



Alien Cradle

○ JEFF INLO

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1. No Sign of Intelligent Life

Rumbling, shaking, unsettling turmoil; Rath Scampion hated atmospheric entry. Despite the presence of heat casters, the bright orange flares bursting across the viewshields convinced him that he was about to ignite into a spectacular light show. The bone-jarring convulsions made shuttle turbulence seem like a light cough. His jaw quivered, his teeth chattered from the intense vibrations; all the while he held steady to the flight stick as if it was his only lifeline. His fingers turned white from the ferocity of his grip. With the scout vessel in computer pilot, he had no true command. The shake of his arm caused no pitch of the wing or jolt to the thrusters, but holding the instrument gave him some sense of security, some belief that he maintained control.

"Damn, I hate this," he shouted into the loneliness of his single-manned cockpit.

He bounced with the lurching of the craft as the thrusters, both fore and aft, compensated automatically for the pitch and roll of the unsteady descent. His stomach muscles tightened and his mouth went dry. Not a new experience, not even close. He had suffered through this hundreds of times before, entered atmospheres which tried to toss him back into space as if God Himself was belching in the face of his ship. Still, he prayed to survive, and for the most part, he always doubted his chances. Wide-eyed, he scanned the display monitors before him. Everything read on the line.

He wanted to close his eyes, but he couldn't. The recesses of his brain exploded with fear. His mind echoed with one thought - *What are you nuts?* His instincts demanded that he remain alert. Perhaps there was some chance he could pull off a miracle of his own if disaster struck.

The moment of pure disorientation sprung on him without warning. He lost his breath, suffered the inability to swallow. He never wore a flight suit, too constraining, so he had nothing to neutralize the physiological strain of propulsion shift, that sudden careen when the ship alters from a space faring vessel into more of a standard aircraft.

As much as he hated reentry, he didn't welcome the effects of gravity with any greater appreciation. In space, there was never really a fear of falling. Certainly other threats existed - exposure to the vacuum or radiation, loss of heat or oxygen - but if the craft lost all forward propulsion, it would just drift in space. Within an atmosphere, there was gravity, and if he lost power now, he would drop from the sky like a meteorite.

That thought always chewed at his nerve-endings. He wondered how long he would remain conscious if his ship ever spiraled out of control and plummeted eighty or ninety thousand meters to a hard surface.

How long would it take? Would he scream?

Really not an end he would choose. Better to lose power in deep space and accept death with a modicum of self-respect than to face drawn out minutes of shrieking terror.

Rath whistled a deep exhale as he focused on his mission objectives. He voiced his instructions to the shipboard computer. "Launch probes and submersibles. Scan all wavelengths and spectrums. Commence landing."

He peered out the forward viewshield. The navigational computer would select the safest site and land the scout without the pilot's aid. He was truly nothing more than a passenger, the computer did the driving. During descent, a few turns brought him a twinge of anxiety, but even that began to ease as he noted the decreasing altitude. He looked over the barren landscape with a more relaxed eye.

The planet Fenrir; *why did the expansionists always choose ancient mythology as a source for the names of these planets?* He didn't know the story behind Fenrir, but he doubted this planet gave it justice. The surface was rugged, but harsh. There was an emptiness about this place, a desolation he had seen so many times before. The absence of life brought a sense of detachment from old earth legends, not the distinguished beauty of some ancient tale dedicated to the power of supreme beings.

"Rocks and empty water, always the same."

Brown and pale gray, nothing else. It was what he always saw. The planets of this class melded together in his memory. Sometimes he would see shades of red or orange from an active volcano, but never green. Never.

The craft shuddered slightly as the Boscon Props kicked in at two percent power to facilitate a slow descent and soft vertical landing. A good feeling, not like the violent shakes of entry. This was the soothing pitch of finding firm ground.

Rath took one last look at the scanner readings. The atmosphere was close to Earth's. A small difference in the percentage mix between nitrogen and oxygen, but certainly not life threatening.

Before exiting, he took several deep breaths. It calmed his nerves and prepared him for his ritual. He stepped out of the starboard hatch and held his breath as he broke into a quick run. He dashed away from his ship. He didn't want to smell the burn of the props or the lingering scent of cooling metal. He wanted his first taste of this air to be pure. After all, he was the first living organism to breathe this atmosphere.

The sensation was always a rush. His lungs demanded oxygen. His face was turning red, then purple. The exertion of running did little to ease his discomfort. Still, he waited. Only when he was clear of the ship did he stop. He closed his eyes and inhaled. The quick blast of near pure oxygen brought swirling colors to his vision.

After a few more deep breaths, he turned back to his objectives. He flipped on his portable.

"Record. Approximately thirty degrees centigrade. Upwards visibility unlimited. Forward visibility about twenty kilometers. Relatively level surface. Rock formations in each direction. No sign of volcanic or seismic activity. Barren surface."

Rath kicked a rock. Watched it tumble along a dusty path until it finally ground to a halt. Dust hung around the trail, but even that began to settle. He smiled. "I'm pretty sure that's the first time a rock has been moved on this planet by something other than the wind or water."

He took delight in that thought. Always did. He enjoyed being the first living thing to extend force upon the inanimate objects of a new world.

#

Dr. Sinclair cleared her throat. She shifted her girth within her chair as the remaining council members came to a hush. Before speaking, she glanced down at the bound report before her with a sense of disdain.

"We face a critical moment. Of that, we should not, can not, argue. We've physically explored beyond the solar system, and we can scan beyond the galaxy. We've located and analyzed hundreds of planets capable of supporting life; atmospheres identical to earth's. We've colonized many of these planets, scrutinized every rock formation, every body of water, fresh or salt. Not a single microbe. Nothing. Every living cell ever discovered originates from earth.

"I'm not even talking about life as we know it. We've explored thousands of planets with various atmospheric conditions. We've sent probes to analyze all possibilities, carbon-based or other. If another form of life existed, we would have discovered it.

"We've even unbounded our definition of life. Our criteria are almost laughable. At this point, a cell would not have to reproduce, seek sustenance, grow, or even move for us to classify it as a living organism. As it stands now, we would probably accept a trace membrane with one identifiable function, no matter how diluted."

She flipped through the report as if cursing at each page. The elongated paused brought a sense of finality to the shadowed corners of the private council chambers.

"Lifeless liquids, minerals and gases. That is all that we have found. Indeed, that may be all that exists in this vast universe. We can argue that all night. You can state we have not searched far or long enough, but it will not change the situation.

"And this situation leads us to a greater problem. If the general population begins to accept that there is no existence of life beyond that which has originated here on earth, they will ask questions we will not want to answer. They will want to know why earth was so special. What will we tell them?"

"If we conclude that earth was the only planet to breed life, then scientific theory itself leads us to only two theories. We are either a cosmic fluke or we were created by something beyond our comprehension, something in the form of a higher power that defies the laws of science. I can not accept either of these proposals. And I will not listen to the rhetoric of the religious organizations if this is our answer."

She thumped the cover of the report closed and hammered off the links to the display screens about the room.

"We can't remain silent forever. We have been commissioned to discover alien life. What will we report?"

#

Completing his appointed requirements, Rath turned to his own intentions, his reward for being the first to explore a new planet with abundant and valuable mineral resources. Probes recorded submerged pockets of gold, but they dwelled too deep in the crust. Harvesting these minerals would require heavy blasting. Too much effort and too much damage to the topsoil. The gems were another story. Readings of aluminum and beryllium assured him of finding large deposits of emeralds and rubies. A little surface scratching with a portable laser was all that was needed to collect an excessively profitable amount.

It was nothing he would have to hide, nothing he would need to worry about. Regency Exploration commissioned scout explorations to the lowest bidders. Every pilot bid below cost, but not so low to raise an eyebrow of some bureaucrat. It wasn't like they didn't know what was going to happen. But there were rules. Don't make it obvious. Don't scout in a freighter, don't dig mine shafts, and don't leave surface craters the size of space carriers. Beyond that, the commissioned pilot could take whatever would fit in the meager holds of a scout vessel.

Rath loaded the cargo bay with what didn't amount to a drop of water compared to an ocean as to what remained. He looked back at the barren landscape and thought of the riches he was leaving behind. One trip with a double freighter and he could retire; no more flights, no more atmospheric entries.

He thought of changing the data, classifying the planet as inhospitable. It wouldn't work. They'd find him out, take his wealth, and rescind his scouting license.

Still, the idea remained enticing. Regency was becoming so disjointed with its growing colonies; it was already dealing with maverick planets and rebellions. Rumors had spread of marauders taking over more than one habitable world. There was even word of a scout named Angelo that had taken over a planet. He never reported back, just kept mining platinum and radium fuel until he was able to buy his own mercenary force.

Rath wondered how many other scouts chose the path of pirating and looting, how many other planets moved toward open rebellion. As he looked over the vast and vacant landscape, he considered if Regency Govern might even be pleased to hear that there was nothing this far out worth colonizing.

The damn scanners. That was always the problem. Regency could see further than he could travel. He was sure the eggheads in one of the commissions already knew for damn sure that this planet was habitable. He wasn't really a scout, more of a human guinea pig. They just wanted to send someone to make sure the pilot survived. After that, the process became routine. Regency handed over colonizing clearance to the expansionists. The council on colonization classified the planet based on mineral and water content, handed out initial mining permits, and finally commissioned the first settler colonies. After that, it was simply a matter of time as the landings would begin in earnest.

Rath took one last look at the rocky terrain before the sun faded out of sight. He wondered how long it would take for the expansionists to make a toehold. He never returned to a scouted planet to see the changes. He heard from other pilots it was a frightening sight. They say the horticulturists begin throwing seeds down in blankets. Tall grasses take over almost immediately. The brown and gray turns to green in less than two weeks standard. From there, they transport saplings right up to mature trees. If he came back in an earth year, he'd see a forest wilderness, and the inanimate rocks before him would be covered up by new life, life from earth.

It sounded pleasant, but only for a moment. The creation of the forest led to expanding settlements. Settlements brought more colonists. And more colonists meant more of everything that somehow didn't belong on this world as it existed now.

The planet's sun sunk below the horizon and Rath decided to wait a few moments for the darkness to swallow the surface. The light blue sky grew darker, turned deep blue, then black. The stars glistened and the view was as crisp and clear as if Rath had taken flight. He stood out in the open, smelling the air and listening to the light breeze of night on an empty planet. He was alone, but loneliness did not enter his spirit.

#

Dr. Sinclair leaned back on her chair. The unbalancing of her own weight illustrated her own point of urgency. "Delays are no longer acceptable. The Boscon Prop engine has seen to that. Now that we can travel to neighboring solar systems in less than a week's time, we have come to our end. There is no one willing to accept further excuses. With each new planet explored and colonized, we set orbital scanners to search further out in the universe. Even the general population is aware that the scope of our sight is expanding exponentially. We have to make a report."

She eyed the other council members carefully.

"In my estimation there is but one thing we can do. We must declare a finding of something beyond our expectations. May I suggest we start with an anomaly... something which must be investigated further, but with a degree of care? This will offer us the time we need."

She spoke quickly now, and with the authority of her leadership.

"Before anyone objects, let me remind all of you the consequences of failure. Regency Govern commissioned us to find alien life in order to help understand the origins of our own existence. We have argued as a council that the finding of extraterrestrial life is the bridge to determining the creation of the universe. The inability to find even a single cell on all the habitable planets explored can, and will, lead to our demise.

"Nothing short of a finding is going to keep the doubters at bay. We will lose our commission. The general public will view it as a waste of funding. All resources will revert to expansionism, or worse, a council of religious experts to examine the creation of life in their own terms. It will be like returning to the dark ages, when peasants viewed scientists as heretics and pagans. The debate will become simplistic and surreal over which mystifying force exerts its influence over us all."

Repositioning herself, she leaned forward.

"For those of you that may believe a false report is beyond your ethics, I simply ask you to consider the ethics of a panel of religious inquisitors. You may not like it, but it is our only acceptable alternative."

#

Rath fired the Boscon Props. Lift off was a surge of unbelievable power and still the prop gauges indicated less than a quarter of maximum power. Rath didn't mind lift off. In their history of flight, Boscon engines never exploded. Within seconds, his vessel would be clear of Fenrir's atmosphere and within zero gravity.

Once in space, Rath punched up the navcodes for Janus. He wasn't going to bother with the outer rim trading posts. It was always more profitable to bring the goods right to market yourself. He edged the props to eighty percent power and noted the time calculation. He would be landing in roughly thirty standard earth hours.

The Boscon Prop propelled ships through space with unbelievable fury, and ships exceeded the speed of light without the consequences of early theory. Pilots didn't go back in time, didn't show up younger than a twin brother. The ship simply became invisible as it moved faster than the light around it.

It was just a matter of propulsion. Find a way to increase energy and you keep breaking speed records. That was the key to the Boscon Prop.

Ironically, Boscon's basic principles dated back to the invention of the wheel. In watching a simple spinning disk, Boscon understood that the number of rotations was the constant while the speed upon the same surface was variable. He applied this reasoning for matter spinning about the nucleus of an atom.

He theorized that if it were possible to expand an electron's orbit around the nucleus without searing it off, the speed at the outer edge would exceed the speed near the center; the speed of light would be surpassed. With a few adaptations, like making the fuel more efficient, and concentrating the density of the charge, interstellar travel became as common as solar system shuttles.

With nothing to do for the next thirty hours, Rath calculated his profits. It was a little better than a rough estimate. He had an idea of gem prices on Janus, but nothing he could check instantaneously. It wasn't as easy to send messages through space as it was for ship travel. Wave transmissions journeyed at a snails pace, and communication required new innovation to keep the whole of Regency informed and intact.

Actually, communications reverted back to a pony express type system. They could be sent faster by shuttles than by any known wave pulses. Courier services blossomed in this day of faster than light travel. Account information, market quotes, messages; all of this made its way through the galaxy via ship transported feeds.

As for the quotes, Rath couldn't link to a planetary system while in Boscon Push. His information from Janus was at least a week standard old, but he doubted he would have to face any great fluctuation. His portable used the last downloaded bids to determine revenues. He nodded happily as the small computer announced the final profit. It was a good trip, money-made, but no where near enough to end the scouts. He thought about playing the interplanetary lottery again, he thought about that whenever he had to peruse the requests for scout bids.

2. Stealing a Planet

Rath held out his wrist band for scanning. His fingers danced over a small keypad as he punched in a four digit alphanumeric security code. He always wondered why that was necessary. Pirates or hijackers would have to hack his hand off to remove the ID band. Why inconvenience them with having to beat a security code out of him? Seemed like an invitation for more punishment.

He shrugged as he voiced his instructions to the robot monitors. "Keep the cockpit under lock. Authorized entry restricted to me. Unloading the cargo bay will probably be contracted out. Let's use the password 'eggnog'. Fuel it up and no extra maintenance. Just make a list of recommended repairs and load it into the service computer. Thanks."

Rath always thanked the robots. He didn't know why, didn't really even think too much of it. But they were helpful, no denying that, and it seemed like a simple gesture he could afford.

The freight ports on Janus were drab. No pleasantries; no gift shops, no piped in music or powered walkways, no decorated terminals. The pads stood on thick steel and concrete platforms. Pilots stepped out into the open without the privilege of fancy enclosed catwalks. All service vehicles - from loaders and lifts to maintenance carts -were fully automated. There were no directories and most robots weren't programmed to answer questions. The pilot had to figure out for himself how to do things, and Rath liked it that way. He might not have appreciated the smell of prop fuel, but he'd accept it for the lack of annoyances usually found in busy shuttle strips. The freight ports were always a little less crowded, always a little more efficient. It's amazing how much aggravation can be avoided when the crowds are removed.

The exit ramps brought him to the shipping service section of Terhit, an intermediate sized city on Janus. He liked that size, not so big he would get lost in the shuffle, but not so small he'd have to learn everybody's name to be accepted.

Only one magnorail serviced the maze of warehouses, the one true disadvantage to a freight port. He cursed the lost time, but he wasn't about to pay for an independent skimmer.

He took a corner seat and lasercabled his portable to the complimentary link. He checked the updated scout bids against his own records. There were a few new ones, a couple that he thought he could win easily. Unfortunately, both were in binary star systems. He shook his head. Atmospheric turbulence was always heavier in systems with two suns. He scanned a little more, even found three single sun systems with available bids. He groaned when he requested the number of applicants. He cut the link with a curse.

At the opposite corner, a brightly lit, satellite lottery machine welcomed his wristband with a credit scan. After deducting the funds from his galactic account, the machine spit out two global pot tickets. The prize was smaller than the galactic lottery, but he'd know if he had a winner a whole lot sooner. Janus had a large enough population to offer drawings twice a day. Rath tore up his tickets before he left the magnorail.

Clean and quiet streets waited for him at the jewel and mineral wholesale district. No residents here, except for maybe a middleman that turned some office space into an apartment. A few pilots walked the streets, mostly freighter and transport jockeys, he guessed. A bit more skimmer activity than usual buzzed overhead. That could mean anything or nothing at all. The buyers normally used the skimmers, and were a hard breed to understand. Rath didn't take the time to learn their patterns. It was easier to deal with a wholesaler and avoid the haggling buyers lived for.

He turned into a moderate scale warehouse and nodded to the middleman he used frequently.

Larinov Smiel greeted Rath with a return nod and a wink. "Hey buddy, how'd it go?"

"Not bad, not bad. Certainly didn't come back empty-handed."

Larinov couldn't offer a chair to his friend. His office was simply a countertop; he sat on a stool behind it, and three terminals for communications and transactions.

"Well, if you came back with the right stuff, I've got some good news for you. Hopefully, good news for both of us."

"What's the right stuff?" Rath asked hesitantly, the lottery loss a fresh reminder of his luck.

"Beryl-based jewels. Emeralds are the best, but heliodors are hot, too."

"You're kidding?"

"You got some?"

"I got half a cargo bay full." But Rath was only partially satisfied. "What about rubies? That's the other half."

Lar grimaced slightly. "Sorry, the price on rubies fell a little. They need the beryl."

"Damn it," Rath cursed. He couldn't refrain from the quick burst of anger. He didn't even know the quotes yet, but he saw the look in Lar's face. He knew there was a big difference. He pictured himself splitting his cargo between rubies and emeralds, and now he wished he didn't.

"Hey, don't curse too much," Larinov admonished. "You got half a load of emeralds. That's better than nothing. And wait 'till you see the price increase. That'll more than make up for the loss on the rubies."

Eagerly, Larinov tapped the monitor screen to bring up the current list of bids for emeralds. He smiled as he rotated the screen slightly to give Rath a look.

"How about that? That should make ya happy."

Rath looked hard at the numbers, convincing himself he was reading them correctly.

"That high? What are they doing, eating this stuff?" He pulled out his portable and made a quick calculation. He looked back at Larinov with a stare. "Is that really the going price or is this some kind of bad joke?"

"That's the bid. They need the emeralds for a new engine or something. Some people are even trying to horde it."

"Can you afford to pay me this?"

"Absolutely, I've got more buyers than sellers. I've been on backorder for three days. And you should see the markup I make off of it. Both of us win."

"Well, I'm not complaining. What's the quote on the rubies?"

Larinov reset the terminal and brought up a new price screen. Here, he grimaced as he turned the screen back to Rath. "Sorry, looks like it went down more today. People are probably selling rubies to buy the beryl stones."

"I can't believe this." Again, Rath imagined the emeralds left behind in order to facilitate the rubies.

The tone was harsh and it caught Lar a little off guard.

"Hey, why so upset? I know the price is down, but you more than made up for it with the emeralds."

"I wasted half my cargo space, that's what's wrong." Rath cursed again. "Do you realize what I could have made if I loaded up on just the emeralds? That's the same as losing money. Damn it! Why can't they get these communications to us faster?"

The scout heaved a heavy breath. "I know, I know. I'm sounding greedy, but you should've seen what I left behind. Maybe I couldn't have known, but it's just my dumb luck. I mean, why couldn't the prices have risen before I left for this scout? It's exactly the kind of thing I run into. Just once, I'd like to catch a break. And I don't mean just half a break, but a nice piece of luck on my side."

Lar felt at a loss, spoke almost as if he was responsible. "I wish I could help you, but you know the deal. I'm too small to work independent quotes. I just follow the market." He hesitated; spoke guardedly as if he was mentioning a taboo. "Look, I know you're not happy with the price on the rubies. If you want to try and negotiate a deal with somebody else, I'll understand. If you package the rubies together with the emeralds, you may be able to get a higher final price. But you'll have to find a buyer to do that. Problem is, I'm going to have to reclassify you from a straight supplier to a supplier/dealer."

The thought was tempting. If the markup was as high as Larinov hinted at, Rath could try selling the emeralds directly to a buyer and add the spread to his profit. He bit his lip. He really wanted the extra money, but he didn't know if he could afford to alienate Larinov. It took a lot of time and effort to build this relationship. He didn't want to have to go back to dealing with buyers, or worse, outpost traders and really getting robbed.

"No," Rath sighed, "I deal with you. That's what's best for both of us."

Larinov let go a breath of relief. "Glad to hear it. Like I said, if I could go off the board with you, I would. I just don't see how. If I make one deal off the quotes, I have to explain it to about six different councils."

"I know, I know. It's just really aggravating that I split the cargo space. With a price like that, I could have taken a few months off, and been a whole lot more selective over my next scouts. What's the deal anyway? What kind of engine needs emeralds?"

"I'm not sure what's going on, but I heard a rumor that it's going to speed up travel. Something about refocusing the energy in a Boscon Prop and more than tripling the propulsion."

"You're kidding?"

Larinov shook his head.

"That could be great. I could have been here in ten hours instead of thirty." But Rath quickly reconsidered the true consequences. His face turned with a sour grimace. "That's going to open up the scouting business. More competition and lower profits. I'm never going to be able to retire."

"We don't know that yet," Larinov advised. He spoke the words which came from experience as a middleman, making both sides of the equation happy. It was his duty to smooth over supply and demand fluctuations, to make both customer and supplier satisfied. "We have to see if it's true first. Second, we don't know what the cost of this change is going to be. If they're loading up ships with emeralds, they're going to have to pass the cost onto the pilot. It's not going to be easy to obtain. It may not affect you at all, and if it does, it may not be for a long while."

"Not with my luck. Every consolidated scout business will have five or six of these new engines, and I won't be able to afford one. This is really ridiculous; I have to find a way out of this business."

#

"I'm sorry to call this meeting so soon after our last, but a potential technological breakthrough has made it necessary."

Dr. Sinclair shook her head and sighed, as if swimming in disappointment. "While we are in agreement on reporting an anomaly, we adjourned without pushing forward with our decision. There may be some of you that hope to delay this process. Unfortunately, I must now press upon you the need for timely action."

"We must select a planet quickly. I have reports that propulsion engineers are focusing the Boscon Prop charge through beryl-based minerals. The result is more concentrated energy and a widening of the electron field. This will seriously increase propulsion power. Estimates have reached my desk that a new engine is being designed to fully implement this energy. In effect, an intergalactic engine will soon allow for travel between galaxies in the time it now takes to travel between stars. At the very least, the power of a standard

Boscon Prop will increase two to three fold within the next few years earth standard.

"I have already spoken with members of the Expansionist Council as well as individuals on the Council of Intergalactic Travel. It will be near impossible to convince them to delay the process. They want this new propulsion source very badly, and they are insistent upon bringing it to fruition as soon as possible."

Dr. Sinclair's voice activated the display of data to all terminals in the council chambers. Each member witnessed the estimation of star system development within a galactic model. Charts and displays illustrated an ever-expanding sphere of Regency bred colonization.

"Here, we have our new dilemma. In the advent of this new engine, the Expansionist Council will undoubtedly increase its efforts, and the number of colonies will advance further from our reach. Potential sites for our purposes will quickly be lost to colonization.

"The increase in marauder and rebellious activity is also a potential problem. As the expansionists move further away from their own center, they are losing more and more control of the population. It will be harder for us to secure a system or even just a planet if it is constantly beset by mercenaries or pirates."

The terminal display quickly flipped through galactic maps. Several planetary systems were discounted for the council's uses. Problems such as pirate activity, Authority base construction or heavy colonization were itemized as reasons for demurral.

"The planet we select must be within a remote, uncolonized sector, but within our ability to control. If we announce some kind of anomaly, we will have to secure the planet from the curious. A delay in our planet selection at this juncture could hamper our future efforts. It may even jeopardize the entire plan. If we are to post a finding, the extraneous scientific community will, at the very least, demand to know the location. We may be able to veil the site in the interests of Regency security, but not for any extended period of time. We will eventually be forced to disclose the location."

A new chart appeared on every display, a map of a single star system. One planet was highlighted in red.

"In response to these circumstances, I have a recommendation. This is a new system with a planet named Fenrir. The planet lies in a remote section of the galaxy. The closest star systems have only small outposts with no reliable growth pattern. Most expansion experts believe that only a few of these outposts will survive and those that do will become nothing more than jump points for the transfer of communications. As there is no abundant source of minerals at these outposts, marauder activity is nonexistent. I believe Fenrir passes every test for our needs."

At this point, Dr. Sinclair bit her lip. She spoke with hesitancy usually absent from her authoritative tone.

"There is one loose end. A scout ship has already completed its initial reconnaissance." As if reclaiming her own authority, her uncertainty evaporated like tears on a stoked furnace. "This is, however, only a small inconvenience. Logs show the pilot, a Rath Scampion, has landed on Janus, but he has yet to make his report to the regional office of exploration. No mining permit has been issued and the matter remains under the jurisdiction of Regency Exploration, not with the Expansionist Council. All that is necessary is to shuttle a directive to the Janus operatives to keep the pilot's report classified and Fenrir will remain the perfect prospect. But we must act now."

#

"Eggnog?" Larinov couldn't hide his amusement. "Why 'eggnog'?"
"I don't know," Rath admitted. "It's a password. It's supposed to be something ridiculous."

"Yeah, but 'eggnog'?"

"Fine, you come up with something new every time I land with cargo. Anyway, tell your guys the cockpit's off limits, but they have full access to the bays. I have to go over to regional and file my report. You know it's a damn shame. They're just going to hand over a mining permit, and someone with pull or a relative on the Regency Governing Council is going to make more money than God."

"God doesn't need money," Larinov corrected.

"Maybe he doesn't, but I sure do. I just wish I had another crack at those emeralds I left behind." Rath rubbed his chin. He looked down at his portable and then looked at Larinov. "I never told you what planet they were from, did I?"

"I don't remember, you might have told me before, but I forgot."

"But it's information you don't need for your transaction, right?"

The middleman turned his head with confusion. "Of course not, but you usually tell me where you're headed."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the transaction order. You're buying a half-load of emeralds from me and you don't need to know its origin, right?"

"No, not from a licensed scout. The trade councils don't want us asking too many questions. They think we'll start selling information to the mining companies. Like you for example. Don't you think the miners would love to know that you just came back with emeralds? No, the councils don't want us asking those questions."

Rath nodded. "So if I came back with a few loads of emeralds for you, you'd buy them all with no questions as to origin, right?"

A look of understanding crossed Larinov's face. "I hope you're not planning what I think you're planning."

"Why not?"

"You want to go back to wherever it was you just came from. That's illegal and you know it."

"But you don't have to know that," Rath stated with a strained expression. "Look, all I'm asking you to do is buy five or six scout loads of emeralds. You're not supposed to ask where I got them from, so you're covered."

"But what about you? If you think you're going to make five or six trips without Regency catching you with a scan, you're nuts. The data may not get back to them for a couple of years, but they'll know you went back. When they do, they'll come and get you."

Rath shook his head. "They won't know it's me and I'm not going to make five or six trips. Just one; one with a freighter."

Larinov just stared.

Rath spelled out his plan. "With the money I just got from you, I can buy a freighter with a landing curtain. They can't see me in flight; the scanners can't sense anything once the Boscon Props kick in. With a veil for takeoffs and landings, I can move back and forth without the scanners spotting me. I just need to make one extra trip."

"You've got two problems with that," Larinov cut him off. "One, if you land with a freighter full of emeralds, they're going to question you. Two, I can't unload a freighter piloted by a scout. That's also illegal."

"I'm not going to land the freighter," Rath shot back. "I'm going to orbit it around Janus' moon and leave the curtain on. I'll transport the emeralds to my scout and land that. I won't have to answer any questions and you won't have to unload a freighter. I sell the whole load over time, then sell the freighter, and retire."

Rath saw the discontent in Lar's face. It was a look that actually hurt, and he felt the need to explain, to justify his intentions.

"Look, I don't want to do this. I'm not a pirate, you know that. It's just that I'm tired. I'm tired of some mining outfit making all the money while I'm left with nothing. Do you really think what I'm planning is going to hurt anyone? There's an abundance of emeralds on that planet. There not going to miss any of it."

Lar just shrugged. "Tell ya what, why don't we just forget we had this conversation. You do what you think you have to, but as far as I'm concerned, you're just a scout, and I won't ask any questions."

#

"If we are to announce a finding at Fenrir, we must consider security." Dr. Sinclair was near severe in her tone. She was challenging and blunt. "It does not suffice that the planet is located in the outer rim of exploration. Within a few years standard, that obscure rim will be accessible to anyone with a new

engine. Our announcement is sure to stir many questions. We must secure the entire system to ensure that we keep the curious away.

"Even if we insist that the planet's identity remain a secret to the public, leaks always occur. I suggest that when we announce our finding, we must request that Regency Authority maintain a military presence. I know many of you are reluctant to include the military, but the Authority is a tool that must be utilized."

She shook her head with disdain, not backing from her opinion.

"As I see many defiant expressions to this recommendation, let me offer my own understanding of this situation. When we announce our finding, the matter will be turned over to at least three supervising councils; Health, Science, and the Authority. They will know anyway. It is better to have them working with us than against us, especially since they supersede the rule of the Health Council. And if you don't believe there will be some overactive bio officer claiming a health threat, you have not been paying attention to Regency politics.

"There is one other very good reason to have the Authority secure the system. They are the only force with the ability to detect Boscon Prop impulses in space. If an investigator from another council tries to intervene in an independent study, the military can stop them.

"Need I remind anyone how vital this is? If our decision is uncovered and our finding declared a hoax, we might as well close the books on scientific study forever. The system must be secured, and Regency Authority is the only answer."

3. No Turning Back

Despite all his previous scout missions, Rath could not break the tense grip which seemed to tie his stomach in knots. It wasn't the expectation of having to break through Fenrir's atmosphere that brought his discomfort; it was the very movement of travel. There was no calm to this long ride, no moments of peaceful reflection, other than the time spent pondering his decision.

Piloting the freighter itself wasn't breaking any particular laws. He was a licensed space pilot and he could shuttle most any ship from one planet to another, but his destination was not a colonized world. Yes, he had won the bid to scout Fenrir, but he had already completed that mission. Worse, he now traveled not in a scout vessel, but in a fully operational freighter. Arriving at an uncolonized world in such a ship was not a lawful act, and his intent would be obvious to even a novice prosecutor. Such considerations weighed heavily upon his spirits, pinned him down like a bully kneeling on his chest, and he had thirty standard hours of travel to contemplate his intended crime.

The freighter hummed along in automatic flight. The nav computer calculated the time and distance from Janus to Fenrir and set the optimal path through the galaxy. With the Boscon Props close to full exertion, the speed rendered manual control useless.

With little else to do, and looking for a diversion from his anxieties, Rath used much of the time to inspect his new craft. The freighter cost him, especially one with a landing curtain, but he'd get the money back. He had no intention of owning it for long, he wasn't about to go through this again. With the expansionists spreading toward the edges of the galaxy, new colonies depended on freighters; needed them to bring food and mining equipment to outposts, and to transport minerals back to manufacturing planets. He felt certain that once he finished this little excursion, he'd find an eager buyer for a vessel with such capabilities, and he would recoup the large expenditure.

He walked the long corridors with an eye to the differences between this ship and his scout which was in tow. The size differential was near staggering. He could certainly fit five or six scout-sized loads into the cargo holds. In truth, that would be a rather low utilization of the space. If he filled the bays to the hilt, he'd probably have the equivalent of near ten times that amount. But he didn't need that much; he just wanted enough to retire. He didn't want to be greedy; people got caught when they got greedy.

The freighter offered little else to look at, and even less to dissolve away any fears. Rath never flew a freighter before, not alone anyway, and his true experience with this class vessel was limited indeed. He spent a year standard as an outpost loader before he earned enough to buy his own scout. He took a

few trips in the cargo bays, but he was never responsible for flight. Those times, goods filled every centimeter of space and it was hard to find room as a passenger.

Not now. Every cargo hold was empty, waiting for the emeralds he was planning to steal, and the vacuous bays offered a vast contrast to the scout ship he had grown so accustomed to. He lumbered through the crosswalks like the ghost of a saint in an abandoned cathedral, but his intentions were not so pure. He grew to dislike this ship. The emptiness felt more like admonishment for his planned sins, and the openness needled at him, a reminder that he stood alone, as if to be judged.

Feeling lost in these empty cavities, he returned to the cockpit. Here, he felt slightly more at ease. The small space reminded him of his scout vessel. A few additional controls dotted the flight panel, mostly needed to handle loading and unloading procedures, but other than that, it was pretty bare bones. This was no vast control room, not like that of a cruiser or a science vessel. A freighter was constructed to move goods or communications. The cockpit was only a tool to serve that purpose, and it was designed for limited space, not for the comfort of the crew.

Knowing, or at least hoping, that this would be one of his last long excursions in space, he considered his past missions. He thought of the time spent in a scout cockpit, the landings on desolate planets, and the long silent travel. He began to realize it wasn't the work that bothered him so much. Instead, his dislike for scouting arose out of the full process. He didn't mind soaring through space. In truth, he usually welcomed these quiet moments. The turbulence of entry offered discomfort, but landing on a barren planet extended a chance to walk in undisturbed solitude, a sensation he always welcomed. The problem rested in the ultimate purpose of his service. His landings simply predated the arrival of others, a throng that would quickly destroy the peace and solitude. If he could end the need for bids, scout for his own enjoyment, he believed he would find fulfillment.

But for now, there was only the wait, and the anxiety it brought with it. Rath stared through the viewshield. He saw nothing - not the stars, not the glow of a distant galaxy - nothing. He traveled through a vacuum of light, for he was moving faster than light. He was invisible to everything around him, and everything outside his ship was, in turn, beyond his own sight.

His scanners were useless. The freighter moved hundreds of times faster than most wave speeds. He could send off a scan, but he'd never receive the return signal. Wave engineers previously attempted to accelerate the wave patterns through space distortions and project them to a point which could be intercepted, but the distortions made the sensor readings worthless.

He wouldn't have used the sensors even if it were possible. The waves would reveal his position. They'd linger behind his ship and leave a trail to be picked up by receptacles on nearby planets. His freighter might have been invisible, but someone at Regency would have discovered the traces. He was

already uncomfortable with his clandestine actions. He didn't need to expand his worries with a path to be followed. Better to sit quiet in space, quiet and alone with no one watching.

#

"I have listened to some concerns about the risks involved. There is a growing sense of trepidation over the course of our action, perhaps even a desire to reconsider the anomaly. There is a prevalent and genuine concern for the reputation of this council and the scientific principles it is suppose to embody."

Dr. Sinclair appeared to speak with genuine compassion, an understanding for the apprehension of her fellow council members that gathered with her in the secured conference room.

"A few have argued to me personally that we can not maintain our deception forever. While we may be able to hide the truth about the anomaly for a period, perhaps as long as our own lifetimes, it is not plausible to keep it hidden for the existence of this council. I can not disagree.

"Those that have made this contention also assert that such a discovery would irreparably damage scientific theory. This claim is genuine in sincerity for it declares science must be objective, not subjective, that the truth must be the ultimate goal, and knowledge must be the accumulation of our activity. Again, I can not argue.

"The most pervasive point of this debate defines the results of discovery. If this council loses its credibility, science loses its credibility. If we are discredited, our embodiment of knowledge is discredited. The reasons for our false report it to keep science alive. If the final result of our action is the destruction of what we hold most dear, and then our designs are less than fruitful, they are cancerous."

She looked down at her own report, appeared to mutter a few words to herself, and then, redirected her attention back to the council.

"Does this mean I wish to withhold our report, or to amend our declaration that alien life is within our grasp? Absolutely not. We must go forward, but we must now look to a greater purpose.

"I will put one suggestion before this council which must be held to the greatest secrecy. We have the planet Fenrir secure. We have a pending report of a discovered anomaly. The system is off limits to all but our own investigators. This creates a genuine opportunity for greater learning than any of us would dare imagine.

"Every member of this council has a dream, a dream to study alien life. That is why we are all here. An opportunity, albeit a close approximation, now becomes available. If for the moment we can not find alien life, are we truly incapable of creating it?"

She allowed a pause. A murmur of interest began to buzz from one seat to another. She appeared happy with this, even hopeful to see it flourish. She made no move to stifle the whispers. Instead, she gently spoke over them.

"Genetics and cloning methods are now available to cure diseases, renew youthful vitality, replace lost or defective limbs and organs, even in some cases, to restore life. Such methods are available for our purposes. We have a controlled environment, an uninhabited planet. Let us utilize all the capacities of science available. We can genetically alter the DNA strands of known organisms and create our own alien life. We can watch the development of a new life on a planetary scale."

Here, she brought an end to the wayside discussions.

"Before I am interrupted, let me make two things abundantly clear. We are a council given the responsibility to determine the origin of life. Watching the development of such a creation will certainly lead to discoveries we could never make anywhere else. This is certainly within the bounds of our charge. We also need to protect the reputation of this council. If in the future our deception is discovered, we have our explanation. In the interests of science, we announced an anomaly, secured a planetary system, and genetically created an alien life to discover our own origins. Can we truly be faulted for such high ideals?"

#

Rath watched the time monitor with indecision. Using a curtain during Boscon Push was as harmless as it was useless. Reducing Boscon propulsion with the device enabled, however, offered its own risks. Sensor veils were known to overload during power fluxes.

In less than one minute standard, the nav computer would drop the Boscon engines to intrastellar capacity, a reduction of over ninety percent power. At that precise moment, the freighter would be visible to sensor waves. Scanner patterns crisscrossing the galaxy would pick up his ship, if he was not veiled.

He had two choices, turn the curtain on now and hope to escape an overload, or enable the device immediately after the props leveled off and hope to avoid scanner detection.

He flicked the sensor veil on before the ship dropped out of push. The energy shift rattled the freighter, but the spike did not affect the curtain. The ship dropped into intrastellar travel and the galaxy became visible through his viewshield.

As the vessel slid along the vacuum of space, Rath eyed the landing curtain power gauges. The veil enclosed the entire freighter as well as the scout ship in tow. The freighter remained as invisible as if it continued at speeds greater than light.

Fenrir's sun burned brightly at a safe distance to his starboard bow. The stars to port glistened like millions of tiny diamonds. He thought of the

emeralds waiting on the barren planet, and for the first time during this journey, he relaxed.

Fenrir waited directly ahead. Rath issued orders to the nav computer to orbit and land.

As the freighter closed on the planet, he took a glimpse at the sensors. As expected, the system was devoid of activity. He noticed a few sensor waves absorbed by the curtain, but he attributed it to nothing more than a galactic scan passing through the system to analyze some other distant planet. A red light quickly altered his opinion, and a computer-voiced warning brought back the tension to his belly.

"Incoming projectile detected."

Defense panels flashed an ominous message. Magno-torpedoes were locked on to the titanium of his Boscon casings, impact in twelve seconds.

"What the hell?!"

His scanners confirmed the existence of the torpedoes, but not the source. All radar indicated the system clear of any other vessels.

"Where the hell did that come from?"

He couldn't wait for an answer and he had few choices. He looked to his curtain gauges and they still read full power. The torpedo, however, was locked to the metal of the hull and was not using any wave-oriented targeting devices.

The freighter was not equipped with counter measures, no polarizing beams to break the magnetic attraction. Rath had one chance. He kicked the Boscon Props to their highest power levels without going hyperlight. He couldn't go into Boscon Push without entering destination coordinates into the nav computer. The risk of slamming into an asteroid belt was just too high.

The speed of the freighter quickly exceeded the speed of the torpedo. Calculated time toward impact began to increase rather than decrease.

"Alright, alright, I got some time. I can out run this thing, but what do I do?"

He fiercely searched his scanners. His was still the only ship in the system.

"It can't be a breakaway, can it? Who could have fired it? There's nothing out here," he yelled to himself.

A thought forced a grimace. He issued an order to his shipboard computer. "Scan the torpedo! How much fuel does it have remaining?"

The computer responded in a monotone voice.

"Fuel load at ninety eight percent capacity. Estimated time of travel at current speed, thirty minutes standard."

"Ninety eight? That can't be right. Rescan!"

"Rescan completed. Fuel load at ninety seven point eight percent capacity. Estimated..."

"Never mind. That thing was just fired. There's got to be another ship under a curtain around here. But how'd they know I was here?! I was veiled when I dropped out of hyperlight."

"Second projectile detected."

"What?!!" Rath stared at the defense panel with disbelief. Another Magno-torpedo locked onto the metal of the freighter's hull. This one came from directly ahead, and as the first still trailed, he was caught in the middle of a crossfire.

He took hold of the flight stick and broke hard to port with the intention of bringing both torpedoes to his tail. Neither weapon displayed Boscon Push capability, nor he still hoped to outrun his predicament.

Each torpedo reacted concurrently. Sensor-filled nose-cones relayed the position of the freighter back and forth to each projectile. The torpedoes compensated their own flight path to keep the freighter between them. In effect, the angle of escape was brought to a minimum.

"Oh, crap!" Rath watched the flight compensation of both torpedoes with growing dread. The two projectiles perfectly countered all of his maneuvers, rendering the speed of the vessel inconsequential.

"This is impossible, this is impossible! They can't be doing that. That's military issue. How could pirates or marauders have gotten their hands on cooperative weaponry? And how can they detect me?!"

A larger dilemma rose to fruition as a new understanding escaped his lips with a tremble.

"It can't be the Authority. It just can't! Why would they be here?"

That, he could not answer, but he could not deny the truth. Only Authority vessels were equipped with cooperative weapon systems, and only the Authority had the ability to track Boscon wave patterns. That's how they knew he was here.

Rath wanted out. He forgot about the emeralds, forgot about retiring. He shoved the coordinates for Janus into his nav computer. But before he could initiate Boscon Push, the freighter shook violently. The computer announced the origin of the upheaval.

"Particle beam absorbed by starboard armor, plate 15. Armor strength loss, forty percent."

"Huh? They can't get a lock. I'm still veiled, right?!"

He looked desperately to the cloak monitor. The landing curtain read full power.

"You are being hailed," the computer advised. "Audio only."

Rath rubbed his forehead.

"Play it."

A stern voice issued a terse set of commands. "This is Regency Authority. Drop your curtain and kill your engines."

"Oh God! This isn't happening."

Rath had not set for return communications, so the patrol could not hear his cursed responses. They did offer one final and threatening rejoinder of their own.

"The torpedoes have relayed your position to us. Veiled or not, we are locked on and will fire. The torpedoes are set to circle your craft, not impact. That can also be changed. Drop your curtain and kill your engines. Now!"

Rath dropped his head further into the palm of his hand. He stole a quick glance at the nav com. It had the precepts for Janus. All he had to do was issue the command, and the Boscon Props would power up.

One small problem. The Authority would read the power shift. They'd blast him before he could escape. With a shake of his head and another curse, he slammed his fist against the curtain controls. The veil dropped as he cut his engines.

The Authority officer issued his last order.

"Good boy. Now, hit your reverse thrusters and come to a complete halt. We will board."

#

Dr. Sinclair spoke with a broad smile. "Actually, this is a great opportunity for many of us and for many different councils. I know we have agreed to maintain secrecy, but there were others I could trust with my own life that I needed to take council. We need the help of many, and they also have much to gain.

"Think about the implications, the chances to study things on a grand scale. It is not just the development of life that is important. Educators and scholars from sociological, political, environmental, and biological studies; everyone with an interest in true learning has to be excited by this proposition.

"Leading members of the Councils of Anthropology, Sociology, and Interstellar Communiology have already pledged to support us. They have also put their hand to acknowledging our deeds and maintaining future discretion. Thus, their stake in this endeavor is as high as our own. Now that we have the understanding and backing of other councils, let us stop the bickering and move forward with our work. I know this prospect excites all of you to the same degree it excites me."

And her excitement lit up her face as well as her words. She spoke like a child before a birthday party, ready to open a pile of beautifully wrapped presents.

"Actually, forgive me. I know we have moved quite far in our discussions and actions. Much faster, in fact, than I would have ever dared hope. As I think about this endeavor, I think about the grandest steps of mankind. What we do now, we should do with the boldness of our ancestors, of those that built the pyramids, those that sailed around the earth or entered space for the first time. And just as the first colonists ventured off earth to build a new world, we should journey forward with the same conviction.

"With such an understanding, let us return to the last order of our debate. We all know that altering the genetics of an earth born life-form will be

simplicity. We have also agreed that we should use an organism other than that of the human species. We do not want to create human mutations, but we do wish to keep the organism close enough so that study remains useful. But we must end this debate over the proposed intelligence and evolution level of our creation.

"If we are to create an alien life form, we must look at the common denominator for all interested parties, what will yield the greatest scientific progress. I concur with most of my colleagues that it would be the most beneficial to preset this life at a stage of development which will produce the most data. What will it serve us if we place a single-celled bacterium in a small pool? The time it will take for this organism to evolve into anything further will certainly span into centuries if not millenniums.

"We must not make this mistake. We must utilize our time as well as our resources. We have an entire planet. Let us use it to its greatest capacity. The development of a single cell can be watched on a slide under a microscope.

"But what about the development of entire alien civilization? Just think of the implications to scientific discovery if we could set an organism with reasonable intelligence into a preset society, say pre-industrial. We can make them herbivores so we need not create any other organisms for herding, but we could slightly alter our own plant material to see how they farm. We could watch their population growth, their societal patterns from infancy, but during a time of reasonable development. It should stir every fiber of your scientific being.

"I urge all of you to consider what might be gained if we truly take hold of this unlimited opportunity. Think not with misplaced restrictions. Release the binding fears and worries, and let us take the grandest step of all time."

#

Authority security personnel escorted Rath out of the freighter cockpit and into an empty cargo bay. They ordered him not to move, and actually left him alone without a guard.

Rath didn't bother entertaining the thought of hiding. Where could he go? He stood and waited as he pictured the security officers going through his logs. There wasn't anything to truly implicate him, other than the obvious facts of the situation. He was a scout pilot, he was on a freighter, and he was where he shouldn't be.

If he disliked the emptiness of the holds before, he hated it now. Isolated, alone, nothing to do except ponder what was going to happen to him; he thought of what he was going to say, tried to conjure some lie. Nothing came to mind, nothing even slightly plausible.

When two interrogators finally returned to the empty bay, they just stared at him.

"Well?" One finally mumbled.

Rath exhaled. He blurted out the obvious, trying to buy time, hoping to find some explanation hidden within the truth.

"I'm a scout pilot. I won the bid to scout this planet."

The first security officer basically grunted with annoyance. "We know. We boarded the scout and checked the logs there as well. We also know that you already completed the mission and even returned to Janus. Did you file the scout report with the local Exploratory Council?"

"No." The lonely word trailed off into the emptiness of the bay.

"Why not?"

Rath shook his head as he stared at the bare metal floor.

The first interrogator offered his own explanation. "I think it's pretty obvious. I saw your initial scouting report. You reported easily accessible deposits of emeralds. You probably scavenged a load full and brought them back to Janus. When you saw the going price, and you thought you'd come back, this time with a freighter. Have I missed anything?"

Rath bit his lip, but remained silent.

The interrogator almost laughed. "Hey look pal, you don't want to talk, that's fine. But we got you. You're not out here in a scout. This is a freighter we're standin' in. I ain't blind. Unless you got some reason to be out here..."

"I got lost," Rath attempted.

The desperate remark seemed to die in the hollows of the freighter and the interrogator took obvious delight in burying it. "No way pal. Your nav computer shows you logged these coordinates right after you took off from Janus. You gotta remember something else; we read your Boscon distortions on our scanners. You came into the system with your curtain up. If you were lost, why'd you run with the veil?"

"I was worried about pirates."

The interrogator just shook his head.

To Rath, the lie actually didn't sound that bad, and he decided to go with it.

"I was in Boscon Push. I couldn't scan the system. I didn't know what was out here, so I hit the curtain. That's why I got it. And I was lost. I don't mean that I didn't enter this system into the nav computer, but this isn't my final destination. I know there's some trading posts out here. I'm just not sure where. And you're right, I know about the emeralds on this planet. I figure when they hand over the mining permit to a company, they're going to need freighter pilots to move this stuff. I heard the rumors about the engines and I knew about the high prices for emeralds. I figure a good freighter pilot with some protection against pirates could pretty much name his price. I want to retire from scouting. You can ask anybody that knows me, that's no lie."

The interrogator chimed in almost immediately. "Lots of problems with that horseshit, pal. First, it takes a while for a mining colony to start up. There's no reason to be out here this early. And you don't contract like this. You gotta talk to the mining company, and they don't send out negotiators to a site until the

colony can support them. You also still have your scout in tow, so don't hand me that crap about wanting to retire. And, you've got a scout license. We checked your log status. You've never flown a freighter in your life."

"There's no law against a scout turning freighter jockey," Rath offered.

The second interrogator spoke for the first time. His tone was malignant. "No, but there are laws against piracy. And they're pretty stiff, especially if you don't cooperate. Now let's cut through this nonsense. You weren't going to transport any minerals because you didn't submit your scouting report. That's the bottom line. No one else is going to believe differently. You never turned over your scouting report to the Exploratory Council. Until you do, there won't be any mining permit. You know that, so that ends that story. Do you have anything else to say about this?"

Rath just cursed under his breath.

The second security officer nodded. "Good, now that we understand each other, let's see what we can agree on. You came here to steal a freighter load of emeralds before a mining permit was handed over. Isn't that right?"

Cornered, Rath spoke the truth in hopes for some leniency. So far, he was still answering to Regency Authority officers and not general prosecutors.

"Yes"

"Were you working alone?"

Rath tried to hide a cringe, but he thought the interrogator noticed his unease. "Yeah, I'm alone."

"How were you going to sell the load?"

Not wanting to implicate Larinov, Rath chose his words carefully. "I was going to bring them to distribution planets and sell them to any buyers I could find."

"Middlemen?"

"Maybe, but I'd probably look for some end buyers, too."

"You're not a dealer, you're a scout. Your status would change."

"I wouldn't care," Rath admitted. "If I could sell a freighter load of emeralds, I could retire. That's what I want. I wasn't lying about that."

The questioner scratched his chin. "I'm not too sure about this. I think you might have been planning on meeting someone and transferring the cargo. Are you going to tell me you've had no contact with marauders?"

"I haven't," Rath insisted. "There wasn't any listing in my logs, was there?"

"That's not something you would record."

Rath shook his head sternly. "I wouldn't want to deal with pirates. This is a brand new ship. Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to deliver a load of emeralds in a ship like this to marauders?"

The security officer withheld any sarcastic comment. "Then how were you going to land the freighter without raising questions? You know that you can't bring in that much stone without transfer permits and mining origination papers. It doesn't make sense. I think you're holding out on us."

"No, I'm not. I kept the scout so I could use it to transport the emeralds. I was never going to land the freighter. I was just going to transfer portions of the load into the scout and land in that. I'd finish the job in a half dozen trips or so. I wouldn't need any paperwork. I do it all the time. Even Regency must be aware that that's standard practice."

The officer moved on. "The log on your scout shows you normally go back to Janus after a scouting mission. I think that means you deal with one broker. Who is it?"

Rath answered quickly, hoping to avoid any further suspicion. "Larinov Smiel."

"Were you going to bring back some of these emeralds to him?"

"Probably some. It would look suspicious if I didn't."

"Does he know you're here?"

"No, he's not allowed to ask me where I'm scouting. He can't link that information with the cargo."

Rath felt good about that line. It was the truth, and it protected Lar. He also believed he convinced the security officer.

"You have no other buyers lined up?"

"No."

"You realize we're going to question this Smiel."

"I know, but he has nothing to do with this. Before I left, I even asked him if he needed to know which planet my load came from. He's the one who told me the rules about middlemen not knowing the destination of scouts." Rath cut himself short, but not quickly enough. He said too much, made it sound like Larinov was truly an accomplice. He did his best to cleanup the mess.

"That's another reason why I got the curtain. I knew Lar wouldn't unload a freighter. He goes by the book. And if he knew I was going to sell emeralds to an end user, he'd be the first to reclassify my status."

Rath watched the officer, held his stare, daring him to contradict this truth.

The interrogator focused on a different portion of Rath's story. He might have accepted Lar's role as innocent, but he was still no where near comfortable with other aspects.

"What's the real deal with the curtain? We both know you had no intention of using it to help secure a freighter contract. And you wouldn't pay all that money for a landing curtain just to keep it hidden from a middleman."

"It's not middlemen I care about, it's Regency Space Control. I needed the curtain for bringing back the emeralds. If I was going to transfer the goods to my scout, I'd have to leave the freighter in space. It would be scanned by the orbiting monitors if it wasn't veiled."

The officer shook his head. "What you say may explain why you'd use it when delivering the cargo, but I still want to know why you turned it on before you came out of Boscon Push. If you already made a scout out here, you know there's no pirate activity in this sector. What were you afraid of?"

Again, Rath was able to answer with the truth. "I didn't want to be detected by an exploratory scan drifting through the sector. I was worried about someone tracing my path and catching up with me later."

The second interrogator's eyes focused on Rath's. "You didn't think we were out here?"

"No, why should I?"

The first interrogator grew tired of being quiet. He offered his own viewpoint with a noted edge of disgust. "Did you really believe you were going to get away with this? What'd you think; the authority was having so much trouble with pirates and rebels that you'd sneak by us?"

"I didn't think you'd be out here," Rath answered with a greater sign of defiance.

"How many times were you going to do this?"

Rath pleaded his case. He spoke mainly to the second interrogator. "I was just going to do this once. I just want to retire and get out of this business. It's not like I'm stealing from anybody. Those emeralds don't even belong to anyone yet. And there's more than enough for me to take one freighter load. I mean really, who's it going to hurt? This really doesn't have to go to a prosecutor, right? Give me a break, huh?"

The first interrogator nearly laughed. "A prosecutor? Is that what's got you worried? You have no idea of what you got yourself into, do you? You got other problems, pal."

"That's enough," the second officer admonished. He became authoritative as he gave his orders. "Send a message ship to the nearest Authority Port. Find out how we should handle this. Include in your report the man's explanation. I think for the most part he's telling the truth. Also advise that I don't want to turn him over to local criminal jurisdiction. That'll just open up a whole 'nother can of worms."

"You believe me?" Rath questioned with a hint of near giddiness.

"Most of it."

"And you're not going to hand me over for prosecution?"

"Don't get too happy. You really don't know what you've got yourself into. I know they've been looking for you. And I just don't know what to do with you. Now you just stay put. You can move about your ship, but stay out of the cockpit. You even try to fly this thing, and I'll throw you in lockup. I suggest you check your food and water supply and tell me your situation. Plan on being here for a long while."

4. Tying Up Loose Ends

Despite the overwhelming significance of her actions, the enormity of her schemes, Dr. Sinclair spoke comfortably to the single visitor in her office. She explained the deception in a forthright manner, as if narrating directions from a text book, showing no indication of remorse and no inclination of wrongdoing. In fact, she spoke as openly as if boasting to her own image in a mirror.

"Things are going very well planet side. The schedule remains intact and each council retains its original jurisdiction. Each researcher knows to clear any potential conflicts through my council. Overlaps of responsibility are turned over to a mediation panel, but other areas require your expertise."

Jack Lasonelli, council coordinator, an individual responsible for maintaining council cooperation and work flow, did not demand an immediate explanation. He knew Elizabeth Sinclair, knew that she would take the time to thoroughly explain the situation.

She did not disappoint. "My selection of Fenrir continues to justify itself each day. The system remains vacant of all interstellar travel, and thus, beyond the interest of marauders and other pirates. Govern accepted my proposal to classify the planet under Exploratory jurisdiction, so all queries of standing must go through me. As Fenrir's status remains off the boards, no one from colonization or mining will question the availability for future development. The planet is ours, and the creation of the "alien" has begun in earnest."

Though out of character, she offered credit to others as well. "The choice of melding the genetic patterns of a lizard, an Australian skink, and an ape, namely the gorilla, was a simple stroke of genius. I must remember to commend Dr. Eurobian. We have generated thousands of these 'aliens' in cloning chambers and have delivered the species to its new home. We have named them Fenrites in honor of their planet, and to our great joy, the organism has adapted well to the atmosphere and the environment.

"We've also had great success with the vegetation. Dr. Morgan supervised the planting sites personally. He selected a mix of plant life, genetically altered of course, which will provide plenty of varied food sources for our creation. To his credit, Morgan has developed a botanical ecology which will not overtake the planet, but remain almost static. Over seventy percent of the land mass on Fenrir will remain barren, with no sign of plant life. This will provide the needed explanation as to why initial satellite scans failed to pick up any signs of life. In such a vast area of desert, no one will question the oversight. If anything, the scientific community as a whole will insist on more sensitive search methods equipment for the future. Another benefit to our cause."

She paused and whispered a personal note into her portable. She wanted to remember to ask the Exploratory Council for greater funding. It was a request that she knew would be met.

"As for our main focus, we have carefully deposited the Fenrites upon different regions of the planet. We will be able to measure the impact of climate as well as the availability of resources. Fenrir has climates as varied as our own earth, but due to the lesser inclination of the planet's axis, the changes in seasons are less drastic. It will still be interesting to see how the colonies placed closer to the poles will fare.

"We will also be able to weigh the influences of neighbors. Some colonies are quite isolated while others have close contiguous settlements. It will be interesting to see if the Fenrites compete for resources or if they develop alliances. It has been theorized that communication will depend initially upon the dominant instincts of the gorilla, but eventually, Dr. Eurobian believes the organism will slowly develop a language similar to New English as that was the base dialect used in the brain wave infusion. We did, however, introduce slight physical changes between some of the different colonies to establish a pattern of racial distinctions. Sociologists are eager to see if such alterations will create warring factions. Everyone is most enthused. I knew as we moved further into this experiment, we would create numerous opportunities for scientific advancement."

Here, Dr. Sinclair folded her hands together and began to search a little harder for the words that previously flowed so easily. She wanted to accent the justification for her next declaration.

"Now, we couldn't just dump an unintelligent life form on this planet and expect to learn anything of true consequence. We wanted to create something worth our efforts, worth study. The genetic operation expanded the brain size. While the Fenrites grew in the cloning chambers, we used brain-wave technology to implant basic knowledge of certain skills. In effect, we brought the so-called alien up to a level of development equal to that of our own pre-industrial age. For example, we expected the first batch to understand the need for agriculture, and each new colony has indeed displayed an instinct to farm. Quite reassuring to know we won't have to watch the plodding development of such rudimentary innovations as fire and the wheel.

"Some may say we have gone too far, but I disagree. This is just another experiment. We are controlling the parameters, analyzing variables, introducing our own criterion; doing all of this to understand our own origins. This is science in its purest form."

She settled back into a more comfortable tone and continued by acknowledging actual disagreement within the council.

"I must admit, we are not without problems. There is still a debate about the ocean and whether or not to introduce altered forms of fish or mammals. There was also an argument over introducing germs, bacteria and viruses in exact replica of our own. It had to be done. We could not risk mutating viruses, but

we could also not have the Fenrites unexposed to common germs. We must have the opportunity to bring our people to the planet for closer study of this new civilization. We can't be concerned with the transmission of a simple virus which might decimate the Fenrites before they can develop their own immunities. Unfortunately, some of my colleagues believe this may be the key to our undoing. They still worry about being discovered.

"I don't mean to bore you with such details. I just thought it appropriate to inform you of our great progress. I also wish to inform you that another potential problem is now close to being solved. That's why I called you here."

With a smile, she came to the point of this meeting.

"In truth, it is a stroke of excellent luck. It was the one area I believed we were truly vulnerable. No one was sure how much this scout pilot physically searched. But... we have him now, and we have his ship. He never filed an initial report with a local Exploratory Council. It appears he wished to steal some emeralds from the planet before turning over this information. Need I say that we can use this to our advantage? What we need to do now is use this opportunity to close any dangerous loose ends.

"Jack, I want you to talk to him. Find out what he knows and convince him he knows less than he thought. Make him a believer and the rest will fall into place. I want you to utilize this scout pilot, make him work for us, preferably unwittingly.

"As of now, he remains in the Fenrir system. He is under the watch of the Authority, but he is being examined by Regency health officials. I decided to use this opportunity to ensure some of the more magisterial health officers that there is no danger to the public safety."

#

Rath didn't like the health officers constantly pricking him with needles and forcing him to exhale and spit into plastic bags. He wanted to spit on them, but such was not his position to debate the issue. So far he was still in the hands of the Authority, and though he didn't like the long duration of his containment, he was beginning to sense a way out.

The longer the Authority kept him under guard, the greater his chances of working a deal. The general population didn't like to hear about the military holding pilots, even if there was a hint of piracy. Any captured pilots were supposed to be deposited to nearby planets for prosecution trial. More than once already, the Authority found itself in a public relations disaster by detaining freighter pilot's in an attempt to break a pirate ring.

Rath didn't ask to be released or to be turned over to a local jurisdiction. In fact, he said nothing. He simply monitored the passage of time by earth standard and he cooperated in every way. He considered the involuntary stay as part of a jail sentence, but not one that could be posted to his permanent record. By prolonging his detention, they were in fact, giving him his

bargaining chip. There would come a time when he would ask to see a security officer of high rank. At that moment, he would announce his deal. He'd keep his mouth shut about the detention, and they'd release him without prosecution. Maybe he'd even ask for a load of emeralds for his troubles.

But that was the Authority and these new visitors to his ship caused a very different problem. The health officials didn't face the same restrictions as the Authority. Their power was near absolute. They could quarantine someone for next to forever, and if they claimed a health risk, no one would blame them.

That's what perhaps made Rath the most uncomfortable. It also answered many of his questions. He couldn't really understand why the Authority was out by Fenrir in the first place. Even the security officer stated there was little to no pirate activity in the area. But there was something out here that bothered them. Every time there was the slightest question, they sent a shuttle into Boscon Push and waited for a response from Authority Command or someone else of equal standing.

The presence of the health technicians and the variety of tests offered an explanation, one Rath found discomfoting. What if Fenrir held some kind of health risk? Worse, what if he was exposed to some contaminate? The security officers didn't wear anything when they questioned him, but the health technician's wore a good deal of protective clothing; latex gloves, cover gowns, even respirators. Hardly reassuring.

"Hey, what are all these tests about?" Rath finally questioned.

The lab technician simply raised an eyebrow, stared into Rath's eyes, and then returned to siphoning blood out of the subject's arm.

Rath read the security badge on the technician's gown.

"Look Abe, I'm not trying to cause any trouble, but I think I've got a right to know what you're testing me for."

The technician's voice trailed through a speaker in his respirator. "We're testing you for foreign bodies."

Rath jumped on the response. "Is that what's going on? You think there might have been some kind of bug or something down on Fenrir? Is anyone sick, anyone that I came in contact with?"

"No one's sick," replied Abe the technician

The statement held some solace, but the tone ate away at any comfort like rust on metal.

"Well, what's up then? Why all the tests? Why the mask?"

The technician didn't answer the question, but he did respond after finishing his task and removing the needle from Rath's arm. "You're going to get company today. I want to assure you that neither one of you show any signs of sickness. You both seem to be perfectly healthy. We do, however, wish to monitor the chance of transmittable diseases. We must insist that you act normal with your visitor. Take no out of the ordinary precautions. It will only prolong your quarantine."

"What're you going to do, bring in some human guinea pig to see if I'm contagious with anything?"

"You have already had contact with this individual."

The technician moved to the bay door. As he exited, Larinov Smiel entered uneasily.

#

"My good colleagues," Dr. Sinclair walked to the head chair with a stride of victory, her cumbersome bulk was but a veil to her triumphs, "we have Inception."

She sat and began to deal out praise to those around her. "I must congratulate you all on the progress we have made. The star system is secured, the ecosystem of Fenrir has become self-sufficient, and the Fenrite colonies are in place. In fact, Inception has been reached and passed. The true birth of Fenrir signifies another momentous occasion for the forging of knowledge. Now, we can enjoy the fruits of our labor. We can begin our studies and watch the development of this "alien civilization".

"Our resources are many. Even the Authority is now assisting us in scanning the planet. I assure you that the scans began only after the colonies were in place. The Authority has no record of pre-Inception activity. Only a few high-ranking generals within the Authority know of our actions, and their allegiance is assured.

"As to the Fenrites, some colonies have failed, but most are making great footholds. They are using the land far better than we could have hoped. We will not have to assist them in the initial stages of development as some might have feared. The Fenrites will develop solely on their own diligence.

"Perhaps the most significant sign of success has been the rapid rate of reproduction. There have already been a number of recorded births among the Fenrites. Further, there is no sign of any mutations in the offspring. The genetic realignment has held and is being passed to the next generation. The species will endure."

#

Lar tapped his fingers on the mess table in the freighter's galley. The military-style meals tasted alright, and they were easy enough to prepare; he just wasn't hungry enough to eat. He was tired, annoyed, confused, and more than a little scared.

"When I heard them mention your name, I thought they were bringing me in on charges of piracy or even sedition. I figured you went ahead with that plan of yours. I thought you just got caught. They even asked me about that first load of emeralds you brought me. They weren't too happy when I told them they were already shipped to buyers.

"But you know what? They never asked me about accepting more stones, or about you comin' up here with a freighter. They never even brought in the local cops. It was just the Authority and some guys in white coats. They just whisked me away to some quarantine ship. Just like that, no charges, no questions, no nothing. Just threw me in a sterile shuttle and put me into orbit away from everybody else. They poked me for a few weeks, watched me for another month or two. Good God, I've lost track of time. Now they've brought me here. I don't even know where here is. Heck, I really don't know what's goin' on"

"Join the club." Rath bit his lip. "Sorry. I'm sorry about all of this. But I really don't know what's going on either. The only thing I can figure is they think something's down on Fenrir, that's where I got the emeralds. That's where we are now, not on the planet, just dead in space. At least I think we're still here. I haven't heard the Boscon Props kick in, so I guess we're still in the system. I have heard them charge the batteries and refuel occasionally. Anyway, it's got to have something to do with Fenrir. They were interested in my logs, and you're the only person I really had any contact with since my first scout. And that's where I got the emeralds they asked you about. With all the white coats around, they must suspect some bug or something."

Lar's eye's widened a little bit and his fingers stopped strumming.

"They told me no one's sick," Rath immediately offered, noticing Lar's reaction. He did his best to soften the blow. "It's not like I've felt bad or anything. Maybe they just caught something on a scan."

Lar had spent most of the last few months denying this possibility to himself. Even after being quarantined, even as technicians took his blood in full protective gear, he refused to even consider this likelihood. But when someone else said it, he couldn't ignore the obvious any longer. His lips trembled as he spoke.

"You really think that's it, don't you? You think there must have been something down on that planet that they're afraid of, something you might have brought back with you or that was on the emeralds. They think we might have contracted some disease."

Rath exhaled heavily. How could he argue? Still, several points didn't add up, and these he spoke of guardedly. He whispered as if he believed they were being monitored.

"I don't know, maybe I'm just trying to come up with excuses, false hope, but a few things bother me about that being the only answer. When the Authority first stopped me, they searched both of my ships, the scout and the freighter, without wearing any medical covers or respirators, or anything like that. They spoke to me the same way. I really figure they would have questioned me through a sealed room if they were worried about contamination."

Lar's fears still pressed him. "Maybe they didn't know about it yet."

"Then why would they be here?" Rath countered. "You've got to remember something; they had this system under guard before I even got here. If they were worried about a contaminate on Fenrir, they never would have boarded my ship without taking some precautions. That's what keeps bothering me. They were definitely worried about something, but they didn't act as if it was a health hazard. But if not that, then why were they here in the first place?"

#

A tall thin man entered the freighter. His arms dangled rather awkwardly from his shoulders as his long legs carried him across the floor with an ungraceful flow. His face was as long and narrow as the rest of his body, and his eyes appeared almost too close together. Anyone who glanced quickly would have thought the man cross-eyed. He smiled, but his teeth did not show.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the man offered in an average, but unassuming voice. "I hope I didn't startle you."

"Is it morning?" Rath asked sarcastically.

"That depends on where you are. For me, it's morning. I believe I have a long day ahead of me and I also feel I have a lot in the way of explaining to do, at least to Mr. Smiel. Mr. Scampion, you are a guest of the Authority by your own misguided deeds. I don't pretend to owe you anything, but I also think you should be made aware of what's going on. It's only fair."

Rath didn't mind the tone of the man's voice, but he heard the meaning. He didn't like it, and for the first time, he hinted at the lone ace in his hand.

"Yeah, I know. You think I'm a pirate here to steal emeralds. But if that's true, the Authority had a responsibility to hand me over to local jurisdiction."

The visitor answered quickly, without hesitation, as if he was prepared for this response. "You were not turned over because of potential health risks. Under questioning, even you would have to admit that you have been treated not as an accused pirate, but as patient under quarantine."

"I'm still a prisoner on my own ship," Rath said.

"Quarantine is often difficult, but sometimes necessary."

"And was it necessary for the Authority to fire on my freighter with Magno-torpedoes? No one issued any warning before they fired. How's that going to look to the public if this is just some health check?"

"You came in with a curtain activated in an uncolonized system," Jack replied. "Every move you made was indicative of piracy. How was the Authority supposed to react?"

"Well, which is it? Am I a pirate or a patient?" Rath countered with a hint of a growl.

The visitor paused, he picked at one of his bottom front teeth with a thumb nail. "I guess this is my fault. I started us out on the wrong foot. I don't want to turn this into a debate over whose actions are right and wrong. I just wanted to

make things clear. Mr. Scampion, you were not brought here against your own free will. You came here with the clear intent to steal emeralds. You admitted as such to the Authority. We did not take you to the local prosecutors because we have no intention of doing so. I hope that makes you rest a little more at ease. It will make today much easier on all of us if you stop being so confrontational.

"It is, however, necessary for me to clearly distinguish the differences between your situation and that of Mr. Smiel. He did nothing wrong, yet he was treated with a great deal of disrespect to his freedom. I must make it clear that it was not the Authority that was responsible for this, but the Health Council for Disease Control."

The man looked directly into Larinov's face and spoke as if he knew the middleman's fears intimately. "Do not be alarmed over that, Mr. Smiel. You have not contracted any disease. Your health is at no risk. It is just that the Health Council gets rather over ambitious with their own concerns."

Rath interrupted. "Hey, if there's nothing wrong with us and you're not going to turn me over for piracy, why are we basically locked up here? What the hell is going on?"

The visitor tilted his head down slightly and then nodded to himself. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Jack Lasonelli. I am, in the simplest terms, a coordinator. I work between the various councils of Regency to keep things moving smoothly. I was brought here to keep this particular endeavor from becoming bogged down with inter-council squabbles over jurisdiction and administration. You see, this is a moment many have waited for. We have discovered the first non-terrestrial life form."

Lar simply stared.

Rath spoke out with a hint of disbelief. "Where? Here?"

"On Fenrir," Jack stated.

"You're kidding. What is this, some kind of joke or something?"

Jack shook his head. "Hardly. There is a prosperous, thriving civilization on Fenrir. There is much we don't know, the proper councils are continuing much of their research with distant scans, but we do know the alien shows marked development similar to that of pre-industrialized earth."

"What? They're humans?" Rath remained bewildered

Jack snickered slightly. "It's hard to call them that. There are of course some similarities. They are bipeds; they show an amazing ability to utilize tools. But as far as appearance goes, they look more like apes, but they also seem to have lizard-like skin as opposed to coarsely-haired hides. Oh, by the way, what I'm telling you now is classified. It is illegal for you to discuss this with anyone else."

Rath didn't care about the legalities. His mind was racing with hundreds of questions. "What are you talking about? You're saying there's an advanced life form down there? That's not possible. I scanned this system. I landed there. There's nothing down on Fenrir but rock."

"We're well aware of your scouting mission, and I must admit that it leads to many questions of many different councils, especially the Exploratory Council. They have reviewed the logs on your scout and they attest that you did not cover up this finding."

"Why would I cover it up?" Rath interrupted. He was growing extremely uneasy with this conversation. He had ideas of what he'd face on piracy charges, but he never expected this. "I didn't find any damn life forms!"

Jack's face became genuinely comforting. He spoke in soothing, reassuring tones. "Mr. Scampion, please relax. You have nothing to worry about, I tried to make that clear earlier. I would have thought your greatest concern would have been possible charges over your own confession of intended piracy. That is absolutely, positively no longer a worry for you. We are going to forget about your previous intentions. It somewhat sullies this momentous occasion. In all honesty, it would be difficult to concede that the first human to land on Fenrir was a pirate. You will be remembered as a scout. It will also be explained that you were brought back to Fenrir to satisfy health concerns. That will also apply to Mr. Smiel. This has also been satisfied. There is no danger of alien viruses as we have tested both the first human to land on Fenrir and his first human contact. Everything you should be afraid of is no longer a concern."

Rath was not relieved. "But what about this other stuff? This nonsense about a life form. What am I up against with this?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," Jack stated almost pleasingly. "There's going to be some questions, but not about your intentions. We need to know why your scanners didn't pick up the life signs, though there are some theories. That is another reason you're still here. The three of us are going to make another landing on Fenrir today, using your scout vessel. We're going to recreate the landing sequence and rescan the planet within the atmosphere. It will test the validity of certain assumptions and hopefully provide the answer to why the life forms were not found by your ship."

5. Fenrir Revisited

The cockpit closed about the three men, left little room for movement, and even less consideration for safety. But Jack had insisted that all three of them be present for atmospheric entry of Fenrir. Rath thought the company might calm his nerves; at least he hoped it would. It didn't. When the scout began to shake at the violence of entry, he broke into a cold sweat. The lack of space compounded his discomfort, and when he felt the lurch of gravity taking hold, he almost vomited.

"Do you always get this upset on reentry?" Jack questioned.

"It's not usually this bad," Rath gasped, struggling for control of his innards. "It's just a little close in here. I'm used to being alone."

A heavy shake throughout his body closed Rath's mouth.

"But your body doesn't like this type of motion, does it?" Jack pressed.

Rath took a moment, swallowed hard. The taste of whatever was in the back of his throat burned going back down. Finally, he found the voice to respond. "I guess not, but like I said, it's usually not this bad."

Outside the viewshield, the orange flares finally died away and the sky turned a bright blue. The stars disappeared as the atmosphere of Fenrir swallowed the scout completely. Flight controls brought the vessel to a slow descent, and the great turbulence of atmospheric entry ceased.

The council coordinator turned to Lar. "How about you, do you feel bad?"

"No, not really." Lar looked more lost than sick. "I don't get to experience this that much. I don't know what to expect." And indeed, he peered out the viewshields with a newfound curiosity. He almost ignored Jack's continued questions.

"How about air sickness? Do you ever feel uncomfortable in a shuttle or a skimmer?"

Lar just shook his head.

"So this is no real problem for you?"

"No, I guess not."

Jack turned a critical eye back to Rath, but spoke loud enough so that Lar could hear. "Your concentration is not the best at this moment is it?"

Rath was indeed paying more attention to his own problems than to Jack's questions. "Huh?"

This nonsensical word highlighted Rath's discomfort as well as his mixed concentration, and Jack nodded to Lar. "That may explain some things."

Rath wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. He fought off a final wave of nausea with a sense of indignity. "What things?"

"You don't like reentry and you seem to have a fear of heights. During your first scout, these factors could have caused you to miss something."

"I checked my screens," Rath argued. "I always check my screens and the viewshields. It's part of my job."

"Yes, I won't argue that, but that's not really my point. You seem much more concerned with your own discomfort. I'm not saying it's a crime, but it could have caused you to miss something."

The height of the craft still left Rath far from comfortable, the possibility of losing power and falling continued to strike at his consciousness like a loose shutter in a windstorm. But Jack's accusations found their way through the fear, brought out an anger which flushed his face.

"How could I miss something like life on a planet? I mean it's there or it's not. If I look out and see nothing but rock, what else am I supposed to look for?"

Jack scanned the nav coordinates. "Take a quick look now, both of you. What do you see?"

Rath pointed to the brown and yellow landscape. His voice held a tone of vindication. "The same thing I saw when I first scouted this planet, nothing."

Lar nodded his head in agreement.

"This is exactly what I saw before," Rath continued. "I don't care how sick I feel, there's nothing down there to see."

Jack smiled. "Of course this is what you saw before; I brought you in at an orbit to mimic your first scout. This is the same flight path. What you see now is exactly what you saw before you initiated automatic landing. But I would like to point something else out. At a higher altitude, more of the surface would have been visible. If we checked the view screens at that point, the view might have been different."

Rath shook his head obstinately. "But I'm sure I made a visual check at initial entry during my first scout. Even if there was something to see then, I would have noticed it."

"Are you certain?" Jack questioned almost sternly. He did not press with hostility, but he offered his own explanation with a degree of confidence. "Remember how badly you felt. You probably did check your visual screens, but how much attention did you give them? Surely if this planet was covered with plant life, you would have noticed, but based on your discomfort, even you would have to admit that a small pocket, a trace anomaly compared to the full expanse of the planet surface might escape your attention."

Rath wasn't so sure. It sounded plausible, then again it sounded impossible. If there was life on this planet, he was certain he would have spotted it.

Jack interrupted with a stern command. "Set your ship for automatic landing sequences, just as you did during your first scout."

More out of instinct than obedience, Rath ordered landing site selection and approach. The Boscon Props shook the vessel as they gently lowered the craft for landing. Rath exhaled as he welcomed the sensation of the props beating

against hard ground. When the ship settled into touchdown, he wiped the last few beads of cold sweat from his head. Quiet settled into the cockpit as Rath shut off the engines.

Jack stared intently at the pilot.

"What?" Rath responded uneasily.

"Complete your check off and take us outside."

Rath shrugged, checked the atmospheric readings, and prepared for disembarking. He led Jack and Lar out of the starboard hatch. This time, he didn't hold his breath or run from the craft. He stood beside it, smelling the cooling metal. It threatened to bring back a touch of nausea, but he fought off any further sickness.

A lifeless desert welcomed them. Jagged brown rocks jutted up from the horizon in every direction. The surface was parched and hard. Dust, sand and rock; nothing more.

"Certainly not the garden spot of Fenrir," Jack admitted.

"I'm not convinced there is a garden spot," Rath countered.

Jack just smiled. "Take us on a walk. I'm sure you normally do a foot scout."

"Absolutely, but you're just going to see what I see now. Oh by the way, my portable is scanning for life signs. There's no reading. Nothing."

"I don't doubt that at all," Jack responded, sounding anything but defeated.

The three ambled for some time through the barren landscape. The scenery held rugged beauty, but no indication of life. Finally, Jack made his last request.

"Take us to the point where you obtained your load of emeralds and rubies."

Rath frowned and did not move.

Jack waved his hand almost apologetically. "Don't worry. I'm not trying to obtain any kind of evidence against you. I just want to retrace your trail. It's an order from the councils. It's the last step in verifying why you didn't find the Fenrites on your first scout."

Rath huffed a heavy breath but finally conceded. He brought them to a small pit where he had used the laser miner to scratch away the rock surface. He watched Jack carefully, still unsure of the coordinator's motives.

Jack just scratched an eyebrow. His narrow features appeared to thin even more under the heat. "Why don't we get back to the ship? It's hot out here and I'm getting tired. There's still much for us to see."

#

"Considerable challenges, considerable challenges indeed." Dr. Sinclair took a handkerchief and wiped the side of her neck. Warmth in the council room didn't create her perspiration, questions and concerns over the Fenrites raised her anxiety and the layers of flesh simply did the rest. "I suppose we should examine the most obvious problem. The growth rate of the Fenrites is

expanding exponentially. The gestation period is much shorter than Dr. Eurobian estimated. Multiple births also seem to be the rule rather than the exception. Colonies are teeming with newborns and growing infants.

"For those of you that worried of the immediate repercussions of overpopulation, I have a leading report which puts some of those concerns to rest. The Fenrites will not starve. To their credit, they have found their own solution to the restricted food supply. They have examined the plant life instilled for them and found the crop which grows the fastest and provides the greatest nutrition. They are using this food source to its greatest potential. Our scanners are already picking up extensive tracks of land utilized to support current as well as future population growth. As they deplete that which was initially provided for them, the larger than anticipated harvests will more than compensate for the loss. In effect, the Fenrites are adapting to their explosive growth by farming much larger areas of land than we expected.

"This will of course alter Dr. Morgan's planned ecosystem. A much larger percentage of Fenrir's surface will be changed from desert into farmland. A small consequence. We have many scanning reports which will provide enough data to assert our claim of Fenrir's desert like conditions before this alteration. This new phenomena will simply be attributed to the stage of development the Fenrites achieved upon our discovery of their civilization. It will be considered part of their evolution and nothing more.

"Perhaps even more interesting, the Fenrites show particular skill toward utilizing the surrounding lands as efficiently as possible, but with a mind to future needs as well. While their main objective is to create a sufficient, reliable, and quickly available food supply, they are not ignoring other alternatives. They seem to be instinctively avoiding our own ancestor's agricultural mistakes which led to the potato famine and the dust bowl. I would theorize that they have actually retained a far greater percentage of the agricultural knowledge planted within their memory than we would have imagined. There is little else which would explain their instinctive actions to refrain from over burdening the soil and relying on a single crop. Perhaps their simple-mindedness and lack of independent thought allowed for such absorption, like pets learning a new trick."

Dr. Sinclair folded her hands and a frown creased her lips downward. "But now to the problem. We are uncertain as of yet as to the true life span of a Fenrite. Dr. Eurobian gives us some insight as to an estimate, but nothing that we can count on with any great reliance. Even if we take the short end of the estimate, the Fenrite population will still grow at a staggering rate. If such growth continues, they will eventually reach a point where there is simply not enough land to cultivate. While it is nothing that threatens them in the near term, in the long run they will face food shortages.

"Some of my associates have offered solutions, none of which I can support. From the ill-conceived notion of creating a predator to the vastly more compassionate, but no less damaging alternative of supplementing the

Fenrites with food shipments from our own ag-planets. I assert that we must allow the Fenrites to find their own solutions as they have already shown a propensity to achieve. Let them deal with the problem and let us learn from it. That, after all, is the basis of this entire experiment.

"Food shortages may lead to other events which our colleagues from different councils are eager to watch. Monitoring riots, war, and the political development stemming from such calamities is just another form of understanding our own past. We must allow the different branches of the scientific community to observe their fields of interest.

"Remember, we are not here to solve the Fenrites' problem. A problem I must remind some that does not exist nor will exist for some time. We can make all the projections and estimations over what might happen a century or two from now, but that does not alter the basic intent of our experiment. We merely must watch how they deal with critical junctures in their own development. The variations and similarities will tell us a great deal about our own historical decisions. We did not create this organism to dictate its lifestyle. We proceeded with this grand experiment to watch the internal development of an alien civilization. To interfere, even with the best intentions, is to break the foundation which is the cause for the Fenrites very existence."

"Now, for some good news." She rubbed her hands together as she took a surveying glance around the council chambers. "We have the scout pilot that made the initial investigation of Fenrir, the only human to physically explore Fenrir before Inception. Due to some genuine luck, achieved by the forthright decision to have the Authority secure the system, the pilot was caught attempting to pirate gems from the planet. He never turned over his report to a local Exploratory Commission, and thus, there was never a need to intercept the planet from the Council of Colonization. We have detained the pilot for some time; even allowed health officers to conduct extensive tests to satisfy their own fears that there are no communicable diseases on Fenrir. Now, a close associate of mine is debriefing the scout pilot and clearly removing any threats that he might represent."

#

"Alright Mr. Scampion," Jack pointed to the flight controls, "why don't you get us airborne, but don't take us into orbit. I want you to keep us in the atmosphere for a little aerial reconnaissance."

Rath grimaced. "What altitude?"

"Set it for 15,000 meters. That should be high enough."

Rath voiced the order and the scout rumbled with life. The Boscon Props powered the craft into vertical lift off, then propelled the scout into a standard flight path at the proper altitude.

"Now, let's take a look at these terminal screens, shall we," Jack requested. "Please activate all exterior cameras and use them to scan the surface."

Rath grudgingly activated all viewing cameras and the far reaching landscape of Fenrir filled the monitors. A touch of vertigo struck him as each terminal flaunted their position high in the sky. He swallowed hard to beat back the growing unease. The only comfort he found existed in the drab appearance of the landscape. Brown and orange rock formations filled the terminal screens. The desert surrounded them and surpassed the limit of the camera range.

"See!" Rath nearly shouted. "There's nothing out there." He paused for a moment to let the display screens accent his point. After nodding his head, he let his anger flow freely. "What the hell is this all about? You tell us there's a life form down there, some kind of ape-lizard thing, and there's nothing here."

Jack said nothing. He just watched the screens.

Rath grew even more annoyed with the silent response. His anger allowed him to forget his discomfort. "How long are we going to stay up here? There's nothing down there."

Jack waited a few more seconds, and then looked to Lar. "What about you Mr. Smiel? Are you convinced there are no life forms on this planet?"

"I guess so," Lar confessed. "I don't see ... wait! What's that over there?"

"Where?" Jack asked calmly.

Lar pointed to a corner of the view screen. "That."

Rath turned his gaze to the point of contention. He stared at a spec of green. He blinked, but it remained.

"Can you zoom the lens anymore, Mr. Scampion?"

Rath stuttered. "A little."

He adjusted a control and the green spot filled a larger portion of the view screen.

"Why don't you change course and head in that direction? Keep your altitude at 15,000 meters, for now anyway."

Rath didn't respond. His attention remained fixed on the monitor.

"Mr. Scampion?"

"Yeah, I'll adjust the course."

As the scout vessel veered toward the anomaly, the green area began to grow, to encompass more and more of the landscape. Within moments, the shadows of plant life filled the entire lower portion of the bow camera angle.

"Gentlemen, let me introduce you both to alien life."

There was no true definition to the picture at this point. They were both too far and too high to determine what kind of plant life nestled itself into the soil, but the existence, as well as the spread of the anomaly, was no longer debatable.

Rath shook his head almost violently as he argued the obvious. "This isn't possible." He switched off the aft and starboard cameras and diverted monitors to sensor readings. He pointed to the screens with renewed vigor.

"Look, there's no reading on the sensors. They're not picking up anything. This is some kind of trick."

"Widen the array," Jack advised.

"I am shooting a wide pattern array. I always ... this isn't right." He fumbled with the controls. He matched the board setting with the readouts. The manual controls indicated they were indeed on wide focus, but the sensor patterns themselves indicated a narrow band.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked with a look of concern.

"The sensors are shooting a band that doesn't match the controls."

"I don't understand," Jack noted innocently

Rath frowned before he explained. He slapped and twisted a few more controls, even requested computer analysis. "Check sensor integrity. Analyze beam pattern."

The computer replied instantly. "Sensor reflection within normal parameters. Wave structure uninterrupted. Beam pattern ten square kilometers."

"That can't be." Rath looked to Jack. "The sensor waves are only rebounding off a fraction of the planet surface."

"Can you increase the width?"

"Damn it, I have. I've got the controls on maximum. On these settings, I should be getting half the planet. There's nothing else for me to turn up. Wait, I can turn control over to the computer." He voiced the order. "Computer override on sensors. Ignore manual controls. In fact, shut down the cockpit board. Maximum scan of the planet for living organisms."

"Insufficient data. Unable to match readings."

"Readings? What do you mean insufficient data?"

Jack nodded. "That was the first reading received by an orbital scanner five star systems from here. An anomaly."

Rath barely choked out one last request of the computer analysis. "Define existing readings within known standards, ignore unrelated material."

"Chloroplasts. Carbohydrates. Amino Acids. Located within numerous complex organic compounds capable of metabolism."

Jack grinned ear to ear, but still his teeth did not show. "You see gentlemen. Alien life. That's why the computer couldn't relate its initial readings to anything within its data base. The most prevalent theory points to life which is quite similar to our own, but with slight differences in genetic makeup. Understandable actually."

Lar peered deeply into the view screens, trying to understand the magnitude of what he was seeing. "That's a lot of green down there."

"Well," Jack offered, "it's actually a good deal more than what was there a few standard months ago. It seems the inhabitants of Fenrir are going through a phenomenal growth stage. They appear to be learning new farming techniques, irrigation and other agricultural processes. It's not unlike what are own civilization experienced during certain times of new invention. They are

farming more and more of the land, turning desert into the green fields we now see. We believe that is why the orbital scanners finally picked up the anomaly a few months back. If the Fenrite population had remained static, we might never have found them until after we colonized this planet."

"Why didn't I find them?!" Rath demanded.

Jack spoke with a reassuring tone. "We don't blame you. Stop torturing yourself. You put your vessel on automatic landing and the computer picked out the safest place. It would be like landing in the Sahara Desert on earth. You would have found no signs of life there, either. The problem was simply a sensor control. We'll have maintenance check it out when we get back in orbit. The Council of Technology wanted to take apart your ship about three months ago, but a decision was made not to. We wanted to run this test, but we wanted to run it with you. We had to have conclusive proof as to why your first scout didn't reveal this anomaly.

"You see, due to your somewhat unethical decisions to return to Fenrir, some councils believe you knew that there was alien life here. They believed you simply wanted to steal the emeralds despite the finding. A good deal of rebellion in a society will create that kind of cynicism. A review of your logs, however, indicated you never found the aliens despite your landing. This, of course, created a debate as to what happened. But we have our answer and there is no need for us to worry about your motives any longer."

Rath bit his bottom lip. He supposed he should have been thankful for the remark, an absolution of blame, but his emotions lie elsewhere. He stared at the growing sections of green on the view screens. He had been to so many planets. They were always the same, rock and dust, empty lands waiting to be raped by miners and colonists. He never returned to the planets he scouted because he didn't want to see the change. He didn't think he wanted to see the desolation forced into something different, something that was perhaps never meant to be, but he was seeing it now.

An alien.

Alien life.

That's what caused this change, or so he thought. He explored and scanned so many planets, investigated barren worlds. He never found anything beyond rocks and lifeless oceans of water. He was a scout; it was his mission objective to search out alien life. Here it was before him, and he was truly not prepared for it. A hundred new questions bit at him, a hundred new thoughts confused his previous convictions.

An alien!

Jack spoke as if he could read Rath's mind. "Would you like to get a closer look?"

#

Dr. Sinclair entered the following note into her portable:

Jack:

After you're convinced the jewel distributor no longer has doubts, send him home. Tell him he should remain silent in the interests of Regency Security. I've checked his profile, and I believe he will remain quiet and simply go back to his business on Janus. He may be an asset we can utilize in the future, but for now, it is better if we return him to his daily routine. He's been away from his business for a very extended period of time. Offer him whatever assistance he needs to quickly return to his life as it was.

As for the pilot, I'd like to keep him with us. He is motivated by money and a man like that can be dangerous. All it would take is one religious zealot with deep funded pockets and this scout may turn on us. Use your best judgment in convincing him it is in his own best interest to stay on.

I have one last request. A minor branch of the Council of Galactic Agriculture wants a sample of the Fenrite crops. Two members of the main department of agricultural are well aware that the samples will provide little benefit, but they do not wish to stall the request, fearing their reservations will appear suspicious. Please advise the Health Council to place a ban on the transportation of plant life until further study is conducted.

As always, treat this memo with proper security procedures. Deepest Regards, Dr. Elizabeth Sinclair

#

Rath glared uneasily. "Is this a good idea?"

"I have clearance for one low pass." Jack replied.

"How low?"

"Pretty much as low as you want. I was only authorized to land in the desert where you made your first scout, so we can't land again. But if you really want to get a good luck at our newly-discovered galactic neighbors, that shouldn't be a problem."

Lar perked up. "You mean we get to see the alien?"

"We'll be able to pick them up with the cameras on full zoom. What do you say, Mr. Scampion? Care to take us down for a look?"

Rath grunted, but he fixed on a grouping of the complex organic compounds as described by the computer. He punched in a low flight path, not the safest altitude for a scout, more like a skimmer route, but for one pass, they'd be alright. He gave one last command to the shipboard computer.

"Fix all cameras on the unclassified organisms, range four kilometers, bearing zero point zero five. Maximum magnification. Display on forward screens."

Jack glanced at the images every now and then, but he focused on the reaction of the two men with him. He smiled.

Lar sat wide-eyed and amazed. "Will you look at that? This is unbelievable. They're like two legged, walking lizards. They got faces like monkeys, but they're all covered in scales. I don't see any tails, do they have tails?"

"A few colonies in a different region have been reported to include tails," Jack said.

Lar's eyes darted about the many forms moving about the small compound nestled in a crescent of medium-sized trees. Small huts of branches, tall grass, rock and mud dotted the backdrop. "This is unbelievable."

Rath stared dead in the center of the screen. He said nothing. He thought of the last time he was here, on Fenrir. He remembered how he felt when he kicked that lonely rock. He thought he was alone, but apparently he wasn't.

#

The Fenrites couldn't ignore the hum of the scout vessel. At first, they sought cover. Some dove behind the cluster of trees which protected their village, others darted into their small huts. In time, however, they all grew curious. They moved about in search of the strange noise. Finally, they looked to the sky, to an area where they had never seen anything but clouds and stars before. There were no birds on Fenrir, but there was something flying toward them now.

They watched the craft sail by, they looked with an eye for detail, and they remembered what they saw.

#

Dr. Sinclair frowned at her associate. "You've seen the reports, haven't you? Of course you have. You know what's going on."

She shook her head as she glanced at the notes before her. Before her fellow council member could speak, she announced her own interpretations.

"Dr. Eurobian, you created the genetic makeup for the Fenrites. I'm looking at your own notes as to why you elected the DNA patterns of the gorilla and the skink. You were certain they would form a societal group similar to that of the human species with only subtle differences to strengthen the presentation of alien origin. If that's true, then I want you to explain what the hell is going on down there. There have been no battles, no skirmishes. No conflicts over land or resources. In fact, our scanners show that these creatures are banding together whenever possible. Why are the Fenrites forming this kind of community at such an early stage of development?!"

This time, she didn't even pause to let him answer. "I've got anthropologists crawling up and down my back, complaining about the lack of tribal conflicts. I've got sociologists abandoning their research due to the conformity of colonies placed thousands of kilometers away from each other. They say

there's nothing to be learned here, no similar pattern to that of earth in the pre-industrial age. This is not what I want to hear.

"Let me see if I can make you understand. If enough councils decide that this experiment has become tainted, we'll be left swinging on the line with only one pin to hold us down. It's your responsibility to analyze your work and offer some explanation as to why this has occurred. I also want you to pose fundamental questions for the sociologists to study. I don't care what kind; just give them something to keep them busy."

#

Jack directed Rath to dock with the Intersystem Propelled Planning Station which had taken anchor to study Fenrir. The large, oval shaped craft included several docking bays for small craft landing.

Rath accepted the instructions with equal amounts of relief and hesitation. He would no longer be kept locked up in the freighter, a ship he had grown very tired of, but he wondered what waited for him in this, one of the Authority's top of the line vessels. Surely, sophisticated holding cells lined detention blocks, and if they didn't want to lock him up here, plenty of transports zoomed in and about the station ready to take him to a local jurisdiction.

He said nothing, simply landed the ship and waited for Jack to make the first indication of what would happen next.

As the coordinator disembarked, he was approached immediately by a courier officer.

"Dispatch for you, just came in on last shuttle while you were out, sir."

Jack took the casing, inspected the seal, and opened it. He downloaded the contents to his portable and read through the note in but a split second. He spoke as if reading from the message.

"I have some good news for you, Mr. Smiel. You're going home."

Rath folded his arms across his chest. "I guess that also means I get to stay."

Jack chuckled. "Mr. Scampion, you're going to have to learn to relax. When are you going to realize we're not out to get you? You can leave if you like, but I think you should listen to an offer."

The statement echoed through the docking bay and rang with an inviting tone, especially to the scout. "What kind of offer?"

"There's going to be a good deal of investigation going on the next few months, probably even years," Jack responded. "Most of the studies are occurring here, in orbit, but we will eventually be sending scout ships for reconnaissance. Perhaps even a few landings and sample gatherings. That means we will need scout licensed pilots. You're here. It seems like a good fit."

"The Authority has its own scout pilots," Rath rebuked very harshly. He didn't want to remain a prisoner, even if it was under the guise of some kind of working permit.

Jack just shook his long narrow head. "Dubious to the end, eh?"

"Is the end near, my end?"

"Dubious and concerned. Interesting traits for a scout pilot. But, since you are being so open with your feelings, I will not hide the true reasons for us wanting you to stay. You are the first person to land on Fenrir. That is going to give you a place in the history books, like it or not. Oh, we'll cover up your reasons for coming back, but we'll be forthright with everything else. We've documented your initial scout and the failure to uncover Fenrite existence. We're not going to blame anyone for that. We've already proven the cause, but rest assured it is an interesting point. Anyway, even though you found nothing, you are still the first human to walk on Fenrir. That means you were the first to enter the Fenrir atmosphere, the first to be exposed to the Fenrir environment, and the first human to walk on Fenrir soil."

"I've been the first to walk on a lot of different planets."

"None of them had an indigenous life form," Jack countered with a tone steeped in the gravity of what that meant. "That's why we want to keep you here. Not because we want to hold you prisoner, but because of your role here. Don't you understand that?"

"I understand that I'm going to be cooped up with the Authority and a bunch of lab coats for the next few months, at the very least. That's not going to pay the bills, and it's not going to bring me any quicker to retirement."

"Ah, but it is," Jack grinned. Here, the coordinator relied on his own savvy, his ability to read others. "You will be treated as a contractor, which means you will receive payment for your time here. I have been authorized to offer you pay at an Authority Master Sergeant's rate for every standard hour you remain with us in this system and cooperate with our investigation."

Jack had been given no true authorization, but he knew he would obtain it once he asked. He waited and watched for the scout's reply, measuring the depth of reluctance.

For Rath, it sounded good, except for one word. "What do you mean 'cooperate'?"

Jack rubbed his temples, but ended up chuckling to himself once more. "You're a trying man, Mr. Scampion. I mean that you will be available for any media conferences, that you will not reveal your original intentions of piracy, that you will allow us to use your likeness in any presentations involving the initial scout of Fenrir, and that you will follow the rules and regulations for civilians aboard Authority vessels. It does not mean that you will be coerced into work you do not wish to do, or that you will be asked to behave in a fashion against your morale standings or beliefs, unless you believe you are above lying about your desire to steal emeralds from this planet."

The last held a slight bite of sarcasm. Rath accepted it, he deserved it, but he remained skeptical of his true financial gain. "The pay sounds good, but what about my scout ship. You said something before about technicians wanting to

take it apart. What about that? A Master Sergeant's pay isn't going to make up for that."

"Well, that is another matter." Here, Jack hemmed and hawed, played up his own concerns. "We do wish to take the scout ship. We want to analyze it as well as eventually archive it to a museum as the first craft to land on Fenrir. It deserves that. Don't you agree?"

"I agree it's a big loss to me."

The coordinator rubbed his chin. "It's a problem. They're not going to give up that ship. And they're going to say that you forfeited it when you came here illegally. But you also have a freighter. They don't necessarily want that. That ship never landed on Fenrir. I'm sure I could convince them to leave the freighter in your possession. There would be no forfeit of that vessel."

"The scout's mine, too," Rath argued. "And I'm not going to promise anything unless you promise to do something about that loss."

"Fine," Jack sighed. "We'll replace it. Top of the line Authority model, but with no weaponry. Agreed?"

Rath considered the full merit of the proposal. Pay for sitting around an Authority station, and a new scout. It sounded too good to pass up.

"Agreed."

6. Evolve

For the most part, the researchers and Authority personnel kept Rath busy with work he really didn't understand, and really didn't care much for, except when they delivered his new scout. He spent nearly two weeks standard just going through it on a docking bay. After that, he made several requests for enhanced scanners, control modifications, comlinks and access ports. And most of all, flight stabilizers. He worked with great joy on installing these features. No more bumpy atmospheric entries, no more bone-jarring turbulence. He fitted his new ship with the latest in Authority issue equipment, stabilizers designed to lessen the impact of particle beams and torpedoes. With these enhancements, the wings and engine could shake from here to Pluto, but anyone in the cockpit could perform micro-surgery.

He could only guess as to the monumental costs of such modifications, but no one seemed to care. Rath loved the military for that. When Regency entrusted the Authority with the responsibility to patrol the entire galaxy, their budget mushroomed in proportionate size. They didn't care about money, they didn't have to. Every new mining colony needed to ante up with a percentage of their own revenues or face marauders without Regency protection. Resources remained plentiful across the galaxy, grew with each explored and colonized planet, and the Authority had the deepest pockets of all.

And since they kept honoring his requisitions, Rath kept asking for more. They even paid him top dollar for his freighter. He didn't need it anymore, and he guessed the flight managers and maintenance crews wanted to free up the docking bay. They flew it out of the system right after he signed the transfer papers and acknowledged the acceptance of sale with a wristband scan.

They even allowed him to take his scout out for system checks and flight tests, as long as he didn't get too close to Fenrir. Other than that, it was open flying. Rather trusting on their part. He could have hit the Boscon Props and taken off to the other end of the galaxy. No one could have stopped him in time. He guessed they really didn't consider him a prisoner anymore, and for his own ambitions, he had no real reason to leave. He wasn't being threatened with prosecution, yet he received monthly deposits into his account. The only thing they asked of him lately involved making some nominal long range scans of Fenrir's weather patterns. He actually enjoyed taking the new scout out and maneuvering it through the empty star system.

After some time, they almost forgot about him, treated him like a lower ranking officer with some minor scout duties. Other than that, everyone else

left him alone. But they sure paid him quite well, and for doing very little. A new ship, no long scouts, no hassles with making bids; he could have worked like this for a few more years standard.

He retained some apprehension over Jack's occasional hints of upcoming media briefings. Over that prospect, he grew less enthusiastic. He didn't want to deal with questions about why he missed the Fenrites on his first scout. Mostly because he couldn't really answer them. He understood the theory alright; malfunction with the scanners on his old scout, automatic landing in a desolate area, but he still couldn't believe he missed the Fenrites completely. That fact still bothered him.

He kept going over his memory of the procedures. He tried to recall the scanning reports. He honestly believed he ordered the dispersal of independent probes and submersibles. If so, he wondered why they didn't pick up this so-called anomaly. He also kept wondering about the narrow focus of his ship's sensors. It just didn't fit with his recollection.

But for now, it was truly a moot point. They took his original scout from him a long time ago. He wondered if it was sitting in pieces in some Authority hangar, or if it was reassembled and waiting for museum bids. He considered asking Jack where it might end up. He thought he might like to see it.

Then again, maybe not. As Jack kept pointing out, he and his ship were part of history now, part of the logs that would describe the discovery and study of the first alien. A great moment, one of the most significant he could possibly imagine. But in truth, not something he could accept with great pride. He didn't find the Fenrites; he skipped right over them as if they didn't exist. That's how they'd describe him in the history logs. And that was probably the type of question he would have to face from any briefing he would attend. Not a comforting thought, and he dreaded the day they might bring the outside media to the system to reveal the home planet of the first discovered "alien".

To his great relief, though, he heard of no scheduled media conferences, no visiting dignitaries, and no carnival-like gatherings to celebrate the discovery. Time passed, yet things remained quiet, professional. The Authority remained in control of the system and the researchers continued their own observations in a guarded environment. Soldiers conducted themselves in stern fashion as technicians roamed the Planning Station with a mind to their examinations.

Rath clung quite happily to this atmosphere. He concentrated on his new scout, on the numerous modifications, and on his simple duties. He also watched his funds grow with each passing month standard. He had no expenses, had no true responsibilities, but reaped the benefits of his situation like an interplanetary stock broker. He sank into the calm of his surroundings with a growing appreciation for what he had stumbled upon.

The council chamber seemed brighter, not warm-bright but operating-room bright, sterile-bright. Shadows tightly defined the corners, and everything appeared narrow and fierce. The crisp light highlighted the gloom painted on most council member faces. But a few contented smiles broke through the unhappiness, members who didn't mind the disaster, especially since it meant trouble for their arrogant leader.

Dr. Sinclair puckered her lips in an exasperated scowl. She kept scratching her head nervously and shifting her weight in her chair as if sitting on an uneven pillow. While the members arrived and before the council came to order, she muttered to herself or whispered over her shoulder to an aide. She had no inclination of allowing this experiment to slip from her control, and when it came time for her to speak; she made it clear she still wielded the full power of her chair. But her gestures and composure betrayed her own misgivings. Her voice remained firm, no break in tone, but she avoided eye contact with those about her while she wrung her hands together in fits of ire.

"I won't deny that this has been a surprise, but we must remember the true scale, and even the very purpose of our experiment. We wanted to test the variables of development. Everyone involved wanted to gauge the different stages of advancement, to find something which may be the key to understanding our own growth. Basically, this is an investigation of how an alien organism develops under certain conditions.

"Which one of us was so sure as to predict the actual phases of growth? Which one of us was so naive to assume there would not be a surprise? Research remains a surprise. It is how we learn. That is why I say there may even be a benefit here, a benefit in dealing with advancement beyond our own reckoning. We must sometimes face the unexpected in order to gain knowledge. The most advanced discoveries occur by diving into the unknown. Yes, we face risks, but right now, we remain in control of those risks. Most of all, I'm not convinced that a true problem even exists."

A few coughs rattled about the room and her pasty flesh started to burn crimson. She clenched her fists on the table. "I repeat; I do not see a problem! The system remains secure. The general population is aware of the discovery, but only in the most general sense. The Authority remains at our disposal and Regency Govern is allowing us to proceed with our own objectives intact. Therefore, let us approach this as scientists and not as politicians. Let us look at the facts. The Fenrites are industrializing. Did we expect they wouldn't?"

Coughs turned into whispers.

"And they are industrializing at a tremendous rate." Dr. Sinclair's voice grew in volume with her annoyance. "I know what you are saying. I've seen the estimates. It is not just a simple breakthrough. They are advancing at incredible rates. They are completing close to twenty years of progress in a week's time standard. They are mining and utilizing precious metals, and they are constructing complex manufacturing facilities. And I say again, I am not

convinced this is a problem."

She almost stood. Her fury and resentment to those that took delight in these misfortunes brought a sneer to her lip. She wanted to openly challenge anyone that would defy her, but she remained in control, remained in her seat.

"We wanted to see the development of a civilization. We wanted to examine the correlation between our own advancement and that of an alien life form. They are moving faster than we did, but they are different. Anyone that expected the progress to move in an identical pattern to our own was, and is, a fool."

She spoke the last word harshly and stared directly at her harshest critics.

"We created them to be different. Instead of fearing these differences, we should be studying them, understanding why their progress moves at such a pace. And as for the true concerns of those that bemoan the accelerated Fenrir development, I find it based in ignorance and unjustified fear. Yes, the Fenrites are inventing advanced technology. Yes, they are progressing faster than we could have ever estimated. Yes, they are becoming a global society, working together to advance their own sciences. But let me remind you all that we remain far ahead of them, as I know that this is the major concern. There is nothing which signifies a true threat to Regency, and there is no indication that this accelerated progress will continue."

She huffed heavily with a shake of her head. "Now, is it too much to ask that we begin studying this new phenomenon? Let us find out just how far the Fenrites have advanced. Let us examine their discoveries, and maybe even attempt to understand how they managed this accelerated process. If this is a behavior that we can somehow duplicate, we may find this to be one of the greatest discoveries ever made."

#

The quiet at the Planning Station ended abruptly, and Rath cringed at the first signs of tension which gripped both the Authority personnel and the research techs. The atmosphere shifted in an instant, as if an alarm blared over loud speakers. Authority officers stiffened as the researchers scurried about like confused rats in a new maze.

He knew the signs, knew it meant trouble. Tempers shortened, and no one liked questions. It was like that moment in a bar right before a brawl. Everyone sat on the edge of their seat, either looking for an exit or someone to hit in the back of the head. Rath usually moved for a door during times like these, but he really didn't want to give up his little gold mine.

He initially wondered if an announcement had been made involving a galactic-wide notification of the Fenrites. Perhaps, it was finally time to reveal the "alien" to the public; time for the cameras, recorders, and dignitaries. Time

for the Regency Governing Council to become fully involved with the proceedings.

That would explain a great deal. The thought made him uncomfortable, why not everyone else.

But time passed, and no one new arrived. More time passed, and nothing changed. Most confusing. The personnel on the Planning Station remained much more concerned with the planet than with the potential of outside intervention. Nothing was prepared, no new administrative vessels arrived in the system, and no one posted a schedule of meetings. Yet, the tension remained and even grew with each day standard.

One day, the station moved behind Fenrir's moon and remained constantly out of direct sight of Fenrir. Rath heard a rumor, something about the Fenrites possibly being able to see the distortion of the station even with the curtain on.

Rath didn't understand how that was possible, but he knew enough not to ask questions. After one glare from an Authority supply officer, he stopped his scout enhancement requisitions as well. He watched from a distance, kept a mind to his ship, but ultimately, he could not avoid the attention of the Authority's growing anxiety.

First, they immediately restricted his flights. No more scans of Fenrir. Eventually, they banned his scout missions all together; no more test flights, no more leaving the docking bays period. Then, they notified him of restricted areas of the Planning Station, warned him not to interfere or to trespass under the threat of Authority punishment.

Rath knew what that meant, and it wasn't good. Prosecution of military espionage was handled internally by the Authority, not by local jurisdiction. Conviction meant execution. He had to remain constantly alert of his surroundings. He couldn't afford to make a single misstep and end up somewhere he didn't belong. Eventually, a Wing Colonel wanted him escorted off the Planning Station and out of the system completely.

Fine with Rath. It probably meant the end of his Master Sergeant's pay, but he wanted out now. It would be almost a relief to go back to scouting uninhabited planets.

#

Dr. Sinclair sat alone. Her hands were folded under her chin. She made one statement into her portable which magnified her predicament.

"The Fenrites have test fired a crude rocket in the equatorial desert of their largest continent."

She clicked off her portable as she shook her head. She didn't need to look at the data from the most current reports to remind her of the cataclysmic changes in her experiment. And it was her experiment. There was no denying that anymore. Every member of every council was more than happy to throw it

in her lap, some even eager. She envisioned her critics dancing with joy over every new development. Even now, Regency Govern debated the issue. *An unpleasant thought.* She continued the narrative into her personal diary.

"Data has confirmed the rocket closely approximates early models of the mid-twentieth century used for both weaponry and space exploration. There are some questions as to the fuel and propulsion mechanics. Some observers wait for another launch, but I doubt there will be further reports on this matter. There is no evidence of mass production of these rockets, and that will probably be the last appearance of this type.

"The Fenrites seem to utilize their production capacity with great efficiency. They manufacture items solely for the purposes of research and development. There is no apparent wasting of resources on items which will soon become technologically obsolete, and for them, such obsolescence occurs with daily frequency.

"This is not to say the Fenrites have failed to develop a powerful manufacturing base. Quite the contrary. Advanced factories are constructed with a fervor which nearly matches the progress of their technology. The fact remains, however, that their production is geared toward maintaining the flow of invention and not to create product."

In scientific principle, that thought was staggering. She could only imagine how the science of her own people would progress if all resources were focused on breaking one technological barrier after another. Consumption and saving would become secondary to the drive for knowledge. With the great expansion, the colonization of distant star systems, the massive gathering of new resources; the scientific community could move ahead in staggering leaps, perhaps even surpassing the current pace of the Fenrites. But her people did not care as much about science as they did about profits, or comforts, or luxuries. While Fenrite factories experimented with metallurgy, new human colonies mined diamonds to stud the interiors of stretch skimmers. *Disgusting.*

She continued, "As the Fenrites will probably not waste time in producing more of these crude rockets, it is my estimation that several key discoveries will follow. It is a stepping stone to powerful military weaponry and even space exploration. It is probably the single most disturbing event in the duration of this experiment.

"The greatest question regarding the Fenrites' progress involves the motivation. To date, there are no theories as to why they have progressed so far so fast. Their explosive population growth might explain the further development of agriculture and infrastructure construction, but then why waste time developing rockets? Actually, the most efficient Fenrite progress tends to occur in the areas of defense related technology. It is difficult to determine what has spurred such experimentation. There is no predator and there is still no sign of hostility among the original colonies or tribes."

She grunted as she corrected herself. "In truth, the original colonies and tribes placed on Fenrir no longer hold any true consequence. The Fenrites have

become one single society, one whole global civilization. There are no perceived borders, no distinctions based on physical characteristics or on geographical origin. Since they have developed global communications, any dissimilarity based on technology has dissolved. They share their knowledge freely.

"Still, their dedication to production and technological advancement tends to point to a pattern of military build-up. This is perhaps the most perplexing and even alarming puzzle. The Fenrites have focused a large portion of their energies upon developing tools and devices which are militaristic in nature. On a peaceful world where there is no war, why would their advancement focus on these goals?"

Questions. Hundreds of questions, but probably not the time or the opportunity to discover the answers.

#

Echoes of footsteps rustled along the corridors of the Planning Station like bats in a church attic. Not many techs remained to buffer the sound. Each day the Authority demanded the removal of more and more non-military personnel. They ordered the evacuation of over three quarters of the research techs, and the handful that remained focused on long distance scans. Rumor had it that they were left to monitor some potential cataclysm.

Replacements arrived, but not in the form of scientific researchers. A section of Authority soldiers took over the empty quarters, pilots actually. Tight-lipped, they walked about like winds of cold death.

The advent of these pilots simply added to the hard-nosed tension Rath faced each day, and every new officer looked upon him as more than just an annoyance. They considered him a trespasser and made no attempt to hide their growing distaste.

It was all Rath needed, the final incentive. He didn't mind giving up the pay now. He wanted out. He just finished packing and prepared to request final clearance for discharge when Jack entered his quarters.

"I don't think you should leave," the coordinator stated blank-faced.

Rath flashed an unappreciative glance at such a remark. "Well, the Authority does, and to tell you the truth, I'm not arguing."

"I did argue. I want you here."

The tone wasn't as accommodating as Jack's usual requests. This was an order, plain and simple.

Rath grit his teeth together. He didn't like this, not one bit. He was ready to leave, he wanted to leave, but he had more than enough meetings with this coordinator to know what Jack was all about. Jack was the guy that got things done, and there was a whole lot of power in that kind of ability, especially in a society with more councils than elected officials.

In frustration, Rath threw his pack on an empty chair. "You want me to stay? What the hell for? Did you know some Wing Colonel on this station is watching every move I make? He's made it pretty clear the only way I'm going to take my scout out again is if I'm leaving for good. What am I supposed to do here if I can't fly?"

Jack seemed to weigh his words before offering a mysterious explanation for the restriction. "It's dangerous out there. The Authority's just trying to keep things under control and to keep any civilians from getting hurt."

"Dangerous? What do you mean? Pirates?"

Jack chuckled, a little nervous laugh, but a cracked smile none the less. "No, not pirates. They wouldn't dare show up here."

"Then what's the problem?" Rath insisted.

"We're discovering new things about the Fenrites, classified things."

Rath knew what that meant, too. He didn't bother asking questions that wouldn't be answered. He simply jumped on another reason for him leaving.

"If it's dangerous, then maybe I should leave. I am a civilian. I don't really have the responsibility to take risks."

Jack responded as if dealing a death strike. "If you don't want to be billed for all that nice equipment you ordered, I suggest you stay."

"I see," Rath exhaled, "and since there's no way I can afford to make that kind of payment, I'm back to being a prisoner."

Jack grinned again. "I just want us to understand each other. You know, a council member once told me you were dangerous because you could be motivated by money. I'm not sure that's the complete picture, but it's part of it. You'll take some risks to get ahead financially, but you worry about your own skin a little more than the usual thief or pirate. You might even give up that new scout if you thought you were in real danger, so let me put that to rest. You're not in danger here as long as you play by the rules."

Rath wanted to ask what these new set of rules entailed, but he focused more on the coordinator's interpretation of his personality traits. "Is that how you see me? Worried enough about my own safety that I might just cut and run? Is that supposed to be an insult, am I supposed to be offended?"

"No, not at all. I think you understand what I'm saying because I think you have me pegged as well. Being a coordinator is perfect for me, although manipulator may be a better term. I size up the situation, just like you. I just do it quicker. I'm not boasting. I have to do it fast. I can't afford the luxury of care. I've got to pull people together, hundreds of people, people with different agendas. I have to deal with that on a daily basis. I miss things, make judgments a little too quickly, but usually it works out. You, you do the same thing. You watch. You analyze. You put things in proper order and then move. And that's why I just want you to understand the situation before you make any bad decisions."

"And just what is the situation. No more bull. Why do you want to keep me here? It doesn't add up."

Jack looked the scout dead in the eyes. "I guess it's just fitting that the first human to land on Fenrir witness the destruction of the planet."

#

Dr. Sinclair's voice trailed off with monotone acceptance of her own fate. She would be replaced as head of this council. She would be forced into retirement and ordered into seclusion by Regency Govern. There would be no further study, no book deals, no galactic tours, and absolutely no lecture circuit.

"The General Council of Regency Govern has taken this out of our hands. At the Authority's urging, the Fenrite experiment will be concluded without further risk to Regency or its population. All Fenrite colonies will be destroyed by nuclear devises launched by melee combat ships. All remaining research technicians will be recalled from the system and debriefed upon completion of Fenrite termination. The system is off limits to all new arrivals and will be secured by the Authority. All scientific scans are to cease, and there is to be no follow-up explorations of the planet or the system.

"All documentation of this experiment will be destroyed. All council members are ordered to hand over all personal notes and diaries. All future discussion of this is restricted. Any council member attempting to disseminate information of this topic will be prosecuted by the Authority for treason.

"This council will continue its research, but all references to Fenrir will be classified."

Dr. Sinclair held her head up. She looked defiantly into the circle of those gathered around her. "I have no regrets. We have accomplished exactly what I had intended. The belief that alien life exists has been retained and this council shall continue its studies. We shall eventually find what it is we are all looking for. I hope that I am remembered when that day arrives. I now officially retire."

#

Rath forgot who he was talking to. He allowed his emotion and confusion to seep into his response. He spoke a little too quickly and a little too heatedly.

"Destruction?!"

"That's right," Jack answered coolly. "It seems the Fenrites are more advanced than we previously thought. Some have speculated that they kept their most advanced weaponry hidden in underground research labs. There's plenty of reasons for that. It seems the Fenrites are an aggressive being, and there are many different warring factions on the planet." He spoke this lie without a hint of anxiety. His voice level, his expression constant. "Sabotage, espionage, even all out open warfare would explain why the Fenrites would hide their weapon stores. They're not hiding them from us. They don't even

know we exist. They're hiding them from each other. In fact, war appears to be their sole motivation. That's why their population lives in the huts that we saw while their armies have nuclear weapon capability. Powerful enough to destroy every living thing on the surface. And they appear to be ready to do just that."

Rath just stared. He remembered the only time he saw the Fenrites. The small village of ramshackle shelters. How could they have nuclear weapons? Jack's words seemed to answer this question, but only in the vaguest terms.

Jack continued the deception, but spoke with such sincerity it sounded as if he had true empathy for the average Fenrite, as if he wanted to do something to help. "It's a paradox really. When we found them, we thought they were pre-industrial, and in some ways they still are. The general Fenrite population is nothing but a group of peasants. Nothing is done for their benefit. The primary objective is war. Maybe that's why large sections of their planet remain barren wastelands, large skirmishes with weapons will do that. And they have advanced to a point where they can manufacture weapons, powerful weapons."

"But nuclear weapons, that doesn't..."

Jack cut him off. "Don't make the same mistake many of the researchers made. They wouldn't believe it, either. It forced them to ignore the facts. They kept trying to tie the Fenrites with our own history, but it seems they didn't progress like we did on earth. We tried to define them in terms similar to our own. That was the mistake. As far as societal development goes, they're near the dark ages; peasants, farmers, the like. But on a military scale, that's where they dedicated their energy. That's the paradox I was talking about. In terms of earth history, they're a fifteenth century society with late twentieth century weaponry. I don't know how to explain it, but like I said, they're not like us."

Jack paused, nodded his head as if just remembering something. He slowly pulled satellite reconnaissance pictures from his flexible case. "Here. If you don't believe me, take a look at these."

The pictures waited patiently for Rath's grasp. They did not shake even the slightest in the coordinator's hand. As Rath flipped through them, they hid their own deception, lies of doctored images and professed untruths about the surface of Fenrir.

"Missile Silos," Jack stated.

"I see them." Rath eyed the photos, but ultimately failed to understand what they had to do with him. This discussion was supposed to be about why Jack wanted him to stay. It wasn't. It was about the Fenrites, and he failed to make a connection as to why he was being asked to remain.

"So they've got nuclear weapons, so what?"

"So they're about to use them," Jack stated coldly. "Over the past few weeks, we've monitored increased hostility. It all seems to be coming to a head. Two Fenrir days ago, conventional weapons were pulled back but with no

indication of any peace accord among the Fenrite factions. Not a good sign. We anticipate all out nuclear exchange planet side in less than one full Fenrir day."

Rath grunted. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear. That's the Fenrites' problem. What does this have to do with me?"

"We want you here as a witness."

"Witness nuclear war?" Rath blurted out. "What the hell for?"

"For many reasons, but mostly to protect the integrity of Regency Govern and the Authority."

"Me? That doesn't make any sense. I'm the pirate, remember? I'm the one who's motivated by money. That's what one of your council cronies said. And what did you say? I was worried about protecting my own skin. How can I protect the Authority?!"

"We were cutting through the bull." Jack's features froze into a stern demeanor. "That's what you wanted. And what did I call myself? A manipulator. I have to bring everyone together. So look at this from a political stand point. We've found alien life. In response, we secured the system with the Authority. Unfortunately, that decision may come back to haunt us. If Fenrir is turned back to a desolate and lifeless wasteland, what do you think people are going to wonder about? They're not going to believe the Fenrites blew themselves up. We can tell people about the warring nature of the Fenrites, but we don't have any real proof. The general public may blame the Authority. So we need a witness, just in case. You're the only one around, so you just got elected."

"And that's that." Rath grimaced, nearly spit on the floor.

"No, that's not that." Jack feigned anger. "Hopefully, you're not going to witness anything. Hopefully, Fenrir will still be here tomorrow, next week and next month. We want to stop this. We don't want to interfere; it's really not our place. We don't even know how our plans are going to affect the Fenrites, but we just can't let them destroy themselves."

7. Shot Down

The pilots hit the bays first. Rath watched them file by as he was ushered, rather vigorously, to a waiting area. The military pilots ignored him, ignored everything, moved with the same calculated precision that carried them through their daily duties. Give them an order and they carry it out with precision.

Rath wondered if this was how they approached other battles. Then, he wondered what other battles they might have faced. *Crushing pirate activity probably.* But what pirate force would even consider engaging twelve full groups of melee class ships; small maneuverable vessels capable of high pursuit, capable of tracing the path of lightning across a desert sky? Pirates didn't have mobile observation stations or carriers. A force of this many melees would make short work of even an advanced cruiser.

He didn't get to see them launch. The pads remained off-limits to him as long as the melees were docked. Security officers escorted him to a secondary command post while the pilots scrambled. Here, all monitors remained secured, all scanners shut down. The silence swallowed him.

Jack entered, but barely acknowledged the scout. He perused his own portable before making a blunt statement.

"Time to go."

It was the last thing Jack said while they remained on the station. He led Rath to the freight bay.

Rath saw his new scout. The Authority had moved it off the main pads, probably to facilitate the melees. They passed it without acknowledgment.

Jack rounded a few more pads before he embarked upon a small escort. No guns on this ship. No scanners and hardly any armor. Basically a deep space shuttle made for generals to move from one flag ship to another, to view the expanse of space through the wide bubble-like viewshields both overhead and forward.

Two Authority flight officers waited in the cockpit. Rath wasn't even going to fly. He was exactly what Jack said he was going to be, a witness, and nothing more.

One flight officer turned, said nothing, but watched the coordinator intently. When Jack nodded, he mouthed something into his headset and initiated takeoff.

The small ship glided into space. The view was staggering. It was like being in a glass bubble propelled through the void. The system's sun blazed like a giant ball of fire, the stars in the opposite direction melded together like a long, dotted streak of bright white chalk dust. The planet Fenrir loomed in the

forward viewshield. It appeared much like Rath remembered on his very first scout. Large sections of blue signified the vast oceans of water. Brown and yellow divided the deep aqua, indicated the existence of land. Fluffy white clouds flowed around the sphere like aimless ghosts looking for a place to land. In many ways, it appeared just like earth. And streaking toward this planet were tiny flashes of bright orange.

The melees darted through space in full group formation. As if guided by the same hand, they penetrated the atmosphere en masse. Most of the propulsion tails were lost in the clouds, but a few remained visible.

One flight officer turned back to the coordinator. "We've reached watch point alpha, sir. Speed and course locked in with planet rotation."

"Fine, fine." Jack studied his portable as the flight officer turned his attention back to the pilot controls.

Fenrir continued to fill the front viewshield. A massive portion of its largest continent held the center. As the transport moved with the spin of the planet, it looked as if the planet was frozen, suspended in space with no rotation. Only the upper atmosphere clouds appeared to move.

Rath watched intently, searching for signs of the melees. He noted a few propulsion signatures darting to the poles.

"I think they broke formation," the scout announced.

Jack was rather apathetic. "Of course they have. They're breaking into a pattern of full coverage of the planet. If they're going to shoot down those missiles, they'll have to be placed in perfect intercept position, and there's still no guarantee this is going to work."

"How long we will have to wait?"

"I doubt very long. We identified coded messages emanating from the planet that contain launch code characteristics, and we observed several birds being fueled in their nests. Estimation is that missiles with nuclear warheads will leave their silos within the next few minutes."

A flight officer interrupted. "Melee wing leaders have signaled position ready. Command has ordered standby."

"Will we get to hear them, too?" Rath wondered aloud.

"Of course not," Jack grunted, as if the question was not worthy of his response. "They're on a secure channel."

"Then what should I be watching for?"

"Flashes of light," Jack replied without looking up from his portable.

#

Dr. Sinclair could do nothing but wait, wait for the courier ship to deliver the sealed report from Jack Lasonelli. Regency allowed her that. Jack would simply note that the experiment was closed successfully. After that, she could retire into the abyss of concealment and isolation.

That's all that what waited for her, and little else. They would let her subscribe to scientific journals, even keep up with the work of the council she just resigned, but it would be a one way relationship. She could not add her own input, offer her own suggestions, or even contact some of her close friends that remained on the council. She would no longer be a scientist; she would barely be an outside observer.

She wondered how many Authority moles would watch her, to make sure she kept out of sight and out of mind of Regency's general population. She wondered what their orders would be if she decided to start writing her memoirs on planetary coms. They'd probably execute her before she could hit the send order.

She shook her head as she cursed a few of the more inept scientists that remained on the council, people she placed the majority of the blame upon. All they had to do was make a few genetic alterations. The general public was not all that bright. There was no need to get fancy. But the geneticists that created the Fenrite species had lauded their creativity, boasted that no one would ever discern from study that the Fenrites were an earth-born species altered to appear alien.

A lot of good that did. In a day or two standard, there wasn't going to be a Fenrite left to study. The planet was going to be washed clean by a nuclear bath. And why? Because the same idiot geneticists couldn't determine why the so-called "alien" was advancing so quickly.

But they didn't get the blame. They were still left to research, to study the remains of her experiment, and to determine why it ultimately failed.

#

Like angry bees swarming free from a nest under attack, the melees set upon Fenrir's atmosphere. These tiny ships zipped across the sky in pre-coordinated attack patterns. They broke from groups into sections and finally into wings as they covered the four large continents of the planet and targeted each major colony.

Only half of the vessels were armed, Spearhead missiles with megaton nuclear payloads, but more than enough to do the job. Detonation of a mere quarter would leave Fenrir a radiated wasteland.

The other half were needed to carry out the deception for the long range scanners. Melees responsible for simulating the signature of ground based nuclear weapons dove deep toward the surface. They took to the tops of the ever-expanding Fenrite colonies, not caring that the aliens would be able to clearly witness their vessels. They hovered over target areas like tiny clouds, harbingers for the fury of nuclear storm.

#

The Fenrites did not scramble for shelter as they did the first time a space craft entered their sight. Those that had witnessed Rath's scout and other Regency vessels conveyed the existence of such space ships across the planet. Fenrites stood ready to observe and to learn.

Though the number of craft left them somewhat uneasy, most Fenrites surveyed the hovering invaders with great interest. They took detailed notes of hull and exterior engine design. Many used their own imaging devices to capture even greater information. A discriminating eye was put to seizing the differences between these flying crafts and the science vessels that previously graced their atmosphere. Every scrap of information was absorbed.

#

Melee pilots ignored the reactions of the Fenrites. In mere minutes, the "alien" would cease to be. Over secured channels, the wing colonels issued their readiness.

#

The Station General with nuclear clearance stood firm at the main bridge of the Planning Station. As the lead officer upon this interstellar station, his supremacy of command went unquestioned. And with such military power on standby, the Authority didn't have just the final say, it had the *only* say. There was no regulation or even courtesy warranted to advise the coordinator. There was no overlap in jurisdiction. No other council, except for Regency Govern, could change his orders, and Govern had already made their intentions quite clear.

Still, General Hollins knew the history of this experiment, knew its origin. He wasn't about to allow the Authority to take it in the rear for erasing the indiscretions of these misguided eggheads. If there was going to be an order to fire such ordinance, it would come not from him, but from the liaison of research and exploratory councils.

He remained in direct communication with Council Coordinator Lasonelli as he issued a coded message directly to the coordinator's portable. The directive was nearly innocent in its simplicity.

"Melees in position. Station scanners set. Sequence to initiate on your acknowledgment."

#

Jack decoded the message in his mind, making no record of the directive. Unflinchingly, he typed one word.

"Acknowledged."

He hit the send order, knowing that this simple keystroke meant the end of the Fenrites.

#

Orders to proceed spread to the melees through the secured web of ship-to-ship communications. There was no hesitation among the pilots. They expected the order, welcomed it. The melees hovering thirty meters over Fenrir's surface fired first.

Elongated flares rose upward into the sky, sailed into the ionosphere and hung suspended like sparklers in the hands of God. Tails of fire crossed the atmosphere, a light show captured by the Authority's scanners and observation cameras. Ops at the station's monitors immediately stamped the records and placed them into secured databanks, but they did not list the objects as simple flares. They attributed each blip to an airborne missile fired from Fenrir launch sites.

#

Rath looked back and forth from the front viewshield to the coordinator. He couldn't ignore the flashes of light cutting through the white clouds, but Jack's stern face held a message of its own.

The coordinator said nothing. His concentration remained almost completely fixed upon his portable, though he allowed himself a few quick glances at the planet when the flares reached mid-flight.

The flight officers in the cockpit said nothing and Rath felt the silence add to the tension. He asked a question more to break the quiet than out of curiosity. In truth, he already knew the answer.

"Are those nuclear missiles?"

Jack spoke as if identifying a body in a morgue.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Are you getting reports on your portable?"

"Yes."

"Well, how many were fired?"

"Too many," Jack responded somberly. He shook his head softly and returned his attention totally to the coded messages flashing across his small terminal. He didn't look at Rath again, he didn't need to. The scout had seen exactly what he had wanted him to.

#

After firing their flares, the hovering melees darted back into space. Only those ships armed with nuclear-laced Spearheads remained within Fenrir's atmosphere. As the elongated flares began their descent, the melees launched

all Spearheads. The missiles assumed a flight pattern accompanying the falling flares, moving besides them like burly bodyguards with malevolent intentions.

Never before had the Authority utilized so much fire power. The cooperative guidance system targeted every inch of Fenrir's surface, not just the main colonies. The impact, the force of detonation, the fallout; every angle of devastation was calculated to carry out full coverage. Not a single living organism would survive the assault. There would be nothing left but the original rock, and even a good deal of that would be blasted away. That was, at least, the intended result. Anyone studying the Fenrites to this point should have expected the surprise.

#

An Authority scanning technician observed the first firing. He called his finding immediately to the Station General.

"Sir, I read a planet based launch. Another one. Sir, several launches have just been identified, all from surface based sites."

The general stood like an ice statue.

A post major stepped briskly to the technicians' station, he replied after one quick glance.

"Confirmed." He looked to the other techs. "All ops report."

They answered in quick succession.

"Launches detected."

"Several airborne objects on scanners."

"Reading missiles in the air."

General Hollins remained emotionless. He stepped over to the scanning station. "Am I to understand the Fenrites have fired missiles?"

The major replied almost curtly. "No other explanation, sir."

The general growled. "I'm not even sure that's an explanation I can accept, major. What are they targeting?"

"The Spearheads, sir."

A dozen questions and a hundred curses rushed to the general's lips, but he stifled them all. It remained his charge to always consider the safety of the station and its crew. And this was what drove his simple response.

"Recall all melees. Dock them and have them refueled."

#

Jack rubbed his forehead as he reread the coded message.

He cursed to himself silently. Unexpected, but not a true surprise. They waited too long, and the Fenrites were moving so fast, unbelievably fast.

He closed his portable as he stared directly at the planet.

#

The Fenrites waited, much like the humans waited, but their whole world hung in the balance, their very existence. They stood in their homes, or gathered in colony centers. A sense of trepidation prevailed across the entire planet, but they did not simply accept their fate. They would fight to survive and their hope rested in the form of radar-guided and heat-seeking defense missiles with high charge explosives. They created these missiles almost out of instinct, a desire to protect their land from the metal birds which seemed to stalk them.

It was the use of the flares that saved them. The humans were so intent on creating the illusion that the Fenrites destroyed themselves, they composed the very circumstances which made the interceptor missiles so effective. The flares, used to make it appear as if the Fenrites fired nuclear missiles, attracted the Fenrites' countermeasures. The Spearheads rode a path right beside these flares, and the flames attracted the heat-seeking defenses of the Fenrites like sugar attracts ants. The radar-guided missiles were less effective, but even they managed to take out more than their share of Spearheads. In the end, only two melee-launched Spearheads reached their targets. For the Fenrites, one was too many.

Their planet was saved, they would survive, but one highly populated colony center and a smaller manufacturing center suffered devastation to the point of total eradication. The destruction captured the fear of every inhabitant and no Fenrite could ever ignore or forget what happened on that day. Word spread among the global community, word of the tragedy. Fenrites had died at the hand of a hostile, outward foe, and the entire planet felt the loss.

When night fell upon each city, town and village, they looked to the stars, not with hope or joy, but with disdain, and they cursed the existence of this enemy to their world.

#

Two recorded detonations, that was all. One must have occurred on the other side of the planet for Jack only saw one bright flash synonymous with nuclear discharge. He waited for long minutes, but no further explosions occurred within his sight. The rest of the Spearheads were destroyed when the Fenrite missiles burst against the flares. The conventional charge was great enough to destroy the arming and detonating circuitry within the Spearheads. The missiles fell to the ground like rigid, toothless snakes; no true danger to the Fenrites but an opportunity for them to learn even more.

Rath witnessed the flash, but he anticipated more. He expected the planet to burn with fire. It did not.

He had seen the melees regroup in space and return to the station. He could only conclude that they had accomplished their mission.

He turned to Jack with enthusiasm, enthusiasm unshared by the coordinator. The scout could not understand the look of confusion, the beads of sweat on Jack's forehead.

"I only saw one. They stopped the rest, didn't they?"

Jack didn't answer.

"The melees were recalled," Rath persisted. "They did it! The crisis is over."

Jack curled his bottom lip. He was not ready to deal with the scout; he wasn't ready to deal with any of this.

"Keep quiet!" he ordered.

Rath recoiled. He sat silent, but he began to watch the coordinator intently, followed Jack's eyes as they perused coded lines on his portable.

Jack heaved a heavy breath. He wasn't use to this. He had lost control, and he had no answers. He stood from his seat and moved to the cockpit. He whispered something into the flight officer's ear.

Rath struggled to hear, but could not catch a single word. Still, the coordinator's movements spoke volumes.

Jack returned to his seat and his eyes fell heavily upon the scout.

Rath met his glance with an expression of anticipation.

"Obviously, things have not gone as expected," Jack began.

"Right now, nothing's obvious to me," the scout pressed.

Jack swallowed hard and his tone revealed exasperation. "I guess that's somewhat true. But you do know what we were trying to do here, trying to stop nuclear war."

"You didn't?"

"No! You saw the flash. What did you think that was? A fire cracker?"

"I also saw the melees leave. That means it's over. And I only saw one explosion on the planet."

"There were two. Another one on the other side of the planet."

"I thought you were worried about the whole planet."

"We are! We wanted to stop them all."

For the first time, Jack sounded less than convincing. His eyes and expression betrayed a larger sense of concern, a deeper problem, and Rath found reason to doubt the coordinator's honesty. To the scout, it finally appeared as if Jack was sorry the planet was still there.

Jack regrouped the best he could. "Look, the detonation of one nuclear device on a planet has huge consequences. These Fenrites are warmongers. Now that one has been fired, they'll fire more. They won't be happy until they destroy the whole planet."

It didn't sound valid, not by a long shot. Rath knew a little about earth's own history, and professed as much as he offered his own considerations. "We used an atomic bomb on earth. People died, it was horrible, and we learned from it. We didn't blow up the earth."

Jack cringed. Too many factors gnawed at his worries, too many pitfalls opened before him. Rath wasn't supposed to see this; he was supposed to see the eradication of Fenrir. The deception was falling apart and he fought desperately to bring it back under his control. "How many times do I have to tell you? This isn't earth and the Fenrites aren't like us. We can't say what they might do, how they might react. It's a whole new ball game."

Rath decided to say little more. He allowed Jack to take the lead. "Fine, what now?"

"I've made an adjustment to our flight orders. We're going planet side. We have to estimate the damage at the two strike sites."

Rath couldn't believe the order. "In this ship? What are you crazy? This is a space shuttle, a ship-to-ship transport. You don't recon in something like this."

"We're here, so we're going in," Jack stated with finality.

"Are you nuts?! Send a melee in there for recon. They're better outfitted for this."

The coordinator exploded. "Melees are under Authority jurisdiction. This ship is under my orders."

"Yeah, but I'm not!" Rath shouted back.

"Then get out."

"Very funny, asshole."

Jack raised the index finger of his right hand, but said nothing further. He called an order to the flight officer piloting the craft.

"Bring us in."

Rath gritted his teeth. He thought atmospheric entry was bad in his scout. This time, he nearly passed out. Even when the transport finally reached a safe flying altitude within Fenrir's atmosphere, his stomach turned over and over. The large bubbles for viewing space buried Rath in a sensation of free falling through the bright blue sky.

Jack ignored him. "Bring us to the second explosion site. I want full camera surveillance. Record everything."

The pilots said nothing. They simply followed the orders. They were Authority officers but they were placed under the coordinator's charge. They reacted as if Jack was nothing less than the Station General.

The transport streaked across the sky, from light into darkness, and back into the edges of an orange sunrise. The first light of dawn skimmed the edges of scorched ground as the vessel reached maximum viewing distance of the second detonation site.

The damage was staggering. Twenty square kilometers were nothing but dust and ash. Not a single structure remained within this radius. Further out, a few blackened poles spiked themselves into the ground, the only remnants of a flattened Fenrite city. Around the rim of the detonation crater, burnt debris formed a gray circular border lifted two or three meters up from the now leveled surface. All life was absent. Staggering levels of heat flushed out from the core, still flaring across the countryside like storms of fire.

Jack looked upon the devastation with a cold grimace. He said nothing about the destruction. Instead, he ordered a reconnaissance just beyond the edge of desolation.

The transport pitched in the turbulence, wavered within the folds of hot winds. The pilot brought the ship up to escape the rough air.

As the transport settled into calmer winds, Jack stepped from side to side of the ship. He looked across the landscape, judging the damage with a warlord's eye.

He gauged the estimated casualties as a mark of lost production capacity. He did the same with the hollowed out factories on the far edges of pure desolation. He wanted the pure elimination of the Fenrites, that he did not get, but here was a staggering blow to their burgeoning population and industrial output. This would certainly serve as a setback for the Fenrites, but would it slow them down?

He doubted it. They kept surpassing every estimate of advancement based on their limited population and supposedly stretched intelligence. Why not another surprise? They'd probably rebuild this colony in the wink of an eye. In truth, he couldn't guess what they might accomplish.

"Take us to the first detonation point. I want..."

The flight officer stopped listening to the coordinator as his attention fixed fully on a transmission threw his headset. When the pilot spoke, it was without regard to Jack's order.

"Station Control is advising us of a missile launch in our area. We have been targeted."

Rath tensed at the warning, braced himself within his seat. He looked to Jack with burning anger. "You idiot. I told you we shouldn't have gone in."

"Shut up!"

Jack seethed, but more, he appeared surprised, as if this was unthinkable.

Rath saw the astonishment, but he didn't understand it. If the Fenrites were capable of launching such powerful nuclear missiles, then certainly they would have the ability to fire missiles at aircraft.

"Do you have a fix on the missile?" Jack demanded of the pilot.

The officer was nothing less than curt. "Sit down, strap yourself in, and be quiet."

Rath almost laughed, but he was too scared. He clenched his fists together as the transport went vertical. He could feel the pressure growing on his chest, pressing against his ribs, forcing the air out from his lungs. He jammed his eyes shut, but his head still felt as if it was about to explode.

Transports of this class didn't have Boscon Props. They were designed primarily for limited space flight, and the engines fought desperately to break free from Fenrir's gravity; twentieth century rockets reached escape velocity with greater efficiency. Still in vertical climb, the transport pitched right at the pilot's command. Through the clear bubble overhead, Rath saw a lance with an orange tale skid meters past the hull.

He heard the pilot curse and he understood. The evasive action caused a serious reduction in climbing speed. The pilot would have to level off, even dive to generate velocity before returning to a vertical climb.

Rath could still see the orange glow of the Fenrite anti-aircraft missile. It did not follow. It had lost its guidance and burned out in the upper atmosphere.

Lights dazzled before his eyes as the ship broke downward. With a sudden lurch, it reverted to a vertical climb. Rath passed out for a few seconds.

As he regained consciousness, he felt the ship rattling uncontrollably, no longer in a pitched climb. They were descending, fairly angled, but definitely going down.

He struggled to look out the forward viewshield, but he could not shake his vision into focus. He felt queasy and almost passed out again. He shut his eyes, bent forward as far as his straps would allow, and took several deep breaths.

With clear sight slowly coming back to him, he looked to Jack. The coordinator frantically dismantled his portable, yanking wires and crushing chips under his boot.

Rath didn't take the time to ask. The horizon finally appeared in the forward view shield. They were about to land, or crash.

8. Safety

It was a rough ride - an unsteady descent, a hard touchdown, and a bone jarring stop - but the Authority pilot landed the transport safely upon the flattened rock of the nearest desert, away from any Fenrite colonies.

When the transport came to a halt, Rath unhitched his strap, ignored the coordinator and moved directly to the two Authority flight officers in the cockpit. He spoke with clear respect.

"I'm a civilian, you guys are in charge. What do we do?"

The pilot repaid the scout's deferment with honesty. "I've transmitted for an emergency pickup. I've already received acknowledgment from Station Control. Two meeles are on the way to pick us up. We evacuate the ship and move a half kilometer west of this transport, wait for the meeles to land, and we get out of here."

Rath shot a glance to the coordinator, making it clear he was going to follow these instructions and to hell with anything Jack might say. He moved aside to let the flight officers get to the escape hatch, and followed without further question.

Jack grimaced, but exited the transport in good order.

The four men jogged quickly across the barren rock. The two flight officers unholstered side arms. One took the lead, the other followed in the rear.

As Rath looked over his shoulder and back upon the transport, he couldn't ignore the blackened damage to the starboard rear panel. The hull was shredded. He could only wonder how close the hit came to a full breach. He was glad he didn't know about this until now, when they were already on the ground. With that much damage to a vessel that was not truly designed for atmospheric flight, landing safely was like a winning the lottery - the big one, the Intergalactic pot.

"Damn good pilot," he whispered to himself.

They moved in a zigzagging pattern, not taking anything for granted. The lead flight officer monitored a small emergency device that served two purposes. It discharged an emergency tracking signal just as it mapped the terrain with a flow of radar. When he led them to a point exactly one half a kilometer west of the downed transport, he took a position behind a cluster of rocks.

Rath stayed low but looked to the pilot. "What happened up there? I passed out when you went into dive to regain escape velocity. I can see the damage to the hull. What hit us?"

The pilot answered honestly, albeit briefly, respecting Rath more as a fellow than as a civilian. "Couldn't avoid a second missile. Ship wasn't made for those kind of maneuvers. Lucky we didn't get blown out of the sky."

Obviously, Jack didn't like the open discussion. "No more talk."

Rath spoke clearly. "Jerk."

The pilot just smiled. The transport was down and they were in an emergency situation. The coordinator was no longer in charge.

"In this situation, verbal communications may be crucial to survival," the pilot said firmly

The other flight officer monitored his own portable. Motion detectors revealed more bad news. "We got company. Ground based, on foot. North, northwest. Less than five kilometers, but there's got to be close to fifty of them."

The pilot gritted his teeth as he checked the time lapse from his first transmitted distress signal. "Confirm your detection with Station Control; get an exact fix on the position."

"Link with control established. Detection confirmed. They're exactly where I said they were."

"Fenrites?" Rath questioned aloud, but he answered himself. "Dumb question. Who else can it be?"

The Authority pilot wanted more information. "Maintain that link with Control. What's the status on our evac?"

The second flight officer offered a statement of acknowledgment. "Melees in flight for pick up. E.T.A. 3 minutes standard."

"Good, they'll get here first, but those Fenrites are going to be a little too close." The Authority officer looked over the fairly level surface of the desert. There were a few other rock formations for cover, but little else. "Let's persuade them to pull back."

He set his sidearm for anti-personnel, raised it, and prepared to fire a timed-charge projectile densely packed with razor blades.

"Do not fire that weapon!" Jack ordered fiercely.

Years of obeying orders brought pause to the pilot, but the very situation created a willingness to proceed. He glared at the coordinator, who repeated himself.

"Do not fire that weapon. You may think you don't have to follow my orders anymore, and that may or may not be true. But if you fire that weapon, I'll see you court-martialed."

The pilot knew the situation, knew that leaving enemies so close to an evac zone was against all recognized procedures, but he also understood the pull of this man, and he lowered his weapon.

Rath could not believe his eyes. "Give me the damn gun. I'll fire it."

Jack still looked upon the Authority officer. "Holster your weapon."

The pilot cursed aloud, but holstered his weapon.

"What?!" Rath groaned. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

A distant rumble flowed through the air, and the second flight officer offered an explanation. "Melees are coming in fast. They're not risking being targeted. They're not going to slow for a vertical landing. They've already marked a runway. It's right between us and the shuttle. We should be out of here in less than one minute. Looks like we caught a break."

The pilot spotted the two vessels coming in low from the southeast. "Cover your ears."

Rath didn't ask questions, he just did it. He never saw anything like it. The melees came in like lightning, and he thought they were going to kamikaze right into the desert ground, but they put down smooth and used their Boscon Props to halt their phenomenal velocity. Still, before the props kicked in, the melees exceeded the speed of sound, and a sonic boom nearly knocked Rath to his back.

The Authority pilot removed his hands from his ears and flashed a grin to Rath. "Some cool landing, huh? Let's go."

They took off into a full run, but as they got near the two landed melees, Jack issued one last order. He pointed to Rath as he screamed at the pilot. "Take this man on that melee and return directly to the station."

Rath didn't care. He wanted away from this lunatic. The flight officers were also more than happy to cooperate. The three men ran away from Jack as if they just discovered he had leprosy. They leapt into the closest melee and signaled all clear. The melee took off with the same speed it landed. Boscon props exerted excruciating force as the vessel screamed forward in a runway take off. In a mere instant, the small craft flashed toward the upper atmosphere.

Jack moved alone to the second melee. He jumped through the hatch and ordered immediate takeoff but to remain within weapons range of the downed transport.

A Section Colonel sat in the pilots chair and did not respond to the coordinator's orders. He guided the melee to emergency evak, but once in the air, he remained in formation with the first melee. As the melee headed toward atmospheric escape, the coordinator was far from pleased.

"Didn't you hear me, colonel," Jack growled.

The gray haired officer aired his own understanding in a very matter-of-fact tone. "I don't see any stars on your collar. I take orders from my group commander and the Station General. That's about it."

"Give me that damn headset, colonel."

Jack did not wait for a reply. He ripped the apparatus off the officer's head and yelled into the transmitter, knowing full well that the message would reach the Station General's command post.

"General Hollins, this is Lasonelli. I want that downed transport disintegrated. Do you understand me? Order this idiot to return to the landing site and destroy that ship with enough firepower so that not a trace remains."

He did not wait for a response. He handed the set back to the colonel and watched with impatience.

The colonel moved slowly, deliberately. He carefully wiped the headset with his hands and placed it gently upon his head. After listening to a reply, he sighed heavily.

Jack would not leave well enough alone. "I got another news brief for you colonel. You just lost your wings."

The colonel put a heavy hand to the flight controls and the melee pitched suddenly. The quick lurch set Jack sprawling to the floor.

"Just following orders, sir," the colonel responded in a similar monotone voice. "Expediting our return to the landing site."

The colonel made no further theatrics with the rest of his actions. With deft precision, he speared the melee downward through the sky and back to the position of the abandoned transport. He quickly targeted the downed vessel with two Slagman torpedoes.

Slagmans were designed more for space combat than for planetary battle. Their shape and propulsion source were contrived for a windless, zero-gravity environment. The colonel had other choices as the vessel was battle-ready and equipped to offer powerful responses to most any threat. As well as Slagmans, the melee carried Hawk and Javelin missiles, more appropriate weaponry for firing within a planet's atmosphere, but Slagmans carried the punch to cripple a star carrier. Even a near miss would do the job.

The colonel fired. A short rumble acknowledged that the torpedoes were away, and the melee began a quick ascent.

Slivers of lasers maintained communication links between the melee target computer and the guidance system of the Slagmans. The colonel watched his weapons board as the ordnance continued its downward trek to the desert floor. The torpedoes fought against the wind currents to keep their target, they wavered and grumbled through their flight, but they both found their mark.

The colonel radioed his observations back to Station Command. "Detonation confirmed, target destroyed."

Jack was not as quick with an assumption. "I want a fly-by confirmation, colonel. I want to see for myself."

"We're ordered back to..."

"Do you want to be court-martialed as well as grounded? I didn't think so. Take us down." Jack took a quick seat before the colonel could maneuver the ship out from under him again.

"Son of..." the colonel broke off.

The melee soared in at high velocity, the colonel was well aware of the Fenrites defenses which knocked out the transport as well as the nuclear missiles. The melee was far more maneuverable and much faster than both, and he intended to use this advantage. Once near the surface, he approached at a skimming altitude, low enough to avoid Fenrite targeting radar. He brought

the nose of the melee directly toward the landing site of the downed transport. Nothing was left but two large craters. Probably every circuit of the transport was annihilated into single atoms.

"Visual attainment of target," the colonel remarked more to his headset than to his passenger, but he spoke loud enough for Jack to hear. "Target destroyed."

Jack stretched his neck to look over the colonel's shoulder and see for himself. "Return us to the station, and tell them to have a new portable ready for me when we land."

The colonel gritted his teeth, but forwarded the request before he landed.

#

The Fenrites that had been closing in on the downed ship were knocked over by the earlier sonic boom of the landing melees which evacuated Rath and Jack. After that, they proceeded with caution. They still hoped to inspect the abandoned craft, to learn more of its secrets, but they now knew of the terrible destructive power of the enemy. They would not simply rush towards the craft, no matter how many secrets it held. Such discretion saved their lives.

When they heard the melee return, they moved away from the transport with heady fear. They weren't certain if they could avoid oblivion, surely no Fenrite in the nuclear destroyed city eluded vaporization. Still, they ran with the desire for self preservation. They dove to nearby cover and they witnessed more of the humans' destructive power from behind heavy rocks.

The Slagmans were unmistakable in appearance, fighting the air currents and wafting through the air like uneven spears. The Fenrites swallowed fear as they witnessed the torpedoes turning the transport into dust. A few suffered sight disorientation and flash burns from the bright explosion, and others took some small cuts and bruises from flying debris, but none were injured seriously. No more Fenrites would die at the hands of the humans, at least not this day.

#

Jack nearly ripped the new portable out of the waiting supply officer's hands. He signed nothing, ignored everyone else around him. He moved like an angry bull directly to the Station General's command post.

Once in sight of the general, he paused. He put his full attention upon his portable, reconfiguring the security pass codes. He entered a few notes while shaking his head.

Finally, he looked up to the general.

General Hollins was none too pleased himself.

Jack didn't care. "Don't even think about giving me a lecture on Authority courtesy, general. I don't have the time. If you really have a bone to pick with

me, you have twenty minutes to write a report on my behavior. You can seal it and have an aide carry it as an escort with me back to Regency Govern, because that's where I'm going.

"As for now, I want several things. I want the fastest vessel you have ready for departure in those same twenty minutes. I also want you to recall all vessels and keep them docked in this station."

The general remarked with cold malice of his own. "Do you really think you can order me around on my own station?"

"No, I can't order you to do anything, but I'm making a request, a serious request. One way or the other I will meet with Regency Govern. They're going to hear what I have to say. And like I said, you can make your own complaint about me directly to them."

The general still spoke as if he maintained power over the conversation. "Fine. I've already recalled all melees. And you can bet your ass I'll be sending a protest to Govern on your behavior. I'm going to have both a ship and a messenger ready in fifteen minute I suggest you be ready because it's taking off and not waiting the extra five minutes for you."

"Whatever," Jack grunted. "And where's that damn scout, Scampion? I want him off this station and out of this system."

The general almost laughed, and he did not hide his amusement. "Hey, he's your problem. He was supposed to be off this station weeks ago. You were the one that kept him here."

"Good. Then, I'm giving him authority to takeoff and evacuate the system. As for any other unauthorized ships that enter this system, I suggest you destroy them immediately."

"Right kind of you to repeat orders I've had for over a month now. I think it's time you got off my bridge."

Jack just grunted, turned his back and stepped away from the general's post.

#

Rath had his gear in his hand as Jack entered his quarters.

"Dena vu, huh? Well, you can forget about ordering me to stay now, pal. I'm gone."

"Damn right you're gone," Jack snarled. "You have ten minutes."

"I only need two, asshole. I know where my ship is, and I'm on my way."

Jack held up a hand. "Just one thing I want you to take with you. You don't talk about what happened here to anyone. We've got a mess on our hands and if you start a panic with what you think you've seen here, we're going to come after you. Remember, while you've been here, you've been on the Authority's payroll and we have the records to prove it. That carries with it a great deal of responsibility. Leaking information will be considered treason and espionage.

You're no longer an independent, mister. So think about that before you go shooting your mouth off."

Rath pushed by the coordinator and headed to his ship. "I just want out."

9. Lies

The trip through space dissolved like sugar in the rain. Rath slept peacefully through most of it, and when he landed on the Janus freighter pads, he felt refreshed. The new stabilizers on Rath's scout made atmospheric entry nearly a pleasure. And it was good to see some familiar sights, good to be away from the tensions on the Authority Planning Station.

As if guided by a grudging sense of responsibility, Rath decided to make an immediate visit to Lar's warehouse. It had been a long time since the middleman left the Fenrir system to return to his business. Rath wondered how much Lar would hold against him, expected at the very least a cold response. He was thankful, as well as surprised, to see that Lar welcomed him first with astonishment and then with a huge smile.

"Rath?! I didn't think I'd ever see you again," the middleman offered the scout a hand. "You've been gone a long time. I mean a long time. I was wondering if they had put you away on some penal planet. I just couldn't believe they were going to forget you wanted to steal those emeralds."

"Who me?" Rath laughed. "I'm an honest scout, remember?"

"Yeah, how could I forget? So really, what have you been doing with yourself all this time?" Lar looked a bit sheepish but asked the question anyway. "Did you have some time to do?"

"No, no penal planet. I've just been working with the Authority. It was a good deal while it lasted so I thought I'd milk it for as long as possible."

Rath was relieved to receive the cordial greeting, but he couldn't hide a twinge of guilt. "Seriously now, I'm sorry I got you into all of that. I should've known better."

Lar waved it off. "Things happen. What am I supposed to do, cry about it?"

"Yeah, but you were gone a long time, too. Don't for a minute think I didn't know that when we were cooped up together. It meant lost business. Is there a way I can make it up?"

"They really must have paid you well." But Lar shook his head. "The Authority more than compensated me for the lost time. They probably gave me more than I would have made had I been operating all that time. They also gave me first crack at major contracts until I got back on my feet again. I didn't suffer. In fact I probably made more money these past few months than I ever have."

"But you wouldn't want to go through it again, right?" Rath asked laughingly.

"You got that right. Once was interesting, but once was enough."

Rath's eyes instinctively scanned the room. Though apparently alone, he still lowered his voice. He could still remember Jack's expression when the coordinator advised him to keep quiet. But this was Lar, who had seen the alien. He didn't see harm in revealing information to the middleman. In fact, he felt almost obligated. "Not as interesting as after you left. You should have seen some of the stuff out there, especially the last few days. I tell you..."

The middleman didn't let Rath continue. Lar's demeanor turned gray with dissent.

"I don't want you to tell me," Lar stated hard and fast. "I don't want to know anymore than I do. I don't want to start up anything new. And I don't need anything else bottled up inside of me. You have no idea how hard it's been not to be able to tell anybody about what we saw. Every time I'm about ready to slip, I remember what that Jack guy said about it being classified. I got a few reminders of that in the beginning and a few new ones just a few weeks ago. I don't need any other stories keeping me up at night."

Rath held up his hands as if surrendering. "You're right, you're right. I guess I just want to talk about it, too. But we're not supposed to, so I'll try to keep you from anymore trouble." He paused and reconsidered how he should put his next question. "I'm not asking you anything out of the ordinary if I want to know how much the public knows about this, am I?"

Lar frowned. "I guess not."

"Have you been checking the coms?"

"Every now and then, but I try not to do it anymore than the average curious Joe."

"What are they saying?"

"Normal stuff. Know-it-alls blathering on about nonsense they know nothing about. It's all guesses and made-up stories. Bottom line is that the Regency Bureau of Information distributed a notice that a possible finding has been made by one of the exploratory councils. They said in order to protect the integrity of the finding and to allow the councils to do their job; they are keeping most of the information classified. Of course the media immediately went up in arms."

"I guess they would. Were they able to force any more information out?"

"Actually, it seems they were. They forced a press conference with the head of the General Exploratory Council. In some heated exchanges, the council head admitted it was a finding of alien life."

There it was again. *Alien life*. The scout had seen the Fenrites up close. He had been on the Authority Station that scanned and surveyed every Fenrite activity. He had been shot down by the alien defenses. Still, the mention of alien life bothered him. The thought that something else existed on that planet before he landed pressed on his own reasoning. Something didn't fit, but it simply evaded him. Now, however, news of the Fenrites was apparently being spread across the Regency population.

"Then, I guess it's out," the scout capitulated. "We've got aliens. We're not alone. I guess everyone is talking about meeting these things, huh? The media's probably distributing pictures."

"Hardly. Regency Govern has determined that the alien organism has rights of its own, and these rights supersede the rights of the media. They want them protected and that's been a debate all in itself. The location is still classified, but you wouldn't believe how good some of these hackers are. With all the Authority activity going on all over the galaxy, they've actually narrowed it down to three possible systems."

"Do they have the right one?"

"Yup."

"Then, someone's going to try and break in."

"Apparently a few already have, but it hasn't helped narrowed down the possibilities. There's a record of a pilot captured in all three systems, and in each case the pilot has been held by the Authority on charges of conspiracy. No one's been able to get in, make a scan, and get out, so no one other than the Authority and the councils no which system it is."

"Except for us," Rath added.

Lar didn't appear thrilled with that thought. "Yeah, except for us. That's why I don't like talking about it."

"Don't worry too much. If there's this much pressure on the council to release information, I'm sure what we know will be general knowledge in a few weeks." Rath decided to quickly change the topic. "So what else is going on?"

"Not much. Business is good, like I said."

"How are the prices of emeralds doing?"

"Still a hot commodity. I hear they've actually made a prototype of the new engine, but the Authority's got it under wraps. They don't want to make it available to public yet. And speaking of emeralds, are you going to bring me some more soon? I need some scouts to do business with. I've got more buyers than suppliers, and I'm always on backorder."

Rath sighed. "I don't know. I guess so. I want to retire, but I don't think I can, not yet anyway. I do have a good amount on deposit to fall back on. That's the first time I've had that luxury in a while. And you should see the nice new scout I have."

Lar shook his head, but smiled for his friend. "All because you wanted to pirate some emeralds. I guess crime does pay."

"I never thought of it like that," Rath admitted. "I guess I am better off than when I started."

#

Reception advised Dr. Sinclair of her guest's arrival. She looked at her calendar again and grunted with great disapproval. He was late, by several

days earth standard. This never would have happened before, but she guessed her ouster from the Alien Research Council allowed others to think they could treat her with less respect. And what could she do about it? Regency had all but removed her power. Why would a coordinator of Jack's status concern himself with an ousted scientist?

She sat in her office with a sour frown. She debated whether or not to return the favor, keep him waiting in the outside hall, like he kept her waiting. It was childish, vindictive, but somewhat enticing - a final charade or a last grasp at control. She decided against it. He might not wait, might simply drop off a note. He probably only arrived out of professional courtesy. There was no other explanation. He didn't need her influence anymore, she didn't have any.

She really didn't even expect a personal visit, all she needed was the final report, notification that the experiment concluded successfully. She was waiting for the classified release when the orbiting Control Station relayed a message that a transport had come out of Boscon Push with the coordinator on board. That actually caught her off guard.

She asked for him to be shown in.

"I must say, I never expected to see you again. I simply expected a note," her tone slipped, made her irritation obvious, "a note I expected days ago."

Jack sat down heavily and waved a disgusted hand. "We don't have time for that. I did not send the release because the experiment is far from concluded."

Dr. Sinclair's eyes widened only slightly at first, then narrowed in an almost accusatory stare. "Excuse me?"

"The Fenrites are still around."

The doctor shook off her surprise as her eyes glistened and her face turned red. Her anger grew as she made her own assumptions before hearing the facts. She clenched a fist almost viciously. "Regency Govern changed their plans and they didn't notify me? They want to keep the Fenrites around. They're going to continue ... not without me. I want back on that council. You go tell..."

He cut her off as abruptly as he entered. "Govern didn't change their plans, the Fenrites changed things for them. They shot down the missiles."

"What?!" This time she couldn't just shake off her surprise. She watched Jack with a dumbfounded expression.

"That's right, the mission was a complete failure." Jack's narrow head tilted to one side. When he raised his eyebrows to express his own astonishment, he appeared more animated than real. "The Fenrites defeated an entire Authority attack, shot down almost every missile. Quite a dramatic event really. I would never have guessed they would have built so many defenses. They had almost complete coverage of their entire planet. Only two of our missiles got through to their targets. Severe damage to one city. I surveyed the damage myself to make sure. They suffered setbacks in production and population, but not enough to wipe them out. I assure you, they're still there."

Sinclair sat quiet, reflecting on this new information.

"A good deal of this is my fault," Jack said without a note of sorrow. "I should have been more forceful with other suggestions. Our main priority should have been to remove the Fenrites. Secondary concerns should not have been treated as important as they were."

Dr. Sinclair finally recovered from her shock, but she still had many questions. "What secondary concerns? I thought the main objective was to destroy the Fenrites."

"It was, but another agenda reared up as well. No one wanted to risk a public relations disaster. Everyone wanted to be ready with an answer for what happened to the Fenrites, and no one wanted to take responsibility. Even Govern accepted the plan. Simple truth is that the Authority was too worried about making it look like the Fenrites obliterated themselves. They used the wrong weaponry. Stupid. They should've just gone down there and blasted them with particle beams and XM bombs. It would have taken longer, but we would've gotten the job done."

"Are they considering that now?"

Jack released an irritated sigh. "Not likely. There's a bit of a power struggle going on between the Authority and certain council members, even with Regency Govern. I'm afraid I'm at the heart of that as well. The idiot Station General feels I insulted him and questioned his individual command. He's not about to simply follow the recommendations of any civilian council. He's even called in the Authority's top leaders in an effort to restrict interference from non-military personnel. I'm afraid that's going to cause a long delay. Meanwhile, I see no reason why the Fenrites won't continue to advance."

Dr. Sinclair paused to consider this heavy news, nodded as options played out in her mind, options that might now reverse her current direction toward uselessness. She played the card that seemed to offer the best chance at recovering some of her previous power.

"That's the question that should be answered," Sinclair said with great conviction. "We still don't know why they have moved forward with such acceleration. As far as I'm concerned, that is the heart of all our problems."

"I agree. I also believe it's dangerous to let the Fenrites examine or even see any of our own creations. I relayed these concerns to Regency Govern. In this matter, they have received cooperation from the Authority. No one wants to risk further failure, so for the moment, there will be no more attacks on Fenrir. There will also be no atmospheric reconnaissance. There's even going to be a reduction of scans. Our observations will be strictly visual with no wave patterns, no particle beams; nothing the Fenrites can detect."

The subtleties of such a situation were not lost upon the doctor.

"Then we're in a holding pattern, essentially maintaining the status quo, but we'll still be watching them."

"That's correct."

Sinclair thumped a pudgy fist down on her desk top. "And the Fenrites still exist, and they still need to be studied. And if that's the case, I want my old position back. No one is more qualified to lead this investigation."

Jack was quick with his response. "You're not going back to that council. Under my assertions, a new council has been created, a council to deal with the Fenrite problem." He held up a hand to keep her from interrupting. "This council will have unlimited resources and will report directly to Regency Govern. It will not be subservient to any other general council, not the Exploratory Council, and not even the Authority. This council will not officially exist; the general Regency public will have no awareness of its duties or its members. This is the council you will chair."

Her face crinkled and despite the power she now had in her grasp, she decided to gain some vengeance. "I see, Regency is now crawling back to me. How can you all be so sure I will be so willing to come to your aide?"

"Elizabeth, please. Remember who you're talking to. Do you really think for a moment I am going to believe you won't take this post, or that you would have me walk out of here and hand this seat over to one of your critics?"

Dr. Sinclair leaned back in her chair. She eyed the coordinator with suspicion, but in the end, she nodded with acceptance. Her demeanor changed instantly, as if she had emerged from a cocoon. The thought of such power; chairing a council to deal with the Fenrites, to act without the chains of other councils, with the veils of secrecy; it renewed her vigor, her personal desires. Her thoughts swam in hundreds of directions. She considered potential peers to join her and which critics to omit, of possible studies, and the ultimate purpose of such an endeavor.

Jack returned to the more mundane of their problems. "This is not going to be as easy as you might expect. We have literally hundreds of possible leaks and loop holes, from the technicians that scanned the planet during development, to the pilots that fired the nuclear weapons."

"The pilots are the Authority's problem," Sinclair noted, almost oblivious to the potential pitfalls of such a decree.

Jack quickly reminded her of the tense relationship between the numerous councils and the military. "The Authority is currently in direct opposition to Regency Govern. They do not want this handed over to another council. They will resist that."

"They'll want to cover their own ass. That's what this is about. As for the pilots, the Authority selected individuals that understood the nature of this situation. I truly doubt they're afraid they'll reveal anything."

"It's more than that, but I'll accept that the pilots are less of a threat than the technicians."

"That is a potential problem," Sinclair agreed "We've removed their reward of studying the Fenrites. We have to offer them something of equal value, and make them understand it is in their best interest to cooperate."

"You have to accomplish this without letting them know this new council exists," Jack advised. "We also can not depend on immediate assistance from the Authority's security and spy personnel. That means we have to find other resources to maintain security. Let me remind you that there were close to three hundred techs aboard the Planning Station. There are another fifty-seven council members of various assemblies that are aware of the truth behind Fenrir."

"You think council members may be a threat?"

Jack did not hesitate. "Until I named you as the chair of this new council, I considered you a threat."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Absolutely. Your work was gone and you had nothing left to do. I doubt full retirement would have pleased you. You would have grown restless."

"And what were you going to do about it?"

"It was my hope that you would have been offered a position on the General Exploratory Council, nothing of specific interest, but enough to keep you busy. Regency Govern agreed and the offer was forthcoming, until this little change of course."

"Why wasn't that offered immediately?" she asked with some displeasure.

"Some members of Govern wanted to see you punished. They thought a period on inactivity was called for. And they didn't want you to think of this as a reward for what they still think is a terrible mistake."

"The mistake was made by the idiot geneticists. If I had my way..."

Jack grinned and reminded her of the new situation. "Now you do have your way. You will choose how to identify and rectify these mistakes. But we still have to consider the possible snares. I agree the Authority will take care of their own, even if they are currently at odds with the councils. There's a Station General that would probably spill his guts to get even with me, but he's already been reassigned."

"Punished like me, huh?"

"Hardly. He was rewarded with a new post in a very active location, lots of marauders, and lots of problems. That's what he wanted. He has full Fleet Command Authority and doesn't have to deal with the likes of me."

"Interesting tactic."

"Nothing less than you intend to do with the research technicians. I believe these are all problems we can handle. As long as we remain attentive to the details, we'll be fine. But we still have that one nagging problem that seems to keep coming back to us. The scout, Scampion. He wasn't very cooperative in the last few days."

The doctor actually grunted. "I don't see why that should be my problem."

"Like it or not, he's part of the whole package."

"Can I leave him up to you?"

The coordinator hid a smile, but he jumped at the request. "If that's what you decide. You have the funding and clearance to do whatever you wish on all matters involving the Fenrites. That includes Rath Scampion."

#

The credits in Rath's account, courtesy of the Authority payroll, allowed him some time to relax. Janus certainly wasn't a pleasure garden, but there were enough taverns and betting palaces to keep him occupied for a few months. He won a little to start, but when his luck turned bad, he stopped gambling. He enjoyed the break, tried to forget about Fenrir, but that just wasn't possible. He accepted the fact that this little piece of history was going to nag at him for quite a while, perhaps the rest of his life. After another few months of meandering about with nothing much to do, he turned his attention back to the scout bids. He still had his ship, and it was something to do.

He also remembered a pledge to Lar, a promise to continue his scouting and to use Lar exclusively as his middleman. And why not? He owed Lar at least that much.

Looking through the bids wasn't as bad as he remembered. It was kind of hard for him to admit, but he wanted to go out again, especially now. He had the kind of ship which would allow him to make bids to most any star system, and he wouldn't have to face the same rigors of atmospheric entry.

He thought about his new scout and how he obtained it. He also considered what Lar had said about the whole ordeal, about crime actually paying. He didn't get what he originally wanted, but maybe he did come out ahead. He wondered if he would do it again. He had a new scout and a good deal of funds on account. What was the down side?

Dealing with Jack. That wasn't pleasant. But that was over, and here he was back on Janus and perhaps even looking forward to making scout bids. But would he do it again? He just didn't know.

Before making his actual proposals, Rath returned to the freighter pads, and his own ship. He wanted to gauge current fuel prices, landing fees, and maintenance costs before calculating a half dozen bids.

He tracked down a maintenance robot with an input device. He laser-cabled his portable to the current price list. No real changes.

The cost for maintenance nagged at him, like something pinching at the back of his neck. It wasn't that it was high; it just left him scratching his head.

He walked away and toward his scout. He'd let the advanced onboard computer do multi-calculations for several bids rather than watch his portable struggle with the load.

Once in his cockpit, he downloaded a bid program from his portable as well as the costs he obtained from the maintenance robot. He linked his scout to the complimentary quote computer on the pad in order to determine potential revenues for different loads. Emeralds still demanded outrageously high bids

and continued to climb. Again, he thought of Fenrir, of the emeralds he had left behind.

"Fenrites probably don't even know how much money they have down there," he grumbled.

The thought of the mineral deposits on Fenrir bothered him as well, a good deal like the maintenance bothered him. For some reason, he kept thinking of a big jigsaw puzzle and he was being handed a bunch of little pieces.

He stared at a monitor as the computer calculated possible revenues against flight costs. The result was obvious. If he could find a planet with easily accessible emeralds, he could basically bid three to four times below cost. The markup on the scavenge would pay for everything and then some. Problem was no one could be sure which planet harbored which minerals. There might be emerald deposits, but they may be too far beneath the surface or too scattered. You just couldn't be sure unless you got within the atmosphere and did a surface scan.

Like a scan he did on Fenrir.

He froze. His memory was as clear as if it were happening right in front of him. He did scan Fenrir. He scanned it when he tried to decide what to scavenge. He found the pockets of rubies and emeralds near the surface. His ship also picked up reserves of gold far beneath the crust. He wasn't scanning with a narrow beam. His sensors were working on a planetary scale. His old ship had been in contact with both orbital probes in flight and submersibles in the water.

There was nothing wrong with his scanner controls during his initial scout of Fenrir. Everything was fine. Otherwise, he never would have found the mineral deposits.

He linked to the maintenance history logs under his name. They were still there - including the last maintenance check done by the robots right here on Janus, completed right after he came back from his first scout of Fenrir. He scanned the report of the cockpit controls. Diagnostics were completed on all functions. Sensor controls were functional.

"Damn it! They lied!"

10. New Direction

Dr. Sinclair looked over those gathered about her with a smugness that exuded her self exoneration. Her critics? No where in sight. She selected each member of this new council, rewarded those that remained loyal. And though she considered these scientists and researchers friends and allies, she took control with an iron hand and a will to match.

"You all know the importance of everything we do from this moment on. We are in control of the Fenrite problem. Make no mistake about it, although there will be rumors of debate over this issue. The Authority is currently taking a hard stance over Fenrir. They're not happy with the results of their attack. They are locking heads with Govern itself over how it should be handled. In the end, however, it is up to us to deal with the Fenrites, to find the solutions to the problems they create.

"Still, we must view this as an opportunity as much as a problem to be solved. We have questions to answer and objectives to meet. The ultimate goal is to remove the Fenrites as a threat. In my estimation, that means determining what made them a threat in the first place.

"Let us follow the trail from the very beginning. This experiment started as a study of the evolution and development of a species and a civilization. Somewhere along the way, that focus was ripped from us due to the unexpected speed of Fenrite advancement. That was the first mistake. The first order of business is to return part of our study to the development of the Fenrites, both technological and sociological. I want two questions answered. First, why did they become a global society without internal strife? Within that context, I want to know who the leaders of the Fenrites are, how they came to power, and what drives these individuals of the species. Second, I want to know how they advanced so quickly. It is nearly incomprehensible that they could have developed the mining abilities, the manufacturing base, and the technological advancement to reach their current levels of production, to say nothing of their defense abilities. This particular point is extremely important because it constitutes the heart the true threat. If we understand what has propelled the Fenrites, we create options for dealing with them beyond simply blowing them out of existence. Without answering this question, we have no true options. In essence we must now comprehend the incomprehensible."

With a snap of her finger, the original documentation of the Fenrite project appeared on all terminals. She would not mention names directly, but she would not dance around the subject of blame.

"The responsibility of this particular problem lies with the geneticists. They created this species through the alteration of DNA strands. They were unable to answer even the most basic questions as to what might have allowed the Fenrites to develop so quickly. This is no longer tolerable. Lizards and gorillas don't just start advancing through technological barriers, production restraints, and infrastructure obstacles as if they were suddenly turned into magic genies. Something happened during the alteration process and I demand answers. Therefore, I want the process duplicated. I want a small colony of Fenrites created exactly as they were created before. This time, however, there will be control. We're going to place an experimental colony in a pre-constructed environment, a biosphere on Earth's moon. We're going to watch them as if we were studying any other animal. This should have been done months ago."

She stopped to gather her thoughts and peruse the directives she had listed on her own portable.

"We can not, however, ignore the potential threat of the Fenrites while we analyze this control group. As the Authority remains at odds with Govern, future conflicts with Fenrir remain a strong possibility. In that vein, I want this council prepared to make recommendations. If we do come to a point where Fenrir must be attacked, I want it done on terms to our liking. We can not afford another failure. Therefore, I want the first attack analyzed to every last order. I want to know exactly what happened, why the vast majority of our missiles were shot down, and why two got through. I want damage and rebuilding estimations. More importantly, I want a sure fire strategy on how to deal with the Fenrites successfully. But we must also keep in mind future study of the planet and possible backlash from public opinion. Keep in mind that any attack strategy will be a plan of last recourse, but I want one ready."

Sinclair immediately began bestowing responsibilities to the different members of the new council. She spoke as if there would be no debate, her word was law. Once finished with the main missions, she turned to ancillary matters.

"Understanding the Fenrites and determining how to deal with them is only the beginning of our study. We have other objectives as well. We must consider the possibility of a security breach. What has happened and what will happen must stay in this room. Only that which we determine acceptable public knowledge will be distributed to the media, and only after we analyze all possible interpretations. There will be no unauthorized contacts with the media or the interstellar coms. That means every one with knowledge of our previous endeavor is a possible risk. I want every single tech with knowledge of the Fenrites accounted for. I want them watched and I want extensive reports evaluating each as a potential risk. I want the same done for this list of fifty seven council members. One leak is unacceptable."

She transferred the list to the individual portables linked to the council network. Many of the members eyed the register of names with hesitancy. These were not simple administrators or low level techs. These were

individuals of high standing and of great power within Regency. Sinclair, however, treated them all with disregard to their jurisdiction or authority.

"Security is an important measure. I want control procedures in effect, plans designed not only to maintain the secrecy of this council, but to protect all matters of the Fenrites. From gentle nudges to outright threats, I want every tech and every council member with knowledge of the experiment to understand the depth of our dilemma.

"And I want the media watched as well. I want the coms scoured. Every opinion and every article must be analyzed. I want answers prepared for any theories. I want skills and agents spread throughout the galaxy ready to dispute anything that may jeopardize our security. At this point, the public has its own opinions about what is going on. They believe we have discovered an alien and now it's time to leak additional information. There will be no official disclosures, but additional reports should be leaked right now. Let the public truly accept that an alien has been discovered, but this alien is now considered warlike, with battles occurring on their home planet. There is to be no identification of Fenrir, I want that to remain a mystery, but it should state that the alien has engaged in major warfare. Let's get the public understanding as quickly as possible that this "alien" is not something they want to meet. We also can't keep tabs on all the scans in every star system. Someone might have caught the nuclear explosions with a lucky scan. I want to be able to explain twelve different ways to Sunday on how anything that happens with the Fenrites is their own doing. We have unlimited resources, let's utilize them. All situations are to be covered."

She heaved a heavy sigh, revealing her dislike for the next topic, but as she understood Regency politics, she could not afford to ignore the Authority.

"I also want liaisons with the Authority, not an official coordinator of this particular council, but an individual with an understanding of our concerns and with established ties to the current leadership staff. The intention here is to reduce stress between the Authority and the councils. I want them working for us again. No more threats, no more power struggles.

"We will have weekly progress meetings, but not to the point where they interfere with our objectives. If you can not attend, courier a report, but keep me up to date. If I begin to question the progress of an area, you will not be able to avoid me. Now, let's get started."

#

Rath walked into Lar's warehouse with a big smile. He moved as if he didn't have a trouble in the world, as relaxed as if stopping by to just say hello. He paused to take a look around, crooked his neck to peer into the back bays, but the absence of any customers did not change his demeanor. He slapped a hand on the counter. The thump rattled the desk top and slightly startled Lar, but the scout spoke with the same carefree smile.

"Nobody here, good. I want to talk to you about some quotes. I'm trying to make a decision on which planets to bid. There's a lot out there to choose from, but I've got some questions. I know the price on emeralds is still high, but I'd like to know what's been going on with some of the other gems. I can get current quotes, but I don't know how the prices have fluctuated over the last few weeks. I figure I should talk to an expert."

Lar looked at the scout as if he had smoke coming out of his ears. Rath never asked him about quotes before a bid, only after he already returned with a shipment. "Wha..."

Rath didn't let him continue. "Let's not do it here," the scout said plain enough. "Close up for a few minutes and let's get something to eat. I'm buying, acknowledgment of my good fortune and maybe to ease a little of that guilt for what I caused you." He said it so innocently, it sounded like he truly meant it.

Lar looked at his watch and shrugged. He didn't know what kind of information he could offer that would help Rath choose a planet, but he was hungry enough to eat. If Rath wanted to buy him a meal, he'd be happy to take a break.

"Fine."

Rath showed no sign of hurry or anxiety. He waited patiently for Lar to shutdown the terminals and lockup the store front, but once they walked on lonely streets below the hum of skimmer craft, his tone and expression changed as if pressed by a gust of arctic wind. He looked around again, but this time with nervous apprehension, wary of any passing strangers. When he was sure they were alone, he spoke in a cold whisper.

"You have to know this, I owe it to you, so don't argue."

Lar blinked at the change in manner, felt more than a little uneasy. He caught himself looking over his own shoulder, then questioned the sense of alarm.

"Argue about what? I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I know you don't, but I don't want you to cut me off in the middle. You have to listen to the whole story. If you don't, I won't forgive myself." The scout steadied himself as he grunted the revelation. "They lied about the Fenrites. They lied about me missing them. They weren't there, not during my first scout anyway. I can't honestly tell you I know what's going on, but I know one thing. Nothing alive was on the planet. No plants, and no Fenrites. Fenrir was as barren as I thought it was when I made my initial scout. And don't doubt it, because I'm sure."

Lar just buried his face toward the ground as he kept walking. He wasn't going to stop, wasn't about to take this conversation into some public place. For whatever reason Rath felt the urge to talk like this, it would be in the streets, alone where no one could watch or hear. He figured that's why Rath wanted them out of his warehouse in the first place.

"This isn't some kind of excuse on my part," Rath assured. "I'm not making this up because I think I look bad. I don't care if I missed them or not, but I didn't miss them because they weren't there."

"But we saw them," Lar pleaded. He wanted to end this discussion as quickly as possible. Rath might have been fixated on missing the Fenrites, but he didn't care. He wanted to end this contention, now. "Remember? We went down together; you, me and that Jack guy. We landed exactly as you landed and we didn't spot any Fenrites. I didn't think there was anything there, either. It wasn't until we went back up and went looking for them that we actually saw anything."

Rath grunted with a sense of disgust as well as disapproval. "Yeah, I know all about, a great choreographed move on their part, but it's just part of the show. We landed in the desert and there was nothing but rock. Just like when I landed. Makes perfect sense, convince us that we think nothing is there and then show us the alien. Makes everybody think that it was easy for me to miss them. But that's just not the whole story, that's just what we see. It's not what really determines the scouting of the planet. The sensors do that. The landing just explained why I had no visual contact, but the shipboard sensors do the full job."

Lar jumped right back with another explanation. "There was a control malfunction, a problem with your scout. You had a narrow beam."

The middleman stopped, held his breath as a freighter pilot walked by. When the stranger disappeared into a nearby tavern, Lar continued with a lowered voice, but with greater determination.

"Your scanners weren't working. You didn't get a reading of the Fenrites when I was with you, but we both know they were there."

"Yeah, I know. Problem with the controls. That's bull. My guess is that they set that up."

Lar let a heavy sigh of frustration escape his lips and Rath felt a sense of urgency to explain, to convince the middleman.

"Look, you may not believe this, but you haven't heard everything yet. Just stick with me. Everything I'm saying is easy to explain. If they wanted to mess with my controls, they had the opportunity. While I was under the custody of the health techs, they had all the access to my scout they needed, to set it up so the beam would narrow even though it was set on wide scan. Why? To convince us there was a problem with the scanners. That's why they brought you and me on that little ride back to the planet. They weren't checking a theory, they were setting us up, trying to make us believe that the controls were broke all the time."

Lar couldn't keep up. He couldn't understand what Jack was trying to say, or why he was saying it. "But they were broke. They didn't pick up the Fenrites even though we saw them. We went in low, I saw them myself. Your sensors didn't pick them up until you turned control over to the computer."

"That was the second time," Rath insisted. "Not the first time, not when I was alone. I'm betting those bastards adjusted the controls before we took our ride, made it look like that was the true cause. Then, they took my ship so I couldn't test the sensors myself to see what they did."

"If you can't test this, how can you be so sure it wasn't really broke?"

"Because I just took a look at the maintenance schedule at the freighter pads. I had the robots do a full maintenance check of both my scout and the freighter before I went out to Fenrir the second time. That was immediately after I came back from my first scout of Fenrir. There was no indication of a problem with the scanner controls. They found other problems with other controls. Nothing severe, but little things that they listed on a repair suggestion docket. So if the sensors passed maintenance check, that means they were working during my first scan of Fenrir, when I was alone, before anyone else had access to my scout. I downloaded a copy of both the docket and the system check into my portable. Want to see it?"

Lar waved a hand in refusal. "I believe you, but couldn't there be another explanation. What if the controls were just starting to go bad, you know flickering on and off? I'm not an engineer or a repair tech, but I know these dumb things go on and off line as easily as a buyer changes his mind. Jeez, the terminals in my office seem to be working fine one day, then they go on the blink, not for long, sometimes just for a minute or two. I bring in a tech and I get funny looks after he tells me they're working perfectly. The same thing could have happened with your scanners."

Rath nodded. "I thought about that, and I had to admit it as a possibility, until I considered something else that's been bothering me. Did I or did I not come back with a load of rubies and emeralds?"

Lar paused for a moment as he did not follow the purpose of the question. Finally, he spoke the obvious. "You did, but what has that got..."

"How did I find them?"

"I don't know," Lar admitted with a fluster.

Rath accented the truth like a prosecutor nailing home a verdict of guilty. "I scanned the planet. Nearly the whole damn surface. If my sensors were on a narrow pattern, I would have been scanning for a month before I could have got the information I needed. Think about it. I'm a scout, but I don't make anything from the scout bid. I make my money from selling what I can scavenge, but I've got limited cargo space. Don't you think I'm going to make sure I find the most valuable resource before I commit to a load? I found sources of all kinds of metals including gold, as well as gems like the rubies and emeralds. That was no narrow pattern. How long do you think it would have taken me to scan the planet and find all of that with a beam covering just twenty square kilometers? That's absurd and you know it."

Lar fell silent. Rath wasn't the only scout with which he had business dealings. He knew how they operated, knew that their true source of income came from finding and scavenging the right resources. He also knew Rath had

come back with a full load of both rubies and emeralds. How could he have found both with just a narrow band? He would have known right then had there been a problem with the scanners.

"Think about it," Rath pressed, "it all fits. Look at this coordinator, Jack. Think about everything he did. He once called himself a manipulator. That's what he did to us. It's so damn clear. He set us up every step of the way. He took us on that little joy ride just to explain why I didn't find the Fenrites on my first scout. He wanted to convince us, because if he did that, he could convince anyone. But the truth is that I was able to scan the whole planet. I found the emeralds, but I didn't find any life signs. How is that possible? It's because the aliens weren't there. And if Jack lied about the Fenrites, that means he could have lied about everything."

Rath watched with a wave of relief as Lar grudgingly accepted what he now knew as fact.

Lar, however, held to his doubts; if not to the facts, then at least to the motives.

"Why would they do such a thing?"

Rath was ready for this question. "I was the first person on Fenrir; I was there before the Fenrites. He had to convince me I missed them. And you, you were the person I sold the emeralds to. It had nothing to do with my plans to steal anything. I had the scout bid. They had to find a way to shut me up. I guess they could have just kept me in prison, but that would have raised suspicions. I think they wanted me around in case anyone had questions about the first scout. I had the bid rights and that's public knowledge. You gotta figure some media investigator would check once word got out that it was Fenrir with the aliens."

"But why?" Lar implored. "Why would they have to go through this elaborate hoax? What's the reason for making it look like you missed them?"

"I've been asking myself that same question," Rath admitted. "I keep coming back to one thing. The Fenrites weren't there when I got there. That means they showed up afterwards, like they're colonizing worlds just like us. Maybe that's what they're afraid of. They want to keep that a secret."

"Why would they be worried about that?"

"I don't know," Rath frowned. "Maybe they don't want to start a panic."

It didn't add up for Lar and he kept throwing his skepticisms out like old garbage. "Then why admit that they even exist? Why bring us to Fenrir and then let us go? Why did the chair of the General Exploratory Council admit to the media that the aliens exist in the first place? That doesn't make sense, not to me. You don't admit to something if you're trying to cover it up. None of this makes sense."

Rath threw up his hands. "I can't answer any of that. I can only guess about their reasons. I'm just sure that the Fenrites weren't there when I first scouted the planet. Now, they want me to believe they were. That's a simple fact, and it means something's wrong. That's what I had to tell you."

Lar sighed unhappily. His thoughts swam in several confused directions. "Why?"

Rath responded with equal distaste. "Because I don't know what to do. I know this is a problem and I'm worried it's going to come back and bite me on the ass. I don't know what I'm going to decide, but I know if I run off, I just can't leave you in the dark."

"Sometimes it's better to be in the dark," Lar said almost wishfully. "Sometimes you get in trouble for knowing too much."

Rath shook his head, pointed out another truth which to him was now just as obvious. "And sometimes you get in trouble for not knowing enough."

Lar didn't get a chance to argue further. A small commotion interrupted the debate. Nothing major, just a few shuttle jockeys running into a nearby bar. Lar heard one of them speak up about a mediacast.

The middleman didn't really care about any breaking news, but he actually welcomed the distraction. He wanted to stop thinking about the Fenrites, and he suggested they take a moment to see what was happening.

Rath shrugged but followed Lar inside the dimly lit establishment. Not very crowded, someone was turning down the background music, while someone else was turning up the media report. Everyone peered into the deep crystal cylinder chamber which captured three dimensional images of a live mediacast. The broadcaster spoke from a prepared statement.

"Media Corp. has uncovered new information regarding the recently discovered alien race. Warring factions on the alien's home world have engaged in nuclear warfare. Damage was reported to be high as several powerful warheads detonated over alien cities. The council stresses that there is no threat to Regency or the general population, but now, more than ever, the alien discovery must be handled with the utmost care. Researchers will continue to observe the situation and the Authority is maintaining a presence to protect the security of Regency interests. No one was available for further comment."

Rath just stared into the screen.

Lar shook his head as some of the shuttle pilots began to debate the issue. This was not the kind of distraction he wanted. He looked to Rath with an almost accusing eye.

"Did you know about this?"

Rath didn't respond.

Lar was not happy and would have raised his voice had he not wanted to be overheard. "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know," Rath admitted. He couldn't understand why the council would allow the release of this kind of news. He wondered if this was the same event which he witnessed or if there had been a new exchange. Either way, it wouldn't explain why they would allow this to go public. Everything was supposed to be classified; everything was supposed to be guarded for the sake of Regency security. Isn't that what Jack told him? He was threatened

with charges of espionage if he spoke to the media. It was supposed to have been kept quiet. And if it was the same one he witnessed, then why exaggerate? Only two nuclear missiles detonated on the planet, hardly several. Was there another exchange after he left? Did the Authority try to stop it again? And of course, there was the matter of his own discovery that the Fenrites weren't on Fenrir when he first scouted the planet. All the information spiraled out of control, left him scratching for answers.

"I honestly don't know what's going on. Let's just get out of here."

Lar cursed, but turned and marched angrily back outside. He didn't wait for Rath. He moved quickly in a direction back to his warehouse.

Rath ran after him. "Look, I don't know what to say, but..."

Lar cut him off. "I don't think I want to hear anymore."

Rath didn't argue the point further. He did what he wanted to do, what he felt he needed to do. He told Lar of what he found. Beyond that, he was confused, and right now it felt like every man for himself. He confessed his own options.

"I'm leaving. I can't say I know what's going on, but I'm not going to wait around for a hammer to fall on my head."

"What?" Lar whirled around and asked with a near snarl. "You think someone's after you now?"

"Maybe. Things aren't adding up and I'm right in the middle of it. Right now I'm a potential thorn in their side. They're not going to just let me waltz around."

"Don't you think you're overacting a bit? I mean even if you do think you know something, as long as you stay quiet, what is it you have to worry about?"

"Everything and anything. What am I supposed to do here, just go back to scouting? The only scout bid I'm going to win is a ride to nowhere. I'm done here."

"Whatever," Lar stated flatly, tired of everything that was going on.

"Hey, I'm serious," Rath shot back. "I got no where to go. The only thing I got is what I can hold against them, and I have to figure out a way to use it."

"And how are you going to do that? Who's going to believe you? I don't know if I believe you anymore. To anyone else, you're just one more nut who thinks he knows something about the alien."

"I've got enough to prove my story," Rath insisted. "I've got my original scout bid. That stands for something. I also have the maintenance check on my scout, and the bill of sales for the emeralds and rubies."

"I'll thank you to leave me out of this from now on!" Lar demanded.

Rath bit his lip. "No promises. You're the one who bought the stones, but I'll do what I can to hide your identity. I'll get a copy of the unloading and transfer documents from the launch pad. That's actually more official documentation, real proof that I did return with a payload from Fenrir. It's enough for me to bargain with and that's what I need."

Lar just turned away. He had enough, and he simply didn't want anymore.
"Good luck. I'll assume I won't be hearing from you again."

11. Testing on the Moon

Dr. Sinclair shuffled across the stark white floors of the cloning lab. "How many Fenrites are you creating?"

Dr. Julios Farmer answered almost evasively. "Around thirty."

Sinclair was not happy. "How many exactly?"

"Twenty seven."

Her reply was sudden, like an instant clap of disapproving thunder. "Why such a small number?"

Farmer hemmed and hawed, but eventually he revealed the truth. "Two reasons, really. I'm not so sure it's a good idea to mass produce the Fenrites and place a large colony on the moon. We have our own moon bases and it would be unfortunate to have another problem."

"You let me worry about potential problems," Sinclair reprimanded. "But if it makes you feel better, I have considered the potential hazards of a Fenrite colony on the moon. I don't care how many Fenrites you create, I'm not about to let them become a threat to anything else up there. If they do, we'll eliminate them with six different poison gases. The sphere will also be charged with explosives. They won't get out, not alive anyway. Now, what's the second reason?"

Dr. Farmer grunted at these rather hostile reassurances as he revealed his other concern. "On Fenrir, the Fenrites displayed amazing reproductive capabilities. I don't know if it was the lizard portion of their genetic map, but their population grew at a staggering rate. I want to try and analyze such growth within our controlled environment. If I keep the number low, I can watch the mating patterns more closely. I can also keep better track of gestation and growth cycles. After all, this is a major component of the Fenrite mystery. They managed to grow from numerous, yet staggered and identifiable colonies, to a mass planetary population. I still don't know how that was possible."

The thought held merit, but Sinclair was not quite satisfied. "We studied that during the first phase of the Fenrite project. I thought our researchers had most of those questions answered."

"Theories only," Farmer countered. "There was indeed confirmation of multiple births and short gestation periods, but I still don't believe that explains the dramatic population increase in full. I've used computer simulations to try and make the initial colony numbers meet the current estimated Fenrir population. In my mind, the numbers don't add up. Unless the offspring were immediately having offspring of their own, there must be something we're missing. Maybe the males are also conceiving somehow, I

don't know. That's why I wish to keep the moon-based colony small at first. At twenty seven total Fenrites, eleven females and sixteen males, I can accurately determine all factors of population growth. If we start out with a larger figure, my data will be skewed. I don't want that to happen."

"I see." Sinclair heaved a heavy, dissatisfied breath. "I'm not sure that's as important a factor as some of the other variables. Determining why they advanced technologically is the major concern. If we hamper them with a low population count, we may never understand how they were able to advance so quickly. Your focus may be misplaced."

Here, Dr. Farmer's confidence grew. "I considered that and I am prepared to handle such a setback. If the colony does not grow in size quickly and this seems to hamper their progress, I will initiate two new adjustments. I will immediately clone additional Fenrites. I will also stimulate their technological progress by introducing inventions that the Fenrites made on their own. Give them a little nudge in the right direction, so to speak."

"Won't that in itself jeopardize the findings of this experiment?" Sinclair asked dubiously "We want to see why the Fenrites have advanced so quickly on their own. We didn't provide Fenrir with little devices for them to study."

"That's true, but I'm hoping it won't come to that."

Sinclair moved her large frame slowly around the cloning lab. She crumpled her forehead into a mass of folded lines as she struggled with the issue. She was about to order Farmer to increase the number of Fenrites immediately, but she bit her tongue.

"I'm going to give you what you want, but I'm going to get what I want as well," she finally announced. "I'm going to order a second biosphere constructed. One sphere will have the limited numbers you wish for your study. The other will hold the much larger number. It shouldn't take that much time. The first sphere is being constructed to house five to six separate colonies. The one you need can be significantly smaller. Is that acceptable?"

Dr. Farmer nodded almost happily. "Quite."

#

The larger moon biosphere, constructed to house several Fenrite colonies, received the first collection of cryochambers. Transport techs injected each Fenrite encased in a frozen capsule with tranquilizers before resurrecting them from the cold. They placed the Fenrites upon the ground in a manner similar to the procedure enacted on Fenrir. All transporters and scientists, cryochambers and resuscitating equipment; all signs of human existence were removed before the sedatives wore off. The researchers left nothing within the biosphere other than the plant life which was an exact replica of Fenrir's own ecosystem. The new colony of "aliens" was left alone within this large, translucent half-sphere, but they were now constantly observed, carefully and continuously watched.

The monitors at Earth-Moon Observation Fenrite (EMOF) covered every moment of inception. The sphere itself was constructed not just to replicate the environment on Fenrir, but to facilitate the full reach of surveillance. Every event was recorded and examined by dozens of researchers.

Of the Fenrite subjects placed here, some were deposited in large gatherings, others in small groups, and a few were completely isolated. The process of following each Fenrite from its moment of consciousness was covered with painstaking detail. The researchers at EMOF would take no chance in missing the key link to discovering the Fenrite's accelerated advancement.

Within the sphere, the true moment of inception came at the first fluttering of a Fenrite eyelid. Slowly, the Fenrites began to show signs of waking. A few grunted. Some rolled about while others rubbed their eyes.

More attention was placed on this moment of so-called birth than had been previously performed at the moment of inception back on Fenrir. Scientists studied every move of the Fenrites - how they awakened, how they stirred upon the ground, and how they finally rose to their feet. The focus never waned.

Two moments were of vital interest - the first communication between individuals and the ultimate gathering of the main colony.

Two of the first subjects to rise carried themselves with apparent curiosity. They first examined their own bodies, scanning their arms and legs and feeling their heads. Once satisfying this seemingly common ritual, they began to focus on the others. They moved about the grass covered grounds as they inspected those that still languished in partial sedation. When these two fully awake members finally came face to face, they simply stopped. They both, two females, appeared to struggle for long moments. Amazingly, one spoke a simple yet strange greeting to the other. "Good Harvest" was the phrase given.

They spoke in New English, the accepted language of Regency. The researchers knew the Fenrites used New English, it was the monitored communication from Fenrir, but they never expected to see this test sample develop the words so quickly.

The two continued to communicate. It was rough at first, as if they had to struggle to remember every other word, but still a stunning development.

Other members of the new Fenrite colony joined the conversation. It was as difficult as it was entrancing for the scientists to study. The communications were labored and slow, a battle to find a word or phrase, but they continued, and the Fenrites displayed an amazing patience. Adding to the intrigue, the isolated stragglers and some of the smaller parties joined the larger group and entered the conversation with similar adeptness of language. No one was treated as a stranger or invader.

As this joint meeting unfolded, the Fenrites discussed their immediate food and water sources, the need to explore the land. They spoke of building shelters and cultivating the soil with an intuitive understanding for survival.

There was a general acceptance of their surroundings as well as their situation and little time was lost on discussing their sudden existence. They selected a leader almost out of necessity and the process appeared good-willed and effortless, as if they knew who was best suited to organize them.

The gatherings of all Fenrites, whether in large groups or in smaller parties, took on an almost logical path. They addressed immediate needs as if they had all been trained in basic survival. In each case, the meetings took but one strange turn, a moment when they all made a reference to "*Finding the true Mother*". Not a single Fenrite gave further explanation. The Fenrites seemed to know who this "*Mother*" was, and the importance in discovering the entity was understood by all.

Much of the same happened in the second, smaller biosphere. The twenty seven Fenrites woke, began communicating and quickly working together. A reference was also made to the "*True Mother*", though again, no further description was given.

After inception in both spheres, Dr. Sinclair called for an immediate meeting.

#

A screened transport with a handful of Espial field agents (Espial is the security and information gathering branch of Regency) departed from the Propelled Planning Station with a landing curtain in full generation. It was the one thing both the Authority and Regency Govern could agree upon, though the Authority was not informed that the request came from Dr. Sinclair's Fenrite Discovery Council. Everyone had questions, and Espial field agents mastered the training and controlled the means to obtain the answers.

The craft took a low profile approach, keeping the system's sun directly at its tail as it entered Fenrir's atmosphere. It dove to the surface with lightning speed, leveling off at tree-top level. The landing curtain remained in full coverage throughout the journey as Espial agents dropped to several locations upon Fenrir soil. The transport never invoked its Boscon Props, relying instead upon ancillary engines and gravitational flying techniques to reduce the craft's signature. Such careful procedures were normally not applied, but the agents moved with a care generated by the unknown.

While observation posts at the Planning Station pinpointed surface radar facilities, intelligence on other means of Fenrite detection and surveillance remained limited. The station receptacles failed to record other wave patterns emanating from Fenrir, but such an absence didn't mean that the Fenrites were without the technology to spot airborne craft. With such accelerated advancement, it would not be unreasonable to assume they might have made major breakthroughs in other techniques. From spectrum enhancement to wave displacement and particle disturbance, the use of such technology might

detect the wake of the transport and threaten the mission as well as the lives of the agents. Such a threat forced careful measures.

Considering the Fenrites a threat became a necessity. They already displayed missile capability and a willingness to engage. Now that they had suffered the loss of an entire city, it was not unreasonable to assume they might be working feverishly to invent and employ new methods of surveillance. Given their speed of advancement, expecting the impossible became standard procedure. And if the Fenrites could indeed detect incoming ships, it was considered a definite possibility they would attack.

With such considerations at the forefront of a reconnaissance mission, over a dozen Espial agents moved on foot toward pre-coordinated observations points with full surveillance gear. Some worked in pairs, others alone.

Starr Jerrings stalked her path without a partner.

She moved from her desert landing point to a pre-located hollow in a nearby rock formation. A small Fenrite settlement that had developed into a complex industrial park was her main target. She would not approach at dusk, but just after midnight local Fenrite time. As the transport could not facilitate optimal landing times for all operatives, it remained the agent's responsibility to remain hidden until the proper time of reconnaissance.

A planetary surface scan performed by the Planning Station revealed the hollow, and no Fenrite life signs were detected in the area. It would conceal her for the few hours necessary before she could begin her independent mission.

Starr took all necessary precautions upon making her drop site. As she made her way to the hollow, she activated an independent curtain, not so much a cloak of invisibility, but more a personal field of wave static. She crossed the hard rock surface of this desolate area in an all out sprint, remaining crouched over like a hunting cat. She slowed only upon reaching her initial destination.

Two sandstone monuments marked her cover point. Ages of wind had pressed opposing rock collections together and compacted sand into a hardened sculpture that looked like the back of a double-humped camel. Below the crevices and between the rock bulges waited the hollow.

As animal life other than the Fenrites was never introduced to this planet, Starr did not have to worry about disturbing a desert snake or poisonous lizard, but her training kept her from simply diving into an unknown hole. Her caution revealed a surprise. She peered into the opening among the rocks and saw not a simple hollow but a long descending path which led to darkness.

She flattened herself against the sandstone, but maintained a position just outside the breach. She took a small glow-stick and carefully scattered the darkness about the very edges of the cave-like entrance. It was supposed to be a small cavity, large enough to fit several humans, not a deep cave as it appeared.

Maintaining silence, she moved into the opening, opting to explore this unanticipated finding rather than abort the mission. She waited in pure stillness, allowing her eyes to adjust to the dark as she killed the light from the glow-stick. The fading sunlight drifted into the cave, and her widening pupils allowed her to scan farther down the path. She moved forward; slowly, carefully, but inspecting the sides of the rock with her hands. The opening section of the cave was smooth and natural, but deeper within the crevice, the rock revealed scars and uneven markings. The tunnel was not formed by the presence of wind or water battering the insides of the original hollow, but by manufactured forces, tools of the Fenrites.

Starr considered the discovery for but a moment. Her main objective, to survey the industrial park to the northeast, remained paramount to supplementary issues. It held information that could not be ignored. The Authority needed to know the defense capabilities of the Fenrites, including their manufacturing base. Still, she had several hours before her original mission could commence, creating an opportunity to explore this tunnel without delaying her main objective, but she could not break transmission silence to gain higher approval. In the end, it was her call, and she decided to explore the tunnel.

#

Dr. Sinclair had new questions, pressing questions, and she was abrupt with her demands.

"What the hell happened in that biosphere? And don't give me any flippant responses. This is not the time for humor. I want to know how they were able to communicate so quickly."

She looked harshly upon the man in charge, her expectations clear. She would not accept indecision or uncertainty.

"Dr. Farmer?"

The geneticist did not hesitate. "In all honesty, it shouldn't have been that easy, but we already have one plausible explanation. As the Fenrites had no other opportunity for development, we must go back to their very creation. It is here where the answers must lie."

In response to Sinclair's impatient glare, he quickly ordered the retrieval of data pertaining to Fenrite conception.

"During the cloning process, we instilled the Fenrites with the knowledge of basic agriculture. That was done for both the new, moon-based colonies as well as the original Fenrites placed on their home world. Most of the information was in the form of illustrations. We didn't try to tell them what do. The brain wave infusion was meant to show them how to grow food in an efficient manner. This was done with a collection of images, pictures for the mind to recollect through memory cells in the brain. It was impossible, however, to eliminate all references of our own language from the knowledge

transfer. If we did, we would have jeopardized the importance of communication. Just as knowledge of agriculture was implanted in their memory cells, portions of our language were infused as well. I believe that the Fenrites are drawing upon those references to recall our own language."

The panel of researches hummed in agreement.

"It really does make sense," Farmer continued. "The first greeting contained a direct reference to harvest. That in itself is an obvious link. We see that they struggle to find the proper words. That is also an important clue. They are searching their own memory, but they have no memory, only what we implanted through the brain wave infusion. We may not have intended to give them a working knowledge of our complete language to start, but looking back at our procedures, I believe that was inevitable. We had even addressed this in an earlier meeting before the first Fenrir project. No one had an objection to the Fenrites using New English. There were some concerns about jeopardizing the secrecy of our actions, but in all, everyone was most enthused about the Fenrites speaking our language. In all honesty, this should have been expected."

Sinclair was far from happy. "I'm not arguing about them using New English, I am concerned about the speed in which they have gained proficiency. We did not implant brain wave or memory knowledge of our language. They were not given the type of intelligence or the instinct modification to fully understand New English, yet they only showed limited difficulty in developing full communications. I want to know how they adopted it so quickly. That continues to be the question. Why is it that they are able to do everything in an accelerated fashion?"

Farmer frowned, but he attempted to describe his own beliefs. He folded his hands in front of his lips as he tried to organize his own thoughts. "I'm not so sure this is an accelerated process. Under these circumstances, using the technology and the genetic patterns we chose, we were simply bound to create this kind of aberration. At least I think so. We know gorillas have their own form of communicating. It is instinctive. It came with their genes. It is still in the Fenrites. We expanded their brain capacity, both for the moon colonies and for those upon Fenrir itself. Our intention was to establish an organism that would pass as an alien with the ability to grow. Now take all the factors and combine them. The inherent ability to communicate, the expanded intelligence, and the knowledge infusion with references to our own language."

"So this wasn't their own development?" Sinclair questioned sternly. "They didn't have to rely on advancement because we gave them this ability?"

"That's my belief." Dr. Farmer started tapping his fingers together. "Actually, though this in itself may not indicate a discovery process, it may help to explain part of the accelerated advancement back on Fenrir. With no language barrier, the Fenrites had one less obstacle to overcome. That in itself can't explain everything, but it is a start."

Other researchers agreed, pointing to earth's history of thousands of languages and dialects.

Sinclair huffed. For the most part, she was satisfied, even enthused about this theory. It offered a working assumption for explaining part of the Fenrites' accelerated development. It did not, however, answer all of the questions which arose from the moon colony inception.

"Well then, can you tell me who is this '*Mother*' they keep talking about?" Farmer just shook his head. "That I can't answer."

#

Hot air drifted up from the steep-angled tunnel, warmer than the winds coming off the cooling desert just outside the camel-humped rock formation.

"Air vent," Starr murmured to herself.

She checked her portable, both for elapsed time and electronic impulses. She still had several hours before she needed to return to the tunnel exit and begin her primary mission, time enough to explore more of the tunnel. As for scanning wave patterns, there was a definite trace of slight radiation, like the emissions of older model terminal screens. There was also an electronic pulse equivalent to microchip discharge. Definitely the signs of an underground communications or command center.

Travel through the tunnel was not easy. It was not a path created for access, but instead a crudely dug ventilation passage to allow air circulation. In truth, its existence offered its own puzzle. Advanced underground command centers normally did not have such unrefined ventilation systems, but this is exactly what she discovered.

She made quick recordings of her findings, and again she detected waiting contradictions. There were mainframe computers of ancient design working in concert with microprocessors that rivaled the efficiency of her own portable. Vacuum tubes covered an entire wall of confused electronics just as deftly architected silicon chips controlled highly sophisticated guidance systems. A pile of punch cards almost brought a cynical laugh to her lips, until she spied a lasercable uplink.

The entire scene was a pure illustration of inconsistencies, containing signs more of a hoax than of any true finding. Starr, however, understood the Fenrite development. They were moving so fast in technology invention, they did not have time to keep all the facilities updated with the most current advances. She wondered how many more incompatible designs she would find when she reconned the manufacturing center. Unfortunately, she would never get the chance to carry out her main objective.

Her portable flashed yellow with motion detection below her and to the right. She froze in the tunnel, still entrenched enough in the vent to remain concealed.

Two Fenrite sentries - dressed in what amounted to sixteenth century armor, only the metal was lighter and more flexible - appeared upon the ground below. They seemed to be transfixed with their own computer, something similar to one of the bulkier laptop models of the late twentieth century, but they showed definite signs of concern and alertness. They traversed the area in a spread pattern, peering behind corners and searching the crevices behind massive equipment.

The creatures were slightly shorter in stature than the average human. They spoke in coarse tones, but they spoke in a language she could understand.

"False alarm?" One asked the other.

The Fenrite holding the laptop shook his head. "No, something was here. Crows in the wheat."

"Crows in the wheat," the first agreed.

Starr bit her lip. She knew the Fenrites had never seen a crow; birds were not introduced to Fenrir. She also knew that the cloned Fenrites were instilled with basic agricultural knowledge. "Crows in the wheat" could mean only one thing. Invaders. They knew she was there.

She checked her position. She avoided their detection for the moment because they checked ground level access points. Eventually they would peer upwards. When they did, she wasn't deep enough in the shadows to elude their discovery. She also wasn't too pleased with what she could distinguish of the laptop. It was obviously a sensor of some sort, not quite a motion detector, more like a low level scanner. It probably worked on the ability to detect heat. The air flow in the vent was masking her presence, but she knew that wouldn't last for long. One flux in the air temperature and they'd know right where she was.

She gauged the distance between her and the closest Fenrite. She had two choices - drop in the room and take them both out, or flee up the shaft. She didn't know how large this command center stretched and didn't know the level of security. For now there were but two sentries, but one had made a reference to an alarm, more might be on the way. She decided to flee rather than fight, hoping to avoid detection. If she was noticed, she would rely on her lead to reach the desert first and lose any followers in the darkness topside.

She moved with great care, but her first motion set off another alarm.

The Fenrite with the laptop could not localize the disturbance, but he called a warning to his partner. "The sky is red, the sky is red!"

The reference to coming storms forced the second sentry's attention to the ceiling. The female guard pointed to the shaft.

"There!"

The Fenrite said nothing further. It bounded across the floor and leapt toward the air shaft.

Starr's lead quickly diminished. She bolted up the tunnel at full speed, but it remained a difficult climb as the shaft was steep and narrow.

The Fenrite had no such difficulty. Its slightly smaller frame fit easily through the opening. Its inherent ability from the gorilla portion of its genes allowed it to handle the steep incline with much greater swiftness. In but a heartbeat, it had obtained a firm hold of Starr's ankle.

The strength of the Fenrite was surprising. The guard pulled fiercely, snapping Starr's lower leg, and then dragging the Espial agent back down the vent.

Starr bit down on the pain, crushed a scream within her while she made one last attempt to free herself. Ignoring the anguish, she flipped herself downward, using the slope to accelerate her fall. She came down heavy on the Fenrite's back, but she simply bounced away and slammed against the shaft wall. This time she could not keep from screaming, but only for a moment.

The sentry kept her hold on the agent's broken leg as she dropped from the ceiling vent. The Fenrite landed its feet, but Starr was whipsawed downward. The agent's neck broke clean as her head crashed against the floor.

#

Dr. Sinclair spoke through a secured channel to the new liaison between the councils and the Authority.

Aron Skysdale did not approach his appointment like other coordinators. He was more of a fact-finder, a communicative link. That wasn't exactly what Sinclair had wanted out of a liaison, she had hoped for someone who might sway the Authority generals back into a stance of cooperation, but she doubted that this was possible in the short term. Authority Command was being as obstinate as ever on this particular issue, and all commanding officers displayed a downright abhorrence to work with any council, even Regency Govern.

Skysdale had served in the Authority as a Station Subcommander. It was not his duty to question orders, only to see that they were communicated to the proper personnel. For this, he had gained the trust of the highest ranking officers within Authority Command, and Sinclair regarded this aspect of Skysdale's appointment as extremely important. If she couldn't get Authority to agree with the councils, at least she wanted to know what they were up to.

Skysdale reported his findings in a casual manner, dropping the formal and respectful style he used when dealing with the military. It was a tone he learned to adopt when speaking to council members, an inflection that made everyone a little more relaxed. He found he liked his position, and he learned to adapt into the role of liaison. For his own purposes, and even his own curiosity, he wanted to get information from both sides.

"They're not liking what they're finding out," he began rather pessimistically. "Apparently, the Espial agents got strong intelligence on a number of tech plants on Fenrir. Their progress doesn't seem to be slowing. In fact, it appears they've recovered parts of the Spearheads that didn't detonate.

They've got samples of our guidance chips, communication links, and fuel sources. No one's happy about that."

Sinclair voiced her own disapproval. "They should have realized that was a risk back before they decided to drop me from the council. I would have never made that mistake. Someone should be putting Jack Lasonelli up for a medal for having that transport destroyed before the Fenrites could get a hold of it. He was the only one that appeared to be thinking straight that day."

"I don't think we want to bring up that name right now," Skysdale interrupted. "Many Authority generals are still using his insolence as a reason for not cooperating with Govern. By the way, what's the word on Coordinator Lasonelli? Both Govern and the Authority are concerned about this Rath Scampion. According to all reports, he's a loose cannon. The Authority wants to know how that's being handled."

"You never mind what's going on with Jack," Sinclair reprimanded. "I've assigned him to take care of the problem with Scampion and I'm sure he'll handle it. I want you to be concerned with what's going on at Fenrir and what's happening between Govern and the Authority. What else did the agents learn?"

Skysdale hid his annoyance. He wanted that information from Sinclair. He had hoped to use it as a bargaining chip to learn a few of the more guarded Authority plans. No one but Espial security and Sinclair knew how the coordinator planned to take out the scout, but he knew others cared about it. It would have made his job easier. For now, he outlined what he was aware of back on Fenrir.

"Espial also got info on Fenrite leaders. More bad news. It's almost an apolitical society. There's no power struggle, no opposing political parties or factions. There are absolutely no restrictions in the form of political impasse. Every leader is simply chosen based on his or her ability to coordinate the most efficient use of their resources. That restricts Espial ability to use subterfuge and counteraction. If there's no rival faction to the group in power, there's no way to flame internal strife. They're all just one big happy family."

Sinclair's brow furrowed in frustration. "You don't know how tired I am of hearing that. Why can't one of these sociological experts explain how that happened?"

"Well I know I can't, but there's one last bit of bad news you should know about. A few agents did not return to the pickup sites. The Espial director is none to happy about that, either. He's in a difficult spot as it is. He's trying to keep everyone happy; the Authority, Govern, even you."

"Well, I'm not happy," Sinclair ranted. "And I don't give a damn which director is upset. Regency Govern has given this council unrestricted power. I hold the chair, which means I have unrestricted power. If he gives you any problems at all, make sure he knows I'll have him removed."

"He could side with the Authority if I do that," Skysdale offered. "I mean, I'll tell him whatever you want, but I think you want him on our side. Right

now, he's holding his allegiance to Govern. He's allowing service requests to the Authority out of standing practice, but if he starts getting annoyed with us; he could easily offer his agency's vast resources and information to the Authority on a more permanent basis. That would not help us."

"What are you talking about? Some kind of coup? That's ridiculous. This is Regency, not some two-bit past earth government."

"I'm just letting you know what could happen. Espial is a unique agency. It reports to Govern, but in all honesty, it doesn't have to. Any message we send to Espial should be through Govern, and my advice is not to ruffle any feathers over there."

"Do you have any other advice?" Sinclair demanded with an edge of sarcasm.

"Actually, I do. The Authority is not backing down to Govern on anything right now. They're playing a waiting game on Fenrir, but I can't say how long that will last. I've talked to some people with connections on the Planning Station out there. They're considering another strike, one that probably won't fail."

"We've developed our own plans for such a contingency," Sinclair interrupted. "If it needs to be done, we have a way to do it clean."

"Authority doesn't care about clean," Skysdale insisted. "They want the threat removed, and they remain very anxious about another council sponsored failure. They're up in arms about a good many things right now. I suggest we give them a spot of good news, something to relax them. That's why I wanted to know about the Scampion problem. If we can tell them how that's being handled..."

Sinclair didn't let him finish. "Just tell the generals we finally got Espial clearance to dispose of Mr. Scampion."

12. Run

Normalcy prevailed over the freighter pads, at least relative normalcy. The sounds that escaped the port were sounds of efficiency, the sounds that any pilot accepted as part of the job. The maintenance drones hummed along from ship to ship as fuelers glided back and forth from the pads to the storage depot. Mechanical arms clanked about as the grind of tractor belts echoed throughout the vast open spaces.

Rath didn't shy from this clamor; it comforted him, eased his tensions. For a moment, it even erased his pressing alarm. The urgency that gripped him, hastened him to leave Janus, could not keep him from taking this stroll of tribute. He walked the pads freely without worry of a landing freighter or a launching shuttle; the Orbital Control panel highlighted the "Clear Space" signal. He took a roundabout path to his scout, surveying the docking bays for what he thought might be the last time.

He didn't see any other pilots, just a few haulers working the loader belts. He nodded as he walked by, cascading his glance about the port in general. It felt like home, and he was leaving it. He would miss this place. It satisfied his expectations, satisfied his needs. Away from most people, away from the noise and confusion they brought with them; here he could exist in peace with a mind to his memories and the possibility of future scouts.

Future scouts? He didn't think so, not from here anyway. He could not imagine life returning to normal. He might find a new freighter port in some obscure sector, but he had grown accustomed to this one, and he wondered if he would ever get the chance to become comfortable with another.

He climbed through the access hatch of his scout. He had certainly learned to appreciate this new vessel. He equipped it with everything he ever wanted and a whole lot more. A dream ship to be sure. Flying it over his old scout represented a change he accepted eagerly. Maybe the same would apply to a landing port once he found a new home.

Problem was, he just didn't know where that would be, and he didn't know what he would do when he got there. He heaved a heavy breath at the sensation; no where to go, no true destination. He stepped up to the cockpit and settled into the pilot's chair.

Maybe he was overreacting. That was what Lar thought, and he respected the middleman. But Lar wasn't at the Planning Station near Fenrir when everything went bad. He didn't feel the tension in the Authority officers, didn't see Jack lose control. And, of course, there was the little matter of the Fenrites.

How could he just shrug that off? And how could he continue with his life without always looking over his shoulder? He wasn't about to solicit scout bids from Janus again. He knew that would be a mistake. He'd basically be telling the councils exactly where he'd be alone, out in space near some unexplored planet. What an opportunity that would be.

Maybe he could change his name, adopt a new identity. He'd have to pay for that, and obtain a brand new scouting license.

But then again, maybe now he was being paranoid.

He shook his head.

"Not paranoid," he whispered to himself. "Realistic. The Fenrites weren't there, and that's a fact."

He cursed that thought, the one revelation that plagued him. He spoke to the empty space of the cockpit as if he expected a response.

"They're trying to cover something up, and they're not going to want me around. If I figured to check the maintenance logs, they're bound to check the same soon enough."

He groaned at a new thought. He requested a direct download from the port logs to his ship. That was stupid. There'd be a record of the transfer. They'd know. They'd know he had inspected exactly what they wouldn't want him to see. His frustration mounted.

"Crap! Why did I do that? I could've picked up an anonymous portable and downloaded it to that." He slapped his palm harshly against the arm of the pilot's chair. "Now, they're not going to have a choice. They're going to have to shut me up. I have to tell somebody." He looked about as if searching for an answer. "Maybe the media, but will they listen? They may think I'm just another nut. Or maybe I can go directly to the council. I can tell them what I know, and that I won't talk. Yeah right. I'll be dead before I hit the floor. But what else do I have?"

He didn't want this, didn't want adventure or excitement. He just wanted to sail through the stars, walk on planets with nothing but rock. He thought of his scout landings, how the ship used to shake and make him sick to his stomach. Right now, he felt worse, and he would have accepted a hundred such atmospheric entries to get out of this. He just wanted to be left alone.

"I've got to find someone that can use this, someone that can get me out of this, someone in a deeper fix."

An idea lit in his mind, a small spark that he latched a desperate hope upon. He brought up the current event files he had downloaded to his portable. He entered a single search word. *Pirates*.

#

Espial agents, the intelligence branch of Regency with ties to both the Authority and Regency Govern, reached Janus literally three standard minutes too late. Before altering the maintenance records of the freighter port, they

confirmed all previous downloads. They tracked a single data transfer to Rath Scampion's scout vessel. Had Espial been given the task to deal with Mr. Scampion at the outset there would have been no such sloppiness as to leave such logs in existence.

Undeterred by the temporary setback, they cleared the logs. They purged all indications of a maintenance check being performed on Rath's old ship. All references to the scout's landing and unloading of emeralds and rubies were also deleted. There would be no official record that Rath ever landed on Janus after his initial trip to Fenrir.

Under high priority, they then identified Rath's new scout and visually confirmed that the vessel remained docked at the freighter port. A consideration was given to boarding the scout and deleting all files, but since that would not confirm the destruction of data from Rath's portable, the decision was aborted. They made no advance upon the vessel and did nothing that would keep the ship from launch.

Remaining at a far distance, but keeping the craft under surveillance, the agents acquired their subject. After watching Rath enter his scout, they transmitted a simple warning that the mark just got its wings.

#

Jack stepped lively through the docking corridor, moving from a transport to the SH-4. A strange experience. Landing curtains veiled each ship as they orbited Janus' moon. The bridging arm that allowed access to both ships was now enveloped by each of their curtains, an overlap which created a visual disorientation in the translucent tube. Jack steadied himself with a firm grip on the hand holds as he moved to the opposite end of the passage. He fixed his focus on one spot ahead of him, a point within a vacuum of light where he knew the porthole to the SH-4 waited. As he closed upon the far end, the hull finally came into view just as the blackness of space swallowed the transport behind him.

He pulled open the hatch and stepped inside. Unfortunately, very little waited within the hi-tech ship to help him regain his orientation. The SH-4, fourth generation spy class vessel, was engineered for stealth and speed. The interior hull sloped in flowing curves. Design techniques used to make the ship invisible to most forms of radar left the coordinator with an overwhelming sense of imbalance. It took him long moments to assure himself that he stood erect and that up was up and down was down.

Once on sure feet, he moved directly to the cockpit, ignoring the three other Espial operatives manning control and surveillance terminals. He sat down in the empty co-pilot's chair and nodded a greeting to the pilot.

"What's your name, captain?"

"Taranson, sir. Captain Allen Taranson."

Jack perused his portable. "Earth born, fifteen years in the Authority, another seven in Espial. I see you have fifth level clearance. Very impressive for a captain."

"Pilots of the SH spy class vessel require heavy clearance, sir. We remain at captain level because that's how we want it."

Jack raised a single eyebrow. "You don't want to be a colonel? Or maybe even a general?"

The pilot almost laughed out loud. "No, sir. Much better to be a captain. Enough rank to have privileges, not enough to be held accountable."

The coordinator nodded in understanding. "I see that you're very comfortable with your position. I also realize that if you have level five clearance you have a good idea of what's going on here. You probably even know who I am."

Jack paused to inspect the pilot's reaction. There was little, only a wry smile. Jack tested the good humor. "You know I have the power to take away this comfortable station of yours, if I have to."

The pilot laughed again, catching Jack quite off guard.

"Something funny about that, captain? Or maybe you don't believe me."

Taranson maintained his amusement even as he shook his head. "I believe you have the power to reassign me, but only if I really screw up. I don't know what your particular deal is, and to tell the truth, I don't care. Bottom line for me is one thing - I follow orders while telling you what is and isn't possible. I don't get caught up in power struggles. I let you make the decisions. If you really have anything on the portable of yours, then you should already know that."

"I do know that," Jack replied simply. "That's why you were chosen for this mission. I just want you to understand the margin for error is a great deal smaller. I may ask you to do things that seem impossible. Even so, I want you to follow those orders. Understand?"

"I thought that was already clear."

Jack finally returned the smile. "We're going to get along just fine."

#

Rath rubbed his temples as he read the news briefs. He kept coming back to one name, a name he really didn't want anything to do with. Angelo.

Pirates who hired and paid for their own mercenary forces were dangerous; dangerous to freighters and merchants, dangerous to miners and colonies, dangerous to the Authority, and dangerous to scouts. But the Authority apparently had their fill of Angelo and they now targeted him as a top priority. The job fell upon some reassigned Station General. The Authority actually bragged during a mediacast that they intended to end the threat of the marauders and Angelo once and for all.

A good deal of speculation existed as to what would happen, how the conflict might unfold. Most thought there would be no battle. Most believed that Angelo would escape. Simply up and move his operation to a new corner of the galaxy. They wouldn't find him if he ran, and why wouldn't he run, especially since the media revealed the new directive through galactic feeds.

The Authority was also taking too long. That in itself added to the conjecture. They announced their intentions, but seemed to be taking their own sweet time about deploying a force. They knew where Angelo set up his base of operations. It wasn't a big secret. Semele; the planet Angelo was supposed to scout years ago, a planet he simply took over for himself. But with the wealth he had accumulated from trading with pirates, rebels and outcasts, he could leave Semele; find a new planet, an entire system of planets.

Others argued he might stay, fight it out to defend his new world. Reports identified other rebels joining up, hoping to make a stand against Regency Imperialism. That in itself offered an explanation for the Authority sluggishness. Perhaps they wanted all the rebels to join together at Semele.

Too political for Rath. He didn't want to be caught up in this kind of thing; he didn't care about imperialism or Regency, but if Angelo was really going to make a war out of this, then it created a possible way out of his own mess. Angelo would want everything he could use against the Authority, even information.

But handing over his files to marauders contained its own risks, certainly more than approaching the media. Rath kept debating the issue in his mind. He wanted to drop off copies of his logs to the news agencies, let them handle it - a whole lot easier and safer than trying to find a pirate. But that last newscast ended any hope of an easy solution. He simply couldn't bet his life that the media wasn't under the Regency control. Not that betting his life on someone like Angelo was any more comforting. That was like the zebra asking the tiger for protection from the lion. But what else could he do?

He transmitted a call for launch clearance from Orbital Control. Immediately, he began to think of all the things that could go wrong. He held his breath as he waited. Did they already know he was trying to leave? Would they try to stop him? He wondered what he would do if he wasn't cleared. He felt worse than when he was on his way to Fenrir to steal gems. He felt trapped and scared.

He almost exploded with relief when he received final clearance, but all of his fear wouldn't fade. Something nagged at him again. This time it wasn't something he forgot or overlooked. It was just a feeling, a bad feeling. And paranoid or not, he began to trust his feelings.

#

Jack pointed to his portable. "Espial agents, your guys, just transmitted that our bird is getting ready to fly the nest."

Taranson checked the upfeed from Orbital Control. "Scout vessel on a freighter pad near Terhit just got clearance to take off. Launch detected. The ship is away and taking orbit. High altitude course, and through the atmosphere. It's now pulling away from Janus, holding a course for system departure, probably loading course codes into the Boscon navigational computer right now."

Jack scanned his own portable before confirming the ship belonged to Rath. "Absolutely. That's our little birdie, trying to get away. Question is where is he going to go? I don't know if I'd make a bet on this one."

Jack lasercabled his portable to the SH-4 navigation computer. "I'm downloading a tracking program into your computer. It traces a beacon from that ship. Whenever Mr. Scampion is not in Boscon, we should be able to pick it up if we're near the same system."

"Planted a little tracking insect, eh? Espial do that for you?"

Jack just smiled. "No, the pilot did it all by himself, ordered a bunch of Authority equipment and installed it himself. I just asked the supply officer to attach a beacon to one of the stabilizers. That's the one thing this pilot of ours won't fool with. He doesn't like rough flights."

"Cute."

"Thanks, but that's only going to help us when he's out of Boscon Push. It's up to you to hold him when he goes hyperlight."

"Which is what he's doing right now," the pilot added. "Ship off all screens, and off of Orbital Control. He's gone."

Jack nodded. "Not a surprise."

The pilot called back to the Espial agents manning the detection devices. "Report."

A burly voice from the rear control announced current status. "Boscon Push distortions picked up on all receptacles. Identifying patterns and submitting solution. Signature established, highly defined."

"It's a good pattern," Taranson offered to the coordinator as he checked the signature himself. "It'll stand out nicely for at least three days standard."

"What about the tracking gun?" Jack asked tersely.

"Moving into firing position now."

Taranson eased the spy vessel into the remnant wake of Rath's scout. With voice command, he engaged the tracking gun. A small barrel propelled a tiny microchip at hyperlight speeds in the direction of Rath's course. The chip, equipped with its own miniature source of Boscon propulsion, headed out into space with a dual purpose; to track the Boscon distortions and to leave a resounding trail for the SH-4 to follow.

For long drawn out moments, however, Taranson kept the spy vessel at sublight speed and made no attempt to fully engage the Boscon Props on his own ship.

Jack, not completely briefed on the new technology, questioned the tactic with obvious annoyance.

"Well, why aren't we moving?"

"We can't, not just yet," Taranson explained. "We have to wait fifteen standard minutes to allow the microchip to follow the target's wake and leave a trail that can be picked up by the receptacle in our nose cone. If we leave too early, we can overshoot the trail. As long as we keep firing the chips in standard intervals and allow them to set the path, we can move without ever going off track. We make up the lost time by traveling at a faster push. This ship is equipped with the new beryl-based Boscon Prop. Our maximum speed is nearly three times greater than our targets, but we have to remain at least fifteen minutes behind the last chip for as long as the target remains in Boscon Push."

"Make it ten minutes," Jack said.

The pilot tilted his head, offered the consequences of such a decision. "The chances of losing the path set by the chips increase."

"I'll take the risk."

"Your call." Taranson just shrugged, but offered a second alternative. "You know, we can fire a Boscon propelled torpedo with something similar to the tracking gun. The torpedo can follow the chips just like we can, but it can catch up to target, knock out our bird while it's still in Boscon."

The thought was enticing, but Jack held off. "No. I want to know where he comes out before we fire on him."

#

Rath did not set his navigation course directly for Semele. He chose a point in the populated Popai system instead. It was in the same general direction from Janus as Semele, but not so close that it would give away his final destination.

There was really no good reason for this ploy, nothing concrete anyway. He was free of Janus, out of the system and in full Boscon Push. This small deception seemed almost laughable. There was no indication he was in any further danger and no reason to think he couldn't make it directly to Semele, and Angelo, but that feeling of foreboding kept nagging at him.

Not satisfied with this small deception, he decided to add to his craftiness, make a move completely out of character.

In mid Boscon Push, he cut the props. A procedure, in fact, which set off automatic warnings. He set no course changes and allowed for no computer computation. He did not allow for gradual speed reduction. He simply killed all forward propulsion. Not safe by any stretch of the imagination.

Without the force of the props, the laws of physics took hold of his ship and returned it forcibly to a sublight speed. Nothing existed in deep space for sound to bounce off, but Rath swore he heard the echo of a metallic groan coming from the exterior of his ship. Alarm lights flashed all around him. Monitors gauged the integrity of the hull as the computer warned of

intolerable heat and stress levels, but he himself was in no position to analyze them.

His body pitched forward as if a mule kicked him square in the back. His breath simply halted and he felt his innards compress. If he hated atmospheric entry, this was worse. Even the Authority issued stabilizers could not keep the cockpit from shuddering. For a moment, he thought he must have crashed into an asteroid, and his ship, as well as his body, was being torn apart by the unforgiving vacuum of space. Rath tried to focus on the nav panels, but the force threatened to drop him into unconsciousness. He peered through the barely open slits of his eyelids. His course was preset by the navcom, but any such assurances of clear passage faded away the instant he killed the props. For all he knew, the scout could be spinning out of control and ninety degrees off its original course.

Slowly, the force of the abrupt halt diminished. Rath began to breathe again, though somewhat painfully. Knowing the dangers he now faced, he urgently flipped viewing terminals to various magnifications as he looked to the viewshields. Blinking his eyes, he finally saw the specs of tiny stars in the distance. The ship remained on a steady course and was not engaged in a spin of any sort.

Scanners sent out wave patterns, but they data return was painfully slow. Not a single solid object appeared around him. Not ready to accept such luck, he focused on his heading, fixed an exterior camera upon his forward path. He took hold of the flight stick, ready to maneuver clear of an asteroid or even a star, but there was nothing ahead of him but empty space.

With no immediate threat, he became aware of a pounding throb in his head, compliments of the rough ride. His shoulders ached as well. This was something he definitely didn't want to do again, but for some reason, he felt better about it. His sense of concern wasn't as burdensome. That in itself offered a welcome change and perhaps even made it worth the risk of what he just went through.

He gave himself a few minutes to relax as his navigational computer scanned the open space trying to find a nearby system. After long moments, the computer switched to a star recognition program and fixed the scout's position without having wave scanned a single object in space.

"No one would believe I'd do something like that," he said to himself. "I guess if I ever wanted to lose someone that would've been the best way."

He didn't go back into Boscon Push right away. He let the ship slowly regroup, moving forward at sublight speed, drifting through one full system before even igniting the Boscon Props. Even then, he did not push full power. He monitored all diagnostic panels before lighting up to greater than one third push. Once convinced his engines received no damage, he entered the coordinates for Semele into the navcom. The thought of dealing with a pirate like Angelo wasn't any less troublesome, but any other concerns seemed to finally drift away.

#

Jack couldn't ignore the blank terminal which previously displayed the reception of the tracking chips.

"What happened?"

Taranson spoke abruptly. "We lost contact with the directional signal." The pilot's concentration then fixed upon bringing the SH-4 slowly and safely out of Boscon Push. He couldn't afford to continue at that speed without a preset course. The risk of smashing into a planet expanded with each second in hyperlight.

Jack didn't care much about safety, he wanted answers.

"Did we overshoot?"

"I don't think so. The pattern was tight. We were receiving the last chip's signal, but then it just stopped." He called back to another agent. "Get a fix on that last chip. Find out what happened."

"Malfunction?" the coordinator offered.

"Possible. The chip might not have been able to take the strain of propulsion, but that's happened before and they always deliver what's akin to a distress signal so we know to send out another. This chip just stopped sending."

An operative monitoring a tracking station called forward a report. "I've located the chip. It is not signaling a course. It's in a search pattern for the Boscon distortion."

"Any registered malfunctions?" Taranson questioned almost harshly.

"Negative. It's simply trying to reestablish connection with the distortion."

"Scan the system with our receptacles."

Jack looked backed and forth, not understanding the dialogue. "What's going on?"

"The chip lost the Boscon signature. It's still functioning. It's in a search pattern trying to reestablish contact, but we're not picking up any Boscon distortions in this area. There hasn't been a ship here probably in weeks."

"Then where'd he go?" Jack demanded.

The pilot could give no answer.

"Keep scanning, enlarge the field," Taranson called back to the operatives as he put a fist to his chin and stared at the blank screen before him. "There's no debris. There'd be a trail of debris if he broke up."

"You think he crashed?" Jack questioned, his own doubts obvious.

"Didn't you hear what I said? There'd be debris. No, he's in one piece. I just don't know how he managed to break off his distortion path like that." The pilot looked to Jack's portable. "Are you getting anything on that tracking device? If he dropped out of Boscon, he can't be far."

Jack looked at the terminals. "He's not anywhere near this system."

Taranson wasn't about to accept the situation. He called back again to the tracking ops. "Any indication of a Boscon distortion in this system at all?"

"Negative."

The pilot paused, looked at his screens, but they didn't hold the answer to his question. "Alright, let's consider this logically. We had a push signature, we have no malfunction report, and we have no debris field. Let's assume he stayed in push and something happened. There'd still be a signature in the area, something we could pick up. Problem is, there isn't, so he can't still be in push. That means..." He came up with an idea, one almost too difficult to accept. "No way. It's possible, but not real smart. But it would explain everything."

"What?" Jack demanded.

Taranson didn't want to say it, but it was the only true explanation. "He must have broke Boscon Push. Just killed his engines. That's the only way this could happen. Normally there's a diminishing trail, a slow deceleration the chips can identify. But there was no trail, it just ended, and the tracking chip goes flying right on through. By the time the chip realizes there's no more distortion to follow, we're about three or four systems away. That's one gutsy move to pull off. Gutsy and stupid"

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Can that really be accomplished? Just stop, just like that."

"It's risky, but yes." Taranson looked to the coordinator. "My question would be why would he do that? He can't know we're following him. He couldn't have scanned us. That's impossible. But there had to be some reason he took that precaution, and the only thing I can think of is that he knew he was being followed."

"He's scared," Jack replied, reconsidering the factors around his own decisions. "When he's scared he overreacts. Damn, I should have known. Can we find him?"

"Probably. I don't want to give you anything more definite than that. If he cut his props, the trail just ends. We'll be able to find that again. That's not a problem. The hard part is finding out where he ended up, and where he restarted his props. It's finding that new path which is going to be the trick."

The black emptiness of space as seen through the SH-4's viewshields seemed to mock any such attempt. Jack peered into the vastness that encompassed the spy vessel and grunted with defiance.

"I need to find this guy."

Taranson hid his own misgivings and simply muttered the obvious. "I know you do."

13. Meetings

Empty space, that's all they could find. Taranson mumbled to himself as the SH-4 spy vessel crisscrossed several systems. Still, nothing. He was able to backtrack to Rath's break point, the moment he killed his props. That information was maintained by the receptacle links which captured the signals from the tracking chips, but Taranson failed to locate any new Boscon distortions. There was simply no sign of a second hyperlight path. And no sign of the scout either, just empty space.

No trail and no ship. Nothing on radar and nothing on Jack's sensor program. Even if Rath had managed to slip a curtain on the scout, the beacon would still reveal his position. But there was no signal, not from their current location and not from any neighboring systems. That meant either the beacon had ceased transmitting or Rath was gone, back in full Boscon Push.

Jack believed it was the latter. It was a simple matter of logic. If Scampion was scared enough to pull a stunt like killing his props, he certainly wouldn't hang around afterward. Finding the new path of Boscon distortion would prove that. It just wasn't going to be easy.

Taranson continued his search. He ordered all receptacles placed on wide array, but in truth, he didn't know which direction to follow. He knew the point in space where Rath had cut his props, but he couldn't predict the course changes brought upon by such a sudden displacement in power. Rath's scout could have ended up in any direction from the last monitored distortion. The turbulence of sudden shift could have sent the scout tumbling up or down, right or left, maybe even backward - or any combination. Who knew? There was just no way to tell. There was also the possibility that Rath kept his scout below hyperlight after re-engaging his engines. The scout could have traveled through half the system before powering props to a point where they would leave a clear signature.

Taranson turned to the coordinator with a look of frustration. "We've got his last known position pinpointed, but there's still no sign of debris, sir. It didn't break up in the shift. I'm sure of that. The target is probably under its own power and heading in a new direction."

"I'm sure it is, captain." Jack responded coolly.

Taranson tensed at the simple response. "We're searching for a trace now. All receptacles are functional and on full absorption. If there is a Boscon distortion nearby, we'll find it."

The tone was a little too official. Jack knew the pilot was worried about losing the scout and maybe he was now following standard procedure to cover

his own butt, so the coordinator offered his own understanding of the situation, just to add a little incentive.

"We have to find it, period. You shouldn't be caring if it's nearby or not. You know how far this goes up. No one on this vessel is going to be able to just shrug his shoulders and say 'Oh well, we lost him. We'll try and do better next time.' That's not going to fly, and neither will you in the future if we don't find Mr. Scampion."

Taranson grumbled again. He was about to protest against the impossible when he altered his focus to the nav terminal. "Fine, I'm instituting a new search pattern, a spherical enlargement. It's going to take some time, but it's the best way to ensure we're not moving off in the wrong direction."

"Whatever it takes," Jack replied simply.

The navigational computer displayed a three dimensional grid. Preset paths curved symmetrically around the end of the Boscon signature. The course of the ship created a growing sphere around that point. Amidst the free flowing precepts, Taranson engaged maneuvering power directly to the computer.

"There, the ship's on automatic pilot. It'll continue to circle about the last know point of distortion, the edge of the spherical pattern will increase with each pass." The pilot paused as he looked to Jack. He hesitated, but spoke his thoughts regardless of any misgivings. "Off the record, this isn't good. You're right; I know what this mission means. I want to find this guy as badly as you do, but I'm still wondering about this little move of his. He's not supposed to know he's being followed. You said he's scared and that may explain things. But what happens next? If he's scared enough to pull off a move like this, what else is he going to try?"

The coordinator considered the point. Breaking off push in mid-flight was dangerous, even life-threatening, not something he would have expected from Mr. Scampion. He chewed a thumbnail nervously as he could not offer an answer to the question.

"I'm serious," the pilot continued. "I've got clearance, I've seen the files on this. This guy's a loose cannon that can cause a lot of damage. If you were Rath Scampion and you're that scared, what would you do?"

"I guess I'd run, just like he did."

"To where?"

"The outer rim," Jack answered with a little more certainty. "He's comfortable out there. He's a long range scout, remember?"

"Yeah, but he's not on any scout mission. What's he going to do when he gets there? He's got no place to go."

"He needs time to think, to consider what's happening. He also feels vulnerable. You asked what I would do if I were him. That's not the right question. It's not about what I'd do, but what he would do. We have to think like him, consider his natural reactions. If I thought like Rath Scampion and I was scared, I'd get as far away as fast as I could. Then, I'd figure out how to save my skin. That's what he does, I know this guy. He likes to take time to

think, but he definitely has a thin line of nerve. He's not going to stick around and pretend like everything's fine and dandy. This little trick of his was a surprise, I have to admit, but surprises usually don't last."

Taranson crossed his arms. "Alright, let's go with that. He heads off to the far reaches of current exploration, maybe a trading post. What then?"

"Well, according to some of your fellow agents, he does have some information he can use against us. He took the time to download it into his own files. He must have had a reason. He might try to bargain with what he's got."

"To do that, he'll need to talk to us. Not an easy thing to do at the edge of the galaxy."

"He can send a message on a courier ship."

The pilot nodded. "So you think he might head to one of the last communication stops near the outer rim of colonization. He could send out a message from there and wait for a response."

"Why not? It fits with character."

Taranson abruptly turned away from the coordinator. He flipped on a secondary navigational computer and scanned certain sections of the outer rim. He spoke to himself as he perused the charts. "He might have been worried about being followed, but he wouldn't have chosen a path too far from his ultimate destination. My guess is he wouldn't want it to point like an arrow, but it would be close. If he continued his path at a slight angle from its origin, he could end up in any of these systems, but to return to Boscon Push, he'd have to go ..."

He gave quick orders to the shipboard computer. "Record present position. Put pattern on hold and save. End auto-pilot."

The pilot took control of the flight stick, glanced at the charts still displayed on his terminal and headed off out of the current system.

"What are you doing?" Jack questioned with more surprise than concern.

"Accepting your theory. If Scampion wanted to go to the outer rim from here, he'd head off in this direction, clear of the system. Once away from the system debris like the asteroid belt, he'd reassert Boscon Push. A good deal of pirate activity in that direction, but maybe he'd accept that as a diversion. If he's willing to just kill propulsion while in push, I doubt he'd consider pirates too much of a risk. Now, I can't say exactly which planet may be his destination, but there are a few communication bases out there. It's a bit of a gamble, he could have gone in the opposite direction, but I think it's worth the risk. If I don't find anything out here, I'll just return right back to where we were and continue the pattern we were on. Just a small loss of time."

Jack nodded.

In less than five standard minutes, the gamble was apparently rewarded.

"I got something. Boscon distortion detected." He directed a confirmation order to one of the operatives monitoring the wave tables. "Match that to our last distortion. Give me the probability of a match."

"Ninety six percent."

The pilot grinned. "I hope you remember that piece of good work when you make a report to the councils."

"Lead me to him and I'll put you up for higher level clearance." Jack offered with growing optimism.

#

Realization hit Rath like a snowball in the ear; it was cold and it stung. The Boscon Props leveled off, dropping him out of push. The Semele system became visible in his front viewshield just as he considered exactly what he was doing.

He was arriving in a system that was declared dangerous and off-limits to merchant vessels, freighters, and scouts. He was showing up with an incredible story just as word was spreading of Authority intervention in pirate activity. Semele was the home of Angelo, the pirate with the worst reputation in the galaxy; a man making his own rules, building his own fleet of ships, and creating a dominion in direct opposition to Regency.

But Rath's history was with Regency. He was a licensed scout pilot; his ship was now Authority issue. That certainly wasn't going to look good. Rath examined his wristband and his portable - his ties to the intricate web of information within Regency, his very identity. What was Angelo going to think when he scanned the information? Would he get the chance to explain what was going on at Fenrir and why he was forced to run? Worse, would he ever even see this now infamous figure?

Semele had become a port-of-call for all pirates; sanctuary for drifters and malcontents. Given a chance, they'd just cut off his arm and take the wristband and all the credits it gave them access to. One thing was for sure, they weren't just going to let him land and waltz up to the king of pirates.

"Stupid idea, stupid idea." Rath wiped his forehead, but any chance or backing out now fizzled away. The scout wasn't equipped with a curtain. He couldn't hide his presence, and two intercepting raider vessels made that point very clear.

Rath surrendered, gave up in more ways than one. His fate was no longer in his hands. He killed all forward propulsion, even powered his reverse thrusters to come to a complete halt. He ordered the computer to signal a general surrender on all channels. He entered the security code to remove his wristband and placed it with his portable on the console in front of him. He slouched in the pilot's chair as he waited to be boarded.

The marauders came in quiet politely, not skittish and not brazen. They were led by a physically fit middle-aged woman with auburn hair, but with graying visible near the roots. She nodded to the pilot, but her eyes scanned the entire cockpit with the quickness of the devil.

Rath decided to remain in his chair, not out of disrespect, he just didn't want to be viewed as a threat.

The woman seemed comfortable with the arrangement and gave no directive for him to get up.

"Are you hurt?" she asked almost compassionately, but in truth, it was more out of curiosity.

"No, I'm not hurt," Rath sighed as he eyed the armed escorts covering her flank.

"Do you know where you are?"

"I'm in the Semele system. The system is restricted. I know where I am."

The woman was almost too open with her comments, as if she was trying to surprise the scout. "This is an Authority class scout ship. We've heard the Authority plans to clean up this system. What's your deal? Are you the forward scout, check out our defenses, that sort of thing?"

"No," Rath said flatly. He was tired and he truly had surrendered in many ways. He didn't want to be there, didn't want to be boarded by marauders, and didn't like to think that this Angelo was his last hope. He hated pirates, but now he hated Regency, too.

"It's a long story," he admitted with a tired tone. "And I doubt you have the time or the desire to hear it. If it makes you feel any better, I'm not here to help anyone but myself, though I doubt that's going to work out."

The woman frowned, but apparently accepted the situation as it stood. Still, she was not quite comfortable with the possibilities. "You're only half-right. I don't have the time, not here anyway, but I do have the desire. Why don't you just give me an idea of what you want?"

Rath summed up his situation as quickly and as bluntly as possible. "This alien thing that's been on the media casts, there's something wrong with it. Regency is lying. I don't know why, but they are. First of all, the aliens are on Fenrir. I know. I was there. I saw them. I was also the first scout to land on the planet. Thing is, they weren't always there. When I made my first scout, there was nothing there, no life forms. I went back and all of a sudden something's going on. Regency went to great lengths to convince me I just missed this alien, but I found some gaping holes in their story. Nothing adds up and nothing makes sense. I don't know if you saw that report about the alien nuclear exchange, but even that sounded like a lie. I was there for that, too. Only two warheads exploded. Melees from a Planning Station intercepted the rest. I still don't know why they would broadcast something like that."

"What's all of this got to do with us?"

"Probably nothing, I just thought you may be able to use what I knew. Bad idea. I just realized it too late. I've been havin' a real bad stretch of luck."

"You just wanted to tell us this story, why not tell someone in the media?"

"I can't trust anyone."

The woman raised her eyebrows. "You think you can trust us?"

Rath actually allowed a light laugh to escape his lips. "I know, it's a bad idea. I just didn't realize it. I don't know. I was feeling trapped. I can't be too safe knowing what I know. They're going to come after me."

"Is that what you want from us, protection?"

"Sort of. No, not really." Rath struggled to explain in the simplest of terms and truly not caring if he offended his questioner. "I guess I wanted to drop the problem in someone else's lap, let you deal with it. I figured if you knew what I did, they'd be more worried about you and they'd leave me alone." Rath looked up almost hopefully. "You can understand that, can't you? It's not a secret if it's out in the open. Why would they even bother with me anymore when you know all that I know?"

"By 'they', I assume you mean Regency."

"I guess so. I don't know which councils are involved; I don't even know what it is they're involved in. The Authority seems to be a big part of it, though. They're the ones keeping the wraps on the system."

"You wouldn't happen to have any proof of what you're saying?"

"I have a few reports, maintenance logs, things like that. Who knows if they're any good. Everything I have is logged in my portable." He nodded to the components in front of him. "That's my wristband, too. You can pretty much check my whole history with that."

The woman frowned again, but this time deep lines formed around her eyes. At this point, she didn't like what she heard and she revealed as much. "You realize of course that if you were a plant sent by the Authority you'd have fraudulent credentials. Everything you have may be forged."

"Whatever," Rath responded in a tone of sheer futility.

"I see. Well, why don't you come and stay with us for a while. Give us a chance to go through your ship."

Rath didn't argue.

#

The SH-4 came into the Semele system fully veiled. It dropped out of Boscon Push completely unnoticed by the orbital control monitors and the heavily armed pirate vessels.

Jack was aware of where they were heading even before they dropped out of push. Taranson had advised him of the course being transmitted back by the tracking chips. Semele was the only planet that made sense. Rath was making a dash for the marauders.

"Looks like our boy planned on bargaining alright," the pilot offered. "He just had no intention of doing it with us. You were right about one thing. This Scampion must be scared, because a rational man does not deal with marauders."

Taranson eased the spy vessel about the system utilizing all of its evasive technology. He slid into a surveillance post near the boarded scout and read the data from sensors directed on the interior of the targeted ship.

"There's a lot of activity going on in there. I read core downloads and laser transfers to dishes on Semele's surface. We can pick up some of what's being

said inside and it sounds like a bunch of techs going through the computers. I've got no match to Scampion's recorded voice pattern. If he's still onboard, he's being very quiet."

"This certainly does complicate things," Jack agreed. "He's probably not even on the scout anymore. He's either dead or being questioned down on Semele."

"What should we do?" Taranson asked.

"For now, keep us veiled and monitor the system. If they didn't kill him, then he's still here somewhere. I doubt he's been here long enough to convince anyone to take him away. My guess is they'll be careful with him, if they believe him at all. Can you monitor ship traffic?"

"Affirmative. We're already hooked up to their space control systems. Untraceable link of course."

"Good, I want to know if any ship goes into push. It's also time the Authority knocks out this pirate base. Can we get a message out of here that'll reach someone fast without being detected?"

"Absolutely. I've got six Boscon-driven courier balls that I can launch. We can set them with Authority base precepts. A message should reach Authority Command in less than forty standard hours."

"The launch won't be detected?"

"I'll keep a curtain around it until it reaches hyperlight. No one's going to see it."

"Fantastic, maybe things are finally going our way. I think the Authority would be happy to know that it can remove the problem of Rath Scampion and Angelo with one strike, don't you?"

14. Opal Listens

The pirates treated Rath a little like a prisoner and a little like a guest, as if they were concerned about insulting him but not so much so that they weren't going to keep a close eye on him. After landing on Semele, they brought him to some kind of administrative complex. Over half the structure appeared buried in the ground. When night fell, tight-lipped guards escorted him through empty halls, brought him to a nice-sized office with two chairs, a single desk, and stark white walls.

"Pirate headquarters," Rath thought to himself.

His escorts asked to sit and then simply left him alone with no further instructions. He had to wait less than a minute before the woman that boarded his ship entered and took a seat behind the lone marble-topped table.

Rath sighed uncomfortably.

"Something wrong Mr. Scampion?"

Rath looked down to the ground. "No, nothing at all. But I was hoping to meet with Angelo."

"I'm Angelo's wife," she said almost bluntly. "My name is Opal Stelbound. Angelo doesn't have a last name, at least he never told me about it."

Rath blinked with mild shock.

"Are you surprised that I'm his wife or that he never told me his last name?"

"I don't know," the scout managed.

"Probably both," Opal offered, "But it doesn't matter. Are you at least satisfied that you're talking with someone of importance? I may not be the top man, so to speak, but I have my own pull within the organization. Depending on what happens here, Angelo may be available later, but he is rather busy. I'm sure you can understand."

"Yes, I can."

Opal's eyes narrowed, almost with malice. And the room seemed to close upon him. The empty white walls melded with the woman's cold stare. "Can you, Mr. Scampion? Can you understand why he's busy? We've received the same reports that I'm sure you're aware of. The Authority has had enough of us and they're coming to attack."

Her sudden shift in emotion caught Rath off guard. He professed his innocence out of instinct. "I'm not with the Authority. They're after me."

"Of course they are," she responded with obvious sarcasm. "I'm sure that's why they gave you that nice scout ship. It's basically brand new. Or are you going to tell me it's stolen?"

"It's not stolen. It's a long story."

"I don't have time for long stories. The Authority is coming, remember?"

"I know. That's why I'm here. I'm trying to give you something that may save you from them. And if you can, you'll end up saving me in the process. Don't you remember what I said? Regency is trying to cover up the real story on Fenrir, the aliens. If you check my logs you'll see that I was there, that I had the scout bid. There was nothing on the planet."

"We did check your logs. We also scanned the accounts tied to your wristband. You've been receiving payments from the Authority for quite some time now, certainly long enough to train you as an Espial Op. Why were they paying you?"

Rath groaned. It was all coming apart. They weren't going to believe him. He was dead.

But Opal offered yet another surprise. "Did you know there's a beacon on your ship?"

The question barely broke through his despair.

"Excuse me?"

"A beacon," Opal stressed, "a guidance mechanism which transmits a signal that can be pinpointed by a simple tracking program."

Rath almost laughed. Of course. Where did the scout come from, where did the extra parts come from? Did he really think the Authority would just hand over a ship without an ulterior motive? He could almost sense the coordinator's manipulative hand at work.

"Lasonelli," he groaned. He could visualize the scout in the Planning Station hangar, see himself adding the modifications. "I probably installed it myself without even knowing."

"Explain." Opal demanded.

Rath considered the request. *Explain*. Was that done so easily? Where should he start? He decided to stick to the basics when describing the coordinator.

"Lasonelli is the council coordinator that tried to prevail on me that I missed the Fenrites on my initial scout. He's the man behind all the lies. He convinced me to stay on the Authority Planning Station which observed Fenrir. Some kind of crap about me being part of history, the first man on Fenrir. Just a bunch of more bull. In return, he paid me, gave me a new scout, and allowed me to install all the new equipment I wanted. I'm one stupid man."

"You didn't know about the beacon?"

"No, I didn't." Rath's tone was defeated, and he didn't expect to be believed. To his surprise, he was.

Opal tapped a laser pen against the marble tabletop. "Do you realize that it was that beacon that saved your life?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your story is too far-fetched to believe. It's exactly the kind of confusing tale which would make me expect you're buying time. The problem is that

simple beacon. If you were a forward scout for the Authority, why would they want to put a tracking signal on your ship?"

Rath didn't know how to leave well enough alone. Unthinkingly, he offered his own theory for the beacon.

"What if they just wanted to follow me to you, to make sure they found you? What if I was supposed to lead them to you, wouldn't that be possible?"

"They wouldn't need to follow you to find us. We're not hiding. We've made no secret of where we are. You knew how to get to us and so does the Authority. Angelo wants it that way. He doesn't want to worry about which pirates and mercenaries are authentic and which were Espial agents planted to discover our headquarters. It's bold, but it makes sense."

Rath didn't see it that way. It was almost too unbelievable. "You think it makes sense to publicize your base? You're pirates!"

Opal scoffed at the remark. "Be that as it may, the Authority has been very busy, and we weren't as big a concern as you might think. The rebel planets, that's what the Authority wanted to control. Those were the ones that caused a real headache for the generals and for Regency Govern. Semele was never a colonized world; we were never part of Regency. We made no contributions, paid no taxes. We were never on their books. So we never really caused them any true loss. Sure, we made our share of hits on freighters, but nothing that would interfere with the Authority's budget. But when one of these colonized worlds goes independent, the military uses a huge chunk of funding. That's where they concentrated their forces, until now."

"So you believe I'm not working for the Authority?"

"I believe there's more to your story than might first appear," Opal responded. "I believe the Authority is worried about you for some reason, worried enough to keep tabs on you. Besides the beacon, there is further proof in the news reports and in your logs. There is apparently a power struggle going on between Regency Govern and Authority Command. There is also a Station General that is being pacified. Someone is giving him this duty to make up for some kind of contrived insult which occurred on an outer planet. We believe the general came from the Fenrite system. We also believe the power struggle between Govern and the military stems from a problem on Fenrir. You did indeed receive the scout bid for that planet, so it is reasonable to expect you have something to offer."

"So you want to use what I know?" Rath asked hopefully.

"For now, I'd just like to know more." Opal sat back. "I must admit something. I lied before. I do have time for a long story. In fact, there's not much I can do right now but wait for the Authority or for Angelo. I don't know which will come first. But perhaps I can find something useful in what you have to say."

Rath sat forward with a new sense of urgency. "Wait for the Authority? You don't plan to stay here and fight them, do you?"

"I don't know what we plan to do," Opal revealed. "Angelo has at least three contingency plans. We'll either fight, run, or a combination of the two. He keeps his decisions to himself. He has to. He's dealing with pirates, remember."

"What about you? Doesn't he trust you?"

"I think he does, but I'm a mercenary and he knows that. That will probably always cause a strain in our relationship. It's nothing I can, or care to do anything about. I do, however, want to hear more of what you have to say. Why don't you tell me the full story?"

#

In a high orbit around Semele, continuously avoiding pirate fighters and orbital space control scanners, the SH-4 concentrated its highly advanced sensory equipment on the surface of the planet. Semele remained almost entirely deserted, and the pirate encampments stood out like black spots on the sun. The SH-4 contained the power to locate and follow a single individual on a planet with a population in the millions. Semele's total inhabitants numbered far less than a hundred thousand, and the few structures built to house them were easy to scan.

In less than an hour standard, Taranson reported a confirmed location of Rath Scampion.

"He's in the largest complex located on the planet, on the smallest of the three continents. He's sitting in a centrally located room with one other person. Infrared shows no other personnel in or near the room. That means no guards. They obviously trust him enough to leave him alone with an interrogator. Our operatives in the back are establishing sound wave enhancement and recording. They're sending the feedback to my terminal. I got him. Yep, that's our man." The pilot paused to listen to the conversation. "Not good news. He's telling everything."

The coordinator folded his long, thin arms across his narrow chest. "That's really not a surprise. That's why he's here. He wants them to spread what he knows. Damn fool."

Jack shook his head as he considered the full merit of the situation. With few alternatives, he made a snap decision.

"There's only one other person in the room, right? I want that person tracked now, too. Same priority as Scampion. I don't want you to lose either one."

Taranson just nodded. "It's a woman. They're already beyond introductions. I'll have to wait a while before I can get any formal name ID."

"Just keep track of her, as well as anyone else she gives details to. How long do you think it will take before the Authority gets our message?"

"It's going to take about at least a day standard more for the message to get to the nearest base, but that doesn't mean the Authority is going to be able to

get here right away. They'll have to assemble a proper force to take out this base. I know they're planning it anyway, but they may have their own schedule."

"If they care about security, they won't take too much time. Let's just hope all of our targets stay in the same fishbowl until then. As for you, your job is simple; track every individual that gains knowledge of Fenrir. My bet is they'll keep it quiet, maintain the knowledge between just a few. And they'll probably remain in that base station. When the Authority does finally get here, I want you to signal them. That building is ground zero."

Taranson saw no problem with that order. "That's got to be Angelo's planning headquarters. It'd be a main target anyway."

Jack waved a hand in acceptance. "Just as long as it gets done."

#

Opal recorded the discussion, but made no transmission. All information was kept within her personal portable. When Rath finished his story by explaining why he came to Semele, she looked at him with more questions.

"So you think this alien colonized Fenrir and that's what Regency wants to keep hidden?"

Rath didn't know how else to put it. "I guess. I just know that Fenrir was as barren as any other planet I've explored. When I went back, suddenly everyone involved is talking about an alien life form. In that time frame, it's hard to believe that a microbe or something evolved to what I saw as a Fenrite. That means they had to come from somewhere else. They colonized Fenrir just like we colonized a whole bunch of barren worlds."

Opal shook her head. "But from your description of them, it hardly seems possible that these Fenrites are capable of space flight, let alone interstellar travel. To colonize, the Fenrites must have reached a certain state of advancement. From everything you can tell me about them, they were not close to that level of ability. Maybe they would be ready for satellites, or space exploration within their own system, but not colonization of other solar systems. You yourself said they were living in huts of grass and mud, highly a sign of advanced technology."

"Yeah, but they were also able to shoot down a transport. They had missile capability which means they had rocket science."

"But for colonization you need more than that."

Rath remembered what he was told, how it was explained to him. "I don't know if that makes a difference. Apparently, that was a mistake made by the research techs on the Planning Station. They tried to put Fenrite progress on the same path as our own. They missed things because they thought the Fenrites advanced just like us. They couldn't believe the Fenrites could accomplish missile capability, but they did. I was in the transport that was shot down, so I know that for a fact. The Fenrites are militaristic so they were

able to advance more quickly in some areas than others. At least, that's what I was told anyway."

"Who told you that?"

"The coordinator, Jack Lasonelli."

Opal asked the obvious. "The same person that lied to you. You think you can believe him about that?"

The question resounded with clear meaning, and Rath answered with a resolve of his own.

"No, I can't believe anything he said, but I'm not basing it on just that. I remember the research techs. They were surprised about a lot of things. They were confused and everybody was nervous on that Planning Station."

"It doesn't matter. I won't argue what you observed on the station, but there are other inconsistencies with the theory. If the Fenrites were able to colonize, they would also have been seen in more systems. There would have been reports by freighters and other scouts. Fenrir's not right next door to this system, but it's not all that far, either. There has never been a reported sighting of an alien space ship in this sector. And what about the orbital scanners being pressed into service all over the galaxy? The exploratory councils are struggling to find signs of other life forms. Regency has the power to search a good deal farther than Fenrir. I have seen reports of scanner scopes with the ability to observe planets outside of this galaxy. If the Fenrites were colonizing, why aren't they being discovered on another planet? Why just Fenrir?"

Rath rubbed his eyes with fatigue. "I don't understand where this is going. Are you saying you don't believe me?"

Opal smiled. It held only a small degree of warmth, perhaps as much as she was truly able to give, but she offered what she could to the scout pilot.

"Again, I accept your observations, but not your conclusions. I believe there was nothing on Fenrir when you made your first scout. The maintenance reports, your personal logs, the fact that you came back with minerals; all of these things attest to the fact that your scout was able to scan the planet. There was nothing there, and there is something there now. But I don't think the Fenrites colonized that planet."

Rath threw up his hands in near frustration. "If they weren't there to start, and they didn't colonize, then how'd they get there? They certainly didn't just appear out of thin air."

Opal shrugged "I don't know if I'd go that far."

"What are you talking about?"

Opal threw out her own theory. "There has been speculation about dimensional deviation, a curvature in space which might allow for someone or something to step through a portal and appear on the other side of the universe. The possibility of such a distortion arose when techs began to experiment with wave transportation, you know, a way to allow scanner readings for ships in Boscon Push. They were marginally successful in

forwarding wave patterns through these dimensional deviations. It may be possible that that's how the Fenrites ended up on Fenrir. Some kind of portal may have opened on their home planet and swallowed a few hundred thousand."

"You think that's how they got there?"

"It's only another theory. It would explain Regency's interest as well as the Authority's. A portal allowing long distance transportation for life forms could open up endless possibilities. Unfortunately, just with your idea, this explanation has its own inconsistencies. My main problem with this is that I seriously doubt the portal would allow for planet to planet transportation. Dimensional deviations in space may be possible, but I can't imagine how they would work within the atmosphere of a planet. I just can't see how the Fenrites could have crossed over if they weren't in space faring vessels. Second, I can't even guess how they were able to move so many to this new planet. You said there were many villages on Fenrir, even a large colony that you saw destroyed by nuclear weapons. How all of that could be transported through a portal is rather confusing."

Opal examined the notes on her portable. She spoke more to herself than to Rath. "An interesting mystery. A barren planet, then an alien. But an alien with limited technology, an alien that lived in huts, hardly a sign of advanced means. The Authority closed off the system, but that was all. If Fenrites were on other planets, they would have to secure an entire quadrant. Fenrir was within scanning range for some time. Why did it take Regency so long to find them? Because they weren't there. That's what your scout proves. But how'd they get there if they didn't colonize?"

The questions did little to invigorate Rath. If anything, the words began to buzz in his ear like the lecture of an uninspired speaker. He didn't care about the Fenrites, or how they ended up on the planet. He just wanted to tell his story to these pirates and move on. Within his fatigued state, he could not fight back a yawn.

Opal smiled again, this time with a little less warmth. She handed back his wristband and his portable. "Here, you can have these back. I see you're getting tired, so I won't bore you with anymore considerations."

At a possible point of conclusion, Rath perked up in his seat. "So what are you going to do? Are you going to issue the information on the coms, threaten Regency, what?"

"That's not up to me."

Rath almost slumped in defeat. "You're going to have to talk it over with Angelo."

"Of course. The important point is that the events on Fenrir are being covered up. It's a weakness for Regency and that can be exploited. He'll know what to do. As for you, I'm going to ask that you stay with us, for a while longer anyway. There may be more questions. Angelo may wish to speak with you directly. I'll have someone take you to a private room where you can rest."

I'm afraid I can't tell you how long this may take. You understand we have to be very careful in what we do next."

"Yeah, I understand." Rath sighed. He didn't even watch her as she left the room.

15. Fenrite Progress

Dr. Farmer was perhaps most intrigued by the progress of the smaller Fenrite moon colony. The twenty seven Fenrites showed distinct signs of agitation after they explored the full length of their containment biosphere. Once certain of their numbers, they fell into a state best described as depression. They made obvious references once again to "*Mother*" and how it would be impossible to find her.

In direct contrast, the Fenrites in the large biosphere displayed no such reaction. They worked furiously. Just as on the planet Fenrir, their advances were near miraculous. Mating and reproduction rates also closely resembled the findings from the original colonies on Fenrir. In a very short period of time, every Fenrite within the larger biosphere was working toward accelerated growth and development.

The smaller population showed no such diligence. They dropped into a state of inactivity and every Fenrite died within a very short period of time.

Dr. Farmer tired again with a slightly larger number, but again the Fenrites found nothing but depression when they discovered their limited resources in both population and natural reserves. Even after increasing the population size one last time, he could not establish a successful colony.

He sent a report to Dr. Sinclair stating he was closing down the smaller biosphere, but he felt that the experiment constituted a finding of some importance.

#

Dr. Sinclair mulled over the growing status reports. The Fenrite colony was still growing in the large biosphere, but the small one was now defunct. Dr. Farmer offered a few theories, but nothing that explained the accelerated advancement of the larger colony. More disturbing, the moon based colony still in operation was making steady advances beyond industrialization. The engineers that constructed larger biosphere had deposited resources within the sphere similar to that of Fenrir, but most were in limited supply. The Fenrites seemed to understand this almost immediately. They recycled everything, nothing went to waste.

Industrious little buggers.

"And still no explanations," the doctor growled. "They can report all the marvelous progress, but they can't tell me why."

She scanned further down her reports. She nodded confidently at the analysis on the failed nuclear attack on Fenrir. At least something had been accomplished. Tying the success of the Fenrite anti-missiles to the use of the flares allowed for certain assurances, an understanding of how not to proceed with future attacks.

That thought immediately brought her attention to the contingency plan for a quick destruction of Fenrir, if necessary. Biological weapons were an unspeakable horror, their very existence betrayed the will of science, but their ability to destroy the Fenrites with few questions asked made the plan at least palatable.

Security was also a reasonable success. There were a few research techs that had to be dealt with harshly - killing was also a far cry from her perceptions of science, but the results of discovery would be far more disastrous. For now, she felt quite comfortable with those that knew the truth of Fenrir's origin and remained alive.

The matter of Rath Scampion was not as simple, though it seemed to be coming to its own acceptable conclusion.

"It's a damn good thing Jack kept a tab on our little scout," she muttered to herself. She examined a copy of the message sent by the SH-4, the call for an immediate offensive against Semele. That would solve a good many problems. Rath would be removed and the destruction of the pirates would alleviate other problems as well.

The Authority and Regency Govern still locked horns over several matters. Giving the Authority a new target would hopefully smooth over the incensed tensions.

Overall, most of her objectives were being met, that is accept for the one question which proved to be the heart of this very disaster. There remained no answer for the Fenrite advancement.

#

In large hangars and within underground research centers below Fenrir's surface, the Fenrites applied what they had learned from the invasion of the melees. They utilized a new understanding of flight dynamics and propulsion theory. They had not witnessed the utilization of a Boscon Prop, but they had observed and recorded the melee's use of gravitational thrusters and stabilizers. They worked furiously on adapting their own crude inventions, on modifying their own designs to develop a more worthy space faring vessel.

The invasion of the melees brought them great devastation, but it also brought them greater knowledge. They recovered the downed missiles carrying megaton nuclear warheads. They examined these devices to create weapons of their own.

They scanned the heavens continuously with each new discovery. They could not find the invader, but they could sense them, almost smell them.

They knew the enemy was still lurking within their grasp. It was their aim to increase their reach, and to ultimately even the score.

#

The answer came as an accident. They did not expect to find the Fenrite laboratory. It was a simple chance exploration of an apparent mine shaft. A geologist wanted to ascertain the mining techniques of the Fenrites.

Dr. Farmer raced into the observation room. He eyed the images with equal parts of anxiety and delight.

"Can you sharpen the image?" he asked with a tremble to his voice.

"That's as sharp as I'm able to get. You have to remember, I don't have a direct line of sight. I'm using reflective imaging."

"That's fine, it's alright, I can see clear enough to know what they're doing. Remarkable."

He studied the activities of the Fenrites as well as their surroundings. He was silent for a moment, but he longed for more.

"Can you rotate the picture? Get a view of what's behind here and perhaps closer to this corner."

"That I can do," the tech responded with a hint of pride. "We're bouncing white light through the shaft. The Fenrites can't see it, but it's allowing for a full 360 degrees of vision. We're recording everything so we don't miss anything. We've also located a secondary access tunnel. It appears to be just a ventilator shaft. We're using the light imaging from there to gain a three dimensional perception. That way, we can see behind corners."

"Good, good," Farmer hummed. He watched the view screens intently. He constantly asked for a wider angle. He looked at every component and every apparatus in the lab. He muttered at the inconsistencies, but reveled in the efficiencies. The oversized glass bubbles filled with embryonic-like liquid brought him near ecstasy.

He could not withhold his exuberance. "Can you believe this?"

The tech shook his head. "No sir, I cannot. But it can't possibly work."

Dr. Farmer just smiled. "It won't work, not at this stage. It's just a model. But it is the mark of a beginning. Just like our own beginning, how we started out when we began the process outside a living host. This lab is a remarkable find."

"But why in the ground? Why out of our sight? Do you think they know they're being watched?"

"Maybe, maybe not. They might have just had a natural instinct to dig down. In the womb, so to speak. But that is rather irrelevant. Get a request to the science vessel back on Fenrir. Have them make visual checks of all the Fenrite underground facilities. It may not be working here, but I bet it's working there. The truth is that we've found their *'Mother'*."

#

Two messages at once for Dr. Sinclair. Neither one of them brought a smile to her lips. Her pudgy cheeks shuddered as she sighed heavily in exasperation.

The first note came from her sources near Fenrir. The Fenrites were experimenting with space flight. They had already achieved self-propelled satellites capable of adjusting their own orbit, as well as discovery probes directed toward neighboring, uninhabitable planets. Now, there were reports of orbital shuttles, experimental spacecraft piloted by the Fenrites themselves. Not what she wanted to hear.

It was also not what the Authority wanted to hear. The same message alluded to growing Authority intolerance toward letting the situation fester. If the Fenrites were reaching for the stars, then they were becoming an even greater risk.

The second message offered little solace. Dr. Farmer had transmitted a priority call with little additional information. He wanted her presence immediately at EMOF. Nothing further was included.

"I don't have time for this," she mumbled.

In the end, however, her curiosity got the better of her and she requested an immediate transport from her earth headquarters to the moon-based Fenrite observation post. Before she left, she sent her own message to the liaison with the Authority. It was voiced into a courier directive.

"Don't let them do anything stupid. We knew the Fenrites we're going to achieve space travel. It was only a matter of time. There is no conceivable risk to the Authority Planning Station at this time."

She shook her head, not truly expecting anything of great consequence from the message. The Authority was going to do what it wanted. She just hoped they'd wait long enough for her to find some more information. Maybe it was good she was going back to the moon. She wanted some answers and Dr. Farmer had enough time to find them. If not, there'd be a new geneticist in charge before she returned.

#

Dr. Farmer ignored Dr. Sinclair's abrupt entrance. He barely heard her bellowing demands for long overdue answers and her curses to assistants that got in her way. His focus remained fixed upon the recordings of the Fenrite cloning laboratories, both the active ones from Fenrir and the model on the moon colony. He requested computer generated comparisons between them and with the cloning facility used to create the Fenrites back on earth. The results were not surprising.

He was blurting out statements to no one in particular, not even truly aware that Sinclair had entered his office. "They're so close. It's like they used our cloning lab as a blueprint."

Sinclair's footsteps fell heavy on the metal floor. She didn't say anything, just stared coldly at the transfixed research scientist.

Farmer looked up with a start. He jumped slightly. "Sorry, I heard you come in. I just didn't think you were next to me."

That was about the extent of the attention he gave to her. He returned to analyzing computer generated models of the population growth on Fenrir.

"It explains so much," he said with heady joy. "That's how they were able to expand their population on the planet. It's all there. Their initial population expanse was due to their own accelerated reproduction, but their ability to populate so-much of the planet with adult Fenrites came from their ability to achieve this! I knew that was the key."

"What are you talking about," Sinclair finally demanded.

Farmer sang out his finding with unfettered joy. "They're cloning themselves. Cloning in chambers. They can actually reproduce without a living host."

Sinclair's eyes narrowed. "The Fenrites are capable of cloning?! That's not possible."

"But it is. Take a look for yourself. This was found by an EMOF tech. He was tracking mining patterns. It's an underground lab."

Sinclair grew quiet, and astounded. She peered into the terminal screen with quiet appreciation of the discovery. She could not deny the facts. The laboratory was crude, not a true cloning chamber, nothing that was acceptable by today's standards, but the intent of the apparatus was clear. Her respect, however, quickly turned to angst. Again, she faced the nagging question of the Fenrites.

"And here, look at this!" Farmer insisted. "These are hidden facilities on Fenrir. They are operational, have been for quite some time!"

"How are they able to do this? This is impossible! This is cloning. They are no where near this kind of technology, not even on Fenrir?"

"But they are," Farmer stated joyously. "And it's the answer to all the questions."

Sinclair's response was quick and pointed.

"How?"

"You wanted to know how they advanced so quickly. That was the main objective of our research. The thing is, they didn't advance on their own. We gave it to them. We gave it all to them. It was the knowledge infusion, the transplant of basic principles into their memories while they were being created. They absorbed the knowledge of how to clone while they were being cloned! From the colony on the moon to the original Fenrites placed on their home planet, they all have the basic knowledge. Their genes were altered so we could enhance their level of intelligence as well as inject basic knowledge within their brains as instinct. It was the act of transferring the basic knowledge of agriculture that caused this. But they didn't just get an implant of agriculture instinct. They got a basic understanding of one of our most

advanced forms of technology. They understood the process of cloning. Their memories were filled with all the critical technologies involved. Don't you see? If they started with the knowledge of cloning, then they were capable of understanding a wide range of studies. From chemistry to biology, from engineering to electronics - the micro processing and the control factors, the advance circuitry of cloning chambers and the structure of chemical reactions - all of this was given to the Fenrites when they were cloned."

Sinclair grew angry. "Are you saying this was some kind of accident?"

Farmer showed no other emotion than the joy of understanding. He didn't care if Sinclair was trying to find fault, he just wanted to explain what he now knew as the truth.

"Yes and no. It wasn't like cloning knowledge was added to the principles of agriculture. It was a side effect that wasn't considered. It's exactly the same as they were able to pick up our language. We used knowledge transfer and memory implantation to bring the original Fenrites up to an acceptable level of advancement. We wanted to watch them at a preordained level of experience so we preset the species with a series of learned principles. From these knowledge implants, the Fenrites were found capable of New English almost immediately."

Sinclair failed to make the connection. "You said the language was part of the transfer, part of the understanding of agriculture. When did cloning processes become part of basic agriculture?"

Farmer turned animated in his anguish to explain his own understanding. "It didn't, but you have to remember the process going on. We fed the Fenrites knowledge while they were being cloned. The implementation of agricultural principles was threaded into their memory cells while their own bodies were being replicated. The two were not separated. Just as they were given the understanding of basic agriculture, they absorbed the principles of everything that was going on around them."

Dr. Sinclair's eyes opened wide. "Cloning technology... *Cloning!* Then that's it!"

"Of course that's it. We were trying to find what enabled them to invent and discover on such an accelerated path. But it wasn't discovery, they already knew. Back in the recesses of their brains, they understood more technology than we ever dreamed they were aware of. Back on Fenrir, they're not inventing anything, not really. They're copying. Their discoveries are based on the information imprinted in their brains. We gave them the map."

"Incredible." Sinclair regrouped. She shook her head one last time. "That may explain how they advanced so quickly, but not why. That's the last thing I need to know."

Farmer smiled. "Then let me lift your last burden. It's '*Mother*'." He paused to let the revelation sink in. "You asked about '*Mother*' once. It was right after inception on the moon. The cloning chamber is what gave them life. They saw it in the recesses of their memory. And they wanted to find their '*Mother*' from

the moment they were born, another natural instinct. But *'Mother'* wasn't there for them. They had to create her. That is why they worked so hard and so fast. They strived to recreate their giver of life, but to do this they had to make great leaps, leaps they were capable of from the information implanted in their memory cells."

The picture came together, nearly the whole picture. The Fenrites were given the knowledge at creation of the most sophisticated technology available. It was the technology to recreate life and the Fenrites viewed it as their *"Mother"*. In their devotion to find their parent, they utilized the transplanted knowledge to make one staggering leap after another.

Farmer finished with some of the smaller details.

"This also explains why they work together. They think they're all related in some fashion. The original colonies on Fenrir were created to make differences, but they all understood they came from the same place. There was nothing we could do to shake that belief. No matter how far we separated them, no matter what we did to their appearance, they all believed they were of the same family."

Conceivable, but it left one gaping hole, a burdensome question that Sinclair pressed. "But what about the militaristic nature of their other inventions? If they had no hostility toward each other, why did they build rockets and anti-missile defense systems?"

Farmer was not deterred, not for a moment. He understood all too well the workings of Regency politics, how it is difficult to separate scientific research from military needs. "Where do you think this technology came from? Maybe missiles have nothing to do with cloning, but the understanding of electronics is the same. Jet fuel is as much a result of the study of chemistry as is cloning fluid. You can't separate them so easily. The knowledge which led to cloning is as much the embodiment of previous knowledge as the development of the Boscon Prop. There is no one path. The Fenrites had to follow them all. Otherwise, they could never be certain they would find *'Mother'*. I think that's the reason why the Fenrites in the smaller colony gave up and died. They knew they did not have the resources to build anything close to *'Mother'*. The knowledge that they could never tap was trapped in their brains and they didn't know how to reach it. It drove them to despair, and finally, death."

Sinclair nodded in final approval. "Very good. Very nicely done indeed. Keep watching them and alert me of any changes."

She turned and walked from the room. The answers were coming clearer now. This revelation was the bridge to the rest. More importantly, she felt she was regaining control of the Fenrir experiment.

16. A Different Attack

Time was their only true constraint. Within their bodies they possessed the skill. Within their brains, they possessed the intelligence. And within their memories, they possessed the knowledge. Some prerequisites, however, simply required time. Certain steps had to be followed, certain procedures needed to be executed. Resources needed to be discovered and then mined. Components manufactured. The overall designs were placed in their memories at the time of conception, but many facets required mapping. The creation of certain basic and even archaic contraptions was essential to pass to the more advanced stages.

But trial and error, the plodding steps of experimentation, this was not an impediment. The understanding of great technology was unlocked at their birth. There was no need to waste time in discovery. Advancing simply meant the creation of a manufacturing base and the ever constant progress through obvious stages of development. If possible, the Fenrites could have built a cloning lab on the first day of their existence, but progress had its own path.

Through it all, the Fenrites remained tireless in their pursuit. Their focus, their grasp of what must be done, never waned. They worked together, an entire society. They worked without a thought to individual wealth, without a desire for personal luxuries. There was no division, no argument over the distribution of resources. Common goals pressed them all into this incessant service.

During their meager existence, they had but two absolute objectives. One was to find their "*Mother*". That instinct was born with them, and it overpowered any other natural desire. It snuffed out any controversy which might have created dissension or diversion. It removed every intrinsic barrier, either naturally inherent or manufactured by the human geneticists that created them. The Fenrites simply produced food to eat and basic shelters to live. Beyond that, they focused entirely upon building the means to recreate their own giver-of-life. It was a path that brought them through hundreds of other inventions. And it brought them to "*Mother*".

It was also the key to reaching their second desire, to unravel the mystery of the sky. Just as there was an understanding of cloning technology, there remained within each Fenrite a clear picture of space, of the galaxy, and what it meant. The Fenrites did not have the time or the desire to develop their own folklore. They did not create myth and fantasy about the edges of their world or the reaches of darkness. They did not fool themselves with false conceptions about the importance of their tiny planet. There existed a deep

memory centered on the stars, a trip through the blackness of space. It was a part of *"Mother"*, a part of their birth.

They had also witnessed mechanical birds, the only birds they had ever seen. First the scout, then the melees. They were birds that had flown not only through the sky, but through space as well. And these birds were predators.

The melees had brought death and destruction to Fenrir. Space was now not only a part of the Fenrites origin, but the source of an enemy with great power. In response, the Fenrites focused their energies on defending themselves, defending their home, and defending *"Mother"*.

They gave the enemy a name steeped in the knowledge implanted in their brains. *The Storm Bringers*. The enemy ships brought streaks of lightning and claps of thunder, and hot winds that melted their homes. And the storm was considered another threat to the crops, and thus a threat to the Fenrites themselves. And just as the agricultural knowledge infusion transferred the instinct to fight drought and pestilence to save their harvest, the Fenrites possessed the desire to end the threat of the storm.

The secrets of the enemy were only a partial mystery, and the Fenrites understood far more than some researchers might have ever guessed. They knew that the key to the Storm Bringers' power rested in the ships that carried them across the sky and beyond. To fight the storm, the Fenrites would need to reach the stars. With the tenacity used to create *"Mother"*, the Fenrites turned toward duplicating what they learned from the invading melees and the downed missiles

"Mother" was now secure, her presence spread all over Fenrir. She was there, making more of them, replacing the losses reaped at the hands of the enemy. There was no longer a need to devote resources toward that end. The stars were now the destination and the Storm Bringers were now the target.

#

Rath spent several long dull days at the large complex on Semele. He spoke with no one. He was afforded three meals, but no other comforts were offered. Mercenary guards warned him to stay put, to stay out of their way.

No problem there. Rath wanted nothing to do with these miscreants. He wasn't here on some pleasure visit. He had delivered his message, released his burden on someone else. If anything, it was time for him to go.

He spent the long hours considering his next move. Hopefully, they would return his scout, minus the beacon of course. He would wave a happy farewell to this system and never look back; head for the most obscure trading post he could find. After that, he'd wait; wait for the news to spread of the Fenrite deception. As for the Regency response, he didn't care. He'd worry about that later. Right now, it was enough to know that others carried the secret, that he was not the only one that endangered Regency security. Just let the dust settle; wait for his own importance to fade.

It wasn't a bad plan. He still had funds in his account; at least he hoped he did. He looked at the wristband and portable Opal had returned to him. They didn't give him access to a link, so he couldn't check his account, but if they would return his scout, he could only hope they'd leave his money alone.

A good deal of this was wishful thinking. He knew that. These weren't the good fairies. These were marauders; pirates, looters and swindlers. They made money off of other people's misfortune. He simply had to hope for some honor among these particular thieves. He had brought them something of value, information that could save them. Rath didn't consider it too much to ask to be allowed to leave in his own ship and with his funds intact.

The graceful entrance of a fair-haired man with a mustache interrupted Rath's considerations. The newcomer moved like a curtain flowing with the wind, and his age was almost indeterminable. His body appeared young and quick, but his eyes held the caution of aged wisdom, or perhaps it wasn't age, but caution driven by living among those with few principles.

Rath had not yet met this man and he sighed at the thought of another guard entering with a warning and leaving with a threat to do bodily harm if orders were not followed. He barely looked up at first, but the voice of the stranger demanded attention.

"Mr. Scampion. I am Angelo. We must move quickly. Follow me."

Rath wasn't given a chance to ask any questions. The man with the mustache turned his back on the scout with a bevy of trust or confidence. Maybe both, but he was certainly in no mood to linger.

As they left the room, Rath noticed Opal waiting at a side corridor. Angelo walked straight toward her, but said nothing as he passed. Rath nodded, but Opal ignored him. She fell two steps behind and followed them to a small room.

Angelo opened the door, but turned to Rath before entering. He held a finger to his lips, making it very clear he didn't want Rath to speak.

Rath nodded as he followed the pirate inside.

The room felt almost alive. A charge of static electricity lingered about like a coarse smell that would not dissipate. Their steps fell on thick cushioned pads, adding a sense of moment to the very floor. Angelo walked under what appeared to be nothing more than a metal umbrella, basically an inverted satellite dish. He pressed several control switches and Rath heard the start of a conversation.

The recording began with Angelo's voice, questions about Rath's experiences on Fenrir and his knowledge of the Fenrites. The scout was very surprised to hear another recorded response. It was his voice. Before he could question, the pirate instructed him to stand under a second umbrella.

He did so, just as Opal took a position under a third, and only after all three were secure, Angelo offered an explanation.

"Simple precaution, Mr. Scampion. Regency has very good vision and even better hearing. In fact, they hear things at a great distance. This little device

was made to divert their attention. They can't hear us now. Only these recordings I'm transmitting. Forgive the unauthorized use of your voice. Opal recorded your discussion on her portable. I simply edited your previous answers, re-spliced them to make it sound like an entirely new conversation."

"You think somebody's listening?" Rath looked upwards only to see his dim reflection in the polished white of the inverted dish over his head.

"Someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to keep track of you. It's highly probable. Now before you step out from underneath that dish, I want you to cover your head and shoulders with that gray blanket that's hanging next to you. It'll mask our presence once we walk out of here. As of now, the synthesizers have analyzed and recorded all the physical characteristics which can be captured by Authority surveillance equipment. The dishes are replicating and transmitting a shadow image of all three of us. We can leave the room and anyone using satellite recon will think we're still here.

Satellite recon? Rath almost shivered at that thought. That meant the Authority was already here. That didn't make any sense, but Rath was in no true position to argue. He had been bottled up in an empty room. He had no idea of what was going on outside. Again he looked up, and again he saw only the concave shell over his head. He wanted to ask if the Authority was truly there, and if so, how many ships. He wanted to know if they had come as they promised - in force and prepared to deal with Angelo harshly.

One look at the pirate, and he swallowed his questions. He lifted the blanket off a pole hook with a shrug. The material felt surprisingly heavy, though it remained soft and flexible. Rath threw it over his head like the cloak of a pauper. He parted the blanket in front of his face and watched with suspicious eyes as Angelo and Opal followed suit.

The pirate leader issued one last warning. "Remain silent until I let you know otherwise, and keep that blanket over your head. We can remove the blankets after we reach a lower level. By that time, we'll be far enough away so that anyone keeping tabs on us will fail to make the connection."

#

The Fenrite built vessels were exact duplicates to the meles from the Planning Station in every way. The only exception involved their form of the Boscon Prop. It lacked the power to go hyperlight. Fenrite ships relied more on ancillary engines and gravitational thrusters. This is what powered the meles during their excursion in Fenrite airspace, and this is what Fenrites monitored and recorded during the attack. As for Boscon props, they had seen them used for accelerated takeoff and landing, but they had yet to witness the utilization of full push. They had no idea that such propulsion was even possible. In truth, a few modifications would have allowed for hyperlight speed, but the Fenrites lacked the awareness of such potential and thus, remained ignorant of the possibility.

For their immediate needs, however, hyperlight was inconsequential. Their space faring vessels would take them out of the atmosphere and into orbit, even to farther reaches of this particular star system. They did not believe they had to travel far, only to a point where they could strike out against the enemy.

They still could not see the Storm Bringers directly, but they could sense them. They still acted very much on instinct. They believed the threat still existed. They felt the existence of the enemy. The Storm Bringers were there and the Fenrites would wait no longer.

They prepared every ship, and the meager force represented the embodiment of their full concentration, effort and resources. In very real terms, this fleet of small ships signified the very existence of the Fenrite society. Each had labored tirelessly to build these vessels. And now, they stood ready to risk it all on one brazen assault.

The Fenrite pilots lacked experience. They had not yet logged the time in actual space flight, and there were no simulators available for training. They flew on instinct, letting the technology of the craft handle nearly every response. Still, some fatal mistakes were made on launch and two Fenrite attack ships burned up before escaping Fenrir's atmosphere. Every other ship escaped undamaged, took flight in space and headed for the backside of the moon.

#

Planning Station surveillance picked up the launch immediately. Authority personnel called out warnings to subcommanders.

"Eight launch sites detected. Airborne objects on radar. Independent guidance systems or steering controls on all bogies. Incoming on our starboard underside."

The Station General picked up the reports on his comlink. The news was more than undesirable, it was unexpected. The station received reports from Espial agents that the Fenrites were constructing ships, but no launch was considered imminent. He turned to an aide monitoring ship defenses.

"Status on our curtain?" he demanded.

"Up and functional."

"But they're still coming after us. Launch all melees. Battle stations."

The metal floor rang out with the echoes of the general's footsteps. He eyed a subcommander with impatience.

"Give me a readout on those bogies."

The response was almost unthinkable. "They appear to be quite similar to our own melees. In fact, I believe if we had our own ships in flight, we'd be unable to identify friendlies without beacons."

To his credit, the general didn't waste time questioning the information. Instead, he turned a quick order to a flight control relay station. "Belay that

launch order. Don't let one melee launch without a beacon. I don't want any confusion out there as to who's who."

The subcommander gave more surprising information. "All bogies are manned and armed. We have not picked up any Boscon signatures. No enemy craft has gone hyperlight. They're coming in direct, but without apparent formation or attack plan."

Attack formation or not, the Station General simply did not expect this; several squadrons of Fenrite space craft armed and apparently willing to attack.

"What do they have in weaponry?"

"No direct confirmation, but readouts remain consistent with intelligence obtained from the Espial agents on the ground. They appear armed with mimics of our own Spearhead missiles."

"Nuclear warheads?"

"That we can confirm."

"Shit." The general whisked about and made a near dash to his command chair. "The enemy is coming in weapons hot. I repeat, the enemy is coming in weapons hot. Initiate all defense measures. Navigation, get us moving. Plot a course to the nearest base. Get us in push ASAP. Spartan base is the closest, right?"

"Yes, sir," an aide confirmed.

"Relay a message to all airborne melees that they are to divert back to Base Spartan after we're in push. Get a messenger shuttle out now. Send it to the nearest fleet. Command's got orders to hit Semele, so send it there. Read, 'Base at Fenrir under attack. Fenrites have melee response. Need assistance.' And drop the damn curtain. They know we're here. No need to waste the energy. Divert power to countermeasures and engines. How many melees do we have off dock?"

"Only two sir."

"Damn. Navigation, estimated time to hyperlight?"

"Four minutes, eighteen seconds."

The general gritted his teeth. "Too long. Emergency procedures only. To hell with locking down. You've got two minutes, then, ready or not, initiate push. Bring up full monitor display. I want camera angles on those bogies."

Like the separate sides of a die, six terminals relayed a wide angle monitoring of all around the base station. The Fenrite attack ships were imaged on three of the six terminals.

They approached with haphazard disregard for their own survival, like kamikazes, or angry wasps stirred from a nest. Each ship remained on course, displaying little in the way of evasive maneuvers. The Fenrite pilots simply aimed their vessels at the station and waited for their weapon systems to lock automatically.

Had the Planning Station been prepared, Authority melees would have easily crushed the Fenrite assault. The flying skills of the human pilots would

have meant the end of Fenrite ships that could not respond to dog fighting maneuvers, but such interceptors were simply not in position, most not off dock at all.

By the time the attacking ships passed beyond Fenrir's moon, only a half dozen melees from the base were in flight. With precision flying, the human pilots engaged and thwarted the attack of several Fenrites, but they were outnumbered and the incoming bogies were spread too thin for a handful of melees to be of any true consequence.

Station Control monitored yet more launches, not from the ground, but from the enemy vessels.

"Missile launch. Missile launch. Enemy bogies have fired."

The general rubbed his head as he peered into the display screens. "Fire all counter measures. Not one missile gets through, not one."

The panel lit up, first with blips identifying incoming missiles, and then, with defensive responses. Anti-missiles, much more advanced than what the Fenrites had used to save their own world, streaked toward the incoming nukes at near hyperlight speed. In some cases, the explosion destroyed not only the incoming missile, but the craft which fired it as well.

Defense panels lit red with an abundance of vectors, course precepts, and intercept links. The number of Fenrite vessels dwindled, as did the number of remaining missiles in flight.

"Radar, any new launches detected from the surface?" the general demanded.

"Negative."

"Any bogies en route that have not engaged?"

The answer was the same.

The news brought confidence to the commander. "Navigation, kill emergency Boscon push. I think we may be alright, but continue to prepare lock down, just in case. Flight Control, how many enemy ships remain in flight?"

"Four, sir"

"Signal our melees to take them out."

One of the last four Fenrite ships fired its missile just as the other assault craft exhausted their own weaponry. The arming device on the Fenrite version of the spearhead was designed to prevent accidental detonation on launch. The safety measure failed and the ship itself exploded in a wave of nuclear fire.

The blast occurred far enough from the station for the base to avoid damage, but the magnetic pulse bathed all ships and weapons in the region.

The flash on the screen held the general's attention for only a split second. "That was nuclear detonation. What the hell happened?"

The din of communications turned into a massive blare. Operative shouted out downed sensors and image echoing. Control displays flashed with confused precepts. A single aide shouted clear enough for the general to hear.

"A Fenrite warhead detonated on launch. Some kind of misfire. Our countermeasures never reached it. I've lost contact with it. It may have lost its lock and is searching for a new target. Recommend abort and self-destruct."

That single countermeasure was not the only defense system to lose its lock. The wave from the nuclear detonation jammed other countermeasures. Anti-missiles previously locked on incoming Fenrite Spearheads with nuclear payloads lost their targets. The defenses misfired and three enemy warheads impacted on the hull of the Planning Station. The devastation was near complete.

#

Semele's satellite space control picked up the incoming Authority vessels just as the fleet-sized accompaniment dropped out of Boscon push.

Pirate cruisers scrambled to intercept. They hit the advance scouts hard and fast. Before Authority combat ships could respond with countermeasures, two dozen Pinwheel torpedoes shredded the hulls of four small escorts.

Semele's defense perimeter of orbital catapults fired Boscon sensitive charges in compact clusters. The large metal canisters locked on the fading Boscon signatures, propelled themselves to a point within the Authority formation, and detonated en masse. A large cloud of chemically corrosive gasses rotated in the very midst of the arriving fleet, forcing the Authority vessels to break formation or face hull decay.

Each of these defenses was anticipated by Authority Command, and Fleet General Hollins issued his first combat order.

"Mist that cloud with detergents. Neutralize it before any of our own ships fly into it by mistake."

While watching clipper ships shoot absorbent crystals through pressure cannons, Hollins issued orders to the carriers in the group.

"Keep all fighter class ships on alert, but don't launch." He demanded immediate status reports from his com links. "What's the damage report on their initial attack? Any manned ships struck by their torpedoes?"

"No, sir. The four ships struck were all decoys. Three of the remotes no longer functioning. The fourth is still responding."

"Send the functional ship around the far side of Semele. I want them worrying about their flanks and focusing on remotes, not us. Self destruct the other three before they can get any readings. I don't want them to know that they're targeting decoys. And initiate attack pattern Pharaoh."

The main display lit up with three bright flashes indicating the fulfillment of the general's orders regarding the decoys. Sector status charts affirmed fleet movement toward the proper formation.

The commander stole a glance at the time table displayed on a planning console. "Five seconds to Sibling. Give me immediate confirmation."

Over three dozen Boscon signatures appeared on the surveillance displays just as a radar tech announced confirmation. "Sister fleet has arrived."

Semele was now sandwiched by two attack groups. Pirate cruisers broke off all forward attacks. They had managed to destroy the fourth unmanned decoy, but only now realized the scope of their dilemma. Raider captains pulled their cruisers back, deferred all engagement against the Authority fleets. They tried to coordinate a flank run, but all ship-to-ship messages drowned in a sea of communications.

The Command Station of the flag ship hummed with message transmissions. Coordinated attack plans, both real and deception, flowed through uuencoded channels.

"Let 'em chew on that for a while," Hollins growled, but a satisfied nod graced those around him.

#

The SH-4 spy vessel slowly altered its course just before the sister fleet arrived near Semele.

"The Authority is coming in," Taranson advised as he flipped flight control back to manual. "I'm transmitting a coded identifier. Authority vessels will know we're here, but no one else. I don't want anyone flying into us by mistake. I'm also easing back so we don't get caught in a cross fire."

A scowl crossed Jack Lasonelli's face. "You just make sure you maintain a lock on our three targets down there. I don't want anyone of them to leave that complex alive."

"Don't worry. I've got a lock on all three. They're all there."

Jack peered through the viewshield at the arriving Authority fleet. "Have your ops monitor the battle, but the main priority of this vessel is to maintain surveillance on our three marks."

"Confirmed. Auxiliary sensors tracking pirate and Authority vessel movement. Reports will be sent to your terminal."

Display maps offered a three dimensional tactical of the battle. Right after breaking ranks to avoid the corrosive defense cloud, Authority ships regrouped to a pyramid formation. A large space carrier sat at the top.

Taranson offered his own findings. "A second attack group has just dropped out of Boscon. Authority vessels are transmitting uuencoded attack formations on all channels. They're flooding the wavelengths."

"You still got a hold on Scampion and his friends?"

"Affirmative. Still in a secured room, no other marks. They're still discussing the merits of Scampion's findings."

"They aren't trying to evak?"

"Not yet. They might not know what's going on outside. No one has come into warn them and no one's receiving any transmissions."

Jack shook his head. "Careless for such an infamous pirate" He scanned the viewshields once more. Marauder cruisers continued to follow rogue Authority crafts, but the larger ships engaged with a great hesitancy. They fired weapons from long range and avoided entanglement with the bulk of the Authority strike group. Smaller pirate controlled ships darted about like buzzing flies, moving too quickly to be of any true threat, but also avoiding Authority tracking guns.

Jack monitored the battle reports with a growing appreciation for what was to come. Both the display terminals and the transmitting channels were filled with confusion, but one overriding fact stood clear. The Authority fleets were converging on Semele and the current formation revealed an impending surface attack. With the number of ships involved, Semele's fate was assured.

"This is how they should've handled the Fenrites," the coordinator mumbled to himself.

The words caught the pilot's ear but Taranson said nothing. He maintained his charge of keeping a fix on Rath Scampion, Angelo, and Opal Stelbound.

The Authority vessels continued to press forward. The two fleets merged in Semele's shadow. The pyramid expanded at the base, and picket ships launched defense measures to thwart any counter offensive. Within the spherical outline of the planet's shadow, the frigates and cruisers shimmered like beacons of doom, but it was the larger vessels near the top of the formation which would carry death to the planet. The space carrier at the pinnacle of the pyramid launched all craft, and a blanket of melees, blitzers, fighter escorts, and bombers took flight toward Semele's atmosphere.

Jack saw the finality in what was to come next. "Tell me if anyone leaves that conference room, or if any guards enter. It looks like this is coming to a conclusion and I don't want any loose ends. I want confirmation that each one of those targets is dead. The Authority is going to want confirmation of Angelo's death, but it's Scampion I want."

#

Near pure silence. Only the whir of a few ventilation fans broke the emptiness of sound. Angelo stared almost absentmindedly at the command terminal which revealed the coming disaster.

Rath wanted to shout. This was sheer stupidity. Maybe they had fooled any long range surveillance ops with their little trick of body covers and false recordings, but they were still in the same complex, and the Authority was coming. *The Authority was here!* Rath counted enough attack ships to blanket charge the entire continent. In his mind there was no question, it was time to leave.

The pirate apparently did not agree. He made no motion to evacuate, only tapped a few controls on a security pad. He monitored a weapons launch with near amusement.

On Semele's surface, accelerator cannons propelled magnetic charges in wide spread patterns. The explosions in the upper atmosphere created a flux in wave reception. Any sensors focused on Semele broke apart in the distortion.

Angelo's fingers danced once more. There was no obvious result to his actions, but he decided to reveal his intentions.

"I've created a wave pulse over this installation, over a good deal of the countryside, in fact. This will ultimately cause the disruption of all monitoring devices fixed on this complex. I cancelled the fake transmissions and shadow imaging in the conference room. No need to continue that charade. I'm ordering the evacuation of the planet. We, however, are not going to leave."

#

"Damn!" Taranson muttered.

"What?" Jack demanded with an unhappy tone.

"I lost contact. They fired some kind of charge into the air, probably to break up ship to ship communications so the surface attackers can't coordinate. I'm picking up launch detections as well. Several small ships. They're buggin' out."

"What about Scampion?"

"I'm trying to reestablish a link, but there's too much interference."

"Break through it, damn it."

"Refocusing now. Increasing power. No, I can't get anything. Nothing there. I'm on their last known position, but I'm not getting any readings. Not even breathing. They must have left the room."

"Those launches. Where did they take place, from the complex?"

"Some."

"Could Scampion be on one?"

"Not possible," Taranson responded with certainty. "He wouldn't have had enough time. He was in a security area less than a minute ago. No launches took place close enough for him to be on one, but I don't think it matters anyway. Take a look. Several smaller ships from the complex are going into full push, but it looks like Authority hunters are locking onto Boscon paths and firing tracking torps. No one's going to get away."

"Track every ship that launched from the complex," Jack demanded. "To hell with the cruisers and escorts that were in flight when Scampion was still on the ground. I want to make sure that every ship leaving the complex is destroyed. Transmit to the fleet command that Angelo and Scampion may be trying to escape. That'll make 'em follow up."

"Message sent. Authority is responding with orders to the hunters. All tracking torpedoes are being fired with confirming beacons. Every ship evacuating will be accounted for."

The attack display offered a grim truth for the pirates. Marauder frigates and cruisers still able to reach hyperlight ignored any pleas from crippled

sister ships and took to full escape power. Hunter ships with tracking torpedoes fired in their wake. The egg-shaped, Boscon-propelled weaponry ate the signature of the fleeing ships until they impacted in the core of the engine. A loss of power at that speed, combined with the detonation of the torpedo, meant total obliteration.

Authority light cruisers took on the task of eliminating escape shuttles and escorts before they could reach hyperlight. Particle beams tore holes in the hulls, forcing a full integrity collapse. The crushed shells of metal either took to a satellite orbit, or were caught in Semele's atmosphere and burned up on reentry. Artillery Rovers handled the crippled pirate vessels unable to reach hyperlight but remained too well armored for particle beams. Hundred ton Slagmans turned any armor into scrap and left blasted, cavity-filled hulks in their wake.

Jack watched with near detachment. He cared little for the pirates. They were a nuisance, nothing else. The true threat remained on Semele, at least he believed so, and for that, he demanded assurances.

"Start scanning the area around Scampion's last known position. I want him found. Now! Use everything you have. He may be dead so don't rely on motion. I want a confirmed picture of his body and you don't have much time. Those blitzers are going to make short work of that complex and I want to reestablish contact before there's nothing left to scan."

#

Rath slunk over to a corner and watched with exasperation, but he didn't need the command terminals to know the complex he was in was targeted for complete destruction. They were deep in the ground, some kind of bunker, but the walls still shook from the force of blitzer strikes. Authority attack ships were simply whittling at the structure, blasting away layer after layer. It was slow agony. He guessed the Authority wanted it that way, punish the rebels and show off their might at the same time.

He looked up to the ceiling, wondering what it would feel like when it would ultimately collapse, what it would feel like to be crushed to death.

He forced the unpleasant image out of his mind. No sense in dying that kind of death more than once, even if it was just in his imagination. He simply prayed for it to be quick.

#

The courier broke out of Boscon Push during uuencoded message transmissions. The pilot had left Fenrir before the base station was destroyed. She was ordered to send an emergency message, and she delivered it now.

She sent only one communication, unaware that the Authority fleet was engaged in wave flooding. It was received in three separate locations.

#

General Hollins made a decision based more on personal preference than on a strategic consideration. He could have quickly completed the destruction of Semele, but he remembered his last encounter with the Fenrites, when he was the Station General and the attack on Fenrir failed to exterminate the species. He examined the communication for only a second.

"Break off the attack. Recall all ships. Transmit new orders on a secured channel. Redeployment necessary. Coordinate Boscon Push initiation with this vessel. Destination Fenrir."

No one dared to question his orders, not the other ship captains, and not the pilots that were forced to break off and return to their carriers. The full fleet regrouped away from Semele and left the planet behind, many of the surface complexes still somewhat intact.

#

Angelo never took his eyes off the command displays, but he could sense Rath's discomfort. There were others about, guards and mercs, who also displayed a sense of urgency.

The shaking had ceased, as did the muffled sound of explosions. Quiet again seeped into the last existing levels of the main complex, but it offered no true respite. It served more to amplify dread than offer relief, like the eye of the hurricane.

The pirate decided to alleviate all of their concerns with one sweeping statement.

"The Authority is breaking off their attack. They've sent a secured message to all vessels. I don't know what it is, but I know they're leaving. I also know why. It seems the Fenrites have attacked a Planning Station and a courier ship was sent to obtain assistance."

"The Fenrites?" Rath professed in near amazement.

Angelo continued to monitor his screens. He did not turn to look at the scout, but he addressed him with a tone of dissatisfaction. "Does that surprise you, Mr. Scampion? You were attacked by the Fenrites, were you not?"

"Yeah, but I was on a transport. To attack a Planning Station, that's"

"A surprise? I assume it must be. The Authority was obviously not prepared for such an event. Otherwise they would not have been in this position. I suppose timing is important in most things. If events remain confused, I suppose it's time I sent a message of my own."

#

Jack shook his head with disgust, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn't transmit to the fleet, he knew who was in command, remembered the last time he spoke with General Hollins. The fleet commander would probably laugh out loud if he tried to order him to stay.

"Keep scanning the complex. See if you can match any of the patterns with the three targets. I'll take anybody at this point. Maybe one will lead us to another."

"The ops are having a hard time getting through the static. The blitzers must have destroyed over half the complex. The bomb residue from the targeting mechanisms is playing havoc with our sensors. I'm picking up trails of survivors, but nothing I can pinpoint."

"Keep trying. What about Scampion's scout, anything on that? The beacon's been removed so I can't locate it. What about you?"

Taranson grunted. "I can put an op on it, but there's so much debris, I can't make any promises."

A view of turmoil greeted the coordinator as he peered through the front viewshield. The battle had ended with the fleet's departure. Wreckage filled every line of sight. Far off to the portside, remnants of destroyed marauder freighters drifted casually toward the sun. A few crippled vessels labored to establish a safe anchor for emergency repairs. A handful of space tugs appeared to assist the truly crippled, but not near enough to do the job. Jack could only wonder how many hands would be lost in the next few minutes as power supplies failed and life support systems dwindled on these disabled vessels.

"What a mess."

He felt no sense of loss, only an impression of unfinished business. Scampion wasn't dead and neither was Angelo. He had no real evidence for that assumption, only another feeling, and a presumption that was quickly confirmed in unanticipated fashion.

"Sir, I've got lock on some marks deep within the complex."

"Can you identify?"

"Absolutely. It's Angelo. I've also got a confirmed reading on his wife and Scampion. There are a few guards as well."

"How were you able to locate them?"

Taranson grimaced and spoke reluctantly. "I'm just trailing his own signal down to his position. He's transmitting a message to us. He knows we're here. He wants one of us to come down to meet him."

Jack closed his eyes, but he still saw red.

17. Deals Made

Even for those in the fleet without access to viewshields or terminal displays, rumors and image files spread fast enough for everyone to know the fate of the Planning Station. General Hollins wouldn't have stopped the flow of information if he could. He wanted the scene burned into every soldier's memory, from cadet to commander. He found no joy in this revelation. He recalled the men and women who served with him before he was reassigned to his new post. If anything, it opened a loss in his spirit, a hole in his pride. But it also offered redemption. It justified his disgust for the entire Fenrite situation, his displeasure with the councils - both the politicians and the scientists. He looked upon the sobering scene as a tribute to *their* incompetence, not the Authority's.

But it was the Authority that had truly suffered. It was their station, their soldiers, that had faced the Fenrites, not the councils or the scientists, and the aftermath filled the main display in the command center with a grim reality. What was an entire self-propelled base station now drifted in space as a charred, crushed mass of fused metal.

The Fenrite missiles had opened several holes in the outer hull of the station. While the devastating explosions ripped the metal apart, the loss in pressure forced an internal implosion. Large sections of the hull collapsed, folding over into layers and layers of crushed metal. What was once shaped like a large oval now appeared more like a hollow bowl with a jagged-edged rim.

"Put meles in flight," Hollins stated firmly, but with a note of calm respect. The image of the collapsed station continued to fill the main display screen, and it quickly became a memorial in the general's mind. He could not simply disregard the last monument of thousands of soldiers, anymore then he could ignore the safety of the fleet. "Signal the carriers. I want complete coverage of the group. We are on full alert. Interceptors are to afford complete and continuous patrol. Set up the pickets and begin full scan of Fenrir. Deploy outer probes. We can't assume the attack came from the planet itself. If they were able to do this, they might come from any direction. Send recon around the system's star and launch comlink satellites into an orbit around Fenrir's moon."

A bevy of activity erupted about the command center, but Hollins continued to focus on the main display and the remains of the base station. "Get all rescue crews available and begin a complete search of the hulk. There could still be some soldiers trapped in internal compartments. Include a team of techs to download any information from their files. And get the pilot of the

courier that delivered the message over here. I want to know what happened. I want to know how a society of cross-genetic, backwards morons destroyed a Planning Station."

It was more than a question; it was a matter of history, one that was almost incomprehensible. The Authority had never suffered such a loss. Marauders were sometimes successful in damaging a frigate or a cruiser, rebel planets at times forced temporary withdrawals of ground forces, but never, ever, had the Authority lost a vessel of such strategic importance.

The general decided to use this to further his own opinion of what should be done next. "Record images of the station. Download to a courier ship and send it off to Base Spartan. Mark it for Authority Command and request immediate response. I don't know why they've been draggin' their feet on this, but I doubt they'll let this go unanswered."

#

Rath just stood and stared. Disbelief stung his every thought, and his eyelids blinked as if tried to wash a mirage from his sight. He had been through so much, yet he never expected to see the coordinator again, at least not here, not with Angelo.

"It appears you two know each other," Angelo stated the obvious while watching the reactions of all parties involved. "Good. That's going to make this that much easier."

"How did he get here?" Rath blurted out.

"I invited him."

"You in..."

"Yes. We analyzed the beacon placed on your ship. It was short range, well, short in relation to today's standards of travel. To receive the signal, a ship would have to be within scanner reach of your scout. Otherwise, they'd be unable to trace you. It was an easy assumption to accept that there must have been some spy ship in the area. I simply sent out a signal on all channels addressing veiled vessels. I wanted to speak with the individual concerned with tracking Rath Scampion. This is who showed up."

"This guy's a liar," Rath sneered.

The accusation rang clear with Rath's emotion. Jack offered no argument while Angelo simply professed his own acceptance.

"Of that, I'm sure. But he probably thinks the same of me. Still, it is possible for two liars to come to an understanding. And that's why he's here."

Jack lowered his head slightly, focused on a point on the ground, and then lifted his eyes to set them solely upon the pirate. If he still cared about Rath, it certainly didn't show.

"I came here, because I want to hear what you have to say, not because I'm ready to make any kind of deal."

Angelo rubbed his hands together as if to warm them. "Fine, this is what I have to say. I want your assurance that the Authority will leave this planet alone."

Jack actually laughed. He shook his long narrow head as he explained what was, in fact, now the truth. "You're talkin' to the wrong guy. I have no pull with the Authority."

"That's bull!" Rath nearly screamed. "I was on the Planning Station with him. He ordered colonels around like they were puppies."

"I think those circumstances might have changed," Angelo offered as he placed a hard eye on the coordinator. "I don't think he really can tell the Authority what to do. Maybe he could once, but not now. Otherwise he wouldn't have let them leave." The pirate scratched the base of his chin. "I can tell just by looking at you that you think the situation involving Scampion, and now myself, is much more important than the Fenrites themselves. If you still had any real influence over the Authority, this conversation wouldn't be happening."

"Perceptive, aren't you?" Jack offered while any semblance of amusement washed away.

Angelo waved off the compliment. "We're all capable of perception. It's just how we decide to use it. Anyway, I'll accept that you can't directly order an end to Authority hostilities against us, but that doesn't mean you're totally without power. Anyone with the clearance to utilize a spy ship in pursuit of one person must have some kind of pull. I'm certain you must have contact with a powerful council somewhere that can post some influence with Authority command."

Jack released a heavy sigh. He wondered if the pirate knew of the existence of Sinclair's supposedly secret council. Doubtful. More likely, the pirate was throwing out guesses to gauge a reaction. The coordinator decided not to play any mind games, and came right to the point.

"And why should I do this, promise to leave you alone? You're not the kind of person I'd want to stick my neck out for."

Angelo released a playful grin of his own. He moved like a snake on the hunt to a display control panel. Whistling near exuberantly, he downloaded all the information he obtained from Rath on the center screen.

"What I have here is all the data you probably want classified. And it's not just what I got from Mr. Scampion, though I must admit, that is the kicker. I have a network of my own spies and intelligence. When you own your own planet, you can afford that kind of thing. I have logs of Authority ship departures, copies of exploratory deep space scans, a basic chronology of all the activity around Fenrir. I have some council reports from sociologists studying this 'alien' and I have my own scanning reports of the planet itself. Alone, they don't mean much, but together they definitely begin to raise a suspicious odor. Finally, I now have information from the scout to first explore the planet. I have his logs which pull all of this together. Regency didn't just

stumble across something on Fenrir, they planted something there. This is the kind of thing that could really cause an uproar."

Rath's chin dropped an inch or two. "Planted? Regency?"

Angelo answered the question, but kept a close eye on the coordinator. "That's right. The Fenrites didn't bring themselves to Fenrir. And they're not true aliens. They are a creation, a creation of Regency scientists."

Rath simply blinked, then rubbed his forehead.

"Another simple conclusion, really," Angelo stated confidently. "The facts are all there. I wouldn't go as far to assume why, though I can guess. We haven't discovered any alien life in our travel. That must have made someone impatient."

Rath looked to the coordinator. "This was a creation? And you knew it?!"

"And now this bastard is going to release this information to the public." Jack turned a disgusted sneer to the scout. "I guess you got what you wanted."

Rath nearly exploded. He did indeed fulfill his hopes, obtained a release from the burden, but he didn't want the blame, and he didn't expect it went this deep. "I didn't want any of this! If you just left me out of it, none of this would have happened."

"Don't blame me, pal. Blame luck, and your own stupidity. I didn't give you the scout bid, and you're the one who decided to hijack a freighter full of emeralds."

"And you're the one who decided to keep me around to try and deceive me. Why didn't you just try me for piracy and lock me up in some outer rim prison, wouldn't that have been easier?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "A trial? How could we have allowed the attention? The experiment was already in progress when you came back to the system."

"Children, children, don't bicker," Angelo intervened. "Does it really matter how we all got involved? We're here and we now have some decisions to make. I have no intention of releasing this information, as long as I get what I want."

The pirate fiddled with a few controls as the information on the screen disappeared. He swirled about like a dancer, but his demeanor now appeared cold and calculating like the thief he truly was.

"Now let's understand something. I know you tracked and destroyed all ships trying to evacuate during this little skirmish, I can't say I appreciate that by the way, and you might actually believe that this is the only copy you have to worry about. Don't believe it. I might not have been able to release a ship, but wave transmissions worked just fine. When the Authority was filling space with phony attack orders, I piggybacked this entire file to a satellite orbiting one of the system's uninhabitable planets. That satellite then transmitted a coded message out of the system. It may take a while, but that message will be received by one of my operatives. That's not all. Now that the Authority has cleared the system, I just deployed a courier ball of my own with another download. It's already in Boscon Push and heading to a different

pickup sight. That makes at least three sets you have to worry about, and maybe I have a few other tricks I'm not willing disclose. What it means is you can't just bury this thing by killing me and destroying what's left of this complex. You've got two choices, make a deal now or I distribute this cover-up to every planetary com my ops are working on."

Jack seethed. "Son of a"

That was the second time Rath saw Jack lose his semblance of control. He remembered the first time, when the nukes exploded on Fenrir. That certainly didn't end like a ray of sunshine and the scout braced himself for another bad ending.

The coordinator swallowed hard, as if accepting the situation like bad tasting medicine. "Fine. We leave Semele alone."

"Can you guarantee this?" Angelo posed, openly wondering of Jack's influence.

"Nothing's a guarantee," Jack stated flatly. In the end, he offered his own assessment of the situation. "Right now, Authority Command seems to be making their own calls. They're not happy with you, but they're more concerned with the Fenrites. You may have just enough of a threat to keep them at bay. But I wouldn't get too cute. You'll have your base of operations, but that's all. You start moving out, expanding, and all bets are off."

"That's all I care about," Angelo stated almost playfully, content with the situation at hand. "I've barely scratched the surface of what I can do with this planet. It has a wealth of resources. I'll probably be dead and my heirs will still be working on developing this place."

The agreement appeared complete until a voice of dissension questioned the situation.

"Uh... That's fine and dandy for you, but what about me?"

Both Angelo and Jack tilted their heads as they eyed the scout.

"Where does this leave me?" Rath repeated.

Jack frowned but said nothing. He waited for the pirate to make the first move, which he did.

"Yes, you are rather dangling about, aren't you," Angelo agreed. "How about this? Part of my deal with the Authority includes that Mr. Scampion be left alone. He's allowed to return to his scout duty with no reprisals from Regency? Will you agree to that Mr. Coordinator?"

"Right now, I could care less what happens to Scampion," Jack scoffed.

"He's a non-factor now. You're the one who should care about him, not me."

"How so?"

Jack gave one quick glance at the scout, like an executioner acknowledging his victim. "He knows everything you know. He hasn't gone to the media or released his story to a com. Not yet, anyway. But what if he does?" Jack turned his gaze back to the pirate. "If he starts talking, the games up. You have nothing to hold over us anymore, and we have no reason not to blow your planet apart, with you on it. I guarantee you, once this gets out; the Authority

will come back here to finish the job. I can't see why you'd want to keep him alive."

Angelo bit his lip, but only for a second. He brushed away the tension with a heavy laugh. "Very good, very good. You want me to kill this scout for you, but I'm not going to. My bargain stands. You leave Scampion alone."

"You'd take that risk?" Jack openly debated.

"I'm not going to do your dirty work for you, if that's what you mean. You want him out of the mix, and I'm not going to accommodate."

Rath turned to the pirate, thankful for the reprieve but still wondering about his future. "What about my scout ship, and the funds in my account?"

Angelo waved a hand in near disgust. "Bah, you think in very small terms, Scampion. I would have expected more from you than that. I don't bother with such meager amounts of money. I have a planet. Why would I need your inconsequential holdings? As for your scout, you will be allowed to leave in it whenever you wish."

Jack turned about abruptly to leave, as if he accepted the discussion as complete, but he stopped at the door. He didn't turn to face anyone. His back addressed the pirate.

"Blackmail's a dangerous thing, Angelo. Especially coming from someone like you. I wouldn't suggest you push too hard with this, there's only so much room we're willing to give. In my estimation, you're at the breaking point as it stands now."

"And threats are dangerous things, as well," Angelo countered "I haven't made it to this position out of pure bluffing. Push me too hard and I also can respond. This information is important to..."

Jack didn't stay to hear the rest. He walked out of the bunker and stumbled through the rubble to return to a shuttle.

Angelo turned back to his terminals without further care, as if Rath wasn't even there.

The scout felt obligated to offer his thanks, though deep inside, it made him feel queasy.

"I guess I should say thank you. You didn't have to do that for me."

Just as Jack didn't turn, neither did the pirate. It was his back that addressed the scout. "Don't feel too warmly to me, Rath old boy. I was planning to turn you over to them before their blitzers reached this bunker. I figured it might buy me enough time to escape. It's a good thing I waited. You see, timing is important."

#

Dr. Sinclair knew she wasn't going to enjoy her meeting with the liaison between Regency Govern and the Authority, but Skysdale insisted. He had been to one quick briefing after another. He had heard generals make

demands and planetary leaders make concessions. Those with true power had made a decision.

"They've had enough. It's just that simple." Skysdale didn't care how Sinclair accepted this news. He saw the reports on the damage to the station, knew how many Authority soldiers died in the attack. Liaison to her council or not, he wanted this counteroffensive as much as any other soldier.

"So they're just going to go in there and blow the place all to hell?" Sinclair sneered.

"They've got the firepower, and they intend to use it."

"What about Semele? My sources say they didn't finish the job, most of the marauder base is still intact."

Skysdale didn't give Sinclair this information. She got it from someone else. He made a note to uncover that in the future. For the moment, he addressed what he did know.

"Semele can wait," the liaison stated flatly. "Marauders are not the kind of threat the Fenrites have become. They're not responsible for destroying a Planning Station. Angelo existed before this mess started, and he'll still be there when we're done with Fenrir."

Sinclair gritted her teeth. She wasn't getting through to Skysdale and she knew it. She also didn't like the use of the word "we" when he referred to the Authority. He was supposed to be on her side, working for the council, but his allegiance to the Authority was now becoming very apparent, and very disagreeable.

"So that's it. The Authority has decided to go in and wipe out the Fenrites on their own, and to hell with Regency Govern and to hell with me."

"I don't think they're worried about answering to you anymore," Skysdale responded coldly.

That was too much for the doctor to take. "And what about you, subcommander. Are you worried about answering to me?"

"To tell the truth, no. I saw what happened to the Planning Station. I'm not happy. Actually, right now no one's happy. In case you're wondering, this thing has just about cut Regency apart. Espial is now firmly siding with the Authority. If you thought it was hard to procure their services before, just give it a try now. As for the councils, Regency Govern members are looking for parachutes. Looks like everyone has had his fill of your council."

"I see." Sinclair scratched the inside of her left nostril while fuming over Skysdale's little outburst. She offered her own assessment of what might happen if the Authority went renegade and started deciding things for themselves. "Then, what does Authority Command think is going to happen when the public finds out about this? The Authority gets its funding from the people. Word starts getting out that the military wants to take control and is in bed with Espial, that funding might just dry up. And what do you think the public reaction will be when it learns the Authority just decided to

exterminate the first alien uncovered? A decision made without the consent of any council?"

"The Fenrites aren't an alien," Skysdale responded in a tone of ice.

"The public doesn't know that."

"They can be informed."

"Don't try to play that game with me. They can also be informed that the Authority had a huge role in the cover up. Either way you cut it, your generals are going to look bad."

She paused, took a long moment to collect herself. In the end, she knew all too well there was no way to pacify the Authority while leaving the Fenrites unpunished. Action had to be taken, but she remained resolved that it would be her decision.

"Now, if I can ask you to remember your job for a moment, I have a suggestion. One that will end the Fenrite threat and cover all of our butts."

#

Angry but silent mercenaries guided Rath to his scout and basically pushed him inside. He had to bite back a sarcastic remark about their hospitality. He took only the time to check his fuel gauges before he launched. A quick check of the galactic charts gave him the course codes for an outer rim trading post. Not even caring about the integrity of his engines, he punched in the codes to Boscon navcom, turned the ship over to autopilot and watched the system disappear in the wave of Boscon Push. He was not at all unhappy to be free of Angelo, and free of the whole situation.

#

Taranson was none too pleased about letting a marauder transport dock with his highly classified ship, but he really had no choice. Once the coordinator was onboard, he offered a suggestion in a most forthright manner.

"We really should get out of this system. We can come right back if you want, but they have a concrete fix on our position. I'm picking up scanning beams of all wavelengths, and that's not the kind of thing Espial likes to find out about."

"We're leaving," Jack announced as if the pilot's opinion meant nothing. "Set a course back to Earth. Full push. You boasted a great deal about what these new engines can do. Impress me."

#

Sinclair brought the initiative directly to EMOF herself. Space travel in shuttles didn't agree with her large frame, and she appeared to be shaking off a spot of queasiness as she directed Dr. Farmer into a private room.

She was in no mood for a debate that she fully expected, so she began with the reason behind her directive.

"You saw what happened to the Planning Station?"

Dr. Farmer grunted with an obvious note of emotion. "Yes. Terrible tragedy. It's hard to accept that something like that could actually happen."

"But it has, and it changes things drastically."

"Yes, I guess it does in some sense," Farmer allowed, but he lifted his head as he tried to offer his own interpretations. "Then again, it fits with most everything we're discovering here. The Fenrites didn't use a weapon of their own creation against us. They simply copied what they saw of our own technology. I would even hazard to guess that most, if not all of the warheads used came directly from the spearhead missiles which failed to detonate on our attack against them. Reconnaissance from Espial agents as well as the Planning Station, before it was destroyed, confirm that several downed spearhead missiles were captured and studied by the Fenrites. That's how they do things, I'm sure of it. They take the knowledge that we give them and they construct the devices. I would theorize that the design for their own melee type space craft came from information they gathered in the same attack."

He held up a finger as he motioned for a moment of pause. He began flipping through reports until he zeroed in upon the study in question. "Yes, yes. Here it is. I have some research done on the genetic process used to increase the brain capacity of the Fenrites. It substantiates a theory that the Fenrites might not be as intelligent as our own species, but they are actually more adept at recall and mimicking behavior. The creative portion of their brain was untouched in the splicing, but when geneticists altered the DNA links to make the Fenrites capable of absorbing our brain wave implants; they created large areas in the brain which act like a large sponge."

Sinclair considered the theory, but only for a moment. Indeed, it answered many of her own questions about the Fenrites ability to build advanced technology, but in truth, it didn't matter any more. The Fenrites were about to become extinct, and she was going to give the order.

"It's time for this experiment to come to an end," she huffed, "both here and on Fenrir. The Fenrites are now too dangerous to be left to their own devices. This time, however, we can't afford to have any mistakes, so I'm ordering a test with the moon-based Fenrites. Biologists have created a toxic mist which can be injected into an atmosphere. It contains an organism that will attach itself to the reptilian portion of their genetic makeup. It is a virus, completely communicable, that will attack the ectothermic response, basically inhibit the Fenrites ability to absorb heat from external sources. They will all freeze to death despite the true temperature within the sphere. We have to be completely sure of the effectiveness before I order the use on Fenrir, so the mist will be injected into the moon sphere in one hour standard."

Farmer began to tremble with anger, shook his head in direct disagreement. "You can't do this."

Sinclair responded with a low-toned voice, slow and forceful. "I asked you if you saw what happened to the Planning Station. This thing ends now. We do it this way, or the Authority goes in and blows everything to hell. That means nothing left to study, nothing left at all. Just ashes."

Farmer's voice flared, his face red. "Well, why here? The moon-based Fenrites haven't attacked anyone. We can continue the study here."

"And let them develop this close to earth? I don't think so."

"But this colony hasn't seen space craft and nuclear missiles. They won't know how if we don't give them anything to copy."

Sinclair shook her head, slowly enough so the rolls of flesh around her neck actually stayed in place. "I can't take the risk. They discovered too many things that were simply off shoots of cloning technology. They might have developed ships and missiles even if we didn't give them models to work from. One hour."

#

There wasn't much to look at. The trading post had just three freight terminals on the entire planet. Out in space, it wasn't much better. A few orbital control monitors scanned incoming and outgoing ships, but traffic was so sparse it could have all been handled by just one.

When the scout touched down, Rath inspected the meager facilities with poor expectations.

"They're going to charge me a bundle for this," he mumbled to himself. "But it's not like I've got a choice."

He followed the passages to a small office which barely ventilated the smell of prop fuel from the enclosed area. A clean-cut, muscular and tan woman raised an eyebrow.

"Droppin' off or pickin' up." Her tone revealed she wanted to get back to the fitness center where she worked on her muscles, her tan, or both.

"I need maintenance," Rath mouthed, none too happily.

"Here?" the woman scoffed. "Why don't you just go into Boscon and head over to the Valky system or even Spinster? They have better facilities."

"I don't want to press the engines and take the chance," Rath revealed. "I'm not going to have you do a lot. I just want to make sure the props are in order and have a sweep done for any beacons."

"Beacons?"

Rath exhaled heavily, but came up with a lie that was actually a half-truth. "Yeah, beacons. I got boarded by marauders. I've got no idea what they might have done. I've heard stories of them attaching beacons so they can keep hitting the same ships that they know are easy targets." He said nothing about his concern for other beacons placed by the Authority. Nothing to gain by admitting he was in trouble with everybody.

"That's news to me, but if you want a beacon scan, will give you a beacon scan."

"And check the props. I went into push once without checking to get here; I don't want to risk it again."

"And we'll check the props." The woman whistled happily as she entered the orders into her terminal. She flipped it about for Rath to see. "That'll be the final cost."

Rath swallowed a cough. "Can I use your link to check my account?"

"Sure."

"When were you last updated?"

"A courier dropped off an updated galactic fund feed less than an hour ago. We like to keep that info fresh."

"I'm sure you do."

Rath lasercabled his portable to the terminal and swiped his wristband passed the reader. He nodded happily once he realized his funds were intact. Before breaking the link, he transferred the requested amount to the trading post general fund. It was more than he wanted to pay, more than he should have had to pay, but at least he was beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

#

Researchers at EMOF watched the end with detachment. Those that couldn't left the observation post on strict orders from Sinclair's council.

The misting occurred through vacuum sealed hatchways across several points of the biosphere, discreet enough so that the Fenrites would not notice the increase in moisture. The virus spread with the utmost efficiency as the Fenrites demonstrated immediate reactions. Agitation appeared almost at the outset, a genuine concern, as if they were aware of the presence of a predator. Most collapsed quickly, their bodies shutting down from the inability to capture external heat. Death was relatively quick and painless.

After monitors and mirror imaging devices surveyed all habitable space and no living Fenrites were found, rats were sent in the sphere to determine if the virus would affect warm-blooded organisms. Tests were already completed in laboratories, but the additional caution seemed appropriate when glancing at the legion of dead Fenrites.

As the rodents displayed no sign of distress, human researchers, although still garbed in bio-protective gear, hunted through the Fenrite corpses for stray survivors. Only one Fenrite demonstrated immunity to the virus. It was summarily executed when it attempted escape. Its body was quickly removed from the sphere, dissected and analyzed for immunity strains.

Several thousand Fenrites died, but the physical proof of their existence - their labs, homes, inventions - remained completely intact for further study. Sinclair marked the test as a complete success.

Farmer had remained to witness the end, only after assuring Sinclair he would not interfere in any way. As the researchers and techs strode about the

dead Fenrite bodies, Farmer stepped up to the head council member and placed a sugar-cube sized metallic block on the table next to her.

"That's everything. All my personal files, diaries, and all the records of every EMOF report I kept. That's every bit of notation I have on the Fenrites. I've made no copies. You have it, along with my resignation."

18. Fenrir's End

"It's a shame," Sinclair stated to the emptiness of her office. "Farmer was right about almost everything. He just couldn't see the end when it was right in his face."

Her portable shimmered like a blinking Christmas tree as she scanned through several reports from the Espial agents, delivered as a courtesy from the Authority. The Fenrite advance was indeed leveling off, the Fenrites themselves turning their attention to their fields and crops. The amount of mining and manufacturing dropped off to near inconsequential levels. Space launches dwindled to a few weather satellites, nothing that could be considered a threat. They made no attempt to strengthen their own defenses as they displayed a complete lack of regard for potential retribution from their attack on the Planning Station.

"I wonder if they actually think they defeated us," she mused. "I doubt it. They must know the fleet is in orbit around their moon. But they seem to act as if the entire incident is finished. Maybe they just can't make the connection between their attack and the arrival of our fleet."

She shook her head and laughed at the irony. It was not a bad assumption, to consider the Fenrites rather dimwitted in certain aspects of intelligence. Creativity and even to a degree inspiration; here the Fenrites demonstrated limitations. They were obsessive in their goal-oriented behavior, but those goals had been given to them by external forces. Their strength resided in what they could copy, and in that, they proved to be the most dangerous foe the Authority ever faced.

That threat, however, was now quickly evaporating. One report after another illuminated her terminal with much less the same status. The Fenrites had reached the end of their accelerated progression, the limit of what they learned from knowledge transplants and observations of Authority weaponry. They were more or less on their own now. They could not depend on a memory implants or a scan of human technology. Invention must now come from within, and the true constraints of their intelligence crippled further advancement.

"Farmer hit that one right on the head," she murmured to herself. "Everything they developed, every technological breakthrough, came about because they drew upon the images we allowed them to retain. They did very little on their own. We gave them the map and they just followed the directions.

"It's a shame we can't let them exist for a while longer. It might be interesting to see how they adapt to a period of stagnation. I wonder if they

retain the same global sense of belonging now that they've lost their common objective. Perhaps they might even fight against each other. Even if they didn't, there is still so much to consider. I wonder what would happen if we dropped some ill-conceived contraptions for them to study. Would they duplicate our mistakes as well as our successes?"

Many other questions stirred in the doctor's brain, but an absolute truth put an end to them all. The Authority wanted retribution, to remove the threat that, in all probability, no longer existed. All the politicking in the galaxy wasn't going to change that. It was over for the Fenrites, and if wasn't on her terms, it would be on the Authority's. The latter would leave little for the researchers to study, so it would be her order, her design.

She considered the existence of her own council. That, too, was probably reaching an end. Once the Fenrites were destroyed, there'd be little use for a council to investigate them. A few minor tasks and responsibilities would certainly be placed in their charge, but it was clean up work and nothing more, better suited for a security council. The important information that could be collected from the Fenrites had already been gathered.

It meant an end to many advantages. The endless resources, the complete power, the security of anonymity; the coming conclusion to this experiment signified a reduction of all these privileges.

But it wasn't the end for her, not anymore. Her council had completed the most important assignments. She had solved the true mystery of the Fenrites, determined how to deal with them, how to prevent future embarrassment. And soon, the Fenrites would be extinct. The end of a chapter, yes, but not to her career. That would continue to prosper.

"Perhaps it is best we end this experiment right here."

#

It actually felt quite refreshing to be back on Janus, almost like returning home. Familiar loading belts and docking rigs welcomed Rath without prejudice, but the scout wondered if some of the people would be as accommodating.

He immediately thought of Lar, about the things he told him. He considered how the middleman might react if Rath revealed what else he learned about the Fenrites, not that he even considered such a discussion. Lar wouldn't want to hear it. Fenrir was a forbidden topic. No, he would leave Lar alone, at least for now.

He expelled a heavy breath from his lips. Another dangling loose end, but one he just wasn't going to worry about.

But what did that mean for Rath? Forgetting about Lar meant finding a new middleman. That wasn't going to be easy, not here. He could try another planet, but that was the same as starting over.

He slouched as he stepped into a magnorail car. He nearly spit at the brightly colored lottery terminal.

"Not with my luck."

He didn't get off at the warehouse district. He let the magnorail bring him to the central province. He stepped into the local Exploratory office and decided to test the deal set by Angelo. It was a risk, especially this soon. Word might not have spread, or the coordinator might not have notified all the parties involved. But Rath was tired of waiting, tired of running.

He moved directly to the main desk and offered his wristband for a scan. His personal information, including his history with the Authority, and probably with the coordinator as well, would be available for inspection. He was either going to be arrested on the spot, or ignored and treated like just another scout. Whichever, he wanted to know now. No more waiting.

The Exploratory rep acknowledged Rath with a nod as he scanned the information coming to his screen.

So far so good. No alarms went off and the rep didn't make any sudden calls to the local jurisdiction. Either this clerk was one good actor or nothing out of the ordinary flashed across his terminal.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Scampion?" the rep asked as if talking to a neighbor he didn't see all that often.

"I want to make a quick run, but I haven't had a chance to put together a bid. You got anything on the expired list without any takers."

The rep nodded. They always liked to reduce the expired bid list. Normally, it included scout runs in systems without planets, orbital scans of gaseous giants where a scout couldn't land, or small errands to drop off space buoys. Most scouts avoided these runs since they couldn't supplement their income with a scavenge hunt. The only thing to be gained on this was the Regency scout money, and once a bid request hit the expired list, the fee was determined by a set of strict calculations. No bargaining, no perks. It was the kind of run a scout made when he needed to pay off a small debt in a hurry.

"I got a couple of simple runs for systems not too far from here," the rep offered with a hopeful expression. "Scanners have already established that there aren't any planets in either system. Regency wants a navigation buoy set in one and a communication booster in the other. I see from the information on the screen that you're bonded, so you can do either or both, if you want. Small pay, though, it's a short trip in both cases."

"That'll be fine," Rath agreed as he looked at the proposed schedule of payments to his account. It really was nothing but chump change, but it'd keep him occupied for a few days. "I'll take them both."

The rep transmitted an acceptance to the two requests and happily watched them disappear from the open list. "I can have both the buoy and the booster ready for pick up in an orbital dock in one hour Janus time. Docking station NM-Green. Is your scout large enough to hold both?"

"Yeah, I've got an expanded hold."

"Good for you. It'll save you some fuel money not having to come back to make a second pickup. The pay's the same whether you make one trip or two."

"Thanks." Rath downloaded the job instructions to his portable. He took his time, almost dragging out the wait. He even executed a comparison to make sure the linked files matched, something he never took the time to do before. He afforded a quick glance about the office, but none of the other clerks and administrators seemed to care about his existence. No one from local jurisdiction showed up at the door, and no one tried to stop him when he finally moved to leave. Certainly if there were standing orders for his arrest, he would have seen some kind of activity, but he walked out the door like any other scout.

When returning to the magnorail station, he looked about for anyone following him, but he was alone.

He released a tired sigh. "I guess they are going to just let me be." He took a seat at the station and for the first moment in a very long time, he felt as if the Fenrite burden had finally been removed from his shoulders. A few worries still nibbled at his innards - what he would do, where he would go - but the overall strain finally began to abate. He thought of Angelo and the deal that brought him this peace.

"More power to the pirates of the world. Let them steal the money and let them deal with the stress."

#

Subcommander Skysdale didn't appear very happy, and that fact in itself brightened Dr. Sinclair's day.

"I take it you have seen the report?" She didn't even try to hide the smile. She wanted her glowing countenance transmitted with her words, wanted the subcommander to see her satisfaction. "Have you also heard the Authority and Regency Govern have agreed completely to my proposal?"

"Yeah, I heard," Skysdale fumed. "I also know that Authority command is pissed about your secret council."

"But they did agree to my plan, even though it came from the very same council."

"They agreed because it takes the heat off of them. The whole thing'll just look like a mass epidemic or a result of the nuclear radiation which the public thinks the Fenrites caused themselves."

Dr. Sinclair enjoyed the moment of triumph. "That was the idea. The Fenrites will be gone, the Authority won't have to worry about another attack, the public won't become outraged at possible genocide, and we still get to investigate the planet without sifting through ashes."

Skysdale couldn't let his anger grow anymore if he wanted.

"And you think that's it? There's still a big mess to clean up. Regency and Authority are no where near harmonious. It was pompous and arrogant of you

to reveal the council's existence to Command. They didn't have to know. You could have passed your proposal to me or directly to Govern. You just wanted to show up the generals, didn't you? The Authority is still looking for some heads to roll."

Sinclair raised an eyebrow. "Well, why not yours? You were part of this council. I don't remember you refusing or even abdicating your position."

"That's another thing," the subcommander shrieked with obvious resentment. "Why'd you have to name me as the council liaison? That was just plain wrong and you know it."

"Not at all. I had to explain the council's knowledge of the situation. Authority Command would have wanted to know how my council received its information. I was duty-bound to tell them."

"Bullshit! You put me in a wringer and you enjoyed doing it. My future with Authority is finished because of that little stunt."

"Ah yes, your future." Sinclair paused to review a prepared electronic message. "I'm forwarding this message to the offices of Regency Govern and Authority Command. As the Fenrite situation is now well in hand, my council is no longer in need of your services. You are dismissed. Good day, subcommander."

#

Fleet General Hollins wasn't thrilled at the prospect. As much as he hated the Fenrites and what they represented, this action was no less abhorrent.

It wasn't that he resented wiping out the Fenrites - they were a creation that never should have been - but it was how they were going to do it. Biological weapons held no honor. Yes, he despised the Fenrites, but this foul creation had earned at least a small amount of respect, far more than the egg-heads and council members that created them. They had accomplished more than any other enemy of the Authority. Out of that simple fact, the Fenrites deserved a chance to die with respect, a chance to fight for their survival. They would not have it.

The Authority wasn't even going to risk sending ships into the atmosphere. Even now, Artillery Rovers took to a high orbit and prepared to launch canister charges that would detonate in the lower atmosphere. The virus would spread planet wide before Fenrir could complete one full rotation.

The general gave one last look to the drifting hulk of the destroyed Planning Station. Not one survivor had been recovered. He tried to focus on his memories of the soldiers he knew, the ones that had died at the hands of the Fenrites. It was a hollow sensation.

"Order the Rovers to launch all canisters. Let's get this over with as soon as possible. This isn't a job for the Authority, but let's do it right."

#

The creations on Fenrir died just as those upon the moon base. Their hearts slowed, circulation failed to bring oxygen to their brains, and they lost consciousness. They made no attempt to escape in their space crafts. They didn't know where to go. The idea that other planets existed beyond their own was only a faint whisper in their collective memories. They truly only knew their home, and they would die here.

The Fenrite experiment ended.

19. Changing Power

The pistol rested within the coordinator's reach, but completely out of the doctor's sight. They sat alone, in Sinclair's office. She rattled off the achievements of the Fenrite Discover Council as she browsed through the notes of her own portable. He sat quiet with his hands folded before him.

He already knew everything she was spouting, knew that she was simply crowing like some beauty contestant that had just won first prize. He let her continue. If she wanted to give her own eulogy, he wouldn't spoil it.

"A research ship is now in orbit at Fenrir." she said. "We have landing teams moving back and forth from the surface to orbital labs in successive rotations. There is no apparent risk from the virus. It was designed to attack cold-blooded creatures and it remains in its original form, no mutations. Techs and researchers are going through all of the Fenrite labs even as we speak. Some of the findings are quite remarkable.

"We've found out everything we could from the moon biosphere. I have researchers sifting through the details, but there was no need to keep the remnants of the colony intact. We've shut it down and removed all traces. The only thing left is the data at EMOF. That will remain as the center for further study, but no one else will ever now just how close a Fenrite colony was to earth.

"Even the Authority has become slightly more accessible lately. I think they now understand that the proper elimination of the Fenrites saved them from many unnecessary headaches. They're helping to keep the Fenrir system secure just in case any of these media nuts try to get curious. I doubt there'll be a problem."

She clicked off her portable with a satisfied thump of her right index finger. Then, she leaned back in her wide chair as if to say "See what a good job I did."

With a nod, she offered her own conclusion. "All in all, it ended surprisingly well, don't you think?"

"Well," Jack almost stumbled with his words, but he focused on his own considerations and forced a reply, "actually there are some lingering problems."

Sinclair's brow furrowed, but only slightly. "You worry too much, Jack. Of course there are some things that must be addressed, but that's why I'm leaving the council intact for a while. We'll smooth out the edges and all of that."

Jack shook his head somberly and Sinclair thought she understood.

"I know there are some points of true concern," she offered. "Things that may not be as easily solved as I would like, but I don't think they'll become true stumbling blocks. It was a big operation, but the council maintained tight control through it all." She hesitated, but just for a moment. She pulled herself forward, though her heavy frame fought against the attempt. "One thing that remains bothersome is the current situation with an associate council member that has quit. Dr. Farmer left quite unhappily. I loath to discuss it, but I'm not sure I can be certain of his intentions."

"Small potatoes," Jack dismissed almost unilaterally.

"Excuse me?" Sinclair's eyes opened just a bit wider. "I know he's handed in all of his notes, but he still knows everything that happened, both on Fenrir and on the moon base. I would hardly consider that kind of person small potatoes."

Jack huffed a light chuckle. "Do you have any idea just how many people know something or another about this project? If you think Farmer's the only threat, then you really haven't been paying attention."

The temperature seemed to drop a degree or two as Dr. Sinclair took the remark rather badly. "I've been paying very close attention, especially to security. Everyone that has inside information has been accounted for, unless of course you're referring to Scampion." Here, she did not hesitate, and she placed blame exactly where she felt it belonged. "Need I remind you of who was supposed resolve that little problem? Hmmm?"

"No, but I think you need to understand what's really going on here," Jack shot back, answering her coldness with a stern demeanor that seemed out of place on his narrow features. "This isn't just a little puzzle that fell apart and you put back together. There are lasting effects that you're not even considering. The Authority broke ranks. Espial, too. For a while, Regency Govern had absolutely no control over its military or intelligence. Do you understand what that means?"

"Politics, and I'm not concerned..."

"Well, you better be concerned," the coordinator rebuffed sternly. "Politics is what this is all about; it's what your council was about. It's maintaining control, giving direction to a society of people spread across a galaxy. It's not some bad word used to shrug off some impropriety. Govern needs to know it maintains control, the public needs to know it maintains control. That's no longer the case."

Sinclair frowned deeply. "The public has no idea what happened. I think you're just talking about a few bruised egos on the main council. Tell them to grow up."

The coordinator could not suppress his consternation.

"A few egos? Hmmm... I don't think so. Look, do I have to spell this out for you? It's over. There are too many cracks in the wall. It's going to break, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon. You've created too many enemies. It's not just Farmer, it's nearly everyone involved in the project. You

want an example? How about your liaison? What you did to Skysdale was a real piece of work. I'm sure he's not going to forget this."

"He won't say anything," Sinclair argued with near disdain. "He knows it'll cost the Authority too much."

"The Authority itself isn't sure it won't go public," Jack stated somberly. "The rift is there, even if you don't want to see it. This was a bad idea from day one. How it ever got this far is as much a miracle as it is a sin. But one thing's for sure. It's over."

He pulled the pistol out from behind his suit jacket.

Dr. Sinclair turned gray, gray like rain clouds in early March. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to make you understand what you're facing. What we're all facing. Regency's ready to crumble unless somebody does something to save it."

"What... what are you going to do with that?"

"What needs to be done."

Sinclair could draw but one conclusion. "Murder? You think murdering me is going to save Regency?!"

"No, not murder. It's suicide."

#

To his own surprise, Rath completed the two runs without incident. Despite the absence of persecution at the Exploratory Council, a shred of paranoia still bit at his consciousness. Each time he launched he thought his ship was going to explode. Every time he was in full push, he waited for the impact of a tracker torpedo. Both times he reached the secluded drop off points; he expected a light cruiser to blow him into space dust. But nothing happened, not when he launched, not while he was in push, and not during his isolated maneuvers in deep space.

He returned to Janus with his missions complete, both the navigation buoy and the communication booster in place. The freight pads welcomed him with the normalcy he was used to. He looked over his shoulder more out of anxiety than out of expectation, but no one followed. He got on the magnorail alone. He even bought a planetary lottery ticket.

Again, he ignored the warehouse district. He returned to midtown and the Exploratory Council to acknowledge completion and accept final payment.

The rep noted there were a few more quick runs in the expired list if he wanted them.

Rath didn't disappoint the hopeful clerk. He accepted one, but said he wasn't going to launch for a day or two.

That was fine with the rep. He was simply happy to see another expired bid removed from his backlog.

Janus was warm that day, and a light breeze kept Rath's spirits fresh. He walked through the streets with a little more kick to his step.

These small runs weren't so bad. Maybe he should do more of this. His ship was a scout, but that didn't prevent him from the little odd jobs that no one else seemed to care about. He could handle a dozen or so of these small excursions in a month, maybe even work with a courier service. They always needed more pilots and ships to deliver financial records and account services. The pay wasn't as good as what he could get from a scout load of emeralds, but he didn't need that much. He had his savings, and he had a new ship. Why bust his hump just for money?

He looked at his wristband to note the time and he remembered the lottery ticket he had just purchased. The drawing was due. By the time he got to a link, they'd list the numbers.

A quick lasercable link to a public access and Rath was downloading.

"Let's see what we got here," he noted with a hint of expectation, a little more optimism than his tone normally allowed. His smile grew as he compared the numbers. He didn't have them all, but he had enough.

"Seven out of ten. How 'bout that. That's gotta be worth something."

He ran a quick check to access the payouts.

"Not bad. I'll take that. Take it any day." He quickly swiped his wristband and the ticket across the public link reader. In less than a minute, the electronic lottery agent deposited new funds into his account.

#

The gun felt uncomfortable in Jack's hand, out of place. It wasn't his style, and the way it shook in his long fingers proved it.

"And it really is suicide," he mumbled. "You killed yourself, but you just don't want to accept it."

It was hard for Dr. Sinclair to accept anything at that moment. Panic gripped her. She couldn't call out. She couldn't think straight. All she could do was look at Jack and the pistol which remained pointed at her forehead.

The tension had its own affect on the coordinator as he spoke through a clenched jaw. "Think about it Elizabeth, think about what you've really accomplished. You did all of this for science, for the advancement of knowledge. Nobody doubts that. From the beginning it was clear that you were worried about research failing in some way or another. It failed to find what you were really looking for. It failed to find the alien link you and many others believed was the key to understanding the universe. But when you didn't find it, you panicked."

"I did what was necessary!" Her voice trembled with obvious fear as she continued to glance back and forth from Jack's face to the barrel of the gun.

"No, I think you did what you wanted to do, and most of it was unnecessary. I guess it was a grand plan, in scale as well as in content. There was a hint of genius in the unexpected, and you sold it with a savvy that rivaled my own. But where did it get you, where did it get us? The defining

lines which kept Regency organized, yet whole, have broken apart. What was once power is now weakness, and we're facing threats from all sides, from blackmailing pirates to renegade generals. Anytime Regency attempts to make a move in the future, this thing's going to rear its ugly head, unless we do something about it now."

His hand shook a little more as he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. He tried once more to steady himself, but the attempt fell short.

"You're really not going to use that, are you?" The doctor said still gray-faced. Her voice still trembled, but she demonstrated a growing alertness to Jack's own discomfort. This, and only this, gave her a shred of hope.

The coordinator raised an eyebrow. "I don't want to. I don't think I'm going to have to." He pulled a small vial out of his jacket pocket. "I think this will do more appropriately. Cyanide. Still the quickest way to go."

The gray appeared to strengthen its hold on the doctor once more.

"I don't expect you're ready just yet to take them on your own," Jack added.

"What? Are you going to force them down my throat?" The image of the rail-like coordinator forcing anything upon the large framed scientist was more comical than possible, but of course, there was still the matter of the pistol. Sinclair fell back upon other hopes. "There are people outside. If you shoot me or if you try to make me eat those, they'll hear. No one is going to believe this suicide garbage!"

"I'm not going to force you to take anything. And you're right; I'm not going to shoot you." He slipped the gun back under his lapel. "I brought that along just to get your attention, just to let you know how serious this is."

The removal of the gun brought a sense of pause, a moment where both the scientist and the coordinator could regroup. Jack spoke up first.

"As for suicide, I'll let you be the judge of that. I don't think there's much doubt when you look at the whole picture that your real life is over. What is it you care about, Elizabeth? Influence? Control? Knowledge? Research? Power?! Are these the things that drive you, give you a reason to get up in the morning? Well, they're gone." He shook his head once before reciting sanctions in quick succession. "As of this moment, your career is finished. You are no longer a council member. You are no longer a part of Regency Science. Your licenses are revoked. Your privileges canceled. You are no longer permitted to request transcripts from any scientific jurisdiction. Your com clearance is removed. All other councils have already been informed of your disposition. They know that discussing any form of research with you is now a breach of Regency security. But I'm afraid it doesn't end there. You are banned from earth. In fact, you will need special clearance for all shuttle transfers and space flights, and only outer rim planets will allow you landing clearance."

Jack decided to unveil the full truth. "I doubt you believe me, so go ahead, use your portable, try to gain clearance... for anything. When that doesn't work use your comlinks. Try to contact anyone. And when you're finished

with that, check your travel clearances, your accounts, and your own personal files, even the encoded ones."

The doctor obeyed, not out of respect to the coordinator, but to deny this unspeakable truth. She worked furiously at all the displays before her. Her efforts were fruitless. Passcodes she had buried long ago for emergency accounts were as useless as simple requests for a shuttle transport permit.

"You can't do this!" the doctor bellowed as if suddenly and viciously impaled with a spear.

Jack's face grew slightly crimson. "You think this is just me? This is Regency. Council members, generals, coordinators, scientists and researchers; everyone that represents the internal strength of this society. We've only got one route to take on this, one hand to play. This is only the first move, and let me tell you, it's no where near the hardest."

Sinclair opted for the only response which came to her clouded mind. "I'll reveal everything I know. I'll release my notes and my..."

"How?" Jack interrupted. "Check your portable. Try to link to the coms. Or are you going to run out of here and go talk to the media. Go ahead. What's it going to get you? You think you're going to get your life back. You're the one responsible for all this, remember? No ones going to forgive you. Actually, if you really want to make a statement, I'll round up the media crews for you. It will make the road ahead a little easier."

She looked at him with disbelieving eyes. He was bluffing, or so she thought, but then again, maybe not. He seemed ready, even willing, to follow through, as if he wanted her to involve the media. Uncertain of herself, for one of the few times in her life, she said nothing.

The coordinator exhaled heavily. "You see, it doesn't matter what you do anymore. Your life is over. No one murdered you, you committed suicide."

He put the pills on the desk in front of her, said nothing more, and left the office.

#

"Dr. Farmer, my name is Jack Lasonelli. I used to work as a coordinator between many of the Regency councils."

Dr. Farmer allowed the stranger to enter his home, even after the admission of working for Regency, but if the scientist was concerned about his own safety, it didn't show. He realized when he walked out on Sinclair that he was doing more than just jeopardizing his career. He really didn't care then, and he certainly didn't appear to care now. Anger served him more than fear these past few days, an anger born out of what Regency did to the Fenrites. He spoke bluntly without considering formalities.

"Coordinator, huh? Never liked you guys. More like little jackals if you ask me," Framer noted near caustically. "But you said 'used to work'. What does that mean? You quit, take a different job? Assassin?"

Jack immediately liked this man. Maybe it was his attitude in the face of very possible danger, maybe it was the way he cut to the chase, or maybe it was the blatant honesty. The coordinator thus answered with a respectful, if not courteous, tone.

"In truth, it means Regency doesn't have cause or need right now for coordinators. There are so many internal struggles and breakdowns that a coordinator can't really help to get anything accomplished."

"So what are you now, and what do you want with me?"

"I suppose I'm more of an agent for Regency Govern."

"You're high up, aren't you," Farmer scoffed. If the mention of the highest council was supposed to impress him, he made it clear that it didn't. "Doesn't make much never mind to me. Regency stinks from top to bottom."

Jack replied almost humbly, decided to explain his position despite the doctor's opinion. "I was a rather successful coordinator when Regency operated as it should. It allowed me to work with Govern. I guess in that respect, I gained their trust."

"Well, you don't have mine. I don't care who you work for. You're just another clown to me."

"I guess that's also true, and since I know of your background, I can even understand it."

"Buttering me up won't help you, either. So why don't you get to whatever it is you're here for."

"Fine, I'm here to offer you a seat on the Exploratory Council. Not a subcommittee, not an advisor position or even a temporary seat. I'm here to offer you a permanent seat on the main body, full privileges and fully sanctioned."

Farmer tilted his head slightly, bore into the stranger's face as if measuring his expression. He accepted the offer as sincere, but he offered his own interpretations as to the worth of such a seat.

"At one time that would have made me happy, now it just makes me laugh. The councils are a joke. They let this happen, encouraged it. They used science. Used it to create something for their own twisted purposes, and when they were through with it, they just destroyed it. How can I work for something like that?" He eyed the coordinator cynically. "How can anyone work for something like that?"

Jack scratched his head, but decided not to argue over his own merits.

"You're right; they have become a joke, a dangerous joke. It's not something that anyone should be proud of, but what's happened has happened. What we need to do now is fix it. Regency needs people like you. People to fix it."

"Like I said before, don't bother trying to butter me up," Farmer jeered. "Sticking a candle up my ass and telling me it's sunshine won't make it burn any less."

Jack could not hold back a laugh. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to tell you anything is sunshine. In fact, I think it's going to be a long time before we see anything that is bright and happy. There's a tough road ahead."

"And maybe you don't want me to make it any tougher, hmmm? What do you think, you want to buy me off with some position? You want to give me something to lose to make sure I stay quiet? Well, don't bother. I don't want it. Not that I have any intention of talking, but I guess you probably won't believe that, either."

"I'll accept anything you say."

One last time, the scientist looked deep into the expression of the coordinator. "What do you really want? Are you just worried about what I might say or do? I can't believe Sinclair isn't concerned about that. I was on her council, remember? I found out what happened to some lower ranking research techs that appeared to be a security threat. I didn't say anything back then, I was too wrapped up in my work." He paused as he bit down on his bottom lip. He shook his head with a demeanor of disgust. "That's a lousy excuse. I should have walked out right there."

He stood up straight, as if accepting what would happen next. "I don't want any position on your council. I'm disgusted enough with myself over what I've already let happen. I'm not going to be part of anymore cover ups."

"We're not going to cover anything up," Jack revealed flatly. "In fact, we're scheduling a media conference right now. We're going to broadcast to the entire Regency public, reveal just about the whole thing." Jack, prepared for Farmer's skepticism, began to list exactly what would be announced. "We will admit that a council of scientists created the Fenrites through a procedure of cross-genetic cloning. We will admit that Govern became aware of the project, but only after the Fenrites were in place. We will admit that the Authority helped to secure the system, but they believed the alien was genuine. We will admit to the creation of the Fenrite Discovery Council and all of its actions. We will admit to the use of biological weapons to destroy the Fenrites."

Jack continued with a straight-faced explanation.

"None of this is a denial of the truth, but I do have to warn you that there are some things we are not willing to reveal. We will not allow the public to know of the split between the Authority and Govern. We will not let the people think that the main council encouraged this experiment. In effect, we will simply reveal the events as they occurred."

Farmer rubbed his chin, drank in the deluge of information. In truth, these were things he wanted to hear, things he believed the public should know about. Of course, there was the matter of accountability.

"And you're going to place the blame entirely on Dr. Sinclair?" There was a note of skepticism, but also a twinge of hope in Farmer's question.

"Yes. Do you believe that's unfair?"

The scientist took long moments to consider the full merit of such a proposal. "Maybe. There were some things she wasn't directly responsible for, but then again, anything that happened occurred because of the original decision. And that was hers. She wanted this experiment. It was her idea to suggest the anomaly and it was her proposal to create the Fenrites. She was certainly in control of the Fenrite Discovery Council." He rubbed his hands together lightly. "I guess maybe it is appropriate."

A gleam lit in the doctor's eyes. "Does she know about this? How is she taking it?"

The coordinator answered directly. "She committed suicide. Took cyanide after she was informed of the decision."

"Suicide?" He wasn't prepared for this, and though it did not cause him pain, it did bring a trace of disbelief.

Jack quickly explained. "Not that I expect you to give any credence to the word of a coordinator, but I assure you, she took the pills on her own."

"Why?" Farmer demanded, still in a state of disbelief.

"Her career was over. That, Regency was responsible for. We revoked everything she worked for, but can you really blame us? Can you?"

Farmer was stone-faced in his simple reply. "No."

"The blame will be placed on Dr. Sinclair, and most agree that's where it belongs. Right now, we need people to clean up the mess. There are going to be hard questions, and we need people with the answers. We need to put Regency back together. If you help, you can make sure something like this doesn't happen again."

Farmer frowned, but accepted. "I'll take the position, but I'll scream holy murder if I find out you haven't been straight with me."

Jack looked to the floor, but spoke very clearly. "There is then one thing I should make clear right now, as I don't want it to be misunderstood in the future. I met with Sinclair just before she died. I told her of the sanctions against her. I placed the pills on her desk before I left, but I did not make her take them. She did that on her own. But, it was what I had hoped for. Do you wish to change your mind about the position?"

Dr. Farmer revealed no sign of sorrow or distress. He tapped his fingers together lightly as he gave his simple response.

"No."

#

Rath sat in a large, busy tavern when the briefing occurred. The feed was carried to Janus on a courier ship. The actual mediacast occurred over five standard hours ago, but this was the first anyone on Janus heard of the jolting revelation. A minister from the Regency Bureau of Information read a prepared statement before taking questions.

The words struck at Rath like bullets. He stared in stunned disbelief as the minister revealed everything; the unnatural creation of an alien, the planting of colonies on Fenrir, the unfettered advancement of the Fenrites.

Blame was placed squarely on some scientist who just committed suicide, though the minister acknowledged an ongoing investigation into her death. The Authority was named, as were many of the councils, but their roles were confined to actions based on misrepresentations of the scientist in charge and the false pretenses of an alien existence. Jack, the coordinator whose business it was to lie, was not mentioned.

Rath found that point interesting, but he wasn't mentioned, either. And for the moment, the media reps did not consider the role of the initial scout.

"They'll get around to it," he muttered.

Not a pleasant thought, but a more unnerving consideration quickly removed any concern over media questions. What was Regency going to do with him now? He was allowed to return to his life because of the deal Angelo had made with the coordinator. But what now? That deal wasn't worth spit. He was safe as long as Regency wanted to hide the truth about the Fenrites, but they were coming clean on their own.

The heavy load was right back on Rath's shoulders, but this time it brought with it panic - shaking, mind-clouding, disorienting panic. Within the bar, all eyes remained fixed on the three dimensional display of the information minister, but Rath kept sensing a focus on himself, as if the people knew he was part of this, and they weren't about to let him go.

He paid his tab with a quick swipe of his wristband before he clumsily rose to his feet. He almost fell.

Still, those around him watched the mediacast. No one called out; no one attempted to stop him.

He moved through the crowd, trying to make his way to the door. Grunts of disapproval greeted him as he slowly nudged through the throng gathered about the monitor. It was like walking through a jungle. Worse, it felt like every pair of hands was ready to take hold, to stop him from fleeing.

He tried to hold back a cough, but in the end, it forced its way out louder. A few more grunts of displeasure demanded silence.

Finally, thankfully, he reached the door. He wanted to glance over his shoulder, but he didn't take the chance. If he had, he would have noticed that no one was paying attention.

The streets were empty. Everyone had entered a tavern or communications center to watch the media cast. It felt good to be out in the open, but only for a moment. New fears entered his brain, unsubstantiated fears, but no less disquieting. He shied away from alleys, looked to the rooftops in search of secretive movements. He saw nothing, but he remained far from convinced of his own safety. He tensed as if expecting an assassin's bullet in the back.

His thoughts swam back to his last encounter with Regency. They had followed him to the pirate base of Semele. They were in the process of leveling the complex when a stroke of simple fate redirected the efforts of Authority gunners. They wanted him dead then, why would they want to keep him alive now?

He looked to a magnorail station, but decided against it. He stayed on the walkways beneath the skimmer paths. He might have been an open target, but at least the space gave him a zone of comfort, a sense of freedom.

He walked the full distance to the freight pads. Near the end, his ankles ached, but once he reached sight of his ship, he increased his pace.

Before entering the scout, he glanced at the space control panel. The pattern remained clear and he could probably request immediate takeoff.

He didn't stop to think about where he was going, didn't pause to develop a plan. He just wanted to launch. He pulled himself through the port hatch and nearly leapt the last six steps to the cockpit. He found he was not alone.

The coordinator never looked up. He scanned coded reports from his own portable as he pointed to the pilot's chair.

"Take a seat, Scampion. We're going on a little trip, something I want you to see. By the way, before you get any funny ideas, there are Espial agents monitoring us right now."

Rath groaned a curse that echoed throughout his body.

The noise brought Jack's attention to the scout. "That sounded awful. Don't get too desperate on me. There's still a good deal to see."

Rath remembered when he first surrendered to the marauders. This felt worse. He collapsed into his chair and eyed the controls with pure futility.

Jack smiled. "When you give up, you really give up."

"Screw you," Rath mouthed, but it was hardly forceful.

"I guess you have a little bit of spunk left in you. Not much, but a little. Do you want to know where we're heading or should I surprise you?"

"Why don't you just tell me, asshole? I'm tired of surprises."

"I guess you should be. We're heading to Semele."

"Imagine that," Rath shrugged.

"Yeah, imagine that," Jack growled. "You want to launch this thing or should I bring in an Espial pilot? I have one waiting."

"The smell is bad enough in here with just you, thanks," Rath scoffed.

"Good! Then let's launch and I'll set the course precepts. We should be there in about twenty-five standard hours or so."

Rath punched the props to launch power. He mumbled to himself, cursed his own stupidity. As the scout was given top priority in the pattern, he was able to exert full Boscon propulsion within minutes. The instant they were in push, he sat back in his chair but kicked the metal support in front of him.

"You don't seem to be in a good mood at all," Jack remarked, but his attention remained on his portable.

"I'll do a dance next time I'm this stupid."

"You think you made a mistake somewhere along the line?"

"I made a lot of mistakes, pal," Rath admitted. "Every one of 'em brings me right back to you."

"That may be so, and I'd love to discuss it further, but I just downloaded certain communications and I need to address some things. You won't mind if I use your quarters for a little privacy, right?"

Jack got up to leave, but offered one warning. "Don't get any bright ideas up here. There's a spy vessel following the Boscon wake of this craft. You try to go off course and you won't get to see anything beyond a deep space funeral."

"And if I stay on course, will I get to see something different?" Rath asked with dry skepticism.

"Keep an open mind, Scampion. You've got nothing to lose to see this thing through."

"That's probably just some more coordinator bullshit."

"That doesn't sound like an open mind to me," Jack stated with raised eyebrows, but he didn't wait for a response.

#

The scout dropped out of push exactly as scheduled. Near a hundred signals on the scanners indicated the presence of a full fleet.

Jack was back in the cockpit, still reading and writing memos on his portable.

"Bring us to a full stop," the coordinator demanded.

Rath shrugged, but did as he was told.

Jack made a direct connection between his portable and the ships communication systems. With but a few commands, he had a direct line to a spy vessel scanning the planet Semele.

"Taranson? That you?"

"Yes, sir," the captain replied.

"Everything in order?"

"The mark has been pinpointed and identified. We have conclusive acquisition of the mark as we speak. No ships have left the system and all satellites have been destroyed."

"Excellent. Keep tabs on our mark to confirm elimination."

"Roger that. Will transfer scanner readings through this link. Your portable should display tracker reports."

Even from Rath's chair, he could see the portable glow with new light.

"Transfer enabled, readings received," Jack confirmed. "Signal the fleet commander. It's his go. And thank him for waiting."

Jack turned to Rath. "I seem to remember a similar situation, don't you? We were in a transport watching Fenrir." Jack turned a wry smile. "I told you that the Authority was going to try and save Fenrir, but that wasn't quite the truth."

"Another lie? I'm shocked." Rath noted with dry sarcasm.

Jack continued, ignoring the remark. "The melees fired the nuclear missiles, not the Fenrites. Or did you figure that out yet? We wanted to destroy them right then and there. They never had silos. We doctored those pictures I showed you. We just wanted to make it look like they destroyed themselves, but it didn't turn out as I expected. They shot almost everything down as if they were ready for us. Some of the researchers think they were, that somehow they knew we would be coming for them. As it turns out, they ended up using the nuclear warheads on the Planning Station, not at all what we expected. Yes, that little incident didn't turn out as expected, but I doubt I'll have the same problem here. No, this is the end of Angelo."

"How do you know he's really down there?" Rath offered, hoping to maybe take some air out of the coordinator's balloon. "He probably knows the word is out on the Fenrites. He knows his bargaining chip is gone. Maybe he realizes you're coming after him just like the Fenrites did."

Jack shook it off like rain on a duck's back. "Do you think I would be stupid enough to release the information on the Fenrites without putting a rope around our marauder friend's neck first? The fleet has been in control of this system for over two standard days. An Authority subcommander met with Angelo in person yesterday. Our friend wasn't too happy at the arrival of the fleet, said we broke our word. He even threatened to go public, but the subcommander was authorized to inform him we were going public ourselves. I can bet he wasn't too happy about that. No, he's down there. You heard the report from the spy ship, didn't you? We've got him marked. See?" The coordinator turned his portable to reveal the location of the mark. "He's down there, and we'll know exactly when he's deceased."

Jack noticed a coded message cross his portable. "That's got to be the order. Yup, ships are moving in now. This time artillery rovers are going to pulverize the continents and then the melees and blitzers will move in to complete the task."

Heavily armored ships moved forward with an orange burst from their tail thrusters. Large, ominous vessels encircled the planet as if it was some kind of wounded animal unable to escape, but the closer they came to the atmosphere the smaller they appeared in comparison, as if it was the planet that was inhaling the attacking ships. Some of the smaller vessels disappeared from sight, lost in the darkness of space or absorbed by the brilliance of the planet surface.

Rath watched the scene from his scout. Silence filled the cockpit as the front viewshield faced Semele. The initiation of the assault was obvious enough. He could see the blight flashes indicating catapult from the rovers. He didn't know what ordnance they were carrying, but it made an explosion on Semele's surface large enough to witness from space.

For the most part, Jack watched his portable screen, but he allowed himself a quick glance at the spectacle from the viewshield. He found a good deal of exultation in the display.

"Did you see that? Now that's power."

Power wasn't the word that came to Rath's mind. Devastation. That seemed more appropriate. Destruction on a planetary scale. Maybe it did signify power, but the scout felt more remorse than awe.

"I'm getting a report that the rovers have destroyed all surface defenses," Jacks stated almost giddily. "Launchers and pads are out of commission. They'll focus on the complexes and hangars now."

Targeting systems pinpointed all structures on Semele, both above and below the surface. Hundred ton canisters of augmented explosives fell like rain from the sky. The detonation left craters larger than small moons.

From space, the view was frightening. Rath could see land masses ignite with bright yellow and orange flames. Staggering.

Jack pointed out the obvious. "Now, do you really think anyone is going to survive something like that? I don't care how deep the bunker is. Anyone down there is going to be dead before this is over. It's only a matter of time before... there it is. A direct hit to the main complex. The mark is gone. You can say good-bye to Angelo the marauder."

Not gone, eradicated. Rath stared at the planet. One person was so insignificant in size - from where he sat, the space a single body would occupy was a hundred times less than a spec of dust - yet, a good deal of trouble was spent in assuring that single individual's death. He only met the pirate once, he really didn't even like Angelo, but the process in which this man was obliterated was more than unsettling. It was like God striking down a heathen, and that kind of power shouldn't have been in the hands of a person like Jack Lasonelli.

"What about his wife?" Rath questioned downheartedly.

"Oh, she was probably killed in the same explosion." The coordinator spoke as if Opal was nothing more than an insect. "Or killed before, or will be soon enough. We didn't mark her, not worth it, I really can't say for sure if she was in the building. But no one's left the planet since the fleet arrived. I guess if she left earlier, she's still alive. Not that I care. What can she do? Spread the word about the Fenrites? Already done. Like I said, not worth it."

"And what about me," Rath asked, "am I worth it?"

Jack closed up his portable before responding. He eyed the scout with obvious distaste, something akin to the way a person looks at spoiled food. "I don't know what you're worth, but I know what you deserve."

"What I deserve?" A flood of anger rushed from the scout. "How about what you deserve. You're killing a whole planet, and you seem to be enjoying it."

"A planet of pirates and thieves," Jack countered. "You almost toppled a whole society, the good as well as the bad. So don't point fingers at me. It's quite a mess out there. The public is calling for a complete shake up of Regency. They want an end to these councils and the power they derive. When I think about that, I really would like to kill you. This isn't just a little discontent; this is getting close to anarchy, a near complete overthrow of a

government that's kept control over an empire that's growing in interstellar terms. Do you have any appreciation for what that means? All of this because you ran to the wrong place."

The accusation didn't sit well and the scout shouted out his own charge "No, all of this because a few scientists tried to deceive the public! Isn't that the real truth?!"

"Not all of it. It was the start, but you were the catalyst."

"And maybe Angelo would've figured it out for himself. You heard what he had to say. He had more information than what I gave him. I didn't know that you created the Fenrites. I just knew they weren't always there."

"Look, I'm not going to argue this with you." Jack stated firmly. "If you don't want to stand up and accept responsibility for some stupid decisions, that's your problem."

"And what about you? You blameless?"

"No, I should have had you killed rather than wasting time trying to convince you that you missed the Fenrites."

The statement carried a ring of conviction, something Rath could understand.

"A mistake you'll correct now, I assume."

Surprisingly, Jack disagreed. "Actually, no. I've got nothing to gain by killing you at this point. In fact, more to lose. You're a link to all this, the one factor that can be traced all over the galaxy to prove that the Fenrites were not an alien but a creation of our own scientists. Some media people are already trying to drum up accusations that the Fenrites were, in fact, an extraterrestrial organism. They want the public to believe we destroyed them out of fear. That's a charge that's worse than the truth. And that's what's going to keep you alive."

Rath wasn't ready to become optimistic. He stole a glance at the decimated planet, a tribute to what Regency could truly accomplish.

The coordinator noted the reluctance. "I'm going to offer you an alternative. It's a simple deal, one you can keep."

"And what about you? I see how you kept your last deal." Rath scoffed as he nodded to the viewshield. "Seems like I remember some promises you made to Angelo. You know, about leaving him and his planet alone?"

"Angelo tried to blackmail me. Now, are you ready to listen?"

Rath didn't answer, but he waited silently.

"Good. Now this is all you have to do. You return to your life as a scout. You don't hide and you don't run. You go back to the way things were, but there are going to be questions, and when they're asked, you answer with the truth."

Rath raised an eyebrow, but the coordinator cut him off before he could make any sarcastic remark.

"You tell everybody - media people, local jurisdictions - everybody gets the same answer. No pointing fingers. No trying to place blame. Just tell them what happened to you."

"Including you, how you lied to me, how you tried to trick me into believing my scout's sensors malfunctioned?"

"I said everything. Just say it as it happened. If you think that's going to get me in any trouble, think again."

Rath shrugged. "Just following orders, right? Blame some dead scientist and everyone else gets off for free."

"Yeah, sure," the coordinator replied with his own sarcasm dripping from every word. "All of Regency is just going to go back to the way it was. There won't be any discontent, no backlash. You're a fool, Scampion. We're facing open dissension. Outer rim planets are already composing documents of secession. We're facing a civil war because of this and we need to bring everyone back together. If some reputations get hurt, even mine, that's no big deal. Besides I don't answer to the public, I answer to Regency."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"Don't like it? Tough. Try to get cute, that's what you'll get." The coordinator pointed to the planet with a jutting finger. "We're not playing games anymore, especially not with you."

Rath heaved a heavy breath. He considered the arrangement and decided to make one additional demand of his own. It wasn't a risk as much as it was a test, a test to see how far the coordinator would go.

"What if I make one extra request?"

Jack frowned, but entertained the appeal. "What is it?"

"I want a new engine for my scout. The kind with the emeralds. If I'm going to remain a scout for long, I have to be able to compete. It might look bad if I suddenly drop out of the business."

Jack almost laughed. "You don't need a new engine to compete, but I don't see the harm in giving you one. It'll get you around faster, and as long as you don't disappear, that's probably for the better. Bring us back to Janus and I'll sign the requisition." The coordinator paused, and then lowered his voice to the cold tone of an unveiled threat. "Take one last look at that planet, Scampion. That's why I brought you here. I want you to understand something. Angelo tried to hold something over Regency to get his way. He thought he could scare a few individuals with threats of exposure. Regency is bigger than a few councils. We went public with this embarrassment to keep Regency alive. We're destroying Semele to send a message to other planets thinking about rebelling. Don't miss what the message should be saying to you. The Fenrites are gone, that mistake has been erased. You made your own mistake that landed you in this mess, don't make anymore. Yeah, maybe we're using you, but you get to live. Try to keep it that way. You can return us to Janus now. I don't expect we'll have to talk again."

The coordinator lifted his tall body from the chair, stooped through the cockpit portal, and left Rath behind to contemplate the final scene of destruction.

The scout watched for only a moment more. He saw the tiny flares of a massive melee and blitzer response. He hardly believed they were necessary at this point. The deluge of artillery canisters certainly leveled the entire planet surface. This was more like overkill, or perhaps indeed a display, a display of what the Authority, of what Regency, could do if another planet got out of hand.

Rath ripped his focus from the viewshield. He set the navcom with precepts for Janus and ignited full power to the Boscon props.

20. A Place of His Own

With a new beryl-based Boscon engine, Rath added a new dimension to each of his scouts. Before he would return to Janus or any other Regency controlled planet, he would head out beyond the outer rim. He found a small planet deep in a cluster of stars beyond the scanners; a place which no one knew existed.

It held everything he needed; water, fuel, minerals. He would scavenge emeralds and heliodors, bring them back to controlled space, and sell them to wholesalers on different worlds throughout Regency. He used the funds to buy fake identification slots and fund accounts. He then bought equipment which he would bring back to his little private hideaway.

Angelo once accused him of thinking small. The pirate was right then, but not anymore. Rath already set up six satellite curtains. A shield of electronic camouflage now encircled the planet, protected it from long-range scanners. It would never be spotted, not by orbiting sensors and not by passing ships. As far as anyone else was concerned, the system was devoid of any planets. Rath owned a world now. Just like Angelo used to.

He had no grand plans of revenge. He did not intend to build a fleet to oppose Regency or to construct a home base for outlaws and rebels. That was Angelo's desire, and it led to his downfall. Rath simply wanted this place to himself, a place to escape, a place of solitude

He stood on the surface. The only living organism on the planet. He did not feel loneliness, he did not feel emptiness. He felt a sense of freedom.

He surveyed the stretching horizons of rock and ocean. He could go anywhere, do anything. Other than the natural forces of this world, he was the sole vehicle of action. Everything else remained dormant, waiting for him to exercise his will.

He thought of the worlds he once explored. All of them were now burgeoning colonies; some were even caught up in the rebellion. But none of them remained as pure as when he first arrived upon their surface. What he loved about being a scout was finding a place that could maintain life, but didn't. A place that seemed to wait for the touch of creation. When life was artificially introduced, whether as it was on Fenrir or even just another planet colonized by the humans themselves, the innocence of that planet disappeared forever.

Rath didn't want that, not here. He picked up a rock and threw it. It skipped across the dirt before rolling to a stop. Once the dust settled, everything was back to the way it was. And the scout wanted it to remain that way.