

Zero-Option

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From CHRONICLES OF THE EARTH EMPIRE series.

ZERO-OPTION by Lindsay Brambles

Introduction:

I wrote Zero-Option back in the eighties on a Commodore 64 using a great little wordprocessor called Paperclip. For a few years it just languished while I worked on other things, including what would eventually become In Darkness Bound (ISBN 1-4241-6560-1), my novel now available from PublishAmerica (www.publishamerica.com) and as of April 2007 in wider release to bookstores and online retailers like Amazon.com and Barnes&Noble.

Zero-Option is about forty thousands words, which puts it in the novella category. I had thought of expanding it into a book, but in going over it I realized that would probably just make it bloated and weaken the story. Everything that needs to be in there is, and adding more would just be deadweight.

The story is essentially told from the perspective of Commander Nathan Imbrahim, but it is really about Captain Lhara Jhordel. The same Lhara Jhordel who is an ensign in my novel In Darkness Bound. This story you're about to read, however, takes place about four decades after events in the novel.

The original version of this story was submitted in competition at the 1989 Pinecone II Science Fiction Convention and won first place. As such, I think rather fondly of it, and despite the fact that some years have passed since then, I believe it holds up well.

If you enjoy this story I hope you'll check out www.freewebs.com/lindsaybrambles for information on In Darkness Bound. The latter is set in the same universe and once again involves Fleet. It's a war novel of the future and Lhara Jhordel figures prominently in it. Within the context of that story you get to see how she became the officer she is in this one.

This story and others, as well as several novels in various stages of completion (the sequel to *In Darkness Bound* is all but finished) are intended to create a sort of 'future history,' hence the *Chronicles of the Earth Empire* heading above. Whether they will see completion and publication will essentially be up to you, the paying public. It takes a lot of time and effort to write books, and though I get immense pleasure out of doing so, that does not, unfortunately, pay the bills. So I encourage you to read this story and hope you'll be encouraged to seek out and buy *In Darkness Bound*. If I can sell enough copies of that book I may be able to push on with getting out the next one—providing my publisher considers it worthy of publication.

And now I leave you to *Zero-Option*. Happy reading.

Lindsay H.F. Brambles, Ottawa, 2007

1.

He realized he'd made an error in assuming the holos he'd seen of her were old recordings. An understandable mistake, given that the woman seated at the desk in the office seemed far too young to be the notorious Captain Jhordel. He stepped back a pace and re-examined the ID plate beside the hatch, then looked again at the woman who was engrossed in the contents of a com-link file. He would have believed her a junior officer but for the braid on each of her epaulettes: four silver bands on each shoulder to mark her rank as ship's master.

She was slight, to the point of almost seeming delicate, and looked as though she could not have been more than thirty. But rejuv could make a woman of sixty look half those years. Often there were telltale signs, but Jhordel had none of them. No faint discoloration to the whites of her eyes. None of the unusual blush to the skin. And her face did not have that pasty, fleshy, baby-soft look that some rejuvs acquired.

“Are you going to stand out there all day, Commander?”

He started, glanced up at her and blinked. She gave him a measured look in return, clearly sizing him up with that one quick survey. He cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Commander Nathan Imbrahim,” he said, snapping off a quick salute. “Naval Intelligence.”

He expected her to laugh and make the tired old joke about Naval Intelligence being an oxymoron. But she merely frowned and examined him again, more closely, thoroughly, and then seemed to dismiss him altogether. She turned back to the com-link.

“Sit,” she said gruffly, not looking up. There was steel in that order; and it was immediately clear to him she was not the sort to countenance disobedience. So he sat.

Her voice, he noted, was thick, hoarse, like she had been inhaling smoke for a few hours. Or shouting. Probably from the drugs, he thought as he settled into the lone seat across from her. He knew the FS Confederation had just returned from a raiding mission deep inside Unity space. He'd seen the scars when he'd come in from Earth orbit on board the flitter. Black blemishes, peppering the

surface of the white hull like some sort of fungal disease. Laser blasts, mostly, though there was evidence the shields had had to absorb more than one hit from antimatter torps.

Jhordel absently rubbed at her neck, revealing a red, perfectly symmetrical ‘hickey’ beneath the high collar of her jacket. He had expected to see it, but still a chill ran through him. He found himself probing self-consciously at the side of his own neck, running his fingertips over the bump that was still there, where a few weeks earlier he’d borne his own such mark. For spacers it was like a badge of honor, which they wore proudly wherever they went. It was the mark of the spacers. And on those who did the deep runs, it was essentially permanent.

Jhordel’s was such a mark, showing signs of recent exposure to the bite of the ‘pumps.’ It looked as though it might bleed; and that said much about the battle she and her crew had just been through. A rough one, he ventured. They would have been hooked into the system for long cycles, bound to those horrid metal leeches that attached to your neck as though they were part of your flesh, sucking blood from you and pumping it back in. On the return the blood was rich with oxygen and primed with a virtual pharmacopoeia. All necessary, if you wanted to stay alive while the g-forces within the ship—despite the gravity dispensators—reached extremes that would render the unprotected human lifeless in seconds.

He shuddered when he recalled what it felt like, and wondered how they could do it, time and time again. He had never grown used to it, despite his many jumps; but men and women like Jhordel went on doing it again and again, running the ship while being crushed into the cocoon of bladders that surrounded each, and kept conscious by a battery of drugs and mechanisms that left one sick and sore and feeling like the living dead long after the fighting had stopped. They went out there into the deeps of space and rained down destruction upon the enemy without complaint, seemingly oblivious of the incredible forces that threatened life itself, treating such threats as though they were simply a fact of life, and enduring the ghastly nightmare of pain that was almost routine on a fighting ship. He supposed that spacers became accustomed to such things; but he never could, having spent much of his life rooted to one planet or another.

Now that he looked more closely, he could see the slight bruising around the captain’s eyes, and recalled looking at his own face in a mirror after one particularly long skirmish. He hadn’t recognized himself: bloodshot eyes, puffy

flesh, the bruising—as though he had taken part in a drunken brawl. It had been frightening the first time, and after that he had never been anxious to look again. They must have been in a long battle, he thought, given that they'd already had a few days to recover.

“I've sent in my report to Intelligence,” Jhordel observed, at last glancing up from the com-link cube and addressing him directly.

“I'm not here about the report, sir,” he said. From where he sat the script in the cube was backwards, but he'd become quite adept at reading from this vantage point and knew she was preoccupied with data concerning the welfare of her ship. Natural enough after a return from battle, he mused to himself; and she doubtless didn't appreciate that Admiralty seemed little concerned about it.

She eyed him warily. “We've just spent three months out patrolling the line,” she said. The ‘line’ was the Pomerium Line, a semi-official boundary between Federation and Unity space. “We're back in port less than a day and Admiralty tells me I have to be ready to sail within a six-shift, but doesn't tell me why.” Her eyes narrowed, an unspoken accusation.

It took Imbrahim a moment to recall that a six-shift was forty-eight hours: six eight hour periods.

“My patience is thin, Commander, so I suggest you tell me why you're here. Since it's not about the report, I assume it has something to do with this mad rush to get us back out there again.”

He ran his tongue over his lips and drew a breath. “Orders, Captain,” he said. He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a file-chip, handed the small square of metalastic over to her and watched as she took it and examined it in a perfunctory manner.

“You're surely joking,” she growled, with all the pretense of one who knew he was not. “We're hardly in shape for ‘spooking.’”

She set the file-chip down on her desk, ignoring it; and he wondered how someone claiming to be at the edge of patience could be so indifferent to its contents. Her renowned discipline, he supposed.

“This isn't a deep-cover mission,” he assured her—though he reflected on

how that wasn't altogether true.

He detected a hint of curiosity in her eyes, but it was held well in check by that same discipline he found unnerving. He wasn't sure he liked the thought of having to serve on this ship under this captain. She was too reserved, too cold, too much a part of this vessel of hers. She could have been a machine; and he was inclined to think it must have something to do with the fact that she was from Tartarus. There were rumors, though, that it had something to do with an event in her past, on her first mission. Something that had happened to her on some backwater planet out on the Fringes. But that sort of thing was kept in a closed file. Admiralty would have told him if he had needed to know. They hadn't, so clearly he didn't.

"I hope this isn't a courier mission," she said with evident disgust. "I find it difficult to believe Admiralty would pull a ship of the line out of service when we need every one we can get out fighting the Unity."

"The file-chip, sir," was all he would say.

She looked at him sharply and grunted. But she picked up the square and dropped it in the com-link slot. The script that had floated in the cube vanished, replaced by new tracts, which glowed an angry red as they hovered in the air above her desk. She read them quickly, the scowl on her face growing darker, until at last she looked up at Imbrahim again.

"There's a war on, commander," she said simply.

"I know, sir."

"Ships disappear all the time. From battle. From poor phase-shifts. Sometimes in shift. Any number of things can happen to you out there. When someone doesn't report in, it's hardly cause to go traipsing out there after them. Especially not with something like the Connie."

"If it were any other ship, I might be inclined to agree with you," Imbrahim said. "Though to be honest, sir, I rather hope someone would come looking for me out there if I were long overdue."

She said nothing, but merely stared, waiting for him to continue. Waiting for him to explain.

“What the report I gave you doesn’t say, and what the Navy doesn’t want commonly known, is that it was the Niagara that disappeared, Captain.”

Jhordel visibly stiffened, but said, “The Niagara was fresh out of the slips.”

“Aye, sir.”

“There was a lot of untried technology on board,” she added, as though that might explain everything.

“It broke Earth orbit a little more than two weeks ago on its shakedown cruise,” he agreed. “And it’s possible something might have gone wrong.”

“Why not send out a probe? Cheaper, faster, and just as effective.”

“We’ve already done that, sir. Twice.” And she had almost certainly guessed that, he told himself.

Jhordel relaxed and slowly sat back in her chair. “I take it you found nothing.”

You know we didn’t. “The results were less substantial than that,” he confessed.

“You lost your probes,” she said, a smile quirking the corners of her mouth.

He felt the heat of irritation, annoyed she could see anything even remotely amusing about the situation.

“Forgive me, Commander,” she apologized, reading the look on his face. “I don’t mean to make light of the situation, but despite your revelation, I still find it difficult to get all worked up about this.” Her features hardened. “I’ve seen too many good people die out there to shed tears for any more. Besides, everyone remembers the Phoenix. This merely could be more of the same.”

She may have been young for a captain of her experience, but the war, he decided, had made her very old indeed. He realized she was much like the masters of the other warships he’d served on, though if anything she was tougher, harder, and perhaps a shade more cynical. He was older than she, but somehow in her presence he felt her junior. He felt the way he had always felt in the presence of his father, and it was a feeling of intimidation he didn’t like at

all.

“Tell me, Commander,” she said, regarding him shrewdly; “since it seems Intelligence doesn’t believe the Niagara had a simple systems failure that resulted in its destruction, just what do you think happened to it?”

He shrugged. “There are a lot of theories,” he said. “Some insist it must have been the Reds.”

“The Unity?” Jhordel snorted and shook her head. “That’s quite far out from Unity space. And since the captain of a class ship is under orders to conduct random jumps during a shakedown, I find it difficult to believe the Unity could have predicted where the ship would have been at any given moment. No,”—she shook her head again—“I can’t see the Red Catholic Church wasting precious resources that far beyond the Fringes.”

Which means you don’t think we should either, he thought; and he wasn’t sure he disagreed with her. He was inclined to subscribe to the theory that the Niagara had simply been a victim of technology. Something new that hadn’t worked quite the way it should have. On the other hand, there was still the possibility it was out there somewhere, relatively intact. There might be people still alive on board, waiting to be rescued. And even if there weren’t, the Navy needed to know what had happened, just so the same thing wouldn’t happen again.

“There’s also the possibility that it’s some kind of natural phenomenon,” he found himself saying. “Possibly something in the transit lines of the Matrix. The last reported jump was through the Rigar Transit Point.”

“And the probes?”

He shifted uncomfortably, because, of course, that was one of the holes in the theory. “The probes were sent from Msatas Transit Point,” he told her reluctantly.

“Rigar and Msatas have both been used for years without incident,” Jhordel said. “If there’s a problem, it would have to be at the other end.” She looked at him squarely and added, “Which doesn’t bode well for anyone following the Niagara and the probes.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed, his voice tight.

“Does Admiralty have some bold plan for how we’re going to make the jump and avoid a similar fate?” she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

He swallowed and grimaced. “They do, Captain, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

2.

“Tell them,” she said.

Imbrahim looked around at the faces of the other officers assembled in the Confederation’s briefing room and thought he sensed a degree of hostility in their eyes. He told himself he was wrong, that it was only paranoia, that he was just letting his own insecurities get the better of him. He wasn’t a spacer. Not in their eyes, at least. And that set him apart from them; he didn’t belong in their world. Consequently, they didn’t trust him as they would one of their own. But they couldn’t possibly hate him, or really have feelings about him one way or the other.

Except that I’m Naval Intelligence, he reminded himself; and nobody in the regular navy cared for Jackson’s lackeys.

“We could forego the transit point and make a blind jump,” he began.

“You can’t be serious,” said Wethers, the first officer. “Even doing skip jumps involves an element of risk. And they’re only short distances. You’re talking about light-years of phase-shifting outside of the Matrix. Two hundred and fifty light-years beyond the Fringes, as a matter-of-fact.”

“I agree.”

Imbrahim glanced over at the navigation officer, Seria Talud.

“In the Matrix we’re pretty well guaranteed safe passage,” she continued. “The use of transit points has made interstellar travel much more efficient and safe. There’s little fear of passing through a planet or a sun or dropping out into one. The lines we use are generally clear of mass and debris. Blind phase-shifting doesn’t guarantee that.”

“But it was practiced for more than two centuries after the development of the Pearson FTL,” Imbrahim reminded them all. “I grant you that use of transit points is preferable, but the only two points that connect to the sector we need to jump to are suspect.”

“It’s possible to drop shift before you reach the exit point on a given line in the Matrix,” said Talud.

“But the risks are no less substantial than blind shifting,” Imbrahim argued. “Dropping shift from within the Matrix means an unsighted exit. Even our best efforts can’t predict an exact entry into sublight space.”

“I’m not enamored of either suggestion,” Wethers grunted. “They’re both too bloody risky. And if there are Unity out there waiting for the next ship to come down the pike, we might not be in any shape to defend ourselves against them. Dropping shift blind or using the old conventional methods could put a lot of strain on the ship.”

“Not to mention the crew,” interjected the chief medical officer. N’robo gave Imbrahim a sullen look, and there was a hint of indictment in his eyes. “We’ve just come off three months of an intense patrol, Commander. We took a beating out there. The crew is tired physically and emotionally. The Navy has no right expecting us to go right back out there without a decent respite. We’re all need of some much-deserved shore leave.”

“I appreciate that, doctor,” the Intelligence officer assured him. “And believe me, if there were any choice we’d use another ship. But yours is the only one available. Every other suitable warship in Fleet is either out on duty or in the dock for repairs. It’s true we could call someone else off the line, but that would mean more delay. You’re here, now. And now is when we need you.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to inconvenience to Naval Intelligence, would we?” Jhordel drawled acerbically. “And I don’t suppose the fact that if you re-directed another ship you wouldn’t be able to have one of your people on board”

Imbrahim blinked at her, but knew it would be fruitless feigning innocence in the matter. “There’s that, too,” he agreed, smiling thinly. “Naval Intelligence has taken a keen interest in this matter.”

“Why?” someone asked.

“Because if the Unity is behind it, they may have some new weapon we should know about,” he replied.

“But you don’t think it is the Unity,” said Jhordel in a blunted tone.

He hesitated. “No,” he admitted, reluctantly, “we don’t. If they’d such a weapon, it isn’t likely they’d be using it out there. Nor does it seem likely they could’ve known the Niagara or the probes were going to be coming through the point in that sector.”

“So what does that leave us with?” asked Wethers.

“Natural phenomena,” Imbrahim offered. “Which is another reason for caution when approaching this matter.”

“And if it isn’t something natural?” asked N’robo.

Imbrahim shifted uncomfortably. “Then it may be something we’ve stumbled upon that we’d rather we hadn’t,” he muttered.

3.

“You’re not telling me everything,” said Jhordel. She gave him a sharp look, suggesting by that glower that she wouldn’t accept prevarication.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” he said innocently.

Her jaw line hardened. “I think you know perfectly well what I mean, commander.”

He swallowed. They were alone again, the others having been dismissed from the briefing room so as to tend to their duties in preparation for departure. Imbrahim looked around the table at the empty chairs, purposely avoiding her eyes.

“There are some in Admiralty who believe we’re dealing with some new agency,” he said at length. He found the courage to look at her, and saw again the discipline that held her in check and kept her composed. It made him shiver and go cold inside.

“New agency,” she echoed. “I see. And they believe this ‘new agency’ to be a threat to the Empire?”

“Possibly.” He gestured helplessly. “Which is why there’s some concern.”

“Because of the information the Niagara was carrying?”

“Yes. She contained our latest developments. If someone got hold of her they could find out an awful lot about Fleet technology.”

“I see.” Jhordel sat back in her chair and rested one arm languidly on the briefing room table. “I take it Admiralty has sent you here to ensure we’ll do the right thing then, should that become necessary.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice strained, not much more than a whisper.

She grinned sardonically and shook her head. “And how does that sit with you, Commander?”

“I, too, swore the oath, Captain. I knew what I was getting into when I joined the Navy.”

“You thought you did,” she corrected. “I know your sort, Commander. You got caught up in the patriotism, as so many do when war looms and we see all that we value threatened by outside forces. But you weren’t gene-typed a spacers.”

He showed surprise.

She laughed at that. “Come, Commander, surely you didn’t honestly think it escaped notice. It’s written all over you,” she said.

“We all make choices, Captain. I made this one.”

“Did you, now? That’s not my understanding of how Jackson works.”

He kept silent, not knowing what to say.

“You must be a latent,” she said.

“Sir?”

“A potential empathy, Mister Imbrahim. That’s the only way you could do as many jumps as you have without having been born a spacers. And Jackson wouldn’t have been interested in you otherwise.”

“You’re very astute,” he said.

“I’ve had practice.” She stared at him, then cocked an eyebrow. “So can you...”

He shook his head. “Like you say, Captain, I’m a latent. The genetic component is there, somewhere, but other than letting me travel at leisure in space with an implant, it’s not much good for anything else.”

“You could have refused.”

“Jackson?” Now he laughed. “Once I made a choice to join Fleet...” He shrugged. “The admiral is not someone you argue with, sir?”

She rose slowly from her seat. And though she was not tall, she had a

commanding presence. He was reminded again of his father. Her lips twitched in a quirky little grin—almost a smirk. “So now you understand,” she said.

“Understand?”

“That sometimes our choices are really not choices at all, are they?” With that she turned from him and left the room.

Imbrahim sat alone in the eerie silence, staring out the floor-to-ceiling viewports that lined the aft wall of the room. He could see Earth in the distance, an enormous shining sphere whose glow blocked out the feebler light of a myriad stars. For some reason it was a more stirring and poignant sight than it had ever been before. He wished he were back there instead of here; he had the feeling he’d perhaps seen it for the last time.

4.

The same ensign who had conducted him through the maze of corridors to Jhordel's office later showed Imbrahim to his cabin in officers' country on the accommodations deck. The Confederation, being a frigate of recent vintage, offered considerably better living quarters than the 'spook' he'd last traveled on. The cabin was spacious and well-appointed, not at all like the Spartan and cramped cubbyhole that had been his on the Aurora for three hellish weeks. Of course, large ships like the Connie were intended to spend months in space without visiting a port; the 'spooks' were purposely designed to be small and elusive, their missions seldom lasting beyond two or three weeks.

More than half the mass of a ship like the Aurora was engine; and it carried few weapons other than those necessary to safely navigate through the errant debris of space. Shields and sensing equipment on such vessels were the primary arsenal, given that those ships were designed for spying well behind enemy lines. The same properties that made them suitable to this task made them ideal as couriers for Naval Intelligence field operatives like him—which was why many of his shipboard days had been spent in the bowels of such craft.

The Confederation, by contrast, was a fortress with engines. As such it was less maneuverable, less agile than the Aurora, but with the power to raze the surface of a planet. And even though space on any ship was at a premium, the Connie was closer to the luxury of one of the commercial interstellar passenger liners than it was to the likes of the Aurora.

Under different circumstances he might have reveled in the good fortune that had won him an assignment on board the Connie. But this was no ordinary mission Admiralty had given him; and he suspected there was nothing fortuitous in being handed it.

He dropped his kit into a nearby chair and strode easily to the large viewport that filled a good portion of the cabin's bow-facing wall. From where he stood he could see along the spine of the ship, forward, towards the prow of the frigate. Between him and the bridge there was an array of weapons, some of them tucked away, others, like the laser cannons, jutting forth threateningly—the sharp, deadly spines of a quiescent beast. They were muted now, but they had not so long ago spat their fury into the eerie silences of space. He felt some

reassurance in seeing them—though secretly he wondered whether even these formidable armaments would be sufficient to the task they were about to undertake.

He moved to the desk in the corner, sat down and activated the com-link. The cube formed above the projector rods, a faintly blue field that rotated to orient itself towards him.

“Personnel information,” he said.

“Concerning?” the AI requested.

“Jhordel, Lhara.”

“Clearance?” the machine queried.

He gave his security code, grateful his position in Intelligence provided him such easy access to information that would otherwise have been off limits. Admiralty might not have thought it necessary he know the truth about Jhordel, but he was damned if he was going to go on this mission in the dark. He liked to know as much as possible about the people he might be called upon to trust with his life.

“Jhordel, Lhara Annyselia,” the AI intoned at length. It rattled off information he already knew: her birth on Tartarus, the ships she had served on, the missions of which she’d been a part. So many missions, in fact, that there could have been two of her and it would still have seemed a remarkable career. But it was the first that caught his attention. She’d been part of the mission that had started it all. The one that had started the war.

“Obsidian,” he murmured to himself.

Obsidian, where Grenier had made her fatal mistake. She had raised the ire of Red Catholics throughout the empire, and there had been no turning back after that. The Red Catholic Unity had gained steam quickly, spreading throughout worlds on the Fringes, then rapidly inwards, towards the more populous regions of the Federation. The Unity had grown more and more powerful, until Fleet itself had been seriously threatened.

He listened through to the end of the AI’s recitation, but was frustrated to find

that one critical piece of data was still blocked. Whatever had happened to her on Obsidian remained a mystery. Nothing he could do would allow him to see the file on that. Admiralty was clearly determined it never be known but by a handful. Or someone in Admiralty was so determined. Because now, as he looked over her dossier, he could see a distinct pattern emerging. Vice-Admiral Carter's prints were all over it. The admiral had constantly intervened in her career; it was as though he had made it his personal mission to do so.

Imbrahim pondered this, considering the many possibilities, and reaching the conclusion that whatever it was that had happened to her on Obsidian had had something to do with the Reds and why she seemed to hell-bent on exacting some sort of revenge. He better understood her, he thought, despite the blacked out information. Jhordel's recklessness—as some would call it—was firmly rooted in her past. It was a simple enough motivation; and he could sympathize with her wholeheartedly. But it was an emotional response, and in his experience that was the sort of thing that led to mistakes. And in space, mistakes got you killed.

While the episode that seemed to have changed her life was sealed from scrutiny, there was considerable information regarding the incident for which she was publicly famous—the one for which she had almost been court-martialed. And would have been, Imbrahim thought, if not for Admiral Carter.

For Imbrahim much of this information was new, since he had not been on Earth at the time of the furor. By the time he had returned, the details had already become blurred by countless retellings. Of course, as far as what had gone on in the Council of the Admirals, that information had been limited to the handful who had been there. It wasn't counted among the data the computer offered up for his edification. He did know, however, that quite a battle had been fought as to whether Jhordel should be demoted and denied future command. Some of the traditionalists had insisted it was the only way of maintaining discipline, but the more moderate element in the Admiralty had foreseen that such a move would alienate the public, and consequently the politicians whose support the Navy so desperately needed.

He smiled roguishly as he imagined the fur flying in that closed room of seasoned military strategists. It had long been rumored that the Admiral of the Fleet himself, Silas Jackson, had taken a personal interest in the case and had come down in favor of Jhordel. For that reason and that reason alone, many

argued, Jhordel had been given the much sought after and prized command of the Confederation. He thought it more likely that Carter had played the bigger role, but Jackson would have gone along with it because of the flak he'd been receiving at the time: Jhordel's success against the Unity in her unprecedented action had been the first major victory for the Federation in several years. It had come, too, after a spate of embarrassing losses.

Certainly in the time that Jhordel had held command of the Confederation she had proven herself an able—and daring—officer. Her ship and crew had the highest success rate of any in the fleet; and hers was currently the only ship given letters of marque that allowed it to raid indiscriminately beyond the Pomerium Line, deep in Unity space. Imbrahim surmised that much of her success arose from the ruthlessness for which she prosecuted her missions—a ruthlessness that had garnered a considerable reputation. And it was probably because of this that in the Unity they called her 'Satan's whore.' The Cardinali, it was said, had put a price on her head, with a reward of untold riches and an assured spot in the Heavens for the captain who brought her down. From what he had heard through the grapevine, there had been many among the Unity fleet who had taken up the challenge; and what he had seen of the Confederation as he had come in from Earth had been visible proof. How long, he wondered, before someone succeeded? Even the magnificent Jhordel, he ventured, was not invulnerable.

Satan's whore. He found it difficult not to smile at that; it was easy to admire someone who could so enrage the enemy they felt it necessary to single her out for attention. Clearly she'd come a long way since that day when she'd evacuated the crew of the Grand Banks and primed it for self-destruct. He tried to imagine what it must have been like for her watching from the tenuous safety of her life pod as her ship had hurtled through the black infinity of space, the defensive array of the Unity waystation pounding it mercilessly. But not enough. Not enough. The old Grandy had defied the odds and made it through the screen of defenses, through the shields, where it had unceremoniously plowed into the station. That in itself would have been enough to wreak havoc; but then the ship's auto-destruct had done its work. The graviton collection coils had collapsed and the thing had become a singularity, sucking three Unity ships and the station into its ever-growing well of gravity.

Three ships and a station. He shook his head in awe. All with an old scow that had been on its last legs as an offensive weapon.

Three ships and a station. How many lives had been lost that day? he wondered. How many thousands of souls sucked down into that well of lightlessness? It made him shudder; and he wondered if he would have been capable of such a cold and calculated maneuver. Without remorse she had casually dispatched tens of thousands of lives. In all the years he'd been a part of this war he'd never actually killed anyone. He'd never actually even seen anyone killed. His assignments had never involved that sort of thing. Naval Intelligence generally left assassination to those best suited for the task: the Empaths. That was just as well with him, since he knew it wasn't in his character to be so ruthless.

He had no doubts, however, that it was well within Jhordel's, and that consequently she was the only choice for this mission.

5.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” the ensign said stiffly, “but the captain requests your presence at her table in the mess at nineteen hundred hours.” He saluted, then turned on one heel and marched away before Imbrahim had a chance to respond. The commander stood in his door, bewildered, feeling as though he’d just been blindsided.

“Better wear your dress togs,” said N’robo, smiling waggishly as he approached from down the corridor. “The skipper is particular about that when in port.” He shrugged and made a noise through his nose. “I guess she feels its one of the rare opportunities to feel civilized in all this madness. Thing’s are considerably more relaxed out on patrol.”

“Thanks for the warning,” said Imbrahim.

N’robo laughed, his ebony face wrinkling with lines of mirth. “Don’t fret it so, Commander. The lady has a reputation, but believe me, she won’t bite. Unless, of course, you get on the wrong side of her.” He chortled loudly, as though enjoying some private joke and taking a particular delight in the nonplused look on Imbrahim’s face, then continued on down the corridor to his own cabin.

Imbrahim watched him go, overcome with a greater sense of isolation than he’d felt in a long time. Once more he was reminded he was a stranger on this ship, alone among them. Not a spacers. Not regular navy. Not even something they particularly liked. Quite the opposite. He had no doubts they looked upon him with a measure of disdain.

He withdrew into his cabin and prepared himself for dinner, not at all looking forward to the encounter.

6.

On a spook there was not enough surplus energy, nor the space available to accommodate a full-fledged reconstitutor. Imbrahim recalled meals as having been adequate, but far from memorable. Granted, some of that was an internal prejudice he had never been able to shake: the constant thread of background thought that always ran through his mind as he ate the stuff, reminding him that the food he was shoveling into his mouth had not so long ago been shit. Some of it, anyway, because of course the components for recycling came from an assortment of ship wastes.

The fare on the Confederation, however, was worthy of anything the commercial liners had to offer—even if it, too, was partially composed of what had once been the bodily discharge of one of the thousand odd crew.

He found himself savoring what appeared to be veal marinated in a wine and mushroom sauce. It had been brought to them by actual crewmembers, rather than servobot. A quaint custom N’robo assured him was, like the wearing of dress uniforms, strictly reserved for in-port occasions like this. Imbrahim didn’t really care; the smell of the food had reminded him that it had been some time since he had last eaten.

The taste of the meal matched the aroma. Candied carrots, scallop potatoes, and snow peas supplemented the meat dish, providing a repast of a sort he hadn’t enjoyed in some time. N’robo, who sat to his right, informed him the vegetables were the real thing, having come from Earthside in a resupply shipment just that day. The veal, however, was clearly not the real McCoy. Not because it tasted artificial, but because no one had eaten ‘real’ meat on Earth in more than two centuries. He had no idea as to whether or not the reconstituted cutlet he was devouring with gusto approximated the actual flavor of veal or not. All he knew was that it was surprisingly good for something that had once gone down a toilet into a separation unit.

“I’m glad to see our culinary offerings meet with your approval, Mister Imbrahim,” said Jhordel. She sipped daintily at her wine and eyed him shrewdly over the rim of the glass.

Imbrahim looked up at her and smiled apologetically, abruptly conscious of

the fact that he had been attacking his meal with manners not much better than those of a lower deck hand. “You’ll have to forgive me, Captain,” he said. “It’s been more than a day since I last ate. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.”

“Ah,” she breathed, a wry look in her eyes. “It would appear then, that we weren’t the only ones caught off guard by Admiralty.”

Indeed not, thought Imbrahim. He’d been called in and given little more than a few hours to prepare himself. A few hours in which to familiarize himself with the matter at hand, but not enough time to do it justice. I’m flying blind, he told himself; and so, he observed somewhat fearfully, was Jhordel. That was not a particularly pleasant thought.

“It has occurred to me, Commander,” she said casually, “that when you briefed us earlier you failed to mention one alternative means of achieving our objective.”

He frowned and regarded her quizzically. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

Jhordel surveyed her table with a lazy eye, taking in the faces of the other command officers seated about it. Finally her gaze drifted back to Imbrahim; but there was a harder edge to it now.

“I’ve spent a few hours reviewing the charts,” she said at length. “We have some fairly decent information on most of the transit points located throughout the Empire, both in the Unity and in the Federation.”

Imbrahim swallowed, beginning to sense where she was headed.

She grinned at him, a feral grin, and he saw in that instant a flash of the cold and calculating ruthlessness that had made her so feared by the Unity and so vaunted by Carter and Jackson. “I believe there may be a transit point that can bring us to within a couple of days sublight travel from the last suspected positions of the Niagara and the probes.”

Imbrahim slowly set down his fork and picked up the napkin in his lap. He dabbed at his lips, suddenly no longer hungry.

“I’m sure Admiralty considered all possibilities,” he said, finally finding his

voice.

“Perhaps,” said Jhordel; but he could tell it didn’t matter to her whether they had or hadn’t. She would do things her way, as she had done so most of her life since Obidian.

“Using a transit point in Unity space would be courting an unnecessary risk on a mission that may well be fraught with far greater peril than any of us are willing to concede,” he argued. He looked quickly around the table and saw the others were gaping at him. Gaping at them. Him and Jhordel. And he realized, then, that they were as astonished as he about this bombshell the captain had dropped.

“The risk involved is relatively minor,” Jhordel insisted. “We can make the jump directly to the Unity point, then use it to jump to our objective. Our time in Unity space would be limited.”

“You make it sound like a leisurely stroll through the countryside,” he accused.

She shrugged.

“With all due respect, Captain, aren’t all Unity points guarded?”

“Afraid of a little action, Commander?” she chided.

“Afraid we might jeopardize our mission, sir.”

“You worry too much, Mister Imbrahim.” Jhordel addressed her officers with a knowing look. “Have a little faith.”

“That’s for the Reds, I’m afraid,” he muttered sourly.

She blinked, caught off guard by this retort; and then she suddenly guffawed, throwing her head back and laughing loudly. Others around the table joined in, until even Imbrahim found himself smiling at the joke.

“We’ll make a spacers out of you yet, Mister Imbrahim.” She gave him a sly look as she raised her glass in a toast. “Success,” she declared, glancing around the table.

“Success!” they all chanted as one.

But as Imbrahim sipped his wine and studied them, he wondered if they truly understood the potential danger into which they would all soon be plunged. And then he almost laughed, because of course they did. They had seen the face of death many times, in many guises. They had stared into its eyes and lived to tell the tale. Every moment they were out there fighting the Unity they lived with the knowledge that each breath they breathed might very well be their last.

He shuddered, struck by the absurdity of this scene. Here they were, wining and dining, resplendent in their finery, acting as though all were perfect in the universe. But it wasn't. They were at war. Had been for more than two decades. They lived in a world of uncertainty, never knowing when they went out into the deeps of space if they would ever return. It was a sobering existence. And a brutally lonely one. Under such circumstances it seemed fruitless to strike up meaningful relationships anywhere; it was too likely you might one day awaken to find the one you loved no longer counted among the living.

He wondered if that was how they saw things. Was it all so clear to them? Did they understand the purpose of their lives so well? Or were they like he, sitting here, bewildered by events that unfolded around them?

He didn't feel in control of his life; indeed, the fact he was here confirmed as much.

Imbrahim swallowed the last of his wine and looked towards the captain. He saw in her things that he couldn't find in himself. She saw this war as a soldier needed to see it: there was the enemy and they must be destroyed. It was as simple as that. No complications. No unwieldy conscience to leave her wondering and indecisive, dwelling upon the right and the wrong of an act. For her the lines of conflict had long ago been drawn, but for him they had blurred with time. Nothing seemed quite so well defined as it once had been; he didn't see black and white, but only gray.

Perhaps it was because he'd fought a different war from the one in which she'd engaged. He'd never been in command of a ship and had never ordered the unleashing of destructive forces so potent that in seconds they could kill millions. How many ships had she ordered so destroyed? How many worlds?

Jhordel's eyes met his. He felt himself chilled by the frostiness of that look,

and quickly glanced away, beyond her, to the viewports that opened out upon the glorious vista of Earth. It looked so beautiful and serene. How many down there would care if this ship and its crew simply ceased to exist? Not many, he suspected; because in the long run it would make little difference to their lives. The sun would still shine and the Earth would still turn on its axis. Life would go on. As it always had. As it always must.

Or so he believed.

Or so he thought he must.

7.

As a professional courtesy, Jhordel invited him onto the bridge during the initial phase-shift. His first inclination was to decline; he preferred to suffer the indignities of the shift in the privacy of his cabin. The captain's request, however, was clearly as good as an order. And so two days after he had boarded the Confederation he found himself sitting on the bridge, preparing himself for the moment when the Pearson FTL would carry them over the light barrier and through the transit point.

You could not enter the complex network of the Matrix without first phase-shifting. To a sublight ship the transit points that were the gateways to this network were merely anomalous energy spikes in the background radiation. Without phase-shifting the transit points were transparent. Indeed, to the human eye they were invisible. Nothing marked their existence; they had no apparent source.

Imbrahim had often wondered how they had first been discovered, and suspected it had been quite by chance. It was not the sort of thing scientists could have guessed at, he imagined, since there had never been any reason to believe that such a thing as the Matrix existed. History was full of such serendipitous discoveries. Of course, not all of them had been so beneficial; and he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever the Niagara and the probes had encountered was to be counted among the latter.

Before they could make the jump they had to get clear of Earth and its moon. If you phase-shifted too close to any substantial mass you could end up almost anywhere—if you ended up any place at all. He was reminded of the Phoenix and quickly put the thought out of his mind.

Even with gravity dispensators cocooning them from the worst of the g-forces brought on by accelerating, the effect on the human body was punishing. Imbrahim could only be thankful they weren't doing 'military' maneuvers. The dispensators were severely tested in such situations, and it required constant use of the 'pumps' to keep the crew alive. A price one paid, he supposed, for seemingly defying the laws of physics and thumbing one's nose at the universe.

He was glad that despite the Confederation's sophisticated AI unit, the bridge

crew were kept busy during the moments prior to the shift. It meant no eyes would be on him as the ship made the jump; and consequently, they wouldn't see how much he loathed this part of any interstellar journey.

The force of acceleration was crushing, but not sufficient to render him unconscious. Without the dispensators, however, he would have been flattened. Squashed like a bug under a shoe, was the analogy he recalled from his Academy days. He had heard of instances where dispensators had failed just at the point of peak acceleration. Needless to say, nothing much had survived of ship and crew in such cases.

All spacers lived with that reality and seemed unbothered by it. He couldn't say the same of himself; it made him blanch.

He had long ago learned that no two shifts were ever exactly alike, each having something different to distinguish it from the other. Not that they were events filled with spectacle in the first place. There were no fireworks, nor monumental revelations. For a spacers, Imbrahim guessed they were all rather routine. Routine, but never taken for granted. That was a lesson they pounded into your head over and over in the Academy: space was never to be taken for granted; it could be merciless to those who were complacent.

Once into hyperspace and through the point, there was no longer a need for the protective embrace of the bladders. He heaved a sigh of relief as they retracted into his chair, thankful to be free of them and their suffocating grasp.

In hyperspace, acceleration was no longer experienced by those within the shell of the ship. Regardless of how much greater it became, the crew of the Confederation would feel no change.

Oddly enough, he felt his safest in hyperspace. It was extraordinarily difficult for an enemy to launch any sort of assault against you while the ship traveled at hyperlight speeds. Of course, there were the rare occasions when a ship had made a jump and pulled in with it a salvo of antimatter torpedoes that had been dispatched to destroy it. The results of such an occurrence were unpredictable, though it was suspected that more than one ship had been destroyed in such a fashion. And then there were the strange instances of debris sometimes as large as small planetoids—being sucked into a transit point. No one could explain how that happened, but the consequences could be devastating. Such a mass was as

immovable in hyperspace as it was in the sublight environment. A ship in transit encountering such a body on the same plane would be as pulverized as any that might collide with a similar mass outside the Matrix.

“Not much action now,” said Jhordel, rising easily from her seat and looking as though she had not just come through the punishing ordeal of the shift. She smiled down at him, and added, “Until we reach the line, of course.”

“And then?” he asked, trying to match her steady gaze and failing. He wished he could stand and not feel the nausea that always overcame him shortly after a shift. But he knew that if he got to his feet just now he would embarrass himself. That was the last thing he wanted to do in front of Jhordel.

“The McLuhan is scheduled to link up with us,” she said absently, looking forward, towards the viewport. “They’re returning from near the sector of Unity we’re interested in.”

“The McLuhan!” he sputtered, almost choking on the words. “They were out at the T’Ching Transit Point.” He stared at her, incredulous, hoping she was just pulling his leg but horribly certain she wasn’t.

She made a face. “They call it God’s Eye Point,” she grunted. They being the Reds, of course.

He ignored her and said, “T’Ching. You can’t be serious.”

“I’m always serious when it comes to a mission,” she said stonily.

He shook his head, aghast, more perturbed now than he had been the night before when she had first proposed this plan. He looked up at her, trying to quell the odd mix of rage and fear that had seized him. “For pity’s sake, Captain! T’Ching is Chastity’s transit point. Chastity! And we could only exit from it. To make the jump that would get us near to the Niagara’s last posted position we’d have to cross the system to T’Chau.” Forgetting his earlier prudence, he pushed himself from his chair and stood before her in angry disapprobation. “It’ll be swarming with Reds. They have their main base there.”

She seemed to enjoy his discomfort. “We can be sure they won’t be expecting us then,” she said, the tone of her words clearly meant to goad.

“They’re the most frequented transit points in all Unity space!” he cried. “Their warships are constantly coming and going. And with Chastity the seat of the Church, those points will be more heavily guarded than any outside of Earth’s.”

“Which is why there’ll be weaknesses there that won’t be found at other, lesser used points,” she argued. “With so much traffic coming and going through T’Ching and T’Chau, they can’t be as scrupulous in their examination of each vessel.”

He gawked at her, eyes wide with incredulity. “You can’t seriously be proposing we jump to Chastity,” he said; but he knew she was very serious, knew it was all part of that dark mystery of her past. He could see in her eyes that this was a challenge she couldn’t pass on. Wouldn’t pass on. It was a way of thumbing her nose at the Reds, like a child taunting a bully. They had put a price on her head, and now she wanted to have a great laugh at their expense. That it might jeopardize them all seemed irrelevant. It was then that Imbrahim decided Jhordel was quite mad.

8.

“I’ve been on the ships since long before the war officially started,” N’robo said. He smiled, looking almost wistful. “Back in those days, Commander, we did pretty much what we do today. But we didn’t call it a war.” He chuckled. “No, it was a ‘skirmish’ or an ‘incident.’ On the ships, though, we never really fooled ourselves: we knew what we were doing. It just took the politicians a little longer to catch up. By then, of course, a lot of good people had died.” He shrugged and sighed. “Maybe if we’d started the war sooner we wouldn’t still be fighting it now.”

Imbrahim turned away from the viewport of the doctor’s office and looked across the room at the chief medical officer. “I think Jhordel’s fighting her own war,” he said quietly.

“Aren’t we all, Commander?”

“Not the kind she is.”

“You think her mad, don’t you?”

“It’s madness to take this ship as deep into Unity space as she’s proposing.”

“Is it?” N’robo’s thick, gray eyebrows shot up on his forehead, as though he were startled by this claim, but Imbrahim thought it more show than genuine surprise.

He frowned at the doctor. “Surely you can see the danger of it,” he pleaded.

“These days there are few missions without danger,” the doctor observed. “I’ve always gone out into them with the belief I might not make it back.”

“But this is unnecessary.”

N’robo lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “I’ve been with many captains in my time, Commander. Each had his or her eccentricities. But none of them were where they were because they hadn’t earned that place. Admiralty doesn’t hand ships to people it can’t trust. The men and women who occupy the

center seats of ships like the Confederation aren't ordinary, Commander. They're something extraordinary. Something special. Something rare. So it may well seem they're a little mad, but perhaps it's only their particular brand of madness that can effectively be used to combat the insanity of war. Perhaps only people like Jhordel have a clear enough vision of what must be done to take us through to victory in this conflict."

"And if they take us to our deaths?"

"It won't be without good reason, I'm sure."

Imbrahim drew a breath and released it slowly through flared nostrils. At length he said, "Jhordel's parents were both killed by the Unity."

"On the attack on Tartarus," said N'robo, nodding. "It's common enough knowledge."

"Perhaps her desire to avenge them is clouding her judgment," Imbrahim suggested.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, there, Commander."

Imbrahim shot him a challenging look. "Why?"

"Because she's not that sort of person. She wouldn't endanger other lives because of some personal vendetta."

"Her history suggests otherwise."

N'robo rolled his eyes. "Look, her parents were killed twenty years ago. Don't you think that if she was mentally unstable because of the loss of her parents, as you seem to be suggesting, she would have been found out by now? You know Fleet as well as I. You know they're constantly assessing the psychological profile of each and every one of us. If you don't fit into a set of given parameters, they quietly let you go. I've seen enough spacers discharged in my day, and the navy hasn't become any more lenient in that direction. They can't afford to. When ships like the Confederation cost as much as they do and are as important to the Federation as they are, Fleet certainly can't run the risk of handing them over to any but the most trusted officers. So while I've no doubt that at times the 'desire to avenge' her parents has been a driving force behind

some of Captain Jhordel's actions, I refuse to subscribe to the notion that she would needlessly jeopardize ship and crew simply for the sake of vengeance. This ship and its crew are foremost in her mind at all times. And I should know, being the ship's doctor." N'robo leaned back in his chair and took on an air of smug certitude.

"No, Mister Imbrahim," he concluded, "the deaths of her parents certainly had something to do with the molding of her character, but Lhara Jhordel is a far more complex woman than that. After serving with her for more than three years, I can personally vouch for that."

"Then you were with her when she took out Trinity?" Imbrahim stared at him with a mixture of awe and incredulity.

"Aye," N'robo said. He smiled crookedly. "We all thought her crazy then," he confessed. "But the results speak for themselves. She gave the Federation a much needed victory."

"At the cost of her ship and considerable risk to her crew, doctor."

"The Grandy was nearing retirement," N'robo pointed out. "Better that it end its days in glory than as so much worthless scrap floating in orbit about one of the lesser worlds. As for any danger Captain Jhordel may have placed the crew in, well, you just ask the people who served with her on that ship. I venture that not one would speak against her."

"That absolves her of nothing, doctor. She took an aging, ill-equipped ship into a region of space she never should have. There was no guarantee when you came out of that transit point that you wouldn't have been annihilated by Unity forces."

"Quite true, Commander. But there are few situations in life in which there are guarantees. Captain Jhordel took a risk, I grant you that. But how much more of a risk than that taken by the commanders of other ships in this war? She saw an opportunity and exploited it."

"You were part of a fleet that had just been attacked by Unity raiders," said Imbrahim. "There was a lot of damage among the Federation ships. Jhordel should have stayed around to assist."

“And missed the one chance she had of returning enemy fire.”

“She couldn’t return anything! She didn’t have the weapons to go up against the likes of the three frigates that attacked you.”

“We had one chance of following them, Commander,” N’robo said patiently. “You know as well as I that it’s virtually impossible to follow a ship into hyperspace. The moment they make the jump, they’re lost to you, unless you’re incredibly lucky and guess which line in the Matrix they’ve chosen. But Lhara did the impossible, Commander.”

“I know the story, doctor.”

“Do you?” N’robo gave him a dubious look. “It’s not all in the reports, Commander. Haven’t you wondered how she managed what no one else ever had?”

Of course he had wondered. He had spent hours pondering that very point after reading her personnel records and the official report on the matter. But there was nothing in Admiralty’s own account of the incident to suggest how she had accomplished what many deemed a miracle.

He sat down in the chair opposite N’robo and looked attentive.

“I’m listening,” he said.

“It’s quite simple, really.” N’robo leaned back and made himself comfortable, looking for all the world like some old vet spinning tall tales. Except that Imbrahim doubted the man was the sort to lie. Not about this. Not about someone he clearly admired a great deal. “When the raiders struck we were on the far side of the fleet. They came in fast, from out of a cloud of planetesimals. It was a carefully planned maneuver, because the assault was right in the line of the transit point. They merely swept past, striking as they gathered speed for the jump.”

“A common pattern among the Unity,” Imbrahim acknowledged.

“Aye. One that Captain Jhordel recognized immediately. She knew they were going to jump, and knew also that we had little chance of making the jump with them.”

“So how—”

N’robo held up a hand, signaling for patience.

“I’m sure,” he continued, “you’ve heard of those occasions when torpedoes launched at a ship in the process of making a phase-shift have been drawn into hyperspace along with the ship.”

Imbrahim inclined his head slightly, said nothing, waiting for the doctor to go on.

“Well, the results can be devastating. I’m not fluent on the technicalities of it all, but as I understand it, the field generated by the Pearson FTL of a ship becomes elongated in some manner as it approaches the transit point. Anything entering the envelope of this field at the moment of jump is dragged into hyperspace, and not only finds itself in hyperspace, but somehow drawn along the same line of the Matrix as the generating force of the field.”

Imbrahim felt a wrench in his gut. It didn’t take much to guess what Jhordel had done with the Grand Banks. How she had had the guts to try such a maneuver he couldn’t fathom, however. And for all N’robo protestations to the contrary, it seemed to him that it was just more evidence of how utterly insane she was.

“Since we couldn’t spin up our Pearson quickly enough to jump with the Unity ships, Captain Jhordel simply gambled.” N’robo grinned broadly.

“She inserted the Grand Banks into the elongated conversion field,” Imbrahim finished for him, his voice thin. “It would have been enormous and considerably more powerful than usual with the three ships making the jump together.” Which in itself, he noted silently, was terribly risky. In the Academy they had always proscribed such a procedure, since phase-shifting in the presence of a mass of considerable size was reckoned to be potentially fatal. And ships that close to one another might constant enough mass to make the jump a risk.

“It was quite an experience,” N’robo remarked. “Not like any phase-shift I’d ever experienced. Not like any I’ve had since. But it worked.”

“But at the other end—” Imbrahim began.

“We didn’t stay with them in hyperspace.”

He stared back at the doctor, stunned. “How on earth...” He faltered, blinked.

“We spun up the FTL in hyperspace,” N’robo related gleefully, delighting at his companion’s reaction.

“You can’t be serious. No one—”

“No one ever had to before. But she did, Commander. She had the balls to try.”

“Balls, doctor? Are you sure that’s what it was? She couldn’t have had any idea it would work. It could have killed you all.”

N’robo dismissed this with an airy wave of a hand. “If we’d been destroyed the raiders would have been as well. Three for one wouldn’t have been so bad.”

Imbrahim just linked at him blankly and wondered how Jhordel could command such obvious devotion.

“Anyway, where was I?” The doctor looked thoughtful, scratched at his chin, then brightened. “Oh, yes,” he declaimed; “we were in hyper, the drive was spun up, and the skipper let the Unity ships run. They continued to accelerate through hyperspace while we maintained a constant velocity. It meant coming out of shift at the other end some two days later. Time enough to prepare what would eventually become Fleet history.”

“How soon after you dropped shift did you loose the life pods?”

“Not ‘after,’ Commander. Before. The pods were released just before we dropped to sublight. Only the captain remained on board. The pods were dragged into sublight space just as we had been dragged into hyperspace. But once the Pearson was cut and the ship’s sublights fired up, we were all left far behind. Jhordel bailed out just after the sublights kicked in, which is why she was much closer to the station when the Grandy struck. A little bit closer and she would have been sucked in along with everything else when the graviton collection coils collapsed into a singularity.”

It was a fascinating tale. Also a very chilling one, for it gave Imbrahim an

even clearer impression of the sort of commanding officer Jhordel was. Her Academy instructors had described her as a model student, prone to being a little on the cautious side. But after Obsidian things had changed. She had changed. He thought that an understatement. And yet, she had won favor among much of the Admiralty. Perhaps because her methods garnered results, and in a war like this maybe that was all that mattered.

And who was he to argue? He didn't know what it was like to be in command of a warship. He never would. And it must mean something when you gained such a reputation that you were feared and reviled by the enemy.

“So, Commander, what do you think of our Captain Jhordel now?”

He wanted to laugh, because the question seemed absurd. But instead, he said, “She's taking us to Chastity, doctor!” That seemed to speak for itself.

“Taking us to Chastity because she believes it's the best way to go,” N'robo said confidently. “I don't question the captain's judgment in these matters.”

“Perhaps you should,” Imbrahim warned, punctuating his statement with an angry snort. “We have more chance of surviving a drop into the chromosphere of a star.”

N'robo smiled indulgently.

“I said something to amuse you, doctor?”

“Perhaps I shouldn't tell you; it may convince you more than ever that our good captain is mad.”

Imbrahim scowled at him. “I think the damage is done.”

“Well, then...” N'robo drew a breath, then went on. “This ship,” he said, gesturing expansively, “has been through the chromosphere of a star.”

Imbrahim rolled his eyes. “Why doesn't that surprise me?”

“Perhaps because Captain Jhordel is neither as unpredictable nor as insane as you would have yourself believe, Commander.”

9.

Lieutenant-Commander Takiro looked ill-at-ease in the comfort of the Confederation's briefing room. Imbrahim wondered if the sheer size of a ship like the frigate was intimidating to a man who spent weeks at a time in the claustrophobic confines of a vessel like the McLuhan. Indeed, as he looked around the table at the faces of the Confederation's command officers he was struck by the realization that these dozen men and women numbered nearly half of Takiro's crew. A spook, of which the McLuhan was one, seldom carried more than thirty. There wasn't need for much more than that, given that the primary objective of such ships was information gathering.

The Confederation had dropped shift several hours ago, and was now moving at sublight speeds parallel to the Pomerium Line. The McLuhan rode off its starboard quarter, matching speed, and visible from where Imbrahim sat if he turned his head and looked out the briefing room viewports. Visible, but barely. There were no ports from which light could spill out into the deep night of space, nor navigation beacons blinking on and off to signal its presence. The hull was jet black, looking like some sort of articulated sea urchin with the huge bulb of a Pearson FTL and a cluster of a half-dozen sublight engines fastened to its stern. Sensor and scanning antennae bristled from it in all directions, rather threatening in appearance, but lethal only for the information they could gather for use against the enemy.

Imbrahim shuddered, remembering all too well the many times he had spent in similar ships. But it had not been the discomfort that had bothered him so much as the skulking about far behind enemy lines, sometimes so close to Unity worlds that he'd been certain they'd be detected. Ships like the McLuhan, however, carried an array of devices that permitted them to move almost right into orbit about enemy planets without much risk of detection. Without that, his job would have been exceedingly difficult. Being couriered directly to an assignment in the Unity was much faster and safer than having to go the longer, more conventional route. The latter involved a convoluted process and meant depending upon commercial liners and freighters to get him across the Pomerium Line into Unity space. It also meant risking detection at each checkpoint—of which there were many in the regions controlled by the Red Catholics.

“You were actually in orbit about Chastity?” the second officer, Erin Chen, was asking as Imbrahim rejoined the conversation. She wore a look of skepticism, which was mirrored in the faces of some of the other, younger officers. But not, he noted, in either Jhordel’s or N’robo’s.

Takiro smiled crookedly. “Only long enough to do a quick survey,” he assured them all, looking somewhat apologetic about it. “There was a small window of opportunity during which the risk of detection was minimal. A solar flare on Messiah gave us the cover we needed to get in close enough to do some scans.”

“Wasn’t your equipment also affected by the flare?” N’robo asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” the young commander admitted. “However, we were able to do visuals in various parts of the spectrum. We also mapped the current locations of the two transit points.”

Jhordel’s eyes seemed to brighten at this. “That’s the information I’m most interested in,” she said, leaning forward eagerly, her forearms pressed against the table.

The position of transit points was not constant, although the variations in their locations was seldom sufficient to cause major navigation problems. Indeed, they were considered stable enough to validate the construction of numerous waystations throughout the Earth Empire. Often the stations were linked with the marker buoys that tracked through space with the point. In deep space, away from systems, this was not of great concern. But within systems the migration of the points could sometimes cause serious problems. There were even those who believed that the radical energy bursts that occasionally showed up in the points were the result of another point within the Matrix migrating through the core of a star.

It made Imbrahim more than a little queasy to reflect on the implications of such a thing; it was possible a ship could unknowingly shift to such a point and come out in the heart of a sun. And not even Jhordel, he thought, with little satisfaction, could escape that.

“The points are currently across system from one another,” Tagiro was telling Jhordel. He used the com-link in front of him to call up a holo of the Messiah system. The sun glowed a bright yellow-gold, while Chastity was indicated by a tiny blue sphere. On either side of the sun two winking red markers revealed the

locations of the transit points. Even to Imbrahim, who was no expert on the matter, it was clear that to move from T'Ching to T'Chau could involve passing close to Chastity or whipping around the far side of Messiah. Those were the only two options that would keep their time in the system to a minimum. But in neither case could they hope to avoid detection. Even Tagiro's incomplete data suggested that the system was thick with Unity ships. Not surprising, since Chastity was the center of the Unity universe.

"There is one good thing," Tagiro offered. All eyes turned to him eagerly. "There's a fragmentary asteroid belt currently passing near T'Chau. We used it ourselves to hide in while waiting for a chance to jump through the point. It would afford some cover, though how effective it would be for a ship as large as the Confederation, I've no idea. The Reds are by no means primitive when it comes to detection equipment."

"They didn't spot you," Wethers remarked.

"But we're not a frigate, Commander. The McLuhan is designed specifically for stealth. By its very nature the Confederation is difficult to conceal. Even with the latest in shields and

counter-measures equipment, you're still a large mass. At a standstill or drifting among debris, you're probably quite safe from detection—even within as densely an occupied zone as the Messiah system. But the moment you move, the impediments of your mass become apparent. You're far more easily detected than a spook."

"We don't intend to hang around long enough to be detected," Jhordel observed dryly.

"And if we are?" asked Imbrahim.

"Then the Reds will wish they hadn't heard of us, Commander." The captain smiled, a thin-lipped smile, the malice of which was signified in the cold, hard glare of her eyes. Imbrahim was thankful he wasn't her enemy.

10.

This time he asked to be on the bridge, not wanting to have to sit in his cabin and sweat out the anxious moments ahead. In minutes they would be dropping shift, coming out of T'Ching into Unity space, into the Messiah system, the heart of Red Catholic territory. It was difficult enough to believe the McLuhan had dared to go where no Federation ship had gone in decades, but it had at least been a spook, designed to slip through the night undetected. A ghost. A shadow. The Confederation would be hard put to duplicate that feat.

As he sat in his seat and watched the people about him, Imbrahim was aware of the tension that engaged the bridge. It was not fear, but excitement. Unbelievably, these men and women seemed eager for what lay ahead; it was not a sentiment he shared. He'd seen the Unity as they never had. He knew what the enemy was capable of doing, knew that it would be far from pleasant to be a prisoner of war in the hands of the Reds.

But maybe she knows, he thought, watching Jhordel closely. Maybe that's her secret. Maybe that's the mystery of Obsidian Carter's keeping guarded for her.

What would her crew think if they knew the truth? Knew the truth about her, and about the Unity? They'd always viewed the enemy at a distance, as machines to be destroyed, or bases to be razed. They'd spent their war years thus far harassing the Reds and generally making life miserable for the Cardinali. To them, venturing so deep into the heartland of the Unity was yet another chance to do more of the same. They didn't seem to consider the possibility of capture or defeat—perhaps because it didn't appear to be in the lexicon of their captain. Indeed, outwardly Jhordel seemed to be treating this excursion into enemy territory as no different from any other mission—a fact that Imbrahim found more than a little disconcerting. He had the impression that for the Confederation's captain this was all something of a game, and that their mission to uncover the mystery of what had happened to the Niagara was secondary in her mind to this bold dash through the enemy's stronghold.

“Look sharp people,” Jhordel said. She glanced over at Imbrahim, the inimitable feral grin creasing her lips. “It won't be long now, Commander.”

Imbrahim had a feeling she took some pleasure in seeing the sick look on his

face. Not that that was unfamiliar territory:

Spacers had always considered themselves a breed apart, and tended to look down upon groundlings like himself. And when it came to Naval Intelligence, no one seemed particularly enamored of the men and women who populated that branch of the service. Largely, he suspected, because of the Empaths, whom even he found unsettling to be about, despite being a latent.

Jhordel began issuing orders, and the bridge quickly became a hive of activity. Imbrahim felt himself floundering in the midst of it all, drowning in the cacophony of sound that filled the narrow spaces. The faces of the crew were studies in concentration, not in the least betraying the evidence of fear he was certain marked his own.

He had been fearless on many solo excursions behind enemy lines. But in all his field operations he had had some measure of control. Here he could only sit and watch as events unfolded, listening to procedures that were largely a mystery to him, uncertain of the good and the bad of it. That ignorance, more than anything else, contributed to his disquietude, and left him white-knuckled and squirming in his seat as they approached the exit from the Matrix.

Jhordel's plan was quite simple. Imbrahim thought it too simple; it was his experience that such things seldom worked as they were supposed to. Nevertheless, there was a degree of elegance to it: They would come out of the transit point behind a barrage of antimatter torpedoes, which would be intentionally triggered so as to momentarily blind any sensors or ships in the immediate vicinity. Theoretically this would give them enough time to get well clear of the point and the arsenal that protected it. Theoretically, because there was no guarantee the radiation released by the torps would sufficiently blind the enemy so as to prevent them from targeting the Confederation and making short work of her. As it was, the barrage would eliminate any element of surprise and immediately warn the Reds of the presence of an intruder. That would make it much more difficult to cross the system to T'Chau.

We'll be like a fox on a hunt, thought Imbrahim disagreeably.

He prayed the fates would be kinder to them.

The ship dropped shift, an eerie, silent plunge into darkness, a stone falling endlessly into a fathomless abyss. And Imbrahim found himself waiting for the

telltale moment of impact, when the illusory comfort and safety of the ship would be shattered, like the silence in a well as the stone cast into it strikes water and waves wash noisily against rock. He closed his eyes and wished himself elsewhere, and wondered, not for the first time, why it was that he found himself here. Admiralty had chosen him for the task, but Admiralty could have chosen so many others. Of course, he could have refused, but it had never even occurred to him to consider such a notion. He liked to think it was because of loyalty, but in the back of his mind he recalled his earlier conversation with Jhordel and wondered if it was really more about not standing up to Jackson.

In the end it didn't matter, he convinced himself. In the end, for good or bad, he had long ago committed himself to Fleet. Initially because of the idealism of youth, but more lately because there seemed no alternative. He couldn't be blind like the citizens of the corporates were. As far as he was concerned, one supported the Federation or one acquiesced to a future dominated by the Red Catholic tyranny.

And so here I am, he thought, and almost laughed; fate had never been too kind to him.

There was not a great deal to see out the main viewport of the bridge. There never usually was. Even with its electronic enhancements it could not display a fraction of the information the vast array of ship's sensors provided. Designers had often argued that such features were superfluous, as were all the viewports on the ship. But designers were not spacers, and spacers had always claimed a need to see the world about them. Even if it was just blackness and the stars. There was something in the human psyche that demanded that window out onto space. It gave one a sense of contact and placement. A sense of belonging. You didn't feel quite so isolated, quite so claustrophobic. It was a connection that even Imbrahim found somewhat soothing.

He stared at the viewport ahead of him, watching the chaos of color that whirled past them, the sweat of anticipation beginning to rise on his flesh. A cold sweat of fear, inspired by his ignorance and fueled by his imagination. The scenarios that presented themselves to him were endless, and he didn't find himself comforted by any of them. He looked at Jhordel and wasn't reassured.

The shifting color of hyperspace seemed to coalesce, coming together as a darkness. He watched, somewhat fascinated, as a salvo of antimatter torpedoes

shot forth from the bow, tiny pinpricks of light arcing outwards as their engines flared in the darkness. Then they seemed to merge as one, a lone star that grew rapidly more distant.

Imbrahim counted the seconds, waiting for the torpedoes to self-destruct. It was not a long wait. Only moments after the Confederation had exited hyperspace, the half-dozen torpedoes blossomed into miniature suns, the wave of a radiation that spread out from them sweeping across the frigate, blinding the sensors and triggering alarms.

He tensed, expecting a response from the enemy. But the ship continued to fall inward to the sun, towards Chastity and the stronghold of the Unity fleet. It would have been easy, then, to have assumed they were safe, that they had made it past the worst obstacle. But they hadn't. Chastity was ahead, with surely a strong enough defense to give even Jhordel pause.

"They'll be looking for us now," said Jhordel, sounding almost jolly about it.

Imbrahim had been thinking the same thing, but with far less enthusiasm. While the antimatter blast had been effective in getting them this far, it had also been a beacon to the forces arrayed against them. It wasn't too difficult to imagine the ships in orbit about Chastity beginning to stir, awakening from their slumber, ranging their battery of defenses against the incoming intruder. Some would begin the long climb out of the sun's well of gravity, headed towards an interception of the Confederation, while others would lay in wait about the planet in case the enemy managed to circumvent the ships sent to stop it. He knew the drill well, for it was the same on Earth, and on a dozen or so other worlds considered critical to the Federation. It was a plan with few apparent weaknesses, which was a weakness in itself.

In the Academy they had learned that such plans were predicated on the belief that the enemy would behave in a certain manner. Strangely enough, this was not altogether wishful thinking. History had shown time and again that there was an element of predictability in warfare. Much like a classic game of chess, the strategies of opponents in a given conflict were often maneuvers that had proved themselves innumerable times in the past. The key to success was in using such moves in imaginative combinations, or unpredictable ways. The more experienced and daring of commanders were able to do just that.

Imbrahim looked at Jhordel, realizing she was one of these; and he sat anxiously wondering how she proposed to get them past the Unity defenses unscathed. He couldn't have begun to imagine what she had in mind.

11.

“We have less than an hour before they reach us,” Jhordel said to the other officers assembled in the briefing room. She seemed unconcerned by the impending confrontation, a fact which, nevertheless, did not reassure Imbrahim in the least. There was something in her manner that was far too cavalier for his tastes; in these circumstances he would have preferred a more conservative approach.

“According to our long range scans there are six ships headed towards us from the vicinity of Chastity, and another three coming in behind us from the transit point.” She looked tellingly at Imbrahim, but he didn’t let her see his distress. In his mind, however, the prospect of being confronted by nine enemy warships was more than just a little daunting. Again he deliberated the insanity of what they were doing, but he could fathom it no better than before. Clearly, he realized, he didn’t comprehend the mind of a strategist like Jhordel.

“We would appear to be seriously outnumbered,” he said, his gaze fixed squarely on Jhordel, denunciation in his eyes.

“The number of the force arrayed against us is of little concern,” Jhordel said, smiling as she addressed him, her regard warmed by the blood-eagerness he sensed in her. He thought her like a predatory beast, an animal stalking its prey. A lion. A tiger. Something wild. Something untamed and dangerous. Too volatile. Too capricious.

“Nine against one is hardly a laughing matter,” Imbrahim rebuked. “We can’t possibly hope to fight our way past them.”

“Indeed,” said Jhordel, nodding agreement. “I’ve no intention of engaging them, Commander.”

Imbrahim started, caught off guard by her response. “I don’t understand,” he managed to mutter; but as he looked around the table at the others, he had the impression they weren’t so ignorant as he of what she intended.

“Only a fool would be drawn into such a lopsided battle,” she continued. “And despite your own thoughts to the contrary, Commander, I’m no fool.”

“With all due respect, Captain, how do you propose to avoid the patently unavoidable?” Imbrahim studied her intently, bemused by her disarming calm. “Even were we to change course now, we couldn’t escape them.”

“Oh, but we can, Commander.” There was a dark, cruel laughter in Jhordel’s eyes and in her voice. “They can’t chase what isn’t there.”

Imbrahim frowned. “What isn’t there?” he echoed, shaking his head. “We have none of the stealth capabilities of a spook,” he pointed out.

“At our present velocity it will take us hours to cross the system to T’Chau,” said Jhordel. “Even were we to somehow circumvent the threat of the ships closing in upon us, we’d still be faced with having to get beyond Chastity. I think we’re all agreed that would be a formidable task.”

It suddenly dawned on Imbrahim that she was proposing the very thing they’d come all this way to avoid. “You’re going to skip jump!” His eyes widened in horror.

“Yes.”

“You can’t be serious!” he cried. “The only reason we’re here is because it was considered too dangerous to make the jump without a transit point.”

Jhordel nodded soberly. “Agreed,” she said. “But a skip jump isn’t the same thing at all. A mere few seconds in hyper. Not long enough to be of any real threat to our safety.”

“But in-system!” He gaped at her in disbelief. “We’re far too close to the sun and Chastity to make it safe.”

“Ships have jumped from closer,” she reminded him.

“With some disastrous results,” Imbrahim countered.

“Our choices are limited, Commander. We either make the jump, or we engage the Unity.” She looked slowly around the table at her command officers, then settled her gaze squarely on him again. “I have little trouble in choosing between the two.”

“You knew it would come down to this,” he charged.

Jhordel looked genuinely surprised. “I assumed you understood what crossing the Messiah system would entail.”

He realized it would be foolish to protest further. They were here now, and there could be no turning back. They had no choice but to forge ahead; and Jhordel’s option was really the only viable one they had. How else to evade the Unity in their own space? And surely making a skip jump across the system was less of a risk than facing a fleet of warships.

Imbrahim gave Jhordel a dour look and said, “I’m reminded of an old Earth adage: There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots.”

“Don’t worry, Commander,” Jhordel said, chuckling softly as she spoke. “I intend to live to a ripe old age.”

“I pray you do, Captain.” He paused, then added, “For all our sakes.”

12.

They couldn't jump right after coming out of transit. The Pearson had to be recharged, which meant a half hour or so during which they remained exposed. But once that time had passed Jhordel, much to Imbrahim's horror, seemed on no hurry to make the jump. She was, is seemed, intent upon making something of a game of it, leaving the phase-shift to the last possible moment. He could only sit and watch in impotent silence as the enemy appeared to draw an ever tightening net about the Confederation. But no one on the bridge showed concern, even though it was clear there was enormous risk attached to what they were about to do. They took Jhordel's orders with a decided calm, responding with a mechanical efficiency as the captain called for the Pearson to be spun up and ordered both fore and aft torpedoes readied for launching. The latter request Imbrahim thought a valid precaution—though making a jump like this with active munitions was proscribed by the experts. But then, the experts had probably never considered the possibility of someone like Jhordel.

“Don't worry,” N'robo had told him after the briefing, “the captain would never put her ship at risk. It means everything to her.”

But Imbrahim wondered about that; and he couldn't shirk the feeling Jhordel had manipulated matters to get her ship here. Aside from spooks, no Federation ship had ever been so deep into Unity space. And although she'd been authorized to go where other Federation ships couldn't, even Admiralty would never have dared allow her to venture so close to Chastity at this point in the war. Now she'd used the opportunities handed her to forge her own excuse for doing so; and Imbrahim was presented with yet another piece to the complex puzzle of this woman. It was clear she had her own agenda, and he was positive it all went back to Obsidian, to the dark mystery of her past. A past he would never know.

In light of what he did know of her, it came as no surprise to him that when they made the jump in system, it wasn't to a position within safe striking distance of T'Chau.

13.

The jump was unlike any phase-shift Imbrahim had ever experienced. It lasted less than the space of one short breath; indeed, too brief to gather fears and dwell in fevered anticipation of the outcome. Not that there was not time enough for that beforehand. Jhordel waited until the Unity ships had launched several salvos of torpedoes at the Confederation before calling for the shift. She was playing for maximum dramatic effect, and perhaps hoping the Unity, in their haste to dispatch the enemy, would end up taking out one another in the confusion that would inevitably follow on the heels of the Confederation's sudden departure.

They weren't around long enough, however, to see any of this happen. One moment the nine Unity ships were bearing down upon them, and the next the Confederation was falling into orbit about Chastity.

Imbrahim had no time to voice his shock, nor, he suspected, did the Unity ships upon which the Confederation rained its terror as it swept into orbit, grazing through the upper layers of the atmosphere and swinging out again toward T'Chau. It all happened so quickly, the moments dreamlike in the unreality of their passing. And then they were accelerating away from sun and planet, out towards T'Chau, towards the cloud of debris that Takiro of the McLuhan had told them about. It was their only option, because they couldn't phase-shift again so close to Chastity and before the drive had spooled up again. And by the time they'd reached a safe distance from the planet they would be too close to the scattered mass of the planetesimals to even dare contemplating another jump.

Imbrahim saw Jhordel's strategy now: They would dive into the cover of the rocky debris and wait until they could safely make a run for T'Chau. It was a wait he feared might be a terribly long one, given that the Unity would be reacting to this incursion as might hornets whose nest had suddenly been rudely shaken.

Jhordel remained unperturbed, displaying the same outward calm that Imbrahim had seen in her since first setting foot on the Confederation. He wondered if there was anything that could pierce that armor of discipline and steely nerve and rattle her cage; he wasn't sure he wanted to encounter anything

that could. Because whatever it was, it would have to be truly terrible.

14.

He was surprised to see her there, alone in the darkened observation lounge, staring out at the drift of rubble that might once have been a planet. At first he considered leaving, then decided against it. A part of him thought that perhaps here, away from the elements that were synonymous with her command, he might see some part of her she hadn't yet revealed to him. Perhaps some truth that would make her that much less an enigma and that much more a simple human being.

"Commander," Jhordel said, without turning from the large blister of a viewport.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked, settling into one of the high-backed chairs beside her.

She smiled but didn't look at him. "The sound of you," she told him. "You're not a spacer." She gave him a cursory look, then settled back into her chair and returned her gaze to the view beyond the ship. "Much too noisy."

"I'll try to be more quiet in the future," he grunted sourly, not pleased with being reminded that on this ship he was the odd man out. And thinking, too, that she was not just meaning his movement when she charged him with being 'noisy.'

"It's the way you walk. Spacers have a certain rhythm that comes from years of moving in light gees."

"I've had my share of space travel," he said archly.

"Aye," she said, amused. "So I understand. But you're not of a ship, Commander. And if you're not of a ship, you can't understand what it is to be of one."

"I chose a different way to serve," he said defensively.

"Indeed. And one I'm sure has served Fleet well."

“I like to think so. I’ve always done what they’ve asked of me.”

“Without questioning why it must be done?”

“I’m not Admiralty.”

Jhordel chuckled softly. “They’re only people like you and me, Commander.”

“Except that the future of the Empire rests squarely on their shoulders, sir.”

“You credit them with too much, Commander. Our future belongs to us all, and we all have a part to play in it. We all have a say in it.”

Imbrahim stared out the viewport and said, “Is this doing our part?”

“We’ve been given a mission, Commander.”

He frowned and regarded her narrowly. “With all due respect, sir, we were assigned to find out what happened to the Niagara.”

“That doesn’t mean we must ignore the main purpose of our existence.”

“Which is?”

She laughed, and there was something of a cruel edge to her laughter that sent a shiver through him. “To destroy the Unity, Commander,” she said. “In any way we can.”

“To ‘destroy’ them?” He suddenly felt uneasy sitting there next to this woman—fearful of what she was capable of doing. Again he saw that part of her that had made her the potent threat she was to the Unity. That terrifying thing that was like nothing he’d seen in anyone else. Not even in Jackson’s ‘angels of death,’ his empathy assassins, who had good reason to despise the Unity after it had hunted down and slaughtered thousands of their kind. Their enmity he could almost understand. But not Jhordel’s. Hers was a feral thing. And he wondered if there would be any place in the Earth Empire for a woman such as she when this war was finally over and the fighting had stopped. How could she even exist without the war, without the hatred that seemed such a vital part of her existence.

“It’s not a difficult concept,” she said, turning to him and staring with her

cold, hard eyes. “Destroying them, I mean. It’s either us or them, Commander. And speaking for myself, I would rather it them.”

“I always believed it was our goal to save the Empire,” he said quietly. “Winning the war is an important part of that, but it’s not all there is to achieving success. If we win, we’ll still have to live with the Reds.”

“There are no ‘ifs,’ Commander. We will win the war.”

“Of course,” he said, though his words carried less conviction than hers.

She was silent for a moment before she said, “You believe victory is simply a matter of disarming the enemy. Overpowering them. But the greatest threat of the Red Catholics, Commander, is their very existence. So long as they remain, there can never be lasting peace.”

“I don’t believe that,” Imbrahim said firmly.

“Ah!” She allowed a thin smile and gave him a more sober look. “That’s where you and I differ, Commander. You’re the liberal idealist who believes that ultimately good must prevail. You look at the Red Catholics and see people. I look at them and see the enemy.” Her face hardened. “An enemy that will destroy us if we permit it to.”

“We’d be no better than they, if we carried this war on until we’d completely eliminated them,” he argued.

“Who ever said we were better?” Jhordel snorted and shook her head. “To the Red Catholics, Commander, I’m the embodiment of evil. In war, as in all things, we each tend to view the situation from our own perspective. It’s always the other side that commits the atrocities. It’s always the other side that has no moral ground upon which to stand.”

“What you say suggests that as victors we should be magnanimous and forgive the sins of our enemy.”

“No. What I’m saying, Mister Imbrahim, is exactly the opposite. The Red Catholics will never concede they’re wrong. They’ll never see this war from any other perspective. We’re driven to fight by a need to defend ourselves and preserve what we believe to be the universal rights of all humankind. The Reds

are fueled by a religious fervor that is intractable. It can't be tempered by reason; it's a doctrine of faith that can't be questioned. Those who would do so are threats, and thus must be eliminated."

"The Empaths," Imbrahim whispered.

"Aye, the Empaths. Their very existence challenges the tenets of the Red Catholic faith. They're blasphemy. An affront to whatever god it is the Red Catholics pay obeisance to. They're an impurity that must be cleansed, as must all unbelievers."

"You seem to understand a great deal about the Reds, Captain."

She gave him an odd look. "They're the enemy, Commander," she said, as though that statement made everything clear. "Above all else in war, one must understand one's enemy. Wars have been lost because of ignorance in this regard."

"And fought because of it," he added.

"We'll win this war, Commander, because we're capable of understanding the Red Catholics. But they'll never understand us. Their faith gets in the way. And they have no desire to know anything that doesn't concur with their faith."

Imbrahim was silent for a long time. Finally he turned to her and said, "What if you were faced with an enemy you didn't know, Captain? What if it were some new lifeform whose motives couldn't be so easily fathomed?"

"I see you're thinking ahead."

"Yes."

"There may be nothing to confront," she said.

"But if there is, Captain. If there's something out there that may or may not be a threat to the Empire..."

She shrugged. "Then I'll deal with it as I've dealt with all things in my life." There was an edge to her voice that hinted at the painful moments of her past—the things that had made her what she was. For a moment he hoped she might

reveal something of it, but that hope was quickly dashed. “I’ll do what’s necessary, Mister Imbrahim—regardless of what it may mean to me.”

“And the ship? The crew?”

“In space, Commander,” she said as she got up from her seat, “I’m master of their destinies.”

“What if you’re wrong? What if you make a mistake?”

“I won’t.”

As he watched her leave the observation lounge, Imbrahim thought she was probably right: she wouldn’t make a mistake. She hadn’t yet.

But what if she did?

He had a feeling they’d all pay for it then. And dearly.

15.

“A simple enough plan,” Jhordel explained to Imbrahim as they sat on the bridge and awaited the moment when the Confederation could activate its engines once more and make a dash for T’Chau. “Submariners would sometimes employ it, back in the days long before we took war into space.”

“Submariners?” Imbrahim echoed, his close-knit brow suggesting a hint of puzzlement.

“We’re kin,” Jhordel mused, ignoring his confusion. “Only time separates us. They had their heyday in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But they weren’t dissimilar to us, floating about in a hostile environment, often working against an enemy they couldn’t see.”

Imbrahim wasn’t a student of ancient warfare; he’d never had much interest in history—particularly not as far back as that. It had always been one of his weaker subjects in the Academy, which was perhaps one of the reasons he’d ended up in intelligence rather than on a ship.

“Sometimes they would drift with undersea currents,” Jhordel continued, using her hands to illustrate what she meant. “Those currents would be a different temperature from the surrounding water, helping conceal the submarines from ships that might be tracking them from above.”

“How?” Imbrahim asked.

“Density,” said Jhordel, as though that explained it all. “Water of different temperatures would have a different density,” she elaborated. “Ships tracking a submarine mainly relied on a device known as sonar. This basically sent out high frequency sound waves, which generally reflected off any solid surface and were gathered by a collector. You could determine a great deal from the length of time it took the wave to return. And by skillful manipulation you could even produce pictures of a sort.”

“I see,” Imbrahim muttered vaguely. “But what about the water temperature?”

“Obviously sound waves would travel at different speeds through water of

different densities. This could play havoc with the readings a sonar might have. In some cases the different densities could form a barrier beyond which the sonar couldn't penetrate, and might, in some cases, actually be reflected."

"So a submarine would drift with one of these pockets or currents of water, hidden from the enemy as though wearing some sort of cloaking device?" He lifted his gaze to the main viewport of the bridge and saw the field of debris into which they had sequestered themselves. "Those rocks out there are like our undersea current," he said, glancing to Jhordel for confirmation.

She smiled mischievously. "Exactly. And if Takiro is correct, then within a few hours this cloud of debris should take us within reach of T'Chau."

"We'll still have to make a break across open territory," Imbrahim reminded her pointedly. "It'll take several minutes to reach the point where we can jump through the point. And by now the Unity have no doubt beefed up security around the transit points."

"Naturally," Jhordel agreed. "No one ever said this would be easy, Commander."

He thought to say that it would have been far simpler if they hadn't come to the Messiah system in the first place. But that was a non-issue with Jhordel; and he knew broaching that particular subject again was not likely to endear him to her. If he'd learned one thing about this woman, it was that once set upon a particular path, she wasn't eager in the least to be dissuaded from it.

"They'll never let us through," he said, shaking his head. "They must have figured out by now we're headed for T'Chau. They know where we'll have to make the jump and they'll be waiting for us. We'll be sailing right into a trap. Especially now we've given them time to prepare themselves and get organized. As we're approaching the point, we'll be sitting ducks."

"I don't dispute that, Commander."

He caught his breath, caught off guard by this admission.

"But I also know they'll be looking for a ship," Jhordel added.

Now Imbrahim looked more confused than ever. "I'm not sure I understand

what you're driving at," he said.

"It's quite simple, really," she said. "You're no doubt familiar with the Jarrant effect?"

"Yes." He recalled his earlier talk with N'robo. "It deals with how errant space debris can be dragged into transit points when ships make the jump."

"Aye."

"But how's that going to be of any use to us?"

"It's believed the Pearson FTL is largely responsible for this effect. I've some personal experience in this regard."

He almost smiled. "Your last mission on the Grand Banks."

She didn't appear at all surprised he knew this, and continued on

as though he hadn't interrupted. "We can project a sufficiently large Pearson FTL field to drag a considerable mass out of this cloud of debris."

Understanding dawned on Imbrahim's face. "I think I'm beginning to get the picture. You're going to throw rocks at T'Chau."

"A crude way of putting it, but substantially correct. In fact, by using our Pearson as a sort of tow rope we should be able to accelerate a sufficiently large chunk of debris to a very high velocity. We can maneuver the ship so we follow this in towards T'Chau, using it as a shield against the worst the Unity can throw at us."

"But you're talking about activating the Pearson FTL here!" Imbrahim cried, appalled by the notion. "That's impossible."

"No, it's merely impractical."

"It's one thing to use the Jarrant effect under normal circumstances," he said, "but to activate the Pearson FTL while surrounded by mass and at a virtual standstill..."

“We’re not going to make a jump,” Jhordel assured him. “We’re simply going to warm the drive to the graviton field stage. That’s the edge of phase-shift, but not quite conversion. Hopefully that’ll produce a field sufficient to envelop this small chunk of rock we’ve been using as cover for the last few hours. Then we’ll boost with the sublights, cut them and the Pearson, give a blast of retros so the rock overtakes us, and then tuck in behind it as it careens towards the transit point.”

“You make it sound so easy,” he grunted. “But you’ll have to push the sublights far beyond their prescribed parameters to move something that massive. Even with the field effect reducing the asteroid’s mass displacement. And what about when we jump? What’s to stop that chunk of rock from following us into the Matrix once we make phase-shift? I needn’t remind you, of all people, that a mass pulled into the Matrix in such a way is going to follow us on our chosen line of transit.”

“Not follow us, Commander.” Jhordel grinned wryly. “Precede us. And I’m counting on it doing just that.”

“You’re mad! You have no idea of how a mass that large will react once in hyperspace. It might be uncontrollable. And we’ll be linked to it.”

“You may be right, but our experience suggests otherwise.”

“But why? Why this insane risk?”

“Because it may be a saner risk than coming out of the Matrix at the other end right into the hands of whatever destroyed the Niagara.”

“I thought the whole purpose of coming to the Messiah system was so we could circumvent the risk of coming out at the other end?”

“We’ve no idea what we’re dealing with, Commander. That whole region of space could be a deathtrap, just waiting for us to fall into it. Our little rock here will catch anyone waiting off guard. It’ll at least prevent us from ending up so much space dust the moment we drop shift.”

Somehow he was not reassured by her words.

16.

It was the sort of thing that Imbrahim could only imagine Jhordel daring, the sort of thing that would either make her an even more legendary figure than she already was, or doom them all. But it was difficult not to be swept along by her confidence; she gave no hint of doubt, no suggestion she was anything but certain this plan would work. And given that she'd got them this far, he supposed she had legitimate cause to be sanguine.

He had to admit the captain made it look and sound so easy as she issued orders in a straightforward fashion. From her manner one would never have assumed they were about to plunge into a situation which might end in their deaths. He'd seen captains show more concern when docking their ships in friendly ports than what Jhordel now displayed; and once again he knew he was witnessing that contradiction of discipline and daring that had served her so well to date.

For all Jhordel's reserved calm, however, Imbrahim was convinced she was sweating bullets on the inside. He couldn't believe she'd be insensitive to the very real possibility that what they were about to attempt could end up destroying them all, without the enemy having fired a single shot in their direction. It was all based on far too many assumptions—though he readily conceded he didn't know enough about starships to determine with any degree of accuracy any deficiencies in the captain's plan. He knew only that he didn't like it; but then, there was very little he was finding to like about this mission.

They began their climb out of Messiah's gravity well and towards T'Chau, accelerating at what seemed to Imbrahim a painfully slow rate. Despite the Pearson FTL field effect, the rock they were towing behind them acted like a sea anchor, dragging at the ship as its sublight engines strove to overcome the inertia of a mass they had never been designed to move.

From where he sat Imbrahim could see the data screen that was the barometer of the ship's health. What he saw didn't inspire him. All six of the sublight engines were operating in the red zone, and even he knew they could only do that for so long. He wondered if they could do it for long enough.

Other than the data screen before him, there was no way of telling just how

successful they were in their task. The forces that acted upon him as he sat cocooned in his chair were misleading, though they did give him some indication the ship was indeed beginning to accelerate. But the question remained: Could they even get close enough to the transit point to make an attempt at a jump?

They were halfway to the jump point of T'Chau when the ship began to shudder. It was only a subtle vibration at first, scarcely noticeable, and certainly nothing that would have been cause for immediate alarm. But as the Confederation narrowed the gap between it and the transit point, the trembling became more and more pronounced, until Imbrahim was fearful they'd be shaken to pieces. He'd never experienced anything like it; and it was that ignorance that fueled the ardor of his terror.

Jhordel's voice had a quaver in it as she spoke, but that was from the shaking of the ship and not the result of any qualms she might have. "Prepare to reduce the field," she ordered. "Wait on my command."

"Aye, sir," said Wethers coolly.

Imbrahim glanced at the first officer and felt his stomach knot in anticipation.

"Now!" Jhordel commanded, in a tone that suggested they couldn't go one moment longer. "Shut down the sublights and fire the port and forward thrusters."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Shutting down the sublights. Firing port and forward thrusters now."

Suddenly the forces that had pushed Imbrahim far into his seat vanished. He felt blood surge through his body like a wild river; and the sudden change left him lightheaded and feeling sick to his stomach. Then a gentler force from what had earlier pressed down upon him seemed to raise him up, pushing at him from behind and pulling him to one side—or perhaps, he thought, pulling him from in front and pushing him sideways. He had no sense of direction as the Confederation seemed to peel away from its massive charge and fall behind it.

Then Jhordel issued more orders, and the enormous chunk of rock loomed into view, frighteningly close. Imbrahim almost cried out, sure they were going to crash into it. His fears, however, were unfounded as the ship tucked in neatly

behind the rock and followed it outwards towards its imminent rendezvous with T'Chau.

It had all been easy after all, though his stomach and his nerves told another story.

17.

They were less than five minutes from the moment of phase-shift when the barrage of antimatter torpedoes struck the rock and carved great gouges out of it. So powerful was the force of the antimatter annihilation that a mere dozen warheads vaporized a substantial portion of the rock's mass. The face of the asteroid began to resemble a comet head, shrouded in a cloud of dust and debris, which slowly seemed to bloom outwards.

More torpedoes fell in a hail against the rock, the resulting radiation blinding the Confederation's forward scans. It made Imbrahim feel as though he were encased in a tomb—even though he could still see out the viewport to the plain of scarred rock that was now surrounded by an eerie aura of glimmering dust. But what blinded the ship also served to conceal it from the enemy, and the captain had counted on this.

“Prepare for transit,” Jhordel commanded.

“Activating Pearson FTL for jump,” Wethers announced.

Now, Imbrahim thought, comes the real test.

They had no idea whether the drive's field would extend far enough forward to fully envelop the rock, nor any inclination as to what might happen if it didn't. Theory suggested they would merely jump with the portion of rock enclosed within the field. Imbrahim had never been one to trust theories; besides, he couldn't help thinking of the proscriptions against shifting anywhere near substantial mass.

The jump was like falling into a hole in the universe; tumbling out into some place that was neither here nor there. There was nothing he recognized from previous jumps, no comforting familiarity to ease his troubled mind. He told himself that all jumps were different, and that this was just a little more different from the rest.

There's no need to panic, he told himself. They were intact, at least. Certainly the jump had not thus far resulted in disaster. He looked to Jhordel, but her face remained as inscrutable as ever. If she were troubled by the shift, she showed no

outward signs of it.

Imbrahim forced himself to relax. There was nothing he could do about the situation. Nothing, he ventured, that any of them could do about it. Not even Jhordel, for all the gifts she might have been blessed with. They would simply have to wait this one out—and perhaps even pray it would have a happy ending.

Despite the uncertainties of the shift and the unknowns that lay ahead, Imbrahim found himself relaxing somewhat, convinced as he was that they'd now skirted at least one potential threat to their survival. His relief was short-lived, however, when Wethers announced they'd a small problem.

“Torpedoes,” the first officer said, looking over his shoulder at Jhordel. “Must be at least a dozen of them.”

No longer confined to her chair by the crushing forces that had acted upon them all when the ship had been accelerating, Jhordel rose and walked over to Wethers' console. She bent over and studied the cube image rotating before him: it showed the position of the Confederation, the rock, and the trailing salvo of warheads.

“The Jarrant effect?” said Imbrahim, joining the two.

Jhordel looked up at him, grim-faced. “Not a wholly unexpected development,” she confessed, trying to sound as though she had anticipated this. “But it's one I'd rather not have had.”

“Do they pose any threat?”

She gave him a withering look. “They're antimatter torpedoes, Mister Imbrahim,” she said, making it clear that was threat enough. “We've dragged them into hyperspace with our FTL field.”

“How long until impact?” Imbrahim asked.

“No way of knowing,” said Wethers. “They're not behaving as we'd expect. Something seems to be holding them at bay for the moment, but the instant the field is shut down, that may all change. Those babies could begin to accelerate again—far faster than we can.”

“And we have to first clear this rock before we can even think of making a run for it,” said Jhordel.

“But surely the ship’s shields—”

“Can only handle so much,” she interrupted brusquely. “There’s no way they can absorb and dissipate that much energy all at once. The forces transmitted through the shields to the ship would crush the hull as though it were made of paper.”

“This has happened before,” said Imbrahim.

She nodded. “Yes. But we seem to have literally put ourselves between a rock and hard place.”

It might have been a joke, but it wasn’t. He stared at her, and realized, with mounting horror, that she had made a mistake. Suddenly she was very much more human to him; but he found himself feverishly wishing she were not.

“What do we do?” he asked in a strangled voice.

Jhordel regarded him with a quite reserve. “We’ve time yet,” she said. She turned and moved back to her chair, settling into it quietly. “I’ll think of something,” she assured them all. She planted her elbow on the arm of the chair and rested her chin on her closed fist, and sat there, unmoving, staring ahead through the main viewport at the bleak expanse of rock that careened through hyperspace ahead of them.

Imbrahim studied her, thinking that perhaps in this situation she might reveal some signs of vulnerability. She did not. And he was thankful for this, having quickly come to the conclusion that he didn’t want her to be a mere mortal. He needed—they all needed—her to be more than that. Much more, if they were to survive.

18.

“We’ve been lucky,” said Jhordel, addressing the others seated about the briefing room table. “It appears the Unity torpedoes have been caught in a distortion within our Pearson FTL field. Normally they would probably have continued along their trajectory until impact. The distortion appears to be holding them in stasis.”

“I take it the mass of the rock we brought into the shift with us has something to do with this distortion,” said N’robo.

She nodded. “It would seem so,” she agreed. “Certainly this shift was like no other we’ve made.”

“Let’s hope there aren’t any other surprises,” Imbrahim muttered.

Jhordel glanced at him sharply and said, “Unfortunately, Commander, there’s no way of knowing that. We can only hope the line in the Matrix we’ve chosen wasn’t also distorted by the extremes of the mass we shifted. But there’re no guarantees; and there remains the possibility that we’ll yet encounter the unexpected.”

“What happens when we drop shift?” asked the chief security officer.

“We can only guess, Mister Thorn,” the captain said. “But the torpedoes were almost certainly accelerating towards us when we made the jump. The Jarrant effect pulled them in with us and the distortion in the field has temporarily halted their advance.”

“Then we may safely assume,” said the chief engineer, from where she sat at the far end of the table, “that the moment we drop shift they’ll close the gap and impact on our shields.”

Jhordel’s features tightened as she nodded in Soulin Mahre’s direction. “Since their engines were operative when they were drawn into the distortion, it seems likely the moment the field collapses and they’re released from the distortion, they’ll be active again. Certainly far more quickly than we can possibly hope to be.”

“What you’re saying is that there’s no way to avoid them,” said Imbrahim, feeling the knot that had been tightening in his gut tighten all that much further.

“Our best estimates are that we’ll have less than five seconds before they hit our shields,” said Jhordel.

“What about the laser cannons?”

“Inoperable during hyperspace transit. And there simply won’t be enough time once we drop shift.”

Imbrahim blew out a breath of exasperation and ran a splay-fingered hand through his wiry hair. “Then we’ve cooked our own goose,” he grunted. He really wanted to say to Jhordel: “You’ve killed us all.” He held his tongue, however, knowing there was nothing to be gained from such an outburst.

“We’re hardly done for yet,” said the captain.

He looked up at her, a feeble glimmer of hope coming to life in him. “You have a plan,” he said.

“An option,” she corrected. She slowly looked around at the others, studying the expectation that shone brightly in the eyes of each. “We could leave it to chance and hope the distortion has eliminated the problem for us. There’s the possibility that when we drop shift the engines in the torpedoes will remain silent.”

“Not a likely possibility, I gather,” said N’robo.

“No,” she said soberly. “Not likely at all.”

“So what’s the alternative?” asked Wethers.

“We can’t destroy them with the lasers,” said Jhordel, “but we may be able to disable them in another manner. At the very least, we may be able to trigger them before they reach our shields. There would still be considerable radiation to deal with, but we’d have more chance of surviving than direct annihilation against our shields.”

“How do you propose to trigger them?” asked N’robo.

“The distance between us and the chunk of debris we brought into hyperspace with us is a fraction of the distance between the Confederation and the Unity torpedoes.” Jhordel placed her forearms on the table and leaned toward them. “We probably have about five seconds to play with when we come out of shift, which will give us enough time to fire a salvo of our own torpedoes at the rock in front of us.”

Wethers’ face brightened. “Of course,” he said. “The blast of dust and radiation should sweep past the ship and form a barrier between us and the incoming torpedoes.”

“But will it be sufficient to fool the torpedo proximity fuses into thinking they’ve struck a ship’s shields?” asked Mahre.

Jhordel shrugged. “We’ve no way of knowing,” she admitted. “But I don’t see we’ve any choice. It’s either this or sit and take our chances that their engines will be dead or that we’ll somehow miraculously survive the bombardment. Even doing this will be cutting it close.”

“Why must we wait until we drop shift before launching our own torpedoes?” asked Imbrahim. “Wouldn’t it be more practical to fire them before, ensuring the radiation and the dust get between us and the Unity warhead?”

Mahre shook her head. “The radiation from the annihilation of so many torpedoes at once would be devastating in the confined environment of the FTL field,” she explained. “Other ships have survived one or two blasts in space, but never anything on the scale we’re talking about.”

“But why?”

“Because the ship is generating the field,” the engineer said, as though that made it all clear. “The immense blast of energy from the annihilation of so many torpedoes would follow the lines of the field’s force and be funneled straight down into the Pearson FTL generator. The shields would be ineffective in this situation; and the generator would almost certainly overload and destroy the ship in short order. The coils would collapse into singularities, which would in turn quickly consume one another and any surrounding matter. Without the FTL field, however, the energy won’t be confined. The ship’s shields should be able to deal with most of what will strike us and warp it about the ship, though at such close range the effect will be considerable and may result in some damage to the

Confederation.”

“Far preferable to sustaining the simultaneous impact of a dozen or so torpedoes,” Jhordel noted. “We know for a certainty the ship can’t survive that sort of bombardment all at once—even without the field active.”

“What if this doesn’t work?” Imbrahim looked anxiously at them all, then focused his attention on the captain. “What if the radiation and dust from the strike against the rock fail to trigger the torpedoes before they reach us?”

“Then we’ll know within a matter of seconds, Commander,” said Jhordel dryly. “And then it’ll all be academic.”

Imbrahim flopped back in his chair and swallowed the lump in his throat. A desk job was beginning to look mighty good just about now.

19.

He held his breath as the six torpedoes leapt the gap between the Confederation and the rock. There was not even time to count before six tiny sparks bloomed into six miniature suns, quickly expanding, growing into one amorphous mass that rose upwards and outwards, a great bubble of radiation and debris that engulfed the ship like the hand of a giant closing into a fist. There was no sound from without, but the ship within seemed to sag and groan under the impact. The shields absorbed and diverted much of the onslaught, but even still, some of the energy from the annihilation was transmitted to the hull.

As needless as it was, Imbrahim gripped the arms of his chair and stared at the blinding white fog that now filled the expanse ahead and made the bridge's main viewport appear incandescent. Of the rock, he could see nothing, nor did the scans register anything of consequence, blinded as they were by the enormous blast of radiation. Within himself the shrill scream of his panic was deafening, but he contained it, wrestling with the terror that made his heart a hammering piston and the surge of his blood a wild river in his ears.

The Confederation shook, trembling its entire length as some of the energy the shields could not bleed off and warp away was carried to the hull. Alarms bleated like wounded sheep, beaconing for attention, and everywhere there were voices calling out in organized chaos. The bridge was plunged into inky darkness, a thick, black curtain that was pierced only by the stabbing, intense glow that came from beyond the main viewport.

It seemed like minutes had passed, and yet it had scarcely been more than three or four seconds.

Thunder; and then silence. Eerie. Deathlike. Foreboding.

Something struck the Confederation with such force that she was sent careening into the cloud of dust that still grew in the airlessness of space before them. Imbrahim closed his eyes and stole a breath, and thought this must surely be his last. But the horrifying, death-rendering crunch of ship against rock that he'd been anticipating didn't come. The frigate tumbled through a cloud of debris, tiny rocks no larger than a flitter striking against the shields and bouncing off into space. The massive chunk they'd carried forth with them as a shield was

no more. Perhaps weakened by the shift and earlier bombardments from the Unity, it had been blasted into oblivion by the Confederation's torpedoes. Shattered, its jagged pieces spinning aimlessly off into space like so many marbles tossed across a polished floor, it was now useless as a shield. But it had served a purpose; and Imbrahim watched the drift of its remains and breathed a quiet thank you.

20.

Jhordel moved quietly from bed to bed, pausing at each to offer words of encouragement to the injured, the depths of her concern etched clearly across her face. Imbrahim watched her from the entrance to the sickbay, conscious of the fact he didn't belong here. He was an outsider. Not a part of this crew. Not a spacer. It was difficult for him to feel a sense of place in this tragedy; he didn't see he had a role, as so clearly all the others did. It was as though he were a stranger at a funeral, detached from the mourners, studying them in their grief with an almost clinical apathy. A stranger who didn't know the dead, didn't understand the pain—couldn't relate to it. A stranger who didn't see that coffin being lowered into the ground as anything more than polished wood and gleaming brass fittings.

Imbrahim didn't know these people, didn't wholly comprehend them. He'd never heard their voices, never heard their laughter or seen their smiling faces. When he tried to think of them he could feel nothing, even though he so desperately wished he could. He wanted to feel the pain of loss, for that would have meant that in some small way he belonged. But there was nothing. No dull ache of emptiness. No sense of injustice. No despair.

He merely stood and watched; and if he felt anything it was a sense of envy. These men and women had each other. They shared common bonds: this ship, the war, and space. There was little to link him with them. Even his war was different from theirs. He'd never been a part of the battles waged in space, had never seen the mass death that so many of them had witnessed. His had been the secret war—the war of stealth. The war of shadows. Skulking about. Espionage.

True, he had seen his share of horror, but it had never been personally linked to him. Not in the way that it had so often been for the members of this crew, and the crews of the many other ships serving the cause of the Federation.

There was another way in which they differed, he realized: they were family. He had worked with others in Naval Intelligence over the years, but he had never felt close to any. There had seldom been friendship. Certainly never anything as deep as love. Perhaps there had been something defensive about that, because from one week to the next you could never be sure where you would be—and whether or not you would be alive or dead. On the ships, however, you

developed a sense of community. On the ships you shared your experiences with your crewmates. There'd never been anyone with whom he could share his.

If I die tomorrow, nobody will mourn me, he thought. Not as Jhordel now mourned those who had been lost on this day. It shouldn't have mattered; for when you were dead you were dead. But he found it meant a great deal to him. Especially now. He couldn't help but think of the close calls they'd had thus far, and of what might lie ahead of them.

There was a very real possibility he would die out there, far from the Empire, far from whatever place it was that he called home. And no one would care. Few would even notice. For his superiors his loss would simply be another irritating hole in the roster that they would have to fill. An inconvenience to be bitched about, as though it were entirely his fault. And to those who had worked with him at some time or another? He doubted they'd feel any different from what he would in the same situation: They would merely view it as another reminder of their own mortality, another reason to be even more vigilant. But they'd shed no tears. He never had.

He tried to convey these thoughts to Jhordel, and was surprised when she told him she envied him. "War would be so much easier if there were no emotions involved," she said.

"We're not machines, Captain."

She glanced up at him wearily, looking as vulnerable as he had ever seen her. "No, Commander, we're not. But maybe we should be. It'd be so much easier if we were. It wouldn't be so difficult to bear the guilt for the losses we incur."

"You blame yourself for these deaths?" He regarded her with a warring mix of disbelief and cynicism.

"Who else is there to blame, Mister Imbrahim?"

"But this is all part of war. You can't assume responsibility for the death of every man or woman who may die under your command."

Jhordel sighed loudly. "You still don't understand how it is out here, do you?" she said quietly.

He didn't respond, stung by the words. After his thoughts of moments earlier it hurt to be reminded yet again that he was an outsider.

"On a ship in space, Commander, there is but one person to make decisions and one person to assume responsibility for those decisions," she said. "They're one and the same. When one assumes the mantle of captain, one assumes much more than merely the command of a ship. There is also the crew to whom you're responsible. Their lives are in your hands. Your mistakes aren't merely errors that may cost you, but failures for which they may pay even more dearly."

"We'd all be dead now if not for you," he insisted.

Jhordel ran her hands through her hair and gulped a breath of air. "We wouldn't have been in the situation we were if not for me," she said, exhaling the words in a throaty whisper. "I gambled with their lives, Commander."

"Isn't that what every captain must do at some point or another in his or her career?" He was surprised to hear himself say this, after all his criticism of her decision to go to the Chastity system in the first place.

"What separates the good commanding officers from the bad, Mister Imbrahim, is that the good ones make the right decisions." And with that she left him.

He stood just outside the sickbay, watching her solitary figure move down the corridor towards the bridge. It was then he realized there was someone on this ship even more alone than he. Strangely, he didn't find any comfort in that thought.

21.

They held a somber ceremony in the main hangerbay. Imbrahim attended because he felt to do otherwise would only serve to further isolate him from these people. But he wasn't comfortable there, standing stiffly at attention in his dress uniform, listening to the spiritual guide read passages from the Ship's Book. He listened, but he didn't really hear. It was difficult to pay attention to anything but the rows of plastic cylinders neatly arrayed on the deck. So many of them; and each contained a body, or what remained of one. Under normal circumstances they would have been launched into a decaying orbit about a planet, there to burn up, shining one last time. But there were too many to discharge in the traditional manner, and out here there was no place but the cold, black depths of space to which they could be consigned. No one, least of all Jhordel, was willing to give them over to that unknown darkness. So when the eulogies had been said and the various ceremonies conducted, those assembled to pay their respects would leave the bay, and the long lines of coffins would remain, until there was a place suitable to which they could be committed. Federation space, he supposed—though he couldn't see the difference between one emptiness and another. Perhaps it all had to do with what they were and why they did what they did. He didn't know. He didn't think he could ever know.

When it was all over Imbrahim made his way quickly back to his cabin, and sat for a long time in darkness, staring out the viewport at the endlessness of space, wondering what reason there was for why he had survived and so many others had not. Of course, there was no logic to it. He knew that. Nearly sixty men and women lay encased in plastic in the main hangerbay, now lifeless where once they'd been full of laughter and hope and love—and all those other remarkable qualities that made a person a human being and not a machine. There was no reason why he should have been one of them; nearly nine hundred others had survived along with him. And yet, he could not help feeling guilty. Perhaps because he had seen the grief and sorrow in so many of those faces in the hangerbay. There had even been tears.

For some reason he couldn't avoid the feeling that because he had lived, another had died. And because he wasn't a part of this crew, it was difficult not to wonder if there were some who might even resent that he'd escaped death while one of their colleagues had perished.

Paranoid foolishness, he told himself; but still, the thoughts persisted in haunting him. Perhaps more so because there was a part of him that was thankful it had been them and not him. A part of him that was thankful to be alive.

He had never feared death, but he had always held tenaciously onto life.

22.

The ship had been seriously damaged. They now had but four sublight drives, which was just one more than the minimum for phase-shift. The hull had been breached in several locations, some of which would require the considerable facilities of a space dock to adequately repair. They had lost power in some sections of the ship, making it difficult to move from one deck to another and leaving the air only partially purified because of a reduction in the number of operable scrubbers. Many of the stern sensors had been fried by the blast of radiation, so that the ship was nearly blind in its aft quarter.

“Not good,” was Jhordel’s broad assessment of the situation. Had she been any other captain in the fleet, Imbrahim ventured that she’d have used this as an excuse to turn back and limp home. But the thought had clearly never crossed her mind. Perhaps, he thought, she had never entertained the notion because to do so would mean that the lives thus far lost had been for naught—except for the symbolic strike they’d made against the Unity in its heartland. But that had little meaning, he told himself; it could have done little to the Reds save remind them that they weren’t quite as invincible as they might imagine. And it had been an unauthorized action, which Jhordel would have had to have explained.

As he walked the corridors of the ship in the aftermath of their narrow escape from annihilation, Imbrahim noted a change in the mood of the crew. There was a noticeable air of tension, an edge to the collective sensibility of these men and women, which he had not observed before. He had the feeling it wasn’t something new; indeed, it was quite likely more common than not of a ship that spent so much time in the thick of things. Still, it stood in marked contrast to the eagerness and fevered excitement he’d felt from them earlier, when they’d been preparing to drop into the Messiah system. But they’d been caught up in the exhilaration of the moment, then—driven by their lust to draw blood from the enemy. There’d been a sense of purpose to it all: striking a blow for the Federation. Revenge. Now, as they waited for the ship to be made ready for the rest of the voyage, there was too much time to think, too much time to dwell upon what had happened. In particular, too much time to consider those men and women who now lay in death’s embrace down there in the gray cavern of the main hangerbay.

How many times had they faced the same thing? he wondered. Probably after

every battle, when the adrenalin had died down and sober second thought had taken hold. Probably then, when they'd had time to reflect upon what had befallen them, and when they'd had a chance to sit back and assess the damage. It was at that point, he imagined, that the deaths became more meaningful. That was when one would have time to shed tears for fallen comrades. In battle, however, there was no time for tears, nor for compassion. A soldier did his job, because if he didn't, then somebody else might die. Perhaps even that soldier himself.

“Do you think they blame the captain?” he later asked N'robo.

“Some might,” the medical officer conceded. “On another ship,” he added pointedly. “But not this one. They're fiercely loyal to Captain Jhordel. They would gladly die for her. And they know who's really responsible.”

“Who?”

The doctor snorted and looked at Imbrahim as though he were an idiot. “Why the Reds, of course.”

“Of course. Still...”

“They love her, Commander. Every man and woman aboard this ship.”

“Why?” Imbrahim wasn't sure he understood such devotion. He wasn't sure he would so willingly lay his life on the line merely out of some notion of loyalty, though some might argue he'd done just that by coming out here. But that had been out of a sense of duty, and a commitment to a cause for which he had strong convictions. Not because of a slavish devotion to a single individual. He had joined the service because he had felt an obligation to do his bit for the war effort. To have remained at home on Earth would have been unthinkable, because the Federation had desperate need for men and women who could fight the 'good fight.'

“We've been through much together,” N'robo said. He smiled sadly. “A bond has formed between the members of this crew and the captain. We've shared victories—”

“And deaths,” Imbrahim interjected.

“Aye, and deaths,” N’robo acknowledged more somberly. “That has a habit of bringing people closer together. Particularly out here, Commander. In space we only have each other. On a ship you are a tiny community far removed from the rest of the universe. Or so it often seems. And when something happens to one member of our community, it affects us all.”

“Even the captain blames herself for what happened,” Imbrahim pointed out.

N’robo nodded. “Of course she does. She always does,” he said. “Because she’s the captain, Mister Imbrahim. That means this ship and all who sail in it are her responsibility. It can never be otherwise.”

“That’s what she said.”

“The truth knows only one face, Commander.”

“Then you think she’s to blame?”

“I believe she’s responsible for this ship and its crew. As such, she’s accountable for all that happens to them.”

“But—”

N’robo held up his hand to silence Imbrahim. “It’s a great weight she carries on her shoulders,” the doctor said. “And every man and woman on board this ship understands that, Commander. They know the choices she makes aren’t easy ones, and that sometimes there must be sacrifices for the greater good of the cause.”

“And they’re willing to give their lives?”

“But haven’t you done the same, Commander? You’d never have done the things you’ve done if there hadn’t been a willingness on your part to pay the dearest price of all. And certainly you’d not be here unless you’d accepted that you might be called upon to die for the cause.”

Of course, he knew that N’robo was right. It annoyed him that this man had seen things about him he’d thought concealed from others—and sometimes from himself.

“Tell me, doctor,” he said quietly. “Do you believe we’ll be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice?”

“We already have, Mister Imbrahim. Does it matter whether it happens today, or tomorrow, or ten years from now?”

Imbrahim searched for words with which to argue, but he found no grounds for debate. N’robo’s words were true: they had but one face.

23

“I thought you might like to be here when we come into scanner range of the Niagara’s last estimated position,” Jhordel said. She glanced over her shoulder at Imbrahim, who had just entered the bridge and was settling into the chair next to hers.

“How long?” he asked.

“Another five minutes and our scanners should be able to pick up the point,” she told him. “If the Niagara is anywhere nearby, we’ll be able to detect her.”

Imbrahim felt an almost giddy sense of anticipation. They had come so far and had been through so much to get here. Now the moment of truth awaited them; and he found he had no idea of what to expect. It was possible they would reach the point and find nothing. Probable, in fact. There was no reason to assume that whatever had happened to the Niagara had happened the moment that it had come out of transit. It might even be light-years from the point, though he doubted that. Doubted it because he had a premonition that part of the mystery would be solved in the next few minutes.

They were moving cautiously, the ship on full alert, the shields up and the weapons systems armed. Jhordel was playing it safe, though not without intelligence. Despite it having been weeks since the disappearance of the Niagara and the probes that had been sent to investigate, there was no reason to assume this region was safe.

It was hot on the bridge. Partly because of the air quality—which had suffered from the loss of scrubber units—and partly because of the tension that seemed to have seized them all. As seasoned as they were, this crew was not taking this lightly. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that they weren’t taking it lightly

specifically because they were seasoned.

“Coming within scanning range of the point now, skipper,” Wethers announced. He peered intently into the depths of the Hidacki holocube before him, studying the information that filled the space above his console. “Nothing yet,” he said, with the air of someone who was expecting something...anything.

Imbrahim divided his attention between the tactical monitor and the first officer, his patience fraying at the edges. He kept hoping for some sign, some indication they hadn't come all this way for nothing. But even if the readouts in Wethers' cube and the tactical monitor had revealed anything, it was doubtful he'd have recognized it. His Academy training had been brief in these areas, and long since forgotten. When he stared into the field of the tactical monitor, he'd only the vaguest notion of what he was looking at. For the most part it was a morass of symbols and intersecting lines; just so much nonsense to the untrained eye. Visual gibberish. Occasionally he would steal a glance through the main viewport, but even with its electronic enhancement it was no match for the scanners. It showed nothing but black space and the stars. If there was something to be found out there, he told himself, it would eventually show up on the scans. It was only a matter of time.

Still, the minutes seemed to last interminably, until he began to think his premonition had been false. It was then that Wethers gave a shout.

“Picking something up now, skipper!” he announced enthusiastically.

“Any details?” asked Jhordel. Showing no more emotion than an elevated calm.

The exec shook his head. “Still too far, sir.”

“Could it be a ship?” asked Imbrahim, letting his eagerness get the better of him.

“No way of knowing yet,” said Wethers. His hands moved across the controls of his console, stroking holokeys in a fluid, practiced manner, fine-tuning the instruments that were the Confederation's eyes.

“Sound battlestations,” Jhordel ordered.

Imbrahim marveled at her composure, and wished he could feel as coldly indifferent as she sounded. But his heart was racing, ganging about in his chest; and he could feel the sweat beading on him and running down his flesh. He licked his lips nervously, wondering what it was he feared the most: that what Wethers' had picked up on the scans was just an errant piece of debris, or that that thing out there before them had had something to do with the disappearance of the Niagara. If the latter, then what chance did they stand against it? Of course, they were not running into this blind, as the Niagara surely had. At the first sign of trouble the Confederation could respond. And there was still the option of fleeing—though in these past few days he hadn't been under the impression that Jhordel was of the 'discretion is the better part of valor' school of thought.

"Definitely artificial," Wethers said, his words almost a mumble as he continued to concentrate on interpreting the information the ship's computer was throwing at him. "But not large enough to be a ship," he added, the thread of disappointment clearly audible in his voice.

"Perhaps part of one," Jhordel suggested mechanically.

Imbrahim swallowed and wiped at his forehead. He studied the tactical monitor again and thought he could make out the object Wethers had locked onto. It was clearly not moving with any great speed, if at all.

"How far is it from the point?" Jhordel asked.

"Less than two million clicks," Wethers replied.

"If it's part of the Niagara," the captain mused, "the ship would have had to have been almost stationary at the time of destruction. If the ship had continued to move at a reasonable velocity after coming out of the shift, we wouldn't find anything this close to the point."

"Stationary?" Imbrahim scratched his head and frowned. "But why?"

Jhordel gave him a sidelong look. Which he thought strayed close to contempt. "Physics, Commander. If they'd come out of the jump with standard phase-shift velocity any debris would have continued on at the same velocity. It would be a lot farther away by now than two million clicks."

“All right. But then why would they have come out of the jump nearly stationary? That doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“No. It doesn’t. Something would have had to have stopped them. Or…” She shrugged.

“Or what?”

“Or they could have decelerated in transit, before exiting the Matrix. It’s not recommended, but technically it could be done. But I can’t imagine a captain on a shakedown cruise risking it. Not without good reason.”

“And what reason would that have been?”

She arched a brow. “Your guess is as good as mine. But I’ll posit this: It could have been what destroyed the ship.”

“If it was destroyed,” Imbrahim said, a touch too testily.

“I’m afraid it looks like it was, Commander,” Wethers interjected.

Both Jhordel and Imbrahim turned to the first officer expectantly. He wore a cheerless look as he said, “There’s no question about it now: that thing out there is part of a ship. Looks like the remains of a Pearson FTL.”

There was still no certainty it was from the Niagara, but Imbrahim had little doubt it was. What he was less sure of was whether or not the ship had met its fate by some freakish accident, or by hands unknown. And if the latter, what chance did they stand against such an incredible force, damaged as they were? If he had been a betting man, he’d not have given them fighting odds. Perhaps ironically, only because of Jhordel would he give them a chance at all.

24.

There was more debris, much of it floating in a tenuous cloud far from the initial find of the drive section. The Confederation had halted amidst this cloud, drifting with it, giving the tech teams a chance to assess just what it was they'd found. To Imbrahim, watching it tumble about from the safety of the observation lounge, it was all nondescript. He could identify none of it; it was just twisted metal, charred and melted, looking as though it had been through an enormous shredder. He had never seen anything like it, nor had many of the crew if he read them correctly. It left him cold, because he kept hearing the screams of the thousands, cut short as air quickly vanished and bodies suffered the horrors of exposure to the vacuum of space.

“It gives one pause to think, doesn't it?”

Imbrahim glanced over his shoulder to see N'robo standing in the doorway. “I thought I was the only one without anything to do,” he said.

“Not much need for my services on this one, I'm afraid.” The doctor stepped deeper into the room, coming to stand abreast of Imbrahim. He was silent for a long time, his eyes fixed on the wreckage, watching it drift about them as though he were studying fish in a tank.

“I've seen a ship swallowed by the singularity formed after the collapse of its coils,” he said at length. “It was very quick, very painless.” He said it with a clinical disregard. “There was nothing left. Not a single molecule. It was difficult to feel anything. But this,”—he lifted his arm and gestured towards the twisted debris—“is like coming across the dead on a field of battle after the bombs have stopped falling and the smoke has cleared. There's something far more sobering about it. Here's something tangible, something we can touch. A connection to the past, to those sorry wretches who once proudly crewed that ship.”

Imbrahim drew a shuddering breath and then expelled it slowly in a manner that suggested a desperate struggle to reconcile himself with what had happened here. “I keep asking myself what could have done such a thing,” he whispered.

“Perhaps we should not be asking ‘what,’ but ‘who,’ Commander.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that it doesn’t seem likely this would have been the work of the Unity,” N’robo explained. “To begin with, the relatively slow drift of the debris suggests the Niagara was nearly at rest when it was destroyed. When the ship dropped shift it appears to have come to a stop almost immediately.”

“The captain thinks deceleration in transit.”

“Really?” N’robo’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, she’d know better than I. I’m a meat man, and I’ve never been inclined to take a viral about spatial mechanics and transiting dynamics. Can’t see the sense of filling my limited brain capacity with all those equations.”

“Quite,” Imbrahim muttered, surprised to hear that the argument he’d often used on himself now didn’t seem so reasonable.

“So they came out slow,” N’robo mused, scratching his jaw. “Must have been a reason why they did.”

“Surely not an imprudent course of action when entering unexplored space,” Imbrahim argued.

“I suppose. But in that case they’d have also come out with shields up and in a defensive posture.”

“It’s proscribed procedure in the manuals.”

N’robo guffawed. “I’d think by now you’d realize the manuals were written by a bunch of overzealous theorists. They based a lot of their proscriptions on untested theory and supposition. Most of those have been proved false by the actions of various captains, including our own.”

“They haven’t always been wrong. There’s the Phoenix.”

“Aye, that I’ll give you. Though one can’t be certain that wasn’t as much the work of the singularity down on the surface of Trillium as anything else.”

“So what does that leave us?” asked Imbrahim. “If it wasn’t technical problems that destroyed the Niagara and it wasn’t the Unity, then what was it?”

“Ever see one of those ancient maps of the world, Commander? The ones from about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”

“Sorry. I’m not much of a history buff.”

“And you an officer and all.” The doctor shook his head dismissively. “Can’t beat history for shedding light on the present,” he said. Then he gave a little shrug of his shoulders and observed: “The captain takes history very seriously.”

“Especially her own it would appear,” Imbrahim said under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, doctor. Just muttering to myself.” He glanced at N’robo and quickly added, “You were telling me about maps.”

“Aye. I was. They used to have on them these places where they’d draw sea serpents or the like. Places unknown, yet to be explored, or where ships had been lost exploring. Near them they’d note: Here be dragons. Or something like that.”

“Here be dragons?”

N’robo regarded him somewhat sardonically and said, “Perhaps it isn’t only in the sea where you find monsters, Commander.”

Imbrahim looked at the remains of the Niagara and shivered.

25.

He found her in her office. The door, as always, was open; she prided herself on always being available to her crew. But he wasn't one of hers, so he hesitated, rapping lightly on the wall outside and looking in questioningly.

"Come in, Mister Imbrahim," she said, looking up briefly to acknowledge him.

He stepped through into the tiny office and stood before her. "Do you have a moment, Captain?" he ventured.

Jhordel pushed away from her desk and leaned back in her chair. She sat there a moment, not saying anything, staring up at him, studying him. "Something on your mind, Commander?" she said at length.

"About our mission, sir."

"You have some concerns?"

"I have some difficulty understanding why we're remaining here," he said.

"Our mission was to determine the fate of the Niagara," Jhordel said, as though that explained everything.

Imbrahim shifted uneasily. "I've talked to Commander Mahre and she says the tech teams have all the information they're going to get from this wreckage."

"Yes," she said simply.

"Then wouldn't it be prudent to set course for home?"

She cocked her head to one side, regarded him curiously. "Why?" she asked.

"Because we've got what we came for," he said, a his temper a little short. "We know what happened to the Niagara."

"Do we?" Jhordel sat up straighter, looked surprised. "You must know something I don't, Commander. Correct me if I'm wrong, but currently we know

nothing more than the fact that the Niagara was destroyed and that it appears to have been by some outside agency.”

“There’s nothing more to be resolved by sitting around here.”

“You may be right,” she agreed.

“Then—”

She cut him off with a sharp gesture, then allowed one of her feral grins, faint, cruel, and maybe even a little scary. “You may be right, but you may also be wrong. What happened to the Niagara could well have been pure chance,” she said. “On the other hand, it may not have been.”

Imbrahim closed his eyes and swallowed. “You think whoever did this to the Niagara could come back,” he said, his voice scarcely audible against the incessant background hum that permeated the ship.

“I see you’ve come to the same conclusion.”

“Aye,” he breathed. “And it’s for that reason I believe we’d best be served by returning as quickly as possible to Earth. We need to warn them, while we’ve still a chance to do so.”

“Warn them about what?” Jhordel asked, spreading her arms. “We haven’t a clue as to what did this to the Niagara.”

“Surely knowing that it was done is enough!”

“If there’s a genuine threat to the security of the Earth Empire, Commander, then it’s our duty to determine just what that threat is. Admiralty didn’t send us all this way merely to confirm what they’d already concluded. I can guarantee you they won’t be satisfied with a few pieces of a debris.”

“They didn’t send us here to end up like the Niagara, either.”

“Believe me, Commander, I value my life as much as you do yours.”

“It’s not for myself I’m concerned,” Imbrahim said stiffly. “I keep thinking of the Niagara and those people down in the hangerbay.”

She stared back at him with eyes that had suddenly gone cold as ice and as hard as stone. “This is a war, Mister Imbrahim. People die in wars.”

“With all due respect, Captain, it’s not necessary that any more people die here.”

The harsh look on Jhordel’s face now seemed to turn to a dark fury; and Imbrahim began to wonder if he’d pushed too far. He had hoped to manipulate her, to use what N’robo had told him about her, to prey upon her conscience and the sense of responsibility she felt for ship and crew. But the tempest that raged across her face suggested he may have erred in playing this hand.

He stood tense, his muscles aching from standing so still, his mouth gone dry, his stomach knotted. He stood, and waited, hoping the storm would pass, hoping the discipline so integral a part of her would temper it.

“Every man and woman on board this ship is aware of the risks,” she said in measured tones.

“No, sir, I don’t think they are.”

She leaned back farther in her chair, lips drawn in a tight line as she regarded him through narrowed eyes. “So, Commander,” she said, “you’ve suddenly become an expert on spacers.”

Imbrahim stared back at her, this time not letting himself be unnerved by her. “I’ve seen my share of death, Captain,” he said bluntly. “Whether I’m groundling or spacer, it makes no difference to the truth of that particular reality. When I see those people down in the hangerbay, or when I see the remains of the Niagara, it means the same to me as it does to you.”

“Does it, Commander?” Jhordel growled. Then, in a low voice, “Do not presume to believe that you know anything about me, Commander.”

He ignored this, though inside he thought he was digging himself a grave. He said, “The mission is complete, Captain. Admiralty expects no more of us.”

There was a long silence, and he could see her marshalling a calm, reining in whatever furies had been loosed within her. At length she said, “I disagree, Commander. I think Admiralty expects much more of us. But even were you

right, on this ship we ask more of ourselves than merely achieving the bare minimum expected of us.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Does it require we take a vote?”

“Perhaps it does, sir.”

She sat up and drew closer to her desk. “You’re dismissed, Commander,” she told him as she settled back to her work.

“Sir?” Imbrahim blinked, startled.

“This is not a democracy, Commander,” she said, looking up at him sharply.

“Surely—”

The intensity of her look sharpened to a glare as she cut him short. “What happens to this ship and its crew are my responsibility, Mister Imbrahim.” Her voice was almost a physical lash against him, brooking no argument. “It’s not your place to question that, unless you’re considering removing me from command. Do I make myself clear?”

“Aye,” he replied, the word a strangled sound in his throat.

“I’m glad we understand each other.”

“Perfectly, Captain.”

Imbrahim retreated from the office, feeling as though he’d just been put through the wringer, and realizing why Jhordel was such a formidable opponent. But when he thought of the Niagara, he wondered if even she could be sufficiently redoubtable to confront and survive what might lie ahead.

26.

The alarms jarred him from a fitful sleep. Imbrahim opened his eyes to the eerie red glare of battlestations, and saw on the com-link near his bed the winking beacon that called for ‘all hands on deck.’ He rolled out of his bed as the first blow struck the ship, and was promptly sent sprawling. As he picked himself up, a second impact rocked the vessel. He grabbed for a nearby handhold and held on tight, wondering what the hell was happening, and realizing almost as quickly that it must be what he’d feared most.

He had only seconds to pull on his uniform and boots, an exercise made all the more difficult by fluctuating g-forces. Less than five minutes after the first alarm had sounded, Imbrahim stumbled out into the corridor of the officers’ deck and headed towards the bridge. There were lights flashing everywhere in a bewildering pattern that seemed to work in harmony with the constant blare of the alarms and the shouted orders that came over the ship-com.

There were others in the corridors, some headed aft, towards engineering, others fanning out to the various operational sections. He crashed into someone as the ship was rocked yet again, and discovered it was N’robo.

“What’s happening?” he demanded as he clutched at the chief medical officer.

N’robo gave him a withering look, but before he could say anything another alarm sounded, this one louder and more shrill than the others. The doctor cursed loudly and looked frantically about. Others were doing the same, and then running as though their lives depended upon—which they did, as N’robo’s next words confirmed.

“For pity’s sake, Imbrahim, find an ESC and strap yourself in!” he shouted above the scream of the alarm.

Imbrahim stared at him blankly.

“Come on!” N’robo grabbed him by the arm and dragged him down the corridor. Here and there along the way there were alcoves carved into the walls, their transparent plaz coverings in place and the red lights of occupation indicating there were already crewmembers in them. But N’robo found one that

was vacant. He shoved Imbrahim forcefully into it before the commander could muster a protest, pulled down the padded restraining bar to activate the unit, and stepped back.

To Imbrahim's horror the plaz facing of the ESC slid across the opening, effectively sealing him in. He heard the hiss of air, and numerous other ominous sounds as the unit came up to speed. A panel to the left of him winked with a pattern of readouts he was too dazed to make sense of; and as he stood there, restrained by the bar, a cocoon of bladders enveloped him, much as they would have in a crash couch. He felt their suffocating embrace, and with it a surge of panic. He'd always been terrified of these things, and had only ever had cause to use them in training. That had been more than enough to convince him his career wasn't as a regular on ships.

Helpless and in the dark, drowning in the chaos that now submerged him, he stood there, waiting. He had never used an Emergency Survival Chamber on a ship before and realized now how woefully inadequate the simulations had been. All the time he'd been on this ship he'd never given them a moment's notice—though every day he'd passed them as he'd walked through the corridors. They were ubiquitous. Had to be, because when a ship went into combat maneuvers there was no guarantee all the crew would have immediate access to crash couches.

He had ignored them, because he had never imagined having to use them. Now he was painfully aware of their claustrophobic confines, and bluntly reminded of their purpose. Belatedly, he wished he'd never left the safety of his cabin. He probably shouldn't have, not being one of the crew. He wasn't even sure why he had, except, perhaps, because of foolish curiosity.

The steel leech of the auxiliary pump and drug infuser unfolded from the wall close to his head, its electric whine sending a shiver down his spine. He couldn't turn his head to see it fully, but he could see the glint of its sinuous chrome umbilical out the corner of his eye. It latched onto him, pressing against his flesh, a cold mouth of metal teeth sucking at the skin, drawing his life into it and pumping a witches' brew of superoxygenated blood and chemicals into him.

He shivered, uncontrollably, and tried to wrestle with his panic. He closed his eyes tight and made an effort to remember his training, to recall emergency procedures for combat maneuvers while in a ship under attack. But all he could

recall was how he had always hated it, how the simulations had panicked him. One more reason why the course of his destiny had been steered towards Naval Intelligence and away from the ships.

The ship moved, accelerating at an incredible rate, so that a crushing force came smashing into him like some great hammer blow smiting him the length of his entire body. He would have cried out, but there was no breath in his lungs nor the strength with which to do so. A red fog enveloped his eyes, blurring his vision, which was rapidly narrowing to a tunnel and fading to black.

He could still hear the alarms, blaring incessantly, shrill voices that now seemed distant, screaming to him across the great ocean of his diminishing consciousness. Desperately he struggled to maintain equilibrium, to hold onto that last thread of awareness.

He heard his heart, a great thumping engine in the cavern of his chest, straining against forces humans hadn't been designed to bear. Machines were the thin tissue of security between life and death here, he reminded himself; he would have been dead in seconds if not for the gravity dispensators and the mechanisms of this chamber that now worked in unison to keep him alive. But how frail and tenuous that tissue: so easily torn. Just one good hit, one fateful penetration through the shields, and every man and woman on board this ship would die in an instant.

It seemed an eternity that he was encased in the high-tech sarcophagus. The g-forces dropped to more tolerable and less painful levels, clearing his vision and allowing him to breathe—though barely. He knew they were no longer maneuvering, for the force against his body was constant now, and not the conflicting whirlpool that had played around him moments earlier.

Straight-line flight, he told himself; it meant the Confederation was running, still accelerating towards— Towards what? The transit point?

Peering forward, he saw the play of lights across the face of the plaz, reflections from the panel near his head. He turned his attention to this, moving his eyes more than his head, and saw the readouts more plainly than before. They made sense to him: g-force levels, air pressure, his vital signs, corridor integrity, and a dozen or so other bits of data that informed him he was alive and that the ship was as well.

He studied the chrono and was surprised to see it read his time in the chamber as having been less than ten minutes. His body said otherwise; it was as though he had suffered a twelve round bout with a professional fighter. Everywhere ached, despite the drugs. When he drew in a breath his rib cage was lanced with pain, like hot needles being drawn through his flesh. But as agonizing as that was, it was far preferable to being dead—which at least the hurt assured him he was not.

He waited, impatient, fearful, trying not to imagine what might happen next. It was a difficult task, ensconced as he was in the chamber, helpless to do anything, hoping to hear something from the bridge and frightened he never would. They might even all be dead up there in the bow for all he knew. The ship might simply go sailing on aimlessly into darkness, while they, like Egyptian pharaohs in their tiny tombs, waited for a release that would never come.

The ship jumped.

27.

“Our casualties were limited,” the woman across from Imbrahim said. He looked at her in disbelief, and wondered how she could sit there and say that with such seeming calculation. Particularly in light of the fact that she was here making her pronouncement because of one of those casualties.

“How many serious, lieutenant?” asked Jhordel.

“Ten dead, Captain,” said the assistant medical officer. “Another twenty-three in critical condition. There were some minor injuries people incurred while getting to the ESCs. A few side-effects from the drugs.” She made it sound as though it were routine, as though she were reading off a grocery list, the dead and the dying nothing extraordinary. Imbrahim supposed that for a medical officer on board a frontline warship the latter might well be true. Perhaps such individuals had to become detached, or in a very short time they’d likely be driven mad by the horror of it all.

“We would seem to have come through this quite well,” the captain observed. Her gaze slowly patrolled the perimeter of the table, surveying the faces of her command officers, shrewdly evaluating each individual, seeing in those faces things Imbrahim couldn’t. But even he could feel the change in mood, which now seemed more subdued, with less eagerness and enthusiasm than he recalled of the previous briefings. He wondered how much that had to do with the absence of the good-humored N’robo.

After a few more minutes of debating technical issues, Jhordel dismissed them all.

Imbrahim started to leave with the others, but at the door to the briefing room he hesitated. The panel slide shut, leaving him alone with the captain. He turned slowly and walked back to the table, standing there at the end, looking down the length of its polished black surface to where she sat. She was looking out the viewports, her back to him, seemingly unaware of his presence.

“What about N’robo?” he demanded.

If Jhordel was startled, she did a good job of concealing. When she looked at

him, it was as though she had expected him to be there. “What would you have me say?” she asked.

He wasn’t sure. He felt angry, felt consumed by a sense of injustice. But perhaps worst of all, he felt guilty. N’robo had sacrificed himself for Imbrahim; he hadn’t made it to an ESC before the maneuvers had begun. And Imbrahim couldn’t help thinking that if he’d just done what he was supposed to do and not ventured forth from the safety of his cabin during the emergency—

But I did, he told himself; and another had paid the price. So why am I angry with her?

Because she hadn’t listened to him. Because she’d refused to consider retreating to the safety of Federation space.

Because in a way she was responsible for the doctor’s death.

He thought to tell her these things, but then recalled what N’robo had once said of her. And as he looked at her, studying that bruised and weary face, he saw the haunted look in her eyes. Saw the death there. Saw it and shuddered, for it was more terrifying than any of the carnage he’d recently witnessed on this ship. It spoke of defeat and utter dismay.

“There’s something you haven’t told us,” he said bluntly.

She didn’t say anything at first, but merely regarded him with a resolute look. Finally, she said, “When we jumped, Commander, I controlled the shift.”

“I see.” Or so he thought he did. “We’re not headed for Federation space.”

“You catch on quickly, Mister Imbrahim.”

“As I’m sure the rest of the crew will.”

“In time,” she agreed. “Some before others. Wethers already knows. Most of the bridge crew do.”

“Don’t you think everyone has the right to?”

“Do you think it’ll make a difference?”

“It doesn’t matter whether it will or not,” he insisted.

She swiveled her chair away, and stared again at the ghostly aura of hyperspace. “They’ll know, Commander,” she said quietly. “But for now there’s a ship to be repaired and order to be restored.”

He snorted. “What for, Captain? So that we can go back and let ourselves be pounded again?”

“It won’t be necessary to do that,” she said. She turned her head and looked up at him. “Our enemy has followed us into hyperspace, Commander.”

28.

“It’s impossible,” he said.

“For us,” Jhordel agreed quietly. “But clearly those whom we now flee have technological skills we do not.”

“But I always thought only the Jarrant effect—”

She nodded. “And I. But we’ve managed to get an aft scanner operational since the jump, and it clearly indicates there’s something running the same line of the Matrix as we are, far beyond our Pearson FTL field. The only explanation is that they’ve the capability of tracking a ship through the jump and into hyperspace.”

Imbrahim struggled with this a moment, trying to accept it, but not wanting to. He stared unfocused at the table, seeing its polished black surface as though it were a window looking out onto the future. The vision that swam before his eyes was not a pleasant one: he kept seeing the Niagara, the twisted and charred remains of it, tumbling end over end through the airless black sea that was space, moving aimlessly where once it had sailed forth with purpose. He thought of the thousand and more crew who had died in it, thought of their screams, blunted by the sudden suffocation. The hard vacuum, leaving them without breath, letting gases bubble out in the bloodstream. If they hadn’t died the instant of the ship’s death, then theirs would have been a horrid last few seconds. Perhaps, he thought, some might even have lasted long enough to register what was happening, to know that the pressure in their bodies would soon overcome them and be their undoing.

He felt sick to the stomach. What would it be like? he wondered. What ran through the mind in a situation like that? He wasn’t sure of the exact details, knew only the popular myths of holodramas. Gruesome, horrible ends in those. Bodies exploding and freezing. He supposed there was little truth to that. But still... The internal pressures of the body and all would wreak havoc. And without sunlight, heat from the body would rapidly be dissipate, radiating into that boundless emptiness. He didn’t suppose it really mattered exactly what the gruesome details were. In the Academy they’d always reminded you of one thing: Dead is dead, and it doesn’t matter how it happens.

Imbrahim had always known he would one day die, but he didn't want to die like that.

29.

“Maybe it’s not them,” he said hopefully, desperate to find some other answer. He would even rather it be the Unity. At least against the Reds they would have a fighting chance. But if a ship like the Niagara could be so easily dispatched, then what hope had they?

“I’ve considered all possibilities, Commander,” Jhordel assured him. “But one must apply Occam’s Razor to this particular situation.” She paused, seeming to gather herself as she turned and rested her forearms on the table.

“We’re hundreds of light-years from Federation space,” she said tonelessly. “There’s a war on, so it’s difficult to imagine ships from either the Federation or the Unity being sent out here.”

Imbrahim swallowed his words of protest, because he knew there was little sense in fighting her simple logic. Why, indeed, would any other ships be this far out?

“Who are they?” he asked in a thin voice.

“The enemy, Commander.”

30.

“We can’t run forever,” said Imbrahim. “The line we’re following in the Matrix has to come out somewhere. When it does, they’ll follow us out. In hyperspace we have the restraints of the Matrix to keep them from accelerating past us. But once we drop shift—”

Jhordel cut him off with a severe look. “I’m well acquainted with the scenario, Mister Imbrahim.”

“Aye, sir,” he said, subdued. He wiped his face with one hand and looked beyond the captain, eyes fixed on the eerie vista of hyperspace, trying to see far astern to the other ship. Who or what were they? What sort of beings walked the decks of that vessel?

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

He blinked and regarded Jhordel dazedly, unaware that he had spoken aloud.

“Why what, Commander?” she repeated.

He looked afar again, and said, “Why would they just attack us like that? Why destroy the Niagara?”

“Perhaps events in their past have given them cause to mistrust encounters with unfamiliar species,” Jhordel suggested. “Or it may be their nature to destroy. Who can know? And does it matter whether we do or don’t?”

“You, yourself, have stressed the importance of knowing your enemy, Captain.”

“In this case, Commander. I think it’s enough to know that they are the enemy.”

“Are they? If we could communicate—”

“They attacked us, Mister Imbrahim,” Jhordel said bluntly. “It seems clear

enough they intended to do to us what they did to the Niagara. Would you have us take the chance of letting them finish the job?"

"But what if they didn't destroy the Niagara?" he protested. "What if it was something else? What if they reacted the way they did because they thought we were that something else?"

"I'll not debate this with you, Commander. I've only the evidence at hand by which to judge these matters. And I can't take the chance to stop and try to engage them in a friendly chat."

"What will it be then, Captain?" Imbrahim asked, his voice tight with anger. "A last stand and a fight to the death? Or do we keep running until we can run no farther?"

She regarded him levelly. "When one assumes command of a ship, Commander, it's always made clear to one that above all else one must never let that ship fall into the hands of the enemy."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that if the ship following us could so easily destroy the Niagara, then it's doubtful we would be a match for it. Particularly in light of the fact that we've sustained considerable damage."

"Then we have no choice."

"There are always choices, Commander."

Imbrahim wasn't sure why, but he didn't like the sound of that.

31.

The alarm for battlestations was still resounding throughout the ship when Imbrahim walked into the bridge. He paused for a moment, just beyond the narrow hatchway, studying the hive of activity.

“You’d better secure yourself, Mister Imbrahim,” Jhordel warned from her command post.

He hurried over to the crash couch beside hers and settled into it quickly. “What’s happening?” he asked. He tried to make himself comfortable but found he was so tense that he couldn’t.

Jhordel gave him a oblique look and said, “We’re about to drop shift.”

Imbrahim thought that he must have misheard her. “Drop shift?” he said. He looked forward, to the bank of monitors, his eyes fixing upon the tactical screen. “Are we approaching a transit point?”

“No,” the captain said simply.

He felt his mouth go dry. “A blind drop from hyperspace?” He gaped at her, started to say, “The risks—”

“Are great,” she cut in. “But it’s possible we could escape our pursuers.”

“And lose ourselves in the process,” Imbrahim charged. “We went through the Messiah system to avoid just such risks,” he reminded her pointedly. “If we’re lucky enough not to drop out in the center of a sun or a planet, we’ll still be dropping into uncharted territory. We don’t know this space. We may not be able to find our way out of it, Captain.”

Jhordel didn’t look unduly concerned. “I’m well aware of all the arguments against it,” she said. “In ideal circumstances I wouldn’t even consider it. But these are not ideal circumstances, Commander. In situations like this we improvise.”

Imbrahim wondered if they would be improvising their deaths.

32.

They waited anxiously, because they were now vulnerable. They had to recharge the FTL drive, which took time they might not have. And with just two sublights currently on line they couldn't technically initiate a jump even when the Pearson was charged and spun up. Engineering promised to have the minimum three drives functioning within twelve hours, but in the meantime the crew sat waiting, tense, watching the scanner readouts, hoping against hope the single aft sensor would show nothing. And as the Confederation continued to sail onward after its drop, with no indication the enemy had followed them from hyperspace, their situation began to look more propitious.

Imbrahim felt a renewed sense of optimism, though even he realized it was too early yet to declare victory and count themselves safe. The fact remained that they didn't know the full capabilities of their enemy, and could therefore not allow themselves to become complacent because of the seeming success of this maneuver. "Too easy," Jhordel murmured as she sat waiting in her command chair. Her attention was focused on the tactical monitor, as it had been from the moment they had dropped shift.

"Does it have to be difficult?" asked Imbrahim, not wanting his bubble of rosy optimism to be so quickly burst.

She didn't look at him, but said, "It doesn't appear they had any difficulty following us into the Matrix, Commander. Clearly they would appear to have a considerably more sophisticated tracking system than our own."

"But a random drop—"

She cut him off with a curt shake of her head. "There're reasons for everything, Commander. A device that could track a ship into hyperspace has more uses for war than for peace. And if they developed such a mechanism, then it stands to reason they'd also have anticipated moves like the one we just initiated."

"And would have developed some means of responding accordingly," Imbrahim said, hollow-voiced.

“Aye. Not much use being able to track a ship into hyperspace, only to lose it because it dropped shift randomly.”

He wrinkled his brow in a troubled frown. “But the scans show nothing,” he protested. “We’ve been sweeping the space about us for more than an hour, and there’s been no indication of anything.”

“Our enemy isn’t stupid, Commander.” She turned and regarded him squarely now. “They’re playing a game of cat and mouse. First they’re testing our capabilities, trying to establish our limitations; and then, when they’ve formed a reasonable profile of us, they’ll attack.” Her eyes, like hard, cold bits of flint, bore into him, as though dissecting him. “Whoever commands that ship is doing whatever any good captain would do, Mister Imbrahim: understanding the enemy. Once you’ve done that, you’re halfway to defeating your foe.”

“They didn’t need to understand the Niagara in order to destroy it,” he said, his voice a brittle challenge.

“I don’t think it’s their intention to destroy us,” the captain said. “I think they could have done that back at the transit point, before we had a chance to jump.”

Imbrahim felt his flesh crawl as the implications of what she was saying sank in. “They want to know their enemy,” he whispered with enlightenment. “And what better way to do it than to capture us.”

“Yes.” She stole another look at the tactical screen, as though assuring herself that nothing had slipped into scanner range. It was a personal conceit, given there were several others on the bridge monitoring the situation.

“They destroyed the Niagara,” she continued, turning back to him. “Perhaps because it took them by surprise, or perhaps because they hadn’t anticipated it falling so easily to their firepower. They may or may not know of the Earth Empire. I tend to think the latter. And what they did to the Niagara would have left them with few clues, one way or the other. But now we’re here, presenting them with a chance to garner a great deal more information about this new enemy. So they feel us out with a few quick jabs. Only we don’t fold like they expect, because unlike the Niagara we’ve been expecting them. Now we’ve got away, and they’ve two reasons for wanting to catch us.”

“The first is obvious,” said Imbrahim. “But the second?”

“Just as we don’t want them getting hold of any information concerning where we come from, they don’t want us to get back home to spread the word about them.” Jhordel smiled crookedly. “They’re smart little buggers, I’ll give them that. But maybe not quite as smart as they think.”

“How so?”

Her smile shaded to the cruel, thin-lipped grin of which he was all too familiar. “They forget that two can play at this game, Commander. And in this case we clearly have as much interest in ensuring they don’t get back to wherever it is they came from and report on us.”

He thought to ask her how she would stop them, but knew, even before he’d had chance to think the question through, that he would probably not like the answer. Better that he remain blissfully ignorant, for now. In time he’d know what she intended—whether he wanted to or not.

They all would.

33.

He could not sleep, though he felt exhausted.

He would close his eyes but find himself waiting, anticipating the battlestations alarm, ready to prepare himself for combat maneuvers or another jump. He wanted to believe they'd somehow eluded their foe, but Jhordel's words echoed in his mind. And though he told himself she was simply being overly cautious, he couldn't bring himself to dismiss her admonitions. He couldn't, he realized, because he trusted her instincts on this matter.

That was rather ironic, he supposed.

He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He'd been lying stretched out in his uniform for more than two hours. Two hours of pretending he wasn't afraid, of trying to convince himself Jhordel would somehow get them out of this.

Why he thought as much he couldn't say; there was a voice inside him that said they wouldn't be here if she'd listened to him. They'd be safe in Federation space. Or somewhere close. But she'd been right about determining the extent of the threat that had dealt the fatal blow to the Niagara. He saw that now. Finding the remains of the ship hadn't been enough; and her assessment of Admiralty's desires in this case were probably far closer to the truth than he cared to admit. They wouldn't be satisfied with a simple confirmation of the Niagara's demise. Of course, he observed wryly, they might not even get that.

He stood and made his way to the viewport of his cabin. They were drifting, having pushed their remaining two engines close to the limit when they'd boosted out from the drop point. Sublight drives were temperamental and fragile beasts at the best of times, which was why warships like the Confederation had six of them. You ran a terrible risk if you pushed them beyond their parameters; and the captains of military ships were renowned for walking the narrow line between safety and disaster. Jhordel was no different from the rest, but even she acquiesced to the entreaties of her chief engineer. Engineering had shut down the remaining drives to prevent them from joining the four others that were off line. Meanwhile, the tech teams were working at resurrecting one of the inoperative four by cannibalizing the other damaged drives, because only with three fully functioning engines powering them could they safely make the transition to

hyperspace.

He looked out and felt that awful sense of isolation that comes from knowing you're in an unfamiliar place. This was not the space of his childhood dreams. It was not the space of a myriad stars he'd once stared at with yearning from the warm security of prairie fields, long ago in those forgotten summer nights of his youth. It was not the space he'd once imagined sailing through—not the place of great mystery and awe that had captivated him as he'd read and watched the exploits of the countless men and women who had become heroes and legends in its boundless reaches. And yet, he told himself, it was indeed the same, and only he and the ship he sailed in somehow made it different.

He walked over to the mess unit in his room and ordered the machine to fabricate him a mug of steaming hot chocolate. "With a marshmallow," he added. A small hatch opened and he reached in and picked up the mug. It was warm, and heavy, and steam rolled and curled off the surface of the dark brown liquid, reminding him of the mist that rose from the river outside his home on the cold prairie days of early winter. It had been a long time since he'd seen that, longer still since he'd warmed himself with a belly full of chocolate.

He wrapped his hands around the mug and felt the stinging warmth of it. Almost, he wished for a harsh winter, so that he could stand at the window and look out past its lace of frost to the endless white of the fields, warmed by the security of his home and the heat from the drink that burned away the cold from hours of play outside. When you got old you too easily forgot those simple pleasures, forgot what it was to be a child.

He moved back to the viewport and peered out. As he sipped the chocolate and swallowed the scalding brew, he felt a cozy warmth spread through him. It was a transitory thing; but for a moment he was a child again, and that eerie vista out there—far more severe and threatening than even the worst of prairie winters—was a place to feel secure from. For a moment he could feel safe and warm.

For a moment.

34.

Imbrahim finally gave up pacing his room and made his way back to the bridge. At least there he could know what was happening right away. At least there he had less a sense of being impotent and in the dark. An illusion, perhaps, but one that left him feeling more secure. He found Jhordel where he had earlier parted company with her, and surmised from the look of her that she'd never left the bridge. For a moment he stood just inside the hatchway and studied her, observing how her concentration never seemed to waver from the bank of monitors before her. They were her eyes and ears into the ship, telling her of its secrets, warning her of its problems. Without that information she'd be blind.

He went to the mess unit on the bridge and ordered up some coffee, then walked purposefully to the seat beside her. "Here," he said, proffering the drink. "You look as though you could use this."

Jhordel glanced up at him, and for just a moment he was sure he could see a sick weariness in her eyes. But if it was there, it was a fleeting thing: gone quickly—replaced by that hard edge of steely determination that seemed to be the engine that drove her.

"Thanks," she murmured, accepting the coffee. Her gaze didn't linger on him, but shifted once again to the monitors. She sipped absently at the drink; and Imbrahim was struck with the notion that he could have handed her a cup of mud and she wouldn't have noticed the difference.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"Until we jump?"

He nodded, then realizing she was paying no attention to him, hastily added, "Yes."

"According to engineering the tech teams should have number five back on line within the hour."

"That'll be the minimum three."

“Aye.” She blew on her coffee and took another sip. “But the minimum is enough, Mister Imbrahim. We just need one shift.”

One shift. One shift and they’d be back in the Federation, or somewhere close. He was just about to congratulate her on saving their hides when something beeped on the tactical monitor. Jhordel jerked upright, her eyes fixed upon the screen, studying it intently. And as he watched her, he felt the life drain out of him; for what was there, he was sure, could only be one thing.

“It’s them,” he said, his voice hoarse from the sudden dryness of his throat. But Jhordel ignored him as she began issuing orders. The bridge, which had seemed so quiet—almost peaceful—moments earlier, was at once buzzing with activity. People scrambled into seats behind consoles, mobilizing for action even as the battlestations alert was sounded. The chattering of voices and the sound of instrumentation was thick in the air, drowning out the monotonous beep that came from the tactical monitor. Imbrahim turned his head towards the screen and stared at it. Something was on the very perimeter of the Confederation’s scanning range. Five hours distance at best sublight speed. Closer if whoever it was could jump so short a distance.

And we’re screwed if they can, he thought; for the Confederation was surely dead if that were the case. Not unless Jhordel could pull another rabbit out of the hat.

He wanted to believe in her. He wanted to be like the rest of the crew and have absolute faith in her. Then there might be hope, because without hope there was nothing.

Without hope they were surely as lost as the Niagara.

35.

“Impossible,” said Mahre, shaking her head vigorously.

“I don’t want to hear it, Commander,” Jhordel said sharply. “We have less than five hours to get that engine back on line and start boosting again.”

“I can’t work miracles, Captain,” the engineer shot back. She glanced at the other officers who had been quickly summoned to the briefing room, looking for their support.

“This isn’t a matter of choices,” Jhordel told them heatedly. “We either make a shift within the next few hours, or we face whatever it is that destroyed the Niagara.” She raked them with her eyes, making it clear to them that she didn’t want to hear anything that even hinted of accepting defeat.

“My people are doing their best,” Mahre protested. “But the random drop put a lot of strain on the ship. We had to supply the shields with an incredible amount of energy. Far more than the engines were designed to furnish.”

Jhordel pursed her lips and remained silent for a minute or two. Imbrabim studied her, trying to imagine what must be going through her mind, and thankful it wasn’t he who had to

bear the enormity of these responsibilities. That she faced this situation with such stoic reserve left him awed; he understood, now, why she was so prized by the Admiralty.

“Since Commander Mahre has made it clear we can’t hope to have the engines back on line before our enemy reaches us, we must seek an alternative course of action,” she announced. She

avored them with a blunt stare. “I need not tell you that standing our ground and confronting them would be futile. We’re clearly not in the condition to defend ourselves against the likes of this enemy.”

“What alternative is there?” asked a wide-eyed Talud. The navigation officer looked anxiously about, her sense of desperation reflected in the faces of the

others.

It was Wethers who answered her. “It’s theoretically possible to shift with two engines,” he said.

“Theory!” Mahre snorted dismissively. “No one has proved it. And all the theories suggest that without a substantial source of gravitonic energy a shift is virtually impossible.”

“There was the Agamemnon,” he reminded her. “They by-passed the sublight thrust manifolds and pumped everything directly into the Pearson.”

“There was no one alive after their shift!” the engineer exclaimed. “And there’s still debate as to whether they actually shifted of their own accord. Besides, they were in orbit about a planet. The mass had a direct effect on the coils. It’s why we don’t shift near mass. Mass means gravitons, Mister Wethers. And the FTL works on the accumulation of those. It’s why we need the sublights to pump up the coils. But you do that near a planet and you’ll overload the system, which is probably why they all died.”

“Exactly. That’s my point: That much mass may have worked against them,” Wethers argued. “But without having to provide thrust to accelerate the ship, two sublights might be enough to pump up the coils and give us what we need to make a jump.”

“Academic,” Jhordel grunted. “We’ve no time to debate the niceties of the matter. The fact remains that it’s our only true alternative. We either take the risk of making the shift under these parameters, or we prepare ourselves for an armed confrontation and hope we can acquit ourselves better than the Niagara.”

There was a long silence in the room. They exchanged looks, but no one dared speak.

Finally, Jhordel rose and said, “Prepare for the jump.”

Imbrahim watched them leave, stricken by the somber mood that seemed to have infected them all. He studied Jhordel closely, but she remained as hard-edged as always, no hint of weakness betrayed in her features. She had provided them with one more chance at survival, weak though it was. But soon she’d run out of options; and then, he knew, she’d have but one left. The one she’d not yet

discussed with any of them, but the one that was surely uppermost in her mind as the enemy drew its net tighter and tighter about them.

36.

They jumped.

Imbrahim knew the moment they entered hyperspace that something was wrong. He might not be a spacer, but even his experience on ships was enough to tell him this wasn't

right. It seemed as though the ship were a living creature, and that as it fell through hyperspace it screamed one long, blood-curdling cry of death. It could have been minutes, or hours, or even days before it ended. He wasn't sure. It didn't matter. All he knew was that as they exited the transit point at the end of the line it was for the last time.

The Confederation would never jump again.

37.

The Connie lay dead in space.

“Now what?” asked Imbrahim, his voice a whispered breath against the uncomfortable silence that permeated the ship.

Jhordel said nothing for a long time. When she did speak, it was with her usual directness. “We do what the Niagara didn’t have a chance to do,” she said. “We prepare to meet our enemy and destroy it.”

“We don’t have the means,” he protested. “You said so yourself.”

“No, Mister Imbrahim, that’s not what I said at all.”

“But—”

“There’ll be a final briefing in ten minutes,” she said, interrupting him. “Any questions you have will be answered there.” And with that she rose from her seat and left the bridge.

Imbrahim sat silent for several minutes after she had gone, mulling over her words, increasingly uncomfortable with the implications of what she’d said. He didn’t need to go to the briefing room to know what it was she was going to tell them.

38.

She stood with her back to them and said over her shoulder, “I could stand here and pretend there was hope, but there isn’t. I’ve often said there are always choices, and I suppose this remains true. But if we’re to remain faithful to what we believe in, then our choice is but one.” She turned and confronted them, meeting their looks with an open-faced one of her own. “We’ve run as far as we can run,” she went on in a subdued tone. “Given time, it’s possible we might engineer a means of limping back home. But time is something we don’t have.”

“Then you believe the enemy will track us down?” said Imbrahim.

“Based on the pattern of events thus far, yes.”

“But this last jump was like none of the others,” he argued.

“True enough,” Jhordel conceded. “And if, by chance, we’ve managed to elude our foe, then so much the better. The decisions made in this room won’t be written in stone, Commander.”

“Are we to be given a say in the matter, then?” Imbrahim asked.

“You’re here because I value your input,” the captain informed them all. “Nevertheless, a warship is not a democracy. Ultimately it’s I who must make the decisions; and in doing so I must do what is best for the Federation, and not what is best for us.”

“Are they mutually exclusive?” Imbrahim challenged.

“They are, if in choosing for ourselves we put the Federation at risk.”

“And what is your decision, Captain?”

Jhordel moved to the table and sat down. She was silent for a moment, rubbing her hands together, staring at them contemplatively, as though weighing a matter of great import—which, of course, she was. Finally she looked up and regarded them knowingly. “There is no other viable alternative,” she said.

Imbrahim studied the faces of the others and didn’t like what he saw. They

wore a collective look of resignation; there was no hint of anger, nor sense of outrage present in any of them. It was a calm acceptance he couldn't understand. Not while his own emotions were a maelstrom of discontent and disequilibrium. He wasn't so willing to accept Jhordel's assessment of the situation, even though he could actually see no clear alternative himself. "We'll have achieved nothing," he argued, turning to the others desperately.

"We'll have bought time," said Jhordel.

"But how much?" He shook his head. "We don't have a clue as to what we're up against here. There could be a whole armada of ships waiting on the Federation's doorstep."

"I think not," said Jhordel. "Only the one ship has chased us. We've seen nothing to indicate there's more than one. If there were, I'm sure we'd not be here discussing the matter."

"A scout," Wethers suggested.

Jhordel inclined her head in acknowledgement. "That would be my guess," she admitted. "Which gives us reason to hope it's far from any fleet it might belong to. Perhaps distant enough to make communications an impracticality, as it currently is for us."

"What if you're wrong?" Imbrahim asked bluntly.

"Ultimately, that makes little difference, Commander. If I'm right, we buy the Federation time. Perhaps a great deal of it. If I'm wrong, it really doesn't matter, does it? One way or another, we'll be sacrificed."

"It's a leap of logic to conclude that the ship that's been following us is a forerunner for an invading fleet," he charged. "It may simply be an exploration vessel."

"So heavily armed?" Jhordel snorted dismissively. "I can't accept that. And why such an aggressive stance? They not only attacked us, but have pursued us relentlessly. Hardly the sort of actions one would expect of a lowly exploration ship."

Imbrahim couldn't argue with that; indeed, everything they knew thus far

pointed to a warship of some description. Moreover, it seemed safe to assume it was a scout; for had a fleet been close at hand, he suspected they'd have seen it by now. His words like ice in a colder room, fell from his lips. "The zero-option," he whispered.

"Yes," said Jhordel, and left it at that.

He recalled his days in the Academy. It was there he'd first heard of the zero-option. At that time he'd never considered it seriously; it had been something theoretical, taught to students in much the same way time travel was. Certainly he'd never imagined he'd ever be in the

position of seeing it executed.

"Tell me, Captain," he said carefully. "What if the zero-option fails?"

Jhordel's face was expressionless as she said, "It won't, Commander. It never has."

He had the feeling she was right, but he wasn't sure he wanted her to be.

He wasn't sure at all.

39.

“Identification, please.”

“Jhordel, Lhara Annyselia,” she said, with a precise intonation. “Captain, USF. Serial number 330-25671-01. Commanding FS Confederation, CFF-23.”

“Acknowledge. Scanning.” There was a flash of light in the com-link cube, then the AI said, “Recognize Jhordel, Lhara Annyselia. Captain, USF. Serial number 330-25671-01. Commanding FS Confederation, CFF-23.”

The hatch slid open before her. Beyond, shrouded in darkness, a small chamber. She licked dry lips and drew a breath, then pulled herself in. A soft blue light suffused the tiny space, cool and almost comforting, giving the bared flesh of her arms and face an eerie hue. Behind her the hatch snapped shut, sealing her off from the rest of the ship. She reached up and slipped a thumb under the chain that held a slender silver key about her neck. She turned about in the chamber and faced a dark panel of holokeys and a com-link that was set in the curved wall. In the center of this was a narrow slot, just large enough for the business end of the key. Jhordel hesitated, her fingers curled tight about the warm metal of the key, squeezing it until its sharp edges pressed painfully into her palm. Finally, without even a tremor of her hand, she lifted the key to the slot and rammed it home. It slid into place with a satisfying click; and then she grasped the protruding end and turned it clockwise. There was a loud beep and the panel came to life, the com-link cube forming before her eyes, the holokeys blooming like unfolding flower buds, splashing her face with their multicolored light. The com-link beckoned; she stared into it.

“You have initiated the first steps in activating the auto-destruct mechanism of the FS Confederation, CFF-23,” the computer announced. “This is not a simulation. Repeat: This is not a simulation. Do you wish to proceed?”

She remained silent for a moment. Too long for the AI’s satisfaction. “Do you wish to proceed?” it asked again; and she thought she detected an undercurrent of impatience in the way it spoke.

“Yes,” she replied sharply. “Proceed.”

“Completion of the correct sequence of procedures will result in the disruption of the continuity fields within the graviton collection coils of the Pearson FTL. Survival of this event, if within the envelope of collapse, is zero percent,” the AI warned. “Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said Jhordel.

The com-link cube seemed to shift and reform, revealing a new image, which Jhordel recognized from her Academy training, and from the only other occasion she’d done this, when she’d been master of the Grand Banks. She’d never thought she would ever see its like again; but this time would be the last time.

“Procedure number one,” the AI began. As the machine talked her through the steps necessary for activating the auto-destruct, she responded to each instruction in a flat, emotionless voice, reacting like an automaton. Red lights turned to yellow in a row of ten, which when complete flashed once and then turned green.

“Auto-destruct sequence executed,” the AI announced. “Final confirmation, please.”

“Allegro, seven, seven, six,” Jhordel said.

“Affirmative. Allegro, seven, seven, six. Auto-destruct confirmed. Countdown limit, or manual activation?”

“Manual.”

“Confirmed. Manual activation. From specific com-link?”

“Captain’s quarters.”

“Confirmed. Captain’s quarters. Programming complete.”

Jhordel closed her eyes and felt the sting of tears. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Captain Jhordel. It as has been pleasure serving with you.”

40.

The ship seemed lifeless.

He encountered no one as he stalked the corridors of officer country. But behind each door he knew there were men and women making their peace with themselves, in whatever way they cared to. Some might even be believers, praying to whatever gods or spirits to which they might subscribe. He envied them that, for he could find no solace in prayer, or in communion with deities. That made for a feeling of loneliness, far deeper than any he'd yet experienced. He paused at the entrance to his quarters, debating with himself. He looked farther down the corridor, to where the door of the captain's cabin stood apart from the rest. Jhordel would be in there, he was certain; because he'd already been over much of the ship and not seen her. Not on the bridge, nor in the engineering section—the two mostly likely places where she might have been found. He had tried the observation lounge, but it had been filled with others awaiting their fate—and somehow he'd the feeling that Jhordel would be spending these last few moments alone. He turned away from his cabin door and headed up country, to the captain's quarters.

41.

There was no vocal invitation to enter; just the door quietly sliding aside, revealing a darkened room. Imbrahim stepped forward, the light of the corridor streaming in from behind like rays of brilliant sunlight, silhouetting him, and casting his shadow sharply against the floor. The door closed with a hiss of vented air and a dull click. He glanced back at it, then turned to face the captain's inner sanctum, peering intently through the fog of darkness as his eyes slowly grew accustomed to the absence of light.

“Are you going to stand there all day, Mister Imbrahim?”

He looked towards the source of the voice and saw the outline of a woman seated behind a desk. She sat facing a viewport, staring out into more lightlessness, to where a myriad of suns shone in the fathomless depths, like chips of phosphor drifting deep in a nighttime sea.

“If I'm disturbing you—”

Her laughter cut him short. It was sharp, humorless mirth, which spoke of hopelessness and despair. “Your presence on this ship has always disturbed me, Mister Imbrahim,” she said. “I've wondered from the beginning why Admiralty sent you here.”

He could tell she was looking at him, though he couldn't yet make out the features of her face. “I was sent to find out what happened to the Niagara,” he said; but even he didn't believe that. Not now. Not any longer.

“Why?” she asked simply. “We've been assigned many missions before, and never an intelligence officer on any of them. Why now, Mister Imbrahim? Why on this particular mission?”

He shrugged, though he wasn't sure she could see him do so. “This was different,” he said.

“Ah, yes. I suppose it was.”

He could see she was holding a glass, holding it at arms length, studying it,

staring at the stars through it. She'd been drinking, but he doubted she could be drunk. Not unless her biobots had been reprogrammed. Spacers were always doing that on shore leave. Pay a few credits to the right person and it could be done in a matter of seconds—if you were willing to take the risk of some stranger fiddling around with something that could as easily be programmed to kill you.

“Sit down, Mister Imbrahim.” Jhordel gestured with her outstretched arm, motioning him to the seat across from her.

He sat, stiffly, feeling uncomfortable, and regretting that he'd come here. But there was no turning back. He wasn't sure he would have if he could have. As conscious as he was of his own biting loneliness, he was even more aware of hers. Once more he was struck by the realization that the loneliest person on this ship was the captain. Perhaps ironically, he was the only one to whom she could turn in a time like this. He was the outsider, the one who didn't belong. The one to whom she owed nothing. There was a bottle on the desk. Jhordel reached for it, barely shifting from her seat, and poured something into a glass. She set the bottle down and pushed the glass across to him. Imbrahim stared at the offering, making no movement to pick it up. He lifted his gaze to hers, met her eyes, which were cast in shadow, and saw the black heart of her soul—saw the tempest of her emotions, raging within her: anger battling guilt and self-pity. But the face was granite. Hard. Impenetrable. It was a reflection of the discipline that had held her captive for so much of her life, and even now, in these final hours, would not easily release her from its hold.

“Drink,” she said. It sounded more like an order than an invitation.

Reluctantly he picked up the glass, sipped tentatively, grimacing at the sharp taste of the whiskey. It had been some time since he'd had real booze; there had never seemed much point when it was impossible to get drunk. And he'd never been the sort to pay some hack in a back alley shop for the privilege. But he thought if he could have found such a person now he'd have gladly paid more than ten times the asking price just to get a little buzz on. Just to numb himself to all this... All this what? This insanity?

He could almost laugh, thinking about those little buggers inside him, at this very moment doing their damndest to keep him alive. Legions of the microscopic biobots floating around in his body, providing maintenance,

repairing internal damage incurred by radiation, phase-shifts, combat maneuvers and whatever else space could throw at you. An army defending their turf and at the same time robbing him of the simple pleasure of getting falling-down drunk. He could drink bottles and bottles of Jhordel's damn whiskey and the worst that would happen is that he'd have to take leak. And that almost made him laugh aloud as he pictured himself stuck in a washroom peeing away when the end came. There was almost something crudely poetic about that.

"From Earth," said Jhordel, nodding to the bottle. "I've been saving it for a special occasion." She giggled, the sort of girlish outburst he'd have never expected from her; and for a moment he thought he caught a glimpse of what she'd been before Obsidian. Before that darkness that had made her what she was today.

"I was rather hoping it would have been for an occasion a little less sobering than this," she was saying; and he pulled himself from his moment of reverie and forced a grin and said, "There's still hope, Captain."

She pushed her chair back a bit, revealing for the first time a tactical display. A touch of a finger brightened it, its multicolored glow washing across her face and splashing onto the cellite desk. It made the deep amber liquid in the bottle glimmer with an eerie radiance.

"There's no hope," she said quietly. Firmly. She stared at the display.

Imbrahim followed her gaze, studying the tactical and quickly spotting the reason for her pessimism. On the edge of scanner range a telltale blip blinked on and off, indicating the presence of another ship. The data scrolling next to it informed him it was approaching them, and that at current estimates it would reach them in less than five hours.

"Our friends," he said, feeling the bottom fall out of his world, hope dashed beyond hope of resurrection.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"With that kind of technology we could have ended the war against the Unity years ago," he observed, forcing himself to speak, hearing the wooden nature of his voice. He felt frightened and angry and a myriad other things. One part of him wanted to curl up and cry. Another wanted to rage against the injustice of it

all, wanted to pound something to a pulp. Something. Anything.

And then, impossibly, there was this crazy notion that somehow, someday, they were going to be saved. The captain would think of some extraordinary escape. Or a fleet of Federation cruisers would suddenly drop shift around them and hammer the bastard that had been chasing them.

They wouldn't die. They couldn't die.

But he knew that was just desperation. It was just the mind refusing to believe the inevitable. It was the man clinging to a cliff, his fingers losing their grip, and him still certain that someone was going to suddenly appear and haul him to safety. It was the prisoner in front of the firing squad, certain there'd be a reprieve even as men lined up before him with guns aimed at his heart.

But that stuff just happened in holodramas. It wasn't real. Real life was cruel and impersonal and didn't give a damn whether you lived or died. After all, in the total scheme of things a human being was less significant than a grain of sand on a beach a million million light-years long. And thinking this, considering this with a phlegmatic regard, he felt all the anger and the despair and the sense of desperation drain out of him.

"It gives one pause for thought, doesn't?" said Jhordel. She shook her head ruefully and glanced at him, sober-faced, the granite of her features shifting slightly to reveal a hint emotion. Mostly it was regret. "We're fighting amongst ourselves," she went on. "Perhaps even on the verge of destroying what we so long struggled to build. And now, here, on our doorstep, is a force that may test us all. We may soon face a threat of such magnitude that it'll make the conflict between the Unity and the Federation seem like a petty parochial skirmish." She sipped at her drink, then held the glass pressed against her cheek as she stared out the viewport. Imbrahim waited for her to continue, knowing that in time she would. He held his own drink in his lap, hands curled about the

heavy glass tumbler, savoring the calm that now suffused him, mildly amused by how removed he felt. That blip on the edge of the tactical screen was a death sentence; yet when he looked at it now he felt nothing no panic. There was no sense of rage anymore, no feeling of injustice. Even when he thought of dying, he couldn't stir himself to anything more than mild curiosity. It was as though a part of him had known all along that it would come to this and had resolved that

it would accept it. And after all, what else could he do?

“I’m almost glad,” Jhordel said.

He blinked and looked up, abruptly aware his thoughts had drifted. “Glad of what?” he heard himself ask.

“That it’s ending,” she said, the words one long sigh. “It seems as though I’ve spent too much of my life running.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head into the embrace of the chair. “There’s almost something liberating about knowing it’ll all be over soon. No more war for you and me, Mister Imbrahim. No more wondering what it’s all about. No more wishing, sometimes, that you could just have a normal life.”

He knew what she meant—understood it as though they were his own thoughts that she had expressed. But he was surprised to hear such things from her; she was not the sort he could ever have imagined as being content to live a ‘normal’ life.

“Do you have family, Mister Imbrahim?” she asked, lolling her head to one side to look at him.

“My parents, and a brother I’ve not seen in years.” He felt a fist close about his heart as he said this. He hadn’t even thought of them until now. Would they ever really know what had happened to him? Perhaps no more so than if he’d died on any of his other missions.

“At least there’ll be someone to miss you,” Jhordel said. “At least there’ll be someone to mourn.”

“For a while,” he said. “But then life will go on, as it has for the many who have already lost loved ones in this war. In time, things’ll be the same.”

She smiled sadly and said, “It’s never the same, Mister Imbrahim. When you lose something...” She stopped, seemed lost a moment, then went on: “If you lose someone dear to you, it’s as though some part of you has been ripped out. It leaves a hole in your soul, which sometimes can fester and grow, until it consumes you.”

He stared at her, and thought she wasn’t talking about the loss of her parents,

but about what had happened to her on Obsidian. He wanted to ask her about it; but now seemed even less appropriate than in the past. And what would be gained by knowing? That he should satisfy his curiosity moments before he died? It didn't seem worth the price of making her relive something that had been so powerful a moment in her life that it had changed her and made her into what she was today.

"I remember in the Academy they told us we'd get used to death," he said, not quite sure why he was saying it. "They said we'd have to, or we'd go insane."

"Then this ship must be full of the truly mad, Commander, for I doubt there's a one of us who has ever become used to death."

"Perhaps accepting of it."

"You'd never dare venture into space if you weren't that."

They sat silent for a long time afterwards. Imbrahim watched the blip on the tactical screen, but over the course of several minutes it scarcely seemed to move. Deceptive, he knew, because in that brief period of time the ship it represented had traveled tens of thousands of kilometers closer to the Confederation. He wondered why it hadn't skip jumped. It could have been on them in seconds if it had. But he had the impression the enemy was moving cautiously, approaching at a conservative pace—perhaps anticipating a far more aggressive response from the Confederation than their first encounter with one another.

"They're not fools," said Jhordel, voicing what Imbrahim had had on his mind.

"They may think it's a trap," he said. "We might not draw them in close enough."

She nodded. "My thoughts exactly." She sat up straighter in her chair and turned it about, bringing herself within reach of the com-link. She reached out a hand and activated it, then asked the AI to summon her exec.

"Skipper?" Wethers face appeared in the cube, looking as attentive as ever.

"One last job for you, Mister Wethers."

“Sir?”

“I want as much loose material as possible gathered together.”

The first officer frowned, puzzled by the request.

“We need to make sure our friends out there come close enough to the ship to be within the envelope of collapse,” Jhordel explained. She looked grim-faced for a moment. “When you’ve got that stuff together I want it put in the main hangerbay. Have the bodies removed from their containers and placed with the loose debris. When that’s done, blow the doors and open the bay to space. I want our friends out there to think we’re dead. They’ll be scanning us before long. Let’s give them something to make them believe it’s perfectly safe for them to come in for a closer look.”

Enlightenment dawned on Wethers’ face. “I think I understand, sir,” he said, almost smiling. Almost, but not quite.

The face of the exec faded from the cube, but not from Imbrahim’s memory. That hesitant look of acceptance was burned into his mind; he thought there was something almost horrific about it. They were obedient to the end, he thought; and then realized he was no less so. He was sitting here drinking, whiling away the last hours of his life with a woman he scarcely knew. He told himself there were dozens of things he should be doing, but when he dwelt on the matter he could think of none. None that were important. None that mattered...now. If Jhordel had chosen to send off a hyperspace capsule to the Federation, he might have sent a message. But the captain had deemed a capsule too risky, fearing their pursuer might be able to track it down and home in on the Federation all that much faster. So they would all vanish in a few hours. Gone. Forever. Without a trace of them left behind.

Imbrahim found himself wondering if even souls could exist in the core of a singularity.

42.

“It’s an old trick,” said Imbrahim as he watched the drifting debris beyond the viewport of Jhordel’s cabin.

“To us,” said the captain. “But maybe our friend’s out there never saw the same movies.”

“They’ll know the truth once they do a deep scan.”

“By the time they can do that, they’ll be within the envelope of collapse.” She looked grimly determined as she peered intently at the tactical display. “All we need is for our bait to work, and then we’ll have hooked our fish.”

“And when they are hooked?”

Jhordel lifted her hand, and for the first time Imbrahim saw the deadman switch that connected her to the com-link. The moment she released it, the destruct mechanism would be triggered. For some reason it didn’t surprise him that she would choose to do it manually; it was her ship and her crew, and he thought he understood her well enough, now, to see that she was not the sort to leave such a final act to a machine. Besides, it gave her an out—a means of retreating from commitment. All she had to do was hold onto that switch and instruct the AI to halt the auto-destruct. For just a moment Imbrahim felt a spark of hope flicker within him. Perhaps, he thought—but it went no further than that. He looked again at Jhordel, at the hand that held the switch. There was something unnerving about being so close to the mechanism that would bring about their destruction. Like sitting on a live grenade.

“Why manually?” he heard himself ask in a faint, faraway voice. “You could have had the AI use a proximity trigger.”

“It was my choice,” she said, confirming his earlier suspicions. “I’m the one who got us here. I’m the one responsible. I’m the one who’ll end it.”

“You make it sound as though you’re at fault.”

“I am, Commander.” She regarded him forthrightly. “As captain of this ship I

assume all blame.”

“And what of fate?”

She laughed. “Fate is for the faithful, Mister Imbrahim; and I’m not one of them.”

43.

He wished he could have seen the enemy, could have seen their ship, seen their faces, so that he would have known them. Would have known what they were, and perhaps in so knowing would have better understood them. But they were just a blip on the screen, fast approaching, soon to merge with the solitary red marker that was the Confederation. They were faceless. Unknown. They might even have been machines, though his instincts told him otherwise. He could only imagine, and the imagining was limited by the narrow breadth of his experiences. In the long run it didn't matter. In that remote corner of space all pasts were forgotten, all lives erased. It was a place of endings, and perhaps a place of beginnings.

Imbrahim watched the tactical screen with a pounding heart and a mouth as dry as dust. Only in these last few seconds, as the two markers indicating the ships joined as one did he realize he was truly afraid to die. But by then it was too late. Jhordel turned from the tactical display and faced him, the hand with the deadman switch held before her. She smiled, and whispered something he did not hear. Her secret, he thought.

Her truth.

Obsidian.

And then the world ended.

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Lindsay H.F. Brambles,

63 Stonepointe Avenue,

Nepean, Ontario,

Canada

K2G 6G4

Lindsay H.F. Brambles

Zero-Option

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