able to begin the serious repair work until January 10, after the end of the New Year vacation period.”

“That is alright with me, Gustav, as I intend to give my own crew some well-deserved time off. By the way, the work needed includes refilling my missile magazines: I fired away 150 of them during the Battle of Ross 128.”

“One hundred and fifty missiles? Hell, that’s a humongous amount of firepower, Tina!”

"I know, but they saved the day for me then: the Drazt' force shield generators were unable to soak up the power of our missiles, which had been set to maximum anti-matter yield. If my missiles would have proved ineffective, then my poor KOSTROMA would have been cut to ribbons, boarded and seized by the Drazt, with my crew ending up either dead or as prisoners. While I don't hate individual Drazt and actually had a good rapport with some of them, I am now convinced that their government can't be trusted and that they will now try to find a way to avenge their defeat. I was very plain about that with the Spacers League's High Council and I believe that they now understand how serious the potential Drazt threat is."

"Well, the main thing is that you didn't suffer casualties in that adventure, Tina. I will stay here in my shipyard, so that I could greet your ship and start myself the damage evaluation work."

"Thanks, Gustav. Oh, I nearly forgot! Be prepared to receive in the next few days a work order from Koorivar Administrator Sheraz, for the fitting of disintegrator cannons and missile launchers on his flotilla of three starships."

That left Gustav nearly stunned from surprise, with his mouth half opening under the shock.

"The Koorivars want to arm their ships? But I thought that they were complete pacifists."

"They still mostly are, but Administrator Sheraz, along with a Hoshi observer, happened to be aboard the KOSTROMA when the Drazt launched their treacherous attack on my ship. The Koorivars may be pacifists, but they are also realists. While their ship crews may not have the stomach to fire at other ships, their ships' central computers will control that new armament and will ensure the defense of their ships against unprovoked attacks. My own Spirit already infused its not inconsiderable tactical knowledge and combat experience to the central computers of the three Koorivar spaceships. Thus, the VEON SHOURIA, SHUNDAR and SHANIZAR won't be simple sitting ducks once armed. Of course, as you already know from your experience at dealing with them, the Koorivars don't have a cash flow problem, thanks to their huge gold and precious metals reserves, so your work will be paid quickly and in full. By the way, you will be able to charge the Spacers League for the repair work and rearming of my KOSTROMA: since I was fulfilling a mission for them, they are picking up the tab."

"Any money is welcomed, as long as it is not dirty money, Tina. I will be waiting for your ship. See you at Number One Dry Dock."

Gustav Shomberg then closed the link, shaking his head and smiling in amusement: Tina Forster was definitely not what you would call an average woman. He then opened an inventory list on his computer and started checking what he still had in stock in terms of the spare parts and extra missiles that he would need for the KOSTROMA.

15:09 (Universal Time) / 18:09 (Nairobi Time)

Monday, February 14, 2321

Cockpit of interstellar shuttle ANDROMEDA

Flying over the Indian Ocean towards Kenya

“We are now some 500 kilometers from the African East Coast. Time to call the Nairobi Air Traffic Control Center and announce ourselves, Roger.” said Valentina Suvarova after a quick look at her navigation display screen.

“On it!” replied the copilot of the ANDROMEDA, 24-years-old Roger Cummings, before activating his radio microphone. “Nairobi Air Traffic Control, this is New Haven Shuttle ANDROMEDA, on approach from the East to Kenyan airspace, over.”

“This is Nairobi Control. Go ahead, ANDROMEDA.”

“From ANDROMEDA: we are heading for the Todonyang Refugee Camp, near your Northwest border, to pick up passengers. Request permission to enter your airspace, over.”

“Permission granted, ANDROMEDA. Be advised that the border regions around the Congo Republic and its neighboring states are presently deemed unsafe because of the present state of civil war inside the African Union. Please exercise caution.”

“Will do, Nairobi Control! Thank you for the warning. ANDROMEDA out!”

Roger then exchanged a frustrated look with Valentina.

“Still more wars and violence, as if Africa needed more of those.”

“Well, our job today is to come pick up some of the ones who lost everything to those wars, to bring them to a place where they will be able to have decent lives at last.” The two of them then fell mostly silent, concentrating on their descent from orbit and on following their authorized flight plan.

Some nine minutes later, having entered Kenyan airspace at subsonic speed and being only a few minutes away from landing at the Todonyang Refugee Camp, Roger noticed something on the display screen of their search radar.

"Hey, I have eight fast contacts heading approximately our way while flying within Ethiopian airspace. These can't be commercial aircraft."

"You're right!" said Valentina after a glance at their radar screen. "Signal them to Nairobi Control and ask what is the story about those."

Roger Cummings nodded once and activated his microphone again, not liking those unknown contacts.

"Nairobi Control, this is New Haven shuttle Andromeda. We are picking on our radar eight fast contacts approaching your Northwest border. They don't radiate radar identification signals. Do you know their identity, over?"

"Uh, one moment, please. I will contact our Kenyan Air Force liaison officer. Standby!"

"I don't like this one bit, Valentina. Maybe we should slow down and wait for the word from Nairobi Control before continuing on."

"I agree! I'm reducing speed to 600 kilometers per hour."

Only a few seconds after doing that, the Nairobi air control operator came back on the air, her voice now tainted with urgency.

"ANDROMEDA, from Nairobi Control: abort your approach to Todonyang and turn around at high speed. Those fast contacts are possibly Somali rebel strike craft heading towards the Congo. Our Air Force is scrambling interceptors right now. Acknowledge, over!"

"ANDROMEDA, we acknowledge and are turning away, out!"

Valentina took action before Roger could respond to the Nairobi air controller and brutally turned around her shuttle, to then accelerate at the rate of 21 Gs eastward. The ANDROMEDA was one of the new models of shuttles using Drazt technologies, which were now the standard ones aboard the KOSTROMA and in the New Haven commercial fleet. She then heard Roger swear to himself.

"Shit! Four of those contacts actually veered off course, apparently to try intercepting us. A pair of interceptors from Nairobi are now speeding towards those four contacts."

"I hope that the Todonyang Refugee Camp will not suffer some damage in that coming air-to-air exchange."

"I hope so too. Maybe we should alert the KOSTROMA about this: it is still in Earth orbit."

"A good idea: do that, Roger!"

Some forty seconds later, after the KOSTROMA had been alerted by Roger, Valentina saw on her radar screen two of the presumed Somali contacts disappear from the display, with the remaining six then turning back towards the Northeast.

“Yeah! The Kenyan interceptors shot down two of those attack craft and the rest is turning away. Maybe we will still be able to go pick up our planned passengers for New Haven this afternoon.”

Valentina’s hope was realized some two minutes later, as she was performing large, slow circles over the Indian Ocean off the Kenyan coast.

“Shuttle ANDROMEDA, this is Nairobi Control. Our Northwest border region has just been declared secured by our air force. You may resume your trip to the Todonyang camp, over.”

“That is great news, Nairobi Control. Pass our thanks and congratulations to your air force pilots for a job well done. ANDROMEDA out!”

Valentina made a bitter smirk as she turned her shuttle towards the West and accelerated.

“Something tells me that Tina won’t like this incident one bit.”

That prediction later turned out to be a monumental understatement.

10:08 (Paris Time)

Friday, February 25, 2321

Ministerial conference room, palace of the Élysée

Paris, France, Northern Alliance

“...and our two extra patrol ships should join the blockade line off the North African coast tomorrow. More ships are...”

The French foreign minister, hosting with his president, Roland Genest, this meeting of the Northern Alliance, was suddenly interrupted when a presidential aide quickly entered the conference room and went to President Genest to whisper something in his ear. Genest straightened up at once in his chair, surprise on his face.

“A delegation from the Spacers League is here?” he asked his aide, who nodded his head.

“Yes, Mister President! It is led by Governor Robeson and demands to speak at once at this conference.”

"She demands? This is most undiplomatic! Tell Governor Robeson that we will meet with her delegation once we break out for lunch."

"Yes, Mister President!" said the aide before leaving the room at a quick pace. Foreign Minister Lemire however did not have time to resume his interrupted sentence before the main entrance doors of the room were pushed open, letting in a large group of at least a dozen men and women which marched in resolutely despite the protestations of Genest's aide. Genest recognized at once Governor Janet Robeson, who was leading the group.

"Governor Robeson, I find this intrusion in an official meeting of the Northern Alliance to be most undiplomatic." said Genest in an indignant tone while shooting up from his chair. Janet Robeson gave him in return an icy stare.

"That's because I don't intend to be diplomatic in the least bit in what I want to tell you and the other leaders of your Northern Alliance, President Genest. Your repeated refusals to answer properly my messages and receive my envoys gave me no choice but to come in person to forcefully speak to you."

As Robeson stopped near the conference table, Genest then realized with a shock that part of her entourage was composed of the chairman of the ASEAN³, Pham Min Wa, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Nomura, Chinese Premier Wei Jin Tao and Korean Prime Minister Kim Keon Nam. The German chancellor, Karl Beck, was next to get up from his chair, clearly pissed.

"What are you trying to accomplish with such a political stunt, Governor Robeson?"

"Pound some common sense and decency into your collective heads, Chancellor Beck, that's what!" replied Janet Robeson, not backing down one bit. "I have been trying to tell you for more than two months that your policies towards Africa were both cowardly and ineffective, but you refused to listen to me and to other state leaders on that subject. So, I decided that I and the Spacers League, along with a few Earth allies, needed to take care properly of the civil war presently ravaging the African continent. You better sit down now, Chancellor Beck, because it's going to get rough."

The German politician reluctantly obeyed, following which Janet eyed in turn the men and women sitting around the table.

³ ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

“The countries of Europe alone have a total GDP equal to over nine times the GDP of the whole African continent. Yet, you have refused to support or help in any way the progressive leaders who put an end to the corrupt and despotic rule of President Makambo. Instead, you unilaterally cut a substantial part of the budget we had previously mutually agreed on and which was destined to support our joint space program, then used that money to blockade the coasts of Africa and turn away any would-be immigrants trying to flee the civil war there. Because of your political cowardice and selfishness, the progressive forces of General Lumumba are now on the verge of defeat, with General Seko within grasp of seizing power in Africa and resurrecting the dreaded and despised Southern Federation. Also because of your selfishness, tens of thousands of innocent people who could have found a safe refuge in Europe died needlessly, either drowning at sea or getting killed after having to return to countries ravaged by war and ethnic strife. In that, you repeated the same kind of head-in-the-sand policies that you followed in 2315, when you refused to preempt attacks by the forces of President Zembelo and Marshall Khan, using the pretext that you didn't want to provoke them. Then, when the Southern Federation forces attacked Europe and North America, your prior refusal to switch enough money from your every-day living to the reinforcing of your military capabilities resulted in your countries being invaded in record time and then being looted by Khan's thugs. What did you do then? You screamed to the Spacers League for help. Well, we did help you then. Our ships pounded Khan's forces from the air and destroyed their bases and combat vehicles. We lost good people in retaking Mars from Zembelo and lost more people when helping on the ground and in the air to chase Southern Federation soldiers from North America. Now, you refuse again to get involved directly in Africa in order to screen your precious Europe from that conflict, thus leaving the initiative to General Seko, while reneging on your accord with us concerning the defense of the Solar System against potential space threats. Well, enough with your selfish cowardice, ladies and gentlemen of the Northern Alliance. The Spacers League High Council has decided that it will not anymore support Europe, either militarily or commercially. Instead, we enlisted the help and support of more responsible countries, countries which had stayed neutral until now but have decided that the time for inaction was well passed. China, Japan, Indonesia and the whole of Southeast Asia have now concluded a pact with the Spacers League, a pact in which we will unite our efforts and assets to help Africa out of its civil war.”

“And how are you planning to do that, Governor Robeson?” asked Chancellor Beck. “Your Spacers League has at most a few thousand ground combatants, while General Seko controls forces numbering over a million soldiers.”

It was the ASEAN chairman, Pham Min Wa, who answered Beck while looking severely at the German politician.

“The countries of the ASEAN, along with China, Indonesia and Japan, have agreed to form a multi-national peace enforcement force which will be sent very soon to Africa. That force will in turn help protect the borders of the countries in Africa which are still governed democratically by moderate and progressive governments, countries that have asked for our help. On its part, the Spacers League will provide both air support and air cover to our allied ground forces and will destroy the bases used by General Seko. The first African countries we will thus help to protect will be Kenya, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, which are presently the most threatened by the forces of General Seko. Kenya in particular will get our help on a high priority basis, as it is nearly surrounded by hostile countries allied with Seko and is acting as a shelter for hundreds of thousands of African refugees, refugees whom Europe has refused to help up to now. We are ready to do that because we have understood that the fate of this whole planet is our collective responsibility and that we needed to act if we didn’t want to see more wars and misery in the years to come.”

Before some leaders of the Northern Alliance could raise more objections, Janet Robeson spoke right after Pham Min Wa.

“We came to tell you about our decisions, not to seek your advice or opinions, ladies and gentlemen. You chose to ignore our advice and counsels and to unilaterally cut our mutual space defense program so that you could isolate Europe from the conflict in Africa as if that conflict did not concern you one bit. Well, since you chose to ignore the Spacers League, we have chosen to ignore you from now on and to rely instead on more dependable and responsible partners on Earth. Consider all of the industrial contracts we signed between us, particularly concerning space ships and installations, as now null and void. The Spacers League will instead transfer those contracts to countries in Asia that are now allied with us.”

“But this represents a minimum of 700 billion credits in annual business!” objected the French foreign minister, horrified.

“That is correct, Mister Lemire. Don’t even bother going to some ‘international’ court to attempt to rule those contract cancellations as illegal: we will simply ignore whatever that court will say.”

Janet then looked severely around the table, raising a bit more her voice to mark the seriousness of her words.

“Understand this, ladies and gentlemen, and understand it well: the days of Europe acting like the center of the Universe are over. Humanity has started to expand among the stars and to populate other star systems. The Spacers League will lead and control that expansion in the name of Humanity as a whole, not you or any other particular group of nations or political entities on Earth. Yes, you will be free to do commerce and practice tourism with those new worlds, but you will have to abide by our rules while off Earth. We in the Spacers League respect and cherish everybody on an equal footing, irrespective of race, gender, sexual preferences or ethnicity. We will thus expect the same from your citizens visiting Spacers worlds. That is all that we wanted to say here. Goodbye, ladies and gentlemen!”

The whole Spacer and Asian delegation then turned around as one and walked out of the conference room, leaving behind European leaders who were now either shocked, furious or both.

11:04 (Nairobi Time)

Tuesday, March 01, 2321

Lokichokio, northwestern border area of Kenya

Eastern Africa

Jean Vermeuil had to jostle a bit to gain a front-rank position in the large group of reporters and war correspondents forming in front of a Kenyan Army major and of a female Asian officer standing next to the Kenyan, who had announced a news conference. In the background, visible in the field of view of the camera fixed to Jean’s helmet, three large space shuttles bearing Spacers League’s markings were unloading through their rear cargo ramp an impressive number of military vehicles of all sorts, along with long columns of troops. A substantial military camp was now nearly completed next to the small Kenyan border town of Lokichokio, itself near the borders with Uganda and Sudan. In the distance, to the East, the gleaming waters of Lake Turkana were visible. Also visible to the East was the Todonyang Refugee Camp,

besides which another Spacers League shuttle had landed. The noise of distant firing could be heard from the Northwest, where Jean knew that Kenyan Army units had been fighting with some Sudanese soldiers who were trying to infiltrate the border into Kenya. The Kenyan officer then raised both of his arms to call for silence.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IF YOU WILL PLEASE MAKE SILENCE, WE WILL START THIS NEWS CONFERENCE... THANK YOU! I am Major Jomo Kisiitu and I am the public relations officer of the Kenyan Army for this border region. Next to me is Captain Ngo Ngoc Mai, the public relations officer of the Vietnamese unit presently arriving in Lokichokio.”

The reporters, most wearing helmet-mounted cameras like Jean Vermeuil, fixed for a moment on the petite but young and very pretty Asian woman next to Kisiitu, then returned on the latter when he resumed speaking.

“What you are seeing this morning is the arrival of a full regiment of infantry of the Vietnamese Army, which is part of the ASEAN contingent that will help the Kenyan Army defend its borders against African rebel infiltrators and saboteurs sent by General Seko in his push to reclaim the whole of the African continent. As you can well see, the Spacers League is also helping in our defense of Kenya and of other democratic countries in Africa, notably by providing air transportation for ASEAN units and by providing air cover to our units. Together, we are confident that we will be able to block and push back the forces of General Seko, who unfortunately have been able to take control of Kinshasa two days ago, forcing the last units loyal to General Lumumba to flee towards the Gabon. However, we and the Spacers League are determined to defeat General Seko and stop Africa from falling into his dictatorial grasp. Me and Captain Ngo will now take your questions.”

A British reporter then managed to ask the first question, out-shouting his colleagues nearby.

“HAVE ANY OF GENERAL SEKO’S UNIT BEEN ABLE TO PENETRATE INTO KENYAN TERRITORY TO DATE, MAJOR?”

“No! The guerrilla units he sent from the Sudan were intercepted at the border and engaged by Kenyan soldiers. The ASEAN troops now arriving in Lokichokio are due to go reinforce our border defenses along the borders with the Sudan and Northern Uganda, while more ASEAN units are being positioned next to our northern borders with Ethiopia and Somalia.”

Jean Vermeuil was able to ask the second question of the conference while looking at the female Vietnamese officer.

“CAPTAIN NGO, EXACTLY WHICH VIETNAMESE UNIT IS NOW ARRIVING HERE, IN LOKICHOKIO?”

“The unit you see coming out of those Spacers League transports is the 131st Vietnamese Infantry Regiment. It is well experienced in jungle fighting and is also a battle-proven unit, formed of tough and well-armed soldiers. You will excuse me if I don't get into more details than this, but we do not wish to advertise our full deployments and plans to General Seko, who is known to have spies implanted inside Kenya.”

“THAT SPACE SHUTTLE WE SEE IN THE DISTANCE, NEXT TO THE TODONYANG REFUGEE CAMP, IS IT LANDING TROOPS THERE AS WELL?”

“No! It is busy taking in a contingent of refugees, who will then be traveling to the world of New Haven, in the Wolf 1061 System, some 13.8 light-years from Earth. As you may know already, refugees from that camp and other refugee camps around the planet have been emigrating for months now to New Haven, where they are offered new, safer and happier lives.”

“BUT, ISN'T NEW HAVEN A PRIVATE CORPORATIVE WORLD? WHAT ASSURES THOSE REFUGEES THAT THEY WON'T END UP BEING EXPLOITED LIKE SLAVES THERE?”

Major Kisiitu, along with Captain Ngo and a number of reporters present, gave a dark look at the Indian reporter who had asked that question. India was still a member country of the Southern Federation, which not-too-covertly supported General Seko.

“Mister, your question is not even worth answering. Fleet Captain Tina Forster, who owns and runs New Haven, is widely acknowledged as a compassionate woman and a confirmed humanist. Please remember that you and other reporters from member countries of the Southern Federation have been allowed to enter Kenya as part of our belief in freedom of the press, so don't abuse our benevolence by trying to push innuendos and propaganda, mister.”

A Canadian reporter then none-too-gently pushed his way to the front rank, blocking at the same time the view of the Indian reporter. The latter, seeing the hostile looks thrown at him, did not dare protest then and backed away to do a solo piece some distance from the group, filming the troops and equipment coming out of the shuttles. In reality, the man was an agent of the Indian Secret Services, sent to Kenya to gather information on the ASEAN and Spacers League's units operating in the country.

The Indian agent was still filming the shuttles and the Vietnamese troops when one of the reporters, an Italian, pointed at something in the sky and shouted out loud.

“HEY, WHAT’S THAT, APPROACHING IN THE SKY?”

All the cameras of the group of reporters then pivoted up and towards the Southeast, pointing at a growing silhouette in the sky. Exclamations followed at the silhouette quickly grew in size, to become a gigantic tower-like ship flying with its longitudinal axis up at the vertical. It kept growing to nearly impossible proportions until it passed overhead Lokichokio at an altitude of 2,000 meters, filling the sky with its mass. It then continued on towards the North at supersonic speed, creating a mighty roar from the masses of air it was pushing ahead of it.

“MY GOD! WHAT WAS THAT?” asked a Spanish reporter to nobody in particular. Major Tisiitu took on him to answer the Spaniard.

“THAT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WAS THE MIGHTY KOSTROMA, CAPTAIN’S FORSTER’S SHIP, ON ITS WAY TO HAMMER GENERAL SEKO’S FORCES AND ALLIES. AS YOU MAY REMEMBER, CAPTAIN FORSTER AND HER KOSTROMA WERE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIGHTING AGAINST THE ZEMBELO REGIME IN 2315 AND HELPED LIBERATE EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA FROM MARSHALL KHAN’S THUGS. THE KOSTROMA IS PART OF THE FORCES SENT BY THE SPACERS LEAGUE TO SUPPORT THE ALLIED FORCES AGAINST GENERAL SEKO.”

The reporters present, still following the KOSTROMA with their cameras, then started speaking frantically in their microphones, describing the scene to their respective viewers. The Indian reporter/secret agent was about to do the same when two Kenyan soldiers approached him, with one soldier covering his camera lens with one hand.

“Stop filming now and cut your radio link immediately, mister, then follow us. We have questions for you.”

“But, I am an accredited reporter. You can’t do that!”

“Yes, we can! Martial law has been proclaimed in Kenya because of this war and you are subject to it, like everybody in Kenya. Now, stop resisting, or we will be obliged to become rough.”

11:19 (Nairobi Time)

Presidential palace, Khartoum

Sudan, African Union

“Please hurry, Mister President: the KOSTROMA is about to arrive over Khartoum.”

“And what are air defense units doing about that?” replied angrily President Abubaker Saleh while continuing to walk towards the elevator that would bring him and his closest staff members down to the underground bunker situated under his presidential palace. His military aide, a colonel, did his best to impress on Saleh the gravity of the situation.

“The interceptors that we sent to block the KOSTROMA’s path were all destroyed in seconds, Mister President. Our air defense missile batteries around Khartoum have however started to engage the KOSTROMA. In the meantime, you need to get to your command bunker as quickly as possible.”

Saleh grumbled at that but knew that his aide was right. The KOSTROMA, however much he hated it, was a very deadly ship which had eliminated a number of top African Union and Southern Federation leaders in the 2315 War. Its fearsome firepower was thus not to be dismissed lightly.

The group of Sudanese officials was about to get to the bank of elevators of the palace when the light coming from a nearby window suddenly turned to semi-darkness. Alarmed by that, one of Saleh’s bodyguards went to the window and looked up through it. What he saw made him shout aloud in near panic.

“THE KOSTROMA! IT IS HOVERING ABOVE THE PALACE!”

“Quick, Mister President, get into the elevator!” said at once the colonel. Saleh did as he was told but, before the doors of his cabin could even start closing, a strange blue light from the outside suddenly entered through the window. Saleh and his entourage only had a fraction of a second to feel indescribable pain before they were vaporized by the crossfire from twenty medium disintegrator cannons. That crossfire persisted for a few seconds, until the whole palace and its underground installations were gone, replaced by a huge, deep crater covering nearly the whole surface of the palace grounds. The Sudanese air defense batteries fired dozens of missiles and thousands of cannon rounds at the flying behemoth obscuring the sky above the palace grounds, but saw their projectiles explode harmlessly against some kind of invisible wall between the KOSTROMA and the ground. Once there was nothing left of the palace,

the disintegrator cannon fire from the ship then switched to the air defense batteries, with their hapless servants being vaporized within seconds, along with their weapons and radar antennas. Holding its position some 5,000 meters above downtown Khartoum, the KOSTROMA methodically continued to target the various military facilities in and around the capital city of Sudan, destroying airfields, military barracks and arsenals in minutes. Then, after some fourteen minutes of firing, the KOSTROMA jumped up and climbed out of sight as quickly as it had come, leaving the Sudanese military leaderless and with its command and control network in chaos. That was however only the first phase of the offensive plan devised by Tina Forster to, as she liked to say, 'cut the head of the serpent'. General Seko and his command staff were next on the list and were similarly vaporized by disintegrator fire a mere forty minutes later, Seko's field headquarters having been located via radio triangulation by the electronic warfare systems of the KOSTROMA.

With most of the politicians and military leaders who were supporting Seko killed in the coming few days by airstrikes from the KOSTROMA and its embarked MAMBA-Class space fighters, which were similarly protected by Drazt force shield generators, the African rebel forces quickly lost steam and halted their advance across Africa. With their command and logistical networks in shambles, the rebel forces soon were left with no choice but to dig in or withdraw, giving a chance to the forces of the various democratic countries left in Africa to regroup and reorganize. The Spacers League then further helped those democratic forces by providing them with new stocks of portable weapons and ammunition. Quite a few reporters and geopolitical analysts wondered aloud about where all these rifles, machine guns and automatic cannons were coming from, the ground forces of the Spacers League supposedly counting only a few thousand troopers and holding only limited reserve stocks of small arms. What they didn't know and what the Spacers League was very careful to hide was the fact that its ground forces had by now largely reequipped its soldiers and security personnel with disintegrator weapons and force shield-protected individual armor sets, craft and vehicles. Two weeks after their arrival in Africa, the units from the ASEAN, China, Japan and Indonesia went on the move and linked up with African democratic forces in a general push to eliminate the remnants of Seko's forces. Still, the fighting went on for weeks and months, with some of Seko's followers turning to guerrilla warfare against African democratic units. However, the bulk of the ordinary African citizens, tired of war,

refused to help those guerrillas and systematically signaled their locations to the now advancing democratic forces. By the arrival of the Summer of 2321, General Lumumba was back in power in Kinshasa, with Seko's regime reduced to a bad souvenir.

CHAPTER 9 – NEW FRIENDS

10:03 (Universal Time)

Saturday, September 10, 2321

Krazts family cave, Grand Island, New Shouria (Wolf 1061c)

Second planet of the Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth

“I AM GOING OUT ON A HUNT, MOTHER.”

“ALRIGHT, BUT BE CAREFUL: KEEP YOUR DISTANCES FROM THOSE BIPEDAL CREATURES.”

“DON’T WORRY, MOTHER: THOSE BIPEDALS HAVE NOT SHOWN THEMSELVES TO BE HOSTILE TOWARDS US TO DATE.”

“STILL, BE CAREFUL, RIAK.”

Young Riak, the sole female offspring of her parents, then walked out of the family cave, using her two powerful hind legs while keeping her wings folded in order not to scrape them against the rock surface of the short tunnel leading to a sort of balcony naturally formed on one side of the forested hill containing the cave. Once fully out, Riak deployed her feathery wings to their full eight-meter span and took off from the balcony. Riak was still fairly young for a Krazts, being what a Human would consider a young teenager, and was noticeably smaller than a fully grown Krazts, who had a typical wing span of eleven to thirteen meters and a length of seven to nine meters from their toothed beak to their feathered tail. The Krazts were the prime predators on Wolf 1061c but, more importantly, were also the only local intelligent species, with an average I.Q. of 80. That level of intelligence allowed the Krazts to make and use stone tools, light fires, speak among themselves and even have a writing system, all things that helped them dominate the fauna of the planet. That was until the arrival of strange bipedal creatures who had come from the sky and then started building large floating structures along the coastline of the big island claimed as Riak’s family’s hunting territory. The first and sole direct encounter of her family with those bipedal creatures some time ago had nearly ended in tragedy but, thankfully, one of those bipedal creatures who had been about to be eaten had shown herself to be an intelligent being with sensitivity and comprehension, something that had prevented a massacre inside the family cave. Since

then, Riak and her two brothers had followed the wise directive from their mother, Koory: 'Bipedal creatures are off the menu from now on'. So, Riak was firmly decided to limit her hunt to the various fish roaming the ocean around the island and to the herds of herbivorous mammals roaming the plains and forests around the family cave.

Deciding at first to try her luck at fishing, Riak flew eastward from her family cave, heading towards the waters of the wide passage between the island and the nearby continent visible on the horizon. Those waters were normally full of fish of all kinds and sizes ready to be grabbed when they breached the surface and became vulnerable. Strangely enough, the new bipedal neighbors of her family, while having built huge floating structures, had not yet been seen by Riak to even attempt to catch fish in those rich waters. Maybe they didn't like fish, or maybe the taste of the local fish was not to their liking? In truth, Riak and her family knew next to nothing about the newcomers, having cautiously kept their distance from them after that first, near fatal encounter. Flying in large circles once well over the ocean, Riak started looking down for some fish ready to be caught in the sharp claws of her hind legs. Her upper legs, which also acted as arms when she walked at the vertical, had sharp claws as well, doubling her lethality and efficiency as a hunter and fisher. She had made three such circles before she saw a fish swimming just under the surface. Her two keen eyes fixed on her prey, Riak dove straight at the fish and, right after cutting that dive, managed to grab her prey in her claws. Flying back to medium altitude, Riak saw that the fish was too small to be worth bringing it back to the family cave, so she decided to devour it herself while flying. That took her only a few minutes, but the fish was enough to fill her stomach and give her more energy to continue her fishing.

Riak had just let go the remains of the fish she had just eaten when a movement to her left caught her eyes. Looking in that direction, she saw one of the flying boxes used by the bipedal creatures as it came down from high altitude, heading towards her family's island and the floating cities moored along its coasts. As Riak had grown accustomed to, that flying box proved impossibly fast, despite its complete lack of wings. She wondered for a moment how that was possible but finally shrugged it off and concentrated back on her fishing. As for the flying box, it either didn't see her or, more probably, simply ignored her and continued its descent.

10:34 (Universal Time)**Koorivar interstellar shuttle SHEMAK**

Eight-year-old Terry Anderson was avidly looking out of his window when he shouted in excitement and pointed at something in the sky.

“DAD, I SEE A FLYING DRAGON!”

His father, Jake Anderson, bent down to look outside and effectively saw what looked like a very large bird covered with a colorful livery of red and yellow feathers. It had a long neck supporting a head with an impressive beak and also had a long flexible tail ending in a large feathery fan that seemed to act like a plane’s rudder. The creature was however quite far away, looking like a small bird due to the distance, and was flying in large circles at low altitude over the sea.

“Aaah, that must be a Krazts, the species of giant, intelligent birds known to live on New Shouria. It looks like it is fishing. It certainly looks like a magnificent creature, with its red and yellow feathers. This is a chance for you to take a picture of it, Son.”

“I sure will, Dad!” replied the preteen boy, who then filmed for a few second the Krazts until it was out of sight. On his part, Jake was happy for his son to have been able to spot it. As a space miner working and living in the Main Asteroid Belt of the Solar System, he and his little family had been dying for a long time for such a vacation on a habitable planet, so that they could change their minds from having to live in a space city located under the surface of Pallas, a large and irregularly shaped asteroid that was the center of one of the biggest space mining networks in the Solar System. The view he and his family now had of the large oceans and forested lands of New Shouria convinced Jake that he had made the right choice by booking a one-week vacation at the recently opened New Shouria Resort Center, run by the Koorivars. The heavy, 1.3 G gravity of New Shouria had at first made him hesitate between it and the equally new resort center on the nearby moon of New Haven, which enjoyed a 0.78 G local gravity, but the fact that the New Shouria Resort Center had artificial gravity decks set to normal Earth gravity, along with the more diverse fauna and flora than the one found on New Haven, had decided Jake into booking a safari tour vacation on New Shouria. Judging from the full cabin of the shuttle, plenty of Spacers hungry for open air and beaches had done the same, something quite understandable when you had lived your entire life in enclosed space cities, save for infrequent vacations on a still overpopulated and polluted Earth.

A few minutes later, their shuttle landed in the middle of a large, floating landing pad anchored just off a luxuriant coast. The landing pad, like three other similar landing pads big enough to accommodate a full-sized starship, was in turn linked by anchored floating bridges to a large floating city on one side and a smaller but still substantial floating complex on the opposite side. When the Anderson family came out of the shuttle, along with the other passengers, they effectively felt only a normal Earth gravity as a guide directed them to a waiting group of buses. The 120 or so passengers quickly filled the three big vehicles, while their unaccompanied luggage were taken out of the shuttle and were then loaded on an air truck. Jake's wife, Janet, rested her head on his left shoulder after they sat down inside one of the buses, looking out with contentment at the ocean and land scenery.

"Oh, Jake, it is so nice to see real nature for a change. This place looks beautiful, apart from being pristine, with zero pollution in evidence."

"It sure does, honey. The tourism agency did not lie about this place. Considering the reasonable cost of booking this tour, I think that we should take more frequent vacations on such new worlds."

"A great idea, Jake. I understand that we had the choice between this and three other habitable new worlds and that more may become available for tourism in the coming months and years, right?"

"Correct, Janet!" replied Jake before consulting his pocket data pad. "Apart from New Shouria, we had the choice between resort centers or cruise ships on New Haven, the first moon of this planet; on Hyanesu, in the Gliese 581 System; and on Oceana, also in the Gliese 581 System. The latest information is that at least three more habitable systems with moderate to warm climates have been selected for colonization and resort building: Vinland, in the Gliese 832 System; Borealis, in the Trappist-1 System and New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System. A fourth place, Icelandia in the Trappist-1 System is also mentioned but, due to its sub-zero average temperatures, will be a Winter sports center on top of having cities."

"Isn't the Gliese 581 System the one that contains the home planet of a hostile and aggressive alien race?"

Jake had to search through his data pad for a few seconds before he answered her.

"You are correct, Janet. The third planet of the system, Gliese 581c, is home to the Vorlaks, a cruel and dangerous race. However, that planet has been put under firm

quarantine by the Spacers League and is closely watched by both armed satellites and warships. The Vorlaks have already earned themselves a series of nuclear strikes which took out their space capabilities and many of their governing complexes. Still, I would tend to agree with you that maybe we should avoid that system altogether. Right now, though, let's enjoy our family time on this planet."

Their bus, driven by a Koorivar, then started rolling, taking one of the floating bridges towards the smaller complex. The latter was still a very substantial structure, as the Andersons could see when their bus stopped in front of the main entrance. It covered a good two hectares of floating platform surface and its twelve-story-high main tower rose more than forty meters above the anchored floating platform supporting it. The resort staff which greeted the fresh batch of tourists was mostly made of Koorivars, a reminder to the Andersons that this planet was now the new official home of the Koorivars. The resort manager, a mature Koorivar, greeted the group in the main entrance lobby, near the reception desks, once the tourists had recuperated all their luggage.

"Good morning to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the New Shouria Resort Center. My name is Shirak and I am the general manager of this complex. For your general information, this complex, like the other installations built on this planet, uses Earth's Universal Time as well as Earth's standard calendar as date and time references, so you won't need to synchronize your wrist videophones during your stay. The reason for using Earth time is simple: this planet completes an orbit around its red dwarf star in only a bit less than eighteen days. It is also tidally locked to its sun, which means that it always presents the same face to Wolf 1061. It will thus be daylight all the time at this complex. However, I am sure that this point will not bother you after living most of your lives in underground space cities and facilities."

A concert of approving comments met that declaration by Shirak, who then pointed at the long reception counter and at the bank of elevator doors visible behind him.

"Once I am finished speaking, you will be free to go to the reception desk to my right, to register your arrival and obtain your access cards and service bracelets before going up to your rooms to drop off your suitcases and relax a bit before lunch. If you were wondering about possibly being disoriented by looking around this lobby, don't worry: if you see the elevator cabin doors move slowly, that's because the whole main tower structure of this resort is rotating constantly on its central vertical axis, doing one complete revolution every hour. Because of that feature of our resort complex, you will be able to enjoy from your rooms a panoramic view of the ocean and of its coastline."

"Now, that is a nice feature!" said softly Janet to Jake while holding the hand of Lisa, their small four-year-old daughter. Jake could only nod approvingly to that as Shirak continued speaking.

"After making yourselves at home in your respective rooms, you will be welcome to come back down to this level to go have lunch at our buffet restaurant, the 'Sunshine Buffet'. Following lunch, you will be able to start your vacation with a guided safari tour around the nearby plains and forests. Don't worry about the 1.3 G local gravity during that tour: we will provide you all with gravity compensation harnesses. The safari tour will depart the resort's main entrance at one o'clock."

Enthusiastic exclamations and comments greeted those last words by Shirak, who then invited his guests to proceed to the reception counter.

At 12:42, after having dropped their luggage in a large, nice suite on the ninth floor of the resort's tower and going back down for a copious lunch, the Andersons showed up in the main entrance lobby, where staff employees provided them with gravity compensation harnesses of the adequate size, including baby harnesses for the few infants present. Then, at precisely one o'clock, the excited tourists boarded a small caravan of all-terrain vehicles, anti-gravity passenger carriers which could fly as well as roll on the ground, with one Koorivar guide per vehicle. Jake Anderson, who boarded the lead vehicle with his family, couldn't help ask a question to their guide on seeing a Human man carrying a holstered pistol board their carrier.

"Uh, Mister Korvan, why is this man armed with a pistol?"

The Koorivar smiled benevolently at that question and answered him in a reassuring tone.

"Mister Mark Donovan is the armed escort for this safari tour, sir. We will be getting quite close to numerous local animals that are still not familiar with our presence on this planet. The tour is actually very low risk, but Mister Donovan will be with us simply as a precaution against any unexpected incident."

Jake nodded his head at that, approving that measure, which was a good, common sense one in his mind, especially now that he was with his two young children and his wife. The only doubt he was left with was about the weapon carried by the said Donovan: a simple pistol didn't sound much of a weapon in his opinion when possibly facing a charging wild beast. He however kept that thought to himself and sat back in

his comfortable seat next to his wife, with Terry and Lisa sitting in the two seats across the centerline aisle from his seat.

After rolling some 200 meters down a large pier linking the floating resort complex to the coastline, the caravan of five all-terrain carriers drove down a trail cut through a thick forest, going slowly to allow the passengers to admire the luxuriant alien flora, which included trees with purple and red-colored leaves and pink flowers and bushes. Janet Anderson opened her mouth with admiration as she looked around at all that alien but beautiful nature.

“Look at all those colors! This is magnificent!”

After rolling through the forest for maybe 600 meters, the convoy emerged out of the tree line and onto a wide grassy plain dotted with small clusters of large trees. The sight of the various animal herds grazing and roaming that plain made both Terry and Lisa shout with excitement.

“LOOK, DAD! BUFFALOS! I CAN ALSO SEE SOME KIND OF ANTELOPES!”

Consulting his data pad, Jake gently corrected his eight-year-old son.

“Those ‘buffalos’ are called ‘Musks’, while those antelopes are more properly called ‘Tars’. However, I will give you that they look quite similar to their Earth equivalents. Mind you, those musks look both big and powerful. Hopefully, they won’t have a temperament as mean as that of African Cape Buffalos.”

Janet, who had visited South Africa a few times in the past, nodded her head at that.

“Yeah, those ones can be mean enough, even when faced with lions.”

“Do they have lions here, Mom?” asked Terry, prompting Jake to again consult his data pad.

“Nope! The only predators known around this planet are a sort of six-legged wolf called ‘Berdash’ and the giant dragons that we saw from our shuttle and that are called ‘Krazts’. The rest of the fauna is described as being mostly herbivorous.”

“Ooooh, I hope that we will be able soon to get out of our vehicles, so that we could approach some of those alien animals.” wished out loud the excited Terry.

The boy’s wish came true some ten minutes later, when the caravan of vehicles rolled to a stop next the wood line and let out its passengers near a large herd of grazing animals which looked like small pink goats. Those goats, apparently unphased by these newcomers, only gave them a passing look before returning to their grazing. Korvan,

the guide in charge of the tour, assembled the 142 tourists near the vehicles before they could approach the goats.

“What you see now are called ‘Gendus’. They are strictly herbivorous and are very sociable animals. You will soon be able to approach them and even touch them, but I will urge you not to try to pick them up, especially the young Gendus: that could trigger a defensive reflex from their mothers.”

“Uh, can I ask who named all these animals we saw to date?” asked a man who was a bit overweight and had a camera with telephoto lens hanging by a strap from his neck. “Those names sound rather alien.”

Korvan smiled and nodded his head at the question.

“True, but that’s because they are alien names: they are the names under which they are designated by the sole intelligent species on this planet: the Krazts, the giant, feathered birds of prey that you may have spotted up to now.”

“How intelligent are those, uh, Krazts?” asked another tourist.

“Intelligent enough to make stone tools, light fires, have a verbal language and even have a writing system of their own. They are carnivorous predators by nature and hunt fish and herbivores for food and can be both dangerous and deadly. However, they are also social beings who form small family groups, which in turn occupy distinct hunting territories that they fiercely defend against other intruding Krazts. When the first exploration team arrived on this planet a bit over a year ago, one of our people was grabbed and nearly killed by a Krazts who had decided that she was going to be his next lunch. Thankfully, our team was able to free her and arrived at a sort of understanding with the Krazts family that considers this island as its exclusive hunting grounds.”

“You sound like those Krazts are few and far between, no?”

“You’re right, sir: the Krazts population of New Shouria is quite limited and is widely dispersed all over the planet.”

“Their language and writing, can we understand it?” asked Janet Anderson after raising one hand high.

“Partially! Our exo-zoologists have been studying them covertly for months now, but we still have much to learn about the Krazts. If there are no more questions at this time, I will now let you approach those Gendus. Again, do not be brusque around them and do not try to pick one up. You may caress their mane gently but exercise a minimum of caution and respect their living space.”

That was enough to make young Terry be one of the first to walk to a Gendus and caress its back. After a first nervous twitch, the animal seemingly got quickly accustomed to the boy and resumed its long grass eating, to Terry's happiness.

Jake and Janet, on their part, approached another Gendus with little Lisa, protecting their daughter while allowing her to touch the animal. Lisa giggled as she caressed the pink fur of the quadruped, but the strong smell of the alien animal quickly made her wrinkle her nose.

"Pheww! It stinks, Mommy!"

"Earthly goats also stink, Lisa, so that's not really a surprise. It is however quite a quiet beast, I must say."

Jake was about to add to that when an alarm was shouted out loud by someone.

"EVERYBODY DOWN!"

Having zero military training or experience, Jake's first reflex was to look up instead of ducking. At the same time, a giant shadow passed over the ground as a huge bird covered with red, green and blue feathers overflowed the group of tourists, flying very low. What Jake saw next horrified him: the Krazts, as it had to be, closed its hind legs' claws around Terry, making him scream in both pain and terror, and started flying away with the boy. Seeing that their armed escort had his pistol out and pointed, Jake screamed at him, nearly hysterical.

"SHOOT! SHOOT IT!"

"I CAN'T! I RISK HITTING THE BOY!"

What happened next was truly stunning.

Flying in wide circles over the plain while looking for an appropriate prey that could provide supper for her family, Riak suddenly saw another Krazts, a fully-developed adult, fly in over the area, coming from the direction of the nearby continent. The sight of that other Krazts, instead of making her happy, lit anger and resentment in her: this was her family's hunting grounds and had belonged to her ancestors for generations. For another Krazts to intrude on it, especially to hunt, was tantamount to a declaration of war.

"What is that Klallat Clan asshole doing here?" she asked herself, identifying the intruder's family branch by the color livery particular to the Klallat Clan, which resided on the continent. She then saw the intruder swoop down, diving on a large group of bipedal

creatures standing among a herd of Gendus. Her anger was then replaced by a mix of horror and apprehension as the intruder grabbed one of the alien creatures in its hind claws and started flying away with his prey.

“NO! THAT ASSHOLE IS GOING TO ATTRACT RETALIATIONS AGAINST MY FAMILY!”

Forgetting about her severe size and strength handicap over the adult Klallat intruder, Riak then dove steeply on him while shouting a battle cry. The Klallat member, speeding away from the group of now screaming bipedal creatures, did not spot her until Riak violently rammed into him, her upper members' claws extended out. Taken by surprise and also hurting as Riak's forward claws gnawed into his head and neck, the Klallat let go young Terry Anderson, who then fell down on the ground from a height of about eight meters, the long grass of the plain luckily softened a bit his impact with the ground. Realizing that this was a fight to the death, the Klallat then retaliated with speed and brutality, beating back the much smaller Riak with his giant wings while biting her at the upper root of her body and right wing. Riak screamed in pain but then bit back her opponent, her toothed beak closing on the Klallat's long neck and drawing blood. Her opponent's answer to that was to jab her, using his beak like a swordsman would stab at an opponent with his blade. With the Klallat putting all his strength in that strike, his pointy beak actually punctured right through Riak's right wing. He then planted his hind claws into her belly and made her fall to the ground under his weight. Riak slammed down hard on the ground, her back on the grass while pinned down by her opponent. The Klallat then threw back his head, preparing to jab his beak into one of her eyes, while shouting in anger.

“NO RORIK ATTACKS ME LIKE THIS AND LIVES!”

Riak, immobilized and helpless, could only wait for the fatal blow to land on her and shouted a last, desperate cry for help. Just then, a loud crack that sounded like thunder resonated, while a sort of bolt of bright blue light struck the Klallat's head, literally vaporizing it. The body of her dead opponent then fell backward, freeing her from his grip. However, atrocious pain reverberated from her punctured right wing and she found herself unable to get up.

The moment that Terry was let go by the giant, dragon-like bird, Jake ran to him and knelt beside him, putting his arms protectively around his son.

“Are you alright, Terry?”

"I...I hurt, Dad." answered Terry in a halting voice, obviously suffering. Looking up quickly around him, Jake saw that the Krazts who had grabbed Terry was now engaged in a violent fight with the other, smaller Krazts. Next, he shouted at their tour guide.

"MY SON NEEDS A MEDIC, QUICKLY!"

Korvan immediately grabbed his pocket radio on hearing that and started speaking urgently in it. The group's armed escort, Mark Donovan, then carefully aimed his pistol and fired once. Jake, who had expected to hear the typical detonation of a firearm, was taken aback by the bright blue ray which cracked out of Donovan's pistol. The damage it did, vaporizing the dragon's head, surprised him even more. However, his sole priority now was his son.

"Can you get up, Son?"

"I...I think so. My right upper arm and left side are hurting like hell, though."

"Here, let me help you: we must get to the cover of those nearby trees as quickly as possible."

Helped gently by his father, Terry soon managed to get back on his feet. That was when he looked at the smaller Krazts lying on the ground some thirty meters away, moaning with pain.

"That dragon...it saved me from the bigger dragon."

"Forget about him for the moment, Terry: you need to have your wounds treated."

The boy nearly replied to that but let his father help him towards the parked vehicles and the trees, where a nearly hysterical Janet met them and frantically kissed her son.

"My God, Terry, I was so scared for you."

"I will be okay, Mom: I only have a few scratches and bruises. That smaller dragon saved me just in time."

Looking up at the downed Krazts lying in the grass, Janet saw Mark Donovan approach it slowly with his pistol pointed. Terry also saw that and immediately shouted at the guard.

"NO, DON'T HURT IT! IT HELPED ME!"

Donovan hesitated for a moment, then lowered his pistol, to Terry's relief. He next returned to the group of tourists to inspect the boy's wounds with practiced eyes and hands.

"Hum, a few lacerations and skin punctures, plus a few bruises, but only light bleeding. Let's disinfect and bandage those wounds while we wait for an ambulance."

After checking on Terry's condition and leaving him in the hands of Mark Donovan, Korvan cautiously approached the smaller Krazts, which was still lying in the grass and moaning in pain. As for the other Krazts, it was definitely dead, its whole head gone. For a moment, Korvan's eyes met those of the wounded Krazts and he saw only pain and distress in them. Taking a decision, he turned around and shouted at one of the Koorivar drivers of the safari tour.

"BRING ME A FIRST AID KIT, QUICKLY!"

Looking back at the Krazts, he then said one of the few Krazts words that the staff of the resort had to learn on arriving on the planet.

"Friend... Friend."

The Krazts seemingly understood him and nodded its head in a very human way, then laid it back on the grass, apparently weak and exhausted. As soon as the driver had brought him a first aid kit, Korvan slowly approached the wounded Krazts while repeating a number of times the Krazts word for 'friend'.

"Sarda... Sarda."

Walking cautiously around the left wing and head of Riak, the Koorivar knelt on the ground, next to where a large puncture wound in the right wing was bleeding, and opened his first aid kit. Watched by the now semi-conscious female juvenile Krazts, he sprayed some antiseptic over the wound, then started gently applying the largest bandage he had on it, while still speaking softly.

"Sarda... Sarda."

His gentleness and repeated claim of friendship apparently worked, as Riak did not attack him and simply watched him treat her, even though she was not sure what he was doing exactly. A delicate moment came when he found that he needed to lift Riak's right wing from the ground in order to disinfect and bandage the exit wound. Looking up at his group of tourists, he signaled and shouted to his tour vehicle drivers.

"I NEED HELP HERE!"

Three of the Koorivar drivers reacted to that and ran to him and Riak, but wisely slowed down to a slow walk once within a few paces of the wounded beast.

"How can we help you, Korvan?" asked the senior bus driver while watching Riak's toothed beak.

"I need to raise its right wing from the ground, so that I could bandage the exit wound in it. Go around me and, on my command, slowly and gently raise the wing by a few centimeters."

"Got it!"

Changing positions took only a few seconds but the Koorivars hesitated a bit before raising Riak's right wing, as the latter was now watching them while hissing softly. Working in unison and with about as much caution as if handling a venomous snake, the four Koorivars managed to finish bandaging Riak's wound in a few minutes. As they were laying back down the right wing, one driver looked at Korvan.

"It seems in pain. Shouldn't we give it some pain killers?"

"We can't! Unfortunately, we still know little about the local biology and what would be a pain killer for us could turn out to be a poison for this Krazts."

The air ambulance that Korvan had called for then landed next to the parked tour vehicles, with two medics, one Koorivar and one Human, coming out at once with a medical gurney. Watched by the anxious parents of the boy, the medics briefly examined Terry Anderson, then laid him on their gurney and carried him into their ambulance. Korvan saw the rest of the Anderson family go in the ambulance as well, electing to follow their kin to the hospital located in Khorramshahr, the newly built floating capital city of New Shouria situated within sight of their resort center. With that worry taken care of, Korvan then had two questions for himself: first, what to do now with the wounded Krazts; second, whether to continue this safari tour or discontinue it and return to the resort center. This present situation had no precedent to it and no protocols had yet been decided for such a case. Korvan then did what most people would do in his place: he kicked the problem upstairs. Grabbing his radio, he called the office of the manager of the resort center, getting an answer nearly immediately.

"Shouran speaking!"

"This is Korvan, calling from the main plain east of the resort."

"Aaah, good! Mister Donovan advised me by radio some minutes ago about this incident with a Krazts. Is the boy now on his way to the hospital?"

"Yes! The ambulance just left here with him and his parents. However, we have still a wounded Krazts here. I gave it first aid as best as I could but don't know what to do next."

"Is that the Krazts who attacked the Krazts that tried to carry away the boy?"

"That one exactly. It is visibly unable to fly by itself right now and looks both weak and in pain. What should I do now? Also, should we stop the safari tour now or continue?"

There were a few seconds of silence on the radio before Shouran answered him, sounding none too sure himself.

"Uh, concerning the safari tour, canvass your group of tourists to see if they want to continue or not. If there are any hesitations or doubts, cancel the tour and return to the resort with them. In that latter case, they will be reimbursed for that tour. As for the wounded Krazts, I frankly don't know. This concerns after all a case with a sentient alien being. I think that I will contact Governor Mirkin about this. I will call you as soon as I get his response to this."

"Very well, sir. We will stay with the wounded Krazts and wait for further instructions. Korvan, out!"

Pocketing back his radio, Korvan then looked at his drivers, who were still kneeling with him around the Krazts.

"I am going to see if our customers want to continue this tour. Stay with this Krazts for the moment and continue reassuring it."

Getting up and walking to the waiting tourists standing near the parked vehicles, Korvan signaled them to assemble in a semi-circle around him before starting to speak to them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am truly sorry for the incident that just happened. Know that the Krazts that attacked a member of our group was not from this island and was probably an intruder from the nearby continent."

"What about the smaller one, the one that attacked the bigger dragon and saved the boy?"

"It is actually a member of the Krazts family known to live on this island. Krazts are known to be very territorial and live in widely dispersed family groups or clans around the planet."

"Is it seriously hurt?" asked a middle-aged woman.

"It is presently unable to fly, but I treated its wound as best I could and it should recover with time. I asked my superiors for instructions about it and am waiting here until I get fresh directives. Now, in view of this incident, I am asking you now if you wish to continue with this safari tour or if you want to cut the tour now and return to the resort center?"

The crowd of tourists looked at each other with indecision at first, with family members discussing between themselves about what to do. Korvan waited patiently as they deliberated and discussed the situation. The majority of the group then decided to continue the tour, to which Korvan nodded his head.

“Very well, ladies and gentlemen. We will do so as soon as someone comes and takes charge of the wounded Krazts. To those who have doubts about continuing the tour, I am offering you to return you to the resort center in one of our buses. What do you say to that?”

The few people who were too afraid to continue the tour promptly accepted Korvan’s offer and loaded up aboard one of the vehicles. Once that vehicle flew away back towards the resort center, Korvan found himself waiting with his customers near the tree line, not knowing how long it would take for him to receive fresh instructions concerning the wounded Krazts. He thus addressed again the tourists in a loud voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it could take a while before the situation concerning the wounded Krazts is resolved. In the meantime, I can continue describing to you the various species presently in sight, if you would like me to do so.”

“That Krazts, it is supposed to be an intelligent being, correct?” asked a young woman after glancing at Riak, still lying down in the grass some thirty meters away.

“Correct! It has about the intelligence level of an ancient Neolithic Human. This one also happens to be a juvenile female.”

“Then, maybe we should try to comfort and reassure her while you wait for instructions.” suggested the same young woman, who was a kindergarten teacher by profession. “After all, she risked her life to protect that boy.”

A number of other tourists nodded and agreed with her suggestion. Then, before Korvan could react to that, some twenty tourists, including a majority of teenagers and young children, started walking towards the Krazts. Afraid that this could scare the wounded Krazts and make her nervous, Korvan hurried to get in front of them and make them slow down.

“Please, stay behind me and don’t make brusque movements or shout: it could make that Krazts nervous. Just follow me and stay silent, please.”

Leading his growing group at a measured pace, Korvan further slowed down before getting really close to Riak and spoke to her while pointing at the group behind him.

“Friends... Sardass... Sardass.”

That seemingly worked, with Riak simply looking on as a small crowd started assembling and kneeling close to her head. A small girl of maybe five years hesitantly approached one hand, then gently touched Riak's long beak and started caressing it. Korvan held his breath, ready to act if the Krazts reacted aggressively to that, but it stayed amorphous, weakened by her loss of blood. Encouraged by that, a little boy imitated the girl and also started caressing Riak, this time on its red duvet-covered head. The young kindergarten teacher grinned with joy on seeing that and looked at the preteen children around her.

"Hey, kids, what about singing a little song for our new friend? Do you all know 'Little Kittie'?"

A good half dozen young children enthusiastically answered her and, watched by a stunned but impressed Korvan and by Mark Donovan, started singing for Riak under the direction of the kindergarten teacher in what a late 20th Century American would have described as a 'Kumbaya moment'. Mark Donovan's jaw dropped open when he saw Riak shed what looked furiously like a tear.

"Well, I'll be!"

Some fifteen minutes later, as Korvan was offering water to Riak, who gratefully drank it, a large anti-gravity cargo platform landed silently next to the group, with two Koorivars and one woman climbing out of the vehicle and going to the Krazts and Korvan. The latter looked with surprise at one of the Koorivars and quickly got up on his feet to greet him with a bow.

"Governor Mirkin? I was not hoping for such high-level help. I am Korvan, the guide for this group of tourists."

"Well, this involves the sole intelligent race that we know of on this planet. I thus consider this as much a diplomatic affair as a humanitarian mission. I brought with me Doctor Kozak, our preeminent specialist in xenobiology on New Shouria, and Doctor Kimi Ideyoshi, a biologist working with Doctor Kozak and a specialist on New Shouria fauna and flora. They brought some special equipment to treat your patient. Could we talk, the two of us, while Doctors Kozak and Ideyoshi take care of our new friend?"

"Of course, Governor!"

As Mirkin was about to walk some distance away with Korvan to talk privately with him and ask him to describe in detail the incident, the governor noticed that a number of the

tourists had multi-function data pads in their hands and were filming the Krazts. That made an idea pop in his mind and he spoke out loud to the assembled tourists.

“DID BY CHANCE ANY OF YOU RECORD THIS INCIDENT, IDEALLY FROM THE START, WHEN THE BOY WAS GRABBED BY THE BIGGER KRAZTS?”

To his satisfaction, a good four hands rose from the crowd.

“THEN, WOULD YOU MIND IF I VIEW YOUR RECORDINGS AND MAKE COPIES OF THEM?”

Again, he got a concert of approvals.

“EXCELLENT! GIVE ME A MINUTE AND I WILL THEN COME AND TALK WITH YOU, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.”

“What do you have in mind with those video recordings, Governor?” asked Korvan as they were walking away together. Mirkin gave him an enigmatic smile in response.

“What I have in mind is some diplomacy, my dear Korvan.”

17:15 (Universal Time)

Roriks family cave, Grand Island

“I don’t like this, Rork: Riak has now been gone for too long. Something may have happened to her.”

Rork gave his mate Koory an indecisive look in response.

“Maybe she killed a big prey and is presently busy butchering it in smaller pieces, to bring one piece here and hide the rest somewhere.”

“I don’t believe that. I am afraid that...”

“MOMMY! DADDY! A FLYING BOX IS APPROACHING OUR CAVE!”

The shouted warning from Kar, the younger male offspring of the couple, then made the two adult Krazts and their older son Koosh run on their hind legs towards the entrance to their cave, where they stopped on the rocky ledge forming a sort of open-air balcony and looked around the sky. As Kar had warned, one of the flying machines of the bipedal creatures now established on their island was approaching quickly. It consisted of an enclosed box at the front, with a flat platform with guardrails at the back. Koory’s blood surged to her brain when she saw a very familiar red and yellow shape in the back of the flying box.

“RIAK! SHE’S ABOARD THAT THING!”

"BUT, WHAT IS SHE DOING THERE?" wondered Rork, who could not think of a logical answer to that.

"I suppose that we will know soon enough. Okay, kids, stay calm and get back inside the cave. Me and your dad will handle this. Rork, we better take a few steps back as well, to let space for that thing to land on the ledge."

Rork did so, imitated by Koory, while both stared at Riak, who was now waving at them from the back of the flying box. The bipeds' vehicle soon landed slowly and cautiously on the rocky ledge, allowing Riak to come out of it, along with eight bipeds. Strangely enough, the bipeds belonged to two distinct races instead of one. Koory then saw the prominent bandage fixed to Riak's right wing.

"Riak, what happened to you? Why are you coming back like this, with bipeds?"

"It's a long story, Mother. Suffice it to say, one of those adult bastards from the Klallat Clan intruded over our island, bent on hunting over it. I saw him as he was grabbing a young biped who was playing with a Gendus in the Central Plain. His presence here angered me, plus I was afraid that this could bring some retaliation from the bipeds against us, so I dove on him and attacked him. He was unfortunately much stronger and bigger than me and he was able to wound me and pin me down on the ground. That Klallat would have killed me, if not for a biped who killed him with some kind of terrifying weapon that throws blue thunderbolts."

"Blue thunderbolts?" said Rork, unable to imagine such a thing.

"Yes, Father. The bipeds then treated my wound and gave me water after killing that Klallat bastard. The fact that my intervention saved their youngling apparently made them friendly towards me...and us. Since I still cannot fly by myself right now, they brought me back to our cave. They also want to show you something and give us gifts as a thank you for me saving their youngling. Their leader came with me to talk with you. He is the one with the red and white ensemble."

Both Rork and Koory snapped their heads towards the biped in question, who was slowly approaching them with three other bipeds, one of them being very different from the three others. To their surprise, that taller biped spoke to them in rough, broken but understandable Krazts words.

"We are friends. Our leader on this planet, Mirkin, wants to thank you for your daughter's actions. First, though, we would like to show you images recorded during the incident involving Riak."

A biped who was carrying a sort of large, flat object, put it down on the ground, atop a sort of tripod. He then touched a part of it, making a video record play, along with its soundtrack. Rork and Koory were then able to see by themselves what had happened, from the moment a Klallat grabbed a youngling biped and started carrying it away, to the moment it was killed just before it could kill Riak. There were also a couple of minutes of extra recording showing some bipeds giving first aid to Riak and with more bipeds singing for her. The whole thing both shook and moved deeply Koory, who understood that she had nearly lost her sole daughter today.

“Thank you for having helped my daughter, bipeds.”

“It is us who must thank your daughter, Koory of the Roriks. Apart from bringing her back to you, we wish as well to give you a small gift as proof of our friendship.”

Four of the bipeds who had stayed near the vehicle then picked up a sort of big box that seemed quite heavy and brought it forward, putting it down in front of the Krazts couple and then opening its cover. Rork and Koory nearly salivated at the sight of the parts from a butchered big Tar, resting on a bed of ice cubes. The tall biped then spoke again.

“Please accept this as a gift from us, Rork and Koory. Know that, from now on, we will know how to recognize you from other Krazts and that you will be welcome to visit us at any time. My kind is called ‘Humans’, while my friends’ kind is called ‘Koorivars’. In the name of Governor Mirkin, leader of the Koorivars on this planet, I again wish to proclaim you as being our friends.”

CHAPTER 10 – BOOMING BUSINESS

10:18 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, November 09, 2321

Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Approaching the Jovian moon Callisto

Solar System

“Callisto Control, this is the KOSTROMA. We are now approaching Callisto’s orbit and are planning to dock at the Callisto Orbital Cargo Terminal, over.”

“From Callisto Control to KOSTROMA: you are cleared to approach and dock at the Callisto Orbital Cargo Terminal. Please switch your navigation computer to the cargo terminal’s automated docking system number three. Be advised that traffic at the cargo terminal is presently heavy.”

“Switching to cargo terminal’s automated docking system number three, understood! KOSTROMA out!”

Frida Skarsgard, manning the pilot’s station at the time, glanced at her navigation radar screen, then twisted her neck to look at Tina Forster, who was sitting behind her in her command chair.

“The Callisto Cargo Terminal is indeed quite busy, Tina. I have nine other cargo ships either docked there or slowly breaking away from it. Using the automated docking system won’t be a luxury.”

“Maybe, but be ready to correct our course and speed immediately, in case that system suffers a glitch. I wouldn’t want to damage or destroy the cargo terminal by accidentally ramming it.”

“Why?” replied Frida with a smile. “A small bump by a three-million-ton ship shouldn’t cause more than a little scratch.”

“Go tell that to the terminal’s manager, Frida. Seriously, I am more worried about other ships slamming into us than of us slamming into the cargo terminal. Keep your eyes open and be ready to react to anything in a flash.”

“Will do!”

Tina then switched on her ship's intercom system and called the ship's commercial office, where Winnie Zambela officiated. Winnie had replaced the highly efficient Piotr Romanski as the ship's commercial agent, purser and financial officer when Piotr had become the Chief Administrator of New Haven a year ago. Up to now, she had proved to Tina that she was up to the task. In turn, Piotr's financial and organizational genius had done miracles to help boost along the development of New Haven as a viable Human resettlement and agrarian world.

"Winnie, did you get the cargo manifest from the Jovian Shipping Lines about our next cargo load and destination? Are we going to have a decent load for our next trip?"

"A decent load?" replied the 34-year-old woman of African descent. "Hell, I got a wish list from the Jovian Shipping Lines that will keep us busy for the next couple of months, apart from nicely fattening our commercial bank account. For today, we are to load at the cargo terminal sixteen various external cargo pods totaling a mass of six million tons and destined for Providence, in the Alpha Centauri B System. While we will be taking on those cargo pods, a fleet of shuttles will bring in 1,293 passengers, also destined for Providence. After that, before leaving the Solar System, we are to go to Earth, where we have to go down and land in Korean waters in order to pick up a new floating city extra-large module destined for New Shouria, along with twelve annex modules. While down on Earth, Koorivar shuttles will bring aboard 2,856 passengers intent on augmenting the permanent population on New Shouria. There will also be some 890 tourists heading to either New Shouria or New Haven, who paid for vacation tours there."

"Wow! We will have to use our old passenger quarters in our core section in order to accommodate all these people and will also have to stock up on our food reserves. We will indeed be at near maximum capacity in terms of passengers. What about the rest of that wish list?"

"Our next priority load will be over seventeen million tons of cargo pods, prefabricated modules, equipment and supplies, along with a crew of 1,600 construction workers and specialists, all destined for New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System. New Venice has now top priority in the updated colonization and space expansion plan of the Spacers League. Once in orbit around New Venice, we are to stay in orbit for two weeks, in order to support the work crews there until the arrival of other support ships. After that, we will have to zip back to the Solar System and load twenty million tons of various pods and modules, along with 1,100 workers and specialists who will start

building a liquid hydrocarbon extraction and processing complex on Hybernia, in the Trappist-1 System, plus an orbital liquid hydrocarbon transfer station around Hybernia and extra living modules on nearby Borealis, in the same system. Our cargo handling crewmembers will be earning their pay in the next few months.”

“I’ll say!” said Tina before falling silent as she mentally reflected on all that. Her KOSTROMA had lately concentrated on cargo and passenger ferrying in the last few months, leaving the job of exploring the various star systems around the Solar System to a pair of specially-converted space liners and to three Spacers League Navy ships. Their quests for new habitable or exploitable worlds for Humanity had quickly turned up a treasure trove of habitable and exploitable planets and moons which were going to enable Humanity to expand and grow among the stars, taking at the same time much pressure off from the long-suffering Earth by allowing part of its excess population to emigrate to new homes under new suns. Apart from Tina’s own New Haven and from the Koorivars’ New Shouria, six new worlds had been found to be ideal for Human colonization, having breathable atmospheres, liquid water oceans, continents and moderate to ideal climates. Of those, Providence, the third planet of Alpha Centauri B, New Venice, a large moon in the Tau Ceti System, and New Polynesia, in the HD40307 System, had been given top priority for colonization, the three of them turning around main sequence K-Class orange or G-Class yellow stars fairly similar to the Sun and thus more natural for Humans to live under than M-Class red dwarf stars like the one around which New Shouria and New Haven turned around of. Added to those three top worlds, six other habitable planets or moons had been found to date, all of which would be suitable for Human occupation but had a bit less than ideal conditions. That count also kept growing every month, as the exploration ships of the Spacers League continued visiting the various star systems situated within a hundred light-years from Earth. Humanity was truly entering a new age right now, free to expand and multiply without the fear of overpopulation or of resources exhaustion. However, the Spacers League High Council had learned from the mistakes made in Earth’s past and had decreed that all the new worlds to be colonized or exploited would respect strict environmental standards, while the various local ecosystems would be kept intact as much as possible. Within a few years, Humanity was going to be solidly established on at least half a dozen new worlds and its long-term survival and prosperity would then be assured. Tina then thought about the Drazt of Ross 128 and felt some pity for them, despite the fact that they had treacherously attacked her ship after she had attempted a diplomatic mission

there. The Drazt were in the same past predicament in which Humanity had found itself in until a mere four years ago, stuck inside a single star system with diminishing resources and a growing population, but had been in that situation for centuries already. It would be only just for the Drazt to finally manage to develop a working interstellar drive and thus become able to expand beyond their home star system and relieve the pressure on it. However, Tina was not going to accept that if it meant that the Drazt would use any new interstellar capability to attack the Solar System, or any other place where Humans would be.

CHAPTER 11 – A MISSED RENDEZ-VOUS

07:30 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, December 20, 2321

Bridge of the Spacers League exploration ship H.S.S. STARQUEST

Arriving in low orbit over the third planet of 16 Cygni B

Triple star system 16 Cygni, 70.5 light-years from Earth

Captain Li Jing Peng felt optimism as his converted space liner, now the interstellar exploration ship STARQUEST, approached the third planet of 16 Cygni B, a yellow G-Class star that was itself part of the triple star system of 16 Cygni, situated some 70.5 light-years from Earth. That triple star system was composed of two yellow, G-Class stars and of one M-Class red dwarf star and, up to now, seemed to have three planets, one of which was a big gas giant similar to Jupiter, but with twice its mass and with a highly eccentric orbit around 16 Cygni B, while another could be described as a ball of lava, being way too close to its star. However, the third planet of the system, 16 Cygni Bd, appeared very promising, being a planet slightly larger than Earth and which blue and brown surface indicated the presence of both liquid oceans and large continents. A visible blue halo around the planet was a sign of the presence of a substantial atmosphere. With any luck, the STARQUEST may just have stumbled on a habitable world compatible with Human life, about the most precious kind of find right now for Humanity in the Universe.

“Are there any detectable artificial electro-magnetic signals in the system, or any artificial lights on the surface of 16 Cygni Bd?”

“None up to now, Captain. We have initiated a long-range radar sweep in order to scan for possible asteroids or meteorites around or close to the planet. We have detected nothing of the sort so far.”

“Alright, let’s adopt a low polar orbit around the third planet, so that we could start mapping and studying its surface and atmosphere.”

“Aye, Captain!”

Some fifteen minutes later, as the STARQUEST was about to insert itself into a low polar orbit, one of the sensors operators on duty on the bridge spoke up, excitement in her voice.

"Captain, our radar is now picking up a small object located in a geosynchronous orbit around the planet's equator. From the quality of the radar echo, I would classify that object as being metallic in nature."

Li tensed up at once at those words: a metallic object in orbit meant the presence of another technological race, or at the least its passage in this system. With the bad precedence from the encounter of the KOSTROMA with the Drazt of Ross 128, that could mean possible trouble.

"ABORT ORBITAL INSERTION! ACTIVATE OUR SHIELD GENERATORS TO MAXIMUM INTENSITY! SCAN FOR ANY POSSIBLE SHIP IN THE VICINITY!"

Li then waited nervously as his bridge crew obeyed his orders and scanned the void around them. Unfortunately, while the STARQUEST was superbly equipped for interstellar exploration, it had no armament whatsoever. After some three minutes, the sensors officer, Suzi Long, spoke up.

"No other ship detected within range of our sensors, Captain. That single metallic object seems in turn to be completely inert, with no signal or infra-red signature emanating from it. It is simply floating in space while in geo-stationary orbit."

"Possibilities?"

"It could be an old reconnaissance satellite left behind by some passing ship a long time ago, Captain. However, only a close visual inspection will tell us what it is exactly."

"Very well! Pilot, head towards that floating object! We will however keep our shield generators on, just in case."

"Aye, Captain!"

After another eight minutes, Suzi Long spoke up again.

"Captain, I have the object on visual. It appears to be some kind of small artificial satellite. I still can't detect any signal or infra-red signature from it. I am switching the picture from our bow telescope to your station."

"Thank you, Suzi." said Li, who then switched on one of his command chair's viewing screens the view from the ship's bow telescope, a powerful optical instrument designed for studying a planet from orbit. What he saw indeed looked like a small,

rather primitive-looking artificial satellite. Judging from the pair of large dish antennas attached to it, they could well have been some sort of communications relay antennas.

"Alright, let's approach that thing cautiously. Once within fifty kilometers from it, we will send a flying work station to go retrieve it and bring it aboard."

"I am alerting our duty craft crew to get ready, Captain. It should launch in about five minutes."

"Excellent! Tell our work station crew to be careful and to not take any risks. If it sees anything suspicious, it is to back off immediately. Also, once in our main craft airlock, that satellite will be kept under strict quarantine conditions. We will use robots as much as possible to inspect it from up close."

"Understood, Captain."

His mind in turmoil as he studied the possibilities about what that satellite meant for his mission, Li followed closely the events of the next minutes, watching as the small, two-person flying work station craft left its hangar bay via a craft airlock and sped towards the unidentified satellite. The small craft thankfully didn't report any suspicious or hostile activity on the part of the satellite as it got within range of its manipulator arms. In fact, the satellite kept acting as if it was indeed dead. The pilot of the work station then made a remark that caught Li's ear.

"Gee, this thing looks old as Hell! It is covered with thousands of micro-meteorite impacts. It also appears to be truly dead. I am going to grab it with my manipulator arms."

Two minutes later, the work station was flying back towards the STARQUEST, the dead satellite held in its arms' pincers. Li got out of his chair as the craft and its find entered the small craft airlock.

"Mister Rambaldi, you have the bridge. I am going down to the small craft hangar section."

"Aye, Captain!"

Using an elevator cabin to go down to the Hangar Deck, Captain Li arrived in the hangar complex, which housed a number of light shuttles, flying work stations and runabouts, in time to see the mysterious satellite being placed in a small, separate hangar designed specifically to quarantine small crafts. Watching through a thick, armored glass window, Li saw a number of maintenance and inspection robots become

active around the satellite. It took only a minute or so before the first results were announced by the engineer in charge of the hangar complex.

"It definitely appears to have been some sort of communications relay satellite, Captain. It was powered by a radio-isotopic generator which used plutonium as fuel. However, the plutonium fuel rods are now completely dead."

Li snapped his head around in surprise on hearing that.

"Completely dead? But plutonium has a half-life of about ninety years, no?"

"Eighty-eight years actually, Captain." corrected the engineer. "Which means that this satellite has been in space for over 180 years, probably much more."

"How much more, Mister Lindstrom?"

"I can't answer that until we will have checked other things, Captain. However, in view of the extension space corrosion from micro-meteorites visible on this satellite, I would say that it has most probably been in orbit for thousands of years, rather than hundreds of years. If a ship dropped off that satellite, then it is long gone by now."

"I see! Inform me as soon as you are able to estimate more precisely the age of that satellite, Mister Lindstrom."

"Will do, Captain."

"Thank you! I'm going back to the bridge. Hopefully, the study of the planet under us will give us more clues about that old satellite."

09:02 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the H.S.S. STARQUEST

Captain Li felt disturbed as his ship completed its first low polar orbit over 16 Cygni Bd: the various cameras, radars and spectrometers of his STARQUEST had only covered a small portion of the planet's surface to date, but that had already been enough to reveal some contradictory facts. First, to his satisfaction and that of his crew, the analysis of the atmosphere via spectrometers and a couple of robotic probes had proved it to be eminently breathable, with an atmospheric pressure superior by twenty percent to that of Earth and an oxygen content of 24 percent, again higher than the 21 percent found at sea level on Earth. The average surface temperature had also proved to be a quite comfortable one, turning between plus 29 degrees Centigrade at the equator to minus five degrees at the poles. The surface gravity had been measured to be 1.1 Gs, a bit superior to Earth's gravity but still easily tolerable by Humans. Liquid water oceans

covered about eighty percent of the planet's surface, with the remaining twenty percent being made up of two continents and thousands of islands, many of the latter being of volcanic origin. With the age of its parent star known to be about ten billion years, compared to the 4.6 billion years of the Sun, 16 Cygni Bd should have had ample time to develop plenty of life during such a long period of existence, especially in view of the apparently ideal conditions on its surface. However, the only life visible from orbit had been sparse and thin vegetation visible at the surface of the few islands the ship had overflown. Hopefully, more signs of life would show up once the ship started overflying one of the two continents, something that was due to happen in a few minutes. Li's intercom then beeped, making him push a button. The face of Kurt Lindstrom then appeared on one of his viewing screens.

"Mister Lindstrom! What do you have for me?"

"Some disturbing numbers, Captain. We have finished our preliminary studies of that old satellite and have a number of solid facts about it. First, about its age: it is over sixteen million years old, if we can believe our isotopic dating on parts of it."

"Sixteen million years old!" exclaimed Li, making more than one head around the bridge snap towards him. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure, Captain. Another fact is that it was not built by either Humans, Koorivars, Drazt or any other sentient race we know. The markings found on internal parts of the satellite are in a language and writing system totally unknown to us. The third fact is that the technology used in the satellite is a rather primitive one, about on par with what could be found around Earth at the start of the Space Age, in the mid-20th Century. We are still continuing to study it, but that's about it for the moment, Captain."

"Thank you, Mister Lindstrom. That information is already quite useful."

Li was closing his intercom channel when the pilot, Vasyli Meklin, spoke up.

"We are starting to overfly the southern continent, Captain. All our sensors are online and active."

"Good! Hopefully, what we will see will help explain where this old satellite came from."

Concentrating his attention on a screen showing the view from a camera pointed at the vertical towards the surface of the planet, Li Jing Peng observed in silence the surface of the continent they were now overflying. He was nearly immediately struck by a number of strange details, and so was Suzi Long, his sensors officer.

"Captain, there is only thin, primeval vegetation visible on the ground, despite the favorable climatic conditions and abundance of liquid water. It doesn't make sense! Also, I see what appears to be faint traces of large, multiple craters that have been eroded by time and then covered by growing vegetation. I can count hundreds of such craters dispersed around the surface of this continent, all of them with a minimum diameter of at least a few hundred meters."

"A dense asteroid bombardment in a distant past? On Earth, a single giant asteroid strike snuffed out the dinosaurs some 65 million years ago and caused a global winter that killed off the majority of both vegetal and animal species. Could that be what happened to this planet?"

"Maybe, Captain." answered Long, not sounding convinced at all about that. "We will need to see more of the surface before I could advance some more possibilities."

"Very well! Let's continue with our mapping and scanning, Miss Long."

A few minutes later, as the ship was about to overfly the northern coastline of the continent after crossing the whole land mass, Suzi Long suddenly pointed at something on the main camera's view.

"There! Do you see that faint straight line on the ground, Captain?"

"Uh, I do, but it is very faint indeed."

"And also very straight indeed: too much so to be a natural feature. I am going to point our main telescope at it."

Li was soon able to look at a much-enhanced picture of part of the faint line that had attracted Long's attention. With the much higher magnitude of the image, that line was now plainly recognizable as being artificial.

"It looks like some kind of elevated highway, but crumbled and in ruins, with a thick layer of dust and dirt covering it."

"In my professional opinion, that is exactly what it is, Captain. This is a remnant from a now defunct civilization that once lived on this planet. My bet is that it disappeared millions of years ago, possibly in the same era when that old satellite was launched into space. As for the cause of that race's disappearance, I fear that I now have a plausible explanation for it, Captain."

Li stared with incomprehension at his sensors officer for a couple of seconds before the awful truth dawned on him.

"A nuclear war? All these old craters we saw would have been caused by the impact of nuclear warheads?"

"As horrible as that possibility is, I believe that this is what happened, millions of years ago, Captain. However, it would be unprofessional on our part to make firm conclusions from all this before getting more facts. That, in my opinion, will require the sending of one or more ground exploration teams, Captain."

"I concur! Let's complete our mapping and scanning of this planet, so that we could then choose the most appropriate spots to land our exploration teams."

11:26 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, December 21, 2321

Central plains of the northern continent

16 Cygni Bd

As the security officer in charge of his exploration team, Leonard Brinkley was the first to step out of the light shuttle, quickly followed by the gigantic Baya Mofongo. Both were armed with disintegrator rifles and wore protective coveralls and filtering masks. Scanning visually his surroundings and seeing nothing threatening, Brinkley then signaled the four other members of his team to come out as well. The access ramp of the shuttle closed up as soon as they were all out with their equipment and two anti-gravity scooters, so that the craft's airlock could be decontaminated of any possible radioactive dust. Kimi Harakawa, the team's exobiologist, bent down to grab and pull out of the ground a small plant, using her gloved right hand. She then visually examined the plant with critical eyes.

"Hum, a rather unimpressive-looking plant. Let's see if it shows any traces of radiation contamination."

Passing slowly a very sensitive radiation meter over the plant gave results that did a lot to make her feel better.

"If this world was effectively killed by a nuclear war, then that war happened a very long time ago. Right now, the radioactivity level that I can detect from this plant is no higher than the normal level from natural background radiations. This planet poses no dangers to us from a radioactivity standpoint. We can take our filtering masks off."

Her companions, relieved, took their masks off at once, shoving them back in their carrying pouches fixed to their belts. Francisco Dominguez, the team's planetologist,

made a grimace after scanning the sparse vegetation around them, none of which grew higher than a few centimeters.

“No animals in sight, not even insects. Whatever happened here must have completely killed off all animal and vegetal life. These plants appear to be primeval and are possibly some mutated forms of the rare plant life that survived whatever devastated this planet.”

“Well, we are here to find out about that, people.” replied Leonard Brinkley. “Let’s go examine this field of holes in the ground that so intrigued our specialists on the ship.”

Climbing on their scooters, the team members then glided over the ground towards the nearest such hole, some forty meters away. Landing softly their scooters only meters away from the big dirt mound in which a horizontal circular hole was visible, the team members climbed the gently sloping slides of the mound, stopping at the edge of the hole and looking down in it.

“This was once an artificial kind of silo, now nearly filled with dust and dirt. It must have been quite deep originally.” said Ariel Shomron, the team’s geologist. “I am going to use our underground mapping radar to find out its exact original dimensions.” As Shomron was preparing his mapping radar, Leonard Brinkley eyed with circumspection the two mounds flanking the hole on two sides.

“I don’t know, guys, but this reminds me of something I once saw in my history classes. Look at those two dirt mounds, the way they flank this hole: they are positioned exactly opposite to each other, with their centerline passing over the center of this hole. Ariel, could you scan first the sides of the hole and those two mounds? I believe that they are significant about this hole.”

“Why not? We have all day to inspect this anyway.”

Watched by his teammates, Shomron started walking around the large, four-meter-wide hole, pushing his mapping radar anti-gravity sled in front of him. At one point, the geologist stopped abruptly, then veered a full ninety degrees to the right and continued advancing for another few meters before stopping and calling up his companions.

“You were right about this being suspicious, Leonard: what had to be a steel track running from the edge of that hole to the mound I am now facing is clearly visible on my radar, some two meters below ground. Let me check something out.”

Turning to the left and pushing his radar sled for some six meters, he then stopped and pivoted again to the left, apparently following something underground. He finally stopped and paused on the edge of the hole and looked soberly at Leonard.

"There is a second steel track running parallel to the other and also running towards that mound. I am starting to understand what this whole thing could be. I will however go check something else before giving my verdict."

Their biochemist, Amin Jamilian, scratched his head while watching Shomron as he pushed his radar sled around the hole's circumference.

"Uh, what are we looking at, actually? I don't have a clue."

Leonard gave him a somber look in response.

"In a nutshell, we are probably looking at an old nuclear missile silo, Amin. Since this hole contains only dirt, we must conclude that the missile that was once sitting inside it was launched. Those two mounds flanking the hole are probably the two pieces of a massive protective concrete cover sitting originally over the silo. Just before missile launch, those two pieces would have been pushed away on rails by explosive charges, opening the silo and letting the missile fly out of it."

"But, but there are a hundred such holes visible from space in this plain alone. They would all be missile silos?"

"Yes, and there are probably hundreds or even thousands more such silos around this planet."

"Thousands of nuclear missiles?" exclaimed the horrified biochemist. "who could have been mad enough to amass so many nuclear-tipped missiles?"

"We did, once! In the 20th Century, there was at one point a total of over 40,000 nuclear weapons in service, ready to be launched and with men sitting next to their launch buttons. We nearly blew ourselves out of existence in that century. Those poor bastards on this planet probably did what we barely managed to avoid, some sixteen million years ago."

Those words left the team members silent for a long moment as they reflected on the scale of the tragedy that this world had once witnessed. Kimi Harakawa was the first to speak again after that, but what she said both stunned and shocked her companions.

"Well, it was too bad for that race, truly. On the other hand, it now leaves us with a fantastic gift."

"A fantastic gift? A graveyard world full of old ruins? Are you mad, Kimi?" exploded Jamilian. The exobiologist stared back at him, unrepentant.

“No, I am not mad, Amin. What I meant by that is that, by snuffing out all life on this planet for millenniums via massive radioactive fallouts and artificial nuclear Winter, that genocidal race has left behind a whole planet with a breathable atmosphere, liquid oceans and a good climate, but with next to no indigenous life left on it. Basically, this planet is now fully ours for the taking and we will be free to reseed to our liking its oceans and plant our own flora and crops on its continents and islands. As an old French saying went: the misfortune of some often makes others happy. This may sound both callous and cruel, but what would be the point of not profiting from this? If it would be up to me, I would call this world ‘Atlantis’, the name of a fabled, long-lost Earth civilization of the Antiquity.”

CHAPITRE 12 – BREAKTHROUGH

10:03 (Drakan City Time)

Saturday, March 04, 2322 (Earth calendar)

Drazt Navy Astroport, Drakan City

Kadosh (Ross 128b)

All the Drazt present on that area of the tarmac of the Navy's astroport either bowed or saluted as Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh walked towards the patrol frigate KOBOL, which had its crew lined up next to the ship's access ramp. Stopping a few paces in front of the crew of 26 members and returning their salute, Bar Kosh then spoke up in a firm, solemn tone.

"Crewmembers of the KOBOL, the mission that you will accomplish today may be the most important mission ever flown in the history of our people. If you are successful in proving that our new interstellar drive works as well as we hope, then you will have opened the road to the stars to our people, thus allowing us to at last expand and multiply out of our home star system. I cannot stress too much to you how vital your mission is, especially in view of the uncomfortable presence of Humans near our star system. Be assured that our whole race will be with you in spirit."

Bar Kosh then took two steps to give a four-arm hug to the captain of the KOBOL.

"I wish you success on your mission, my nephew. Return safely from your trip."

"I will not deceive you, Supreme Conductor." replied Gor Mak, hiding his nervousness. In reality, if his interstellar test flight proved to be a failure, then he would be able to kiss goodbye to his career as a naval officer. He already owned his present command position and rank mostly to his family connections and favors and there would be no shortages of officers who had been jumped over by him and who would then be too happy to sink him. Also, the Supreme Conductor may have been his uncle, but he was known to react badly to failures by others. Being his nephew would not be enough to save Gor if he returned from a failed mission. After a last salute to his uncle, Gor pivoted around and shouted out loud an order.

"CREW OF THE KOBOL, TO YOUR POSTS!"

With Gor Mak taking the lead, the 25 other crewmembers ran up the access ramp of their frigate as Bar Kosh and his escort party took a safe distance before the ship could take off. Some six minutes later, the KOBOL started to rise nearly silently from its landing pad, then accelerated its climb once at a safe altitude, watched by Bar Kosh and the Navy admirals present.

“Go and make our family proud, Gor.” said Bar Kosh to himself.

10:42 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the patrol frigate KOBOL

Speeding away from Kadosh (Ross 128b)

“Destination coordinates and jump parameters entered and locked in the main computer. We are ready for our jump, Shipmaster.”

“Excellent! Initiate final countdown to jump!”

“Initiating final countdown. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one: jumping now!”

The announcement by the navigator was followed by a brief, silent flash of light that appeared for only a fraction of a second. The tense bridge crew waited for more physical signs that their interstellar jump had been successful, but felt nothing more. Deathly worried that this would prove to be another failure in the long history of attempts by Drazt scientists to come up with a working star drive, Gor Mak looked at the external view screens of the bridge. He felt immense relief on seeing a lone red star dead ahead that was visibly not Kadosh’s mother star.

“Navigator, confirm our position! Is this the Markan Prime Star?”

“Analyzing now the spectral signature of the star ahead... Yes, Shipmaster: this is indeed the Markan Prime Star!”

A concert of joyful shouts and comments greeted that announcement, while Gor Mak sat back in his command chair while letting out a breath of relief.

“Thank our ancestors’ spirits for that! Alright, since we are here now, we might as well see what is this star system made of. With luck, we will find one or more planets which will prove habitable for our people. Sensors Officer, do you detect planets in this system?”

“Affirmative, Shipmaster! Two small planets are visible right now. I will be able to provide more data about them in a few minutes.”

"Very well! Pilot, head towards the nearest of those two planets at best speed: once there, we will go into orbit around it in order to map and scan it."

"Aye, Shipmaster!"

Gor Mak observed intently the planet they were approaching, hoping to see a living world instead of a dead rock. As the KOBOL got closer to the planet, large blue patches became visible on its surface, boosting Gor Mak's hopes. The sensors officer finally reported back to Gor, his voice tainted with joy.

"Shipmaster, I can now detect large quantities of liquid water on the surface of this planet. There is also evidence of the presence of a substantial atmosphere."

"Excellent! Pilot, place us on a low polar orbit around this planet, so that we could start mapping and studying it. Sensors Master, activate all of our sensors and optical cameras and prepare to effect a full survey of this planet."

"Aye, Shipmaster!"

Less than three minutes later, the patrol frigate was inserting itself into a low polar orbit, with all its sensors activated and recording. What the Drazt crew saw at first was quite encouraging indeed.

"Shipmaster, I can confirm the presence of a breathable atmosphere around this planet. The average surface temperature is also within acceptable limits. I am now transferring to you command chair the detailed results from our scanners."

"Thank you, Sensors Master."

Gor Mak had been looking at the scanners' data and images for a few minutes when a shout of alarm made him twitch in his command chair.

"AN UNIDENTIFIED SHIP JUST CAME OUT FROM BEHIND THE PLANET, SHIPMASTER. IT IS ALSO FOLLOWING A POLAR ORBIT BUT IS HEADING STRAIGHT TOWARDS US."

That made Gor slam one of his fists on the left armrest of his command chair at the same time that he swore loudly.

"BY THE MORGS' SLIME! IT MUST BE A HUMAN SHIP! TO ALL THE CREW: BATTLE STATIONS!"

11:16 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the exploration ship H.S.S. QUAZAR (ex-space liner AURORA)

In polar orbit around planet LHS 288c (17 light-years from Earth / 7 light-years from Ross 128)

Captain Vance Merrik, having up to now a rather quiet duty shift as his crew of planetary scientists mapped and examined LHS 288c, had allowed his wife Elizabeth to come visit him on the bridge, along with their baby daughter Mindy. It was actually common for civilian ships like the QUAZAR to have family members aboard, including small children. In the case of the QUAZAR, a converted ex-luxury space liner, the top-notch onboard accommodations made that even more convenient, something that helped tremendously the morale of the crew during long space missions like this long-range exploration mission.

Vance had three-months-old Mindy in his arms and was cuddling her when the duty sensors officer suddenly shouted, surprise and alarm in her voice.

"Captain, we are now detecting another ship! It is also following a polar orbit similar to ours, but is turning in an opposite motion and is coming at us."

"Another ship? But we are not expecting a courier ship until tomorrow. Do you have a positive identification for it?"

"Negative, Captain!"

"Then, hail it and ask it to identify itself."

"Aye, Captain!... Unidentified ship approaching on low polar orbit, this is the exploration ship QUAZAR. Please identify yourself!"

11:18 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol frigate KOBOL

In low polar orbit around LHS 288c

"SHIPMASTER, THE OTHER SHIP IS HAILING US: IT IS A HUMAN SHIP!"

The warning from his communication officer made Gor Mak swear violently.

"Damn! I knew it! That vermin is decidedly everywhere. The orders from the Supreme Conductor about such an encounter are clear and strict: that Human ship cannot be allowed to report back to Earth about our experimental jump. Weapons Master, is that ship within weapons range?"

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

"Then, open fire with all batteries! Destroy that ship!"

"Aye, Shipmaster!"

Pushing or touching a few buttons and tactile surfaces, the weapons officer had the unlucky QUAZAR locked into his firing computer in seconds, then pressed a prominent black button.

"FIRING NOW!"

The four medium disintegrator cannons of the KOBOL then spat blue beams of lethal energy which straddled the exploration ship at once.

On the bridge of the QUAZAR, Vance Merrick didn't even have time to react before the first disintegrator beam hit his ship head on, vaporizing part of its bow section, including its Koomak drive generator. The giant hole in its hull immediately created an explosive decompression in a number of main compartments, sucking out into space dozens of screaming crewmembers as well as members of their families. Two seconds later, a second disintegrator beam struck, holing the ship in its mid-section, killing more crewmembers and disabling its main thermonuclear drive engine. With no weaponry of his own and with disintegrator beams hitting in succession his ship, Vance Merrick could only give one order.

"TO ALL THE CREW: ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN: ABANDON SHIP!"

He then looked firmly into the eyes of his terrified wife while giving her back their little daughter.

"Go to a rescue pod, Elizabeth, now!"

"But, you..."

"I will follow you soon. Now, go and save our daughter!"

Understanding that her husband was right and that time was of the essence, Elizabeth Merrick cradled little Mindy in her arms and ran to the nearest elevator, intent on going down to the nearest deck with access to life pods. Her elevator cabin barely had time to go down two levels to her chosen deck and open its doors before a new hit on the QUAZAR violently shook the ship, nearly making her fall on her knees. A female bridge crewmember riding with her and seven other crewmembers caught her in time and supported her while running with her out of the cabin.

"THE LIFE POD TUBES ARE THIS WAY, MADAM. FOLLOW ME!"

Two more disintegrator beams hit the ship before they arrived at the sealed access hatches of a group of four life pods. Pulling open a cover panel, then pressing a large

green button, the bridge female officer made the access hatch of one life pod open quickly. She then forcefully pushed Elizabeth and her baby inside.

“QUICK, GO TAKE PLACE IN ONE OF THE SEATS AND STRAP YOURSELF IN!”

The bridge officer did not follow her inside the life pod at once, instead shouting and gesticulating at other crewmembers and family members who were running towards the life pods.

“COME ON! HURRY UP! WE MUST LAUNCH THE PODS BEFORE THIS SECTION IS HIT.”

Pushed by fear and panic, nine more people ran into the open pod hatch before the bridge officer decided it was time to go. Besides, the pod was now at near full capacity. Entering herself the pod and closing and locking its hatch, the female officer ran to one of the two remaining available seats in the pod and sat down in it, shouting a command to the computer controlling the life pod as she started to fasten her safety harness.

“LIFE POD COMPUTER: EJECTION NOW!”

The computer did not waste any time into responding to her order, being programmed to eject as quickly as it was safely possible to do so, and made the protective outer cover of the launch tube blow away. A quarter of a seconds later, a pressurized air blast ejected the four-meter-long ovoid pod out of its launch tube and into the void of space. Three seconds later, a disintegrator beam struck that section of the ship, vaporizing two pods full of crewmembers which were about to be launched. Inside Elizabeth’s life pod, the wife of the captain could only sob hysterically while pressing little Mindy in her arms.

“My God! Please let Vance escape as well.”

On the bridge, Vance Merrick was now alone in his command chair, having ordered all the other bridge crew members to evacuate the ship while himself staying at his post. His command panels, at least the ones still functioning, told him enough for him to realize that his ship was irremediably lost. Feeling both anger and bitterness about such a treacherous attack on his ship, he did his best to control his emotions and switched his intercom to the central computer of his ship.

“Computer, this is the Captain. Voice recognition mode!”

“Voice verified and identification confirmed, Captain Merrick.”

“Computer, program our interstellar distress buoy for an immediate jump to the Solar System, then eject it, now!”

"Distress buoy programmed. Ejecting now!" replied the always calm voice of the QUAZAR's central computer. Less than a half second later, a small ovoid object the size of an oil drum was ejected at high speed into space from its deep core storage tube. Being very small despite its advanced capabilities, the distress buoy was not noticed by the KOBOL, its mass being masked by hundreds of pieces of metallic debris breaking off from the exploration ship. Only once the buoy had been confirmed as launched did Vance Merrick jump out of his command chair and started running towards the nearest elevator cabins to go to a life pod. He never made it before a new hit explosively decompressed the bridge section. At about the same time as Vance Merrick died, the QUAZAR's distress buoy activated its small Koomak Drive generator and jumped out of the LHS 288 system, heading out to the Solar System.

On the KOBOL, Gor Mak looked on, fascinated, as the Human ship broke up into dozens of large pieces, some of which then fell towards the planet and reentered the atmosphere, where they burned up before impacting the surface. He was happy to see that Human ship destroyed, but it had been much easier than he had expected.

"That Human ship didn't fire back once. How come?"

That prompted a guilty look from his communications officer.

"Uh, I am sorry if I didn't provide you with that detail before, Shipmaster: that ship announced itself as being an exploration ship. It was probably unarmed."

While a few bridge crewmembers froze on hearing that and felt bad about it, Gor Mak shrugged that off after a split second.

"Too bad for that ship: the orders from the Supreme Conductor about leaving no witnesses to our passage in this system were clear. Sensors Officer, do you detect any sign of life inside the sections of that ship that are still in orbit?"

"In ship sections, no, Shipmaster. However, I can detect a total of four small objects with thermal signatures inside them. They are probably lifeboats of some sort."

"Very well! Weapons Master: target those lifeboats and destroy them."

The weapons officer hesitated for a moment, nearly voicing an objection to that order: one of the mottos of the Drazt Navy was 'Honor'. Killing survivors inside their lifeboats struck him as a most dishonorable act, but the Shipmaster was also a nephew of the Supreme Conductor and was following a direct order from him. The officer thus targeted one of the four life pods they had detected and, after a last hesitation, pressed his firing button.

“Firing now, Shipmaster.”

The disintegrator beam, having a diameter over half of that of the life pod, completely vaporized it on impact. Elizabeth Merrik and her little daughter Mindy didn't have time to suffer before being obliterated, along with the ten other occupants of the life pod. Less than a minute later, the three other life pods and their occupants had been vaporized by disintegrator beams, leaving only debris in orbit around LHS 288c. Satisfied with his work, Gor Mak gave a new order to his navigator and pilot.

“Let's leave this system before another Human ship could show up. Navigator, calculate a return jump to Kadosh and jump when ready. I am anxious to give the good news about our new interstellar drive to the Supreme Conductor.”

“Aye, Shipmaster!”

A minute later, the KOBOL disappeared from the system, on its way back to Ross 128.

CHAPITRE 13 – WAR

12:05 (Universal Time)

Saturday, March 04, 2322

Space Operations Center of the Spacers League's Navy

Command orbital station in low orbit around Callisto

Jovian System, Solar System

Rose Holloway was about to go on her lunch break and was waiting for her replacement before leaving her work station in the Space Operations Center when a red light started flashing on her communications panel. She frowned at once on seeing what kind of warning signal it was indicating. First taking the time to refine the location and identity of the emitter from which the signal came, Rose then called out loud to her work station her shift supervisor, Lieutenant Nicky Miura.

"LIEUTENANT, I AM RECEIVING A DISTRESS SIGNAL RELAYED BY THE EMERGENCY BUOY OF THE H.S.S. QUAZAR."

Miura, a young but highly competent officer of mixed Japanese-Australian ethnicity, came at once to Rose's station to look at her main display screen.

"Was the QUAZAR operating inside our system?"

"Negative, Lieutenant! The buoy just jumped back into our system and came from the LHS 288 system, where the QUAZAR was conducting a space exploration mission."

"Okay, ask it to transmit its report on what happened to the QUAZAR."

With intra-system signals often needing many minutes to get to their recipient, Miura didn't waste time waiting for the answer and shouted an order to another operator in the center.

"Valdez! We are receiving a distress signal from the emergency buoy of the H.S.S. QUAZAR, which was operating in the LHS 288 System. The buoy is presently some two million kilometers from Callisto, in Quadrant Six. Send one of our shuttles to go retrieve that buoy. Make that a top priority task."

"I'm on it, Lieutenant!"

Returning her attention to Rose's display screen, Miura soon saw a long text appear on it, along with a star chart and a few pictures. Reading quickly the condensed report composed by the central computer of the QUAZAR, the young Spacers League officer let out a soft swear, realizing at once the importance of that information.

"By the Kamis! Those damn Drazt attacked and destroyed the QUAZAR inside the LHS 288 System. Apart from this being an act of war, this also means that the Drazt have finally managed to design a working interstellar drive. This is huge! I'm calling Admiral Xi about this. Rose, make me a copy of this emergency report on a data chip, so that I can give it to the Admiral."

Half a minute later, with the data chip given to her in one hand, Miura composed the call number of Admiral Xi Lao Tzu, the Chief of Staff of the Spacers League Navy. The reason that Miura was not calling the Admiral in Chief of the Navy was because no such position existed: Xi Lao Tzu was actually the highest ranking officer in the Navy. That was due to the fact that the Spacers League Navy was in reality a loose coalition of many space forces of various sizes which belonged to either one or another of the planetary systems governments or asteroid-based corporations which formed the Spacers League. As Chief of Staff of the Navy, Admiral Xi had the authority to coordinate on a daily basis the operations of the various ships belonging to the Spacers League...to an extent. Any major space operation, especially if it demanded some kind of armed military action, needed the explicit prior approval of the High Council, except of course if urgent defensive measures needed to be taken. An historian had once compared that arrangement to that of the antique League of Delos, which had linked together the forces of a number of ancient Greek city states under the leadership of Athens, and this in order to resist invaders like the Persian Empire and Sparta. That this said League of Delos had been plagued with disagreements and conflicting interests had not been lost on many when that comparison had been made.

Admiral Xi Lao Tzu was eating one of his favorite dishes, a Vietnamese recipe of spicy noodles called 'Bun Cha', at the officers' mess of the station when his wrist videophone buzzed. Excusing himself with the two senior officers he was having lunch with, he flipped open the cover cum viewing screen of his videophone, opening the link.

"Yes, Lieutenant? What do you have for me?"

"A top priority emergency situation, Admiral: the H.S.S. QUAZAR, which was exploring the LHS 288 System, was destroyed by a Drazt ship in that system. The

distress buoy of the QUAZAR jumped into our system some six minutes ago. A shuttle is now on its way to retrieve it and I have the condensed report from the buoy in our databanks.”

All idea of continuing his meal now gone, Xi jumped to his feet and started walking towards the mess’ exit while speaking in his videophone.

“I’m on my way to the operations center right now. Sound the general alarm around our whole system and place all our ships on top alert: this could possibly signal a general attack by the Drazt against us.”

“System’s general alarm and all our ship on top alert: understood, Admiral!”

Xi then closed the link with his operations center. As he was approaching the nearest bank of elevators, he took a decision and placed another call on a confidential personal line, getting an answer within seconds.

“Governor Robeson speaking!”

“Madam Governor, this is Admiral Xi, calling from our Navy’s command orbital station. I have grave news for you: our exploration ship H.S.S. QUAZAR has been destroyed by a Drazt ship while surveying the LHS 288 System.”

“WHAT?” was the shocked response from the governor. “How certain of that are we?”

“Very certain, Madam Governor: the distress buoy from the QUAZAR jumped back to our system a few minutes ago and we have the condensed report from the ship’s computer, composed only seconds before the buoy was ejected from the QUAZAR. I am now on my way to go analyze in detail that buoy’s report and will contact you again once I will have seen it. As a precaution, I just ordered a general alarm to be sounded across the Solar System and have put all our ships on top alert: this could possibly mean that the Drazt are planning to attack us. At the minimum, it tells us that the Drazt now have a functioning interstellar drive for their ships. As for the attack on our QUAZAR, an unarmed ship, it is nothing short of an act of war against us.”

Janet Robeson was silent for a couple of seconds as she was swallowing that news, then spoke up firmly.

“I concur with your assessment and agree with your actions, Admiral. Contact me again once you will have analyzed that buoy’s report. On my part, I will order the sending of star shuttles to our various members of the High Council, in order to inform them of this and to call for an emergency meeting of the High Council.”

"Understood, Madam Governor." said Xi before closing that link just as he was entering an elevator cabin.

Two minutes later, Xi was entering the operations center in hurried steps, with Lieutenant Miura going to him at once, a small data chip in her hand.

"Here is a copy of the QUAZAR's buoy report, Admiral. We have already started to analyze it in detail and the data leaves no doubt about what happened in the LHS 288 System: a Drazt ship engaged without provocation the QUAZAR with disintegrator cannon fire as it was mapping the second planet of the system."

"Damn! What do we have presently in the Solar System in terms of armed, jump capable ships?"

"Not much in truth, Admiral. As you know, the bulk of our planned fleet of interstellar warships is still under construction or running their acceptance trials, while their crews are still being trained. Right now, we have only three armed starships present in the system: the cruiser CENTURION; the brand-new patrol frigate ADMIRAL RODNEY and the KOSTROMA."

Xi gave Miura a sharp look when she mentioned the KOSTROMA.

"Where exactly is the KOSTROMA right now, Lieutenant?"

"It is presently docked at the America Passenger Terminal, in Earth orbit, loading passengers and cargo destined for New Haven."

"Call at once the KOSTROMA and have it stop its loading. It will unload all the passengers already aboard, then will leave for the LHS 288 System, where it will investigate on the spot the destruction of the QUAZAR. Once that is done, it will return here to present a detailed report to us. As for the CENTURION and the RODNEY, I want them to take defensive blocking orbits around Earth, to protect it from any Drazt attack."

"Understood, Admiral!"

With the precious data chip now in his hands, Xi then walked hurriedly to his command office, situated along a gallery overseeing the central operations room, where he was planning to review in detail the distress buoy's report. He mentally thanked the fact that all the ships now equipped with a Koomak Drive carried a jump-capable distress buoy. If not for that faithful decision, the destruction of the QUAZAR could well have stayed unknown to him for days or weeks, once an absence of reports from the QUAZAR would have prompted the sending of another ship to the LHS 288 System.

14:19 (Universal Time)

Sunday, March 05, 2322

Hangar Deck, A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Low polar orbit over LHS 288c

Tina was in attendance in Craft Hangar Number Two when a heavy manipulator robot carried into the hangar what was left of a standard ship's life pod. A shuttle had found it amidst the large debris field orbiting the second planet of the LHS 288 System and had brought it inside the Craft Airlock Number One, which was adjacent to Hangar Number Two. Ahmed Jibril, who had replaced Bill Morrison as Chief of Security aboard the KOSTROMA after Morrison had become the chief of public security for New Haven, was also in attendance, along with two of his guards, plus Tina's husband, Michel Koniev, and an engineering team. Tina's expression was grim as she looked at the heavily damaged life pod.

"The top third of this life pod was unquestionably vaporized by a direct hit from a disintegrator cannon. In view of the small size of the pod and of the distances involved, this was no random shooting: the Drazt deliberately shot at a life pod containing survivors from the QUAZAR. This is nothing less than a war crime. Ahmed, I want this to be treated like a crime scene. Have plenty of pictures taken of the outside and inside of that life pod and record everything."

"Understood, Tina!" replied the big man before looking at Jennifer Biddles, one of his two guards accompanying him. "Be ready with your camera, Jennifer. We will film the exterior of the life pod first once it has been put down on the deck, covering all the angles, then you will follow me inside."

"Got it!" said tersely the tough blond woman, already expecting to be confronted by some awful scene inside the damaged life pod.

The heavy manipulator robot finally put down the life pod on its fixed landing legs, its ovoid hull standing erect to a height of about four meters. However, the top meter had been disintegrated, leaving a large hole with blackened edges. As Ahmed and Jennifer slowly walked around the life pod to film it from all possible angles, Michel Koniev spoke to his wife in a low voice while pointing at the damaged top portion of the pod.

“With a hole that size, decompression must have been complete in a mere fraction of a second. The occupants of that life pod at least died quickly. You were right about this being a deliberate act. Such precise shooting against such a small target had to be deliberate. The fact that all of the other three life pods that had time to eject from the QUAZAR were also hit by disintegrator fire leaves no doubts about that.”

Tina shook her head in disgust as she still stared at the life pod.

“Even in our worst wars in Earth’s history, the shooting up of survivors and life boats from sunken ships was always considered as a crime and contrary to the laws of war. The attack on the QUAZAR is even more inexcusable when you consider that it was an unarmed ship and could not have possibly be a threat to that Drazt ship. The recordings from its distress buoy clearly showed that the QUAZAR identified itself as an exploration ship in its radio request for identification.”

“Those Drazt most probably didn’t want to leave any witnesses behind who could have alerted us to the fact that they now have a working interstellar drive.”

“I believe that you are correct about that, Michel, but it still does not excuse such an atrocity.”

Their tour around the life pod completed, Ahmed Jibril then went to the access hatch of the pod and, with Jennifer Biddles filming him from closely behind, turned the manual opening lever and pushed open the door, sticking his head inside, a flashlight in one hand. Tina felt dread when she saw Ahmed, a hardened, combat-experienced man suddenly back off and turn his head away, a look of horror distinctly visible on his face. As for Jennifer Biddles, she also turned away and violently threw up on the deck after one look inside. Walking quickly to Jennifer, Tina gently patted her shoulder while giving her a paper tissue.

“Here, Jennifer: clean up your mouth with this.”

“Thanks, Captain. Be careful: the sight inside the pod is horrible. There are at the least six bodies inside, all charred beyond recognition. Two of them are small children, judging from their size.”

“Can you continue filming? I can take over from you if you prefer to.”

“I...I will do my job, Captain.”

“Thank you, Jennifer. Take your time to go over this, though. I will go see myself in the meantime.”

Arming herself with courage, Tina then stuck her head inside the pod, looking around the three-meter diameter chamber with the help of a head lamp fixed over her forehead. Despite being warned, she still felt instant nausea and horror when she saw two small charred bodies, still attached to their seats and flanking the body of an adult who was probably one of their parents. As for knowing if it was the body of their mother or that of their father was impossible to say on first look, so burned up and shriveled it was. After looking around for a few seconds and counting a total of nine bodies, Tina withdrew from inside the life pod, leaving enough space to let Jennifer Biddle resume her camera work. She had to pause and close her eyes for a moment next to the life pod, time for her to recover from the scene of horror she had just embraced. When she opened her eyes again, her husband was gently holding her with one arm around her shoulders, a concerned expression on his face.

“Are you alright, Tina?”

“I will be. What a horrible sight! The Drazt will definitely have to pay for this.”

“What do you intend to do, Tina?”

“What we will do will be up to the Spacers League’s High Council. However, if it would be only for me to decide, I would gladly resort to good old gunboat diplomacy against those Drazt bastards.”

16:41 (Universal Time)

Government palace, Drakan City

Kadosh (Ross 128b)

“So, what are your recommendations about what to do next, now that we have a functioning interstellar drive?”

The four high-level Drazt officials facing Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh across a conference table hesitated a bit and looked at each other before Vice-Admiral Sho Dar, who had taken over command of the Navy after the death in battle of Admiral Tok Tharn, spoke up first.

“Supreme Conductor, we have studied various action scenarios, as you had requested. However, the results of our analysis of the battle where our fleet lost against that giant Human ship are not very encouraging as they pertain to our new capability.”

“What do you mean, Admiral?” replied Bar Kosh, irritation detectable in his tone of voice. “We can now travel through the stars, like the Humans do. We should thus be

able to strike back at them and avenge our thousands of navy crewmembers who died in battle against that KOSTROMA, no?"

"Uh, a number of things are complicating the situation, Supreme Conductor." Answered Sho Dar, feeling in his small shoes. "We will have to correct a number of deficiencies before we can attack the Humans, especially if we want to strike at their home world."

The choice of words by Sho Dar angered Bar Kosh, who slammed a pair of fists on the table.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'IF WE WANT'? I WANT TO STRIKE AT THE HUMAN HOME WORLD! THAT'S NOT AN OPTION!"

Defense Minister Muron Kha then tried to come to the help of his admiral.

"What Admiral Dar meant was that we presently lack a number of critical capabilities before we could strike the Solar System and cause enough damage to prevent the Humans from attacking us again, Supreme Conductor. Attacking before those deficiencies are corrected would doom our offensive to failure."

Somewhat calmed by those words, Bar Kosh looked severely at his defense minister.

"And what exactly are those 'deficiencies', Kha?"

"First and most evident, the severely depleted ranks of our Navy, Supreme Conductor. Despite the best efforts by our arsenals, we still have only eight patrol cruisers in service, compared to the 48 cruisers we had before the battle with the KOSTROMA. Worse, we are still training replacement crews for our cruisers still under construction. Unfortunately, such training cannot be cut short or neglected, as that would directly affect the combat performance of our Navy."

Bar Kosh could only nod his head at that.

"I will concede that point, Kha. What else?"

"Next is the limited combat capabilities of our cruisers, Supreme Conductor. If that disastrous battle with the KOSTROMA taught us something, it is that our ships' armament is wholly insufficient to engage such large and heavily armored enemy ships. Our standard disintegrator cannons were more than sufficient for centuries, while our cruisers engaged in routine patrols around our system, but they apparently barely scratched the massive bow shield of that damn KOSTROMA. We definitely need bigger and more powerful weapons and also more of them on each of our ships. The present standard of four medium cannons per cruiser is simply insufficient to engage successfully Human warships."

“But, the KOBOL, a simple frigate, just destroyed a Human ship around the Markan Prime System.”

That remark prompted Vice-Admiral Sho Dar into calling a data file on his personal data pad before passing it to Bar Kosh.

“After receiving and analyzing the mission report filled by Shipmaster Gor Mak, we found out from our data bank on Human ships that the ship the KOBOL destroyed was actually a luxury liner that has recently been converted into an exploration and survey ship, an image of which you can now see on my data pad. As such it had zero weapons and no ship armor and stood no chance at all in a combat against any of our warships. If the KOBOL would have met instead, let’s say, the KOSTROMA, then it would have been pulverized in an instant, Supreme Conductor.”

“I see! So, what kind of weaponry do we need for our ships, Admiral?”

“Apart from a lot more batteries and bigger disintegrator cannons than the ones presently standard on our cruisers, we will also need to have new weapons able to inflict massive damage to both ships, orbital installations and planetary targets. In essence, we will need to arm our ships with nuclear-tipped missiles before we could strike in a significant way the Human home system. Against a large orbital station or ground facility, our medium disintegrator cannons will be grossly insufficient. Our most recent intercepted electronic signals from the Solar System did indicate to us that a dozen giant, heavily armored and armed orbital stations defend the orbit of their home planet, Earth. There could be more of those defensive orbital stations around the Solar System. Right now, our battle simulations show that even all of our remaining cruisers would be destroyed if they attacked just one of those Human armed orbital stations.”

Bar Kosh frowned noticeably on hearing that, but he would have been much less shaken if he had known that those said orbital defense stations around Earth were things of the past, having been destroyed by the Spacers League some six years ago after it went to war against the Terran Federation in 2315. Unfortunately for the Drazt, simple physics was playing a nasty trick on them, as electronic emissions from the Solar System took nearly eleven years to reach Ross 129 while traveling at the speed of light. Thus, everything that the Drazt believed that they knew about the Humans was outdated by over a decade, with such things as the War of 2315 and the dismantlement of the Terran Federation being still unknown to them. However real or not, that information made Bar Kosh realize something very important and relevant to the discussion at hand.

“But, haven’t we scrapped all of our nuclear warheads centuries ago, after the first planet-wide government of Kadosh was formed? Do we have any of them left today?”

Defense Minister Kha shrunk at those two questions, knowing that Bar Kosh was not going to like his answers to them.

“Yes, we did scrap all of our nuclear warheads then, Supreme Conductor. Presently, we have none of them left in our arsenal.”

“But the Humans recently demonstrated to us that they possessed something even more destructive: anti-matter warheads. Are we capable of producing anti-matter warheads in quantity and, if not, how long would it take to produce missiles with thermonuclear warheads?”

“Presently, we only have the capability to produce infinitesimal quantities of anti-matter, Supreme Conductor, and this at a tremendous cost in energy. Worse, the little that we can produce is now used in priority to fuel our new interstellar drive. As you may know already, our new interstellar drive uses a tiny anti-matter pill for each jump that one of our ship accomplishes. Without those anti-matter pills, our interstellar drive becomes useless. Right now, and even with us rationing electrical power to the general public, we can produce a grand total of five anti-matter pills per solar rotation. Thus, stockpiling anti-matter warheads is simply impossible for us. As for producing thermonuclear warheads, that is thankfully a lot more feasible, as we still have working designs for such weapons. However, it will take quite a lot of time before we could build sizeable stocks of them: we have to restart production of the right fissile materials for them and will have to build brand new factories for that purpose.”

“We don’t have the time to wait, Admiral.” replied Bar Kosh, growing angry at Dar. “Sooner or later, the Humans will find out that we destroyed their exploration ship in the Markan Prime System and will then more than probably attack us. We need to attack first!”

As much as Vice-Admiral Sho Dar wished that he could do otherwise, he decided that he could no longer avoid giving Bar Kosh his honest professional opinion. The existence of Kadosh itself was now at risk if they made the wrong move. His own command position clearly had to pass after the outright survival of Kadosh and of the Drazt race today.

“Supreme Conductor, to be totally frank, I strongly believe that attacking the Humans, either soon or in the medium future, would be a horrible mistake that could cost our race dearly. Their weapons, as well as their expertise in war, are simply too superior

to our own combat capabilities. I thus recommend that we pursue for the moment a diplomatic approach to our conflict.”

Struck with sudden rage, Bar Kosh jumped to his feet and shook one fist in the face of the unfortunate Sho Dar.

“I DIDN’T PUT YOU IN CHARGE OF OUR NAVY JUST TO GET SUCH COWARDLY AND DEFEATIST ADVICE FROM YOU, SHO DAR! YOU ARE RELIEVED OF COMMAND AS OF RIGHT NOW! NOW, GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY PALACE!”

The poor Sho Dar, shaken to the core, had no choice left to him but to get up and leave, his head lowered in dishonor and embarrassment. After the door of the conference room closed behind Dar, Bar Kosh, still on his feet, pointed a finger at his defense minister.

“Kha, I want you to name immediately a replacement for this coward. Once that is done, boot Dar out of the Navy! And make sure that his replacement has more resolve than him.”

“Yes, Supreme Conductor!” could only answer Muron Kha, nearly as shaken as Sho Dar had been.

08:28 (Universal Time)

Thursday, March 9, 2322 (Earth calendar)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Patrolling the outer edge of the Ross 128 System

To say that the atmosphere around the bridge of the TARASK was serene would have been a gross misrepresentation as the crew went on with its patrol mission. By now, everybody aboard knew about the destruction of a Human ship in the Markan Prime System and, as the old saying went, were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Most apprehensive of the lot was the shipmaster, Dozna Wiss. She realized better than anyone how powerful Human warships could be, having witnessed the utter massacre of the fleet led by Admiral Tharn against the KOSTROMA. Having personally met Tina Forster, Dozna also appreciated how competent, brave and tactically savvy she was as a ship captain. If she represented the quality standard of most Human warship captains, then Dozna had good reasons to be worried about the future. Another factor that was disturbing Dozna was the abrupt sacking of Vice-Admiral Sho Dar, who had been widely

acknowledged before as a competent senior commander who cared about his crews. In his place now as Navy Commander was Vice-Admiral Lona Gren, a senior officer mostly known to be a politically-connected commander with little true leadership qualities. Dozna had met Lona Gren a number of times during her service and had not been impressed by her one bit.

Dozna was still mentally churning her pessimistic thoughts in her head when her sensors officer shouted an alarm, a bit of fear in his voice.

“SHIPMASTER, WE ARE DETECTING ON LONG RANGE SENSORS A GROUP OF FIVE SHIPS APPROACHING FROM THE DIRECTION OF THE HUMAN SOLAR SYSTEM.”

Dozna’s blood nearly froze in her veins on hearing that, but she did her best to keep her apparent calm as she started to give orders around her from her command chair.

“SOUND BATTLE STATIONS! MAN ALL OUR BATTERIES! DEFENSIVE SHIELDS AT MAXIMUM POWER! SENSORS, HOW FAR AWAY ARE THOSE SHIPS?”

“They are approximately four light-seconds away, at the limit of our radar coverage, Shipmaster. I am now detecting radar echoes bouncing off our ship: those ships probably detected us as well, Shipmaster.”

Dozna didn’t reply to that immediately as she furiously juggled mentally her options. She could of course simply flee towards Kadosh while sounding the alert by radio, which would be by far her safest option. However, that also meant that the approaching group of ships would be free to speed towards Kadosh without any opposition.

‘The shit is about to hit the fan!’ thought Dozna as she took the decision to stand her ground, no matter the cost to her ship.

“Signals Master, send the following alert message to Navy Headquarters: Fleet of five ships approaching the outer edge of Quadrant Seven, coming from the Solar System. Will try to delay their advance as much as possible. Repeat that message until you get an acknowledge.”

“Uh, understood, Shipmaster.” answered the poor communications officer, now as pale as a white sheet. The rest of the bridge crew had similar ‘we’re fucked!’ looks on their faces, something that Dozna couldn’t blame them for. In fact, she was not sure that she looked much more assured than them right now. Thinking about how she could

delay the most the advance of those five ships, she finally gave an order to the assistant communications officer.

“Assistant Signals Master, use the known emergency call frequency used by Humans and then connect the line to my command chair.”

“Yes, Shipmaster!”

Some ten seconds later, one of Dozna’s viewing screen came alive. Putting online the ship’s translation system and setting it to ‘Human English’, Dozna then started speaking in as firm a voice as she could muster.

“Unknown approaching ships, this is the patrol cruiser TARASK, of the Drazt Navy. Turn away at once from this system or we will engage you.”

‘Those Humans are probably going to laugh their heads off when they will receive my challenge.’ bitterly thought Dozna while her video signal took the few seconds to cover the distance between her cruiser and the Human ships. Some twelve seconds later, an image appeared on her screen. While not laughing, the Human now looking at her via their video link was smiling widely.

“Hello, Dozna! It is nice to see you again.”

‘I should have known!’ thought to herself Dozna while doing a facepalm before speaking out loud. “Fleet Captain Forster, state your purpose for coming to this system with five ships.”

The smile on Tina’s face then disappeared, to be replaced by a somber look.

“My purpose is to respond to the act of war one of your ships committed against an unarmed exploration ship in the LHS 288 System. I believe that you call that star system the ‘Markan Prime System’.”

‘Damn! Here we go! You may kiss your ass goodbye now, Dozna.’ thought Wiss.

“And what may your response be, Captain Forster?”

“Dozna, you are one cool customer, I have to give you that. In short, I want an unarmed delegation of no more than three Drazt high-level officials with real powers of decision to come here and visit my ship, where they will be presented with the terms of our ultimatum. If no officials show up within 24 Earth hours from now, or if they refuse the terms of our ultimatum, then we will consider ourselves at war with your race and act accordingly. Please emphasize in any message you will send home that we are not joking. You know very well that I have enough firepower on my ship alone to sterilize your home planet. Please don’t oblige me to apply the most severe option in my plans.

You may advise me as soon as you get a response from your government. In the meantime, my ships will hold position here. And tell your geniuses on Kadosh not to try another surprise attack on us.”

“I understand perfectly your message, Fleet Captain Forster. I will contact you again as soon as I get a response from Kadosh. TARASK out!”

Once the video link was cut, Dozna allowed herself to blow out a breath of relief: she now had at least a few minutes more to live.

After some seemingly interminable fifty minutes, a coded message was received from Kadosh aboard the TARASK. Reading it as soon as it had been decoded, Dozna felt some of her stress evaporate. Reestablishing a link with the KOSTROMA, she again saw the face of Tina on her screen.

“Fleet Captain Forster, I just got a response from Kadosh: a group of three officials will leave Kadosh shortly and will be here in about eleven of your hours. Will that be satisfactory to you?”

“Very much so, Dozna. I will be expecting them. Tell your envoys to board your ship first. Then, one of my runabouts will come to your ship to take them to the KOSTROMA. After our last encounter, you will understand that I am not ready to let any uninspected Drazt craft approach my ship. You can also tell them that they have my sworn word that they will not be harmed in any way while aboard my ship.”

“I know that you will respect your word, Tina.” said Dozna, using her opponent’s first name for the first time today and making a couple of heads twist around in surprise around her bridge. “I sincerely hope that we will be able to come to a peaceful agreement.”

“I sincerely hope as well, Dozna. KOSTROMA out!”

20:04 (Universal Time)

Hangar Deck of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

To their collective surprise, no party of heavily armed guards was waiting for the three Drazt delegates when they walked out of the small runabout which had come to the TARASK to get them and had then carried them to the KOSTROMA. What they found was a few crafts parked in the hangar where the runabout had finally landed, but no living person. The only Human present was in fact the lone pilot of their runabout, a

young woman wearing a simple ship coverall and a pair of boots, but also not carrying any visible weapon. Chief Advisor Gorat Vorka bent sideways to whisper in the ear of Division Master Korb Ren, who officially represented the Drazts Navy for this visit but who was in reality the head of the Navy Intelligence Division.

“How come they have no guards waiting for us? Are they playing some kind of psychological trick on us?”

“That is very possible, Chief Advisor. From what we know of their history, their long experience of warfare has made them develop all the possible aspects of war, including propaganda and deceit. I am however sure that armed Humans are hiding not too far, ready to intervene if we would try anything against this ship. Just act as if you are visiting a friendly ship and we should be alright.”

“Can we truly trust the word of these Humans, Division Master Ren?” asked Defense Minister Muron Kha, also whispering, making Kha nod his head once.

“Yes! From what we know of this Fleet Captain Forster, she is a highly principled person, even though she is also a dangerous tactical opponent. I don’t expect any treachery on her part.”

What Ren didn’t say and kept to himself was that Forster had proved to have a higher sense of honor than that of his two companion delegates or of late Admiral Tharn, who had planned and directed the ill-fated surprise attack on the KOSTROMA during the preceding visit by Forster to Kadosh. He thus kept silent as their runabout’s pilot led them out of the crafts hangar and through a personnel airlock, ending in what appeared to be a sort of craft maintenance workshop. Crossing the workshop, they ended in a wide-open space over ten-meter-wide and twelve-meter-high, which seemed to form a sort of ring around what had to be the core section of the ship. While not commenting out loud about what he was seeing, Korb Ren mentally recorded everything significant he was seeing on this visit. Up to now, he had to say that he was truly impressed. This KOSTROMA was a true leviathan of space, immensely larger than any existing Drazt ship. Due to its sheer size, the thickness and thus solidity and resistance to hits of its various bulkheads and hull structures, made evident to him as his group went through various airtight doors, proved impressive to Ren: only a nuclear weapon would be able to inflict any significant damage to this behemoth.

Going through another airtight door, which was made of thick steel, the group, still led by the Human female pilot, entered what appeared to be the core section. Using

his portable translator unit, Ren couldn't help ask a question to his Human guide at the sight of two huge armored doors visible to his right.

"Uh, this seems to be a sort of communication space, Miss Silisca, but what are these huge doors for, if I may ask?"

The female Human answered him at once without hesitation while pointing the doors, each measuring ten meters by twelve meters.

"Those are the access doors to the two heavy cargo lifts running up and down the centerline axis of the KOSTROMA. Those lifts are used to move between decks various cargo containers, heavy vehicles and heavy cargo pallets. We also have four smaller cargo lift wells and twelve personnel lifts inside this core section and which also run along the whole length of the ship."

"Are you saying that this is a cargo ship, and not a warship?" asked a shocked Gorat Vorka, attracting a malicious smile on the face of Eve Silisca.

"Chief Advisor Vorka, the 'A.M.S.' in this ship's name stands for 'Armed Merchant Ship'. The KOSTROMA is first and foremost a heavy lift cargo ship, although it is no slouch in any battle. The four other ships you saw while approaching the KOSTROMA are however dedicated warships, designed and built exclusively for war."

The three Drazt couldn't help exchanged worried glances on hearing that: while not as big as the KOSTROMA by a far shot, those four other ships they had seen from the runabout had each looked much bigger and more massive than a Drazts patrol cruiser. Eve then invited the three Drazt to enter with her one of the elevator lifts lining the centerline column forming the spine of the ship.

The lift ride proved short, with the group going up by only nine levels before the cabin stopped and its doors slid open. The three Drazt had to stop and look around them once out of the elevator: they had expected to arrive at some kind of command or executive complex. Instead, they now stood in a ten-meter-wide and four-meter-high circular hallway forming a doughnut around the core spine. Along the outer walls of the rotunda were a number of offices and what appeared to be commercial public facilities, while a few dozen Humans went around, using those facilities.

"What is this place, Miss Silisca?" asked Gorat Vorka, confused.

"You are presently on the Human Services Deck, on Level 16. It contains mostly educational, medical and entertainment facilities, along with a few administrative offices.

As you can see, we have families with children living aboard, so this ship was built with facilities to educate and care for them”

“And where are we going exactly?”

“We are going to a quiet place where you will meet the leader of the Spacers League, Governor Janet Robeson, who will then present you with the terms of our ultimatum.” answered matter-of-factly Eve. Thus reminded of the prime reason of his trip, Vorka and his two companions followed Eve along one of the four wide hallways running outward from the core section. After walking some sixty meters, they arrived at a wide, thick steel airlock sliding door which opened automatically when they approached it, revealing the inside of a large personnel airlock with a similar sliding door at its extremity. Korb Ren felt both awe and apprehension as he was able to judge the thickness of the outer bulkhead of this section: while most probably a multi-layered bulkhead with empty space within it, the bulkhead was over a meter-thick steel sandwich! Yet, in proportion to the whole ship, that was like a paper-thin wall. The resistance to damage of this giant cargo ship had to be nothing short of phenomenal. However, another and even bigger surprise awaited the three Drazt when they passed the outer door of the airlock and they had to stop, frozen by stupor.

“A...a forest, here in a spaceship?” managed to say with difficulty Muron Kha, as he looked around him at the large forest of black spruce, balsam fir, jack pine and other boreal coniferous trees, which extended beyond his visual reach. Looking up, he saw what had to be giant display screens, covering the ceiling at a height of eighty meters and simulating a starry night sky with a large, bright moon. The air was actually quite fresh and carried the scent of the coniferous trees surrounding the group. After giving a few seconds for the Drazt to recover their wits, Eve pointed down a small paved trail to their left which meandered through the forest.

“If you may follow me, gentlemen. By the way, this is only one of the four forest habitats you will find on this ship, each of which covers 7.1 hectares and recreates a different ecosystem as found on Earth. All those trees are real ones, not fakes or optical illusions. We will now follow that forest path, which will bring you to where Governor Robeson and Fleet Captain Forster are waiting for you.”

When the group finally saw Janet Robeson and Tina Forster, it was after walking for maybe forty meters along the meandering trail and arriving in a clearing where a large water pond sat. Around the water pond was a grassy area maybe four meters

wide and surrounded by trees on three sides. The fourth side was made up of a high rock cliff along which ran down a small cascade of crystal-clear water which ended into the pond. A few wooden park benches and picnic tables were dispersed along the shoreline of the pond and the noise of bird songs mixed with the noise of cascading water to make the place a most relaxing one.

"This is incredible, so beautiful and serene." couldn't help say Korb Ren, truly impressed by all this. "That such a place could exist in a spaceship is mind-boggling."

"Captain Forster wanted her ship to be like a village in space, where her crew and their families could travel around space while feeling at home, with plenty of natural beauty surrounding them." explained Eve. "Beyond this forested area is an outer ring containing giant aquariums full of Earth marine life. But we are here for business, deadly business, so let me present you to my leaders."

Leading the Drazt to one of the picnic tables where Janet Robeson and Tina Forster sat, waiting, Eve then presented her three charges to Janet Robeson, who had stood up from her bench, like Tina Forster.

"Madam Governor, these are Chief Advisor Gorat Vorka, Defense Minister Muron Kha and Navy Intelligence Division Master Korb Ren. Gentlemen, this is Governor Janet Robeson, Chairperson of the High Council of the Spacers League."

"Uh, wait! How do you know that..." started saying Ren, stunned. That made Tina Forster grin with malice.

"Don't forget that we copied all the data contained in the central computer of the MURKAN during our first ever encounter with your race, Division Master Ren. That data contained complete files about the organization, hierarchy, equipment and support facilities of your navy. If we ever are obliged to strike you militarily, then we already know precisely where and what to strike. But don't worry about yourself being unmasked: I was fully expecting to see you here."

'Damn that female Human! She is way too clever for our own good.' thought Ren. However, Janet Robeson spoke up before he could respond to Tina.

"Gentlemen, and I am measuring my words here for the sake of politeness, one of your ships committed five days ago what can only be called an act of war by destroying without provocation or even prior warning an unarmed exploration ship of the Spacers League. Furthermore, that act of war was compounded by a war crime committed by your ship when, after having destroyed the H.S.S. QUAZAR, it deliberately

targeted and shot up the four life pods which had managed to eject from the QUAZAR with a few rare survivors. Before you attempt to deny that act, please look at these pictures on my laptop.”

The three Drazts looked down at the laptop sitting on the picnic table and which Robeson was turning around, so that they could look at its display screen. The first picture shown was that of what remained of a life pod that had been half vaporized by disintegrator fire. Two more pictures followed at a few seconds interval as Janet Robeson spoke, her voice cold and resentful.

“These pictures show what was left of three of the four life pods that had managed to eject from our doomed ship. As you can see, all three were hit directly by disintegrator cannon fire. Those hits were no mere flukes, as these life pods are quite small, thus hard to target from long distance. The fourth and fifth pictures you will now see show the fourth life pod which ejected out. It was also hit by disintegrator fire but that hit was more a glancing blow than a direct hit and only one third of its top section was vaporized. However, that was more than enough to kill all of the nine shipwrecked survivors inside the pod. As you can see on the fifth picture, two of those survivors had been small children. They died beside their mother, completely incinerated like the other occupants of that life pod.”

Even Korb Ren, who had seen his share of victims of space accidents in the past, had to turn his eyes away from the picture, feeling nausea rise in him. He then mentally damned Shipmaster Gor Mak, who had pasted over in his mission report that part of his encounter with the QUAZAR. However, Janet Robeson continued to speak, her tone of voice becoming even harsher now.

“It is true that we Humans have been engaged into a multitude of fratricidal wars in our past but, even then, we tried during the last few centuries to limit the damage and pain caused by those wars by following a few basic universal rules, which we call ‘the laws of war’. Those rules were not always adhered to, far from it, but those who broke those rules and lost their wars then had to face justice for the crimes they committed. One of the cardinal rules of war at sea or in space is that survivors from a sunk or destroyed ship had to be rescued and then treated humanely by their adversaries. Even during our most savage recent wars, that rule was respected in the overwhelming proportion of cases. Those who disrespected that rule could count on being severely judged and punished, often getting the death penalty for their crime. Well, we want

justice for the crimes committed against the QUAZAR and its 188 occupants. You may want to sit and note down what I will tell you next, gentlemen.”

The three Drazt did so, taking out their respective data pads before looking back at Robeson. The latter then spoke in a slow, clear voice, making sure that the Drazt understood fully what she was saying.

“Here are the terms of the ultimatum from my Spacers League to the Drazt Empire. First, the Drazt Empire will have to pledge that it will not attack again any of our ships, space installations or planetary worlds, ever! Any such attack will attract an immediate and overwhelming retaliatory strike from us, going if need be all the way to the sterilization of your home planet of Kadosh. Second, the Drazt Empire will pay a monetary compensation of fifty tons of pure gold for the destruction of our ship and the killing of its occupants. That gold will in turn be used by us to give some measure of compensation to the surviving relatives of our people killed. Third, we want the captain of the ship that destroyed the QUAZAR to be delivered to us, so that he could pay for his crimes. If he is not in our hands within two weeks of our calendar, then we will launch an all-out attack against Kadosh. Fourth, since that ship captain most probably got his mission orders directly from your precious Supreme Conductor and since that Supreme Conductor also most probably ordered or at least allowed the past treacherous attack by your fleet against the KOSTROMA and my special envoy, Fleet Captain Forster, we consider that peace between our two races will be impossible as long as Bar Kosh remains your Supreme Conductor. We thus demand that he resigns forthwith as Supreme Conductor and retires from his position of power. If either he or you refuse to obey that fourth term, then we will launch an attack on Kadosh and make sure ourselves that your Bar Kosh is taken out of power, one way or the other.”

“But, what you are asking for is nothing less than inciting a civil war on Kadosh.” Protested Gorat Vorka. “You know very well that our Supreme Conductor will never agree to be humiliated in such a way, while you will find that he has both the respect and loyalty of his people.”

“Then, he will die, along with those who will insist on continuing to support him. If he truly cares about his people, then he will abdicate and disappear from power. However, our own Human history has shown us that dictators and absolute rulers are always the ones least ready to pass the good of their people over their own personal power. We had such men as Napoleon, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Bokassa of the Central African Republic, President

Zembelo and Marshall Khan of the Southern Federation to prove that point over and over again. If Bar Kosh refuses to step down, then you better make sure that he does step down, or you will collectively pay for his selfishness and egomania.”

“Is that it?” asked Gorat Vorka in a bitter tone. “What do we get in exchange if, and I say ‘if’, we obey all of your terms?”

Janet Robeson stared hard in Vorka’s eyes as she answered him firmly.

“Then, we will not attack your planet and you will be allowed to continue to travel through space...within specific limits.”

She then changed the picture on her laptop in order to show a star chart, at the same time that she handed both a printed star chart and a data chip to Vorka.

“These are the limits of the space you will be able to travel through and colonize new worlds. Basically, your zone of control will cover a sphere some five light-years wide around your star system, plus all the space included in a thirty-degree cone expanding from your local sphere towards the Galactic North. As you can see, there are nine other star systems just within your local sphere, plus twelve more star systems contained within forty light-years of the cone of space indicated on this chart. That should be more than enough to allow your race to expand and find new resources for itself. However, if one of our ships encounters one of your ships outside of the zone allotted to you, then we will challenge your ship and oblige it to return to your allotted zone. In return, we pledge that none of our ships will legally enter your zone without your consent. If you ever feel the need to contact or visit us for diplomatic purposes, then we will allow a single unarmed ship at a time to visit our colony in the Alpha Centauri B System.”

“And I suppose that you are reserving all the rest of space to yourself, Governor Robeson?” replied Gorat Vorka, feeling deep resentment and indignation mounting in him. Robeson replied with a cold stare.

“Not all of it. Know that, even though we ourselves barely started exploring the star systems in our local area, we have already encountered a total of nine other intelligent races, not counting the Drazt. Most of those races willingly allowed us to visit their worlds or even gave us the rights for some limited use of their worlds, subject to their own conditions. We also found the remains of a long-gone civilization which basically destroyed itself in a massive nuclear war some sixteen million years ago. All this is to say that the Universe around us is full of life, both sentient and non-sentient, and that we don’t have the right to appropriate all of it because of our greed or vanity.”

“What if we ever wish to conduct trade with you in the future?” asked Korb Ren, both shocking and surprising his two companions. That question made Janet Robeson soften considerably her expression.

“That would be most welcomed by us and we would certainly entertain any diplomatic talks on that subject in the Alpha Centauri B System, Division Master Ren. Whether you will believe me or not, I say to you now that we have no wish to make war with you, as long as you accept our terms and refrain from any further aggressive acts.”

“Your history is littered with wars, big and small, over a period of thousands of your years.” said Muron Kha. “Your race doesn’t strike us as a pacifist one, Governor Robeson. Why would we believe your claim that you do not wish to make war against us?”

“Let me answer that, Governor.” then cut in Tina Forster. After a nod of the head from Janet, Tina took out her data pad and called up a picture on its screen before turning it around to show it to the three Drazt. To the latter’s surprise, it showed a little Drazt baby sleeping in its cradle.

“This is Riza, the baby daughter of Shipmaster Lem Dov. While on my previous diplomatic mission to Kadosh, I was able to visit Lem Dov and his family at a time when he was still in disgrace and living in an impoverished district of Drakan City. That is where I saw little Riza and took a picture of her. To answer your question, Minister Kha, I fervently wish that we could avoid a war between our two races, so that little Riza does not possibly end up like the two unfortunate Human children found incinerated inside a life pod from the QUAZAR. Innocents too often pay the price of war, rather than the bastards who caused them. I don’t want to see millions of Drazt civilians die in such a war, nor do I relish the thought of having possibly to kill thousands of Drazt Navy crewmembers, some of which I have met personally. However, I will have no compunction about turning your Supreme Conductor’s palace into a pile of smoking rubble if it takes that to achieve peace.”

While Muron Kha and Gorat Vorka showed some skepticism about her claims, Korb Ren was left both conflicted and shaken by her words. He however hid his true feelings behind a mask of impassiveness as Janet Robeson addressed Gorat Vorka.

“So, what is your answer to my terms, Chief Advisor Vorka? I do hope that you have the power to take decisions by yourself and that you will be able to give me more than a ‘definite maybe’.”

"Governor Robeson, I am the most senior advisor to Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh and have plenty of personal power, thank you. However, such grave decisions can only be taken or approved by the Supreme Conductor, and no one else."

"Can I at least hope that you will advocate that he accepts my terms, Chief Advisor Vorka?" pointedly asked Robeson, getting a bit pissed.

"You can, Governor! Be assured that our Supreme Conductor has only the good of his people at heart."

"Very well, then. I will now let you go and return to your ship and Kadosh. I will stay here and wait for your definite reply by radio to my ultimatum. You have three Earth days to give me an answer. After that, if I don't get a clear answer or get a refusal, my fleet will then attack Kadosh. Am I clear on that, Chief Advisor Vorka?"

"Very clear, Governor Robeson. We will answer you within three days. Goodbye, Governor."

"And goodbye to you, gentlemen. Eve, you may now bring these gentlemen back to their ship."

"Yes, Madam Governor!"

As the Drazt turned around and left the area of the pond, with Eve Silisca to guide them, Janet Robeson gave a questioning look to Tina Forster, who appeared thoughtful.

"What do you think, Tina? Will their Bar Kosh accept my terms?"

"Him? Not very likely. However, some of his entourage may get cold feet and decide to force him into accepting our terms. That Division Master Ren in particular seemed to have taken very seriously our threats. I just hope that his political masters will not purge him, or worse, for advocating for peace."

"Yeah! Dictators like Stalin or Hitler tended to react badly to contrary opinions." said bitterly Janet Robeson, having few illusions about how this could all end.

08:16 (Universal Time)

Friday, March 10, 2322 (Earth calendar)

Tarmac of the Drazt Navy Astroport, Drakan City

Kadosh (Ross 128b)

Division Master Korb Ren, having just disembarked with Gorat Vorka and Muron Kha from the fast courier ship that had brought them back from their meeting on the

KOSTROMA, was about to follow the two politicians inside an air limousine sent from the government palace when Gorat Vorka turned around and blocked his path.

“I am sorry, Division Master Ren, but your presence will not be needed at the palace. You may return to Navy Headquarters to prepare your report on our visit to the KOSTROMA.”

Vorka then got in the limousine, which then took off and flew away towards the Supreme Conductor’s palace, leaving a bitter Ren standing alone on the tarmac. Ren had no illusions about why he had not been allowed to go to the palace: Vorka most probably had found him too ready to negotiate with the Humans. In fact, Ren would not be surprised at all if he found himself relieved of command in the next few hours, the same way the unfortunate Vice-Admiral Sho Dar had been sacked by the Supreme Conductor and had then been replaced as Navy Commander by that political toady, Lona Gren. Bitterness was then replaced by a sense of doom: if, as he fully expected now, the Supreme Conductor decided to refuse the terms of the ultimatum given by the Humans, then the Drazt race could well face mass destructions and deaths, even extinction as a civilization. Discouraged and feeling helpless, Korb Ren looked slowly around him while trying to think about a viable solution to this lethal problem. His eyes then caught on the patrol cruiser MURKAN, which was parked on one of the landing pads of the astroport and was being serviced and resupplied. Taking a sudden decision, Ren then started walking resolutely towards Lem Dov’s ship.

17:59 (Universal Time)

Officers’ mess of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Holding a blocking position facing the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Outer edge of the Ross 128 System

Shipmaster Dozna Wiss was forking around her salad without much appetite, despite the fact that Kovor Salad was her favorite dish. Despite their powerful appearances and strong jaws, the Drazt were in reality mostly vegetarian creatures. Apart from vegetables, nuts and fruits, their diet included as well pastas and bread made from cereals, but no meat, fish or other animal protein except for the occasional eggs or milk. What made Kovor Salad Dozna’s favorite dish was the intricate mix of vegetable oil dressing and spices added to the variety of fresh vegetables in it. Yet, right now, it felt nearly tasteless to the depressed Dozna, who could only think about what the near

future would bring to her race. As she tried another bite of her meal, she saw her signals officer enter the officers' mess and walk towards her table, a pocket crypto machine in one hand. Dozna immediately put down her fork, wiped her mouth clean and straightened up in her chair: this could only mean that they had just received an encrypted 'Shipmaster's Eyes Only' message. In that case, on the receipt of such a message in the transmission room of the TARASK, it was loaded, still in encrypted form, on a pocket crypto unit, then the original was erased from the ship's data banks. The pocket crypto unit, with the still encrypted message in it, would then be brought by hand to the shipmaster, who would have to have his or her identity verified via eye scan before he or she could decrypt the message and read it. Then, the shipmaster would have the option of either printing a paper copy of the message or of simply deleting it after committing its content to memory. This procedure thus ensured that nobody but the shipmaster of a given ship would be able to know the content of that message. Such messages were actually not uncommon in the Drazt Navy, an organization where mutual trust, especially between senior commanders and their subalterns, was not exactly a common virtue.

The signals officer stopped at attention next to Dozna's table, then handed her the pocket crypto unit.

"Shipmaster's Eyes Only message for you, ma'am!"

"Thank you, Vogn!" said Dozna while taking the brick-sized device. She put one eye against the reticle of the eye scanner and, when her identity was formally established by the device, pressed the 'Decrypt' button. A text message covering less than one full page then appeared on the viewing screen, which she had to look at while pressing her face against a rubber ring which prevented anyone else from seeing the screen. The nervous twitch and body stiffening she did as she read did not escape her signals officer, a male she was on most friendly terms with.

"Is everything alright, Shipmaster?"

Dozna took some time to answer him, doing her best to hide the shock that the message had caused in her.

"Yes, Vogn! I will hold to this for the moment. Could you please call all the officers to the mess for an urgent command meeting? And make sure that the stewards and cooks are not around."

"Of course, Shipmaster! You can count on me, Shipmaster."

The tone in which Vogn said his last sentence made Dozna look up into his eyes to scrutinize his expression. What she saw was friendship and trust.

“I know that I can, Vogn. Thank you for your loyal services.”

As Vogn walked away and left the small mess, Dozna used the ‘Print’ button of the crypto device to print the message on a pocket memo format, but did not delete yet the electronic message as she would normally have to do. Calling the head steward of the mess to her table, she gave her a simple order.

“Dara, tell the cooks and the stewards to leave the mess area and to not return until I say so. That includes you as well.”

“Understood, Shipmaster!” replied the curious but obedient female.

Some six minutes later, the 37 officers of the ship, out of a total crew of 226, were assembled in the mess around Dozna, who now stood in a corner of the mess. What they couldn’t see was that the retaining strap of her regulation pistol’s holster was snapped loose, with her pistol’s safety on ‘fire’. She first looked around at the small crowd of males and females facing her in a semi-circle before speaking: all of them had served on her ship for at least six deca-rotations and had proved their loyalty towards her many times.

“My dear fellow officers, I called you here so that I could inform you about an encrypted ‘Shipmaster’s Eyes Only’ message we just received from Navy Headquarters. As you well know by now, our government still has two percent of a rotation to answer officially the ultimatum given to us by the Humans. Well, the message we just got was our answer to that ultimatum...sort of.”

The assembled officers tensed up as one, sniffing a bad news to come. However, what Dozna said then was even worse than what they had imagined.

“I will now read aloud to you the message I got, signed by Vice-Admiral Gren, and which I was not supposed to inform you of in detail. It says, quote, from Navy Headquarters to Shipmaster of patrol cruiser TARASK. Secret, Shipmaster’s Eyes Only. The Supreme Conductor has decided to reject the terms of the ultimatum received from the Humans and has ordered the Navy to fight them to the death. As a result, all the patrol cruisers and frigates still in service will converge on the present position of the Human ships and prepare for a mass coordinated attack, while staying out of radar range of the Human ships. At the exact time given in this message, all our ships will then accelerate at full power towards the Human ships while flying zigzag courses and

will concentrate their firepower on the largest Human ship, the KOSTROMA, with the goal of destroying it. If, for some reason, our firepower proves insufficient to destroy that ship, then our cruisers are to continue to fly at full acceleration towards the KOSTROMA and ram it. Our still surviving ships will then ram the remaining Human warships. The sheer survival of our race as an independent civilization will be at that cost. Our Supreme Conductor is confident that you will serve the Empire loyally, no matter the price. Long live the Empire! Signed, Vice-Admiral Gren, unquote.”

When Dozna raised her eyes from her printed message, she saw a collection of tightened jaws and somber faces.

“You may now ask questions or make comments about this message, comrades. Be assured that what you will say to me will not be used against you and will not pass the doors of this mess. Be frank and direct!”

Her signals officer, Vogn, was the first to raise one hand to ask permission to speak.

“Yes, Vogn?”

“Shipmaster, wasn’t a similar kind of coordinated mass attack attempted before against the KOSTROMA, and this with 42 of our cruisers?”

“Yes, and all 42 of our cruisers were destroyed by the KOSTROMA, which at the time was alone, contrary to now.”

“Then, what makes Vice-Admiral Gren think that such an attack, but with less than what, fifteen ships, will be successful this time?”

“An excellent question, my dear Vogn. Tactically, I would qualify Vice-Admiral Gren’s attack plan as nothing less than suicidal, with only small chances of actually destroying the KOSTROMA or inflict serious damage to it. As for defeating the whole Human battle fleet facing us right now, you would have to be delusional to believe in that.”

“Then, why attack like this, Shipmaster?” asked the medical officer of the TARASK, Healer First Class Teona Far. Dozna gave her a pained look while answering her.

“Forgive me all for what I am going to say, my friends. I believe that the only true goal of that senseless attack is to buy enough time for the Supreme Conductor and his close entourage to flee Kadosh and escape to another star system aboard our experimental interstellar ship, the frigate KOBOL. If Vice-Admiral Gren really believes that a suicide charge by us will scare away the Humans, then it will only prove that she understands nothing about them. We are dealing here with an alien race that has been

fighting wars for as long as they have existed, including wars with modern technology and spaceships. We, on the other hand, have not experienced war for eons, that is until we tried a surprise attack against their KOSTROMA, which by the way is not even a dedicated warship. According to Intelligence Division Master Ren, who visited the KOSTROMA as part of our recent delegation, the KOSTROMA is merely an armed merchant ship. However, the four other large ships we are also facing now are purpose-built warships. I can only imagine how terrifying they could prove in a battle.”

Dozna was easily able to feel the wave of fear that went through the ranks of her officers. However, she understood their reaction too well: the notion of dying for no good purpose while facing an overwhelmingly superior enemy would have scared anyone with a grain of common sense. However, they would probably still be all willing to fight, if at least it gave them any chance to repulse the Humans and avoid the destruction of the Drazt race. Another officer, her chief engineer, then asked another question.

“Shipmaster, what did the Human ultimatum say in the case where we would refuse their terms?”

“They would then attack Kadosh, concentrating first their fire on the imperial palace, then at our Navy’s installations. They however appeared unwilling to indiscriminately bombard our cities unless forced to, according to Division Master Ren.”

“So, all this is being done solely to save the Supreme Conductor and his hold on power, right?” asked Teona Far, a female officer who tended to say things as they were.

“Correct, Teona. Vice-Admiral Gren’s plan, which was most probably ‘suggested’ to her by the Supreme Conductor or by one of his toadies, will only result in the total destruction of our navy, followed by a large-scale attack by the Human fleet against our home world.”

There was a long silence before Dozna’s first officer, Kol Drak, spoke up hesitantly.

“So, what do we do now, Shipmaster?”

“Wait and hope, Kol. I am far from sure that the majority of our shipmasters will accept to needlessly sacrifice their entire crews in such a pointless attack. The planned hour for that coordinated attack is anyway still a while off, probably to allow our dispersed ships to concentrate in this region. When it will be close to the planned attack time, I will then inform you of my intentions. Be assured however that I will then act in the best interests of our whole race. Can I count on you to follow me, whatever course of action I choose?”

“YES, SHIPMASTER!” answered in unison and without hesitation every officer present.

CHAPTER 14 – DEMONSTRATION OF FORCE

04h51 (Universal Time)

Saturday, March 11, 2322

Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

On station at the edge of Ross 128 System

Making sure that all of her bridge crew now wore their spacesuits, with their visors opened for the moment, Tina Forster twisted her neck to look at Governor Janet Robeson, sitting in one of the V.I.P. seats of the bridge and also wearing a spacesuit.

“Ready to tango, Governor?”

“Ready, Fleet Captain! Show me your magic!”

“With pleasure, Governor! Patricia, how many Drazt ships are now in position around us and at what distance are they staying?”

“The passive sensors readings from our pre-positioned stealth probes indicate a total of eight cruisers, including the TARASK, plus four frigates. While the TARASK is still holding position at about two light-seconds in front of us, the other Drazt ships are staying at a distance of five to six light-seconds from our fleet, beyond the theoretical detection limit of our radars...but not of our stealth probes. The last ship took position five minutes ago and there is 33 minutes left before their designated attack time.”

Tina nodded once, satisfied. Spirit had once again performed miracles and had managed to break the code presently used by the Drazt Navy. Mind you, that had been made easier by the fact that, while the Drazt had changed their codes last year, they had only changed the permutations in them and kept the same basic encryption architecture. Tina had thus been able to read the message received by the TARASK a mere few minutes after Dozna Wiss had read it. Also, the stealth probes used by her ship during the battle against Admiral Tharn’s fleet over fifteen months ago had stayed in their hiding spots after the battle and had simply become dormant, until reactivated some twelve hours ago. With the Drazt apparently not realizing that the KOSTROMA was holding position in the same region than the one where Tharn’s fleet had been destroyed, the stealth probes had been in able to blow the cover of the Drazt fleet...again. She now had the totality of the Drazt Navy where she wanted it, except maybe for one ship.

However, that missing ship's respite was not going to be a long one. Opening her fleet communications channel, Tina spoke calmly but firmly in her helmet microphone.

"To all ships, from the KOSTROMA. The battle line will advance on my command. Master countdown starting...now!"

On the Drazt cruiser TARASK, Shipmaster Dozna Wiss was starting to feel fatigue from having been on combat alert for nearly two days now, with only brief periods of rests at intervals. Her bridge crew was equally tired, apart from being under increased stress as the time for the attack approached. Looking at her ship's chronometer, Dozna decided that it was time for her to decide what she would do and was about to do a collective call to the other Navy ships in the vicinity when her sensors officer yelled a warning.

"SHIPMASTER, THE HUMAN FLEET HAS STARTED TO ACCELERATE TOWARDS US! THEY ARE ADVANCING IN AN EXTENDED BATTLE LINE!"

Dozna felt total frustration on hearing that: she was not going to have the time to discuss with the other shipmasters about whether they should attack the KOSTROMA or not. Worse, if she refused to do battle now and retreated, then she and her whole crew were going to be branded as cowards. She now had no choice but to fight.

"PILOT, START ACCELERATING STRAIGHT AT THE KOSTROMA! FULL ACCELERATION! SIGNALS MASTER: ADVISE THE OTHER SHIPS THAT THE HUMAN FLEET IS NOW ON THE MOVE."

"AYE, SHIPMASTER!"

Then, a mere few seconds later, her sensors officer shouted again.

"THE...THE HUMAN FLEET: IT JUST DISAPPEARED! I DON'T HAVE THEM ANYMORE ON EITHER MY RADARS OR MY INFRARED DETECTORS."

"WHAT? USE ALL OUR SENSORS: FIND THOSE HUMAN SHIPS!"

After working for a frantic minute, the poor sensors officer could only look at Dozna Wiss with a haggard expression.

"I am sorry, Shipmaster: The Human ships are nowhere in sight."

"How could that be? They have to be somewhere around." said Dozna before she understood in a flash where the Human ships could have gone. Blood drained from her face as she realized that she and the other navy ships had just been had.

"By the ancestors! They must have jumped straight to Kadosh! And our whole navy is now here, eleven hours away from Kadosh. Forster played us for a bunch of

fools! PILOT, REVERSE COURSE! HEAD AT FULL ACCELERATION TOWARDS KADOSH! SIGNALS MASTER, WARN THE FLEET!"

04:58 (Universal Time)

Quadrant space traffic control center

Kar Lev-Dom orbital station and space terminal

Medium equatorial orbit of Kadosh (Ross 128b)

One of the six Drazt space traffic controllers on duty in the control center, itself part of the huge Kar Lev-Dom orbital station and space terminal, did a double take when her radar display sphere suddenly showed five new echoes seemingly coming from nowhere.

"Woah! Where are those five ships coming from?"

Designating electronically those five dots, Dara Swit got only a blank information box from the high-capacity computer which analyzed the data collected by the sensors of the station.

"Unknown contacts!? Is this a joke? SUPERVISOR ROKAN, I HAVE FIVE SHIPS THAT JUST APPEARED NEAR THE STATION, OUT OF NOWHERE."

Dara's shift supervisor, Nila Rokan, came at once to her station and looked at the radar display sphere for a few seconds.

"I don't understand! I didn't get any warning about a Navy exercise in our area. Besides, how could these ships appear so close to our station without being detected before?"

"I don't know, Supervisor. These appear to be big ships: they should have been detected much earlier."

A strange-sounding voice speaking in the Drazt language suddenly resonated in Dara's earphones, at the same time as a text message started scribbling down on one of her flat screens and those of the other five space traffic controllers.

"Kar Lev-Dom space station, this is the Human Spacers League ship KOSTROMA. Advise immediately all the ships presently docked to your station to keep their present position and not fly away. All Drazt ships presently approaching your station are to turn away and adopt waiting orbits at a lower altitude. Any ship approaching us will be destroyed without further warning."

Despite being as stunned as Dara, Nila Rokan managed to overcome her confusion and reply to the mysterious call.

"To the ship that just called, this is the Kar Lev-Dom space traffic control center. If this is a joke, it is not funny. What is your proper identification?"

"This is the A.M.S. KOSTROMA, flagship of the Human Spacers League First Battle Squadron. In case you still have not heard about that yet, your race is now at war with the Human race. We have no intentions to kill innocent civilians, but any ship approaching us will be destroyed immediately. Please advise all your ship traffic to stay put for the time being."

"Us, at war?" said Nila to herself, totally confused. Thanks to the Drazt government's tight censorship policies, no civilian agency or organization had been told about the conflict with the Humans or even about the space battle in which most of the Drazt Navy's cruisers had been massacred many rotations before. Of the Human race, Nila and her staff only knew that it was some barbaric, war-prone race inhabiting a nearby star system. She was still trying to make sense of all this when all the radar display spheres of the control center suddenly went blank, at the same time as a sharp noise reverberated around the station.

"Damn, what is happening now?" asked Dara Swit to herself. One technician answered her question with a alarmed shout.

"SOMEBODY JUST SHOT UP OUR SENSORS MAST! WE ARE NOW BLIND!"

"OUR RADIO AND LASER TRANSMISSIONS ANTENNA MAST HAS ALSO BEEN DESTROYED, APPARENTLY BY DISINTEGRATOR BEAMS. WE ARE NOW BLIND, DEAF AND MUTE!" shouted another technician. That was when Nila understood that all this was no joke.

"ALRIGHT, ALL OF YOU: STAY CALM AND CONTINUE MANNING YOUR STATIONS. REG, MAKE AN ANNOUNCEMENT VIA INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS LINKS AND OVERHEAD SPEAKERS: ALL SHIP DOCKINGS AND UNDOCKINGS ARE SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. NO SHIP IS TO ATTEMPT TO LEAVE THE STATION. WE HAVE ENEMY ALIEN SHIPS NEARBY."

"Uh, understood, Supervisor." replied the technician in a less than assured voice.

In one of the embarkation waiting lounges of the orbital station, Zar Dov, with her little daughter Riza asleep in her arms, was able to hear like the other waiting passengers the announcement via loudspeaker that resonated around the lounge. She

was on this station with Riza because her husband Lem had discretely urged her before his sudden departure on a secret mission to temporarily leave Kadosh and to go to one of the space resorts dotting the first moon of the planet. She had been waiting to board a passenger ship due to leave for the moon when this announcement had come. While everybody around her was now acting either confused or incredulous, Zar understood at once what was happening and lowered her head to hide her instant grief. Lem's secret mission was now too evident to her: he had gone out to fight the Humans, opponents that Lem himself had described to her as being vastly superior in military terms to the Drazt Navy. Despite the fact that the whole subject of the clashes with the Humans was classified, Lem had told quite a bit to Zar about it, especially after one Human had visited them some time ago at their apartment in Drakan City. If the Human fleet was now near Kadosh, then that could mean only one thing: Lem was now dead, with the Navy's fleet destroyed.

Zar was still quietly crying in her chair when someone shouted above the din of the crowd occupying the lounge.

"LOOK AT THAT HUGE SHIP! IT IS COMING TOWARDS US!"

Wiping the tears blinding her, Zar raised her head to look through one of the large panoramic windows of the lounge which gave a view of the void of space around the station. An apparently big ship was indeed approaching the station, but not really on a collision course. Instead, it passed close under the station, letting the waiting passengers in the lounge appreciate how gigantic it was. Having been shown in the past pictures of that ship by Lem, Zar recognized it at once, sucking in her breath and then whispering its name with dread.

"The KOSTROMA..."

05:13 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

At the vertical of Drakan City

Low equatorial orbit over Kadosh (Ross 128b)

"We now have the Supreme Conductor's palace centered in our main optical telescope, Captain. There is one Drazt patrol frigate parked on the main landing pad of

the palace complex and we can also see a number of vehicles around it. It seems that some kinds of supplies or equipment are being loaded aboard that frigate.”

Tina Forster, sitting in her command chair, looked at Janet Robeson, a sardonic smile on her face.

“I knew it! The rats are leaving the ship, and this even before it has started sinking. You care to bet with me where the Supreme Conductor is planning to find refuge from us, Governor?”

“Oh, LHS 288c would sound like a good bet to me, Tina. After all, it is the only other habitable star system that they know about for certain.”

“Bingo! Well, let’s send the good Bar Kosh and his gang of sycophants on their way...to Hell. Renée, you may open fire now.”

“Aye, Captain!” replied Renée d’Argenteuil, sitting at a weapons fire control station. “Heavy rail gun batteries loaded with kinetic shells, firing now!”

With three of its four 150-meter-long electromagnetic rail guns pointed down at the surface of the planet, the KOSTROMA started firing salvos of 300 kilo armor-piercing shells every five seconds. The shells, very dense projectiles with a core made of tungsten carbide, left the muzzle of their guns at a velocity of over 6,000 meters per second, creating long trails of flames as they entered the atmosphere of Kadosh and flew through it at hypersonic speeds. To anyone watching them from the ground, they looked like bright meteorites coming down from the sky. However, being hypersonic, the thunder-like noise they created on their passage could only be heard on the ground once they had impacted. In this case, the shells impacted the roofs and grounds of the palace complex occupied by the Supreme Conductor and its close aides, burrowing deep into the ground while liberating a frightening amount of kinetic energy that translated into thermal energy and powerful shock waves. The patrol frigate KOBOL, sitting on the palace’s main landing pad, was one of the first targets in the complex to be hit and was utterly destroyed by the monstrous impact of one kinetic shell. Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh died shortly after the destruction of the KOBOL, killed while riding an elevator connecting his underground command bunker to his palace. The same shell that killed him also went down all the way to the command bunker, the flash from the liberated kinetic energy burning at once the oxygen inside the bunker and killing its occupants. A total of 45 kinetic rail gun shells hit the palace complex in less than one and a half minutes, turning the two kilometer-square palace grounds into a field of deep craters and terrorizing the citizens of Drakan City. However, nobody but the occupants and guards

of the palace complex were killed by that bombardment. In this case, Tina Forster had followed one of her favorite dictums: that it was preferable to cut the head of the serpent rather than try to cut its tail.

At the Drazt Navy headquarters, some five kilometers from the palace complex, Division Master Korb Ren hurried to the command offices of Vice-Admiral Gren, only to be stopped by the two guards posted in front of her door.

"Halt! If you are looking for the vice-admiral, then she is not in her office, Division Master." said one of the two navy guards. Ren gave the guard an incensed look.

"What do you mean, not in her office? An enemy fleet is busy bombarding the city right now! Where is she?"

"I believe that she is at the Supreme Conductor's palace, Division Master."

That answer made Ren slap one foot on the floor, furious. To the hidden indignation of many other officers at Navy Headquarters, Vice-Admiral Lona Gren had not taken direct command of the fleet sent to attack the five Human ships at the limit of the system, instead sending a bunch of messages to the individual ships of the fleet. She had not even named an actual, on-the-spot fleet commander to properly coordinate the attack, thinking that choosing a specific attack time for all the ships would be enough. Ren doubted very much that Vice-Admiral Gren had gone to the palace simply to brief the Supreme Conductor: she could have done so faster and more efficiently by simply using a video link with the palace, something that would have also allowed her to stay where she was needed right now: at her post. Thus, Gren had just proved to be a coward, on top of being an incompetent commander. However, her latest act of cowardice had not saved her, judging from the spectacular lights and sound show coming from the palace grounds. Unfortunately, that did not solve Korb Ren's problem, which was to find someone in command to take charge of this mess and decide how to deal with the Human fleet.

Ren, utterly frustrated and swearing to himself, had turned around and was heading towards the underground command bunker of the headquarters to go speak with the duty commander there, when all the lights inside the building went out at once. With only the weak illumination of the night sky coming through the windows, Ren suddenly found himself in near total darkness. Stopping and taking a few seconds to let

his eyes adjust to the low light level, Ren then noticed something through a window that made him swear again: the whole of Drakan City was now totally dark in the pre-dawn morning! Going to the nearest bank of elevators, he tried to call a cabin, but without results: the elevators seems to be as dead as the lights.

“How is this possible? Our auxiliary power systems should have kicked in automatically by now.”

A very loud thunderclap-like sound suddenly made him jerk and turn around towards a nearby window, in time to see an explosion of sparks on top of the nearest defensive turret of the astroport. Twelve of those remotely-controlled and operated turrets, armed with medium disintegrator cannons, had been hastily built around the astroport after the past battle that had cost 42 cruisers to the Navy. Before, only a perimeter fence and a few guarded gates had defended the astroport, the legacy of centuries of peace on Kadosh. Ren could only watch helplessly as turret after turret, each of them already without power and plunged into darkness, were destroyed by what had to be powerful laser beams tuned to the invisible spectrum. In the distance, Ren could also see that the radar antennas of the astroport were being destroyed as well. Strangely enough, none of the occupied buildings or hangars of the astroport got hit by laser fire, nor did they seem to have been targeted at all. Still, the whole astroport ended up being turned into a pitch-black expanse after only a couple of minutes of enemy fire. As for the ships that would normally have been at the astroport, they were all out in space, supposedly trying to stop the Human fleet from attacking Kadosh. Korba Ren, having seen enough, started to run towards the nearest staircase well while swearing at the helplessness of his navy.

10:37 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the Drazt patrol cruiser TARASK

Speeding towards Kadosh

“Still no response from Navy Headquarters, Shipmaster. The planetary space traffic control system is also silent.”

“No, no, no, no, no: this can't be!” whispered to herself Dozna Wiss, her stomach gripped with foreboding and worry. To be totally helpless to stop what was happening now to her home world truly maddened and sickened her. The shaking voice of her sensors officer then added to her despair.

"Shipmaster, our telescopes show the planet to be completely dark. There are no city lights visible from space. Our orbital space stations around Kadosh are also dark. We can't detect any radar, radio or other electronic emissions coming from the planet."

"NOOOO!" cried out Dozna, losing control of herself at that awful news. She then hid her face in her hands and started to cry. Her home planet was now apparently dead, destroyed at the hands of an enemy that possessed anti-matter weapons and she and her crew had utterly failed in their duty to protect it. After long seconds of crying, her despair gradually changed to anger and hatred towards the enemy who could do such a monstrous genocidal act. Wiping off her tears, she then looked around at her bridge crew: her officers and operators were all clearly as despondent as she was and were now sort of apathetic at their work stations. Dozna swallowed hard, then spoke up in a strong voice.

"FELLOW DRAZT, WE MAY HAVE FAILED IN OUR DUTY TO PROTECT OUR HOME PLANET, BUT WE NOW HAVE ANOTHER DUTY TO PERFORM: TO AVENGE IT. WE ARE GOING TO FIND THOSE HUMAN SHIPS AND WE WILL DESTROY THEM, BY RAMMING IF NEED BE."

Her announcement was met by a vengeful roar from her crew. Her bridge personnel then became alive at their work stations, scanning space around the star system in search of the monsters who had destroyed Kadosh.

Some twenty minutes later, as Dozna had just finished a conference call with the other shipmasters of their fleet, her signals officer suddenly looked at her with a shocked expression.

"Shipmaster, we are receiving a call...from the KOSTROMA."

"WHAT? THEY HAVE THE GALL TO CALL US AND MOCK US AFTER THIS? CONNECT ME WITH THOSE BASTARDS!"

"Yes, Shipmaster!"

Dozna soon had the image of Tina Forster visible on her command chair's viewing screen. The calm and relaxed attitude of Tina only made Dozna angrier.

"YOU MONSTER! HOW DARE YOU CALL ME AFTER WHAT YOU DID?"

Tina kept her calm despite Dozna's aggressive tone and looked at her with a somber air.

“What you think happened is what will effectively happen to Kadosh if your race tries another treacherous attack against us like the one your Supreme Conductor ordered your fleet to conduct, Dozna.”

“Uh? What do you mean, ‘what I think happened’? Kadosh is dead!”

“Ah, yes, that!” said Tina before turning her head briefly to give an order to one of her crewmembers. “Renée, lights on, please!”

Seconds later, exclamations ran around the bridge of the TARASK when the lights of cities around Kadosh and of orbital stations became visible again. Dozna could only look at Tina in incomprehension.

“But, what...”

“What happened is that, during our limited attack against Kadosh, which only took out your Supreme Conductor and your radar and radio transmitters, we infiltrated a powerful computer virus inside your various computerized systems controlling your power generation and distribution networks, and this across the whole planet and aboard your orbital installations. I just ordered that computer virus to temporarily switch power back on. However, if your government still refuses to accept the terms of our ultimatum, then the power will shut down again and I will order my ships to implement a gradual fire plan which will selectively target your various military and industrial installations, until you become reasonable. I was sincere when I said that I have no wish to kill Drazt civilians or even Navy personnel, but our patience is wearing very thin. As for your government, it will have to take a decision about our ultimatum without your precious Supreme Conductor: that tyrant and his band of sycophants are now dead, buried in the rubble of his palace.”

Dozna, nearly crippled emotionally, was unable to reply to that for seconds. When she was able to speak again, it was to see that Tina had simply waited patiently for her to regain her composure and was now speaking again.

“Dozna, we truly wish for peace between our two races and we still hope that you will become our friends rather than our enemies. The Drazt will however have to shed this paranoia of theirs about the Human race. Many things have profoundly changed in the Solar System in the last few years and our race has now established some firm holds on a number of new worlds. You are still welcome to share space with us, but only if you act like a peaceful, sincere neighbor. My fleet will now return to the Solar System and you and other reasonable Drazt will then be free to instill some common sense back into your government. When you will be ready to accept our terms and discuss true

peace, then send one unarmed ship with a diplomatic delegation aboard to the Alpha Centauri B System, where we will be able to talk. KOSTROMA out!”

Dozna sat back in her command chair after the link was cut, feeling emotionally drained: it had been a truly close call for both her race and Kadosh. However, a lot was left to be done now, starting with making sure that none of Bar Kosh’ toadies were left in charge on the planet. The Drazt just could not afford another armed confrontation with the Humans, especially if more jingoism was involved.

CHAPITRE 15 – PEACE AT LAST

07:41 (Providence Time)

Tuesday, August 08, 2322

Bridge of the Drazt interstellar transport ship KAL DROGA

Arriving in high orbit over the planet of Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

Alpha Centauri B System (4.36 light-years from Earth)

“The spectral analysis of the star confirms that we are in the Alpha Centauri B System, Shipmaster.”

Dozna Wiss, sitting in the shipmaster’s chair of her new ship, felt relief on hearing her navigator’s announcement. This was only the third interstellar jump that her recently built and commissioned transport ship KAL DROGA had made, the two previous ones having been used to certify the ship as good for service. The fact that her ship was now inside the system of an orange star, with a yellow star as a visible close companion, was enough by itself to prove to her that she was not anymore in her home system, in which the star was a solitary red dwarf.

“Sensors Master, what do you see inside this star system? How many planets are there?”

“Our sensors register the presence of two planets and an asteroid belt, Shipmaster. The first planet from the star is very close to it, thus would be way too hot to be habitable. However, the second planet is well within the habitability zone of its star. It has two moons, one a fairly massive body turning in a regular orbit around its parent planet, the other an irregular-shaped body circling in a highly eccentric orbit. The irregular moon may be a large asteroid which was captured by the second planet a long time ago, judging from its elliptical orbit.”

“What about the second planet?”

“It is emitting plenty of artificial electronic noises, Shipmaster.”

“Then, let’s get to it! Pilot, head for the second planet. Once there, we will insert ourselves in a high equatorial orbit and wait to be hailed. Signals Master, start broadcasting in a continuous loop our message of peace in English: let’s not scare the

Humans in and around the second planet and make them think that we came to attack them.”

“Yes, Shipmaster!”

As her signals officer punched a button and started playing on the radio the message meant to identify the KAL DROGA as a diplomatic ship, Dozna couldn't help admire the big orange ball of Alpha Centauri B. It was much larger and luminous than the red dwarf star that illuminated Kadosh, which the Humans called Ross 128. The other two stars in this triple system, a nearby yellow star and a much more distant red dwarf star, added to the novel aspect of this system for her and her crew. The second planet, which was supposed to be the one named 'Providence' by the Humans, was plainly visible on the bridge's viewing screens and was a ball half covered with the blue color characteristic of oceans. Its sight made Dozna sigh with envy: Kadosh, being the only habitable planet in her home system, had been severely overpopulated for centuries already and the Drazt race badly needed a new planet to resettle the excess population living on Kadosh. Up to now, only one system with a habitable planet had been explored to date by the Drazt: LHS 288. The rate of exploration missions away from Ross 128 was unfortunately slow, being severely limited by the scarceness of the anti-matter pills needed to fuel the Drazt interstellar drive system. Unfortunately, the production of those anti-matter pills was already at its maximum capacity, despite swallowing a huge amount of energy from the entire planetary energy sector. Thus, every interstellar jump literally counted, but Dozna's trip to Alpha Centauri still had rated as a high priority one. Arriving at a lasting peace with the Humans was essential for the Drazt race, if it wanted to avoid another armed confrontation with the Humans, a confrontation that it was next to assured to lose. Her present mission was thus a matter of sheer long-term survival for her race.

Some fifteen minutes later, the signals officer twisted his head to look at Dozna.

“Shipmaster, we are now receiving a video response from the second planet to our broadcasted message. It is on Channel Two.”

“Thank you!” said Dozna while punching a button to connect her chair's display screen to the said channel. She was then able to see the torso and head of a Human male sitting at some sort of work station. The translation program of her ship's computer made a written translation in Drazt language appear at the bottom of the screen as the Human spoke in English.

"KAL DROGA, this is the Providence space traffic control center. Your identification message has been received. You may proceed to the Providence High orbital terminal station, flying in a low equatorial orbit around the second planet of this system. You can follow the station's radio beacon signal on the frequency 881.5 megahertz. Once in sight of our orbital station, you will be free to approach it and dock at its Number Two Docking Station, which will have its indicator lights flashing green."

"This is the KAL DROGA: your message is understood. We will call back once on approach, out!"

Once that call was concluded, Dozna switched her screen to the intercom system of the ship and called the V.I.P. suite on the Passengers Deck, getting an answer on the second buzz.

"Prime Minister's suite!"

"This is Shipmaster Wiss. Tell the Prime Minister that we have safely arrived in the Alpha Centauri B System and that we have been invited to go dock at an orbital space station around the second planet, Providence. We should be there in nine chu."

"I will inform the Prime Minister of this right away, Shipmaster." replied the aide before cutting the link. Dozna then sat back in her command chair, mentally reflecting about the seismic changes that had happened within the Drazt society and government during the last few rotations. With the death of the Supreme Conductor and the mass purging from the government of his various loyalists, sycophants and coat-hangers, the way had been cleared for a profound reform of the political system on Kadosh. Instead of naming another quasi-dictator with wide powers, the general population, led by the progressive elements of the Navy's High Command, had voted to adopt a fully democratic model of government, with a Prime Minister elected via universal suffrage and governing with the help of a ministerial cabinet and of regional governors, also elected democratically. In turn, the new Prime Minister had at once shifted the government's priorities to a new space exploration and resettlement program geared towards finding habitable planets and building settlements on them. Despite the limited availability of the anti-matter pills vital for interstellar jumps, some habitat and support modules were already in place on LHS 288c, the first planet officially designated as a resettlement world, while the concept of resettlement on new planets had become a subject of enthusiastic conversations among the Drazts population.

After a couple of hours of flight, an orbital space station became visible in orbit around Providence. As her ship was approaching it, heading towards a docking station clearly marked by huge green flashing panels, Dozna was able to appreciate how big the station was. Vastly larger and longer than her own KAL DROGA, the station looked like a three-kilometer-long vertical rod topped by a 400-meter-wide disc-like section and with pairs of well-separated spokes jutting out by 700 meters and attached at intervals down its central spine structure. Each spoke ended in a docking station able to welcome ships much bigger than the KAL DROGA, while more spokes set at ninety degrees from the docking spokes served as support and storage arms for hundreds of cargo modules, liquid bulk tanks and container pods. Numerous robotic arms and local free-flying tugboats moved those modules, tanks and pods around, attaching or detaching them from cargo ships docked at the orbital terminal. However, what truly attracted the attention of Dozna and of her whole bridge crew was the sight of a gigantic cargo ship docked to the station and busy transferring dozens of cargo pods to the cargo storage terminal.

"The KOSTROMA, it is here!" said to herself Dozna in a low voice. There was no mistaking that ship, with its massive round bow shield, four thermonuclear engine rocket exhaust plasma tubes and nozzles and its system of external carry of cargo pods and modules. It certainly had not been designed to fly at speed inside a dense planetary atmosphere and could be described as somewhat ugly in appearance, but Dozna knew too well that the KOSTROMA was king in the void of space. As if saying its name had triggered some link with it, the signals officer spoke to her again.

"Shipmaster, the KOSTROMA is calling us."

"I will take the call." replied Dozna. Two seconds later, the picture of Tina Forster appeared on her viewing screen. Tina smiled at once on seeing Dozna.

"Hello, Dozna! It is truly nice to see you again. I see that you are now commanding a new ship."

"That's right, Tina. I am now the shipmaster of the KAL DROGA, a newly-built interstellar transport ship."

"A transport ship, hey? It specializes in carrying cargo or passengers?"

"It is actually a mixed transport, Tina. It can't approach the carrying capacity of your mighty KOSTROMA, but it will be very useful for us to establish settlements on the new worlds of our civilization."

"A worthy purpose indeed. So, I understand that you called in as a diplomatic ship? Then you came here to sign a peace treaty with us, right?"

"Correct! Are there representatives of your government present here who would be mandated to discuss and sign such a treaty?"

"Uh, I am afraid not. The highest official present in the system right now is Governor Rosa Goldberg, who is the top administrator of this new colony. However, I could escort your ship to the Solar System, where your envoy would then be able to speak directly with Chairperson Robeson... What? You suddenly look embarrassed. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, Tina, you didn't say anything wrong. It pains me to say this, but you would eventually learn about it, so I will be frank with you. Our new interstellar drive necessitates anti-matter pills to work, with one pill needed per separate jump. However, the cost and energy demand to produce each such pill are astronomical and we can't produce more than a handful of them at a time. Right now, my new ship has only two such pills aboard: one for our return trip and the other as a backup in case of a failed jump. Jumping to your Solar System would reduce my safety margin to zero."

Tina was left speechless for a second by Dozna's confession.

"Uh, I see! In that case, let me send one of my star shuttles to the Solar System, so that it could inform my government of your arrival here. It would also be able then to bring here our top officials. Would your ambassador mind to conduct his negotiations aboard my KOSTROMA? I would be delighted to be able to host such a historical event."

"I will certainly pass your offer to him, Tina. To be frank, I have been dying for a while to be able to visit your ship."

"And I was dreaming for a long time to be able to greet you aboard the KOSTROMA, Dozna. Uh, that makes me think about a small but crucial detail: what do Drazt eat? Will our food be edible to you?"

"We are what you call vegetarians. We eat vegetables, fruits, grains and nuts. We also consume dairy products from time to time, like milk, cream and eggs. As for the compatibility of your own agricultural produces with our digestive systems, you don't need to worry: we have been studying for many of your decades your open electronic literature and documentaries concerning your various food sources and what you call 'culinary art'. From the chemical and biological descriptions given in those intercepted documentaries, our biologists and doctors have concluded that your vegetables and

fruits should be edible for us. The only thing that we don't know about them is the taste and flavors of your various food items.”

Those last words brought a wide grin on Tina's face.

“Hey, that would be a great excuse for me to invite you and your people to a food sampling buffet on my ship. I would love to see that! Your people would of course be welcome as well to tour my KOSTROMA. Did I already tell you before how proud I am of my ship?”

“Yes, you did, Tina!” replied Dozna, an amused smile appearing on her lips.

“Then, once you are docked at the Providence High terminal, you and your people will be most welcome to visit my ship at their leisure during their stay on the station.”

“Uh, you really would let us Drazt come aboard your ship at leisure, without some armed escort?”

“Yes, I would! Don't forget that my ship is primarily a cargo ship and not a warship. Only a few specific sections of my ship would remain out of bounds for you, like our weapons systems and ammunition magazines. On the other hand, we have our forest habitats, giant aquariums, commercial promenade, restaurants and hydroponic gardens, all of which could prove interesting to your people. And I mean all of your people. They could even buy souvenirs in the shops of my commercial promenade if they wished to.”

“Stop! You are making my head turn with so many possibilities. Very well, I will take your gracious offer, Tina. Our diplomatic party will go visit your KOSTROMA once we have docked.”

“Then, bring as well a few of your biologists and some of your cooks, so that they could study and taste our vegetarian food items and also bring samples of them for analysis back to your ship. I will be present to greet you at your docking station. See you then, Dozna!”

Once the link was cut, Dozna exchanged a look with her second in command.

“I must say that it is hard not to like a person like that, once you get to know her.”

“She certainly appeared most sincere in her enthusiasm at the idea of hosting us, Shipmaster.”

“Personally, I believe that Captain Forster doesn't have a single fiber of meanness or xenophobia in her. Dak, I would like you to select a group of no more than twenty of our crewmembers who would then accompany the Prime Minister and his

diplomatic delegation during their visit aboard the KOSTROMA. I would like to see a couple of our biologists, our chief of hydroponics, our chief cook, our chief healer and a few of our engineers in that group. Then, inform the crew that each duty shift will be allowed to go visit the KOSTROMA once off duty. And please tell them all not to bring any weapons with them! The last thing that we need now is for some misunderstanding to end up in a shootout aboard the KOSTROMA.”

“What if our people would like to buy things about this KOSTROMA, Shipmaster? What kind of money do these Humans use in space?”

“I am not sure, but I am certain that both gold and silver coins would be accepted there. Human history is full of stories about their insatiable thirst for such precious metals. Tell our paymaster to issue silver and gold coins to our crewmembers wishing to visit the KOSTROMA, debiting their electronic credit balance in exchange.”

“It will be done, Shipmaster!”

11:10 (Universal Time)

Access lounge of Docking Station Number Two

Providence High orbital space terminal

Low equatorial orbit of Providence (Alpha Centauri Bd)

When Prime Minister Sho Dar, Dozna Wiss and sixteen other Drazt walked out of the protective airlock of Docking Station Number Two, they were greeted by Tina Forster, Eve Silisca and a tall man in his fifties wearing a short beard. The bearded man was actually the first to step forward to shake hands with the new visitors.

“Welcome to the Providence High Orbital Terminal, ladies and gentlemen. I am Sergei Ivanov, Chief Administrator of Providence High.”

Waiting a couple of seconds to let time for his portable translation unit to translate Ivanov’s English words, the head of the Drazt delegation spoke while shaking the administrator’s hand.

“And I am Prime Minister Sho Dar. To my right is Shipmaster Dozna Wiss, in command of the KAL DROGA. The people behind us have been selected to visit the KOSTROMA, following the generous invitation from Fleet Captain Forster.”

“And they will be welcomed to visit as well my station afterwards, Mister Prime Minister. My staff and the personnel of this station have been told to treat all visiting

Drazt as having diplomatic status during this visit of yours. Your people can thus go around it without any worries for their safety.”

“That is very kind of you, Chief Administrator Ivanov. I must say that your orbital terminal is a very impressive installation.”

Ivanov smiled with pride at that compliment and pointed Tina, standing next to him.

“I owe a lot to Fleet Captain Forster in that respect, Mister Prime Minister. Her ship carried the prefabricated elements of this station to this system, then helped assemble it in orbit.”

“Really? And how many trips did it take to bring all the pieces of your station to Alpha Centauri B?”

“Two trips by the KOSTROMA were sufficient, Mister Prime Minister.” replied Ivanov, making Sho Dar look at Tina Forster with incredulity.

“Two trips only? May I ask what is the cargo capacity of your ship, Fleet Captain Forster?”

“You certainly may, Mister Prime Minister. My KOSTROMA has a maximum cargo load capacity of a bit over twenty million metric tons. But we could discuss this further once you will be inside my ship, when you will be able to see it firsthand. Know that a courier shuttle left for the Solar System some twenty minutes ago, to bring the news of your arrival here. I expect Chairperson Robeson, of the Spacers League High Council, to travel back here aboard that shuttle. She should thus arrive at this orbital station in a few hours at the most.”

“That is good news indeed: I am anxious to discuss peace with her, so that we can put all the past unpleasantness behind us.”

“I couldn’t agree more with you on that, Mister Prime Minister. Behind me are a number of passenger platforms which will carry you and your people to the docking station at which my KOSTROMA is docked. If you will sit in the first platform with me, Mister Prime Minister.”

“With pleasure, Fleet Captain Forster.”

With everybody jumping aboard the anti-gravity platforms, each of which had benches for up to twelve passengers, the convoy of vehicles was soon driving down a large tunnel running inside the docking station’s support arm. They then entered a big cargo elevator which started going down towards the level where the KOSTROMA was docked. The whole trip from docking station to docking station actually took a good

twenty minutes, an impressive testament to the size of the orbital terminal. As the platforms started driving into the covered telescopic gangway linking the station to the KOSTROMA, Dozna was struck by the twin row of trees lining the sides of the large hallway they were following.

"You have trees even here? Division Master Ren told me about your fantastic forest habitats, but I did not expect these in a simple access tunnel."

"Aaah, but you will find green plants, trees and other kinds of vegetation all over my ship, Dozna." replied Tina, smiling. "This ship is much more than just an armed cargo ship for me and my crew: it also is our home in space. I thus did my best to turn it into a flying village in space, a village in which we can live, shop, raise our children and educate them and, in the case of some of us, conduct business and trade. Actually, over half of the occupants of the KOSTROMA are not crewmembers per say. Instead, they are either spouses or children of crewmembers, or work in the various commercial concessions you will find aboard. In fact, the first thing you will see inside my ship proper will be the Main Promenade, on Level Nine. There, you will see a variety of shops, restaurants, bars, clubs and entertainment facilities, including a children's playground."

Those last words made Dozna give a skeptical look at Tina.

"Don't tell me that you had children aboard your ship when you came in to attack Kadosh."

"On that occasion, no! Before going to your system with four of our warships, I had dropped off the families of my crewmembers on New Haven, where we have our fixed homes and go periodically on vacation, in order to experience open air nature again. However, when I first went to Kadosh on a diplomatic mission, our families were aboard, as I was not expecting to be attacked then."

Dozna couldn't help lower her head in shame then.

"And I was not proud of our acts then, Tina."

"Please forget about that, Dozna." said Tina softly while patting her shoulder. "Those responsible for that are now dead. Let's concentrate now on ensuring peace between our two people."

"You do have a way with words, Fleet Captain Forster." said Prime Minister Sho Dar while glancing at her. "Your leaders chose the right person to come visit us at first. A more belligerent or xenophobic ship captain than you would have triggered a large-scale war at once."

“Oh, we have no shortages of such ship captains or politicians, especially on Earth itself, Mister Prime Minister. But let’s change the subject for a more agreeable one: we are now entering my ship’s Main Promenade. If you don’t mind, we will now disembark and continue on foot, in order for you to better enjoy your visit. I will escort you, Shipmaster Wiss and your two personal aides around, while Miss Silisca, my own personal aide, will guide your followers from the KAL DROGA around at a more leisurely pace.”

With the convoy of anti-gravity platforms stopping and parking along one side of the ten-meter-wide circular boulevard forming the Main Promenade, their occupants stepped out on the pavement and split in two groups, one small one led by Tina and the larger one led by Eve. The first commerce they passed by attracted more than one incredulous look from the visiting Drazt.

“You have a sex club aboard your ship?” asked a bemused Dozna, attracting a grin from Tina.

“Of course! When your cruiser returns to Drakan City after a space patrol, I can bet that your unmarried crewmembers probably go first to visit the prostitutes in the city, if of course you have prostitutes on Kadosh.”

“Of course we have prostitutes on Kadosh, and they are not all female. Did you think that we Drazt can’t have fun from time to time?”

“I thought so! Maybe your people will want to go have a peep inside that club later on. But let’s get to more mundane things, like shops and restaurants. As you will see, there is a wide variety of restaurants along the Main Promenade, representing nearly all the various culinary traditions found on Earth. Some of them serve mostly or exclusively vegetarian menus, so your people will be able to sample a few of our food items during their tour. Later on, you will all be invited to go sample a variety of our vegetarian dishes at a special buffet which will be set for lunch in the ship’s business class dining room. By the way, that buffet will be free.”

“And your restaurants and clubs, will they be free as well, Tina?”

“Uh, no, since they are private commercial enterprises and must turn a profit to survive. I however can arrange for some funds to be distributed to your people, out of my hospitality budget.”

“That is a truly nice offer, Tina, but my people have brought with them some silver and gold coins, so that they could spend a bit on your ship.”

“Silver and gold are definitely accepted aboard, Dozna. Talking of silver and gold, here is the ‘Gleaming Star’, a jewelry store. It sells in particular a particular type of gem from the tenth planetary body of my Solar System, on which we found an abundance of beautiful orange-brown diamonds of volcanic origin. Let’s go admire some of them.”

Entering together the small jewelry store, Tina led her Drazt guests to a glass display case where a number of pieces of jewelry were on display, pointing to a splendid diamond brooch resting on a velvet cushion.

“That is an Eris diamond.”

“It is beautiful!” said Dozna, while Prime Minister Sho Dar nodded his head in appreciation.

“It indeed is! I have personally never seen a gem on Kadosh with that kind of color.”

That gave an idea to Tina, who glanced at Sho Dar.

“Are you married, Mister Prime Minister?”

“I am, with three grown children.”

“Then, could I offer you this brooch, so that you could give it to your wife on your return to Kadosh? Don’t worry about my bank account: cargo business has been quite good to me lately.”

“Are you sure, Fleet Captain? I would hate to abuse your hospitality.”

“Not at all! Would you prefer that brooch, or some other piece of similar value that would be in your wife’s taste?”

Sho Dar did not answer immediately, as his eyes went around the display case to look at the various pieces of jewelry.

“This Eris diamond brooch is still the piece that I find the most attractive in this lot, Fleet Captain.”

“Excellent! Mister Simonov! I am buying this Eris diamond brooch here. Could you charge it to my account and then gift wrap it?”

“With pleasure, Captain!” replied the jeweler and gem cutter, delighted: that said brooch was listed for no less than 15,600 credits! Delicately taking the brooch from its cushion, he next went to wrap it as Tina looked at Dozna.

“And you, Dozna? Do you see something that you like here?”

"Uh, thank you for your offer, Tina, but I am really not the type to wear jewelry, even when off duty. May I suggest another recipient for a gift from you, though?"

"Oh? And who would that be?"

"Zar, the wife of Lem Dov, whom you met while visiting their apartment with me. The poor Zar went through some rough times in the past, most lately when she found herself and her little daughter aboard an orbital station plunged into darkness by your KOSTROMA. She recognized your ship as it flew past the station."

"Oh!" said Tina, looking contrite as she imagined that moment. "That's an excellent idea, Dozna. Since you may know her tastes better, I will let you choose the gift for her."

"With pleasure, Tina."

It took only a minute for Dozna to look around at the displays before pointing at a diamond pendant with gold chain.

"This one has a chain long enough to fit around the neck of a Drazt. It also has a nice gem."

"Then, let's go for that pendant! Mister Simonov, could you add this pendant to my bill? I will need it to be wrapped separately from the brooch."

"Understood, Captain Forster."

Four minutes later, the small group walked out of the jewelry store, with Dozna pocketing the small box containing the diamond pendant for Zar Dov. Tina, satisfied with herself, rubbed her hands together while looking at her guests.

"Are you getting hungry, my friends? For us, lunch time is nearing."

"According to our system's time, it would be more like supper time for us, but a meal would be welcomed soon, Fleet Captain." replied Sho Dar.

"Then, let's continue our tour of the Main Promenade until we arrive at a really good vegetarian restaurant situated on the inner ring of the Main Promenade: they have a really nice selection of salads and vegetarian dishes."

14:29 (Universal Time)

Temperate Rain Forest Habitat, Level 16

A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Sho Dar closed his eyes for a moment as he enjoyed the smell of nature around him while sitting on a wooden bench next to a pond set in the middle of a forest.

"This place is so relaxing. The smell from those trees also add a special quality to this décor. Your idea of planting forests inside your ship was truly fantastic, Fleet Captain Forster."

Tina, also sitting on a bench next to Dozna Wiss, smiled at the compliment.

"I must say that my idea was a bit of a selfish one too: I was dying for some real nature after long space trips, so I decided to bring nature with me in space. Mind you, my crew certainly liked my idea. Our giant aquariums were installed with the same goal in mind and are also well appreciated by my crew and their families."

"And your ship must be unique in that aspect across this galaxy, Tina." added Dozna. Tina was about to reply to that when her wrist videophone buzzed, making her raise her wrist near her face and flip open its lid, to see the face of Shanandar, who was presently in command of the bridge.

"Yes, Shanandar?"

"I am calling to tell you that the shuttle carrying Governor Robeson and her negotiating team is now on final approach to our craft airlock number four. By the way, Governor Sheraz and Doctor Koomak are also aboard, as per your request."

"Excellent! Me and my guests will now move to the Hangar Deck to greet Governor Robeson and Governor Sheraz. Thanks for warning me."

As Tina closed the lid of her videophone and got on her feet, Sho Dar asked her a question.

"May I ask who this Governor Sheraz is?"

"You certainly may, Mister Prime Minister: he is the political leader of the Koorivars who survived the destruction of their original home planet, a long time ago. Their first new colony is on Earth, where we welcomed them after saving one of their refugee ships from its icy tomb on Eris, the tenth planetary body in our Solar System. However, the Koorivars are now busy building up a new home world for themselves in the Wolf 1061 System, on the planet 'New Shouria'. As such, the Koorivars are members of the Spacers League and Governor Sheraz has a seat on its High Council, like I do."

"You have a seat on that council, Tina? How come?" asked a surprised Dozna.

"Because I am the corporate owner of a planetary body, 'New Haven', in the Wolf 1061 System. I represent New Haven on the Spacers League High Council."

Dozna exchanged a glance with Sho Dar but didn't say more, instead following Tina down the paved trail leading back to the core section of the ship.

Their group, including Sho Dar's two personal aides, arrived at the Hangar Deck some four minutes later, in time to see a star shuttle cycle through one of the four craft airlocks of the ship. They then watched through a thick armored acrylic window as the shuttle moved into one of the hangars connected to the airlock, to finally land on its steel deck. With the hangar kept pressurized at all times, contrary to the airlock, Tina was able to lead her group inside it at once and took position near the shuttle's aft access ramp, which was now coming down. The first to come out was Janet Robeson, closely followed by Governor Sheraz, Doctor Koomak and three high level functionaries of the High Council. Tina came to attention and saluted Robeson, as this was a most formal event.

"Welcome aboard, Madam Governor, Governor Sheraz! May I present you Prime Minister Sho Dar and Shipmaster Dozna Wiss, who carried him aboard her ship, the KAL DROGA. Prime Minister Sho Dar, this is Governor Janet Robeson, Governor of the Jupiter system and Chairperson of the Spacers League. To her right is Governor Sheraz, leader of the Koorivar people."

There was a quick exchange of handshakes, following which Tina looked at both delegations.

"I propose that we move to my personal suite on Level 24, where we will be able to discuss in complete privacy."

"That is fine with me, Tina," said Robeson, to which Sho Dar echoed his own approval. The combined group, led by Tina, then left the hangar and went back into the core section, where they took place in an elevator cabin. As the cabin rose speedily, both Janet Robeson and Sho Dar discreetly measured each other in silence. Once on Level 24, on which the suites of the senior officers of the ship were situated, Tina led the group to the main entrance of her suite and opened it by putting her right hand flat against the glass screen of the wall access panel. As they were entering the suite, a little toddler boy happily ran to Tina.

"Mommy!"

Tina bent down and grabbed her son with both hands before raising him to the level of her head to kiss him on the forehead and left cheek.

"My sweet Misha!"

"You have a cute son, Fleet Captain Forster," said Sho Dar, sincere, as he examined the first Human child he had seen in person.

“Thank you, Mister Prime Minister! Since he is still too young to go to school, he normally goes to the ship’s daycare center when both me and my husband are on duty. Today, my husband is off duty, so he is keeping an eye on our Misha. Here he is in fact. Mister Prime Minister, this is my husband, Michel Koniev. Michel, this is Prime Minister Sho Dar.”

“I am honored to meet you, Mister Prime Minister.” said Michel while shaking hands with Sho Dar, who was quickly becoming accustomed to that Human gesture.

“And I to meet you, Mister Koniev.”

Next, Tina gave little Misha to her husband, promising her son to be with him soon before looking at Sho Dar and Janet Robeson.

“If you may follow me to the upper floor of my suite: I have a private meeting room there where we will be able to discuss in peace.”

That meeting room, apart from proving to be fairly large, with a conference table big enough to accommodate ten persons around it, also gave a fantastic view through wide panoramic windows of the temperate rain forest habitat situated below. Sho Dar, like Dozna Wiss, took a moment to admire the view outside before sitting in the chair offered by Tina, which was opposite that occupied by Janet Robeson. Tina then sat to the left of Robeson and smiled to the members of the Drazt delegation.

“Well, Mister Prime Minister, since you came here to hold talks with my government, then I believe that you should be the first to speak.”

“Thank you, Fleet Captain.” replied Sho Dar before looking directly at Janet Robeson and speaking slowly, so that his translation unit could do its work. “Madam Governor, many things have changed since your fleet attacked Kadosh, five of your months ago. With our Supreme Conductor dead, along with his main followers, me and other members of the Navy’s high command made a sweeping cleanup of the planet’s government apparatus in order to purge any remaining Bar Kosh loyalists from positions of power. After a short period of martial law, our citizens were able to vote for a new constitution and a new government, which I now lead. Know that we have adopted your system of federal government, with a prime minister, a ministerial cabinet and regional first ministers, all elected by universal suffrage. I thus speak in the name of the whole Drazt people, and not only for me or my personal beliefs or interests.”

“I am pleased to hear that, Mister Prime Minister. We Humans also had to endure dictatorial rules many times during our tumultuous past before finally recognizing

the fact that a democratic government is still our best choice, especially when it comes to avoiding wars. I am also pleased to tell you that, in view of your change of government, the Spacers League High Council and me have decided to soften noticeably the terms of our initial ultimatum as given to you prior to our strike on Kadosh. While the radius of the sphere allotted to you around Kadosh stays five light-years, the allotted cone of space radiating outwards your system and going towards the Galactic North has been doubled to a total of sixty degrees, rather than the thirty degrees decreed in our original ultimatum. Thus, the total number of star systems located within your allotted cone of space and situated within forty light-years of Kadosh is now up to 29, with plenty more star systems beyond that distance. There should thus be plenty of star systems available to your race for the foreseeable future.”

At that point, Tina cleared her throat to attract attention on her, then spoke to Robeson out loud.

“If Prime Minister Sho Dar would excuse me, I would need to pass some new information to Governor Robeson, Governor Sheraz and Doctor Koomak in private. This should take only a minute or so.”

“Go ahead, Fleet Captain.” replied Sho Dar, a bit surprised and also suspicious. While Janet Robeson was as surprised as Sho Dar by this, she did follow Tina to an adjacent room, along with Sheraz and Koomak.

“So, what is this new information that you deem important enough to call for a pause in those talks, Tina?”

“The fact that the Drazt’ new interstellar drive system has a flaw that severely limits their present ability to explore and colonize new worlds. When I proposed to Shipmaster Wiss to escort her ship to the Solar System, so that we could hold talks more easily, she confessed to me that their new drive necessitates the use of one anti-matter pill per interstellar jump and that, due to the huge cost in energy needed to produce each of those pills, they are limited in fact to only a handful of interstellar jumps per month for their whole fleet. At that rate, it will take them decades to properly colonize just one new world. We may be ready to allot to them more space, but they are actually incapable of profiting from our generosity.”

“I see their problem in this, Tina.” said Doctor Koomak, the old Koorivar physicist who had invented the interstellar drive named after him and which equipped the KOSTROMA and all the Human interstellar ships and craft. “The clue is for them to find a cheaper and more efficient way to produce the anti-matter which power their drive.

This one pill per jump is definitely a rotten solution and I agree with you that it will stop the Drazts from fully profiting from the space volume allotted to them.”

“Uh, I understand that this is definitely a problem for the Drazt, but what do you suggest as a solution, Tina?” said Janet Robeson.

“I see two possible solutions to this, Madam Governor, but either of them will necessitate for us to take risks, big risks.”

Tina then spent a couple of minutes to present and explain her two possible solutions. At the end, Robeson exchanged looks with Sheraz and Koomak.

“This is indeed risky as hell for us. What do you think?”

“That the risk needs to be taken, Janet.” replied Sheraz. “Besides, both of the technologies involved here are Koorivar inventions, thus we would have technically the legal right to give them to others as we see fit. Some members of the High Council may scream murder about this, but I support Tina’s second solution. If we are to put confidence in the Drazt’ good faith and true wishes for peace, then we might as well give them our full confidence.”

“As inventor of the Koomak Drive, I support Sheraz’ opinion on this.” added Koomak in a firm tone. Janet Robeson debated mentally their point for a moment, then nodded her head once.

“Then, let’s go for Tina’s second solution. We may end up being known in the future as the most generous bunch ever, or as the most naïve policy bunglers ever.”

“Hey, be famous or infamous, but be somebody!” then said a smiling Tina.

When their group returned to the meeting room, they found Prime Minister Sho Dar standing in front of the panoramic windows, looking down at the forest habitat below. When he saw them return, Sho Dar hurried to sit back in his chair and looked at Janet Robeson, doing his best to hide his anxiety.

“So, what is it about this larger allocation to our space sector, Governor Robeson?”

“Well, Fleet Captain Forster just informed me about the deficiencies of your new interstellar drive, which severely limits your capacity to explore and exploit the other star systems around Kadosh. Since it would be quite hypocritical to give you more space to operate into while knowing that you could not use it properly, I was thus faced with the choices of either washing my hands of your problem, or of helping you in your predicament. In turn, if we chose to help you in this, we could have either offered you to

use our ships to carry around your construction equipment and settlers, under contract terms, or provide you with the proper means to use your volume of space.”

The Drazt collectively held their breath and tensed up then, waiting for Janet’s final decision.

“I finally decided that, if we are to place our confidence in your good will, then we might as well put our full trust in you, Mister Prime Minister. After this meeting is over, Doctor Koomak will download on data chips two complete copies of the schematics and operating principles of both our Koomak Drive and of the old Koorivar technology of instant transmutation of matter into anti-matter. He will then give you those data chips: one for you, Mister Prime Minister, and the other for your top physicist present here on your ship.”

For a moment, Sho Dar could not reply to that, the sudden rush of blood to his head making him dizzy. On her part, Dozna Wiss, equally stunned, stared at Tina with a look that clearly amounted to a ‘thank you’. Sho Dar was finally able to speak after long seconds, his voice still marked by emotion.

“Governor Robeson, you just have earned the eternal gratitude of the Drazt people. I just can’t express properly my joy at hearing this.”

“Well, if we have to live side-by-side in this part of the galaxy, then we might as well live as true friends, Mister Prime Minister. Now, to another original term of our ultimatum, concerning the entry of Drazt ships within Human space. I have decided to soften it as well. While we still ask that you refrain from sending warships within our space, you may now send individual transport ships to any of our star systems, and not only to Alpha Centauri B. This should greatly facilitate the communications between our two races and also help prevent any future misunderstanding between us.”

Having just obtained a lot more than what he had expected to get, Sho Dar decided that it was his turn to show good faith.

“Madam Governor, I fully agree to your new terms. I thus believe that we are ready to study the exact wording of a peace accord to be signed by both of us.”

“Then, let’s get to work on that, my friends.” replied Janet Robeson, feeling a heavy weight lift off her shoulders.

21:12 (Universal Time)

Western access point of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA

Janet Robeson watched on until the anti-gravity platforms carrying Prime Minister Sho Dar and his delegation was out of sight, then turned to face Tina Forster and looked gently at her.

“Tina, you helped pull a miracle here...again. You may be still quite young, but you have more common sense, true empathy for others and sharper thinking than all the politicians I know. First, you and your ship were pivotal in the defeat of the Terran Federation and of the Zembelo Regime back in 2315. Then, you discovered that Koorivar ship frozen under ice on Eris and was instrumental in making friends out of them. Now, you just helped to put an end to an interstellar conflict which could have cost millions of lives. I frankly don't know how the Spacers League could properly thank you for your services and for those provided by your ship.”

Tina simply smiled with malice then before answering her.

“Easy, Madam Governor: simply give me a fair share of the cargo business to be done between the Solar System and our new colonies and I will be plenty happy.”

“But, that's not much of a gift, Tina: your ship is still nearly unique in its capacity to transport large prefabricated modules between star systems. Hell, take this orbital station, as a matter of fact: your KOSTROMA carried ALL of its prefabricated elements in only two return trips from the Solar System. No other ship in our fleet can compete with your KOSTROMA in that respect.”

“Well, that's not my fault if the other shipping line owners are sitting on their thumbs, Madam Governor. You should whip them into action.”

“Maybe I will, Commodore Forster.”

Tina took a second to grasp the meaning of Robeson's words.

“Commodore? But I am still only a reserve navy officer and still consider myself simply as a commercial cargo ship captain.”

“Then, consider yourself as a commercial cargo ship captain...and a navy reserve commodore.” replied Janet Robeson, smirking.

CHAPITRE 16 – MOVING ON

08:06 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, December 12, 2323

Main conference room, government conference center

Callisto Prime, Callisto moon

Jupiter System

Having greeted at the entrance of the main conference room every member of the Spacers League High Council as they arrived, Janet Robeson went to take her seat at the head of the table as the latest arrival, Vladimir Gasparov, took his seat as well. All the participants had sober expressions, as they all knew how important this meeting was. Selecting a picture on her computer, Janet then made it appear on the giant viewing screens fixed to the four walls of the room, showing to all a star chart centered on the Solar System and showing all the stars within one hundred light-years. Twenty-seven of the stars on the chart were marked with a blue halo.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, I am certain that you are all very familiar with that star chart by now, as what it represents is impacting strongly on us and our citizens. Those 27 habitable worlds are the potential future for us...and for the whole of Humanity. As you well know from our recent history, the Spacers League was formed some eight years ago in order for the citizens of the various Spacers colonies to resist the tyranny of the then Terran Federation. Those Spacers colonies were themselves formed over 200 years ago, when enterprising Humans emigrated from Earth and established themselves in and around the various planetary and asteroid bodies of our Solar System, in order to extract and exploit the minerals and resources which were becoming increasingly unavailable on Earth due to unfettered and irresponsible exploitation during the past decades and centuries. Those colonists also left Earth to escape an increasingly polluted planet subject to disastrous climatological changes caused by Humanity’s own excesses and irresponsibility. In order to survive and thrive outside of Earth, our ancestors had no choice but to create safe, pressurized habitats protected from space radiations by digging themselves under the rock or ice of their new home worlds. So were created Callisto Prime and the other cities we call

home today. Our ancestors accepted the price of having to live essentially underground or on orbital space stations in order to escape the growing poverty, pollution and depletion of resources, including foodstuff, found on Earth. They built their cities underground, in pressurized and climate-controlled shells, but did their best to recreate as much as possible their old Earth's environment, by using artificial vistas on giant viewing screens and by planting trees and vegetation wherever they could. The final result of their efforts, in which we are living in today, was an impressive achievement by all measures and provided us with a comfortable and safe environment to live and multiply. The magnificent ship of Commodore Forster, the KOSTROMA, is maybe the ultimate such achievement. However, as you all know, we all experience from time to time a fever to renew with true nature, a nature where we can bathe in a real sea and tan ourselves under the rays of a real sun. You just need to consult the statistics about the volume of tourism by Spacers to Earth to see that this fever still very much exists. Which brings me to today.”

Janet paused for a couple of seconds to let her words sink into the members seated around the table.

“While our ships are still hard at work exploring more star systems around us and are finding nearly every month new habitable planets or moons, we already have found a total of 27 star systems containing one or more planetary bodies with surface conditions suitable for Humans to live on them. Out of those 27 systems, we explored in detail eighteen habitable planets and moons. Some of those planets and moons are a bit cold, like Icelandia, in the Trappist-1 System. Others are a bit hot, like New Polynesia, in the HD 40307 System, which also happens to be an ocean planet with few emerged lands. Other planets that are habitable but that I have not listed are already home to intelligent alien civilizations and are not ours to take, like Gliese 581c, Gliese 581ca, Gliese 581d and Ross 128b. This actually left us with a total of ten worlds which we consider prime colonization worlds: New Shouria; New Haven; Providence; Vinland; New Venice; New Polynesia; Gemini; Atlantis; El Dorado and Jurassika. Of these, New Shouria has been designated as the new home planet of our Koorivar partners, while New Haven is a corporate world owned by Commodore Forster and used to resettle refugees and destitute people from Earth. In passing, I would like to applaud Tina for the admirable display of compassion and generosity that New Haven constitutes.”

Tina, sitting at the table, blushed a bit from embarrassment as the other members of the High Council applauded her warmly for a few seconds. Janet Robeson then resumed her speech.

“Apart from New Shouria and New Haven, which have been the goal of intensive building and modeling efforts for more than three years and are now self-sufficient in terms of food production, our efforts at building colonies have been mostly concentrated on Providence, in the Alpha Centauri B System, on New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System, On New Polynesia, in the HD 40307 System, on Gemini, in the HD 10647 System, on El Dorado, in the Tau Boötis A System, and on Jurassika, in the Epsilon Andromedae System. Why did we concentrate on these six particular worlds? Simple: they are all illuminated by main sequence yellow-white or orange stars, which are similar or close in appearance to our own Sun, a G2-Class yellow star, a fact that makes them especially attractive to our citizens. In contrast, both New Shouria, New Haven and the other worlds in our list of habitable bodies turn around M-Class red dwarf stars. While they are still nice worlds to live in, their environment is visibly different from that of Earth, simply because of their parent stars. This finally leads me to the main reason for this meeting: our planet colonization programs. Despite our best efforts and huge financial and industrial investments in those programs, the demand for emigration to those new worlds has constantly and largely outstripped the existing reception capabilities of those worlds. We simply can’t build fast enough or develop their food production potential to a level that would safely accommodate all of our citizens wanting to emigrate from our present space habitats. However, I can easily understand the wish of our citizens to go live in a place like Providence, Gemini, New Venice or El Dorado, where they could finally walk under a yellow sun without the need to wear a spacesuit.”

“Tell me about that!” grumbled Jacobus Stein, the CEO of the Pallas Mining Industries, based in the Main Asteroid Belt. “My best workers are leaving Pallas as soon as an opening is created on one of those worlds, while recruiting new workers is becoming damn near impossible. As a result, the population of Pallas has decreased rather than increased for the first time ever last year. If this continues, I will have to start shutting down some of my industrial facilities.”

“The same here!” said Karl Langemann, the CEO of the Vesta Consortium, also based in the Main Asteroid Belt. “Mind you, if I would listen to myself, I would retire from business right now and go buy a personal island on New Polynesia, so I could go roast

myself on a nice sandy beach for the rest of my life, with plenty of young women around, of course.”

That attracted many smiles and a few giggles around the table, lightening the atmosphere in the room. The next to speak was Charles Watts, the Governor of Mars.

“Well, it is indeed a fact that our colonization efforts are not advancing as quickly as many of our citizens would wish, but our industries and construction yards are already working at near maximum capacity. The living, industrial and support infrastructures have to be completed first before settlers could move in. What else could we do, apart from telling our citizens to show some patience?”

There was a noticeable silence afterwards, until Vladimir Gasparov spoke up while looking around at the other participants.

“I see only one way to accelerate our construction efforts: to spend more of our treasury and buy or order a lot more heavy equipment from Earth, whose overall industrial capacity still vastly outstrips our own production capacity.”

“But, the Earth governments would then demand in exchange that we let their own citizens emigrate freely to the new worlds.” Objected Jacobus Stein. “We would end up with chaos on our new worlds and may permit that way the exportation of the same political, ethnic and religious conflicts that are presently poisoning Earth.”

That was when Tina Forster decided to speak in turn.

“I do agree that uncontrolled and unfiltered mass emigration from Earth would most probably bring a lot of the old problems which still curse the Earth. However, if well-managed, such emigration may not turn into chaos. Also, I believe that there is another solution, short of allowing mass emigration from Earth in exchange for more industrial contracts.”

“And what would that be, Tina?” asked Governor Watts.

“Close down in sequence some of our industrial and food production facilities, then strip their key equipment and transport it to one of our new worlds. Mister Stein just complained that he would soon have to shut down some of his facilities due to the lack of qualified workers. Well, lets shut down those facilities and then let’s carry them to, say, Providence, Gemini or New Venice, where they could be installed back and returned to operation in a few days.”

The other members of the High Council looked at each other for a moment, as if they had just heard a divine judgement, before nodding their heads.

"I like that idea!" exclaimed Karl Langemann. "Since those industrial plants are contained on the most part in pressurized giant modules sunken deep under surface ice or rock, maybe we could simply dig them out and carry them whole to another star system."

"Now we're talking!" added enthusiastically Janet Robeson. "Our own industrial facilities on Callisto and on the other moons of Jupiter are all contained in such under-ice modules which would be easy to bring back to the surface by melting the ice around them. After that, a ship could take them in tow and transport them to one of our new worlds."

"YES! Let's discuss this in detail, my friends!" said a happy Jacobus Stein. "And thank you for your idea, Tina."

"You're welcome, Jacobus." replied Tina, smiling.

The discussion then switched to a highly technical one for the next few hours, where specific facilities were considered and then selected for eventual transport by ship to one of the new worlds. When the meeting adjourned at the end of the afternoon, Tina was tired but happy. Once out of the meeting room, she stopped for a moment in front of one of the large windows which gave an outside view of the rest of the giant habitat module that contained among other things the government's administrative and executive facilities of Callisto Prime. Janet Robeson joined her there a few seconds later and also stared outside in the distance.

"When I think that this city was built over 160 years ago and that we may well end up in the next few years either abandoning it or transporting parts of it to another star system. Once our installations on our new colonies are completed, very few people, if any, will still want to live here, underground. In a way, our new capability to travel among the stars may just mean the dislocation of the Spacers League."

"Wrong, Janet! The Spacers League will not be dislocated: it will simply move to better locations. It will still live as a political and administrative entity for all Humans living off Earth."

"But your idea just possibly saved five years or more out of our colonization schedule, Tina."

"And it also means that my old KOSTROMA will be busier than ever, as it is one of the few interstellar cargo ships large enough to carry those modules. Mind you, I didn't propose my idea simply to get more transportation contracts."

Janet looked at Tina and gave her a gentle smile.

“Tina, I know that you did it in order to be constructive and helpful, and not for crass business reasons. You always thought of the good of others first and I admire you for that.”

“Thanks, Janet!”

Tina was silent for a moment then before speaking softly, still looking outside.

“Whether to build our new colonies or to ensure transportation and trade between them and Earth, we will need more interstellar cargo ships like my KOSTROMA, a lot more in fact. Those ships will need to fully incorporate the gravity drive technology of the Drazt and the Koomak Drive to be best at their job. I am more and more thinking about ordering a new ship to my specifications, so that I could augment the carrying capacity of my corporation. I already talked about that project with Gustav Shomberg, the owner and chief designer of the Avalon Space Yards, and gave him a few guidelines and directives. Gustav has promised me to start working on the design of that new cargo ship in the next few days.”

“Then, you can tell him that the Spacers League will fully authorize and finance the installation of complete weapons and defensive suites on your new ship, if you wish for it to be armed.”

“I do, Janet! We still don’t know what we may be facing in the future in other star systems that we still haven’t explored. The Vorlaks of Gliese 581c were a bad enough surprise for us as it was.”

“What will you do with your KOSTROMA once your new ship will be completed, Tina?”

“Well, building a new ship of the same category as my KOSTROMA will take a minimum of ten years, Janet. By the time that it is completed and enters service, the KOSTROMA will already be 51 years old and its fusion drive will by then be obsolescent technology. However, while slower than newer ships with directed gravity drives, it will still be more than good enough to haul around ultra-heavy, outsized pieces of cargo, like prefabricated construction modules or even complete industrial plants. With a towing capacity for modules up to 440 meters in diameter and 200 meters in height, just for its stern towing station, my KOSTROMA will still be valuable in carrying all kinds of large loads across the stars.”

“Indeed! Who will command the KOSTROMA once you will have your new ship?”

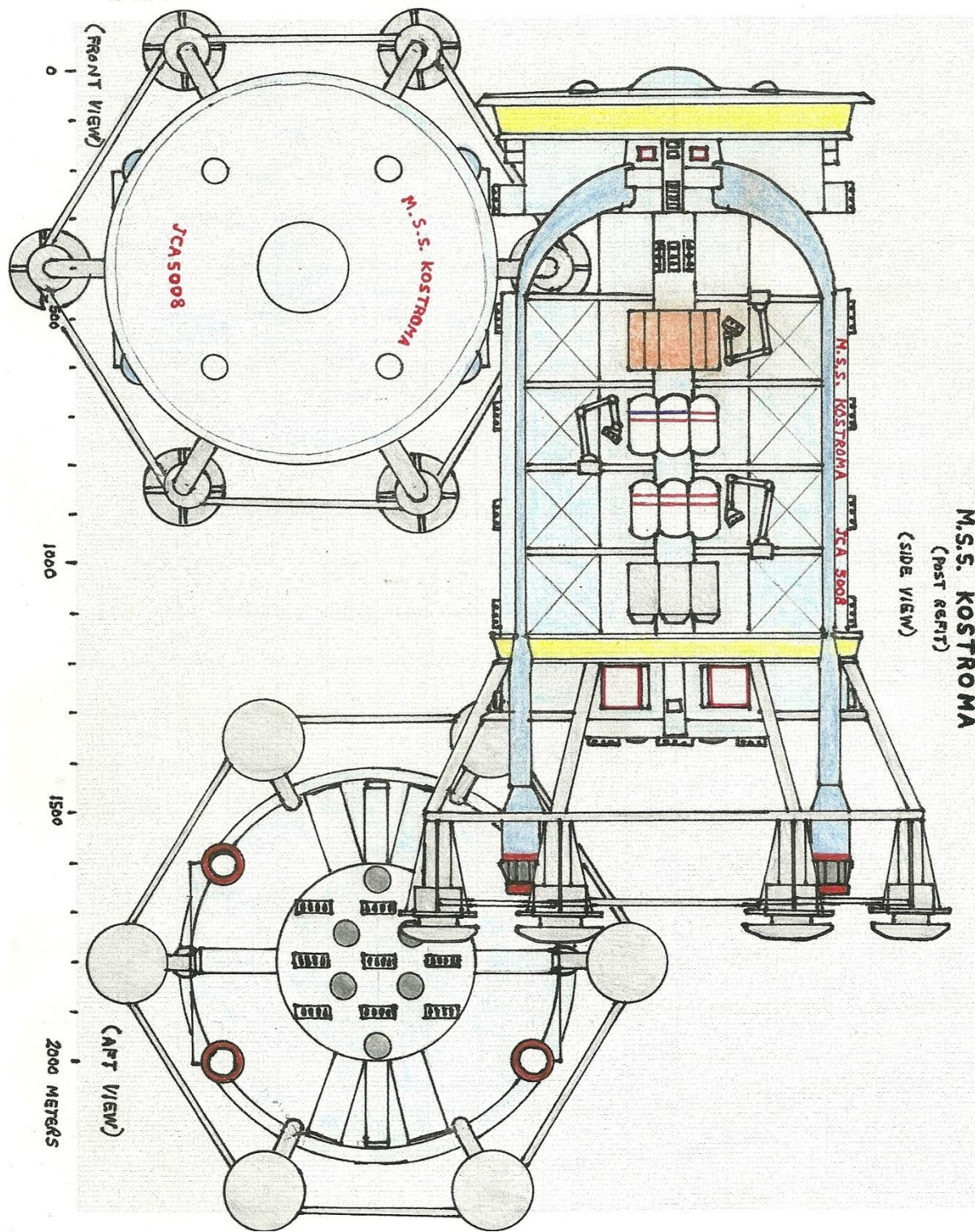
"I haven't thought about that yet, to be frank. This is after all still some ten years in the future. The one thing I know about that is that I will want to have one of my old crewmates to take command of the KOSTROMA after me, even though I will still be the owner of it. My navigator and executive officer, Dana Durning, would be a good candidate for the post of captain."

"What about your son, Misha? Do you plan to make him one of your officers?"

"Only if he wishes so and proves that he is competent enough for the job. He may be my son, but he will have to prove himself worthy of whatever position he wants. I will make sure that he understands that as he grows up, while being gentle and supportive with him."

"Spoken like a truly responsible parent. I am sure that he will grow up to be a fine young man, Tina."

THE KOSTROMA



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