

# FAR FROM HOME

"Hyperwave technology made the universe accessible for humanity, and twenty years later it nearly destroyed us. I wasn't around for the discovery of the Hyperwave, but if I trace far enough up my family tree I can find someone who was. The 22nd century was a long time ago, and Earth was a terrible place.

When a few eggheads discovered a new type of matter, no one cared. The air was still toxic, the ground was still barren, and scientific breakthroughs that didn't instantly make life easier or more affordable were generally ignored.

I've seen the old scans of paper news from the time. In 2108 the discovery rated half a paragraph in a low grade scientific journal. By 2109 every news outlet in the entire solar system was talking about the Hyperwave.

I leave the science work to Jorgan, but the basic idea was to harness the Hyperwave into both a starship drive generator and a communications package, as was achieved in 2109. When people heard they could take such a ship to the Mars colony or Jupiter mining station in seconds instead of years, they started caring.

The first ship, tactlessly named "Hope", left port in 2110. She was Corporation owned, Stettler-Kon in fact, even if they're a footnote now. The company had pooled every resource they had to be the first to build a Hyperwave capable starship, and their efforts were rewarded. The Hope was bulky by today's standards but she carried both a Hyperwave Drive and a Hyperwave Transmitter. The desired circuit was Mars, Jupiter, Pluto, and back to Earth. Before the applause of the Terran crowd had died down Hope arrived in low orbit of Mars. As the celebration party started on the surface, the ship Hyperwaved to Jupiter. The mining station was used to cryogenic sleeper ships knocking on their door, so they were floored at such a vessel. The next Hyperwave jump was to our military base on Pluto.

While civilians cheered, Stettler-Kon scientists nervously watched energy readings and diagnostic software. They were waiting for a call. And exactly 48 seconds after the first Hyperwave jump, they got it. The clear voice of Captain Vitus Cabral of the Hope rang over the lab comm. He was saying hello from Pluto.

I'm always amused reading such stories. How naive could we get. The majority of Earth and the rest of the Sol system expected the Hope to swing back to Earth. Then other corporations could mimic her design, and a new era of space colonization would begin. Finally we would break free of Sol, past Pluto, past the dark void of space and into new galaxies.

Instead the Hope Hyperwaved again, and she wasn't seen by Earth for 160 years.

Spies from Fumatsi and Glencoria inside the Stettler-Kon lab quickly told their parent corporations what had happened. It seems Stettler-Kon had a different flight plan.

For years scientists had talked about sending a gigantic ark ship to Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to Sol at only four light years. But Stettler-Kon had grander plans than a measly little hop. First they Hyperwaved sixteen light years to Gliese. From there, a second jump took them forty light years to an undiscovered star now known as Konholm. The crew of the Hope settled on Terminus Kon, a mostly livable planet that could be improved with terraforming in a matter of years. A hair under 530 trillion kilometers from Sol in the snap of a finger.

How they knew about Konholm or the Earth-like planet there is beyond me, and actually

beyond most of the history books. The secret died with the original scientists working on the project.

Regardless the outcome back on Earth was disastrous. Fumatsi and Glencoria and dozens of other corporations were furious that Stettler-Kon would have the first colony outside of our solar system. Their own ships were months or years away from being spaceworthy. Drastic changes swept through every massive corporation in Sol. Entire companies now dedicated their focus to spaceships instead of agriculture, electronics, medicine, or whatever else they were into.

The race to colonize the galaxy had begun, and the corporations were the only participants.

By 2118 there were 470 colonies recorded by fifteen corporations. Espionage and skirmishes were common amidst corporations, but outright war was frowned upon. Colonists at least had that basic decency.

Earth was reduced to a couple billion people from the mass exodus to distant stars. Each planet jockeyed to attract colonists and immigrants by announcing increasingly ludicrous claims like moons made of gold, vegetation that grew diamonds, and rivers of the popular drink Blamo.

As ridiculous as the advertisements sound now, it was preferable at the time to dying gasping for breath in a slum on Earth. And Hyperwave technology had made transportation cheap, cheap enough that a family could jump to a colony for a month's salary.

In 2121 the number of colonies had grown exponentially to over 52,000. No longer were starships built with the dwindling resources of the planets in Sol and limited to a single point of origin. Each colony would create their own vessels and successively colonize another dozen planets.

The first shadow over the golden age of space travel was barely noticed. The planet Dreith simply ceased communicating. There were 3 million people on the surface, which was mostly Thallium wetlands, and not a single soul transmitted anything.

Dreith was owned by Patel Unimantics, and rescue ships were dispatched from the nearest star. Upon arrival the inhabitants were found safe and alive, but confused. Their Hyperwave Communicators had spontaneously shutdown. Likewise the Hyperwave Drives in their fleet of starships weren't responding to jump commands.

Patel Unimantics decided sabotage was to blame. After all their largest competitor Leache were well known to play dirty. Replacement equipment was provided and life went on as before. Except this situation happened again and again across thousands and planets and dozens of corporations. Soon the replacement equipment began to fail too. Then half the time newly built Hyperwave Drives wouldn't even turn on. Not wanting to show weakness to their enemies, each corporation didn't mention when a colony "went dark".

This meant no one saw the synchronized epidemic of Hyperwave failures that rippled across the galaxy. As thousands of colonies lost faster than light communication and transportation, humanity's empire of the stars collapsed.

It took close to 150 years before we truly recovered from this. Planets were cut off from resupply, trade, and corporate orders. Just as quickly as Hyperwave technology had shrunk our horizons, it blew them back up. Scientists still don't know what happened to the Hyperwave, but it seems to have simply disappeared. Maybe it was an anomaly whose time had run out, or

maybe we used up all the new matter. Regardless of the cause, the result was the same. The unspoken corporate rule of avoiding outright war was shattered. Stettler-Kon blamed Glencoria, Fumatsi blamed Patel Unimantics, and in the middle of all this finger pointing our map of the galaxy was growing dimmer and dimmer.

Ugly, unceasing wars lasted from the final failure of the Hyperwave technology in 2126 to the Unification Pact in 2267. As far as we know now the major conflicts were focused in Sol, which was all that was left of our empire. 141 years of war, billions of lives lost, and all because a few corporations wouldn't talk to each other first.

Looking back I imagine that would have been the end of humanity. We finally pushed each other and old poor Earth one too many times. But the savior of our race was on the horizon. It wasn't negotiations, or economic sanctions, or conquest. It was a little piece of technology called the Miramachi Device.

The Device was discovered in 2266, just four short years ago. I was 32 years old at the time, and was two years free of mandatory corporate service in Africa for the Horizon Integration company.

During my tour I had been involved in some low atmospheric dogfights, and was trying to maintain a job flying commercially. Aside from living in a one bedroom slum I wasn't in too bad shape.

I vividly remember the newsfeed as it scanned across my living room. "Hyperwave Replacement Possible" was the title, in big, bold font. I always felt I was born into the wrong century; that flitting amongst the stars was my true home. And now with the Miramachi Device I might have the chance to do just that.

As with the Hyperwave a lot of us didn't understand how or why the Miramachi Device worked. Maybe twenty years down the road it will fail as well. Call it hubris, call it foolishness, but everyone in Sol was restless for a second shot at the galaxy. Here was faster than light travel and communications knocking on our door again. Humanity was tired of war, and were eager to open that door.

The Unification Pact was signed on Earth in 2267, only a year after the Miramachi Device was discovered. Using the new Device we were able to spread the word to the rest of the Sol system in a matter of days instead of years. Corporations from Mercury to Pluto were dissolved and assets pooled to create the fledgling Solonian Empire.

Their fleet was made up of "Prospectors". Right from the literature pamphlets their purpose is to "explore and restore contact with Terran Colonies". The corporations had nearly exhausted the resources of Sol, so most of the first starships were built from materials mined off drifting asteroids. But we managed a fleet of thirty ships by 2270.

Of course you know the rest of my personnel details if you read my pre-launch biography. Sufficient to say I applied and was accepted as Prospector Junior Class, worked my way up the ranks, and eventually became Prospector Captain of the "Klondike", a fourth generation Prospector starship.

As an addendum to the pre-launch documents I created, this is my official launch day entry. Soon the Klondike will jump, or Mirawarp, to the planet of Pramout. She is 93% bromine oceans, and at one point housed 130,000 employees of Hines Fabrication in great floating domes.

From the Prospector reports so far, I can't even begin to imagine what I'll find. 150 years without contact means every Terran Colony has wildly diverged from their Earthly origins.

We've found cases ranging from flourishing societies built on advanced genetic manipulation to stone age hunter gatherers barely surviving.

It's a big universe full of remnants of our past. As Prospector Captain, I vow to explore, document, and ally or pacify every Terran Colony I can find."

Captain: Ronald Gin  
Permit: #44681-AA\_0  
Starship Class: Prospector IV  
Starship Name: "Klondike"  
Entry Date: Earth Surface, Sector 1, Year 2270

"The interior damage is being repaired by Kurt, and Jorgan is getting Clover back into fighting shape. The Angessians appeared passive at first, and their Technology Rating of 4 didn't overly worry us. But our planetary scans were incorrect, and only their villages and social structure were low tech. As we've seen in the past three hours, the weaponry available to even the simplest of Angessian is at least Technology Rating 9. Recommend planetary bombardment of major cities, followed by virus bomb of outlying communities if hostility continues."

Captain: Ronald Gin  
Permit: #44681-AA\_1  
Starship Class: Prospector IV  
Starship Name: "Klondike"  
Entry Date: Angess Orbit, Sector 58, Year 2271

Captain Gin finished the entry and leaned back from the desk. Pain still thumped across his shoulder from the ion blast he'd taken earlier. His force field has lessened the damage and Jorgan had been quick to patch the rest.

His cabin was small, and entered via a ladder leading up to the command module of the Klondike. Various artifacts and trophies from his first year of exploration adorned the walls, amidst a scattering of functional furnishings.

Gin momentarily grinned when his gaze settled on the mounted claw of an Onyxer. The alien creature was found on the planetary rings of Trezu Minor, and Captain Gin had stalked and slain the beast to win the allegiance of the Terrans on Trezu.

Although pieces of alien wildlife were among the trophies, the Solonian Empire still had not found another galactic civilization. The Empire deemed simple beasts and other unintelligent specimens far below even the most radically engineered Terrans.

"Aliens, yes," Gin stood and said to the empty room, "Alien civilization..." he paused, questioning his own beliefs on the matter before continuing, "still undiscovered."

The Angessian colonies on the planet's surface below provided an interesting stretch of this definition. Initial orbital scanning revealed scattered villages following a tribal structure. No immediate weapons or threats were visible on any spectrum. The terrain was mountainous with traces of bismuth and selenium.

Although Angess was a small planet, closer to Mercury in size, three major cities were found. The crew of the Klondike had landed far outside of one, dubbed Concord, and Gin and Clover had taken a two person shuttle into the core.

Upon arrival they were greeted with a surprising sight. Even after dozens of planetary expeditions Captain Gin was still amazed at how wildly the Terrans had branched from their

human origins.

Originally Lima Megacorp colonists, the humans had used genetic restructuring to meld their forms with the local alien species. Upon exiting the shuttle Captain Gin was surrounded by towering Angessians. Their lower bodies were reptilian, six-legged, and striped with blue like a bizarre tiger. From the torso up Angessians remained mostly human. Muscular, with a purplish tinge to their skin and long leathery hair, but still resembling mankind.

Tame versions of the original alien species wandered around the city, though their six-legged body featured a large carnivorous mouth instead of a human torso. For good reason they were locally named "Und Fan", which roughly meant "Death Mouth". The city itself was carved from blocks of bismuth, giving a magnificent blue reflection to the entire area.

Relations soon soured with the Angessian greeting party, and the two humans fled back to their shuttle and headed for the Klondike. Both were wounded, and the Angessians gave chase from the ground. Their advanced ion weaponry damaged the shuttle and nearly killed Clover and Gin, but they reached the lower atmosphere and escaped to the safety of the Klondike. Captain Gin recalled the meeting with a mix of anger and sadness. Once the initial flash of revenge and fury had passed, his cleared mind regretted what would happen to the Terrans. But all for the duty of the Empire, he thought, straightening his posture and focusing on the next course of action.

He climbed the ladder to the empty command module, and opened a communication channel to the medical station. "Jorgan, status?"

The doctor's sullen voice replied, "I've replaced three and a half of Clover's ribs and relinked the nerve endings, but the autodoc will need another forty minutes to finish rebuilding the skin." Gin wouldn't have minded a full repair by the autodoc, but Clover Star was the priority. Half her stomach had been melted in the opening salvo, before she could activate her force field.

"Affirmative, Jorgan, keep at it."

Clicking two buttons he opened the comm to broadcast through the rest of the ship. "Crew, I'm going to maintain low orbit for one hour, then we'll set down outside the Angessian's second large city, codename Harrier." The crew had a tradition of naming each landmark from a specific genus of Earth animal. Currently they were on birds of prey.

"I'm not sure about their communication technology, so we might be able to get into Harrier before they find out what happened in Concord. As you all know we haven't had any luck contacting the Angessians over standard comms...that isn't to say they lack the technology though."

Gin closed the channel for a second, sighed, and clicked it back on. "Our entry will be more cautious this time, but we need a larger sample size of Angessian behaviour before we condemn the planet. Out."

Gin double checked the autopilot, which was maintaining a steady circular pattern seven hundred kilometers away from Condor. Their scans hadn't identified any Angessian flight technology, but it also had missed the ion weaponry, so he wasn't taking any chances.

The command module was circled by thick glass, and the armored blast shields were currently layered on top of that. Gin was flying by the radar, scopes, and other instruments that made up the machinery surrounding the pilot seat. Aside from leading excursions and deciding the course of action for each planet, Captain Gin also handled the navigation and piloting. On a ship of four people, plenty of overlap was necessary to cover all the stations.

Climbing from the chair he took a second ladder up to the "spine", which was the main corridor linking everything on the ship. A bright yellow #1 adorned the wall beside the ladder. Each end of the spine was a double airlock portal to the outside world, although they kept the front entrance barred for security.

The spine corridor was close to forty meters long, which was only ten meters less than the entire length of the Klondike. Aside from the ladder Gin had just ascended, there were five other portals leading into various compartments of the ship. The corridor smelled of fresh air and a mild breeze was blowing from the engineering section at the opposite end. Clear white light spilled across the metallic walls and tiled floor.

Prospector ships were commonly used as mobile fortresses in hostile environments, so defensive strategies and funnelling invaders were a big factor in the design. Also since the voyages had no set end date, comfort was also a large factor. Every crew member had their own quarters that were six meters long. The cabins were situated under their primary station on the starship. Six meters didn't sound like a lot in the design schematics, but the rooms were spacious compared to the bulk liners that crammed civilians into three meter coffins.

He walked past the next ladder, this one marked with a #2. It lead to the medical station, where he could hear the delicate machinery of the autodoc swishing and swaying over Clover's body. The same ladder also lead further down to Jorgan's quarters, similar to how Gin's own room was below the pilot cabin.

"Kurt, I'm coming back to help with the shuttle repairs."

The searing white noise of a plasma torch echoed through the command module as Kurt opened his comm. The torch stopped and Kurt's rough voice replied, "Yes, sir, she's almost patched."

Continuing his brisk walk Gin passed Ladder #3 which went the core. Below that on the bottom deck was the common area. The core contained the Miramachi Device, gravity generator, and fuel for the orbital engine. Two floors deep and no cabin underneath meant the core was the biggest section of the ship.

A further eighteen meters away Ladder #4 led to the opposite side of the core, and Ladder #5 following that went to the armory and Clover's room. This was a critical ladder that also ascended above the spine to the Klondike's turreted weapon system.

Below Gin, Jorgan, and Clover's room were sections for cargo and supplies. Fuel and machinery filled the bottom deck below the core, and the shuttle docked neatly into a section below Kurt's room at the back of the ship.

Finally Gin reached the end of the spine and Ladder #6. The earlier sound of plasma cutting had been replaced with a whining grind as Kurt worked on the repairs. Orbital engines flared from the back of the ship, and Gin could feel their power vibrating through the spine.

"Coming down Kurt," he called out, sliding down past engineering and Kurt's quarters. He stopped on the bottom deck, which was actually the roof of the shuttle. The shuttle docked into the back of the Klondike, and actually provided additional thrust from its own engines when in orbit.

The diminutive vehicle was a Venture II named "Crusader", and was barely larger than Gin's cabin. It seated one comfortable, or two in a pinch, plus enough machinery and fuel to range over 2,000 kilometers from the Klondike. The docking station had just enough space for the engineer to squeeze around the outside of the shuttle to perform maintenance.

Whoever designed the setup hadn't planned on Kurt doing the work. He was a massive man by

Solonian standards, both tall and broad shouldered. His complaints about the cramped working conditions were as constant as the seasons on Earth. Currently his engineer coveralls hung loosely around his waist and grease and chemical stains blotted his shoulders.

"Sir, glad to have you. I fixed the damage on the bottom and was just checking the atmospheric shielding on the port side."

"Looks good Kurt, glad to see the Angessians didn't ding us too badly."

"Well, they did. What the hell kind of Tech Rating 4 gun was that?" Kurt wiped sweat from his brow to hide his smirk.

"Watch your tongue, Engineer." Gin wanted to sigh, but repressed the urge. Keeping a professional front with the crew was important to maintaining order and decency as the voyage went on. The Solonian Empire provided strict guidelines for conduct and rules for many circumstances of day to day life on a starship. Individual Prospector ships varied the level of enforcement of these codes, but Captain Gin was closer to "all the rules" than the looser, community feel he found aboard other vessels.

"Sorry, sir," Kurt said, snapping to attention. The salute was legitimate, as the gruff man respected Gin and all he had achieved in their year together. "I have another eight diagnostics to run, but we should be ready to launch for Harrier in half an hour."

"Back to the question of Tech Rating. I need to know what happened with our scans. Why didn't we pick up their weaponry, and why couldn't we get a read on the Angessian anatomy?"

"My best guess, sir, is the heavy bismuth content."

"Shouldn't we have picked it up on a thermal scan or electrical analysis though?" Gin tapped his chin, "I scanned all the standard modes and we still got TR 4."

Kurt cracked his knuckles, "Bismuth has low thermal conductivity and is even worse for electrical." He shrugged and continued, "I think it acted as a barrier to the scans. The Angessians might even leverage or enhance the base properties of the metal."

"That might explain the structures and weapons. The bismuth must get into their diet though? Or in their armor? We didn't have any idea what they looked like until we got close in the Crusader."

"That's a likely possibility, sir."

Gin shook his head ruefully, "Not good. I don't like flying blind like this."

Both men looked over the hull of the Crusader, tending to focus on the fine lines of machinery instead of making eye contact. "Well...maybe Harrier will be a nicer place?"

The Klondike shuddered as Gin took her closer to the surface. Clover was sitting the second expedition out, so Kurt would be his second-in-command on site. Currently the engineer sat with his back to Gin, busily working the dials and levers to smooth their approach. Few crew, many roles, the Captain mused.

Upon viewing Harrier on their first circle the city appeared larger than Condor. The same bismuth structures greeted them and wandering alien and Angessian forms populated the sparse terrain.

Their plan was to land the Klondike directly near the city, as a show of strength. Some of the Terrans would only respond to Empire visitations if they were cowed first. The tiny Crusader shuttle may have failed to do that.

"Still guessing," Gin muttered under his breath, gently twisting the joystick to bring them towards a large open square.

"Okay crew, setting down in 3...2..."

Unexpectedly a green landing strip illuminated underneath them. Scores of Angessians poured from the nearby buildings, their powerful arms raised overhead to block the dust scattered by the Klondike's engines.

"What the - looks like a welcoming party?" Gin asked, still talking over the comm.

From the medical station Clover's voice replied, tentative but with an angry undercurrent. She didn't like getting shot to pieces. "Be careful, sir, their welcoming party could be an ambush."

"Understood. Clover can you get into the turret?"

Against the background noise of Jorgan's protests Gin heard, "Yes, sir, on my way." The sound of boots on a metal ladder echoed from the spine corridor.

The Klondike settled to the ground and Gin edged the atmospheric throttle back, reducing the amount of grit being tossed into the air. Then he switched from the internal frequency to the external loudspeakers and spoke, "Angessians, my name is Captain Gin, Prospector of the Solonian Empire. We are like you, from Terra, and wish to speak in peace of trade and joined prosperity."

His speech was well rehearsed and varied little between planets. Grabbing another mouthful of recycled air he continued, holding back no secrets. "You may have spoken to your kinsmen from the city to the east. There was an encounter, and violence, and myself and another crewman were wounded. No Angessians were hurt, and we wish to keep it that way."

Kurt nodded, appreciated the subtle threat the Captain made.

The blast screens of the Klondike were opened, and Gin could look into the faces of each of the gathered specimens. No reaction so far, but their numbers seemed to have stabilized at fifty Terrans.

"Two of us will be exiting the ship in a couple of minutes. We have cargo to trade, and would be interested in learning more of your people."

Still no reaction.

"If you understand, please confer some sign of non-hostility." The computer went to work translating his Solonian words into a babble of different languages, in case the Angessians preferred a different dialect.

As the message was repeating Gin stood and climbed to the spine, with Kurt close on his heels. They passed underneath Clover who sat snugly in the turret, more at home in the cramped weapons platform than in her spacious quarters.

Already the two men were equipped for the hostile environment outside. Without an Atmospheric Exploration Suit, or AES, they would be dead from heat in a matter of microseconds. But gone were the bulky astronaut suits from history. Instead each AES had a thin, highly powerful force field layering their skin. They could "suit up" simply by attaching a bulky power generator to their clothing and activating the force field. Four metal disks attached to their knee and ankle joints to help resist gravitational forces.

A second layer of protection was present in their shield, which was an invisible wall of force encircling each explorer. The purpose of the shield was less to protect against the environment, atmosphere, or biological attacks, and instead to redirect laser and ion attacks from hostile forces.

Another benefit of the AES was backwater colonies who had forgotten technology were amazed by the unseen magic, which appeared as powerful as the deities depicted in their stone caves. Unfortunately for Gin and Kurt, the Angessians were well versed in the capabilities of

force fields and shields. No such tricks would save them here.

Each man grabbed a small pistol from the armory, which was easier to conceal under their clothes. They didn't want to appear overtly hostile, but Gin was on edge after the last encounter soured.

The pistols were standard 200kW lasers, with a microbattery powerful enough to allow continuous fire for days on end. Gin was comforted by the familiar weight as the metal barrel warmed against his hip.

"Clover, don't fire unless I give the word." Gin was sending orders from his on board comm, another benefit of the AES. After receiving confirmation from Clover, he turned to the bulkhead at the rear of the spine. "Okay Jorgan, open her up."

The first door slid open and the two men stepped in, watching gauges and temperature metrics update to account for the change in pressure. When the inner door was securely closed Jorgan hit the switch for the outer door. Instantly a raging inferno of heat swept into the small decontamination chamber at the rear of the spine. Gin felt himself crushed by the outside gravity before his AES compensated. A sense of being underwater lingered as he stepped outside.

Blinking against the foreign sun, Gin climbed down from the Klondike. Kurt followed closely, his hand reluctantly leaving his weapon holster to help stabilize the descent. Angessians were waiting below, a dozen in number. As soon as Gin touched down on the rocky surface the largest Terran approached and bowed.

"Solonian of the sky, we are pleased you have visited. We wish you had brought Kanthari heads as a gift!"

The crowd stomped and grunted in agreement. For an Angessian a rough grunt and smash of their six legs against the ground was the same as a Solonian cheering and clapping.

Surprised, Gin recovered quickly, "I am glad to be here, and to see a peaceful welcome. Tell me mighty Angessian, who are the Kanthari you speak of?"

"First, Solonian, we are not Angessian. That is your term. We are Kanthem, and the Kanthari leemas I talk of are the ones who attacked you hours ago."

A year of exploring space had improved Gin's natural talent for understanding foreign cultures and tongues. He identified the term "leemas" to mean the equivalent of "scum". The Captain was also reclassifying the planet as warring factions, instead of a unified species. The Kanthari would be from Condor, and the Kanthem would be from Harrier.

If his life hadn't depended on keeping the information and terminology straight, Captain Gin would have been lost.

"The Kanthari, they are your enemies." Gin was certain to keep his voice level to imply a statement, not a question. "As a Solonian, I do not know more. Tell me, why do you fight?" The Captain also had a knack for imitating the timbre and pace of each colony's speech patterns.

"The Kanthari have raided our city for many seasons. We started as a weak strain. Now we are forced to grow warlike to compete."

Gin could tell the coloration of the Kanthem was slightly different than his frantic memories of the flight from Condor. Also these Angessians appeared smaller, and perhaps more fragile. He wished he could sneak a subvocal transmission to the Klondike to get a skeletal scan of the creatures. Gin imagined their bones were thinner and lighter.

Since the Kanthem seemed straight forward and to the point, Gin dared to impose. "Can we speak more inside?"

The lead Kanthem nodded and motioned to the nearest bismuth hut. The building jutted from the sand like a fallen boulder, and reflected the same blue color as the rest of the city. As the Kanthem began to migrate inside, Gin turned his head back to the ship and sent a quick message.

"We're going in. Stay covering us, but still wait for my signal. This city is at war with Condor."

The interior of the Kanthem structure was even more impressive. The bismuth had been polished and cut to enhance the blue reflections, and the entire room dazzled the Solonians. Squat, functional tables and furnaces bordered a worn circle in the middle. When Gin entered he saw the creatures sat in a semi-circle, their numerous legs splayed out underneath them. "I am Kkar, and lead this ken. Our wordsmith is Kaluh," he nodded to the Kanthem standing to his left. Kaluh had a larger brain cavity and numerous wrappings that replaced the armor the rest of the Angessians wore.

"In your words, he is a historian. He knows of the time of the Great Dark, when we Kanthem were left on our own."

At the mention of the "Great Dark" the room fell silent, and Kaluh stepped forward. "Yes, Solonian. I remember the day from the tellings of wordsmiths before me. Of our impending starvation. Of our bonding with the noble many legged animals of this planet. Of the aggression of the Kanthari who longed for violence as a solution. The Great Dark made them lash out."

Kaluh looked around the dwelling, and Gin realized the history lesson was as much a tradition to teach the young as it was a tool to enlighten visitors.

"They have never stopped lashing out. Blaming us. Seeing us as weak. Who knows the mind of a Kanthari? Who wants to know such leemas!"

The circle of sitting Kanthem swayed their legs back and forth, indicating anger and disdain.

"Our patience has paid off. Our blessing will be their curse. The Kanthari drove you away. Let us seek revenge for your ken. Let us ride to war!"

The swaying legs switched to a deafen stomp and a thunder of grunts bellowed from the busy room.

"To war!"

For half a minute the noise persisted, before finally Kaluh stepped behind the leader Kkar. As the noise tapered off, Gin advanced to the two figureheads and said, "Kanthem, we share your sentiment. But war is costly. We of the Klondike cannot rush into it."

The swaying of Kanthem legs started again. Captain Gin knew he was treading a fine line, especially with the occupants so worked up. But his mission wasn't to use the Klondike to settle petty squabbles between cities. As a Prospector he had to report gains to the Empire, and an iron clad alliance with the ruling city of Angessian would ensure that.

But currently Kanthem was far from the ruling city. They appeared to be bullied by the Kanthari, and maybe all the other cities of Angess. Perhaps even the villages took part in the raiding. Gin wasn't confident in backing the underdog.

On the other hand, these were the first Angessians to speak openly to the crew. He couldn't waste the Kanthem's favor.

Kkar spoke next, his booming voice silencing the rising cacophony of rubbing legs. "Solonian we understand. Our youngbloods are eager for battle. For revenge. But take time and think."

"Yes, we know you can see the rest of our planet as easily as we see the next mountain." Kaluh

added, well aware of what a spaceship was capable of.

Kkar nodded and continued, "Travel and learn. Return to us before the season is over. If war is in your hearts, we shall ride."

"Thank you for your generosity Kkar. We shall do as you say. Let us understand the situation, investigate the enemy." Gin quickly calculated travel velocity, distances, and points of interest on Angess. Satisfied with an estimate, he finished, "We shall return in two weeks."

"Very well. But first bring out your crew." Gin visibly bristled at the curt suggestion, his mind still fearing ambush. Kkar eased his concerns by raising a tankard from the nearest table. "Let us drink the leenan of our ken."

"Kanthem wine, to celebrate," Kaluh translated. The foaming mug Kkar held was more than enough of an explanation for the Solonian.

Captain Gin switched off his two layers of protection. Safely inside the second airlock, he shrugged off the AES power pack and walked to Ladder #4. Kurt was still removing his AES, but had been offering ideas and suggestions since the two men got back on board.

Gin tuned him out and slid down the ladder, past the core, and walked into the common area at the bottom of the ship. "All crew report to dining for a quick debriefing."

In moments Jorgan, Clover, and Kurt filtered into the eighteen meter long room.

To remind them of Earth the common area was lavishly decorated with oak furniture and a complete kitchen. Cooking duty rotated amidst the crew, but Jorgan tended to create the best meals. Lights ensnared in shatter resistant mesh casing illuminated the room. Covering the floor was a soft rug woven of fibers from the planet Coram. The entire common area smelled like processed protein capsules, but the scent of exotic spices from Jorgan's personal collection somewhat masked the odor.

"I assume you two were listening to our meeting."

"Yes, sir," Clover answered while Jorgan nodded. The AES had an optional transmitter to allow the on board Klondike crew to monitor excursion members.

"So you know as much as I do about the Kanthari and Kanthem. Right now we don't have time to worry long term. Yet. For now we need to gauge whether their offer to drink "leenan", which sounds awful, is legitimate or not."

"Sir, I was switching between medical and the cockpit," Jorgan offered, "Trying to scan for changes in blood pressure, facial tensing, anything of the sort that might indicate lying. Our systems are designed for a variety of Terrans. Enough so that they would give us an idea if these Kanthem had been planning an attack. From what I could tell, their request is real and honest."

Gin found himself comparing Jorgan's long winded status update to the curt Kanthem tongue. Seeing the scientist was finished, he leaned on the wood table and said, "Well done. Unless anyone has a doubt, I think we should re-equip and head back out. The sooner we arrive the sooner we can leave and get busy planning what to do with our two weeks."

Normally the Solonian Empire guidelines encouraged Captains to make their own decisions about encounter strategy and resource allocation. But Gin preferred to bring everyone in on the debate, since their lives were at stake too. Although they were his crew, they were also his friends. Still hunched over the table Gin reflected, "Plus I don't have a big enough ego to assume I think of everything."

Speaking aloud, Gin ordered, "Jorgan, can you whip up a quick antibiotic shot for all of us?"

We'll scan the leenan first, but an extra coating around our stomach couldn't hurt." Smirking in the corner Kurt added, "From what I smelled of the stuff, it could peel the paint of the Crusader at a hundred yards." Jorgan laughed and nodded. "Will do, sir. Medical still has some leftover tablets from Wait." "Good. Clover, put the turret on autoshot, keyed to all of our voices." "Roger, sir. The current activation code is Whiskey Hanover." Everyone nodded, familiar with the process of activating the turret remotely. "Just shout that, or even transmit it subvocally, and the fireworks will start," Clover reminded. "Okay crew, exit in five," Gin said with a tone of finality. A chorus of affirmatives came from the gathered Solonians, and they hustled off to the AES stations and armory.

Gin gave the crew a once over before they left the ship. Everyone was dressed in their AES and the glimmer of green status lights notified the Captain that everything was set. He paused slightly in front of Clover, who had the noticeable bulge of a weapon slung under her shirt. "Clover, what is that?" "Sorry, sir, non-regulation scattergun." Even though the corridor was dead silent, she leaned in closer and whispered, "After the last incident, well...if it comes down to it, I'd prefer a fair fight instead of a repeat." "That sounds reasonable. At this point the Kanthem might appreciate extra martial prowess," Gin said, trying to be understanding of the rattled quartermaster. He advanced to the bulkhead and slid up the manual override switch.

"Solonians. You have returned. I am glad to see your soldiers Cap'tain Gin." Though he had been practicing the title, Kkar's voice still broke in the middle of Captain. "Thank you Kkar. We are pleased to celebrate with you." Feeling comfortable pandering to the Kanthem, Gin reassured the various creatures, "Let tonight mark the start of our friendship." The festivities began with traditional Kanthem music, which consisted of rhythmic leg grinding against bizarrely shaped instruments. Gin thought he recognized a mixture of a cello and guitar, but the unknown materials and design generally left him baffled. Inside the large structure various glowing stones had been strategically placed to cast appealing ambiance across the rooms. Shadows and light played against the sharp bismuth surfaces, and accented the rocky floor and smooth movements of the Kanthem. Plates and plates of wildly colored food were brought out by an endless supply of Kanthem. Some brought the flavorful dishes as offerings to the Solonians, while other course were prepared specifically for the celebration. At their heart every Terran was still somewhat human, or at least had a distant memory of humanity. So Gin was not surprised when the highlight of the evening was the leenan. Drinking strange brews was not unknown to the crew of the Klondike, although leenan turned out to be particularly potent. As Kkar explained to him hours later, the naming of "leenan" was intentionally close to "leemas", which mean slime or scum. The drink was bitter and foul to the Angessian palate and nearly toxic to the Solonians. Jorgan's medical remedy from earlier certainly saved the crew from permanent damage to their tissue and organs. "Plus it's inshedibly strang!" Kurt blurted as Kkar was going over the origin of leenan. Gin was

preparing to scold the intoxicated engineer but cracked a smile instead. A score of Kanthem nearby mimicked Kurt's coveralls by wrapping multiple pieces of their armor together. The Captain could tell the ruse was meant as a compliment since the same gang of Kanthem followed Kurt wherever he stumbled. Quite the fan club.

The drinking and celebrating went long into the night, although Gin was careful to keep his mind relatively clear. Clover was likewise focused on sobriety and her hands never strayed far from the various weapons hidden across her body. Kurt had no such inhibitions and, as the sun rose, he had to be carried to the Klondike. Even Jorgan appeared sickly and pale the next morning, although he tried to blame the food.

"Well I'd say we made a good impression on the Kanthem. Kkar certainly spoke highly of us and appeared even more eager to march to war."

"Aye sir, and it only cost us half our liver," Jorgan quipped. He was hunched in the kitchen mixing various tonics into their morning breakfast.

The rest of the crew sat sprawled around the central table, their posture reflecting how tough the night had been. Between her stomach wound healing and keeping on edge overnight, even Clover was exhausted. Gin was busy arranging planetary maps, splitting his attention between a headache and plotting their next course.

"We've seen two of the three major cities so far, but none of the villages. I recommend we try to visit the smaller communities before the last city, then circle back to Harrier if we're still set on combat."

Gin didn't have to look up to know the crew were pushing through their personal torments to give him their full attention.

"Once we test the waters with the first village, I recommend splitting two by two and seeing another half dozen villages each. That should be a big enough sample size to understand the Angessians." Gin subscribed to the view of avoiding diminishing returns on their effort.

"We'll call the last city Eagle, and it's here." With a twirl of his fingers Gin spun the electronic map to expose the opposite pole of the planet. A second deft manoeuvre of his hands zoomed the map out and highlighted twelve population centers between fifty and one hundred occupants. The yellow dots glowed all across the planet, since wide distribution was important for properly analyzing a colony.

Jorgan dished out a warm breakfast of protein, vitamins, and various pharmaceuticals to quell their grumpy stomachs.

Gin spooned a mouthful of the "There are enough villages that we'll have to drop to game birds for their naming. Goose, Penguin, Duck, and so on. First up is Grebe, which we'll hit tomorrow right before the Angessian midday."

"What can we expect in Grebe, sir?" Clover spoke up, "Are we assuming another Angessian strain entirely, or just an offshot of the Kanthem?"

"Uncertain at this point. So Jorgan and Kurt I want you to scan the location as much as you can. Try to work around the bismuth, try to figure out what these Angessians look like and if there are similar subtle variances as exist between the Kanthari and Kanthem." Gin nodded to the two men, confident that their combined abilities would ensure a well researched third excursion.

"Clover, work on tweaking our AES collection to be better protected against ion weaponry."

"Very good sir." Clover perked up from her plate and leaned eagerly over the table, "That's all I

saw at the Kanthem hut yesterday so I'd assume ion is the primary gun tech for the whole planet."

"Excellent. I'll continue checking the surface maps. We have two weeks, plus I've allotted another week if we do go to war with the Kanthari. I'll confirm our next colony destination with the Empire and start planning for that."

Although the day would be busy, the crew took their time with breakfast. Sharing stories and bonding was as important for morale as successful excursions. After the last plate had been cleared Gin retired to the Klondike's cockpit.

After strapping in the Captain transferred the updated planetary map from his handheld copy to the ship computer. A second button light up the cockpit with a massive overlay of the map, including distance and elevation calculations. Working his other hand Gin raised the blast shield and fired up the starship.

Kanthem tradition dictated that they not say farewell to the Klondike, since that implied they might not see the crew again. As a result the surrounding area was surprising empty of movement as the orbital engines hummed to full capacity.

"Prepare for take off," he said curtly into the nearest comm. Easing the joystick back, Gin lifted the ship up into the boiling atmosphere, and steered the Klondike towards their next goal.

The sun cast thin shadows across Grebe as the crew approached. Jorgan and Kurt had many interesting findings from their scans. This set of Angessians were heavily built, and had an additional arm sprouting from the center of their chests. Preliminary reports marked twenty seven occupants in the town, with another six in the hills busily collecting precious stones and other valuables.

With more mass and appendages the crew were wary that this strain of Angessians had been modified, or evolved, for war. Clover's AES modifications gave them a sense of comfort, since she had been able to achieve a seventy seven percent gain in protection against ion weapons. To accomplish this protection against other forms of energy like tachyon blasts and plain laser was reduced.

That weakness was less of a concern since Kurt had found evidence of ion weaponry throughout the camp. Improved scanning techniques mixed with casual openness by these Angessians with their guns had meant the crew were well prepared for the trials ahead.

"Remember, if we wanted to conquer this town we'd blast it from orbit," Gin reminded the crew. "We need to contact the Terrans and get a sense of their standing. Do they know of the Kanthem and Kanthari feud, and which side do they support? Stay focused on that."

A crackle of affirmatives came back to the Captain. The four Solonians were advancing in a loose formation with several meters between each member. Due to the imposing size of this strain of Angessians they had swapped laser pistols for Hines Fabrication mass drivers.

The mass drivers were impressive weapons, and in the case of conflict should have no problem penetrating the Angessian armor. Their design sped a circular chunk of matter down a series of electromagnetic rails. The incredible exit velocity of the mass meant brutal, crippling impacts on any targets.

"First Angessian of the Grebe village spotted," Gin noted on his subvocal channel. A log of events leading up to violence was important to the Empire. Since the Captain and crew had a feeling this village would be aggressive he was quick to mark down their passive, open approach. Although the Empire had never reprimanded a Prospector for using force, Captain

Gin didn't want to be the first to be punished.

The aforementioned Angessian was one of the workers of the village, although his casual appearance and garb suggested scavenger more than miner. From the back of his six legged lower half to the top of his head the Angessian was almost four meters long.

"Hail Angessian. We are Solonian explorers who wish to offer trade and prosperity to your village. Do you-" Halfway through the speech the Grebe villager turned and sprinted towards the town center.

"Shit!" Jorgan yelled in surprise.

Clover smoothly lowered herself to a crouched position and shouldered her mass driver. "Sir, shall I take the shot?"

Gin recovered from the sudden retreat and ordered her down. "Negative, let him go." He surveyed the rocky mountains and distant blue tinted buildings. "Let's double time it to the village."

The crew took off at once in pursuit. With each thunderous step over the burning terrain their AES gravity cushions whined. After half a kilometer the only sound aside from breathing was the swish of ammo belts and crunch of rocks underfoot.

Finally they stopped after crested a knoll overlooking the village. Busy, animated action took place below them as the Grebe villagers ran for cover. Barely one hundred meters away Gin flicked a switch on his power pack and amplified his voice. "We come in peace and are looking for trade!"

His answer was a white hot blast of ions streaming passed his face. There was a second fizzling noise from the village perimeter and another shot tore into the hillside.

"Dammit!" He cursed, diving for cover behind the crest of the hill. Clover and Kurt were busy pumping mass capsules into their rifles. Jorgan was further to the left and had a scanning glass glued to his eye, which he systematically swept across the camp. "Looks like all twenty seven villagers are up and armed, plus the one who fled here."

"Got it," Gin said, starting to load his own weapon. "Return fire on my command and began sweeping back to the ship."

Clover and Kurt were shoulder to shoulder to his right. Three kilometers of broken terrain barred their return to the Klondike. With a clear line of sight her powerful turret weapon package would be effective far beyond that range. Looking over the rolling hills and mountains caused Gin to curse under his breath. No chance for solid firing lanes until they were within half a kilometer of the ship.

The Captain finished loading his mass driver and leaned the barrel over the hill. Sighting the optical scope onto the nearest Angessian he sternly ordered, "Fire!"

There was a chest rending thump as the mass driver barrage began. Super accelerated shots flew through the air and crashed into their marks. Two Angessians instantly crumpled to the ground, a giant cavity of dripping flesh marking the lethal attack.

The third target stumbled but did not fall. Kurt's shot had severed two arms but the creature recovered long enough to roll into cover.

Jorgan put down his mobile scanner and joined the onslaught. After each crew member emptied three or four shots into the aggressive horde Gin called for the retreat.

"Jorgan and Clover first. Fifty meters back, go!"

Meanwhile Gin and Kurt continued to fire. Even with the bismuth structures and crude barriers deflecting some shots their mass drivers were taking a noticeable toll on the Angessians. The

six legged creatures tried to regain the initiative, but shooting uphill at concealed targets with inaccurate ion weaponry was an exercise in frustration. Groans and roars bellowed from the village as the Angessians settled in to defensive positions.

"If we can keep up this volume of fire they might not want to follow, sir." Kurt offered while reloading.

Gin scanned the battlefield and counted at least fifteen downed Angessians. The engineer's suggestion rang true considering the Grebe villagers were already below half strength.

"Hop!" Gin yelled into his comm. Firing once more, he dove down the back of the hill and sprinted to Clover and Jorgan's old position. The two crew were already mirroring the retreat forty meters away.

And so they went, creeping back to the Klondike in fifty meter increments. Gin knew even that pace was punishing in the heat and high gravity. Even in his AES he poured sweat and knew his crew were feeling the strain as well.

Their mass drivers were holding together, and the lighter ammo meant they had plenty of supplies for the march. And they needed it. Seemingly behind every hill were scores of Angessian, reinforced from mining duties in the mountains. Gin could hear them grunting back and forth, and hoped the Grebe village was the only strain involved. No need to stir up the entire planet.

The sun was beginning to settle behind the horizon when they finally saw the glint of their starship. Immediately he opened the remote comm and calmly said the activation code "Whiskey Hanover". Gin crossed his fingers that the computer would recognize the words between gulps of air.

Tracking lights glowed across the bulky turret and servos murmured as the weapons trained onto Angessian targets. Clover cheered over the comm, and Jorgan said something before the boom of starship weaponry drowned out his words.

Their hand held mass drivers were shooting soft pebbles compared to the mighty tachyon cannons. Prospectors were often engaged in space dogfights, so the turret system had been designed with thick starship armor in mind. When it came to impact the towering Angessians may as well have been wearing paper for armor.

The nearest pack that had been doggedly chasing the crew were vaporized. No mess. No blood or skeletal remains, just a thin waft of ash drifting over the surface of Angess where once five intimidating Angessians had stood.

With a stampeding of multiple feet the chase instantly broke off. Even in full retreat through the hills the Klondike took a deadly toll. Blasting straight through rock and Angessian alike, the automated turret claimed another nine lives. Gin knew the count would be even higher if a Solonian had been aiming the cannons.

Once relative calm returned to the valley Gin began organizing the crew. "Jorgan, check for life signs in the immediate area. Kurt, let's try to grab an Angessian specimen."

"Roger, sir," Kurt started, and then mumbled to himself, "If we can find anything more than ash."

Ignoring the comment, Gin continued rapid firing orders. "Clover, get in the turret in case they muster up a second wave."

The crew split to fulfill their duties. The Captain followed Kurt to a nearby ravine where two Angessians were slumped in the dirt. Cataloguing a specimen would be extremely beneficial both to the Empire and their future dealings with the planet.

Their work was sporadically interrupted by Clover firing the tachyon cannons. Apparently a few stragglers had decided to get a glimpse of the Solonian expedition. Gin could visualize Jorgan busily scanning and calling targets for the deadly weapon.

The bulk of the pair of fallen Angessians made the task at hand quite daunting. Kurt and Gin tried lifting the creature, but barely succeeded in getting the Angessian off the ground, let alone carrying it back to the ship.

Breathing heavily from exertion, Kurt suggested, "What if we redirect power from our shields to the grav servos? That might give us the spring we need to move the thing."

"Sounds reasonable," Gin said, twisting knobs on his AES power pack. The air shimmered slightly as the outer layer of protection dimmed to nothing. The atmospheric force field was still in place, and no immediate threats warranted full shield power.

As soon as Gin saw movement from the second Angessian body he knew they had made a grave mistake. The creature must have heard their approach and understood their plan. Perhaps it was waiting patiently to strike, or perhaps it was petrified with fear.

Regardless the Grebe village leaned upright with a powerful thrust of its front arm. Kurt's mouth was open to yell a warning when two clawed hands smashed him aside. The limp Solonian flew backwards and slammed into the ravine wall. There was a wet smacking sound as he landed and Gin saw the telltale red of blood.

As the second target Gin had precious extra seconds to react. He lifted the muzzle of the mass driver and fired a hasty shot. The panicked blast from the hip flew wide of the Angessian's center mass, only managing to graze its shoulder.

With a roar the Angessian leaped closer and swung its two outer arms at Gin. The inner claw went straight for his weapon, and pure reflex saved him from quickly being disarmed. Gin ducked the barrage of limbs, his back tensing as he heard the swish of hot air as the claws passed overhead.

Tipping backwards Gin fired two rapid shots at the Angessian. The speeding projectiles tore the attacker's right arm off in a spray of purple gore. Now they were even at two arms each. Gin barely had time to savor his success before the weight of those arms hit him. The Angessian, seemingly immune to pain, simply smacked down at the prone Captain. Its first claw cracked the mass driver chamber and the second landed squarely in Gin's chest.

The inner force field of the AES was not meant to redirect kinetic energy, and it momentarily shattered from the force of the blow. In the half second the field took to recharge Gin could feel the intense heat of the native atmosphere. He smelled burning flesh and realized a spiderweb of scorching rashes were rapidly covering his body.

Gin nearly blacked out from the pain before the AES recovered and cooled his internal temperature. Amidst the Solonians Gin was considered a veteran of many environments, and the comforting wrapper of the AES restored his will to fight.

From his booth Gin drew a Tungsten knife, which gained tensile strength from the extreme heat. The blade shone in a dazzling arc as he thrust upwards into the Angessian. Before it could react Gin drove the knife home. Purple blood splashed from the creature's torso and it groaned in agony.

The Captain mercilessly twisted the blade and drew the Tungsten upwards, severing vital organs of the foreign anatomy. He left the weapon wedged beneath the Angessian's middle arm and rolled to the side. With a crash the creature slid forward and slammed to the ground. Not knowing how to check for vital signs, and not wanting a repeat of the surprise attack, Gin

crawled to Kurt's mass driver and sent a fusillade of slugs into the Angessian. Although only the second villager had attacked, Gin still swung the weapon to the first body. Aiming carefully he blasted its head apart. No chances.

"Hopefully once we know more about the Angessians this sort of thing won't happen," Jorgan said calmly while repairing the burn damage across Gin's chest. "Not having an intact head on either specimen will reduce the effectiveness of my studies, but I should still be able to learn anatomy, life signs, dietary needs, and-"

"Weak spots," Kurt interrupted.

Without missing a beat Jorgan continued, "Most importantly those."

Clover was still occupied in the turret, but the rest of the crew were in medical. Kurt ended up having some minor spinal damage from the rock face, but Jorgan was able to reset the bone structure and let the autdoc rebuild the nerve endings. Sometimes the doctor wondered how humanity survived before modern medicine. Having fought a devastating war for years and years certainly advanced the field of patching wounded soldiers.

When Clover and Jorgan had recovered their downed comrades Gin certainly looked gravely wounded. But most of the damage was on the surface and superficial. The burns destroyed a deep section of tissue around his torso, but the underlying bones were mostly unbroken. Before going into a trance of medical sedatives, Captain Gin had ordered the fastest methods to be performed. "Just the bare minimum," he had told Jorgan. Just enough to get him functioning and able to pilot the ship.

In three and a half hours Gin recovered and was awake enough to take the helm. Immediately he blasted off, redirected the majority of core energy to the turret, and proceeded to bombard Grebe into the ground.

The turret was mounted on the top of the Klondike, so he had to execute a roll to line up the weapon with the ground. Then he held the triggers until the blasts of tachyon had excavated a medium size crater where Grebe used to be.

Without saying a word Gin retired from the pilot seat to medical and let Jorgan perform a more thorough overhaul. Kurt took over and flew the Klondike in a loose circular pattern before setting down for the night on an island far from any village.

The next day Gin was in much better spirits. He glowed from the instant gratification of exacting revenge on his attackers, as well as excited curiosity at the idea of Jorgan dissecting their Angessian specimens.

"Grebe was an unfortunate repeat of Condor, but the behaviour does help confirm that the allegiances and motives of each Angessian strain vary greatly," Gin said, taking a sip of tea. The hot drink had been laced with stimulants to help the healing process, at Jorgan's request. "Our plan still calls for visiting eleven villages. From what I've seen I expect at least half to be hostile."

The crew were having an impromptu meeting in the spine. The long hallway echoed Gin's words, but no one replied.

"Let's visit two more villages as a group, and then split our forces as I talked about earlier. Two in the Crusader and two on board here. Any volunteers for shuttle duty?"

"We'll go, sir." Clover offered, nudging Jorgan. The pair exchanged a glance, having already discussed the matter earlier.

"Very good. Let's visit Quail tomorrow, after Jorgan has some time with our visitors. Then Turkey the next day, and split after that." Gin paused and looked at each of his crew members, "Any questions?"

Everyone shook their head "no" and the meeting dissolved. With enough planning, organization, and natural luck the Prospectors should be able to return to the Kanthem brimming with knowledge and insight.

"Cap, you're going to want to see this!" Kurt squawked into the comm.

"On my way," Gin replied, immediately excusing himself from the three Angessians he had been conversing with.

The two had set the Klondike down near Dove, which was the ninth village the crew had visited. His quartermaster and doctor were busy at Goose, over twelve hundred kilometers away.

So far the Solonians had learned much about the Angessians, including a little of their history and culture, and a lot of their drinking and celebrating habits. Gin was nursing another leanan hangover from their visit to Partridge the day before.

Jorgan had deciphered enough of the foreign skeletal structure that the team felt confident in identifying numerous weak spots on the Angessians, in case another skirmish occurred. They had been on a lucky streak though, as the last four villages were passive and open to trade. By Angessian standards Dove was a simple town. Dominating the center was a well worn circle for meetings and celebrations. Numerous bismuth structures squatted against the harsh weather. The occupants were slightly smaller than the Angessians from the cities, and were quite interested in the plasma torches and other metal working tools the Klondike possessed. Jogging across the soft dirt Gin barged in on his engineer. "What is it Kurt?"

An Angessian was leaning against the blue wall, his hand occupied with a remote for his view screen. Kurt stood beside the creature, his eyes intently focused on the video being played. "Day 37. We're having trouble calibrating our equipment for the extreme surface temperatures. As expected the native alien creatures have no problem adapting, but tests to utilize their carapaces have failed thus far."

A gaunt face spoke the words. The speaker was Terran in the truest sense, looking no different than the Solonians who watched the video. His face was washed out from the intense glow of an old video recorder but his voice had the unmistakable air of authority.

The video cut black momentarily, and when it resumed the man was hunched in a different posture. "Day 42. We successfully harvested five kilograms of bismuth by using rotating shifts. When our suits started to heat up we returned to the ship and another team went out. We expect our harvesting levels to exponentially increase from this point forward. Our goal is," he leaned off screen momentarily and spoke, but Gin couldn't decipher the words. "Our goal is one ton by the end of the week."

In the next gap of cut video Gin quickly asked Kurt, "What is this?"

"Video log, sir," Kurt answered. The voice returned and Kurt managed to get in, "Speaker is captain of the original colonists."

The Angessian seemed fully entranced by the video. His fingers rested on the worn remote control, and Gin detected a mixture of awe and fear on the villager's face. After the next pause in the video, which followed day forty six, the Angessian froze the recording and spoke.

"Captain, I'm glad you could join us. As you could tell from your friend Kurt, this is an

important piece of Angessian history." Gin noted the villager referred to himself by the planetary species name, unlike the Kanthem days before.

"My name is Anthony, although my comrades call me Anthurak. I am a descendant of Captain James Preble." Anthony subtly blushed, and Gin was only able to catch the emotion due to Jorgan's extensive revelations follow his research. "I knew growing up I was...different, especially compared to the focuses of my comrades. They looked to the ground. To precious stones and dirt. I looked up," he gazed upwards, imagining the wide galaxy beyond his bismuth roof, "and I dreamed. I want to leave Angess. I want to travel the stars as my father did."

Finally Gin interjected, "Your father? But that was almost 150 years ago, he can't-"

"You are right, of course. He is not my direct father. But I feel as if he is speaking just to me in these recordings. As father to son. Directing me and helping me find my path."

Kurt gave Gin a wary sidelong glance, trying to gauge the Captain's reaction.

Many questions were in Gin's mind, but few of them mattered. How did Anthony get the recordings, and keep them for so long? What did such a link with the past mean? Would this information help decipher their course with the Kanthem?

"Tell me Anthony," Gin started, choosing his words carefully, "what have you learned from these videos?"

"That we Angessians are not a warlike people. We did not start so divided. Unity was our strength, not weaponry or power over one another."

"Well spoken," Kurt said, nodding in agreement.

"I assume Kurt has not told you much of our situation. We too are from Earth, from the Solonian Empire. Our goal is to establish alliances and trade with the old colonies."

"Yes, the Solonian Empire. Your engineer mentioned the name."

The trio stood in silence, mulling over the revelations. Anthony broke the silence, "I...I am not a leader. I mostly scavenge and work with our technology. If I was a leader, I would desperately want to ally with the Empire." Invigorated by his impromptu speech, Anthony stood. "You are doing good works, you are reuniting the brothers and sisters of Earth." He looked down at his six legged body and whispered, "Regardless of what form they now take."

Gin and Kurt beamed at the compliment, feeling quite comfortable with their actions and progress since landing on Angess. "You say you're not a leader Anthony. Then tell me, who is? We have visited two of your cities and found them mired in warfare."

"Yes, the Kanthem and Kanthari have a long blood feud. And our third city focuses on economics and does not dirty their hands with war. There is no unity."

Kurt sipped water from his AES canteen and asked, "What started the conflict? Why did it turn out like this?"

"As I said our people are not warlike. The cities used to trade and scavenge in peace. Ten years ago though a starship landed."

Gin audibly cleared his throat, surprised at the turn of events. "A ship? But...from where?" As far as the Empire knew this was the first visit to Angess after the original Terrans.

"They were not Solonian, and their ship was slow. Crude. I do not think they could outrun light. I don't know where they came from, but their arrival created a rift in our society."

Although questions flooded his mind, Gin focused on listening to Anthony's impressive story.

"Malin and his brother Kkar were the leaders of the two cities."

"Kkar, yes, we met him," Kurt confirmed.

"Malin must run Concord. Um," Gin paused to clarify the naming scheme, "the city of the Kanthari that we were driven from."

"Well, the two brothers were happy to scavenge together and shelter each others people during the warm season." Gin's concentration broke as he tried to imagine anything hotter than the atmosphere already was.

"But when the ship landed, they disagreed. Kkar wanted to scavenge the vessel and send the invaders into the wastes. Malin wanted to kill everyone on the ship and scavenge the rest." The Captain leaned against the wall opposite Kurt. He noted that both brothers considered looting to be a foregone conclusion. And although he wasn't certain about "the wastes", he figured both brothers were intent on killing the crew. The only difference was their method. "Are you sure they were invaders?" Kurt blurted.

"I would assume so. Why else come to our planet?"

"We came to Angess, and we are not invaders." Gin sternly reminded Anthony.

"True." The Angessian ignored the lingering question and continued, clearly not ready to doubt the history of his people. "In the end Kkar and Malin could not agree. Their disagreement turned to anlen." Kurt and Gin tried to hide their confusion. "Anlen is ritual combat," Anthony clarified.

"Anlen lead to skirmishes, and eventually war. The two cities have been engulfed in violence ever since."

Kurt frowned and repeated an old world phrase, "The two biggest kids on the block."

Ignoring his engineer, Gin asked, "What happened to the starship and its occupants?"

"Long gone. Since the war was starting we focused our scavenging on weaponry."

"Ha, I knew the ion weaponry was out of place."

"Kurt, stow it." Gin turned on Anthony and brightened his tone. "The individual Kanthem and Kanthari, do they want the war?"

"I am not a leader, so I do not know."

Kurt looked at Gin, who was looking at Anthony. The Angessian stared at the frozen frame on the viewscreen.

"Well, we'd better ask them." Gin lifted his comm and started belting orders to the rest of his crew.

"So you're saying we're not the first ones here?" Jorgan asked, incredulous.

"That'd be the second ones here, after the Terrans. And we're not even second," Clover criticized.

Kurt was focused on the scattered drawings in front of him. "Some kind of sleeper ship, maybe?" He had extracted as much information as possible from the villagers of Dove. Now he was trying to combine and reconstruct an accurate picture of the visitors.

"Quiet." Gin ordered as he stared at the planetary map in front of him. "We can't go to war alongside Kkar now that we know the history." The screen glowed across his face as he swept across the map. "We can wipe out both cities and let the villages pick up the pieces."

"That seems a mite heavy handed, sir," Kurt mumbled.

"It's a concrete option, and that's what I'm after right now. Assassination of both brothers would be ideal. Quick and clean with little collateral damage."

Clover was nodding while absently scratching the table with a knife. The crew knew the Captain's mood, and the best response was to let him think out loud.

"If we assume the populace will cease the war once their leaders are dead that is our best strategy. So far the Angessians seem to be volatile in their behavior. Some villages have been peaceful, others have shot on sight."

Gin started pacing around the room, thinking better on his feet. "But they haven't been shooting each other. Well, at least in the villages." Kurt opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it. "I can understand their desire to fend off starships after the fallout of the last landing. If this was Earth we would do no less."

"We poll the population, get a sense of where they stand. If a ceasefire looks plausible after removing the leaders we proceed with assassination. Otherwise we leave the planet."

Clover looked up, surprise splayed across her face. "Sir?"

"That's right, we leave. Aside from the stolen ion weaponry the Angessians aren't very advanced. They won't break atmosphere in the next thirty years."

"At least that," Kurt said, slightly less optimistic about the possibility of an Angessian starship.

"We don't need to solve every problem of every planet," Gin stated, and then lectured, "We need to re-establish contact with a colony, try to form an alliance or trade deal. I don't want to be bogged down as an arbiter in this conflict, and I certainly don't see the current attitude of the Angessians being conducive to trade."

"Anthony certainly was eager to trade." The crew had given Anthony a portable communicator in exchange for a copy of Captain Preble's video log. The Solonians benefited two fold, since now they had an inside contact.

"He was, Kurt, and if every unruled Angessian acts the same we may have a chance after all."

"You said 'poll the populace'. I know you weren't at Tinamous, but their greeting was even colder than Grebe. I don't think we can exactly go hut to hut and ask?"

"I don't appreciate the tone Jorgan, but I understand your point." Gin knew they had a rough time at the village of Tinamous, as the angry red wound along Jorgan's arm showed. "Luckily our trade with Anthony was beneficial in many ways. For one, we learned what how the Angessians are communicating long range."

"The Tympanic Membrane?" Jorgan asked, excited that one of the mysteries of his research might be solved.

"In a word, yes. I know that nickname was based on the human ear, Jorgan, but we'll stick with it because I can't pronounce what Anthony called it." The crew responded with light laughter, but Gin could tell they were eager to hear his findings. "From what Anthony said the Angessians can speak across large distances by transmitting and receiving vibrations in the Tympanic Membrane. Almost like they each have a biological radio."

"So that's why we didn't pick up any comm channels on initial scan," Kurt explained.

"Exactly. It's basically subvocal, and completely beyond our current tech to pick up."

Kurt heard a challenge to his engineering, and started "We could try to rig up a-"

Gin ended the idea before it could gain momentum. "No, Kurt. No time, and very little chance of success."

"So this membrane..." Clover prompted, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"The Tympanic Membrane means Anthony can talk to his friends in the cities."

Jorgan scoffed, "What, he just has childhood friends all over the planet?"

Answering for Gin, Kurt pushed aside a scrap drawing and said, "Basically. He leads an astronomy club, in a sense. Apparently the landing ten years ago sparked a lot of Angessian imagination."

"That seems..." Clover searched for the word, "childish?"

"Keep in mind Anthony is equivalent to a young teenager. He's pushing thirty Solonian years, but Angessians live, what'd you figure Jorgan?" Kurt looked at the doctor, his busy mind filled with starship designs instead of research results.

"At least five Earth decades longer than us."

"Right, so that makes him right in the middle of adolescence," Kurt finished.

Gin closed his map and summarized, "What this all means is Anthony will communicate as far across the planet as he can, to as many friends as he can. He'll try to get a sense of how the majority of Angessians would act without the brothers pushing them to war. In other words, he'll poll the population because we can't."

"Sir, sorry to doubt the plan, but aren't we putting an awful lot of trust into this Anthony?"

Clover asked, still uncertain about her feelings on Angessians.

"Look, I don't like this anymore than you do." Gin sighed, "I hate having the fate of the expedition taken out of our hands. But we've seen this situation before. Realistically we can't communicate with a decentralized authority structure on this short of a time line."

Gin wanted to shout, "Do you think I want to rely on a Terran and his star gazing club? On a method of communication we can't hear, or even ensure exists?" But the Captain held back, not wanting to rattle the crew. They already knew how tenuous the plan was, but Gin didn't see any other options for solving Angess.

"Anthony is going to use his portable comm to keep in touch through this process. We've given him our last four days to talk to as many people as he can. He'll log every conversation, and we'll have the final say on how to proceed."

After four days the Solonians would be expected back at Harrier to meet with Kkar. Gin had scheduled another week if conflict erupted, and then they would be heading offworld to the next planet.

Gin could see the crew remained unconvinced of the strategy. But since no alternatives were offered, he was certain they were as perplexed about viable approaches.

Four days passed in a blur to Gin. Between rushing village to village for last minute personal polling he had been up all hours of the night keeping in touch with Anthony. The Angessian seemed dedicated in his professionalism and had endless energy for communication.

In general the outlook was promising. Gin didn't expect the citizens of Condor or Harrier to back him directly, but he was sure they would end the war with the two brothers dead.

Unfortunately the assassination would be harder than expected, mainly because of the timing. Both brothers would have to be killed within an hour of each other or the survivors would blame their opponents and the war would continue. Even more challenging was the fact that the deaths had to look like suicides or accidents. With both brothers dying at nearly the same time the populace would certainly suspect foul play, but as long as neither side could prove anything the war would hopefully end.

Afterwards Gin and his team would work with Anthony to pick up the pieces. Their main goal from a Solonian point of view was to get a permanent leader in place. A leader that the Empire could setup a trade contract with. After that the Prospector's work would be done. They just surveyed, stabilized, and allied with a planet. Their job didn't entail the specific management of trade routes and shipments. A separate Empire detachment of merchants would follow up with Angess.

Gin hadn't been in contact with the Empire since he landed. Part of the allure of Prospector duty was the near total autonomy each ship had. His contacts back in Sol wouldn't mind that he had to bombard a village, or planned to assassinate two leaders to achieve trade. The Solonians wanted to hear good news, and plenty of it. The Captain wasn't ready to contact home until Angess was wrapped in a nice, clean package.

At the end of the first day of gathering opinions Gin had assigned Clover the task of planning the assassinations. He knew the longer she had to organize the better, and even early in the polling process they had a good enough idea of where the population's interests lay.

After enjoying dinner on the second night, Gin and Clover retired to her quarters below the armory. He wanted to see where her schemes were at. Plus Gin knew that Jorgan didn't fully embrace assassination to achieve their goals, so he was avoiding opening old wounds by holding the meeting in private. Instead of the oak table of the common room Gin sat at a curved metal chair in Clover's frugal room.

Gin knew he couldn't handle every job himself, and some tasks were best left to the experts. He had given Clover full reign in the planning and continued to extend confidence in the execution. "Okay, lay it out for me Clover. How do you see this happening?"

"Let me explain Kkar first, Captain. You can see why he'd be easiest." She started counting off her fingers, "Harrier is passive and open to us. He invited us back at a set time. We've seen the interior layout of his home. We could ask favors of Kkar that would seem unreasonable to Malin."

"All true, and all hopeful."

"Right sir. The obvious choice is poison, before we even meet with him. The reason I am confident about this is the Angessian medical and diagnostic equipment is not up to par. There is a chance they won't even suspect poison, and may just bury Kkar right away. Even if they do suspect poison, they won't be able to confirm with their lacking tech."

"Two questions," Gin said, raising his hand like a student at the academy. "First, do we know enough about Angessian biology to assume we can create an effective poison? Second, mode of delivery?"

"Well Jorgan seemed confident in his research, which included toxicology. I think given the supplies we have, plus Anthony's knowledge, we should be able to craft something deadly. As for mode of delivery, I'm assuming a liquid poison. Any of the classics will work." Clover again started counting her fingers. "Sneak it and slip the poison into his leenan. Slight needle in the middle of the night. Dart gun with non-residual ammo. I've planned for all three, but think we should see which is most viable day of."

"Excellent work Clover. If there is nothing else, please outline the plan for Malin."

Clover stood and paced back and forth, hand cupping her chin. Her face was deep in thought and creased with worry. "That won't be as easy," she started.

"I know it's a tough assignment."

"Not just because he's a fortified target in a hostile environment. But because the easiest and most logical method is what Anthony suggested."

Gin raised an eye brow, surprised that Anthony had been recommending anything for assassination. The Angessian had come across as rather diminutive and passive.

"Yeah, I have my doubts too, sir. Apparently Malin enjoys hunting the native aliens using traditional, almost ritualistic techniques."

The Captain craned his neck, trying to imagine facing one of the six legged, many fanged

monstrosities they had seen wandering around Condor. He shuddered and stopped.

"This means there is a high probability of injury or death. What Anthony suggests is to time both assassinations around the next hunt, which happens to be tomorrow night."

"That would give us a day to spare before our planned meeting with Kkar." Gin bit the inside of his cheek, thinking hard. "I definitely like a time buffer like that."

"The field kill would be really easy too. Malin doesn't travel with a large contingent for these hunts, again, part of the tradition. We ambush the party and mangle the bodies to look like native Und Fan bites."

"Almost too easy, in a way," Gin said, hesitant.

"I agree, sir, that's why I wanted to bring the plan to your attention. Anthony has been extremely helpful."

Gin grinned, "No denying that."

"Right, but, well..." The quartermaster was nervous and uncertain.

"What is it Clover? It's just you and me, just tell me."

"It's just...don't you find it suspicious that he already had a network of agents in the major cities? That he happens to have an assassination plan organized and timed?" Clover stopped pacing and looked at Gin. "Even though he said 'I'm not leader, I don't want to be a leader.' how much do we really know about him?"

"I know, and I share your concerns. Presenting his ring of friends as an astronomy club was believable, but they certainly are well organized."

"I'm not saying we wipe the planet on my hunch." She said, resigned and seated once more.

"But maybe we try a different approach for Malin. One that Anthony doesn't know about."

"We may even be able to create an elaborate ruse to try to draw Anthony out." Gin's face had hardened. "Test his loyalty."

"Sir, if I may. We're already going to be spread pretty thin on this one."

"I know Clover. One to stay on the ship. One to delivery the poison to Kkar. One to finish Malin. And now maybe one to watch Anthony."

There was a pause before Clover smiled and said, "Actually, sir, when you put it that way we sound perfectly set up for this task."

"As long as no surprises happen and nothing comes up in the mean time," Gin smirked, knowing their luck wouldn't hold forever. "Now tell me your alternate plan for Malin, aside from the easy bait of getting him on the hunting trip."

"Well, it's a little more complex," she started.

Jorgan looked over the blasted landscape and groaned. The Captain had ordered him to man the Klondike while the other three went into the field. He knew Gin was being nice by letting him avoid the messy details of the dual assassination.

In fact he was so focused on avoiding the details that Jorgan wasn't even sure what the plan was. He had flown low towards Harrier and dropped Gin a few kilometers away with a dose of the poison. Jorgan figured that would handle Kkar. After flying the ship to safety, Kurt and Clover had taken the Crusader to Condor. She had five kilograms of industrial grade mining explosives with her.

That left Jorgan all alone. He sat in the cockpit of the Klondike equidistant between the two major cities. All comms were open, but the doctor hoped each mission was a success and he didn't have to intervene.

Not that Jorgan shirked his duty. In fact quite the opposite, he was an ardent supporter of the Empire and quick to offer his services where they were needed. But assassination and murder felt below the educated doctor. He knew Clover was good at her trade, but Jorgan still considered the operation the same as amputating a leg instead of trying to save it.

Kurt leaned against the hard rock and waited. He didn't expect Anthony to show up, and in a way hoped the Angessian would stay home. If the fledgling astronomer managed to make an appearance that would definitely indicate he had bigger plans beyond helping the Solonians. The engineer was focused on a small patch of land populated by Und Fan. Fertile hunting grounds, and the traditional spot of expeditions from Condor. He had added a scope to his mass driver, and carried various knives and bludgeoning tools in case he had to mimic an Und Fan attack on an Angessian body.

But Kurt didn't expect any action on the field. His comm was open to Jorgan back at the ship, just in case. Clover had dropped the engineer off and continued with the shuttle to Condor. He kept the scoped mass driver ready, still remembering the physical pain and mental anguish the Angessian attack had caused him a week ago.

Clover was thankful for the weather. Today the boiling atmosphere had spawned lightning strikes, and the booming reports would help cover her plan. Although she trusted her AES, Clover also hoped some sort of terrible acid rain didn't start as part of the storm.

She was surrounded by blocks of thermite jutting rudely from the rocks. In total there was five kilograms of high explosives amidst the boulders.

Her position was thirty meters above the edge of Condor. Ideally she would be further away, at a ravine bottleneck on the way to the Und Fan hunting grounds. The Captain had decided Anthony couldn't be trusted fully, and Malin might not even leave the city to hunt.

So Clover waited. Her plan seemed complex compared to the scheme to assassinate Kkar. But the quartermaster was confident she could set off the explosives to create a focused landslide from the mountain. The boulders would tumble and roll and crush Malin's home.

She had circled the city two times on foot, double checking the target and surrounding area. The rest of the day rested on her shoulders. When the thermite was blown and the boulders start rolling Clover would communicate with Gin. The Captain would finish off Kkar, and everyone would meet back at the ship.

Fully focused on the job at hand, Clover was waiting for an appropriate opportunity to detonate her massive, rolling wave of death.

Gin stalked from hut to hut, trying to use the glinting bismuth as cover. His time in Africa under Horizon Integration helped immensely, and the Captain knew he'd be dead otherwise. Stealth and sabotage had been principle in the overseas operations.

A thin bottle of bright orange liquid was securely hooked inside his jacket. The vial was destined for Kkar, and would kill the brute over the course of an hour. Assuming Jorgan was correct in his study of Angessian biology.

Based on Clover's timing, the Captain planned on adding the liquid to Kkar's midday drink. The plan hinged on her landslide starting close to noon, otherwise there was a chance Gin would have to resort to a backup plan. Even though Kkar loved leenan, he didn't drink it all day.

A pair of Angessians talking in the street started to saunter towards Gin's position. He leaned behind an overhanging piece of bismuth. Slowing his breathing, he focused on not moving. The voices faded into the distance and he scanned the area quickly before continuing towards Kkar's hut.

Clover lifted the binoculars and tried to catch a glimpse of Malin. After a moment of sweeping the area around his hut she saw the leader. Two Angessians were bowing before him and offering buckets of precious stones. Most likely new recruits to the war effort, trying to demonstrate their fealty. Malin didn't appear to be in Und Fan hunting garb yet, but Clover couldn't tell for sure.

She looked to the sky, waiting and anticipating a lightning strike. In the belly of a distant cloud she was the tell tale fracturing of light. Just to keep the Klondike updated Clover sent a curt message over the comm to Jorgan, "Detonating landslide."

Then her calloused finger jammed the round detonator button. When they had shipped out thermite was the finest heavy explosive the Empire had. There was no delay and no misfire. The blocks of explosive blasted hundreds of tons of boulders.

Lightning shattered at the exact same time as the detonation. Clover pumped her arm in victory at her perfect execution.

Massive chunks of the mountain slid on top of boulders, using the rolling rocks like wheels. Faster and faster the landslide went, crashing and thundering down towards Malin and his entourage.

Unlike the low collateral damage of poison, the landslide would claim more victims. Clover was hesitant to call them innocent since the Angessian closest to Malin were likely just as eager for war.

The binoculars returned to her eyes and Clover watched the fleeing six legged forms. The Angessians were pushing each other aside to get away from the wall of death. In a matter of seconds the landslide reached Condor.

Her extensive background in demolition had ensured that Clover chose the best mountain possible. Best in the sense that the landslide would be directly focused on Malin's house, and not completely ruin the city itself.

Rocks crushed and shattered bismuth homes in a terrible rending sound. Malin's hut was washed away in a sea of lumbering weight. Clover tried to confirm the kill as accurately as possible. Malin had been running with his two new recruits, and the next moment the ground had been piled with boulders.

Now she needed to withdraw before any inquisitive Angessians showed up. She grabbed any visible detonator scraps. Any other evidence of the explosion would be covered by the landslide.

Gin split his focus between the interior of the hut and Jorgan's whispering voice. "Sir, Clover is done. Go."

The message was short and quiet to avoid compromising Gin's position. The Captain was at a delicate stage of his secret entry to the hut. He had wormed his way through a wide panel that passed for a window. Now Gin lay curled behind a massive Angessian cupboard. The slanted and angled bismuth walls provided perfect nooks and crannies to lean into, and the furniture covered him from the front.

He could hear bubbling fermentation in the leenan container. The bitter drink was stored in an impressively decorated oval bowl that sat on a central table. The room was empty, but Angessians of varying heights and colors had been parading in and out of the area for the last half an hour.

Gin took the opportunity to stretch his shoulders, which were cramping from the long stay in an awkward position. The time to strike had come. He checked the AES time unit, which was close to midday. Gin hoped that leenan would be served in a matter of minutes.

Clawing his way from the bismuth hiding spot Gin clicked open the vial. The six legged anatomy of his target provided one benefit to Gin; he could hear their many footfalls approaching. Currently the room and outside hallway were silent. Gin upended the vial and watched the orange color disappear in the vat of leenan. He tucked the evidence away and scurried back to the cupboard.

Gin knew he was taking a risk staying in the house, but he had to confirm that Kkar drank the poisoned leenan. As he passed the window panel the Captain was tempted to bolt to freedom, but duty found him crawling back into the bismuth alcove. He'd have to improvise an escape once the drink was imbued.

Minutes that seemed like hours passed, and finally a lone Angessian shuffled into the room. He immediately went to the leenan bowl and started doling out the vile drink. In moments the practiced serving hand had filled tall mugs crafted from an indeterminate material.

"Drinks up, my lord!" He bellowed, grasping the brew and marching out of the room.

Gin strained his ears and could barely hear Kkar's voice. "Excellent. I wish the Solonians were here to share with us, but they should return soon."

"My lord," another voice said, "what if they go back to Condor?"

"And join my enemy? Never!" There was a clink of glasses. The Angessians had apparently carried forward the human tradition of cheering alcohol.

The conversation continued but at an even quieter volume. The speakers must have turned to look out the front door, and Gin couldn't pick up their words anymore.

The Captain decided this was his cue to leave, and started pulling himself from the alcove.

Standing he checked the room once and stormed to the window, staying low. Eagerly he clambered through the panel and into the boiling rays of the sun outside.

Gin had been sloppy in his exit. Too sloppy, he thought. The fact was confirmed when a booming Angessian voice spoke behind him, from the hut. "Cap'tain Gin?"

Jorgan closed the line to Clover and returned to his slouched position in the cockpit. A panicked, heavily breathing voice broke him from his reverie. Kurt was speaking. "He's here, oh shit he's here Jorgan and he brought friends."

"Kurt, calm down, who is it?"

"It looks like every single Angessian from his astronomy club." Anthony had arrived. "At least two hundred total."

"Hold tight, stay in cover. I'm taking off immediately." Jorgan sent the message and started flipping switches and cranking levers to bring the slumbering Klondike to life. The central computer calculated distance and storm velocity to provide Jorgan with as much information as possible. At combat speed the starship would reach Kurt in four and a half minutes.

Kurt hugged the rocks, sweat dribbling down his brow. Phantom pain shot through his healed

spine, but Kurt tried to remind himself the throbbing was in his mind. His close brush with paralysis following the combat with the Angessian specimen had deeply shaken the traditionally stoic engineer. The idea of being unable to move, unable to work or function truly frightened Kurt.

The sight of so many armed and armored Angessians brought back his fears. He froze. Part of his mind, a gruff, distant part, was screaming to get up and think of a plan. But Kurt stayed curled against the rocks, waiting and hoping for Jorgan's avenging appearance overhead. Although Kurt had withdrawn inwards and was barely focused on his surroundings, his AES was recording details of the scene. Anthony lead two hundred and fifty of his agents. They were armed with all manner of ion weaponry and garbed in the finest armor they could scavenge.

Clover's hunch and the crew's fears had been realized. Anthony was using the Solonians all along. His astronomy club was an underground network of Angessians who cared only for the advancement of their technological prowess. The brother's war got in the way of that. No research or time would be spent on starship design when each city was focused entirely on destroying the other.

So Anthony had built a circle of trustworthy friends and comrades who saw the same destiny for their species. The landing ten years ago had inspired his efforts, and the wily Angessian had been plotting ever since. The arrival of a powerful, somewhat ignorant outside force was exactly what he needed. Eagerly Anthony had set about scheming a way to get the Solonians to do his dirty work. And also a way to steal their mighty Prospector starship, and tear out the secrets of faster than light travel.

Clover's long strides carried her quickly to the hibernating Crusader. The shuttle had been tucked neatly into a canyon, giving perfect cover from any wandering mining expeditions. At a full run she toggled the back door open and got on board. Chucking the bag of used detonators and blasting scraps into a corner, she slid into the cockpit and fired up the shuttle.

"This is Clover, preparing to return to the Klondike."

Silence on the other end.

"Jorgan, do you read me?" She asked, a hundred different scenarios filtering through her mind. All of them were bad.

"Roger, loud and clear Clover." Jorgan's voice answered, strained and edged with stress. "I'm heading to Kurt's position, recommend rendezvous there."

To Kurt? Clover was confused. She figured Anthony had shown up, but that didn't warrant mobilizing the Klondike. Their plan was to capture the astronomer and interrogate him if necessary later.

"Say again Jorgan. Why to Kurt?"

"Strong Angessian presence detected at his location." Jorgan dropped his professional tone.

"Anthony brought friends, and lots of them. I'm reinforcing Kurt against the two hundred plus Angessians hanging around the hunting grounds."

Her face grew dark. Clover knew that had succeeded in killing half that number on the retreat from Grebe, but that was a disorganized, angry force who didn't know or understand the Solonians. Anthony was different. He had been in close contact with them and their ship for the past Earth week. "Understood," she gritted her teeth, "on my way."

"Cap'tain Gin! What are you doing here?" Kkar yelled from the edge of the hut door.

Gin paused and collected himself. First he straightened his posture from the stealthy stoop he had been sneaking away in. Although he had sabotage training from his time in Africa, Gin's true talent was talk and persuasion. He had realized this skill during the year of visiting old colonies. Trying to communicate and figure out the motives of dozens of Terran variants kept him in prime shape for negotiation.

So the Captain was all smiles when he turned around to face Kkar. "My friend Kkar, there you are! I had thought this hut was yours, but then second guessed myself."

Kkar seemed happy on the outside, but Gin detected a suspicious edge to his questions, "I see. You have come to talk of war then?"

"I certainly have come to talk." Gin was hesitant to commit to war, even as a lie. "My crew has travelled to many villages around the planet, and we are close to making our decision."

"I am glad to here this. Come in, sit at my table and let us share leenan to celebrate." Gin tried to hide a grimace at the invitation, knowing the deadly poison that laced each mug.

"I was hoping to visit briefly. I just wanted to let you know I'd be returning with my crew later." He was telling half the truth, at least, and Gin knew a lie rooted in fact was normally easier to mask.

"No, no," Kkar strode from the door and stood towering beside Gin. "I insist."

"One drink won't hurt," Gin smiled. He briefly looked around the city for possible escape routes, but decided against running. "But I need to return to my starship right after." The hidden meaning of the statement was lost on the beaming Kkar, but Gin knew if he didn't reach the Klondike in an hour the poison would kill him.

The Captain sat comfortably at the table, nodding at the assembled Angessians. Kkar motioned a lesser Angessian to get a mug of leenan. He returned in a moment and put a massive, bubbling brew in front of the Solonian.

"Cheers to your upcoming decision!" Kkar roared, crashing his mug against those of his friends. Gin joined in the salute, mouthed a quick prayer, and took a swig of the poisoned leenan. For all the Solonian knew the toxin would affect him differently, perhaps even instantly killing him.

His windpipe stung and the Captain coughed and hacked. His grip tightened on the mug, thinking he had finally met his end. The potent drink stung the inside of his stomach and he wretched some more.

Then he calmly remembered the stinging sensation and terrible burning were all part of drinking normal, unaltered leenan. Gin relaxed, put the mug down, and mentally noted the time. One hour to go.

After a few more pulls from his mug and a smattering of conversation with the gathered Angessians, Gin excused himself to the restroom. He considered emptying the contents of his stomach to try to remove the poison, but knew enough of the deadly serum had been absorbed by his body already. Instead Gin whispered harshly into his comm, trying to raise Jorgan and the Klondike.

No response. Gin wasn't sure if the distance was too great, if the bismuth was interfering, or if the ship had come under attack. All he knew was his odds of survival just dropped dramatically without access to the Solonian medical station.

Kurt shielded his eyes as dust scattered from the Klondike's wake. The starship circled above as

Jorgan slowly brought the vessel in for a landing. The engineer glanced at Anthony's forces from his covered position. The Angessian was yelling and directing his troops, and the angry Terrans were scattering to fulfil his orders.

"We don't have much time, get me off this rock!" Kurt shouted, still recovering from his mental shock at reliving his assault.

"Fine," Jorgan said, clearly irritated at being told how to fly. The Klondike suddenly jolted downwards and slammed into the ground mere meters from Kurt's location. Before the spine had even opened the engineer was scrambling towards the vessel. He clambered up the shining, armored hull and jumped through the welcoming bulwark.

Jorgan watched his ascent and quickly returned to the sky as soon as Kurt was on board. A flurry of activity had started when he appeared, and even more happened when the Klondike had momentarily landed. Angessians piled towards the starship, weapons gleaming in the boiling sun.

Blasts of ion ineffectually hit the ship. The shots were powerful to unarmored, human sized targets, but the weapons did little against a Prospector ship. The fusillade continued as Jorgan carried the vessel higher and higher into the sky.

Kurt scrambled into the cockpit, breathing heavily from his sprint to the starship and run down the spine. "Just get us the hell out of here."

Jorgan nodded and switched on a comm. "Clover, come in."

"Here," she replied, strained from her hurried flight in the Crusader.

"I have Kurt on board. Recommend full retreat and regroup with the Captain."

Hastily reading a scanner, Clover shook her head by reflex and said, "Negative."

Jorgan scoffed and was about to reprimand the quartermaster when she continued, "I'm picking up an inbound signal. Please confirm?"

For a moment the doctor froze. He was an adequate pilot, competent enough to take off and land in case of emergency. But fighting with some kind of Angessian vessel was far beyond his imagination.

Kurt saw the paralysed doctor and snapped out of his own anguish. The engineer leaned across Jorgan and pressed a button which illuminated the planetary map. A single, unassuming dot was streaking towards their position. The computer calculated the original trajectory to be Harrier.

The Angessians below had stopped firing, but Kurt could practically feel Anthony's icy stare even from that distance. The astronomer had some kind of missile or ship or other flight capable vehicle coming their way.

"Affirmative, Clover. Signal confirmed." Kurt said into the comm. "Get the Crusader back here now!"

"Sixty seconds out," they could hear the click of dials, "keep flying up but don't break orbit."

Kurt patted Jorgan on the shoulder to snap him back to reality. "Doc, I'll head to engineering to help Clover dock, and to handle any repairs. She'll handle the turret." He looked at the shaken Jorgan. "You fly, okay?"

"No, I can't Kurt. I'm no combat pilot, why don't-"

"Get it together!" Kurt interrupted, loud enough to leave his ears ringing. He didn't have time to coddle the doctor. "Unless you've been taking starship engineer classes that I don't know about, you can't exactly do core management or repairs. So pull yourself together, think like the Captain, and fly this thing!"

Jorgan shook his head to clear his thoughts, "Right, you're right." Over his shoulder he continued to talking to Kurt as the man headed to engineering. "Keep your comm open, I'm going to try to figure out what's approaching."

"Now that's more like it!" Kurt yelled back, already running halfway across the spine.

After thirty seconds of dedicated scanning and computer calculation, Jorgan was able to identify the incoming blip. An ancient Orion class starship, of original Terran design. Call sign "Barracuda".

Clover docked the Crusader soon after the discovery, and immediately headed to the cockpit. Her and Jorgan looked on in amazement as the computer displayed the specification details. The vessel had been modified extensively in the years since the original expansion of humanity. Exterior panelling had been replaced and reworked, and the computer detected numerous updates to critical subsystems.

"Where did they get her?" Clover asked aloud over the comm.

Sitting next to her, Jorgan said, "No idea. The computer says definitely not scratch built, and definitely not from around here."

Kurt crackled over the comm, "I might have an idea. When the Captain and I were first talking to Anthony he mentioned a landing ten years ago."

"I remember hearing that from the audio debrief," Clover interrupted.

"Well, it sounded like the crew were killed and the vessel salvaged. But maybe he somehow kept the ship." They could imagine Kurt shrugging his shoulders from the belly of the engineering compartment.

"The Hyperwave Drive must have gone dark, and maybe a nearby colony sent her as a sleeper to figure out what was going on," Kurt reasoned.

"Either way, she's coming in fast and hot." Clover calculated the distance quickly, "Should be here in a few minutes."

"Get our weapons up," Jorgan said, trying to control the waver of fear in his voice.

The Barracuda was massive compared to the sleek Prospector ship. Like most technology, advancements in space travel had miniaturized in the years since the original colonization effort. Hyperwave Drives took much more power, space, and resources than a contemporary Miramachi Device. Life support systems, crew compartments, even armor plating had advanced to be more effective in a smaller package.

Kurt had suggested Jorgan take the Klondike out of orbit. The Barracuda's gargantuan atmospheric engines would outperform the Klondike when gravity, thrust, and air resistance were involved. But the modern Prospector ship would have the upper hand in manoeuvrability once they broke orbit.

"Plus, she might just fall apart," Kurt mused, wondering whether years of misuse by the Angessians would have irrevocably damaged the starship.

Jorgan approved the idea, and started climbing higher and higher as the enemy starship got closer and closer. The Barracuda was still a distant speck on the horizon when they broke free of the boiling heat and gravity well of Angess.

"Switching to the PP drive," Jorgan said, removing a protective sheath of glass from a large blue button. He pressed the button and for a moment the crew were weightless. Then the core fired to life and started generating artificial gravity. Their thrusters changed from fuel burning

engines to pulsar propellant drives.

"Barracuda in pursuit," Clover said, her tachyon cannons tracking the vessel as it started arcing towards space.

Tuning the core output with various sliders, Kurt mumbled, "Let's see if she makes it out."

The Barracuda rumbled as her engines generated enough thrust to break orbit. Clouds evaporated in her fiery wake, and the Solonians could only imagine the constant jarring inflicted on the Angessian crew.

For a moment the enemy ship paused, looking to almost stall before pushing to space. But the Barracuda continued forward, unrelenting, and soon the two starships were facing each other. Jorgan jumped back in his chair, shocked when a booming Angessian voice echoed over their intersystem comm.

"Greetings crew of the Klondike. This is Captain Anthony of the Orion class Barracuda." His voice was edged with excitement. Clearly this was the virgin flight of the Barracuda into space, and the astronomer was enjoying every new sensation. "Come back to Angess with us. We only wish to open a trade agreement with the Solonian Empire. Your assistance in the removal of the brothers barricading such a deal is admirable. We only wish peace."

"Hello again Anthony." Jorgan was certain to drop the "Captain", hoping to remind the Angessian that stealing a ship didn't make one a leader. He also refused to offer a title or name, instead focusing on refuting Anthony's words. "I wish I could believe you, I really do." Jorgan's mouth set hard and he said, "We landed with open arms, seeking an alliance and fair trade with our old colony. But as your covert army showed at the Und Fan hunting grounds, there can be no peace."

"An unfortunate misunderstanding, crew of the Klondike. My troops are not well organized like the Solonian Empire, and they got overly excited and hostile," Anthony replied, his tone covering a pitiful lie.

"Bullshit," Kurt said over the Klondike's comm system. "I saw Anthony ordering them to fire on us."

"As he says," Clover started, "let's put this dog down."

Jorgan had seen Captain Gin in combat enough times to know you don't talk when it's time to fight. You fight, hard, and with everything you have. So instead of replying to Anthony, Jorgan ordered Clover, "Fire when ready. Try to disable his weapons first."

The doctor didn't have to wait long for a response. Clover quickly synchronized the computer to her input system, targeted the tachyon cannons at various weak points on the Barracuda, and fired.

Great glowing purple goutts of tachyon erupted from the Klondike's turret. The searing projectiles flew towards the Barracuda and shattered across the shimmering blue shield protecting the vessel.

The enemy ship started a ponderous drift to try to avoid future shots. Anthony's voice shouted over the comm, "You leemas! This is a peaceful scientific ve-" Jorgan shut the channel off, clearing the comm from Anthony's empty words.

"Keep firing, I'm going to try to get out of her front arc," Jorgan said, his eyes switching between the scanner, energy reports, thrust details, and targeting information.

As nimble as the Klondike was, the starship didn't quite clear the deadly forward weapons of the Barracuda. Blasts and beams fired in a dazzling array of various colors. The Klondike's shields held for the duration of the salvo, but Kurt was quick to speak after the last shot.

"Shields holding, barely, but don't let them line up another barrage."

Jorgan was too concentrated on piloting to notice the complaint. He flew the Klondike above the Barracuda and spun her to keep the turret lined up with the enemy vessel. His hope was to match speed with the enemy, always staying above or below the Barracuda, but never in front. The Orion class starship had powerful forward weapons, but little in the way of rotating turrets. In fact the call sign of Barracuda was perfect for the vessel, since it had a deadly bite but little else.

The starship had also been defunct for a number of years, mainly because of critical weaknesses discovered at great cost by the old Terran empire. When the thrusters were activated cooling vents would open on the bottom hull. The openings would expose vital veins of electrical wiring and pipe work.

Each Prospector ship had detailed schematics of known starships included in their primary computer. Jorgan knew of the schematics from the various identification duties he'd performed in the past. Splitting his attention between the joystick, navigation computer, and vessel database, the doctor opened details of the Orion.

After a few seconds of scanning the schematic page he knew the Barracuda's blind spots and where to strike for maximum damage. Once the enemy shields were disabled Jorgan could fly underneath the Barracuda and hit the weak coolant vents.

Clover was doing a fine job of working the Angessian shields. Her repeated tachyon blasts were always accurate and took a slow but steady toll on the Barracuda. Even assisted by the computer she had to adjust for drift, projectile travel time, and numerous other factors. Jorgan knew the continuous stream of hits were a testament to the quartermaster's skill.

Meanwhile the Barracuda had been trying to swing the Klondike into her forward arc. Every time the slower, bigger Orion class vessel turned upwards, Jorgan merely drifted to match her heading and stay on top of the enemy.

"No wonder they scrapped these ships," Kurt scoffed, able to visual the action from his console in the core. "Shields recovered," he noted over the comm, keeping everyone up to date on their energy usage.

A burst of tachyon glinted as it connected with the armored hull of the Barracuda. The shields were starting to fall.

"I'm going to try to get under her, to the weak vents," Jorgan informed his crew mates, gently twisting the joystick. The Klondike responded by firing thrusters on her port side, pushing the Prospector ship around the circumference of the Barracuda and towards the soft belly.

"Watch it," Clover warned, noticing a shuttle launch from the Barracuda. The vessel streaked towards the Klondike, through her shields, and was about to ram the top. She shouted the warning again, "Watch it! Enemy shuttle launched. Brace for impac-"

Sparks erupted in the turret, temporarily blinding her. She heard Jorgan's surprised cry over the comm. Then the bulky shuttle impacted and pushed the Klondike down. Quickly the Barracuda seized the moment.

As Jorgan desperately tried to counter thrust against the ramming shuttle, the Barracuda swung end over end and brought the bristling array of forward weapons to bear. Arcs of light pulsed from the enemy ship, tearing into the Klondike's shield.

"Get us out of here!" Kurt yelled from the core, not even bothering to use the comm. He rapidly worked the generator sliders, trying to balance the shields. The Barracuda kept firing, the steady pulse of her weapons causing the ship to vibrate.

Recovering from the shuttle impact, Clover wiped her eyes and barked, "They're ripping her apart keeping up that level of fire."

The Barracuda was starting to show stress fractures and her weapon barrels glowed orange from overheating. Still Anthony fired and fired until the Prospector shield collapsed. Next their armor started to splinter and drift into space from the massive directed energy. Red warning lights flashed across the cockpit as Jorgan desperately tried to take evasive action.

Like the breaking of a massive tidal wave, the attack finally stopped. Jorgan looked over at the Barracuda and saw leaking sprays of oxygen. Her shields and life support were failing from the energy surge required to hold the barrage.

Seeing his chance, Jorgan ignored the warning lights and swung the Klondike under the Barracuda. The Angessian ship tried to correct her course and bring the forward weapons to bear again.

Clover made sure they never had a chance. Not even waiting for the order from Jorgan, she targeted the various cooling vents spanning the bottom of the enemy ship. Piercing blasts of tachyon erupted across the hull, severing critical electrical links with each impact.

Jorgan was happy the intersystem comm was still turned off, since he didn't envy the death awaiting Anthony's crew. The hull of the Barracuda bulged like a swollen whale as explosions tore apart her interior. Without proper cooling or life support fires were undoubtedly spreading through the ship.

Kurt cheered over the comm, as did Clover. The Barracuda continued to implode, and Jorgan was quick to fire reverse pulsar propellant drives to shift them away from the expanding field of debris.

Stopping her celebrating momentarily, Clover lined up a final shot and disintegrated the enemy shuttle that floated nearby. The vessel was already crumpled from the previous impact, and the blasts of energy ripped the remains to pieces.

In seconds they were alone in the space over Angess. Bodies of the Angessian crew floated from the dark Barracuda, the lifeless forms bumping against ruined flakes of armor. Clover and Kurt both congratulated each other and Jorgan over the comm.

The doctor dropped shaking hands from the joystick and breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't enjoy taking life, especially not in such a gruesome manner, but he was still proud of his flying and the crew's success.

After the cheers had died down Jorgan spoke, "Okay, let's get back onto Angess and find the Captain. I'm sure he's twiddling his thumbs waiting for an extraction."

Gin rolled down the hillside, dust trailing him like a cloak. After promising to return, the Captain had stumbled from Kkar's residence and escaped out of the city. Now he desperately tried to get closer to the last location of the Klondike. Gin knew he couldn't reach the starship, even without poison in his veins the distance was too great. But if he could get back into communication range he could summon the vessel to save him.

Trying his comm again, he cursed at the silence. Then he cursed his heart, which pumped the poison deeper into his body. Gin groggily stood and cursed the boiling atmosphere, all of Angess, and was just about to curse the Klondike when he heard the distant report of broken atmosphere.

Streaking from the cloudy veil overhead were pieces of starship hull. Laced with fire from orbital re-entry and charred from weapon blasts, Gin assumed the shrapnel was from the

Klondike.

He slumped to the ground as the rain of debris continued. Anger evaporated into resignation. Now he welcomed the steady pulse of his heart, bringing him one beat closer to inevitable death.

Once again face down in the dirt, Gin barely noticed the second boom of re-entry. He rolled over and lay in poisoned daze staring at the glowing form of the Klondike. Heat shielding shuddered as the starship descended closer and closer to the surface. Gin breathed a sighed of relief, knowing he only had a few such breaths left.

With numb fingers he fumbled for the comm switch, and croaked, "Klondike...help..." Then his upraised neck went slack and he slumped to the ground again.

"Did you hear that?" Jorgan asked, twisting two dials to control the frequency and volume of his comm.

"Sounded like Gin!" Clover exclaimed, hurtling down the ladder from the damaged turret.

"I'm picking up his life signal." Jorgan squinted at the scanner to his left. "It's weak and fading fast."

From engineering Kurt commanded, "Bring us to the source, now!"

Jorgan jammed the atmospheric thruster velocity and the Klondike lurched forward in response. They blasted down at a severe angle, but the doctor was able to heave the ship level right before impact with the ground.

Clover had been suiting up since their initial discovery, and Kurt was already in his AES from earlier preparations for repairing the exterior of the starship. As the ship was still completing the landing sequence they both threw open the spine door and charged out.

Gin's prone form greeted them, blasted with sand and grit. He was not moving. With Jorgan and the ship so close they didn't bother running a life diagnostic. Instead the pair of Solonians wasted no time in lifting the limp form and carrying the Captain back on board.

As the Klondike hummed in standby mode, Jorgan ran to the back of the spine and watched the Captain be carried over the blasted landscape. The doctor knew he could save the Captain if there was the faintest sign of life, but flat out resurrection was beyond his technology. Biting his lip in worry Jorgan tried to visually check the body from his perch.

Soon all three Solonians were back on the ship. The outer airlock sealed shut and they twisted the inner door open. Jorgan could see the Captain was breathing, but his complexion was pale and sweat dappled his entire face.

"Let's get him to medical," Jorgan said, needlessly, as Clover and Kurt were already hurrying that direction.

Although every room on the ship was accessible by ladders, the medical station had a backup elevator for emergency cases where time was critical. Looking at Gin, Jorgan knew this was such a case. They rested the body on the floor of the spine and Jorgan mashed the elevator button. A section of the corridor hissed and started lowering into the medical station.

Kurt and Clover lifted the Captain onto the central medical bench and breathed a collective sigh of relief. Their work was done, and although they feared for the Captain's life, they also knew Jorgan was competent at his craft and had some of the best medical technology at his disposal.

The doctor quickly fired up a life scanner that began checking the Captain for abrasions. As the

scanner worked up and down the Captain's body, Jorgan's face dropped. "How could I be so blind!" He roared, switching off the scanner.

"What...what are you doing?" Clover said, biting her finger nails.

"Don't worry. This isn't some stab wound or ion burn. I recognize the symptoms now." As he talked Jorgan whirled around the sterile cabinets and drawers, grabbing various chemical vials and tools. "He was poisoned, by my own toxin." Jorgan returned to the operating table and pressed a series of buttons to summon a stasis cage around the Captain's heart. The glimmering net of energy would slow his pulse and blood flow and buy Jorgan a few more minutes.

In a flash Jorgan was combining chemicals to create an antidote. Having designed the initial poison provided the doctor with the intimate knowledge of what was necessary to cure Gin. He swapped half filled vials into a rotating mixer, then returned to a set of beakers and all manner of glass work.

Precious minutes later Jorgan poured his finished antidote into an opening on the operating table then pressed a button. Internal systems of the table injected the serum into Captain Gin, who immediately started to regain color in his face. Jorgan dabbed sweat from the Captain's face, and the beads of perspiration did not return. Disabling the stasis cage allowed the Solonians to see that Gin's heart rate had settled to a normal pace.

"He'll be alright. Just needs some rest." Jorgan said, slumping back in a chair. The doctor was utterly exhausted from the day's ordeal. Between space dogfights and madly creating an antidote on the fly, Jorgan was ready to leave Angess. Clover and Kurt alternated between looking at the Captain, the doctor, and each other. Everyone was ready to leave Angess.

Gin groaned and rolled over on the operating table, "I recommend we keep antidotes on hand for any toxins we fabricate." He coughed a splatter of blood onto the cool metal beside him, which the operating table automatically cleaned.

"Captain! So glad to see you've recovered," Jorgan beamed, leaning over the prone form and running a final series of diagnostics. "The leenan and poison made a mess of your internals, but you're on the mend."

The Captain started to wave the doctor away, but Jorgan firmly pushed the man back onto the table. "You'll have to stay here for the rest of the day."

Pausing and breathing hard, Gin looked at the doctor. "Thanks, Jorgan," The Captain opened his mouth to issue further orders, but instead yawned and fell asleep.

In a week they had left Angess. They spent another week in orbit, enjoying some downtime after the chaotic flurry of activity on Angess. Gin found his friends performed best with a week or two rest after each landing, and before the jump to the next planet. Once they jumped he knew the crew, including himself, would be eager to explore the surface immediately.

Kurt jury rigged enough armor plating and external hull patchwork to safely get them into deep space. He also fixed the rotating mechanism on the turret, all of which had been damaged in the shuttle impact.

Captain Gin was on his feet the next morning, chipper at his survival and eager to sort out the aftermath of their mission.

Jorgan watched the Captain closely, but his recovery seemed stable and fast so the doctor soon turned to filing reports on the new toxin and antidote. The medical databases of the Solonian

Empire grew from their trials.

Clover focused on entering data on the Angessians, again hoping to catalogue as much as possible for the next wave of Solonian contact.

Kkar, Malin, and Anthony were all confirmed dead. The poison had worked even better on Kkar than it did on Gin, and the warmonger was dead in an hour. News broke from Concord that the landslide had crushed Malin and a few loyal supporters. And Anthony's body was recovered from the wreckage of the Barracuda, along with dozens of his underground agents. The Angessian population took all of these events in stride. Most of the outer villages cared little for the tribulations of the cities. The populace of Harrier and Concord signed a peace treaty two days after the assassinations, and as far as the Solonians could see the ceasefire would be a lasting one.

Many were surprised that Anthony had hidden a working starship. Feelings were mixed; some saw the Barracuda as freedom from Angess, others saw the vessel as a way to scavenge broader regions.

In the end a young and popular Angessian named Daeker stepped forward as the unofficial leader of both cities. The Angessians didn't have a well defined political structure or hierarchy, but the tribal traditions seemed to support Daeker. The Prospectors were confident in his ability to lead.

Gin was eager to report their success to the Solonian Empire. He crafted an entry detailing their achievements, what steps he recommended next, key points about the main players, and general notes about the behaviour, habitat and culture of Angess.

At the end of the week, scores of Angessians bid farewell to the Klondike as she ascended to the stars. Two weeks after that, a wave of Solonian merchants, traders, and bureaucrats landed to solidify a trade agreement with Angess. The Solonians were impressed with the Angessian drive to scavenge and mine, and soon were trading medical equipment and luxury goods for bismuth and precious stones.

"After our success on Angess the crew was eager for our next landing. We are currently heading to Drofo, a desert planet about fifteen light years from Angess. A mere wink of the Miramachi Device. The original colony was only forty members, mainly because there was little interest in a dust bowl. Since the planet was never reinforced we have to assume the colony died out or became massively inbred. Our task, as usual, is to re-establish contact and try to setup a trade agreement or alliance with the Terrans on Drofo. Failing that, we must assess the planet for economic or military value.

I am optimistic about Drofo. The records indicate it isn't any hotter than Angess, and our AES held up fine under that boiling sun. Angess. Now that was a tough haul. I haven't been that close to death before. Knowing you're about to die...truly believing it and staring death in the face, that changes a man."

Captain: Ronald Gin  
Permit: #44681-AA\_1  
Starship Class: Prospector IV  
Starship Name: "Klondike"  
Entry Date: Drofo Orbit, Sector 59, Year 2271

"Prepare for Mirawarp," Gin ordered over the comm.

He double checked their position in space, and with the aid of the navigation computer also reviewed their jump path. Drofo was fifteen light years away, or a little over four and a half parsecs. With the hull repairs Kurt had made they should safely reach the planet in a matter of seconds.

"Remember Captain we'll need to fly easy once we reach the planet," Kurt reminded. The engineer had been incessantly talking about the low atmospheric fuel reserves, after their extra orbital work and constant flying on Angess.

Normally a Prospector ship would circle a gas giant and use fuel scoops to grab the necessary raw materials to keep their reserves full. But Drofo was a desert planet, and no gas giant was within thirty light years.

So instead the Captain and crew had agreed to keep the Klondike in orbit and land in the Crusader. The shuttle was designed for breaking atmosphere and on the ground she was as sturdy a fortress as the Klondike.

The downside was crew capacity. The life support, volume of supplies, and compartments were designed for two people. In past emergency situations the Solonians had fit all four personnel into the vessel, but such a plan was suicide for a long term landing.

Since Drofo was recorded as a desert planet the crew had opted to flip a credit chip to decide who had to go. Gin was an obvious choice, since he always lead the excursions. And Clover lost the chip toss, so the two of them would be descending to Drofo after the jump.

Gin was fully focused on handling the Miramachi Device. Although faster than light travel was miraculous and saved humanity, the science was also a gray area and tended to be dangerous and somewhat unpredictable. If his navigation course was off by a hundred thousand kilometers they could crash through a field of asteroids or end up exploding inside a planet's core.

"Say again, prepare for Miramachi activation," Gin sternly ordered over the comm. Throughout the ship his crew were strapping in and buckling down.

Over a single channel to the engineering section Gin asked, "Kurt, are we green?"

"Yes, sir. Everything is clear down here."

"Roger." He flipped to the public comm. "Mirawarp in 3...2...1..."

All the Solonians nearly threw up when the Miramachi Device engaged. Spirals of blue energy arced across the core and for a moment time stood still. The cloak of space outside changed from pure black to blinding white and back. Sometimes both colors melded together in a twisted optical illusion. The force of the Miramachi Device crushed their hearts into their feet, and everyone was light headed and confused for the brief time they were jumping.

Just when Gin thought he couldn't take the mind shattering effects anymore, the ship lurched to a halt. Gin was even sure, had the Klondike even moved or had space folded around the vessel? The Miramachi Device was a grand unknown to the vast majority of Solonians.

"Miramachi Device jump complete," the central computer chirped.

"Confirm, jump successful. Drofo in sight," Gin opened the blast shield and brought up an overlay of the distance to Drofo. "I'm re-engaging the PP drive. We should be in deep orbit in twenty minutes." The irony of travelling more than dozen light years faster than intersystem flight never failed to amuse Gin.

"Cap'n, we should be getting preliminary scans in ten minutes."

"Confirmed Kurt, advise when you start seeing data."

Clover chimed in with her own status report, "Weapons are prepped, sir. I can modify the drop

package when those scans are done."

"Sounds good, quartermaster."

The final crew member didn't have much to add. Jorgan's roll was limited during the initial approach and scan of a planet. Aside from trying to identify life forms and estimate their behaviours, Jorgan normally kept to his quarters until the shuttle left.

Gin was pressed into his seat as the pulsar propellant drive engaged and sped the Klondike forward. Stars glimmered past and flecks of space dust jingled against the cockpit. Intersystem flight was one of Gin's favorite times on board, and he could only imagine the old sleeper ships that flew months or years at a similar speed. He almost envied the slower pace, when a pilot could really enjoy every majestic piece of the galaxy. Faster than light travel had hastened the pace of planet hopping.

In a mere tens minutes data from the long range scanners started picking up details of Drofo. At the same time Gin had magnified the distant planet to get an idea of how the size and coloration looked. He and Kurt spoke nearly simultaneously, both with amazement in their voice.

"I'm getting massive life readings, sir-"

"-It's not a desert planet, it's fertile."

The engineer and Captain had come to the same conclusion. Drofo was not the dusty, stained brown color of a desert world. Instead the surface was awash with vibrant greens and twists of blue. Kurt's scan results had found thousands of life forms per square kilometer.

Momentarily thrown off guard at the discovery, Gin stuttered, "C-check for cities. For tech."

"On it..." Kurt's voice trailed off and Gin could hear the clicking of buttons. "Negative, no settlements or structures detected."

"What the hell happened here?" Clover breathlessly asked over the comm.

Gin was so baffled that he didn't even reprimand the quartermaster for cursing.

Out the window of the common room stars twinkled. The massive planet Drofo, ringed in a cover of blue atmosphere, dominated the view. The Solonians sat around the oak table, poring over scan results. The Captain had shut down the pulsar drive and the Klondike now drifted in deep asynchronous orbit.

From the close distance Gin and Kurt were able to perform the full battery of planetary scans. The computer painted a picture of paradise below. The floor was carpeted in verdant jungle. Massive, towering trees grew from the vegetation, alien in shape and color. Fresh water rivers meandered over the entire planet like a spiderweb of life.

Kurt tapped the screen in front of him and spoke, "From our records the closest Earth environment the computer can match Drofo to is the Amazon in the early 18th century."

Clover raised an eyebrow, "The what?"

"A big jungle in old South America," Gin interjected.

"But the life readings are like nothing I've seen," Kurt continued.

Jorgan's eyes lit up and he leaned forward, "The place is bristling with alien natives. Nothing above instinctual intelligence from what I've seen, but the sheer variety..." he leaned back in his chair, sighed wistfully, and shrugged his shoulders. The doctor was always impressed by the infinite forms of life in the universe.

"Any sign of the Terrans?"

"No can do, sir," Kurt said, frowning and tapping the screen again. "No chance to pick out a

specific life form in a sea of life forms."

"This planet seems like a perfect location for an Empire research lab," Gin mused, "and perhaps for a wood processing facility." He stood and circled the table in wide, confident strides. "Let's get down to Drofo and confirm it's as good as the scans look."

He turned to Clover, "Do you need to modify our loadout at all?"

She pondered the question, knowing a mistake or underestimation at this phase could prove deadly once they were on the surface. "With that much life let's double the ammunition. We can spare the weight in the Crusader."

"Atmosphere looks habitable," Kurt said, absorbed in his scan results.

"True, but there could be untold number of microbes and alien bacteria floating around." Gin was wary from his last brush with death due to a venom he couldn't see or fight. "Outside the shuttle let's keep full AES activation at all times."

Clover nodded and matched Gin's standing posture. "Ready when you are, sir."

Still immersed in his set of screens, Kurt fed the pair more information. "The axis of Drofo is tilted, so day lasts a mere six Earth hours."

"And night?" Jorgan asked, recovering from his wistful slouch.

"Twenty Earth hours."

Gin didn't know why, but he gulped.

The Crusader had been lovingly packed by Clover in the recovery week after Angess. Inside was an impressive array of camping equipment, light sources, high protein nutrient packs, munitions, portable comm units, and hundreds of other pieces of gear that a year of space travel had shown to be useful.

Gin hoisted a repeating laser rifle, the worn handle fitting comfortably in his hand. He turned to Clover and struck a pose, then casually remarked, "Glad to see we're sticking with the classics."

The mass drivers used on Angess had been switched to the repeaters. Clover assumed they would be outnumbered in combat, so the rapid shots of a laser rifle were more important than the penetrating power of a mass driver. Laser rifles were also very reliable, having been the primary weapon for years of corporate warfare. Each weapon could fire upwards of fifty times on a single microcell, and would perform admirably even if soaking wet or clogged with mud. Jorgan was piloting the Klondike during their launch, in case course corrections were needed to ensure a clean exit by the Crusader. Kurt was standing by the core generator, ready as always with his energy management sliders.

Gin stowed the rifle and moved to the Crusader's ramp. The shuttle had a two seat cockpit, with the option to fold each chair into a flat bed to create a secure sleeping location. A standard package of shuttle navigation and control lined the inside of the cockpit. Behind the chairs was the main hold, which was a narrow hallway packed with gear. Although each Prospector varied the layout of their hold, Gin opted for mesh cargo nets to maximize weight distribution and capacity.

The shuttle was entered via a ramp at the back of the hold. To save space there was no airlock, so each crew member needed to be in their AES until life support could regenerate a breathable environment.

A stock Venture II shuttle had no armament, since the vessel was designed for landing and orbital travel, not combat. But under the cockpit Kurt and Clover had rigged a double barrelled

scattergun. The weapon was mounted on a rudimentary turret. After the first month of landings they had decided anything was better than being unarmed.

Gin ran his finger down the interior of the Crusader as he walked to the left chair. Clover was close behind and sat comfortably in the right. They proceeded with the standard safety checks and launch sequence.

"This is the Crusader, we're set for launch."

Jorgan checked the Klondike's scanners and telemetry and replied, "Roger that. Everything looks clear from here, sir."

"Launching in 3...2...1..." The shuttle lurched as Clover disengaged the landing hooks. Landing rails inside the Klondike pushed the Crusader back, so the shuttle didn't have to damage the interior by using reverse thrusters.

For a moment they were weightless, then the Crusader's engine started and settled a comfortable layer of gravity on them. They were free of the Klondike, and with a deft flick of his wrist Gin turned the shuttle towards Drofo.

"Just a reminder, we're open comm for the first hour on the surface. After that we'll maintain hourly comm updates," Gin said. A shuttle landing was different because energy usage was a primary concern, unlike a larger vessel with a powerful core.

"Understood, sir," Jorgan replied over the comm.

"Approach vector is looking good," Kurt added, closely monitoring their descent to Drofo.

The shuttle bucked and shuddered as they reached the blue sheath of atmosphere. Unlike Angess the fertile world below had a rich layer of atmosphere surrounding the planet. Gin's feet warmed as the nose heat shielding took the brunt of the entry.

"Steady now," Clover said, more to herself than the Captain. The heat continued to build as they descended through clouds and fog. "Scopes are showing surface at eighty kilometers." Readouts informed them the gravity drive had shutdown successfully and they were now in the sky over Drofo.

"Hopefully we can come out of these clouds for the landin-"

Gin's mouth dropped mid-sentence. They broke through the heavy and he was awed by the sight below. A rainbow of colors greeted him in every direction. He could tell from Clover's rapid intake of air that she was also appreciating the view. In the distance the horizon curved around the planet, and a sea of red, pink, green, and purple trees met the sky. No towering mountain vistas broke the carpet of vegetation. Dark amber and blue rivers alternated churning rapids with wide spaces of calm.

Everywhere the pair looked they saw life. Strange hook winged forms paddled through the air. Twirling creatures that looked like a mix of octopus and snake surfaced for air in the rivers. The top canopy of leaves bent and bowed from tiny shapes that darted across the jungle.

"Look for...look for a clear spot?" Clover offered, trying to follow the standard landing procedure.

"I wish we were that lucky." Gin said, slowing the shuttle and circling the endless forest. For several minutes they searched for a clearing or divide in the trees big enough to put the shuttle down.

Seeing the futility of the situation, Gin suggested, "We could try a water landing and anchor in the river."

"Not sure about those snake things, sir," Clover said, switching a screen to magnify a scanner

focused on a dark shape underwater.

"How long would it take to clear a landing zone using our scattergun?"

"Hmm," Clover pondered, "assuming the trees aren't plasma resistant we could clear the bare minimum in an hour."

Gin checked the energy gauge and considered his options. "Wait a second," he said, raising a finger. "Shuttle Crusader to Klondike, come in, over."

"We're here Captain, what is it?" Jorgan answered.

"Requesting an orbital bombardment one kilometer from our present location."

Kurt and Clover both seemed confused. "Sir?"

"You heard me. Clear a landing spot for us." Gin had already been slipping into just thinking of the resources of his shuttle, instead of remembering the powerful Prospector ship drifting far overhead.

In space Kurt ran to the turret while the Klondike rolled over. He maximized the energy output and fired several blasts of tachyon towards the surface. The atmosphere partially dissipated the projectiles, but they still managed to demolish a thirty meter square of jungle.

"Much appreciated, Klondike. Captain Gin out." He peered at a view scanner aimed at the charred remains of the jungle. The floor seemed even more alive with life than the bright trees and rivers. On full magnification he could see diminutive creatures shuffling through a dazzling array of ferns and other growth. The Captain imagined this one patch of jungle floor had more natural life than many capital cities back on Earth.

Their eyes equally bright with excitement he turned to Clover and said, "Let's take a look."

His laser rifle was slung at the ready as Gin lowered the Crusader's exit ramp. Steamy, fuming air poured into the ship and he knew the shuttle would have to work overtime to regenerate the friendlier Earth atmosphere inside.

A cacophony of alien calls and screeches greeted them, much like walking through an old zoo exhibit at home. The sheer volume of creatures running, swinging, and climbing around them was dazzling. Gin couldn't believe this planet was a desert once. He wasn't sure if the Empire archive was wrong, or if a majestic new ecosystem had formed in the 150 years since the original colony.

Gin caught a glimpse of a furry four legged animal that almost resembled a koala. He was about to comment on the alien when it turned around and Gin could see a long eye stalk sprouting from the center of the creature's chest. The probing eye scanned the Solonians with disinterest and the alien turned to continue climbing.

There were various insectoid scurrying underfoot. The Captain didn't know enough about biological classification to be sure if they were "bugs" in a true Earth sense, but they sure looked the part. Numerous legs swathed in cold black carapace whirred as aliens of all shapes and combinations crawled through the undergrowth.

"Get clear, let's close her up," Gin ordered the quartermaster, not wanting one of the strange bugs to get onto the shuttle. Clover nodded and hurried down the ramp. Gin turned and flicked a scanner open beside the exit ramp. He let the locking mechanism scan and verify his retinal pattern. With a grinding screech that caused a new height of volume in the alien calls, the exit ramp started to close.

After half a second the Crusader was sealed, and the Solonians were alone on Drofo.

With any unexplored planet the first goal was to try to find or establish contact with the old Terran colony. The colonists normally provided enough information about the planet and were the final word on whether a trade alliance could be established. They might even know what had turned the planet from dusty sand and scalding temperatures to verdant life and a livable atmosphere.

However from Gin's scans that task was quite challenging on Drofo. The planet had endless life but no technology, so he wasn't sure where to start. The two Solonians decided to spend their first day merely walking around, exploring. No goal, and no direction besides away from the shuttle.

The Captain's primary concern with the plan was Drofo only provided six hours of daylight, and twenty of darkness. If they wanted to achieve real, noticeable gains they would need to expand their safaris to night.

Gin opened a comm to the Klondike to relay their plan, "Ground excursion to Klondike. We landed safely in the clearing. No sign of Terrans, but plenty of alien species to catalog. Our plan is to use the shuttle as a base camp, explore the immediate vicinity, and return to the Crusader at night."

"Roger, Captain. We recommend you turn on your AES video feeds, instead of just sound," Jorgan offered. "That way I can start a preliminary report on the life forms you see."

The Captain hesitated, still concerned about power usage and a long term stay on the planet. Finally he replied, "Works for us," then nodded to Clover. They both configured their AES power box to enable a live video transmission to the Klondike.

"Coming in crystal clear, sir."

"We'll just keep the feed on during the day."

"Understood," Jorgan's replied curtly, having performed enough planetary excursions to know how precious energy cells were.

After an hour of marching the Solonians noticed the trees clear ahead. Carefully edging forward they realized they were slightly above a wide river, similar to the many they had seen from the sky. In this case the body of liquid was amber in color.

The river had carved a path through the soft vegetation and fertile soil underfoot, and sunk into a gully five meters below them. After their time hidden in the dark jungle they were nervous about being so exposed. But after checking and rechecking the area both Solonians felt confident they were safe. So far the alien life, while interesting to the explorers, had been totally uninterested in them.

Gin skidded down the tiny slope first, his heavy boots cutting into the muddy banks. Upon reaching the river he pulled out a mobile scanner and ran the device over the nearest pool of amber colored liquid.

He held up the device as it hypothesized details about the liquid. "As I thought, majority bromine."

Out of reflex Clover stepped away from the substance. Unshielded contact with the liquid would sear their skin and leave painful sores. The AES also protected them from the red vapor seeping off the river, which would sting their eyes and nostrils.

"At least we didn't try a water landing. Maybe the blue rivers are nicer?" Clover suggested, motioning for Gin to step back into the protective concealment of the trees.

"No, let's stay here and see if we can't catch a glimpse of the aquatic aliens we saw on our

approach."

With wide eyes Clover pointed to a deep spot in the bromine stream. "You mean one of those?" A slimy bubble of skin crested the surface. Gin couldn't tell what color the alien was initially, but lifelong exposure to bromine had stained it a dusty red. The hump of skin had a bulbous black eye jutting from it. Two breathing holes sucked in precious air before disappearing back into the river.

Gin was about to speak to Jorgan when he saw the trailing feature of the alien. Long tentacles, at least a dozen in number, curled and writhed from the central form. Each tentacle ended in a eyeless, snapping maw filled with jagged teeth.

The Captain took Clover's advice and backed up from the river's edge.

"Jorgan, did you see that?" He whispered over the comm.

"Captain," Kurt crackled over the radio, "I'm piloting now while Jorgan works. He suggests 'Octok' as a name for the alien."

"Combining octopus and snake, just like we said," Gin replied, returning to a normal speaking volume. "Makes sense to me."

"Recommend not taking a swim, Captain," Kurt jested.

Gin readjusted the laser rifle on his back. "Recommendation noted."

With the discovery of the menacing Octok, the Solonians decided the amber rivers were off limits. Gin pulled up a digital map of where they had explored so far, and overlaid the information onto a surface scan performed by the shuttle as they landed. Their meandering trail had lead them to a river east of the shuttle.

Gin rested his laser rifle against the nearest tree and sat to analyze the map. The shuttle was in the center of a landmass formed into roughly rectangular shape. Bordering each side was the curling line of a bromine river. Having no desire to cross the rivers, Gin knew they were effectively cut off from the rest of the jungle.

"Clover, look at this," Gin said, motioning to the glowing screen.

"Huh, looks like we're on an island, sir?"

A plan formed in his head, which he described to Clover. "This is good news." She nodded as Gin continued, "We can explore this first island, catalog the aliens here, take samples of the vegetation, and so on. Then we fly the Crusader over to another chunk of Drofo surrounded by rivers and do the same."

"Sir, just keep island hopping?"

"Exactly. If we fly in a wide enough pattern we should be able to get a valid sample size of the Drofo natives." He put the map away and continued walking.

"And we might run into Terrans eventually," Clover reminded him. "Sir, I'd really like to try to find the colonists. All these aliens are interesting and valuable to the Empire," she sighed and looked nervous about continuing. "But we need to know how and why this planet turned from dust to jungle."

"I'm well aware of our duty, quartermaster," Gin said gruffly, not appreciating the advice. The Captain still wanted to maintain some sense of a chain of command.

"Apologies, sir."

Gin stopped marching and turned on Clover, recovering from his flash of anger. "No apologies necessary, Clover." He remembered his earlier thoughts about listening to his crew and utilizing their expert knowledge. "Your suggestion is appreciated, and we definitely do need to learn the

secret of Drofo."

Lead by the map the Solonians explored a second tributary bordering the north of their landmass. The stream of bromine appeared similar to the eastern river. There were more rapids present from the red liquid smashing over rocks and fallen trees. The fierce solution slowly ate away at both, trying to calm the river by removing impediments.

The pair performed a handful of scans on nearby vegetation and any bugs slow enough to be captured by the rays of the device. The distant sun was starting to sink below the canopy of trees so they turned to leave.

Both froze when they heard a bellowing roar across the river. Clover reacted faster than Gin could even see, and she was snug in cover before his brain finished processing the noise. He ducked behind a wide tree opposite Clover. Squatting low and trying to peer through a branch of curled pink leaves he saw movement on the far bank.

A lumbering mass shambled down the slope and splashed into the river. The alien's skin was mostly brown with streaks of purple to act as camouflage among some of the trees. Gin wasn't sure what to make of the creature. It had six stout legs, a long body, and a head weighed down with a frilly bone crest and massive central horn. Two pairs of squinted eyes showed instinctual fear and panic.

Over the comm Jorgan's voice startled Gin. The doctor was busy trying to relate the Drofo alien to archetypes in the Solonian ecosystem. "Almost like an Earth rhino, and a...triceratops?" "Quiet," Gin ordered under his breath, still watching through the branches. Both crew had unslung their rifles and leaned the weapons to use the tree as a stabilizing platform.

The alien was clearly not built for swimming. The six legs feebly paddled against the current, barely keeping the crested head above the bromine. Gin wasn't sure what had caused the alien to dive into the river, but he figured something terrible chased it.

He was about to whisper to Clover when the river exploded into a torrent of bromine around the alien. An Octok had slithered unseen and now ensnared the lumbering beast. Snapping tentacles bit and tore at the rhino creature, and thick black blood mixed with the fast current. The slimy appendages struggled and flexed as the six legged alien tried to escape. But the Octok was a skilled hunter and soon the feeble kicking slowed.

Gin considered unleashing a salvo of laser fire, and from Clover's narrowed eyes he could tell she was ready to do the same. But they were not in immediate danger. As far as the Solonians had seen the Octoks couldn't move on land. So the Captain let the natural cycle of Drofo continue unabated.

Gin instead looked right into the single eye of the Octok as it pulled the alien under the surface. He shuddered and lowered his gaze.

"Sir, movement in the trees," Clover hissed, her steely face never leaving the sights of the laser rifle.

Gin raised his head from the rifle and swung a single lens scanner up. The device magnified the far treeline and the Captain tried to distinguish the forms he saw jumping and rolling through the underbrush. In a rush and flurry of movement the shapes were gone, and the jungle was left quiet. But Gin felt a menacing edge to the serenity, almost as if they were being watched.

After an uneventful minute Clover eased her grip on the laser rifle. Gin looked upwards into the darkening sky and knew they should return to the Crusader. Without a word the pair of

Solonians stood and started a hurried march back to the shuttle. Neither shouldered their rifles, instead of they held the weapons at the ready.

With the map as his guide Gin lead them unerringly back to the Crusader. As they approached the ring of trees bordering the landing zone Clover gasped. A new growth of jungle surrounded the Crusader, even though they had left the vessel only five hours ago.

Gin ran forward to check on the shuttle, which was their lifeline to the Klondike and their fortress against alien bugs and nocturnal predators. Some of the vegetation had sprung from the ground and was growing across the hull. Twisted vines wove their way around the landing gear, and a gnarled jungle plant blocked the ramp.

"We've got to clear this, now," he said to Clover as she followed him into what was left of the landing zone.

"Captain, you're coming through a bit patchy. Is everything okay, sir?" Jorgan's voice asked over the comm. The Captain could tell his nerves were also on edge from the forms they saw earlier. "Jorgan, we are fine. Overgrowth on Crusader." Static whined across his comm. "Say again, overgrowth on Crusader." He glanced at Clover, who had drawn a particle scalpel and started on the vegetation.

"Roge...do...cle...sir?" The reply was broken and scrambled. Gin wasn't sure what was causing the interference and didn't like the worsening situation. He checked the microcell on his rifle before moving to help Clover.

Between the setting sun, swathes of vegetation, erratic comms, and frantic forms they'd seen earlier Gin was on edge. What had started as an interesting exploratory mission was quickly souring.

"Focus on the ramp, let's get inside," he ordered, turning to cover Clover's exposed back as she worked. The particle scalpel was compact but powerful, and she quickly severed the tree directly behind the shuttle entrance. Vegetation around the frame still blocked their access. Neither Solonian considered how they would escape further growth the next day and leave the shuttle.

Another distorted transmission crackled from the Klondike. "Sir, we're...pickin-...forms" Gin tried to tune out the noise of the scalpel and focus on the words. "Say aga-...form-...inbound." The sun had set fully and the mood of the jungle was changing. The earlier squawks and calls had been replaced by shrieks and moans. Larger forms, barely distinguishable in the cloak of night, moved outside Gin's range of vision.

"Hurry," he murmured, raising the laser rifle to his shoulder.

"Working," was Clover's clipped reply as the scalpel continued to sever alien greenery from the ramp.

Gin opened a pouch on his waistband and dug out a lamp. He pushed a large button on the bottom soothing light flooded the area. "No, really," Gin urged, the light reflecting off a multitude of sharp fangs and glimmering eyes, "Hurry!"

Gone was the daylight. Gone was the pleasant humidity of the pink and red trees. Gone were the indifferent furry aliens and tiny insectoids. Instead hulking beasts ringed the landing zone, their powerful postures both imposing and threatening. In the rapid strobes of light Gin couldn't see where claws ended and limbs began. To the Solonian the Drofo jungle seemed to have grown hundreds of teeth all hungry for human.

"We're clear. Open it!" Clover said, switching positions with the Captain so he could activate the locking scanner. Clover had been so focused on the scalpel and vegetation that she hadn't

seen the mass of aliens congregating around them. Her reaction was similar to Gin's, but the practiced quartermaster calmly breathed and restored her nerves.

"Shall I fire?"

Leaning his eye into the scanner, Gin quickly said, "Not unless they advance."

Clover said nothing, just tightened her grip on the repeater and watched for any rapid movement. Taking Gin's lamp she shone the beam beyond the ring of aliens. Behind the wall of predators Clover saw the same leaping and rolling forms as earlier.

With a grinding noise the ramp snapped free of the remaining vegetation and started opening. Blinking status lights and familiar smells poured from the vessel. Before the ramp had even touched the ground both Solonians dove inside, Gin slamming the close button on his way past.

A second before the ramp closed there was a sudden eruption of hooting and hollering. Neither of the prone Prospectors could tell what was making the noise. Then the ramp slammed shut and automatically locked, blocking out the terrible yells. For once Gin was happy to have the added security of the retinal scanner protecting the entrance.

The ramp was solid trilobium, one of the strongest triple alloys the Empire had ever created. Gin was almost completely confident the alien menace outside couldn't penetrate the material. Almost.

After a brief moment to catch their breath the Solonians sprang into action. Although the aliens had appeared hostile, they technically had not made any overtly aggressive attacks. So when Gin crawled into his seat he didn't immediately grab for the scattergun trigger. Instead he flipped on the comm and scanner. Clover worked the blast shield lever to slide armored plates over the fragile cockpit.

"Clover, try to get a read on how many are out there," he ordered while opening a channel to the Klondike.

"Jorgan come in, do you read me?" Silence. Keeping his tone steady Gin asked again, "Jorgan, are you there?" Still the comm remained dead. He knew many issues could prevent clear transmissions. The Klondike might have moved to the opposite edge of the planet, or meteorites could have disrupted the signal, or some local disturbance could block the line.

"Looks like fifty to sixty aliens, sir," Clover said without looking up from the scanner. "Also I'm getting another nine readings behind the first set."

"More aliens?"

Clover shook her head no. "Life signs are reading as Terran."

"They must have been the jumping and rolling forms we saw across the river. They were watching us."

"Maybe they were hunting the rhino thing."

Gin nodded, "Most likely. That make sense when you consider how much meat the alien would provide."

"I also caught glimpses of them diving behind the wall of alien predators right before we got in," Clover added, turning off the lamp she had borrowed earlier.

"So they watch us from the river, they follow us back, and they holler and yell as we close the ramp."

The Solonians sat in silence for a while. The scanner beeped and fluttered with various targets moving outside the shuttle. Gin was thankful for the sturdy walls and protective technology helping them.

Finally Clover leaned forward and opened a report. She scrolled through the screen and eventually planted a finger on a line of text. "I remember the report saying the original Drofo colony was only forty people. No records exist of resupply or additional population arks." "You mean to say those nine Terran signals are descended from forty people over one hundred fifty years ago?"

"Seems like it sir." Gin suppressed a shudder. "Which means they could have massive deformities, brain damage..." she shrugged, "I'm not a doctor but I know you can't have a healthy or sustainable population from forty people."

"Nine deformed Terrans that somehow are at peace with aliens packing more teeth than wolves or bears. I don't like it."

Clover shut off the report, "Neither do I."

The next twenty hours felt like the longest of Gin's life. The pair took turns staying awake to watch the scanner. The Captain handled the first ten hour shift. He spent the time cramped in the shuttle chair, listening to Clover's shallow breathing and waiting for a breach alarm. Half the time he worked at convincing himself to not open fire with the scattergun on anything that moved. Gin had to suppress the natural instinct to harm anything or anyone different than him. The writhing wall of teeth flashed into his thoughts, and the knowledge that fifty or more aliens waited outside was no comfort.

Even when his shift was over Gin tossed and turned in the uncomfortable chair. He imagined waking up to find the entire ship covered in eight feet of jungle. Unable to take off, unable to communicate with the Klondike, and unable to open the exit ramp. Gin quieted his imagination and tried to rest. Every blip or whir of the scanner startled him awake though. Finally the time clock reached sunrise. Breathing a sigh of relief, Clover opened the blast shield. Fresh morning light poured into the cockpit and awoke Gin.

"How'd you sleep, sir?"

"Fine," Gin lied, half denying his fear and half wanting to keep shared morale up. He glanced at the scanner, "Looks like our friends cleared out?"

"Must be nocturnal. The aliens started leaving half an hour before sunrise, sir. The nine Terrans stayed right until the sun broke the horizon."

Clover eyed the cockpit exterior and was pleased to see no additional growth had snaked across the shuttle. "The plants must not grow overnight either?"

"Perhaps they are like Earth and need the Drofo sun," Gin shrugged.

"Any success with the comms?"

"Well, sir, that's the bad news. I still haven't been able to raise the Klondike."

Gin resisted the urge to curse. Instead he calmly said, "If we're all clear, let's load up and check the shuttle."

The exit ramp creaked open and slammed with finality on the ground. Gin and Clover had their rifles out and covering the woods. After the scanner failures on Angess they were leaving nothing to chance.

"Like I said, sir, it looks like the vegetation stopped growing."

Gin stooped to look at the severed tree trunk that had blocked the exit ramp. "True. Which means we're safe at night and won't get shut in. But look at this," he motioned the quartermaster to the cleanly cut stump.

The surface of the cut was alive with movement. On a cellular level the jungle tree was splitting and growing at an amazing rate. Upon close visual inspection the Solonians could see the bark and soft wood slowly rising upwards.

"Amazing," Clover gasped.

"Truly impressive." Gin laughed and said, "Jorgan would love to see this."

Clover smiled, "Wouldn't he though?"

"Not only him, but the whole Empire. If the wood is usable we could have an unlimited supply of it. Imagine fields of this growing under solar lamps."

Clover nodded and the pair spent a few minutes marvelling at the growth.

Gin's AES gravity cushions hissed softly as he stood. "In our case it's a nuisance though. We can't be cutting down a tree every time we want to get back on board."

"We could try to surround the shuttle with rocks? No, maybe sheet metal? Flares?"

Gin turned his back on the Crusader and peered into the encroaching jungle. "We don't know enough about these trees, or what would stop them. We need a plan," he turned back to face Clover, "Let's grab some rations and think."

Uncertain if the Terrans would return, the Solonians settled for cold protein rations. They had a compact heat radiator stove, but didn't want to be ambushed in the middle of breakfast. As much as Gin and Clover yearned to leave the shuttle and enjoy the refreshing morning, they remained safely in the shuttle.

"So far it looks like the Terrans and their friends can't get in here. That means we're safe at night," Gin was thinking out loud. "We can't contact the Klondike, at least not right now, so we don't know how long we'll have to hold out."

Gin took a bite of his protein pack. "Overall we need to make peaceful contact with the Terrans. Just once, just to see how they react."

"If hostile, nine of them shouldn't be a problem," Clover interjected. "And we have supplies for..." she calculated in her head, "a month, assuming we go to half rations after the second week."

"So we're in good shape, especially since the days seem safe. Which means we need to finish these," he took another bite, "and start scouting. If they are nocturnal, the aliens must lie low somewhere during the day."

Clover pulled up the map from the day before. "What direction do you think, sir?"

Gin zoomed the map out and tried to look for distinguishable land marks. As he thought Clover said, "Maybe we should check our landing zone for tracks."

"Right, good idea Clover."

They finished the rest of the meal in silence. After checking their weapons and trying the silent comms one more time they opened the Crusader's ramp.

As part of her duties as quartermaster Clover was trained in tracking. Her skills extended to historical surveys of the land for footprints, broken vegetation, and other signs. But she had also been trained to use the X400 Bloodhound, an advanced attachment for a mobile scanner that would look for residual heat patterns, scent particles in the air, and other advanced techniques to find a target.

She now held the device before her, swinging the Empire technology in a slow circle as she walked around the edge of the landing zone. "Numerous tracks. These aliens aren't worried about stealth." After a few more paces she crouched and scanned an area of rocks. "On the

other hand no sign of the Terrans."

Gin nodded, expecting as much. He knew well trained Earth citizens could remain undetected in their local environment. "Let's choose an alien predator and follow it."

Clover continued her circuit, then stepped deeper in the jungle as the pace of the Bloodhound's beeping increased. "This looks like a good lead, sir."

"Very well," Gin said, taking a look around the landing zone one last time. "Let's get going."

The path lead west, and soon the obvious trample marks and unsettled dust disappeared. Clover was grateful for the Bloodhound then, as the alien target became more and more invisible the further they went.

Gin was pleased to see familiar, friendly aliens, like the furry tree climbing creature with the long eye stalk. The chatter of bugs and light squawks in the distance had returned with the new day.

"Still detecting agitated mud two centimeters below the surface, sir," Clover nodded her head in the direction they were walking. "Still west."

"Excellent work. Let's keep on him."

They were three hours from the shuttle when the trail heated up again. Gin's first indication was the Bloodhound's change in pitch, the second was Clover dropping to a knee to inspect the ground. "The tracks are back, sir." She was slightly confused as the alien seemed to have stopped working to hide the trail.

"I see them," he said, stooping beside the quartermaster.

They scuttled forward, still crouched, easily following the marks left by the alien. The footprint appeared to have many vertical toes that dug into the ground like a pole. Just as they were about to stand and continue the hunt the tracks ran into a tree.

Clover was back on the Bloodhound, sweeping the device to either side of the tree to see where the alien had gone. Her brow furrowed and Clover twisted two dials. Gin saw the Bloodhound screen change to infrared, then sonar.

"The tracks dead end here," she said, pointing to the tree. She held the scanner over her head.

"This doesn't make any sense. No readings up the tree, so the alien probably didn't climb it, sir."

"Hmm," Gin started, but abandoned the thought. Instead he sat and leaned against the tree, trying to visualize the alien shambling through the jungle. Clover stood and calibrated the Bloodhound for a few more minutes, but without further success. Finally she sat down too, resigned.

At first the Captain thought he imagined the stirring against his back. When the tree dug into his back a second time he sat bolt upright and turned on the bark.

"What is it?" Clover asked, also rising.

Gin said nothing. Instead he slowly reached towards the tree, resting his hand against the rough surface. A chunk of bark vibrated from movement deep in the wood.

"It moved!" Gin said, snapping his hand back. He knew better than to stay close to an unknown.

Clover slung the Bloodhound and put her own hand against the tree. Her quick retraction was all the confirmation Gin needed.

"Open it up," he ordered, motioning to the particle scalpel still on the quartermaster's belt.

Responding quickly Clover fired up the tool and sliced a long vertical line down the center of

the trunk. Both Solonians were uncertain what they would find, but Gin figured he wouldn't like the result.

The tree lurched and creaked as the line split open. With a great sucking sound a curled form dropped from the interior. In reaction both Solonians jumped back and aimed their rifles. Gin had to steady himself and force himself to remove his finger from the laser rifle trigger.

On the ground the form didn't move. The shape had a pair of legs and arms, the latter being broad and powerful. Long talons terminated each arm, and a row of splintered teeth hung in its gaping mouth.

The most striking feature of the form was its skin. Instead of flesh, fur, or carapace the creature was layered in tough bark. Its hide looked exactly like the tree it had fallen from. The claws and teeth were just long thorns. The entirety of the creature seemed to be fully organic and flora based. Gin noticed the color of the leafy branches on top of the creature's head matched the tree.

"What is this thing?" Gin said, trying to hide his disgust at the ichor and sap covered creature. Clover stepped around the prone form and looked closely at the tree. The scalpel gash had exposed a complex system of pulsing tubes and veins, almost like a deep sleep chamber.

"This must be one of the aliens we saw?" Clover scrunched her nose, confused.

Gin pondered the idea, and took a second look at the creature. "They must hibernate inside the trees during the day, and come out at night?" Everything Gin said was a loose hypothesis, but he continued speaking, "Maybe the trees can't even grow without this alien thing inside, which is why the jungle ceased at night?"

"Right, sir, some kind of symbiotic relationship." The Captain nodded and Clover continued, "Maybe their teeth, er, thorns," Clover corrected, glancing at the alien, "aren't for attack. They might just be a defense mechanism, and they aren't actually carnivorous?"

"Potentially," Gin said, still uncertain if he considered the tree alien to be passive or harmless.

"We don't have the tools on board the Crusader to diagnose this alien further. We could try to tie it up and launch back to the Klondike?"

Clover tried her comm again, without success. "Do you think this alien could be restrained, sir?" Her voice wavered with doubt as she looked over the sturdy arms and coarse bark.

"You're probably right, Clover. We do have bigger concerns at the moment." The pair lapsed into silence, still overwhelmed by the prone alien and hewed tree.

"May I suggest we just call them Treeums instead of 'alien thing', sir?" Clover offered, preferring to have a name for any unknown entity. From a Solonian point of view a name helped empathize and more importantly understand aliens.

"Very well, Clover. Treeum it is," Gin nodded and continued, "Let's open another tree, in case this was just an anomaly. If we find another Treeum, we can be assured to have easy access to a specimen when we get in touch with the Klondike."

"Understood, sir," Clover replied, hustling over to the nearest jungle tree. Her particle scalpel worked quickly and accurately, and soon another of the trees was split open. As before a Treeum tumbled out, unmoving and yet menacing.

Gin stomached his disgust and said, "If the aliens encircling the Crusader last night truly were Treeums, it would explain their staggered exit."

Clover interrupted, "Of course, closer Treeums would leave last, since they didn't have to walk as far. But what about the Terrans, sir?"

"Perhaps they have a second tier of symbiotic living. The Treeums shepherd the jungle

vegetation, and the Terrans manage the Treeums," Gin guessed, then looked up at the sun. "Either way, we need to start heading back to the shuttle." Their trail had lead them almost three hours away from the Crusader. "It'll almost be dark when we get back."

The second night was better. The Solonians quickened their return pace and reached the shuttle with half an hour of sunlight to spare. As expected new growth covered the Crusader, including the jungle tree that blocked the entrance.

Before Clover could work on the trunk with her particle scalpel Gin said, "Let's cut it open first. See if a Treeum is inside."

Nodding, the quartermaster started the scalpel and performed a routine vertical cut down the center of the tree. With the same sucking sound a Treeum dropped from the wound. Unlike the previous two Treeums this alien was smaller in stature and appeared younger and less developed. "Just like the host tree," Gin nodded. "Freshly sprouted and still growing." Clover stayed by the ramp and didn't say anything. "Cut it down and let's get inside."

They had fifteen minutes before the sun set. Fifteen minutes of peace inside the Crusader. The interior atmosphere regenerated in five minutes, so they powered down their AES and tried the comms again. The Klondike and remaining crew were still unresponsive.

"Blast shield up," Gin said, deploying the armored plates.

The jungle transformed again as the sun set. And as expected the alien signals returned, filtering in one at a time until another fifty blips were detected.

Gin hovered his finger over the button for the main Crusader lamps. "Let's confirm they're Treeums," he said, pressing the button.

Bright light filled the landing zone. The lamps were meant for illuminating asteroid mining operations or deep sea dives, and the nocturnal aliens instinctively shied from the glow. Gin worked the cockpit console to capture several digital images, as well as zoom and enhance the exterior camera screen.

Long claws hung slack and leafy hairs, for lack of a better word, swayed in the breeze. Bark skin twisted and flexed like knots of muscle. The hunched forms definitely matched the Treeums they had seen earlier.

"Any sign of the Terrans?" Gin asked, peering into the scanner.

"Negative, sir. Wait! I see two rolling forms outside the lamps," Clover said, focusing her camera on the quick footed Terrans.

"I see them. More must be coming."

"Should we do anything, sir?"

"Negative, not tonight." He powered down the exterior lamps to conserve energy. "Not until we've found where the Terrans go during the day," Gin said patiently, knowing they had plenty of supplies and a nigh impenetrable castle of trilobium. "Alright, you take first watch Clover," Gin ordered, then leaned his chair back. "Catch you in ten."

"Roger, sir," Clover replied, edging forward to focus on her scanner.

Clover woke Gin up after her uneventful ten hour shift. The ring of aliens had reformed and stayed the same distance from the ship. All nine Terrans were present, but continued to hide behind the wall of Treeums.

"Before you go," Gin said, "Let's try talking to the Terrans."

The quartermaster stopped halfway through a yawn and shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"Probably a good idea, sir."

Gin cleared his throat and activated the external speaker. "Occupants of Drofo, we mean you no harm. We wish to speak peacefully of trade and mutual prosperity." Gin wasn't sure if the words would get through to the Terrans, or if he was using the best approach.

The jumping forms started to holler like the start of the previous night. There was also a brief exchange of words, but not in Earth Common. Gin nodded to Clover who pressed the galactic translator.

As soon as the device was running the speaking stopped and the hooting increased. The Captain wasn't sure if the Terrans knew they were being eavesdropped on. Regardless, no intelligible reply seemed to be forthcoming, so he shut off the speaker.

"Well, it was worth a try. See you in the morning, Clover."

She nodded and leaned her chair back and fell quickly asleep, already starting to become familiarized with the mass of life forms outside.

The night ended the same as the first, with the Treeums and Terrans filtering away as the sun rose. Gin tried to see which direction the Terrans went, but they were masters of the jungle environment and disappeared like ghosts at the edge of the landing zone.

The Captain ate his morning meal thinking of a very specific goal for the day. The Solonians didn't talk, but Clover could see by the glimmer in his eye that they would be exhausted by the third night.

"We need to get the Terrans on their own," Gin said as they walked around the landing zone, using the Bloodhound to search for tracks. "If we can capture one using non-lethal methods we might be able to communicate."

"They are just mocking us each night with their howling. Some face to face time would be useful, sir." She was splitting her attention between the Bloodhound's interface and the conversation.

"I agree. We certainly aren't making forward progress, and the lack of comms is starting to worry me."

"Likewise, sir," Clover said as the Bloodhound beeped. "More Treeum signs, but still no Terran tracks."

"Then let's proceed with my plan for the day."

"What do you suggest, sir?"

"We get rid of the ring of Treeums, so it's just our ship and the Terrans," Gin stated.

Clover considered the idea, "So we fire on the Treeums as they approach?"

"No, nothing so crude." Gin wiped sweat from his neck. "So far it seems like a steady fifty aliens show up every night. So we simply clear the jungle within easy walking distance of here."

Clover nodded, "Ah, kill them while they hibernate?"

"Exactly." Gin beamed at his plan, "We can use the termite for clumps of trees and particle scalpels for the rest." As with their actions on Angess, the loyal Solonian didn't consider the Treeums anything but a burden and barrier to the rich resources of Drofo.

The Solonians loaded heavy packs with explosives, and set about the grim duty of implementing their scorched earth policy.

After the first two hours they had destroyed over one hundred Treeums. The density of the jungle made the task tedious. Gin felt that for every tree they gutted or blew up, they turned

around and another corpse of five was found.

By midday the landing zone had been extended another five meters in each direction. Both Solonians were drenched in sweat from the hot scalpels and constant jogging to safety after planting termite.

"We're looking good, sir," Clover assessed as she glanced at the sun overhead. "The Treeums will definitely have to come from far away if they want to support the Terrans."

Gin simply nodded and continued working.

By dusk the landing zone had nearly tripled in size. At least a thousand Treeums were torn from their sleeping chambers or blasted to pieces in the six hours of daylight.

The Captain wiped dirt from his hand and smiled at Clover. "Good work, Clover. We definitely made a dent in their numbers."

"Now to see how it pays off," Clover said, tired but interested to meet the Terrans.

Gin started the third night with his routine attempt to reach the Klondike. The comms were still silent though, and the Captain started to worry they'd have to take off and orbit the planet looking for the starship.

The Solonians huddled around the scanner, waiting for the first telltale blip of a Treeum. But the device remained quiet and empty. Gin leaned over and said, "So far so good." His voice was hushed with expectation.

An hour after dark the first signal was received. A lone Terran strode through the ruined trees, finally walking at an even enough pace for the Prospectors to get a clear look at him. This time Gin was ready. The translator was already activated, and the lamps of the Crusader were dimmed to not frighten the populous.

The man appeared similar to the Solonians and wasn't drastically modified or re-engineered in any way. He had two arms and two legs, a pair of dark eyes squinting in anger, and a cold mouth turned down. The Terran's garb was crude but lightweight, appearing to be made mostly of leathers and jungle wood. He carried a simple spear with a glinting, triangular head. Grinning with excitement the Solonians watched him stop ten meters in front of the Crusader. "This is it," Gin whispered. "He looks like he wants to speak."

The Terran raised his spear overhead and spoke in the same chattering Drofo language they had hear snippets of before. The translator beeped and displayed various text as it tried to decipher the words. Finally a common linguistic strain could be found, and broken Earth Common was repeated by an electronic computer voice.

"...Have destroyed us. Your technology have destroyed us. You will be destroyed."

Clover couldn't resist a jest, seeing the lone spearman standing before an armed shuttle. "Well that doesn't sound hopeful, sir."

"Quiet, quartermaster," Gin hissed, and then routed the translator through the external speaker so the Terran could understand him.

"Now we can speak as a group." The translator struggled with the language, but Gin was sure the majority of his message got across. Electronically chirping the voice continued, "Without the aliens we can speak. We are of same, each from Earth."

"Not the same!" The man was shouting now, "Your life technology, we repent technology."

"Repent technology? Must be a translation error," Gin figured, twisting a dial on the translator.

"Sounds like they live primitively by choice?" Clover said to herself, confused at such a barbaric lifestyle choice.

"Whatever their choice, I don't think they are in any position to barter the resources of Drofo," Gin solemnly said, unhappy with the path before him. Destroying aliens to draw out Terrans was something he could stomach. Needlessly killing colonists was harder, especially those that looked so much like Solonians.

Clover understood the Captain's resigned tone and reached for the scattergun trigger. Before she could fire there was a grinding noise at the trilobium ramp.

"What the-" was all the Captain managed before the entrance started to open.

The quartermaster narrowed her eyes and squeezed the trigger. The Terran disappeared in a hail of flechettes, the man dropping to the ground in agony as the scattergun tore into him. Before the weapon had finished firing Clover was spinning to the rifle rack. She grabbed the nearest laser repeater and crouched against a cargo net. Bulky foodstuffs and supplies dug into her shoulder as she levelled the rifle at the doorway.

After closing the cockpit blast shields Gin was beside her a second later, his own rifle covering the entrance. Both Solonians had hastily activated their AES, both for survival against the jungle microbes and to deflect blows with the personal shield.

"We need to bottleneck them with corpses, sir," Clover calculated, knowing they could easily be overwhelmed by sheer numbers inside the cramped shuttle.

Gin nodded and swallowed grimly as the ramp continued to lower. He didn't have time to consider how the Terrans had defeated the retinal lock, or if all eight survivors were eagerly waiting to tear apart the Solonians.

When the trilobium ramp was halfway open the Terrans spilled in. Javelins, thorn darts, and twirling hatchets bombarded the sheltered Solonians. Clover fired twice before ducking behind the cargo nets, but she knew a charge was close behind the incoming barrage.

Gin was deeper behind cover already, so he managed five shots before a male Terran closed the gap of the cargo bay. The attacker yelled with bloodlust and swung his spear in a double handed, overhead arc, aimed directly for Gin's skull.

Clover shot him twice in the back. The first laser bolt pierced the Terran's spine and the second caught him in the neck. The spearman dropped to the ground midswing, dead.

Gin didn't have time to thank the quartermaster for another two Terrans had worked their way through the cargo nets. The female was carrying a vine net barbed with thorns, and the male worked a pair of bone daggers.

The Captain managed to lift his rifle to block the first dagger, but the second slipped under the repeater and dove straight for Gin's heart. Thankfully his AES shield slowed the blow. Instead of killing the Captain instantly the dagger managed to stab half a centimeter into his skin before bouncing off his ribs.

Roaring his own battle cry Gin grabbed the attacker's hands and lifted the knives upwards, hoping to disarm the opponent. Now that he could see the Terrans up close he realized they were hideous. Their bodies may resemble Solonians, but their faces were warped and pitted from years of inbreeding.

While Gin fended the male off, Clover had more success against her opponent. Clearly used to fighting in the open jungle and not an enclosed shuttle, the Terran had trouble leveraging her net. On her first back swing the barbs caught the cargo net and nearly disarmed the female. Clover capitalized on the slip and smashed the butt of her laser rifle into the Terran's stomach. The attacker doubled over, wheezing, but rolled backwards before Clover could reach her head for a deathblow.

The Terran quickly adapted and wrapped the vines around her wrists and hands, using the net like a pair of chain gauntlets. She swung wildly at Clover, who was cornered by the angle of the cockpit. But the quartermaster remained calm and collected, and once the Terran's fury had played out Clover drew a thin knife and went on the offensive.

With a few deft flicks of her wrist Clover had slashed the vine net and most of the Terran's hand to ribbons. A severe fifth stab and sixth thrust ended the attacker's life.

Meanwhile Gin realized how physically outmatched he was against the male attacker. The jungle Terran had been born and bred in harsher conditions than the Captain, and holding his arms was like holding two bars of iron.

Instead of trying to beat the Terran in a test of strength, Gin used his greater knowledge of the Crusader. While struggling to keep the knives at bay he ordered, "Computer, activate extinguisher three!"

The shuttle responded by sending a great gout of fire retardant down from the ceiling. The foam blinded and distracted the Terran long enough for Gin to raise his repeater and unload three shots into the man's stomach.

Both Solonians edged around the cargo nets expecting to meet a tide of Terrans. But instead they saw five corpses sprawled in a heap. With the scattergun kill earlier that meant only three of the colonists remained.

Suspecting a trap to be waiting outside the shuttle, Clover and Gin took a moment to collect themselves. Their AES features partially prepared them for a chase through the jungle, so they settled for grabbing spare microcells and an extra lamp each. Having just survived a vicious melee Clover also traded her thin boot knife for a heatblade. The weapon was exquisite, expensive, and had cost Clover most of her savings before shipping out. The trilobium sword had a boiling alloy edge, which meant it could sever any material she'd encountered.

While Clover armed herself, Gin turned and tipped his head into the cockpit to quickly check the scanner to see if there were any immediate dangers. The device was silent though, so he ducked back and said to Clover, "Let's get out there and find the rest of the Terrans."

She nodded and checked the charge on her repeater. Then they moved to the back of the Crusader and swung their rifles out to cover the wide landing zone. Harmless flying aliens drifted overhead, chirping like Earth bats to support their method of sight.

The clearing was empty. Opposite the Crusader a pair of smoldering trees cast a dim glow. Keeping his rifle steady, Gin whispered, "How's the Bloodhound?"

"Livid," Clover replied, twisting the volume down to stop the loud beeping from compromising their position. "The tracks are fresh enough that I'm still getting heat paths, sir."

"Perfect. Lead on, I've got you covered." Gin said, motioning to the dark jungle with his shoulder.

Still expecting an ambush Clover brought her rifle to bear as she walked down the trilobium ramp. "The tracks lead south." She lowered the Bloodhound to the ground and performed a closer scan. "Three sets, sir."

Creeping forward slowly the Solonians advanced from the safety of the clear landing zone and headed into the foreboding jungle. During the day the massive, brightly colored trees were appealing and somewhat restful. But with twenty hours of darkness ahead the angles became sharper and more menacing.

The pair levelled their weapons in the direction of any alien screech or scratch, and after an hour of marching were weary from the tension. "Tracks still look good," Clover started,

breaking the silence. "The Hound calculates twenty or thirty minutes ahead of us."

"Any idea on their pace?"

"Looks like a flat out run, sir."

Gin nodded and continued his steady, safe advance. After ten minutes covering as many meters, the Captain turned on Clover and hissed, "What is it? I can see you fidgeting."

"Sorry, sir, it's just that..."

Gin raised his eyebrows to prompt the quartermaster to continue.

Clover cleared her throat and calmly said, "We won't catch them at this pace."

Lowering his rifle Gin stood from his ready pose, "So you want to go charging after them? Right into a trap?"

"Sir, we have protective shields and our environmental force fields. We just countered their ambush and killed five Terrans. They are probably running scared, and will bunker down and hide out."

Gin tightened his mouth but said nothing.

"If we don't catch them tonight, I don't think we'll see them again," Clover shook her head, "Sir."

For a moment anger flashed in Gin's mind, but he realized Clover was correct. In the deepest pit of his stomach Gin knew he was partially afraid of the Terrans. Even without their superior numbers and barely any technology, the colonists had been aggressive, lightning fast, incredibly strong, and were extremely comfortable in their jungle environment.

Gin mentally faced the doubts, reminded himself that he was a Prospector of the Empire, and tightened the grip on his repeater. "You're right, Clover. I don't know what got into me." The Captain raised his chin and peered into the expansive jungle with renewed determination. With a final check of his AES Gin charged forward, the powerful gravity cushions boosting each long stride. He could hear Clover's quick breaths as she matched his pace a meter to the right.

After ten minutes of running Clover raised the Bloodhound, checked the readout, and between breaths said, "Tracks are heating up. Twelve minutes old."

Gin spared a nod but maintained his focus on the trail. Even with the bouncing light cast from their lamps the jungle was deadly. Jutting roots, hanging barbed vines, and all manner of unknown dangers awaited them as they weaved through the trees.

The jungle blurred by, and Gin survived on instinct. His rifle became an extension of his body and mind, and his heightened senses tracked and deciphered every passing noise. He heard the drifting current of the river long before they crested a knoll and saw the expansive body of bromine.

"Tracks?" He said, savoring the opportunity to catch his breath.

Clover worked at settling her heart rate while she scanned the river with the Bloodhound. "I see tracks on the bank, some slight residual heat crossing the bromine," She zoomed the device in, "and a final set continuing south. The opposite tracks are three or four minutes old, max."

Gin felt his fear and uncertainty rise as he looked out across the amber river. He recalled the terrible Octok's lone black eye. Pitiless and edged with satisfaction as it pulled the rhino alien under. Then he visualized the gargantuan planet harvesting ships of the Empire settling onto Drofo, all from his good work.

Inspired, he turned the environmental shielding to maximum on his AES. Trusting his laser rifle to perform even when soaked in bromine, he slung the weapon over his back to focus on

swimming.

"After them," he ordered, sliding down the river bank and submerging his legs into the flowing bromine. His force field shuddered and glowed a fierce blue as the red river hit it. Trusting the AES, Gin continued to wade forward until the river was at his throat. Then he rhythmically pushed his arms through the liquid.

Clover was close behind him, paddling with one hand while lofting her repeater with the other. They were halfway across when disaster struck.

The initial warning was Clover yelling, "Shit, sir!". Gin could hear the rapid churning of liquid behind him. Then a sharp pain erupted along his shoulder, and he looked down to see a milky red tendril latched onto his skin. The AES force field, already pushed to the limit keeping the bromine from their skin, simply couldn't deflect the blow.

A bright laser bolt illuminated the Octok, but Clover's hasty one handed shot was wide. Before he could react Gin felt another three stinging bites as the maw tipped tendrils lashed across his body.

If he had time to think the Captain may have been paralyzed with fear. The Octok was a powerful, capable river predator while he was a land based Solonian far out of his element. But Gin didn't think. He just reacted.

Gin unsheathed his trusty tungsten knife and furiously stabbed towards the source of the tentacles. The bromine slowed his strikes, and a great splashing maelstrom erupted around him as the knife struck home. The maws continued to tear at his skin in reaction, and he could feel the Octok constricting him closer.

Safely away from the swirling melee Clover tried to find an opening to hit the Octok with her repeater. The splashing bromine made her shots risky, so the quartermaster settled for swimming closer and slamming the butt of her rifle into the quivering Octok.

His knife strikes slowed as the Octok's maws took their toll and the adrenaline drained from his veins. After a pair of feeble strokes Gin felt himself drifting under the surface of the bromine.

Ignoring the thumping drum of Clover's smashing the Octok landed another five maws across Gin's body. Now he was doing more than drifting under, he was actively being pulled by the monstrous alien.

The force field crackling against his face as the bromine reached his head spurred a second dose of adrenaline in the Captain. In desperation he changed tactics from stabbing the body to slashing the tentacles. The tungsten blade bit deeply into two of the agonizing tendrils, which severed cleanly and dirtied the river with Octok blood.

Gin felt relief from the jagged teeth as three more tentacles unlatched from his body. The Octok was trying to retreat from the savage assault. Although he was bleeding from numerous wounds and gasping for air, Gin managed to bitterly yell, "No you don't," before renewing his deadly slashing.

The Captain caught a pair of tendrils as the Octok started to swim upstream, tearing them in half. Now that her line of fire was clear Clover swung her rifle around and blasted the retreating form, peppering the Octok with half a dozen laser burns.

Meanwhile Gin focused on reaching the far shore, knowing that his wounds needed to be treated immediately before he bled out or dire infection set in. Lingering numbness was starting to set into his limbs when Gin pulled himself up on the soft mud. Breathing heavily Gin collapsed into the turf as bromine streamed off his force field.

Splashing behind him caused Gin to reflexively bolt upright. But the noise was Clover wading to shore, the tip of her laser rifle charred from firing. She swung the weapon up, and Gin thought she had gone mad.

Then Clover held the trigger and raked the jungle in front of them. From the shadow of the trees two bleeding forms tumbled forth, dead from multiple laser wounds. Gin squinted through his pain and saw the two bodies were Terrans. One colonist left, he mentally marked. He was starting to become delirious and woozy from the pain and blood loss, so Gin didn't think too heavily on how Clover knew the Terrans were there, or whether the last survivor was lying in wait for them.

Clover however was frantic with concern. After the battle on the shuttle, in the river, and the rapid firing into the jungle she needed to reload. Keeping her refreshed rifle trained on the woods she turned the Bloodhound volume up and set the device on the ground. Then she crouched beside Gin, now unconscious, and tried to assess his wounds.

"Clover to Klondike, come in." Oppressive silence when she clicked the comm to receive. Trying again she whispered, "Jorgan, are you there?" Still no answer, which left the quartermaster alone with a nearly dead Captain and a fierce Terran stalking them.

Throughout the fight nine of the maws had connected. Gin had torn skin and exposed muscle across his entire chest and upper body. Clover was overwhelmed on where to start, and didn't have nearly enough medical supplies to handle the wounds. She settled for unwinding the slings from their weapons and tying crude tourniquets across the largest wounds.

Then the Bloodhound beeped, and all concerns of healing fled from her mind. Clover mentally wove through well worn pathways in her brain to a state of tense readiness that training had opened and experience had refined.

She heard a branch snap to her right flank, so she naturally swung the laser rifle in that direction. But two forms burst from the woods on the opposite side. A howling Terran lead a groaning Treeum in a charge down the bank.

With its tough bark skin, razor sharp fangs, and nasty claws, Clover assessed the Treeum as a greater threat. She at least understood and had fought the unmodified Terrans in hand to hand before. In a flash she twisted and dropped backwards, firing a flurry of bright shots at the trailing Treeum.

The alien stumbled and fell against the onslaught. Then the Terran was upon the quartermaster. From her prone position, legs out, she caught the man full in the chest and flipped him over her head.

Sailing past her the Terran splashed into the river. Both combatants snapped to their feet, the Terran brandishing a curved sickle while Clover drew her heatblade. The blazing sword illuminated a circle in front of her, and Clover instantly felt more confident against the lone Terran. The Drofo colonists may have foregone technology, but Clover held no inhibitions about using the best the Empire had against them.

The man was clearly intimidated, both by the glowing weapon and the fierce determination on the face of its wielder. He uttered a rapid sentence in his guttural language, and Clover reached back to turn on her AES recorder to analyze any other words back at the shuttle.

Trying to prompt the Terran to talk, she said, "It doesn't have to end like this." Doubting the Terrain could understand Earth Common, Clover still continued, "We are both humans, and we can work this out peacefully."

Yelling and hollering in his own language, the Terran grew red in the face as he spoke. Clearly

he felt passionately about whatever topic he was trying to convey.

Seeing his anger peak and fall, Clover lowered her heatblade slightly. But the man exploited her show of weakness and sprung forward, sickle cutting a sharp path towards her chest. Clover snapped her heatblade up, tilting it slightly so the boiling edge met the sickle. Whatever barbaric material the Terran weapon was forged from didn't compare to the heated alloy, and the sickle shattered in a cloud of smoke.

The Terran rattled off another sentence, lowered his destroyed weapon, and fell to his knees. Taking the slumped posture as a sign of surrender, Clover edged her heatblade down. The quartermaster tried to think of what she could use to bind the prisoner.

Then the Terran looked up at her, his ugly, twisted face bubbling with anger. He spit one Earth Common word at her, probably an insult passed down from inbred father to inbred son. But the malice and hatred behind the word surprised Clover. "Dog!"

Staring into that horrible face, Clover knew the Drofo colonists would never surrender, never bow to the Solonian Empire. In a way she admired that quality and stubbornness. But the Empire had no place for defiance, not with so many colonies to explore and trade with.

In a flash the heatblade was through the Terran's chest. He didn't scream as the liquid alloy seared his skin and pierced his heart. Instead the Drofo colonist dropped backwards, his dead body sliding off the steaming blade.

Clover jumped in surprise as her comm crackled to life. "Ground crew can you hear us? This is the Klondike with comm attempt five thirty two."

"Jorgan?" Clover said in surprise, fumbling with her comm. "We're here. You can hear us? We're here!"

Excited cheers echoed back at her, "So good to hear your voice. We were starting to calculate fuel usage for landing, just to-"

Kurt also spoke, flustered with enthusiasm, "We thought you two were gone for sure."

"The Captain nearly is gone," Clover interrupted, "One of those Octok things snagged him pretty badly. I'm going to try to patch up his wounds and get him back to the shuttle. We'll blast off as soon as possible, so have that medical station ready," she rapidly reported.

Then the quartermaster tore off strips of cloth from the fallen Terran, desperate for more material to wrap Gin's bleeding wounds. As she ripped a piece from the Terran's quilted vest she found a strange silver circle tucked into the man's trousers. The reflective surface looked unnatural compared to the soft green and brown tones that composed the rest of the colonist's color palette.

She pocketed the circle, not having the slightest second to spare to figure out the mystery. Clover quickly dug inside the two laser rifles, snapping key wires and components to disable the weapons. The run back to the shuttle would be tough enough without two heavy rifles weighing her down, and she certainly didn't want to leave working Empire technology lying around.

Then she tightened Gin's makeshift bandages one last time and shouldered the unconscious man. Gritting her teeth Clover starting into the flowing bromine. Clover made the treacherous crossing by sheer force of will. Between the Bloodhound, heatblade, AES packs, and Gin's limp body she wouldn't have thought the trek possible.

But the jungle flew by as she jogged up the bank and veered towards the Crusader. The night sounds continued around her, but Clover focused solely on her breathing. Stress, pain, and

exhaustion nagged and throbbed across her body, trying to crush her will to continue. But the quartermaster pushed doubt and physical discomfort aside and focused on getting one foot ahead of the other.

Clover couldn't tell how long she ran, or how far. By the end she could barely remember her own name. Drenched in sweat and shaking with fatigue she tripped and fell when she reached the edge of the clearing.

While in a tangle of limbs on the ground the quartermaster vomited, but then she forced her exhausted body to stand for one final push. Lifting Gin over her shoulder Clover set a shaky pace to the back of the shuttle.

In their haste to give chase the trilobium ramp had remained open, which was a blessing to Clover. She stumbled into the vessel, painfully slamming her leg into a cargo net in her delirious walk to the cockpit.

Clover dropped the Captain and her heavy technology, slammed the button to close the ramp, and nearly blacked out when she sat down in the pilot seat. Shaking her head, Clover kept telling herself she only had a few more tasks to do. She kept trying to trick her body and push it a little bit further.

"Taking off," she slurred into the comm. Clover skipped the necessary safety checks and set right to leaning on the throttle. The Crusader thrummed to life, powerful atmospheric engines clearing a wake of jungle behind the ship.

Although she didn't remember the next dozen button presses and dial twists, the shuttle was off the ground in seconds. Clover veered up and away from the horrible, dark jungle of Drofo. The Crusader shuddered as the vessel started to break atmosphere, and Clover felt like her arms were going to break from exhaustion.

Then the peaceful weightlessness of space settled on the shuttle. Gravity generators fired to life seconds later, painfully pressing down on Clover's tired body. Her scanner picked up the orbiting form of the Klondike, and she aimed directly for the starship.

Clover drifted from weariness during the final approach, but was rudely awoken by beeping alarms once she was close enough to dock. Jorgan and Kurt were giving instructions over the comm, but Clover's mind was beyond registering anything but the base, mechanical instincts necessary to land the shuttle. Once the final docking clamp settled on the Crusader, she collapsed in her seat, fast asleep.

Gin awoke to the glow of an overhead light. Crisp illumination and calming white walls suggested the medical station. For a moment the Captain thought maybe he was hallucinating while digesting inside the Octok.

Then he caught snippets of Jorgan's whispered words, "...severe wounds, but I...is definitely...amputate..."

Gin heard amputation and immediately performed a mental inventory of his limbs. Except he couldn't move his limbs. The Captain wanted to scream in anguish, but he settled for a dignified, "My legs..."

Jorgan was instantly at his side, calming and soothing the Captain, "Don't worry, sir, I've given you a load of anaesthesia. Your legs are fine, your arms are good too."

"But...amputate?" Gin struggled to say.

"I was just telling Kurt I'm definitely happy we didn't have to resort to amputating anything. Don't worry, you're good. You're whole," Jorgan pulled up a medical chart beside the table.

"Clover is here too, she's resting. She had a series of alien talons wedged in her calf."  
Gin nodded calmly and drifted back to sleep.

When Gin opened his eyes next thick vegetation was over his face. The colorful red and pink leaves of Drofo greeted him. Then the Captain knew he had imagined Jorgan and the medical station.

Except the Captain could feel the cold plastic of the operating table below him. When he craned his neck to peer at his surroundings Gin saw all the tools and beeping scanners of medical station on board the Klondike.

"Mentally gone at last," Gin thought. But the Solonian didn't feel any different, and certainly not less sane.

To try to figure out what was real and what was feverish imagination, Gin sat up and examined himself. He was in a teal operating gown, and numerous bandages covered his arms and torso. Distant, throbbing pain signalled unhealed wounds were fresh under the bandages. He heard an angry curse from the spine above. The voice was definitely Jorgan or Kurt.

"Dammit! I thought the hatch was sealed!"

"Captain, can you hear us?" Kurt cupped his hands and yelled down to Gin. "Are you okay in there?"

"What...I...what is going on?" Gin decided he really was in the medical station, and there really were Drofo trees all around him. "Report!"

"Sir, the Crusader brought back a handful of parasitic vegetation variants," Jorgan replied.

"We're still in orbit over Drofo, one day since you first awoke."

"Cap'n, we woke up this morning to a jungle on board. These plants have an insane rate of growth and-"

"We need to kill them," Gin interjected, nervous and angry at the same time. "We need to burn and destroy them all."

The Captain could imagine Jorgan's confused face when he replied, "But sir, why?"

Ignoring the question Gin asked, "What time is it?" The pair of crew above the medical station didn't answer fast enough, so Gin ordered, "Computer, time on Drofo?"

"Unable to perform chrono reading," The computer chimed.

"Is it sunset?" Gin frantically lifted himself from the operating table, "Is it dark?"

The computer determined an answer and calmly replied, "Yes, the local star has set on the Drofo landing zo-"

"We're too late!" The Captain frantically scurried up ladder #2, running into Jorgan and Kurt at the top. The entire spine was humid and green from vines, trees, and small vegetation growing everywhere.

"Get to the cockpit," Gin hastily ordered. Confused, but trusting their Captain, the Solonians turned to run through the jungle to ladder #5. "No, wait, belay that order. Where is Clover?" Before the doctor or engineer could answer the nearest jungle tree split opened. A blast of warm air erupted from the opening, and the Solonians recoiled from the pulsing veins and tubes inside the tree.

A fresh Treeum crawled from the tree, the dark bark skin and jagged claws all too familiar to Gin.

Kurt reacted first. The engineer snapped a massive red handled wrench from his belt and smashed the alien across the face. The force of the blow twisted the Treeums head entirely

around, dropping the Drofo native.

"What are those, sir?" Jorgan asked calmly, his interest in new alien species tempering his fear. "A gift from Drofo," Gin kicked the slumped corpse. "Is Clover's room sealed?"

"No," Jorgan said.

"Yes," Kurt retorted.

"Dammit you two, I don't have time," Gin snapped. "Which is it?"

Kurt glared at Jorgan and reiterated, "Yes, sir. I sealed the hatch myself."

"Like the medical station?" Gin mumbled, shoving past the two crew members. "We'll hold at the armory," he ordered.

The spine echoed with a series of popping sounds, groans, and the cracking sound of bark against metal. They had to cross the wide roof of the core room before getting to the armory ladder. Almost twenty meters of jungle, bristling and overpopulated with angry, disoriented Treeums.

"Kurt, got anything else in that belt?"

The engineer nodded and handed a zero-g welder to Gin, and a particle scalpel to Jorgan.

Then he stepped in front of the Captain. "Sir, let me take the lead." Kurt confidently hefted the wrench, and Gin leaned aside to let him through.

With a roar the Solonian charged the nearest Treeum. The alien was still struggling to stand after dropping from his tree nest, and Kurt capitalized on the disorientation. With a boom the wrench shattered the bark and leaf head in a spray of ichor.

Every swing of the heavy wrench dropped another Treeum. Any wounded that escaped a fatal blow were quickly finished off by Gin or Jorgan with their makeshift weapons. In half a minute they passed ladder #4 to the core.

Then a Treeum dragged Jorgan to the ground. The doctor had been trailing the pair, but hadn't checked behind him soon enough. As easy as shredding paper the long thorns of the Treeum's claws tore into Jorgan's leg. His skin parted and blood sprayed from the three long wounds.

The doctor screamed and dragged his particle scalpel across the Treeum's face. Recoiling from the energy the alien was too exposed to fully escape the attack. With perfect precision the scalpel cut a clean line through the Treeum's face. In a moment Gin was at Jorgan's side, using his welder to finish off the stunned and wounded Treeum.

"Come on, doc, I've got you." Gin said, lifting the bleeding man to his feet. Jorgan leaned heavily on the Captain's shoulders. Gin was determined to repay Jorgan for the many times the doctor had saved him.

Kurt looked back at the commotion, but turned quickly to block the Treeum in front of him.

With masterful twists of his wrench Kurt deflected blows, shielded his friends, and shattered aliens into pieces of firewood.

They reached the next ladder and Kurt covered the Captain while he struggled to lower Jorgan to the armory. Through teamwork they were able to safely get everyone down the ladder and into the room. As soon as Kurt was through they shut and locked the hatch above and checked the lock to Clover's room below.

Drofo trees had spread to the armory as well, and a dozen Treeums waited for them. But with a quick visit to the nearest weapon rack Kurt was able to upgrade his wrench to a laser pistol. Gin and Jorgan likewise armed themselves with the powerful blasters.

A missed shot could spell disaster if the laser pierced the hull, so they focused on taking shots they were absolutely certain of. Which meant the Treeums had to get dangerously close before

anyone would fire.

Still there was no contest between three trained and armed Prospectors against mindless, shambling aliens made of bark and thorns. In seconds the entire Treeum population of the armory was reduced to zero.

After killing the mobile aliens, the crew set to work destroying the tree nests. Using Kurt's tools they cut trunks, split trees, and destroyed any chance of the Drofo trees regrowing that night. Sweating from the higher temperature and struggling atmospheric generator, the Solonians slumped restfully around the armory. "So, Cap'n..." Kurt started the conversation.

Still recovering from his wounds and stressful excursion to Drofo, Gin was barely awake. But he straightened his posture and replied, "Right. Well, those are some of the aliens of Drofo. At the time we called them Treeums. We figured out they basically use the trees as homes or hibernation chambers."

"Nests," Kurt spit and frowned.

Gin continued, "The trees don't seem to grow without a Treeum in them. The aliens are nocturnal, which meant the trees only grew during the day when the Treeums are sleeping."

Jorgan piped up, "Makes sense. We see all kinds of symbiotic relationships like that."

"Save the science, doc," Kurt gruffly remarked. "And let me take a look at that leg."

"Anyway we didn't realize seeds had gotten on the shuttle," Gin shook his head, frustrated at their sloppy mistake. "And I guess we were in rough enough shape to skip the quarantine."

"I'd love to hear more about Drofo, sir." Jorgan grimaced through Kurt's rough patching of his leg.

Kurt rolled his eyes, "Sounds like a charming place, Cap'n. Surprised you didn't want to stay longer?"

"Cut the chatter," Gin said, standing and checking his own wounds. "We need to figure out our next steps. First," he pointed to the lower hatch, "I'll check on Clover. See if we can't wake her up so we're all in the same place."

"Okay, we have enough weapons and munitions to clear the ship of trees," Clover sternly said, not at all pleased about waking to the trees of Drofo again. "But they are clearly resilient." Everyone nodded, and Jorgan added, "And they grow like nothing I've seen. To gain five or six feet of height in less than six hours." He shook his head, yet again impressed by the mysteries they found.

"Sounds like we need a quarantine ship," Gin said, knowing the suggestion wouldn't be popular.

"Ah damn Cap'n, really? I think we can-"

"Kurt, enough." Gin glared at the engineer. He may handle a wrench well, but Kurt seemed to forget the chain of command far too often. "I get it, none of us like those ships. But we can't fly around with a chance of waking up to an army of Treeums."

"Very true, sir," Clover agreed, totally invested in any plan that permanently removed the Drofo infestation.

"Okay, sir, so we need to get someone to the core and someone to the cockpit," Kurt offered, trying to focus on the logistics of the plan. "That way we can activate the Miramachi Device for an FTL transmission."

"What's the nearest Empire base?" Gin asked, trying to wrack his memory. "Does anyone know?"

Jorgan scratched his chin, "Hmm, Inell 7 maybe?"

"They're too small though," Kurt argued, "I think Clene Minor is our best bet."

Gin looked at the faces around the room before confirming, "Okay, we try to get in touch with the starbase orbiting Clene Minor."

Intimately familiar with the medical starships, Jorgan said, "They could have a quarantine ship loaded and in Drofo orbit in eight hours."

"Okay, Clover you'll come with me to the cockpit to send the request." Gin turned to the engineer, "Kurt we'll escort you to the core along the way. Remember, load up for close combat." Everyone nodded, understanding the risks. "If we were worried about piercing the hull, I don't even want to think about hitting the Miramachi Device." Gin moved to the nearest weapon locker. "Oh, and Jorgan, just stay here and try to give that leg some rest."

"Understood, sir," Jorgan said, more than happy to avoid hand to hand combat with vicious aliens.

Clover was happy to put her heatblade to use against non-human targets, so she brought only that. Gin took a folding spear, knowing that in his recovering condition keeping some distance would be best. Kurt chose a hefty particle club, the flanged head laced with strips of particle energy to give the weapon the same devastating power as their scalpels. The engineer was familiar with the weight and feel of a club against the Treeums from his earlier usage of a wrench.

They worked up a sweat and suffered minor scratches taking back the core and cockpit, but overall the Solonians were able to smash and cut through the Treeums like ripe wheat.

Once settled into the pilot seat Gin opened a comm to the generator room, "Okay, Kurt are you set?"

"Just a second, sir," the engineer replied, tinkering with last minute settings of the Miramachi Device. Besides status reports and planetary reviews each Prospector ship tried to avoid calling home for assistance. Although the Solonian Empire didn't mind sending help, each Prospector felt a personal failing if they weren't self sufficient.

Gin had briefly considered trying to decontaminate the Klondike himself, but the risk was too high. A quarantine ship was designed for exactly their scenario. The towering, square starships would travel to any requested star system and swallow up smaller Prospector vessels. Once inside the quarantine ship, specially trained crews, manually programmed robots, and powerful chemicals would set to work on purifying the vessel.

The visit would also let the Captain skip his biannual resupply run to an Empire base. Being able to get a new set of laser rifles, check on the latest Empire technological advancements, and see friendly faces were all appealing.

"All good here, sir," Kurt communicated from the core.

"Message prepared on my end. Transferring to you," Gin said, pressing two buttons. His encoded missive went to the display unit in the core. Kurt would then be able to use the Miramachi Device to send the transmission to Clene Minor in under a second. The base was over seventeen hundred light years away.

The actual process was quite mysterious to Gin. Kurt had explained the faster than light communications network treated the transmissions like small ships. The same technology of the Miramachi Device that allowed ships to jump from star to star could be used to jump a message.

"Received it, sir. Sending in 3...2...1..." The ship shuddered slightly as the Miramachi Device activated. Behind glowing screens Kurt worked a set of buttons to send the message to Clene Minor.

Almost instantly a reply came back, which was displayed on screens in the core and cockpit.

"What do they say?" Clover asked, her back turned to Gin and the cockpit. The quartermaster was busily covering the spine in case any Treeums got reckless.

"Message received Captain Gin of the Klondike, permit..." he rolled his hands and skimmed the rest of the message, "We are scrambling a Class 5 Quarantine Starship, the Avicenna, to assist you. Estimated arrival is 460 minutes."

"Wow you see that Cap'n?" Kurt asked over the ship comm, "Class 5! Luxury accommodations."

"We could definitely use some rest after these last two planets," Gin replied, realizing how worn out and exhausted he felt.

"For now, everyone head back to the armory." Gin stretched his arms and rose from the pilot seat. "We've got a little under eight hours to go."

There was a distant flash as the Avicenna emerged from the Miramachi Device distortion. Gin was watching their approach on a mobile scanner in the armory. He switched open a system wide comm and hailed the vessel. "Avicenna, this is Captain Gin of the Klondike, do you read?"

"Good day, Captain. We read you. Avicenna on approach to third planet in the system."

The formality and tone of starships in close contact with the Solonian Empire was always refreshing to Gin. "Glad to hear it, Avicenna. We look forward to receiving you."

There was a moment of silence over the comm. "Your report said floral infestation. Confirm, Captain?"

"Confirmed. All interior areas are infected to some extent. The trees appear fast growing, and have a bipedal alien form that grows in parallel inside."

The calm voice continued, "Understood. Continuing approach. Avicenna out."

Soon the Avicenna thundered overhead, dwarfing the Prospector ship sixfold. The larger vessel was in a matching orbit over Drofo. Wide sliding doors opened on the bottom of the ship as the Avicenna lowered over the Klondike.

Inside the armory the crew didn't get to see the interior or hordes of busy robots scrambling around the hangar. They felt the Klondike shake as docking hooks were engaged. Then the Avicenna communications officer spoke over the comm, "Docking is complete, Klondike.

Preparing Scan Set 433, please stand by."

Gin had only called a quarantine ship one time, very early in his career. Back then the Klondike had set down on an arctic planet, and what looked like snow had turned out to be incredibly resistant bacteria.

He knew the scans would take some time. After that a squad of robots would open the spine and clear the ship of active threats, and also remove the crew for personal quarantine. Once the ship was safe Solonian "scrubbers" would embark and set to work decontaminating the rest.

The requested Scan Set 433 took half an hour to finish. By the end the entire Klondike crew were anxious to get out of the armory and get their starship back to normal. The calm Avicenna voice notified them of the next step. "Artificial squad deploying. Eight in number. We detect you in the armory compartment. Please stand by."

Gin rose to his feet when he heard tapping at the spine door. "Roger, Avicenna. I am opening

the entrance bulwark."

"Negative, Klondike. Say again, negative." The tone never varied, even when overriding Gin's orders. "We will handle the entry."

The tapping noise turned into a grinding sound as the entrance was cut open. "Ridiculous," Gin muttered under his breath. On the other hand he could understand the concern for safety. Plus he had volunteered for this process by calling the quarantine ship in the first place.

"Captain, the artificial squad is on board. Estimated time to clear Drofo life forms is six minutes."

Kurt scoffed and whispered to Clover, "We could do it in three." In reply she nudged him with her elbow.

After the squad cleared the few surviving Treeums in engineering and the other sections they visited the crew in the armory. The last Empire robots Gin had seen were crude exoskeletons, mainly designed for heavy lifting and other simple tasks. The new quarantine models were quite the opposite.

The top hatch to the armory was cut open and a sleek brass colored robot rapidly descended the ladder. Solonians still preferred their public facing robots to match humans, so the design had a pair of arms and legs. However the face was a sleek oval with a series of blinking lights in the place of eyes. The mouth was a thin line barred with bronze studs. Gin noticed the armored pistons and wiring of the robot's forearms was covered in scraps of bark from dispatching the last Treeums.

"Um, hello," Gin said to the robot, surprised at the advancements to artificial life forms in just one year. Technology always seemed to outpace the ability to disseminate it.

"Greetings Captain Ronald Gin of the Klondike. Permit #44681-AA\_1." Gin wasn't sure if he should shake the robot's hand. The droning voice continued unabated by the awkwardness.

"We are Robotic Cleansing Unit A51. Please come with us."

"Okay, well, let's go," he said to the robot, then motioned his crew to follow.

Gin stepped over a pair of Treeum corpses and then the smoldering scalpel lines of the spine bulwark. Instead of the inspiring emptiness of space, the Captain was greeted by the gray walls of the hangar. Solonian voices mingled with robotic footsteps and echoed into one overbearing cacophony in the massive room. The hangar had clearly been designed to accommodate starships much larger than the Klondike.

Following the measured footsteps of RCU-A51, Gin tried to take in all the sights. He hadn't seen so many Solonians since his last visit to an Empire base. Friendly workers and busy scientists alike all stopped to wave at the Prospectors. In the back of his mind Gin was sure the behaviour was an enforced policy, but the warm greetings made him feel comfortable regardless.

"Would you look at the size of this place?" Kurt whispered over Gin's shoulder. "I've forgotten how impressive the Class fives are."

"The Avicenna can house 3,500 workers," the trailing RCU-A51 lectured, a line in his programming prompting the robot to provide factual information to visitors. "Current crew is 1,250. There are..." The machine continued to spout facts and figures until the Solonians had reached a quarantine bunker.

The building was on the edge of the hangar and had numerous individual cells, in the case of plagues or other transmittable diseases. Gin and his crew were confident the infection was

purely on the ship, but the Avicenna played exactly by the book.

They were ushered into a cell each, and after a few seconds a battery of tests and sweeps started. Doctors, scientists, and technicians all watched safely from behind a force field barrier. After several minutes of probing, a green light flicked on in the corner of each cell to mark the occupant as safe.

Once everyone was cleared, the cells deactivated and a new set of workers met them at the doors. A tall man stepped forward and offered his hand to Gin. "Welcome aboard, Captain Gin, we're glad to have you."

Now that they had been deemed uninfected, the workers met them without masks or other protection on. The man shook Gin's hand and continued, "I'm Preston Crossfield, second rank interpersonal officer." He let go of the Captain's hand and grinned, "Well, that's a fancy way of saying I help you enjoy your time here."

"Nice to meet you, Preston. This is Clover, Kurt, and Jorgan," he motioned to each crew member in turn. "They are my steadfast quartermaster, engineer, and doctor."

"I can tell you Prospectors have been through a lot," Preston turned and motioned for them to follow. He led them to a narrow hallway on the opposite side of the quarantine bunker. "Let me take you to your temporary quarters."

Gin hadn't told his crew, but he was quite serious about taking some downtime. Traditionally he liked to have a week after each planet excursion. There was so much to do and tell about Drofo that he wanted to extend the time. "We were actually hoping to stay for nine days, Preston."

Behind the Captain the crew exchanged pleased glances. Kurt was especially beaming, as the engineer was very excited to enjoy the features of a Class 5 quarantine ship.

"That won't be a problem." Preston pressed a series of keys on his mobile computer, relaying the information up the Avicenna chain of command. "Were you planning on staying in Sector 59 or can we head back to Clene Minor?"

Gin thought about the question before speaking, "Probably easiest to head back to Clene. We can Mirawarp from there to our next colony." More typing from Preston.

"Excellent, Captain. Can I just say that I'd be very interested in speaking more about your...adventures." Preston grinned and leaned in so the other workers couldn't hear, "I always wished I had gone into Prospecting instead of Quarantine."

Gin returned the smile and patted the Solonian on the back, "It's never too late. The universe is a big place, and the Empire needs more Captains all the time."

Preston waved his hands, dismissing the fantasy. "Ah, here we are. This is Residential Block Purple." Gin could see the reasoning for the name. The rows of fabricated housing units were a light pastel violet color. The narrow walkways overhead were also a shade of purple. Even the various lamps cast a soft purple light. "You are in House 2 and 3. If you require more quarters, or find the accommodations lacking in anyway, please don't hesitate to tell me."

"Will do, Preston," Gin said, turning to see the crew's reaction. Kurt was all smiles, fully ready to relax and stretch his legs on a bigger ship. Jorgan was still aglow from the discoveries and frantic escape from Drofo. Clover looked content and drowsy, like a tiger after eating a gazelle. The Captain was quite happy to take some time to sit down and write a full, detailed report about Drofo. He also had to research their next location. Leaving from Clene Minor instead of deep in Sector 59 might provide different options.

"Do you have any idea how long the decontamination will take?"

"Let me check for you, just a moment," Preston said, quickly tapping at his mobile computer. "Should be two days before the Klondike is clear. We'll move her from the quarantine hangar to a storage hangar, and jump back to Clene soon after."

Compared to savage Terrans, thorn clawed Treeums, the biting claws of Octoks, and the oppressive twenty hour nights of Drofo, the nine days aboard the Avicenna were pure bliss. As Preston had estimated, the Klondike was ready for visitation after two days. The dedicated scrubbers of the Avicenna were able to remove all traces of Drofo infection from the vessel. In addition the research branch of the Empire was very interested in the fast growth rates of the various vegetation.

Soon after Gin met with cargo masters and equipment detail teams to oversee the resupply of the ship. Their fuel for the atmospheric engines was topped up, their weapons were tuned and replaced, and their food supplies were replenished.

Before filing his report Gin also sat down with his crew and pieced together all the events of Drofo. Jorgan and Kurt spoke of orbiting the planet, trying every hour to reach Gin and Clover. Then they had switched to twice an hour, and finally every fifteen minutes. The Captain appreciated their dedication and could understand their excitement when communication was restored.

Gin also was deeply moved by Clover's bravery and endurance in rescuing him. During her flight to the shuttle a series of thorns had caught in her calf, but the tough quartermaster had run through the agony. Not only that but she had carried Gin's unconscious body and nearly all their gear all the way back to the Crusader.

Kurt was able to decipher why the comms had failed in the first place. The silver circle Clover had recovered from the last Terran appeared to be some kind of technology dampening device. The comms had worked at first because the Terrans were far away from the landing zone. But transmissions failed as soon as the colonists got closer, and remained until the last Terran was dead. Similarly the technology dampening fields, combined with clever trickery and hard work on behalf of the Terrans, had allowed the retinal lock for the exit ramp to be bypassed.

By translating the recording from Clover's AES the Solonians were able to shed some light on the recent history of Drofo. Originally the colonists were studying the natural desert life on Drofo. Among their findings were small underground plants that reproduced rapidly and when the sparse rains came.

Soon after the discovery they focused on modifying and expanding the desert plants as an alternative to traditional terraforming. The fruits of their labor was turning the alien Treeums from tiny, harmless plants to creatures inhabiting massive trees with an insanely fast growth rate.

When Hyperwave technology went dark the colonists appeared to have taken the failure as a sign. They became vehemently anti-technology, to the point of destroying their own labs and structures. Before their final reversion to barbarism the colonists completed their Treeum expansion project and turned Drofo from desert to jungle.

After a full summary and debrief with the crew Gin made his report to the Solonian Empire. They were immediately interested in the option of harvesting Treeum wood, and also the possibility of gaining other materials from the fast growing aliens. Gin followed the issue closely and found many researchers were talking about terraforming with Treeums, using the aliens as expendable shock troops, and many other uses. The Captain was proud to have

rediscovered and documented such a valuable planet.

After the nine days of rest and relaxation, the Klondike crew was starting to get anxious for open space and the freedom of exploration again. Gin found himself spending more and more time aboard the docked Klondike than in the temporary quarters in Residential Block Purple. Part of his anxiety was from deciding the next colony to visit. The moon of Rath had a colony from Hines Consumables, an child corporation of Hines Fabrication. Originally a mining colony the Terrans had bored out the moon in their quest for heavy metals. Gin was interested to see what Rath would look like after 150 years.

The Solonians said their farewells to Preston and the rest of the Avicenna crew. Although they hadn't spent any time on Clene Minor itself, Gin also sent a cursory thank you note to the Empire base.

At first the nine days seemed to drag, but when Gin sat back in the Klondike's pilot seat he felt like they had passed in a rush. Rubbing the fresh jacket covering his shoulders, Gin opened a comm to the core. "Kurt, are you ready?"

"Sir, yes, sir," Kurt replied, fully energized from his rest on the Avicenna. His near death experience on Angess was a distant memory to the engineer. "Miramachi Device is set, just waiting for your command."

"Excellent." He switched to an open comm. Gin already knew the answer, but politely asked anyway, "Everyone buckled in?"

Confirmations came back from Clover and Jorgan. As was traditional Gin had double checked his route to Rath. "Activate Miramachi Device in 3...2..."

"Hold it! Wait a second!"

Jarred by the panicked command, Gin ordered, "Cease countdown. What is it, Kurt?"

"Sorry sir, but a message just came in from Admiral Caird."

Gin heard the words, but couldn't comprehend them. "What? Admiral Caird? What does he want?" The Admiral was in charge of the Prospectors, and had been since the program's inception. Gin had met the man twice; once when he had become Captain, and again at the Klondike's inaugural launch. Admiral Caird made a point of being present at every Prospector launch, regardless of the time of location.

"Not sure, sir," Kurt replied, "The message is encrypted to your access level only. I can pipe it up to you?"

"Please do," the Captain said. A moment later one of the screens on the cockpit console flared to life. After entering his personal credentials, Gin unlocked the message and carefully read the text.

"Captain Gin, I've been hearing very positive reports from your first year with the Klondike," the letter continued with other compliments and kind words that certainly boosted Gin's confidence. Finally the Admiral reached the essence of the message, "We've been receiving disturbing reports from the Terran colony on Loerteco. I've attached documents detailing the planet. The short version is the colonists were originally from West Ultradynamics, and Prospector Marilu of the starship Quickstep re-established contact four months ago."

Gin grew more and more interested as he continued reading. "The Loertecos are transhuman Terrans, in the sense that they have surpassed organic bodies and moved to artificial forms. They also have advanced nanotechnology that we've been trying to trade." The Captain could only imagine the font of information Admiral Caird was.

"In the last four days the Loertecos have notified us of an invasion against their planet. Naturally we sent two warships to support such a valuable alliance. We mustered the Siacco and Lillianna and sent them a day ago. But they haven't replied to our transmissions since. We're getting mixed reports from the Loertecos on what happened. The consensus is the warships were destroyed by the invaders." Gin cringed at the thought of an alien army powerful enough to destroy two of the supreme Empire starships.

"The Loertecos had a good experience with Captain Marilu, but unfortunately she was killed in action a little over one month ago. They are requesting a Prospector, and your name came across my desk."

"Understand this, Captain Gin. If the invasion force is alien in nature, this would be the first intelligent non-human civilization we've found. The attack may be localized, or it may be a scouting force for a larger armada. Right now we don't know, and frankly, that isn't good enough."

"You have the Solonian Empire's full support in this. Anything the Klondike needs, from supplies to supporting warships to armies, just let us know. And Ronald, on a personal note, this is another big chance for the Prospectors to distinguish ourselves. Make the name proud. Make me proud."

Gin looked up from the message. He had been so fully immersed in reading the incredible story that he hadn't noticed the incoming comms from his crew. Instead of replying he transferred a copy of the message to a mobile screen and ordered, "Cancel the Mirawarp. Everyone to the common room. Now." The Captain rose from his pilot chair, but felt like a massive burden was trying to push him back down.

The faces around the oak table displayed a variety of emotions, the most evident being confusion. Gin stood facing away from the crew, looking out a port force field to the busy Avicenna hangar beyond.

"You are all aware of Admiral Caird and his role in the Empire," Gin started, trying to choose his words carefully. "His message was a special request to travel to the planet Loerteco, in sector 81."

"Loerteco, isn't that the nanotech colony?" Kurt asked, vaguely remembering news feeds about the planet from months ago.

"The very same." The Captain praised the engineer, "Good memory Kurt. As you can imagine the trade alliance is important to the Empire."

"What's the problem on Loerteco," Jorgan asked, although the doctor imagined he wouldn't like the answer.

"Apparently an invasion." At the words the confusion painted on the crew's faces dissipated into a mix of anger, fear, and excitement. "Reports are spotty at the moment, but the invasion appears alien in origin."

Kurt was immediately incredulous, "Alien, wait, as in not even Terran?"

"From what I can tell that's the leading hypothesis," Gin confirmed. "The original Prospector that established contact is now dead, so the mission fell to us." The Captain continued to brief the crew on the pair of missing warships and remaining scraps of information they had so far.

"So unknown invasion force on a critical planet, got it," Kurt remarked sarcastically. "Anything else, sir?"

Gin shook his head in disapproval of the flippant tone. "Yes, actually," Gin's face darkened with

even more disapproval, "We'll be getting another crew member."

The common room erupted in noise and complaints.

"Sir, we don't have the space..." started Clover's comment.

Jorgan tried a different tack and began, "We can't interrupt our team dynamics like this..."

And the bluntest was Kurt, "No way no how, Cap'n. A new crew member? This is bullshit..."

"Quiet," Gin said, but his normal tone was overruled by the raised voices of his crew. The Captain turned from the force field viewport and slammed his fist on the oak table, "Silence!"

"You'd think you were all fresh amateurs who had never made planet fall. In this Loerteco matter we're supposed to be a shining example for Prospectors everywhere," Gin raised his fist and glared at every crew member in turn. "And here you all are, squabbling like children."

"Listen, this is directly from Admiral Caird." Part of the specifications and detailed reports attached to the Admiral's message was a crew transfer order. "You don't have to worry about the new addition getting a room, or getting emotional and messing with our dynamics."

"What do you-" Kurt started, but Gin's furious glare silenced the engineer.

"Our new crew member is REU-CM72, and it's an exploration robot."

After quelling his crew, Gin went to the landing depot alone. The Captain wasn't particularly excited about introducing a robot onto the Klondike, but a request from the Admiral wasn't ignored. "Plus," Gin thought, "this machine might be handy against our mysterious invaders."

A tiny shuttle had blasted off from Clene Minor and docked with the Avicenna an hour ago.

The vessel was little more than a pulsar propellant drive strapped to a coffin. But a robot didn't need the human luxuries of space, nourishment, or as many stringent safety controls.

REU-CM72 was waiting in standby mode when Gin reached the landing bay. From a distance the exploration model looked similar to the cleaning units the Captain had encountered earlier. Instead of bronze REU-CM72 was tinted a matte green, although Gin assumed the camouflage circuits could change the color to match each planet.

Moving to stand before the motionless robot, Gin ordered, "Activate. I am Captain Gin, your new commander for the Loerteco assignment."

Lights flickered across the oval face as the unit returned to full power. "Greetings Captain Gin, permit four four-"

"No need for formalities. I understand your..." Gin struggled for the proper word,

"model...comes highly recommended by the Admiral."

"Correct, Captain." The robot replied in a soothing male voice that rang through the metallic mouth. The Solonian was pleased to note the robot had dropped "Gin" to oblige his request for informality. "I am a Robotic Exploration Unit, manufactured on Clene Minor, set number 72.

The abbreviation REU-CM72 suits me, but you may use REU if you wish."

"Ray-oo," Gin tried the word and found the name to be a better substitute than a long acronym. "Very well Reu. Do you have anything to bring on board the Klondike?"

"The Klondike," Lights blinked as Reu referenced an internal database, "Prospector IV class starship. Crew complement of four." More blinking lights, which made Gin feel like he was left out of a conversation. Reu continued speaking, although his complete lack of hand motions or other body language was disconcerting to Gin. "Impressive record, Captain. As to your query, I do not have belongings. I am trained in all the weapons present in a standard Prospector IV class vessel though."

"I'm sure there's a lot you can do, Reu. Tell me on the way to the ship," Gin nodded his head

down the hallway, back towards the Klondike.

Gin climbed to the front entrance of the spine, Reu in tow, and opened the bulwark. The Solonian crew were waiting. After the revelation that the new crew member was artificial the attitudes had changed.

Jorgan went from nervous hesitancy to downright disapproval, generally finding robots to be rather crude mockeries of natural life. Kurt actually brightened his mood, eager to try out various engineering schemes and ideas he had. Clover, initially focused on the logistics of a fifth member, remained ambivalent.

So Gin was not surprised to see Kurt first in line to meet Reu. Clover hung close behind, mostly focused on sizing up the combat abilities of the robot. Jorgan was at the back of the line, and the doctor was working hard to appear disinterested.

Reu walked through the doorway and offered, "Greetings, crew of the Klondike. Kurt, engineering. Clover Star, quartermaster. Jorgan Kormos, doctor and scientist. I am Robotic Exploration Unit manufactured on-

Having suffered the full title already, Gin interrupted, "We're just calling him Reu."

Kurt idly twirled a deactivated particle scalpel and leaned against the hull of the Crusader. "So West Ultradynamics, they were focused on carbon framing, right?"

"Correct, Kurt." Reu answered, its gyroscopes adjusting to keep the body perfectly still while the Klondike shuddered through a field of asteroids.

"I can see how that'd evolve into nanotech," Kurt curled his lips, "Definitely an impressive technology. What do the files say about how far along the Loertecos are?"

Processing lights blinked on as Reu queried a variety of sources. "They have moved to artificial forms similar to Earth palm trees, wherein-

Kurt straightened his posture, did a double take of the robot, and started laughing. "You're serious? You don't have humor circuits right?"

"Negative, a humor module is not a standard feature of the Robotic Ex-"

The engineer waved his hand to silence Reu's running diatribe, "So they look like palm trees?"

"I can display a picture if you desire."

"Please do, Reu." Kurt was intrigued and amused. Reu turned and a slot opened on its back, revealing an advanced mobile display. A picture of a stark shining tree flashed on the display. The creature had a long, narrow central stalk. The limbs, or fronds, were located near the top and branched out.

Kurt tried to puzzle out the benefits of the form, before giving up and asking Reu, "Why a tree?"

"The leafy hands at the top branch smaller and smaller, until they reach a point of manipulating nanomachines on a nearly molecular level. This gives the Loertecos immense control over their creations."

"Impressive," Kurt thought more about the capabilities of such a granular approach, and said, "Very impressive. I'm not sure how useful the forms would be in a lot of cases though?"

"Please provide an example, Kurt," Reu replied instantly.

"Well, combat, for one thing."

"On the contrary, they may be peaceful, but there are a few records of their combat prowess. A log from Captain Marilu says 'As if from thin air Loertecos can instantly create nanomachine

fortifications, providing instant and durable cover on the battlefield."

"Something must be ignoring their so called prowess, if this invasion hasn't been fended off in a week."

Reu retorted, "The invasion also hasn't been successful in a week, Kurt."

"Hey, you can't contradict me, Reu."

"Actually my programming allows for-"

Kurt rolled his eyes at Reu's failed grasp of sarcasm, slapped the robot on the back, and said, "Let's see how the Captain is making out with these asteroids."

Captain Gin followed the guide pathways overlaid by the cockpit console onto the asteroid field, but also focused on listening to his intuition. Easing the joystick from side to side he lead the Klondike through a field of asteroids. The floating space rocks were small enough that a direct hit wouldn't destroy the Klondike, but Gin didn't want to take any chances this close to Loerteco.

The field was created by the recent destruction of a tiny moon on the second planet in the star system. Gin wasn't sure if the invading force had done the damage, or if a natural phenomenon shattered the moon. Regardless the asteroids were unexpected and certainly slowed their progress.

The Klondike had Mirawarped to thirty minutes outside of Loerteco, and were using their pulsar propellant drive to get closer to the planet. From the Admiral's reports, they were looking to land in the massive city of Stiers, which was the last stronghold of resistance against the invasion.

Clover was in the armory deciding on what weapons would be most effective against an unknown enemy. Jorgan was cleaning and organizing the medical station in case they needed to receive wounded. And Kurt had moved from engineering to the core.

Reu would recharge and hibernate in the cargo zone below Clover's room, which put him between engineering and the core. The robot required very little space and even fewer supplies beyond an energy outlet.

After concluding its conversation with Kurt, the robot moved along the spine towards the cockpit. Upon reaching the Captain it said, "Sir, I am detecting life forms among the asteroids." Gin was so focused on piloting that he barely heard the robot's words. After dodging a particularly nasty cluster of three asteroids, Gin glanced over his shoulder and ordered, "Say again. Life forms? I'm not detecting anything."

"I suggest switching from thermal scans, sir."

The Captain doubted the robot, since traditional Prospector doctrine recommended focusing on thermal scans. Any heat would show up very easily against the freezing backdrop of space. But Gin was willing to test the new robot, so he eased his left hand off the joystick and pressed two buttons above the radar. Instantly the blank asteroid field illuminated with hundreds of tiny shapes. "They are as cold as space. How could they-"

Then a cloud of the creatures started drifting towards the weaving Klondike. Between the asteroids narrowing the escape routes, and the sheer volume of incoming creatures, Gin knew he couldn't escape them all.

Thankfully the starship's outer shields were already active to protect against asteroid impacts.

So Gin slammed on the comm and yelled, "Brace for attack. Some kind of creature."

He caught a glimpse of a handful of the tiny, cold aliens seconds before they tried to latch onto

the hull. They were as big as his hand, but curled like Earth shrimp. Their inner bodies had dozens of sharp, barbed hooks. The outer shell seemed to be an armored carapace. The creatures were pure black in color, which Gin assumed was a defense mechanism to blend against the darkness of space.

Their negligible mass meant the Klondike didn't shake as the aliens slammed into the outer shield. Gin looked at the shield console and saw the defensive layer was rapidly weakening. Regardless of what direction the Captain flew at least two dozen creatures were waiting to bounce off the shields. Each impact reduced the shield effectiveness by a sliver.

"Clover, get in the turret. Switch off thermal and target the small black shapes hitting our shield."

The quartermaster was strapped into a chair in the armory, still braced for the attack Gin had warned about. But at the Captain's request she sprang from the seat and rushed up ladder #5 directly into the turret.

"I'm here, sir." She toggled the scanner as Gin had recommended, and saw the plethora of targets available. "Targets locked, starting to fire."

"Kurt, try to boost the shields," Gin ordered next. "Take energy from the engine if you have to. We aren't flying fast enough through this asteroid field as is."

"Jorgan, get on a console and try to figure out what we're dealing with."

"Captain, what duty should I perform?" Reu asked, noticing Gin hadn't given him a task. Offhand Gin answered, "Hang tight for now, Reu."

While Clover fired blasts of tachyon at the miniscule targets and Kurt worked his energy sliders trying to keep the shields active, Jorgan reported over the comm, "Sir, they are definitely biological, sir, although their physiology is like-

"Cut to the chase, please," Gin asked, not having the time or concentration to spare on Jorgan's scientific tangent.

"Depending on the rate of movement of their hooks, I estimate they can tear through our armor at a rate of one centimeter a minute."

Gin cringed at the information. Such penetrative power didn't bode well when they still had half the asteroid field to fly through.

"Sir, at this rate of impact we'll lose shields in forty seconds. Fifty tops, if Clover keeps having a ninety nine percent hit rate," Kurt added. The quartermaster was so busy tracking and firing at the endless wave of black aliens that she didn't respond.

Gin couldn't think of a way out. No matter what direction he flew they would have to pass hundreds of the aliens. Instead he hoped their shields and armor would prevent a hull breach long enough to get clear.

After forty five agonizing seconds Kurt's resigned voice spoke again, "Shields down."

Sitting with gritted teeth in the cockpit Gin was well aware from the flashing red lights and beeping alarms.

Without a shield to deflect the attackers the first dozen aliens reached the hull. Instantly their hooks latched on and began burrowing through the armor. Gin couldn't imagine what biological material allowed them to cut through starship armor. But the Captain had a sinking feeling they would only find worse on Loerteco.

For now he had more immediate concerns. "Sir, they're digging faster than expected. We're losing that centimeter of armor in half the time," Jorgan said over the comm, his voice full of

worry and almost outright panic.

"How long until breach?"

"Sir, if I may suggest-" Reu interrupted.

"Dammit not now," Gin snapped, straining to hear a reply to his question.

"Looks like six minutes at our strongest points," Kurt replied. "Not sure if they're smart enough to go for the thinner armor, but those weak points would be three to four minutes."

"Everyone activate your AES. That'll give us a few minutes extra," Gin almost said 'when', but corrected himself to a more inspiring 'if', "if we get breached."

The AES force fields were powerful against surface threats, bacteria, and temperature changes. But they wouldn't last long against harsh exposure to deep space. Gin knew they had full protective suits hanging below Kurt's room, but he doubted they could get into the suits in three minutes.

"Captain, I must insist," Reu interrupted again. Gin was ready to lash out at the robot when he realized Reu was now part of the crew. It had as many useful talents, perhaps more, than the Solonians on board.

"Sorry, what is it Reu?"

"Captain, I am certified for radiation levels and long term deep space exposure. Let me exit to the hull and try to remove the unknown life forms."

Gin considered the plan, realized he didn't have a better idea, and nodded, "Get to it, but keep an open comm out there."

"Be aware Reu is going to exit the front spine to try to detach the aliens," Gin said to his crew, in case anyone was accidentally near the airlock. Knowing Jorgan's attitude the doctor might think the robot had gone insane.

The robot turned on its heel and climbed up the first ladder to the bulwark. Rapidly clicking buttons it opened the heavy inner door and stepped into the decontamination chamber. Once inside it let the door close and recreate an atmospheric seal. Then he twisted the well worn lever to open the exterior door.

By now the Klondike was swamped with the aliens. Clover's firing had slowed as the creatures blocked her targeting sights. Kurt had given up on the shields and was focused on conserving energy for life support and atmospheric regeneration. The ship was being eaten from every angle, but they could potentially fall back to the core and buy a few more minutes as the aliens chewed through the rest of the decks.

As Reu climbed across the hull Gin tried to reach Loerteco via intersystem comm. "Planet Loerteco, this is Prospector Captain Gin of the Klondike. Requesting immediate assistance, please respond."

Reu had activated magnetic studs in its feet which locked him to the exterior hull. Slowly it shambled forward, the magnets causing it to drag its feet instead of lift them. The hull was writhing with the snapping aliens as they burrowed and ripped at the armor plating.

After a microsecond to calculate the optimized route and approach, Reu began tearing the creatures from the hull. Powerful green hands ripped up pairs of the aliens, crushed them, and discarded the husks into the void above Reu. By focusing on the targets nearest to breaching the hull Reu was able to clear several critical areas of the menacing aliens.

The busy robot bought the Solonians several minutes. Gin gave up on his attempt to contact the Loertecos and instead ordered Clover, "Get out of the turret and into a suit. Try to help Reu if you can."

The quartermaster replied, "Roger, sir," and abandoned her blind turret and quickly got into a deep space suit. Then she exited the front spine as well to help Reu.

Even when touched by her gloved, human hand the creatures seemed passive. Clover was able to pull off the aliens one at a time, carefully stomp on them, and kick the remains away. The quartermaster didn't have the benefit of metal hands, and worried about piercing her suit by trying to squish the aliens in her fist.

Now that their shields were down Gin knew hitting an asteroid would likely pierce the ship.

Between the alien menace and the drifting rocks Gin ended up pouring sweat from the stress. After numerous narrow misses and close calls, he finally saw the edge of the asteroid field.

"We're almost out of it." He knew the crew were just as tense. "Kurt, prepare to give full power to the engines. Clover and Reu, buckle down when you feel the ship pull. We'll make sure none of the aliens can get us once we're clear."

With only a few centimeters of armor left, the Klondike broke out of the asteroid field. Gin immediately cranked the throttle and left the rocks and aliens far in his wake. Meanwhile Jorgan, who had provided an invaluable initial assessment of the aliens, now suited up and joined Clover and Reu outside the hull.

The crew of three were able to clear the remaining black shrimp-like aliens quickly and without any injuries. With the Captain's permission Jorgan kept one of the specimens as a sample. Everyone had a foreboding feeling that the aliens were a border guard for whatever invasion had happened on Loerteco.

Before Gin let Jorgan in the airlock he made sure Reu cleanly killed the alien. Then the three heroes passed quarantine and entered the spine in a tired huddle. Reu was absolutely covered from head to foot in blue viscera, with the Solonians having a similar coloration around their feet.

The robot had saved the ship, and if it had emotions Reu would have been quite proud.

Instead the green robot accepted warm pats on the shoulder from the rest of the crew. His initiative to rush outside, and artificial survivability that let him do so, had certainly stopped the aliens from breaching the hull.

Aside from their brush with defeat at the hands of tiny aliens, Gin knew the Klondike was in rough shape. In some places ninety five percent of the armor had been stripped away, and any starship combat was certain to end in their destruction.

While everyone recuperated, Jorgan set to work researching his specimen. Closing the final set of holding clamps, the doctor began series of scans to try to decipher basic biology. Following the scans he dissected the alien, trying to get an idea of the internals. Jorgan focused specifically on the hooks, wanting to learn what could be strong enough to burrow into trilobium.

Lifting his eyes from the microscope, Jorgan stretched and walked to the comm. "Sir, I'm almost done my report. Can I debrief you in the common roof?"

"Good work Jorgan. And yes, that would work well," Gin replied.

Gin opened the meeting with a brisk tone, "Okay, we're only ten minutes out from Loerteco, so let's hear it."

"I've codenamed the aliens Rippers, which I think suits well based on the speed they tore through our armor. The Rippers are an amazing, interesting creature-

"That nearly got us killed!" Kurt rudely interrupted, having no respect for Jorgan's love of all life.

Gin shook his head to silence Kurt, then nodded to Jorgan to continue.

"Well they survive like plants, growing and thriving off solar radiation. They don't have a stomach or digestive system, instead absorbing nutrients via photosynthesis. The inside of the Ripper was actually fairly sparse, mostly doughy flesh with few internal organs. There is no heart or veins, which is why thermal didn't pick them up."

"Wait, how can they cut through trilobium without a heart?" Clover asked, incredulous but knowing they had encountered stranger aliens and modified Terrans so far.

"Similar to the *Dionaea Muscipula* from old Earth jungles."

Confused silence descended on the room until Kurt spoke up, "A what now?"

"Apologies, a Venus fly trap. Basically a plant that moves and reacts like a mammal or insect. In the case of the Rippers, they convert stored energy into motion for their hooks."

Jorgan's eyes were edged with excitement. "The hooks themselves are impressive. The core structure is based on bone, more or less, but the razor sharp edge is a biological compound I've never seen before. The computer didn't have a record, and when I asked Reu his queries came back with nothing."

"So a totally self sustainable space parasite that lives to burrow," Gin sighed, then continued, "What about their seeking behaviour? How did they know to follow the ship?"

"Instinct, from what I can tell they are born to flutter towards movement and start burrowing, regardless of what they latch on to."

"I guess that explains the smaller asteroids, maybe they had a light snack before we arrived," Kurt joked.

"As I said, a truly marvellous creature. The Ripper is born...bred...designed, whatever you want to call it, for a singular purpose."

"Sounds like a weapon," Clover muttered.

Gin raised an eyebrow, "What was that?"

"Sorry sir, I was just saying the Rippers sound like a weapon."

Jorgan cocked his head, thinking deeply. He opened his mouth to speak but Reu reached a conclusion first, "A biological weapon. I believe we will find similar life forms on the surface of Loerteco. The odds of the Rippers being unrelated to the invasion is over thirteen million to one."

"I might not be a walking calculator," Jorgan frowned, "but it's right. No way are the Rippers here by chance. They are part of the invasion force. I think whatever we'll find similar aliens, each with a specific purpose, as the foundation of the attackers."

"Great," Gin said. Before he could say more a transmission request beeped on the nearest computer. Striding to the device Gin flipped a button. A voice, harmonious but cold at the same time, spoke calmly, "Captain Gin, this is Loerteco city Stiers. We have you on our scopes. The Admiral spoke highly of you, and we hope you can aid us in our desperate battle against the Bios."

The crew exchanged glances, figuring the name "Bios" wasn't just a friendly nickname from the artificial colonists for humans.

As they flew towards the landing pad in Stiers the Captain was overwhelmed by the intricate detail of every building. Kurt was eagerly explaining how nanotechnology allowed building

from a molecular level, which provided an almost unlimited control over matter. In a way the excited engineer sounded like Jorgan, except his topic of interest were tiny machines instead of tiny Rippers.

The towering city rose far from the ground on thin, fragile looking spires. On top of the smooth towers were hundreds of buildings in a wide variety of styles. Gin had learned you could tell a lot about a species from their architecture. He thought back to the stout huts, almost bunkers, of the Kanthem in Harrier on Angess and their related warlike nature. Looking at the elegant, delicate buildings of the Loertecos, Gin could feel their peaceful calm exuded from the structures.

Already Gin could tell great sorrow had visited the city and surface below. Fires and billowing smoke marked a battle front not far from Stiers. Using the magnification tools on the Klondike he was able to see black specks of so called "Bios" rushing against an unmoving white wall of Loertecos.

"Cleared for landing, Captain Gin," came a confirmation over the comm. Easing the ship down on the platform, Gin cut the Klondike's atmospheric engine.

"Okay crew, this planet is safe for human life, so you don't technically need your AES activated," he looked across the platform to the ivory buildings. "Personally, I'm going to keep mine on. After the Rippers I don't know what to expect from these Bios."

The Solonians nodded and stepped into the Klondike's airlock. After Drofo they weren't taking any chances with alien parasites sneaking back on board.

Gin stepped off the ship first, his feet comfortably settling on the smooth ground. The gravity on Loerteco was similar to Earth, so he deactivated the gravity cushions and enjoyed some natural walking.

A row of shimmering creatures awaited the crew at the edge of the landing platform. Gin hadn't seen the picture Reu had provided to Kurt, so he was initially taken aback by the Loertecos appearance.

Each Loerteco was centered around a single elegant spire, very similar to the towers holding up the city. When Gin later learned of the palm tree comparison, he would find the metaphor sound. At the top of each spire, or trunk, there were a series of branches. The number of branches varied between Loertecos, and Gin guessed there was a complex system for who got how many. The branches descended outwards in smaller and thinner sizes, until the very tips were invisible to the naked human eye.

The true power of the Loertecos was in their cascading branches, or fronds. Gin considered a floral based comparison to be insulting, since the Loertecos had worked so hard to become artificial life forms he called the branches "hands" instead.

The hands diminished to microscopic tips that could interact directly with nanomachines, and even molecules directly in the case of some of the older Loertecos. Gin was amazed that the drastically advanced and different forms had once been plain Terran colonists.

Although the Captain, Jorgan, and Kurt would have loved to ask their own questions of the Loertecos, they knew the time was not right for a history lesson. Instead Gin confidently walked forward and stretched out his hand to the tallest Loerteco.

The artificial form bowed in reply, then in half a second assembled a gray hand for Gin to shake. Kurt whistled in appreciation. Reu hummed and blinked while analyzing the nanotechnology creation.

The Captain retracted his hand slightly in initial surprise, but met the handshake after a recovering. The hand crafted from nanomachines felt dead and lifeless, and when the hand constricted to shake Gin's it felt like a million tiny pins gently pricking his palm.

"As you know I am Captain Gin," he said, releasing the hand.

"Well met Captain. I am Xepashopon, and these are my nine sons." The Loerteco proceeded to list off equally the incomprehensible names of his children, but Gin was still busy trying to decipher what the father had said his name was. The Captain hoped Reu was recording the names and would be able to uniquely identify the creatures later.

"I, we," he looked back at his crew, "have so many questions about your amazing culture and technology. But I understand now is not the time." Gin pursed his lips, "On our flight in we saw the massive battlefront."

"I appreciate your interest, and your concern. Let us move to the council chamber where we can properly brief you."

After settling into comfortable white cushions around a massive table, "Biomorphs, or Bios as we generally call them, are the greatest threat the Loertecos have faced. Perhaps even the Solonian Empire and galaxy beyond." The speaker had identified himself as Laxpurason, and from what Gin could gather he was the leader of Stiers. The creature clearly understood their need for immediate details and solutions.

"They arrived here a week ago, and have absorbed sixty percent of our planet since. Twenty percent that remains is arctic wastes devoid of life. The other twenty percent is all of Stiers and some surrounding natural preserves."

Xepashopon had told Gin there was a certain protocol to speaking in the council chamber, even in times of war, so the Captain remained silent.

"The Bios are like unlike anything we have seen. While we pursued artificial methods of advancing and improving life, the Biomorphs have gone the opposite direction. Every Bio troop, vehicle, even the buildings themselves are living creatures. We do not know the breeding or growing process, but we have learned how they use raw materials, at a great cost." The room of Loertecos echoed the words, "At a great cost." Gin marked the event as some kind of ritual, perhaps to remember a recent tragedy.

"The Bios leave nothing in their wake. They take life, in every facet and on every scale. Soldiers, vegetation, insects, bacteria, all is broken down into a gelatinous blue paste. We do not know where the blue liquid goes, as of yet, but we think the raw materials are re-purposed to grow new monstrosities."

"If they could I'm sure the Bios would rip the very dirt from the bones of our planet." There was an oppressive silence as Laxpurason let the words settle on the crew.

"We do not know if Loerteco was targeted first, or if we're just the first planet to have the technology and trade connections to report the attack to the Solonian Empire. For all we know the Bios have been destroying planets for thousands of years."

At the words a frightened murmur arose from the gathered council members.

"If we do not stop the Bios here, now, then none of us can fathom the loss of life that will ensue. With your help, Solonians, we can turn the tide."

Laxpurason bowed and took a step back to an allotted standing space on the ground. Next another Loerteco, some kind of organizer, stepped forward and motioned to Gin. "The next speaker is Captain Gin."

Murmured words passed between the gathered creatures, and Gin couldn't tell if they were pleased, nervous, or disgusted. Steeling his nerves, Gin rose from his seat and took a step forward. Admiral Caird's words echoed in his mind, and the Captain was eager to fulfill the high expectations of the Prospector leader.

"Loerteco council members, I thank you for receiving me," Gin started, bowing low as the previous speakers had done. "I am here as a representative of the Solonian Empire. We stand poised to support you in the war against the Biomorphs. From what we have heard today the Bios are ruthless and nigh unstoppable."

The Captain pulled a sharp breath and looked to Clover for support. Her unflinching calmness always reinforced Gin's own will. As he looked around the room at the drastically modified Terrans, he thought of the might of the Empire. The fire and energy in the human race to have achieved so much after being so close to the brink of destruction.

"The Solonian Empire will not bend to invasion. We will not break or retreat, regardless of how many planets the Bios conquer and how much life they extinguish. Through the unified might of our alliances, we will be victorious!"

The Loertecos whispered among themselves, and Gin was deflated from the unexpectedly mild reaction. Then Kurt stood and began clapping. In a flash Jorgan and Clover had risen and followed the applause. Reu joined as well, its metal hands clanging as it clapped.

The excitement caught on, and soon the Loertecos were showing their support with friendly words and gestures.

Gin took a step back, bowed, and sat back down.

Two days later Gin sat crouched against a low white wall, a Loerteco nanomachine rifle tucked into his shoulder. The Loertecos had their own name for the weapon, but the Solonians preferred "The Tornado". Once activated the deadly weapon would spin up and start sending guided nanomachines towards a locked target. When the weapon reached maximum firing speed the sheer volume of nanomachines began to look like a swirling tornado, thus the Solonian nickname.

His four crew members were beside him, along with five Loertecos. Further down their right flank was the main battle line of Loertecos. And over the wall and across a barren field was the central horde of Bios.

"Okay, the word has gone out to Admiral Caird, and he's working to assemble a Solonian fleet," Gin whispered. "In the mean time, the more information, breeds, and weaknesses we discover the higher our chances of success are."

Unlike traditional armies the Bios didn't appear to have supply chains, or patrols, or any traditional weak points. Instead they streamed forward in an unending, unceasing wave. The Loertecos had fought the horrible aliens to a standstill, but at great personal sacrifice.

The Solonians had seen images, video capture, and even live streams of the Bios. But so far the crew hadn't been exposed to real combat against the aliens.

Tonight that would change.

A steady stream of smaller Bios rushed the Loerteco lines, and Gin had been briefed that the attacks were constant sacrifices to wear down the defenses. From this distance the slithering creatures looked like centipedes. Up close they were similar to the Rippers, with numerous hooks and stunted legs for locomotion. Except instead of hand sized each Centipede was two meters long and the hooks were as big as Gin's chest.

But the Loertecos were well prepared, and had settled into a defensive routine to hold off the centipedes. Alternating fire mixed with raining formations of nanomachines shaped like spikes stopped the centipedes before they could reach the Loerteco line.

Behind the endless writhing mass were the taller Bios. They were bipedal, but with long arms that touched the ground, and a gigantic triangular shape on top of their shoulders. Their skin was jet black and protected by strategically placed carapace.

According to the Loertecos these were the true Bios. They lead the other aliens, organized and strategized and were seen as the most generalist Biomorph encountered so far.

Behind the bipedal Bios were the war machines. Sluggish behemoths with numerous limbs, incredibly thick carapace, and rows of weapons waited for an opening in the Loerteco line. Gin had been told they were nicknamed Bulls.

A dozen other variants of Biomorphs took their turn charging the withering fire. Jorgan was busy cataloguing the creatures to complement the Loerteco databases and frame the threat in a way the Empire could understand.

"When the next wave of Bipedals move in, we'll spring," Gin whispered, wanting to capitalize on their field experience by fighting the generalist Bios first. "We," he motioned to the crew of the Klondike, "will strike at their backs. You," now he pointed at the Loertecos, "cover us. We'll move as a block towards the Loerteco line, then split off to either flank so they can fire at anything pursuing us."

Clover nodded confidently, as the plan had been her suggestion. "Got it, sir." The other three crew members nodded and the five Loertecos bowed in agreement.

"Captain, we believe the Bipedals will move next," a Loerteco said, motioning towards the distant line. "We can see them collecting a wall of Centipedes to cover their advance."

"Which is why we'll be in a perfect position to hit them from the flank," Gin replied, his hands started to sweat with excitement.

As predicted a wave of Bipedal Biomorphs started to advance. Their great loping strides kept pace with the wall of Centipedes scurrying in front of them. Gin found something strangely human about the running motion, but that only made him disgusted even more by the Bios.

"Okay, move out!" He ordered, then planted a hand on the wall and vaulted over it. The Solonians were quick to follow, while the Loertecos fanned out ahead of them. The thin spires moved by creating a line of nanomachines beneath them, then sliding along the tiny robots. As they passed across the line the trailing nanomachines would reattach to the Loerteco and start the process anew. Gin had been told their space travel worked in a similar way.

In seconds they had sprinted to the back of the Biomorphs. The Bipedal creatures didn't notice their approach until the first barrage of nanomachines hit them. As the Solonians fired at the back of the Bios, the Loertecos in turn covered the humans.

Gin had only used the tornado in a quick training course provided by the Loertecos. He hadn't seen the weapon strike flesh before. And for a brief second Gin wished he never had. The nanomachines landed on the nearest Bipedal and instantly started destroying the carapace and soft underlying flesh.

To stop the Bios from adapting each nanomachine used a different method of attack. Some shattered individual molecular bonds. Others detonated, melted, or cut and pierced the target skin. The end result was the Bipedal the Captain had shot at simply ceased to be. In half a second the ugly creature crumpled into an agonizing pile, and was torn apart further until

nothing remained.

The Loertecos had learned that any remains would be re-absorbed by the Bios, and basically nullify the initial kill. Only by vaporizing and shredding the target on a molecular level could they truly deter the Bios.

As the crew unleashed the tornadoes on the Bipedals, Gin began to wonder how the war wasn't won already. Their tacticians were experts of defense, their weapons were viciously effective, and the Loertecos had a dozen other tricks in their branches.

Gin got his answer, and also learned the Bios had their own tricks.

The only warning the Solonians received was a terrible, high pitched screech. And then out of nowhere the sky darkened with hundreds of thousands of Bios. The Captain was so occupied with retreat that he barely got a glimpse of the newest attackers.

Out of the corner of his eye Gin saw they were similar to the Rippers, but larger and winged for atmospheric flight. The swarm descended on a trailing Loerteco and the ally was quickly turned into a tiny silver pole. Then the remains were devoured by the flying Rippers.

"Fire on the run, the tornado will lock on!" Gin yelled over the screeches. He didn't need to order his crew to retreat, they clearly understood the threat of the airborne creatures.

Heeding his own words, Gin held the trigger down on the tornado. Clouds of nanomachines poured from the muzzle, and quickly looped back and started destroying the swarm of Bios above, behind, and to either side of him.

His AES shield crackled as the swarm reached Gin. Thankfully the safe atmosphere of Loerteco meant Gin could turn the environmental force field very low. With an abundance of energy, each crew member had cranked up their protective shields to levels they normally didn't get to enjoy.

So when three dozen of the Rippers smashed against his shield, Gin knew he would be safe for a while. Plus nearly every Ripper that was repelled by the shield was soon hunted and destroyed by friendly nanomachines.

As they approached the Loerteco firing line Gin naturally veered to either side, and ordered his crew to do the same over his comm. Once the avenue of attack was clear, the Loertecos unleashed a devastating barrage.

Clearly they had encountered the flying Rippers before, for half the Loertecos worked tornadoes while the other half hastily crafted hawks and other birds of prey from their store of nanomachines. The machines would fly into the swarm and meet the Rippers at their own game.

A Loerteco slid past Clover as she ran opposite Gin. Her shield had taken numerous hits and a pair of Centipedes had disabled her gun with a suicidal rush. The ally motioned for her to stop, then the creature's branches whirled in a blur. In a matter of seconds he built a white oval around the pair. She could hear the Rippers scratching against the outside, but as quickly as the Bios tore away the walls the Loertecos tirelessly added more layers.

Then Clover realized the oval was moving using a similar method to the Loertecos. The structure slid along the ground, carried on the backs of millions of nanomachines. She didn't know where they were headed, or how far the firing line was, but Clover was happy for the repose. She also felt quite useless compared to the incredible flexibility of the Loertecos' abilities.

Finally the Solonians regrouped behind the firing line, and added their tornadoes to the barrage driving away the swarm. Soon the sky lightened as flying Rippers were vaporized by

nanomachines.

Before Gin could catch his breath, another wave of Centipedes smashed into the barricade, supported by a handful of Bulls.

Fifteen hours later an exhausted Solonian crew limped back to the secure zone far from the battlefield. What had started as a research expedition ended in a fight for their lives. Unlike traditional enemies that rushed, retreated, regrouped and rushed again, the Bios had the numbers and unified will to attack constantly.

Gin didn't know how the Loertecos had achieved a stalemate, and he wasn't sure the Solonian Empire could do any better. Once confident, perhaps overly so, in the warships of his race, the Captain now understood how Siacco and Lillianna were destroyed.

Dragging their weapons, which their tired minds tripled the weight of, the exhausted Solonians reached the nanomachine lasso to Stiers.

The crew collapsed near the wire, which wove around them and started to lift them to the city. Nanomachines built and rebuilt the lasso until each member of the Klondike was safely at the entrance to Stiers.

Through sheer force of will Gin was able to stand, and saw the rest of his crew managed the same. They wanted to keep a facade of courage and rugged enthusiasm for the fight against the Bios, and passing out after their first battle wasn't a step in the right direction.

Xepashopon was waiting for them, and ushered the tired soldiers to the barracks. Gin knew the Loerteco was talking the whole time, but his mind simply didn't have the energy to process the words.

The Captain didn't remember the details, but he found himself face down on a wonderfully soft pillow and plush bunk. Then he drifted to sleep, and mentally re-fought the Bios from his fifteen hour tour.

The next day was a struggle of meetings and debriefing with his crew. The Solonians were sitting around a white table in the barracks, trying to plan their next move.

"Admiral Caird tells me the fleet will arrive in five days," Gin said, checking the resource bar on his tornado. "I tried to tell him to make it four if he wanted anything left to defend."

The crew were in various states of slouching. Some picked at food, others checked equipment. Finally Jorgan spoke, "I know the Loerteco think these Bios don't need to resupply," he leaned closer, not wishing to offend any of the spires milling about the room, "But where does all the liquified material go? The Bios must bring down cargo ships, or shuttles, or something."

"I was thinking the same thing," Kurt offered, nodding at Jorgan. "I can appreciate the Loertecos' view. They've discovered this enemy, and they've been fighting hard. But I think they are so worn down that they are happy with a stalemate."

"I agree," Reu said, welding a new strip of plating onto his leg to replace a section that a flying Ripper had burrowed through. "They have lost the initiative, and don't appear to want to regain it."

"Those are all good points...that the Loerteco would have trouble swallowing. What we need to do is inspire them with a breakthrough, to show the troops that the Bios can and will be stopped," Gin firmly stated.

"Tell me more about your cargo ship theory, Jorgan?"

The doctor leaned across the table, forgetting his food and eager to share his ideas. "Well, we

haven't been up in the Klondike since we arrived. My understanding is the Loertecos are spread so thin on the ground that they can't spare materials for starships."

Although the Bios stripped planets for raw organic matter, the Loertecos had a similar method for fuelling their nanotechnology. Each nanomachine had a short lifespan, and could build duplicates from other fallen nanomachines. But there still had to be a steady supply of metals and base minerals for the nanomachines to work from.

Before the Bios attacked, the Loertecos had struck a perfect balance of nanotechnology usage to maintain the resources of their home. Now they were desperate to battle the Biomorphs, which meant converting every scrap of natural beauty on the planet.

Gin could understand the irony of the situation, but even with his limited knowledge of both fields the Captain could nanotechnology was still the best defense against the Bios.

Clover continued the doctor's reasoning, "So you think the Bios are coming from somewhere?" "They must be. And if it's not a starship, there certainly are factories, or...birth lots or something."

Kurt shuddered at the idea.

"What do you suggest?" Gin asked.

"Let's take the Klondike back up and do some reconnaissance. We were so focused on analyzing the space Rippers that we didn't do our usual scans of the planet, or even check the orbit."

"What if more of the Rippers await us outside the atmosphere?" Reu wondered, sitting perfectly still now that his welding was complete. "We barely escaped last time."

"I have an idea for that," Kurt smiled but refused to say more.

The next morning the Solonians returned to their ship. Xepashopon and a few of his sons were at the landing pad to see them off. Gin had received the well wishes of Laxpurason and the council already. He hoped to return with good news.

Using their nanomachines the Loertecos had restored the Klondike's armor, which was dangerously thin in places from their scrape with the Rippers. Kurt had worked late into the night on his mysterious Ripper defense system. The engineer was clearly having fun with the modifications and wouldn't tell Clover any details when she tripped over a bundle of wires leading from the core into the walls.

"Okay, all systems look good. Repairs seem to be holding during startup sequence," Gin said, checking two displays to his left. "Testing atmospheric integrity. Check. Prepare for launch."

Moments later the Klondike heaved up from the landing pad and started rising towards the stars. The familiar chemical composition of the atmosphere did little to slow their ascent, and soon they were weightless in orbit around Loerteco.

As the gravity generator activated, Gin set to work scanning nearby space. Jorgan was working on planetary readings, trying to look for concentrations of Bios that might indicate a base. Clover was tucked into the turret, which had modified sights to be more effective even if a horde of Rippers tried to block her sensors. And Kurt sat comfortably in the core room, his hand not far from a big red button with a nest of wires burrowing from underneath it.

"Okay, I'm picking something up," Gin said, pressing a series of buttons to try to refine his sensor readout. "Looks like it's anchored just above the Loerteco atmosphere."

"What is it?" Jorgan asked, although the doctor was fairly focused on his own scans.

Mumbling while he worked Gin said, "Still trying to figure that out."

"Sir, with the new sight package on the turret, I think I can. Yes, target confirmed."

Gin sat up in his chair, nervous and excited to see what the quartermaster had spotted.

"Hooking into your visual, everyone prepare to receive."

"J-Jorgan was right," Kurt sputtered nervously. "It's huge. We can't fight something like that."

Instead of Gin telling the engineer to pipe down, Reu spoke first. "Kurt, be calm. The Biomorph vessel is only three times the size of a Victoria class warship."

Scoffing and cursing Kurt angrily spit into the comm, "What the hell? You dumb robot, the Empire only has four of those!"

Reu remained unfazed by the remark, and simply said, "Kurt, that means we'll outweigh them."

The engineer was silent, so Gin took the opportunity to speak. "That definitely is an impressive ship. Some sort of carrier or cargo vessel." Gin mused, "Maybe a planet cracker that destroys a location after it's been striped."

"Sir, you aren't exactly inspiring confidence..." Clover whispered on a personal comm line.

"We shall call it the Whale." Gin knew the importance of a demoralizing name for intimidating enemies. For all he knew the Biomorphs had called the vessel an Eater of Worlds, but he wasn't going to let the Empire know that. "Sure it might be big, but it's also bloated, ponderous, and we could fly circles around it."

"And so could our Victorias, which are arriving in three or four days. So buckle in, and we'll try to get some closer scans."

"Understood, sir," Kurt replied, as did Jorgan and the rest of the crew.

The Whale was a fleshy organism shaped loosely like a square. Gin imagined the interior was some kind of factory or processing facility for the Biomorph armies. Various other creatures drifted around the central ship, acting as guards or perhaps observation vessels. Gin realized how little they truly knew about the enemy, while the Bios seemed to have their enemies solved.

Flying careful Gin swept the Klondike over the crest of the planet, keeping just above the atmosphere to try to block and sensors the Bios had. "Jorgan, any luck with the scans?"

"Not yet sir, just get a bit closer and we should be able to run the standard suite."

"We'll glide right up to them," Gin said, cutting the pulsar propellant drive to reduce their residual trail.

The Klondike drifted forward silently, like a shark. "Almost got it," Jorgan whispered over the comm, his voice caught up in the suspense of their stealthy approach.

When the first Ripper bounced off the outer shield, Gin knew they had strayed too close.

"Shit! Initiating evasive action. We're getting out of here," he yelled, his hands a flurry of motion as he prepared to dive into the atmosphere.

Precious seconds passed as the propellant drive came back online. They continued towards the Whale, and Gin was helpless to prevent hundreds of Rippers from floating towards the ship.

Unlike the asteroid field, the creatures were here in force.

"Shields down," Kurt warned from the generator room, although his voice wasn't quite as panicked as before.

The first Rippers struck the hull, and Gin could hear Reu's pounding feet on the spine as he ran for the bulwark.

"Hold, robot," Kurt said.

"Captain?" Reu asked, conflicted.

"Kurt, what are you doing?" Gin demanded.

Kurt grinned in the core room, said, "Trying out my new toy, Cap'n," and hit the big red button. Fuelled by the Miramachi Device, coiled lightning arced across the hull, splattering dozens of Rippers that were already latched on. Even a few of the aliens that were getting close were zapped by the defensive system.

"Very nice, Kurt!" Gin said, his cheer matching that of Jorgan and Clover. Reu paused at the bulwark, and slowly walked back down the spine.

"Atmosphere broken," Gin said as the Klondike blasted towards Loerteco. Between the lightning grid and the ozone the space Rippers had left the Klondike alone.

However Clover's voice worried Gin as she said, "Picking up two signals. Looks like enemy ships, sir."

The Captain buckled in and gently touched the throttle. On the ground he was just another Solonian. In space he was a Captain and an explorer. But in the upper atmosphere, he was a fighter pilot.

"Hold on to your protein," Gin whispered and heaved the joystick down.

The Klondike responded brilliantly, the atmospheric engines blasting a clean wake as the ship screamed closer and closer to the surface. On the battlefield far below Gin could see the scurrying black forms crashing into the white firing line. But the conflict grew closer and closer and finally Jorgan's voice crackled over the comm.

"Sir, we're...going...too fast," the doctor forced the words out, unaccustomed to the heart rending descent.

Gin's eyes were alight and he quickly switched to Clover's channel. "Any sign of them?"

"They're right on us, sir. The vessels look sort of like triangles, almost like the Bipedal heads."

"Well, keep some pressure on them," Gin replied, his last word cut out by the sound of tachyon cannons firing.

He was one kilometer from the surface when the Bio ships returned fire. Living missiles spewed from the bow of both ships, the weapons screeching and spraying a vile green cloud behind them.

Gin threw the joystick to the right and pumped the throttle, sending the Klondike into a rapid roll to try to distract the living weapons. He wasn't sure what kind of tracking mechanism they used, but the barrel roll was vetted from his tour in Africa.

"They're...still gaining...sir" Clover said, her fire slowing as she fought unconsciousness.

Gin smiled and said, "Not for long." Then he cranked the throttle all the way back. The front of the Klondike burst into light as the reverse thrusters fired. Gin snapped forward in his chair, the safety belt keeping him from smashing into the front of the cockpit.

Unprepared for the sudden movement, the missiles careened pass the Prospector ship. Without a target in front of them the creatures drifted to the surface and exploded into a cloud of flame and blue gore.

As soon as they were clear Gin opened the throttle again, continuing his rapid, suicidal charge to the ground. The Bio ships followed relentlessly, which was what the Captain was counting on.

A console displaying the altimeter changed from green to yellow to a bright red as the Klondike dropped to two hundred meters. With a scarce fifty meters to spare, Gin pulled on the joystick with both hands. Yelling a victory cry he dizzily levelled the Klondike out.

Vegetation was flattened from the cushion of air, and the overhanging Crusader clipped the top of a tree. In the medical station Jorgan barely held his lunch, while Kurt gritted his teeth and gripped his chair with white knuckles. For a moment Clover blacked out holding the triggers, which sent a spray of tachyon across the sky.

Behind Gin the eager Bios cratered into the planet. They had been so focused and hungry for Solonian blood and were ready to sacrifice everything to get it. The first triangular ship folded and crumpled as the creature hit the hard rock. A torrent of blue sprayed in a starfish pattern around the dead vessel.

The second starship was close behind, and was spared an equally gruesome death only because the initial crash padded the landing. The force of the impact shuddered across the hull of the second ship, but the vessel flipped and rolled. The remains skipped across the grass and rock, and after two hundred meters came to rest against a ledge.

The crew cheered and hooted at the narrow escape thanks to Gin's daring, almost suicidal, flying. Clover had ceased firing and Kurt was busy scanning the Bio vessel.

"Sir, that thing is showing faint life signs, all across the hull," Kurt relayed.

"Well, considering the big Whale floating overhead, the whole vessel is probably alive," Jorgan reasoned, typing hastily at a console as he activated further readings.

"Sir, if I may," Clover started.

Having defeated the pursuit, Gin eased off the throttle and replied, "Yes, what is it?"

"From what the Loertecos tell me, they haven't been able to capture a Biomorph alive," Clover had loosened her grip on the tachyon cannon triggers and was sitting in her chair speaking into the comm. "Typically the foot soldiers, centipedes, Rippers and so on do a type of suicide or self destruction if they are captured."

Kurt saw where the quartermaster was heading and picked up her thread of thought, "Right, so a living Bio ship would be a big help in this war."

Gin nodded, said nothing, and spun the Klondike in a wide arc to circle back to the crash.

The Prospectors didn't know if the Bio ship could destroy itself as the ground troops did, so time was critical. As soon as the Klondike had settled on a flat grassy patch beside the leaking enemy vessel, Gin hopped from the pilot seat and clambered to the spine.

As he headed for the airlock he ordered, "Clover and Jorgan, grab appropriate weapons and meet me at the bulkhead. Kurt, maintain comm contact and keep scanning. The more information we can gather passively the better."

"My role, sir?" Reu asked, his cold metallic voice echoing over the comm.

In the rush to capture the enemy vessel Gin had forgotten the latest addition to the crew. "Reu, you prepare to come aboard too. We could use your instruments and survivability."

Kurt opened a private channel to Reu and said, "Good luck, be careful in there."

The three Solonians and one artificial life form advanced on the steaming, crushed form of the spaceship. Up close they could see the triangular ship was close to seventy meters in length. Instead of armor plating or traditional asteroid shielding the hull was composed of hexagonal scales, almost like the giant lizards of Dorova.

At different angles the color seemed to change and shimmer from soft gold to a dull copper.

Reu and Jorgan were quick to edge to the back of the vessel and examine the engine

apparatus. Gin moved to the front of the triangle, where he assumed the cockpit or piloting

area was. Clover was busy looking for weapon systems, since armament interested her the most.

After a cursory glance of the exterior, and with the knowledge that the ship could die very soon, the crew quickly congregated at an open hatch. The portal had a torn edge where the hexagonal scales flapped in the wind. No handle or knob was visible, but Gin knew there were many methods for controlling exterior access. Voice commands, centralized computers, even telepathic manipulation.

“Kurt, are we still good on comm?” Gin said in a hushed tone, not wanting to disturb any occupants beyond the hatch.

“Roger sir, reading you loud and clear,” Kurt's crackling voice replied.

“We're about to enter the ship.”

Gin was the first Prospector into the ship. With a firm step he leaned through the hatch and swung his laser pistol to cover the room. Beyond the hatch was a small entry area. The walls and floor were unlike anything Gin had seen. Stalactites of flesh hung precariously from the roof, their surfaces moist from the humid interior air.

A dark blue fog drifted from deeper inside the ship and into the fresh Loerteco air. The floor was lost in the mist, but Gin could feel the surface give under his foot. Looking at the unknown mist Gin was thankful for his AES.

“Reu, come in and give us some environmental scans.”

The robot obeyed instantly, leaping through the hatch and into a perfectly aligned combat stance. “Room clear. Beginning scan.” A series of probing beams and scanning arrays erupted from Reu's blank face and swept around the room.

“Air is toxic to Solonian lungs