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MCCAFFREY**

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ANNE McCAFFREY



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to

MATTHEW HARGREAVES

for all the hard work, effort and time that he expended in nailing down an excellent bibliography of all the works by this grateful author

(except this one which wasn't written yet!)

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PROLOGUE

THE first incursion against the Nine Star League by the Hive entities occurs at Deneb, where Jeff Raven and the undeveloped Talents of his planet stave off a vicious attack by three alien scout ships orbiting Deneb IV. Calling for assistance from the Earth Federated Teleport and Telepath Prime, Peter Reidinger, Jeff Raven encounters the Rowan, Callisto's Prime. In a mind merge, two of the three invaders are destroyed and the third sent back, as a warning, to whence it had come.

Three years later the Mother Hive ship, a spherical leviathan, appears at Deneb heliopause. The Talents once again merge to defend the planet: the Rowan, pregnant with her second child, Cera, is the focus for the feminine minds which then immobilize the female Many Mind that governs the Hive ship. The male merge, with Jeff Raven as focus, then teleports the Hive ship into Deneb's primary.

Nineteen years later, while recuperating on Deneb, Damia Gwyn-Raven, another T-1 Talent, and Afra Lyon, a Capellan T-2, have "dreams" which they realize are being implanted by the alien figure which appear in these dreams. Contact is made with these visitors, who call themselves the Mrdini. Through dreams the Mrdini explain that they have been defending themselves and their colony world against the incursions of the Hive for centuries. They had followed the Hive ship to Deneb and been fascinated by its destruction without loss of life on the part of the defenders. They offer an alliance.

In order to establish meaningful relationships, young 'Dinis are placed with Human children, in the sound belief that early exposure to another species facilitates understanding. Among those selected for this experiment are the children of Afra and Damia, now Tower Prime for Iota Aurigae, a mining world. Their eight children all have 'Dini pairs.

At sixteen, the eldest daughter, Laria, is sent to the 'Dini homeworld of Clarf to teach 'Dini Human language and to expand her own understanding of the adult vocabulary. At about this time, Mrdini scouts observe three Hive ships which separate before the 'Dini can catch up. But the ion trails left by the three are strong and can be followed on their disparate ways.

The Alliance of Mrdinis and Nine Star Leaguers decide on a four-pronged expedition. The first element of six ships is to backtrack to see if it cannot locate the elusive homeworld of the Hivers. The other three elements are to follow the Hive ships to their destinations, preferably to destroy them if at all possible before they can colonize another world by first sterilizing it of all existing life forms.

Isthian Lyon, Laria's brother, is seconded by FT&T to the AS *Vadim* to act as Prime with the tracking mission of six ships, four Human, two Mrdini. It is his job to improve communications and relations between the Allies, and to receive supplies to keep the ships moving toward their objective. Thian has always been interested in naval matters so he is well suited by the assignment. Thian is accompanied by his 'Dini pair, Mrg and Dpl (Mur and Dip).

When the *Vadim* encounters a lifeless stationary derelict, it is identified as a Hive ship, though larger by another third than any previously encountered. It appears to have been destroyed by the heat of an expanding nova. Three escape pods seem to have been used, though others were destroyed *in situ*. An exploration detail of both 'Dini and Human is to examine the wreck. Encountering hostility from a crewman, Thian is nearly killed on the Hive ship, where he discovers undamaged Hiver eggs. These are sent to be studied by the Alliance xenobiologists. Recovering from his injury, Thian elects to continue with the Mrdini ship, the *KLTL*, as the Mrdinis insist on being certain that a nova has destroyed the Hive homeworld.

Two of the ships in Thian's element are required to start the derelict on its way to a point at which

both Mrdini and Human specialists can examine it thoroughly. The remaining three ships decide to track down the three escape pods. It is essential to capture the pods, for just one queen is sufficient to establish a new colony.

While Thian continues with the *KLTL* on toward the site of the nova, the search for the three large ships, as well as the escape pods, continues. Attempts are also being made to reassemble from its shattered parts as much of the big Hive Sphere as is possible to reconstruct, in an effort to learn more about the enemy.

One of the escape pods, bearing a live queen, is discovered by the *Beijing* and captured, and is safely in tow behind the ship. Afra and his son Rojer are sent out to 'port the pod to the Heinlein Moon Station where it can be safely examined in great detail. There is considerable debate and many factions: some wishing to summarily execute the queen, others wishing to approach her in an effort to establish communications with and knowledge of a species never before captured. The Mrdini are particularly against keeping the queen alive. Rojer, with his father acting as focus, easily transfers queen and pod.

Back on Earth, the captured queen pod is secured and placed under twenty-four hour surveillance. When she finally emerges, she is seen as a mantis-type creature, tenlimbed, and egg-heavy. Since no one has had much luck in incubating the eggs discovered on the derelict ship, it is decided to deposit these with her.

There is considerable objection to keeping the creature alive, but those who insist that knowing more about the enemy may be a deciding factor in a final victory over its incursions manage to win the argument. She is kept alive. Food of all varieties is supplied and she is seen to prefer vegetables over fruits. Her actions, when there are any, are monitored and shown to all interested.

Zara, the fourteen-year-old sister of Laria, Thian and Rojer, becomes emotionally involved with what she sees as the queen's dreadful plight and imprisonment. In a remarkable adventure, Zara arrives at the Observation Station and, distraught by the queen's condition, 'ports herself into the facility and realizes that the queen is freezing, being accustomed to a much hotter temperature in her parturitional stage. Zara's intercession saves the queen's life although, despite a hope that there has been some empathy between Human and Hiver, this bizarre incident is not repeated, nor can Zara explain why she acted as she did. Her parents realize with some regret that Zara is not Tower material even though a Prime. Elizara, the T-1 medic for whom she was named, and her great-grandmother Isthia decide she may have healing Talents.

Meanwhile, one of the escaping Hive ships has been tracked to a star system where it is obviously slowing down. Rojer is sent to the *Genesee* to expedite messages for Squadron B—two Human ships and one Mrdini ship—which is hovering, undetectable, within an asteroid belt of the system.

The crew watch as the arriving Hiver ship is attacked from moon bases and planetary surfaces. When the ship's ammunition is exhausted, the queens flee in escape pods which are disintegrated. This shocks those on the *Genesee*. As much as the 'Dini have observed of their enemy over the centuries, they are as surprised and stunned as their Human allies. It is new territory for them, too.

Instead of being allowed to go in blasting, Squadron B and the *Genesee* are ordered to hold a watching brief, utilizing as many probes as possible, with Rojer's help, to gather information. It is thought that Thian, on his way back to "civilization" on the *KLTL*, which has now definitely established that the Hiver homeworld was destroyed in the nova, will join or replace his brother on the *Genesee*.

Two squadrons are still in pursuit of the remaining two Hive spheres while Squadron A, Thian's original group, is searching for the other two pods which evacuated from the Great Sphere before it was hit by the nova shock wave. A waiting game is played on several levels and ethical problems of great magnitude must be addressed by both Human and Mrdini civilizations.

CHAPTER

ONE

DURING the course of the next few weeks, while Rojer waited for his older brother, Thian, to replace him on board the *Genesee*, he spent a great deal more time on the bridge than he had originally thought he would. Not only was Rojer Lyon the FT&T T-1 which linked Squadron B with its homeworlds and was the means by which the three ships were kept supplied by twice-weekly importations of supplies, he was also able to provide other services to the Squadron not in his original brief. If he was referred to as “the boy” or “the civilian,” he couldn’t deny “boy” as he was not quite sixteen, although tall and well-muscled from an active life on his home planet. He also had inherited the family lock of silver hair which made it difficult for some to believe he hadn’t yet reached his majority. Most times these references to his age or status were jocular. Sometimes envy or disparagement tinged these epithets—until he reported in the next supply drones, when he was again in favor with all. Sometimes it appeared to him that his ’Dinis, Grl and Ktg, were more acceptable to the *Genesee* officers and crew than he was, but he encouraged them to continue teaching their language to any on board who wished it. At night, in his cabin, he could enjoy the consolation of his friends and they were very good at diverting him with amusing shipboard incidents and their own special companionship. When he was particularly upset, they would “dream” the tension away.

Since the Squadron was on orders to hold a watching brief and to take no direct action against the ancient enemy which occupied the system, tedium became a problem. Even escape pod drills became a welcome variation of daily routine. So, when Captain Osullivan asked Rojer if he could report the newly developed and undetectable probes to discover what they could about the moons’ defenses and the three spherical ships in docking orbit around the planet, he was quite willing to oblige.

The activity was one he was well able for: in fact, it gave him no little satisfaction to know that “the boy/civilian” had an ability no one else in the B Squadron had. He was also just as curious as anyone else in the Squadron to learn as much as possible about the Hivers’ world. He had discreet knowledge from Gil and Kat that Captain Prtglm of the *KTTS* would have preferred direct action to surveillance and had been extremely upset by the “surveillance” order from the High Council which had originated from the Human Supreme Commander, Admiral Tohl Mekturian, and the Mrdini High Councillor, GkmtgInt.

The Squadron had been given a stunning display of the planet’s defenses when they had observed the attack on the refugee Hive ship which they had followed to this system. Their three ships would have been totally outgunned and unable to inflict telling damage on planetary installations.

It was a different matter entirely to survey as much as possible of this enemy planet. Rojer enthusiastically entered into dispersing disguised monitors to the material clustering about the three sphere ships which were in a construction-level orbit about the planet. Certainly any ground-based sensors wouldn’t notice him tucking a few more “pieces” amid the clutter that spun in disarray round the world. Frankly, Rojer thought tossing such garbage into space was an appalling way to discard rubbish.

Neither Captain Quacho of the sister ship, the *Arapahoe*, or Captain Osullivan of the *Genesee* had expected that the refugee Hiver ship would be attacked by its own species, its queens driven to escape in the pods which had then been summarily disintegrated by the planetary batteries. Captain Prtglm

had announced that it was no more than could be expected of Hivers.

Since Rojer's first assignment was to inspect the three sphere ships in their docking orbit, tensions were defused further when the monitors proved that only one looked to be spaceworthy. Quite possibly it had been the ship which had transported the original colonizing group. One of the other two was near completion, though it had significant gaps, probably left open to receive equipment, while the other was only partly hulled. That gave rise to further speculation as to why the planet's defenders had "holed" the refugee ship, rendering it unusable.

Somewhat reassured by that investigation, which he had Rojer relay in his daily message to Earth Prime, Captain Osullivan requested Rojer to make a geographical survey of the eight land masses, the biggest one spreading from pole to pole. An opportunity like this, to gain firsthand knowledge of a Hiver world, should be utilized to the fullest extent possible. It also provided occupation during the tedium of a watching brief.

The Hive culture appeared to be totally land-based and every centimeter of land was cultivated. Rojer's guided sensors showed that mountainsides were terraced up to the snow-line with what Commander Metrios, the engineering officer, considered amazing techniques and, although some fields were fallow, the majority sprouted with vigorous, if unrecognizable, flora. Narrow tracks bordering the fields provided access for the scurrying life forms involved in agricultural occupations. Their constant presence made it dangerous to attempt to 'port in a sample-collecting probe. Another variety of beetle-like creatures specialized in irrigation, trundling water, held in body sacs, which was carefully dribbled along neat rows. What surprised Lieutenant Istvan Mrkovic, the science officer, who had made due note of the teeming marine life, was that the Hivers had not made any attempt to harvest nutritious seaweed and plankton so abundant and easily obtained.

"So they're vegetarians? Seaweed's a vegetable," he exclaimed.

"They seem to be single-minded in many respects," said Anis Langio, the astrogation officer whom Rojer admired at a distance. She was the prettiest of the female bridge officers and he was old enough to appreciate her presence. "A stagnant culture determined to replicate itself ad infinitum."

"That may alter," was the captain's crisp remark.

"I'd give anything to see a weed among all that perfection," remarked Anis Langio in a tone bordering on disgust. "Talk about purpose bio-engineering. A purpose for every critter and a critter for every purpose. Appalling. Specialization ad absurdum!"

"Look at these," Rojer said, focusing his sensor at its finest magnification where gatherers were stripping rows of a globular green vegetable form. Finishing the collection, the gatherers turned from the rows into neat triple ranks and trundled toward a central installation into which they disappeared.

Thousands of these installations had been scanned. They varied in size, evidently depending on the volume of crops, but not in shape, all being square buildings covering three to four acres, four or five stories in height with interior access at ground level along each side. Rojer had whizzed a sensor close enough to see that the entrance sloped downward. Activity continued night and day, for the creatures apparently did not require illumination for their tasks.

"And we thought this duty was boring," one yeoman was heard to mumble, eliciting widespread grins and a mild reproof.

"Those buildings have to be the access to tremendous subterranean networks," Istvan Mrkovic said thoughtfully. "There isn't enough space inside any of them to store the amounts brought in on a daily basis. Do they pick for daily use, since I noticed they do leave immature vegetables on the vines and bushes, or just to process for storage? Yet I can't pick up any trace of smoke or heat to account for cooking."

"Vegetarians eat a lot of raw foods," Anis remarked. "Or maybe they have a critter with heat-resistant paddles to stir the stew."

Istvan shot her a reproving look for such levity, though even the captain smiled. “Certainly we haven’t seen anything coming back out for distribution so that has to be taken care of underground. Wow! What an organization! You gotta give ’em that.”

“The workers *have* to be fed something at some point to continue at the pace they go,” Anis Lang said, no longer bantering. She had her head propped on one hand and, as she watched the screen, was idly twirling a dark, springy curl around one finger. It seemed oddly out of character for someone of her rank and expertise. “You don’t see any of them lying down on the job or expiring from lack of care.”

“All mining must be done subterreaneously, too,” Mrkovic decided. “I haven’t seen anything remotely resembling an adit but those ships required a variety of metals. I’ve noted the presence of all the ores that we use but only that one finished ship in the construction orbit has been covered with their special coating. And if they have every centimeter producing food, the planet must be full up.”

“The last harvest before blast-off,” Anis quipped.

“Not if they’ve only one spaceworthy ship.”

“Maybe the agricultural workers are multi-tasked and once the harvest’s in they turn on their construction mode,” was Anis’s rejoinder. Istvan gave her another of his disgusted looks.

“She could be right,” Metrios said. “The palp that pulls the pepper could also manipulate delicate equipment.”

“And the trundlers shift struts and panels...” Anis went on.

“While the irrigators fill the fuel tanks,” Doplas said, joining in the fun.

“That is when we must be most cautious,” the captain said, and turned to Rojer. “You can withdraw the monitors quickly?”

Rojer nodded.

“Commander Yngocelen and I are still trying to include a small self-destruct unit, sir, just in case,” Metrios said. “Small enough not to create much flare but enough to fuse the innards to an unrecognizable slag.”

The captain nodded approval. “Our relief ships are not that far away.”

Rojer held his breath in surprise. Would he actually be in on the first invasion of a Hive world? He had heard the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Commander Yngocelen, and some of his staff discussing what would be needed to “take out” the moon batteries but no one had sounded very optimistic about success in that direction. Despite all they had seen of this Hive world, there were many unknowns.

From their Mrdini allies and once firsthand on Deneb, Humans did know something about Hive colonization practices. The creatures preferred G-type stars, M-5-type planets, worlds similar to Earth, or Clarf, the Mrdini homeworld, which meant that the three species were in competition with each other. The Hive method was to send one of their Sphere ships, managed by the Many Mind of ten to sixteen queens with specialized workers doing whatever crewing was needed. Each Mother ship was equipped with scout vessels which it sent on ahead to investigate appropriate systems. The Hiver then “cleared” the planet of all life forms, using as a fumigator first one, then other, viral infections, until the world had been cleared of its indigenous life forms. Then the Mother ship landed its queens and propagated its species until the new world, too, was overpopulated, when the process of exploration and colonization was repeated.

“But we’ve seen no activity at the ships at all,” Anis said. “Or has the arrival of the refugee caused a panic...”

“Hivers wouldn’t know panic if it bit them...” Metrios interjected drolly.

“...Well, then a rethink? I don’t understand why they haven’t done anything to repair the refugee ship for use if they’re about to send off a colonial expedition!”

“They also haven’t restocked their moon installations,” Yngocelen remarked. “They pumped out

bodacious amount of ordnance in that attack...even if most of it fell short. Surely they'd have to replenish it unless they have almighty storage facilities up there." He glanced hopefully at Rojer, who laughed.

"Sir, there's no way I can get a probe in those moon emplacements. Not a niche or a crack and I've no idea of what space is available inside. I can't 'port blind."

"No, no, of course you couldn't, Rojer," the gunnery officer replied, but his expression remained wistful.

"Been no messages sent there. No communication on any frequency," Doplas said, glancing down at his control console as if it had capriciously malfunctioned.

"Told ya the refugees didn't have the right password," quipped Metrios, a grin on his narrow sardonic face. Then he suddenly sat up alert. "Lookee here. Activity in the shipyard." All attention was instantly focused on that screen. "Can you hold that monitor stationary for a bit, Rojer?"

"Sure thing," and he complied, trying to see what had attracted Metrios's attention. A wide hatch had swung open at the end of the one uncultivated area on the whole planet—its space facility.

"Doplas, magnify," Captain Osullivan said and paused a beat before he added, "Pods! The units they're carrying look the right size and shape to be made into escape pods."

"To replace the ones they blew up!" Anis added unnecessarily and glanced anxiously at the captain.

His strong-featured face showed only keen interest in the surface activity as hundreds of low-slurp many-legged creatures, loaded with sections, trundled slowly across the flat surface and deposited their burdens at sixteen separate places before they scuttled back to the aperture, which sank back into the ground.

"Are the *Arapahoe* and the *KTTS* receiving these transmissions, Doplas?"

"Aye, sir, on automatic relay."

Before the captain could ask Doplas to open a channel, both Captains Quacho of the *Arapahoe* and Prtglm of the *KTTS* called in.

"They begin to refit," Prtglm said. "Time takes. Talent informs Alliance."

"They don't seem to be doing any work to complete the other two ships," Quacho remarked dubiously, his heavy brows nearly bridging over his roman nose.

"Those are already fitted with escape pods," Osullivan reminded him.

"Always queens are first," Prtglm said. "Time takes."

Rojer dutifully made contact with Jeff Raven to report the activity and was told to relay further developments as they occurred. Once the ground entrance closed, no further activity was seen. Excitement waned and Rojer was allowed to retire from the bridge at the end of his watch. Rather than have to evade questions on this new development, he spent the evening quietly in his cabin with Gil and Kat, watching more of the *Genesee*'s huge library of old tri-Ds until the red alert had him 'porting himself and his friends to the escape pod assigned him. He and the others who occupied his pod were nearly asleep again when the "all-clear" hooted.

* * *

The next morning he overslept and had to 'port himself to the bridge to be on time. Looking somewhat as grumpy as Rojer felt, Commander Metrios duly noted his hurried arrival but issued no reprimand. Casually Metrios told Rojer that no further activity on the space field had been noted.

"Maybe they have to *hatch out* the assemblers?" Anis Langio suggested and then yawned, wiggling her fingers in welcome as Rojer stepped up to his couch. He grinned back at her.

"Any corrections needed, Commander?" Rojer asked Metrios, gesturing to the screens and the

roving sensors.

“No, Roj,” Metrios said, with a wry grin. “They’re where we need ’em right now. We’re just lucky there’s so much space flotsam that our sensors seem just like one of the boys out there.”

“You know, for a planet that’s spotless,” said Eri Gander, the morale officer who often dropped by Rojer’s station, “they’ve made a right mess of space.”

“Haven’t developed a form to gobble up their garbage, that’s all,” Metrios replied.

“Vegetarians get their iron and minerals from their food,” Anis remarked with an overly innocent expression on her face. “Which reminds me, Eri, we could use some new tri-D’s. There’s nothing I haven’t seen a zillion times.”

Eri and Anis both looked queryingly at Rojer who held his arms wide, mimicking Anis’s expression. “Look, I’m just transport. I have nothing to do with loading.”

“Which reminds me why I’m here,” Eri said, turning to Rojer. “I’ve four to ship back this week.” He raised his eyebrows queryingly.

“No problem. My ’Dinis told me that there’re two ’Dini pairs to go as well.”

Anis heaved an exaggerated sigh. “I’m always glad to know they are not as po-faced and stiff-upper-lipped as Prtglm pretends they are.”

“The ’Dinis’re going to hibernate,” Rojer said and grinned to defuse any criticism as he added, “That’s not considered a weakness in ’Dinis.”

“At least you save them from going on the line,” Metrios said, nodding his head approvingly.

Anis gave a convulsive shudder. “I don’t care what euphemism they apply to the process, it’s still cannibalism.”

“Term it exigency during long space hauls and accept that interpretation,” Mrkovic said, but his expression indicated he was in complete agreement with the astrogator.

“At least we have Rojer here. Man and Mrdini’s best friend is the local FT&T Talent.”

Rojer grinned back, relieved that the subject of ’Dini traditions was not pursued. On the bridge, at least, he wasn’t quizzed to the point of aggravation by pruriently curious crewmen and women. He had had to make the point that he might have lived closely with “immature” ’Dini, but he didn’t know much about the adults.

“So what’s to be done today, Commander?” he asked Metrios.

“Close watch on the shipyard and those pod elements. We’ve got a little self-destruct package in the new probes I ordered up in case we need to put more in action.”

“Don’t I just wish we did have some action,” said Yngocelen as he stared glumly at the static scene on the screen. “Aren’t they putting the cart before the horse? I mean, assembling escape pods when they haven’t repaired the hole they put in the refugee ship? Never did understand why they plugged it. Especially after they had already conned the queens into leaving in their escape pods.”

“Puzzling indeed,” Metrios admitted, “since it damaged a perfectly spaceworthy craft which would have nicely increased their existing fleet.”

Because he now knew these officers well enough, Rojer decided to voice his thoughts.

“Commander, I don’t think that torpedo hit a cargo or docking area,” he said.

“You don’t?” Metrios’s expression encouraged him.

“No, sir, I think they holed the life support systems. Because it was a hole, not a shattering blast.”

“Show me.” Metrios was not the only one who perked up with interest.

Rojer ’ported one of the monitors into the appropriate position. Unfortunately the entrance point was in deep shadow. What was visible were the clean edges of the torpedo’s entrance. The damage would be easily repaired. At least it would on any of the Alliance ships.

“Maybe there was something in that torpedo they sent up,” Rojer added quietly, steeling himself for dispute.

“Yeah, but what and why?” Yngocelen asked in a caustic tone. “We know from even the partial reconstruction of the Great Sphere which A Squadron discovered that they can seal off decks and are just as we can.”

“Yes, but the queens were evacuating and there’d be no one to issue orders to the workers to close anything. I think,” and Rojer paused so as not to sound as sure as he was of his theory, “this lot wouldn’t want the workers spawned by other queens. They’d want to get rid of them before they filled the ship with their personal workers.”

“So the torpedo delivered a gas or something noxious to fumigate it, huh?” Yngocelen asked, mulling over that theory.

“Boy’s got a good point,” Metrios said, over Rojer’s head, but his tone was approving.

“I could send a probe inside the ship to find out,” Rojer volunteered, since no one had discredited his theory. Although Captain Osullivan had not taken part in the conversation, he had been listening.

“Then do so, Mr. Lyon,” Captain Osullivan said, nodding to Yngocelen. “And program it for a full scan, Mr. Yngocelen. It’s about time we learned what’s going on in there, since Mr. Lyon’s Talents allow us to be discreet.”

Although Rojer sent the tiny probe through ventilation ducts and up and down dark and empty corridors, nothing was going on inside the hulk. Nothing apart from a haze which still hung like a miasma in the interior, and especially heavy in the center of the vessel.

“Could be a combination of gases,” the science officer said, “because there sure aren’t any workers of any description left and there are signs of corrosion on the few organic substances the monitor identifies. The Hivers seem to specialize in lethal doses. I wouldn’t want to send anyone in to investigate. Despite the hole in the hull letting vacuum in, the stuff’s lingering. It’s going to take time to flush all that out.”

“Sections weren’t closed off either,” Yngocelen said, tapping Rojer approvingly on the shoulder. “Yup, and that junk even cleared out the tubes where larvae are stored. Clean sweep!”

Rojer could not entirely suppress his delight that his theory had been verified, but everyone was smiling so he felt it wasn’t inappropriate for him to do so, too.

“Good thinking, Rojer,” Osullivan said to cap his moment of triumph.

Nonetheless Rojer heard—not from the direction of the officers—less grateful sentiments from one or two of the ratings on duty.

“It *was* only a theory, sir,” Rojer said, altering his grin to modest self-deprecation. It was awful hard to please everyone all the time no matter how carefully he conducted himself.

“How long will it take for that gas to clear, Mr. Mrkovic?” Osullivan asked.

“Can’t say for sure, sir, it’s heavy stuff. All systems are dead on the ship. If they were activated…” and he shrugged. “With respect, sir, the *Genesee* doesn’t have eva suits on board that would protect us Humans against a corrosive gas atmosphere.”

Nor did the Mrdini when the options were discussed at a captains’ conference. Although the derelict Great Sphere was being subjected to the most exhaustive scrutiny by both Humans and Mrdini, the emphasis had been on establishing what powered Hive ships and what fuel was used, and analyzing the peculiar composition of the hull material. Ventilation and life support systems were a low priority.

“Captain Prtglm would like us to figure out a way to get in that ship,” Captain Osullivan reported to his staff officers. Rojer was also sitting in, as he had attended the captains’ meeting as translator. “It has an idea,” and Osullivan’s smile was amused, “of boarding and bringing a relatively undamaged Hive ship back to Clarf. I gather Prtglm is to be retired at the end of this mission and it would like to do so in glory, as it were.”

There were murmurs of understanding for such ambition.

“I didn’t think Mrdini did things like retire,” Anis Langio remarked.

Osullivan cleared his throat and smoothed back his hair. “I believe it’s a question of size.”—

“Yeah, it is the biggest ’Dini I’ve ever seen,” Yngocelen said thoughtfully. “If it gets much bigger it won’t fit in its own ship. It has to bend over to walk our companionways and this ship’s built for tall.” As the gunnery officer was just under the two-meter mark, he was sympathetic. “But you know, he went on off-handedly, “maybe Rojer could ’port a small boarding party directly into the torpedo hole. *They’re obviously waiting until the gas disperses. Of course, we’d have to figure a way of doing that first.*”

“What *do* we know about the Hiver ventilation systems?” Osullivan asked rhetorically.

“No more than what the probe could see, sir,” Metrios replied.

“Any idea of where or what the controls would be?”

Everyone turned in Rojer’s direction.

“Me? I know as much as you do but...”

“But what, Mr. Lyon?” the captain prompted in an encouraging tone.

“Well, sir, when I first came on board, I believe I mentioned that groups back on the homeworlds are trying to reassemble the innards of the Great Sphere? We know what the main investigative team is working on—the fuel and engines—but maybe somebody else might have a clue to the life support area. I could make a discreet inquiry.”

“Of whom?”

“The T-8 engineer at the Aurigae Tower.”

Metrios looked considerably more receptive the moment Rojer mentioned “engineer.”

“Please contact him then. Discreetly, of course,” Osullivan asked Rojer.

“Certainly, sir,” Rojer replied. He had determinedly not fallen into the habit of naval parlance of responding with the usual “Aye, sir.” That was his subtle reaction to “boy” and “civilian.”

Metrios grinned. “Would you need much power?”

“Not for a query,” Rojer said, grinning back. Xexo would be as up-to-date as possible on what was being assembled, either by the naval or the “civilian” piece jiggers. “And he might even have some informed guesses. Thing worries me, though, is that that explosion might also have taken out the ventilation control system.”

“That’s a distinct possibility. Sure wrecked the area,” Metrios said.

Rojer held up one hand, indicating he was initiating his query, but he sensed a definite eagerness the atmosphere of the bridge. Clearly Captain Prtglm was not the only one who wanted to secure a trophy out of this encounter. Of course, the *Genesee* and the *Arapahoe* would share any honors with the *KTTS*. Everyone in the Alliance would rejoice to have purloined a nearly operational ship from a Hive colony. He suppressed the chuckle that threatened to upset his composure and sternly focused his mind on the gestalt to send the message.

Familiarity with Xexo’s mind made the ’pathing easier. Rojer elected to make it an informal query because nothing might come of it and there was no point in getting hopes up only to dash them down.

Xexo was surprised to hear Rojer.

Coming through loud and clear, lad. But shouldn’t you...

No, this is between you and me, Xexo, about our piecing. They don’t have a set on board here and need your help on one aspect of the reconstruction.

Oh, well, in that case... Xexo had always been more interested in the mechanical aspects of Tower than protocol so he made no further objections. Whaddya need to know?

What Xexo knew about the ventilation and life support systems was incomplete. In fact, Rojer realized that his probe had accumulated more cogent information, which he then shared with the T-8. Xexo could then confirm that the main environmental control systems had probably been demolished.

by the torpedo.

~~Queens seem to have had an independent emergency supply. Get that started and you might flush a lot of the gas out, 'specially with a hole already in the hull. Hey, you guys bring that ship back and you will be real heroes!~~ Xexo added, excitement coloring his usual imperturbable manner. ~~Too much of the ship Squadron A salvaged has been damaged beyond guess or gosh.~~ Then Xexo “showed” Rojer what diagrams existed, incomplete as they were.

“Since the queens abandoned ship,” Metrios said when he had a chance to study what Rojer transferred to the screen, “that area would not have been secured. But it appears,” and his finger wandered off the diagram, “that one could flush the system of the gas quite efficiently from the main circulation point.”

“If we knew how to work such controls,” Rojer said. “’Dinis keep telling us that the queens developed specific workers for various ship operations. What would a life-support worker look like?”

Metrios shrugged. “That’d be a problem. They seem to produce all kinds of workers.”

The other officers on duty on the bridge had been following the conversations.

“The ’Dini records have reconstructions of some definite types, from corpses that were found after space battles,” Anis Langio said and keyed in a program. They all watched as the sketches were accessed. Langio gave a snort. “Take your pick.”

“That queen they’ve got at Heinlein Moon Base? Have her eggs hatched yet?” Metrios asked.

“They’re growing and she’s eating,” Rojer replied with a shrug. He was still of two minds about his sister Zara’s interference even if it had saved the queen’s life from hypothermia.

One of the three pods to escape the Great Sphere had contained a live and egg-heavy queen. Conveying the pod to the Heinlein Moon Base had been Rojer Lyon’s first official duty as a Prime, though his father had been the focus of the kinetic energy of that teleportation. An Observation Module had kept close track of her activities since she had emerged. She was, in fact, the first living specimen of the Hive race that either Human or Mrdini had seen. Her continued existence had elicited controversy, and sometimes strain, among the Allies. Fortunately some of the more liberal Mrdini leaders also felt that the need to know more about their enemy was of greater importance than a very public and summary execution, no matter how psychologically satisfying. Others found some beauty in her mantislike appearance: the maudlin were deeply concerned about her total isolation and incarceration.

“I’d heard that each queen lays several different types of workers,” Anis said. “Maybe she’d been programmed for the type we need right now.” She turned an impudent gamine grin on her audience.

“If we knew what sort we needed,” Metrios said, gloomily. He leaned forward across his panel. “I wish we could somehow clear enough of the gas to put a salvage crew aboard...”

“Ah, we’re much too far away to use tractor beams...” Yngocelen said and then turned brightly to Rojer.

“Hey, don’t look at me. That’s *mass*, Commander,” Rojer said, fending off that suggestion with raised hands. “It’d take a whole Tower crew to shift that one.”

“Then it’d have to be a landing party...”

“With Hiver ground batteries trained on it?” Yngocelen asked sarcastically. “They’d blast it out of the sky once they saw it moving away rather than let us have it.”

“But they don’t *know* we’re here,” Langio reminded them.

“And they’re not supposed to,” Metrios said, heaving a sigh.

“Rojer, you couldn’t just inch it out of their surface-to-air missile range?” Langio asked plaintively.

“No, I couldn’t. Not even to give Captain Prtglm its moment of glory.”

“Now wait a minute,” Metrios said, and turning to his console, accessed another program. “To get

the Great Sphere back, two Galaxy-class ships acted as tows, and a shuttle was attached to control directional thrusters....”

“So?” Yngocelen asked.

“If we could mount thrusters on the hull...”

“That would mean we’d be seen from the surface...” Yngocelen interjected. “Oh...” he added, and turned, as Metrios had, to Rojer.

Rojer shook his head. “Look, *sirs*,” and he paused to give the courtesy address emphasis, “I’m glad to oblige with a lot of things but if anyone...anything...down there is monitoring space—and they were sure knew when the refugee ship arrived—thrusters big enough to move it out of orbit would be very very visible, even if putting them there wasn’t.”

“What do we know about Hiver eyesight?”

“They probably have a specialist for that, too,” Anis remarked in a caustic tone.

“Possibly,” Metrios agreed and then went on, “but why would they be watching a ship they know disabled and uninhabited?” Clearly, he wanted to defend his strategy. “They *don’t* know we’re here. They certainly wouldn’t expect *anyone* to come robbing them of a ship. Surprise is a big plus...”

“Our orders, gentlemen,” Captain Osullivan reminded them in droll reprimand, “are to hold a watching brief.” Then he gave them a wistful smile. “The Council has not given us any latitude. We are especially not to engage the enemy at this point in time.” He heard their murmurs of discontent and disappointment. “If we can follow their ion trails, they can follow ours.”

“True enough, sir, but they don’t have another operational vehicle,” Metrios pointed out.

“We have our orders, gentlemen, and we will obey them,” Osullivan said and strode to his command chair, where he remained the rest of that watch.

* * *

It was the next morning that the captain asked Rojer to report to the bridge before his usual watch.

“It occurred to me, Rojer,” Osullivan said at his most relaxed and genial, “that we shouldn’t miss a golden opportunity.”

“Which one, sir?” Rojer asked dubiously, glancing at Metrios, Doplas and Yngocelen, who were ranged behind the captain.

Osullivan grinned, as did the others. “Only that one area of this vessel is destroyed? Right?” When Rojer nodded, the captain went on, “You seemed to have no difficulty ’porting that monitor around the interior.”

“It was a small one, with a limited detection capacity.... Oh, I see...”

At Rojer’s sudden comprehension, Osullivan turned to the other officers. “He catches on real quick. Good lad. If we can present coherent diagrams of every level of *this* ship, the crews restoring the Great Sphere will have a template to work from. Captain Prtglm informed me that the design has not altered in all the centuries they’ve been dealing with the Hivers.”

“Except for the size of the Great Sphere...” Metrios interposed.

“Would you oblige?” Osullivan said, gesturing at Rojer’s couch and grinning with invitation.

“I don’t see why not, sir. I’ve been everywhere else I could ’port a device. But what about the corrosive gas...”

“You can use as many probes as you need,” Metrios said expansively. “When the captain made his suggestion, we found a coating that will somewhat retard corrosion...I think! I hope. First one you have to bring back, we’ll run an analysis on and see if we can’t identify the combo used.”

“I’ve altered the visual schematics,” Doplas said eagerly, “so that we can get dimensional readouts and identify any gross design alterations.”

Rojer found the process more time-consuming than tiring but he was very glad when that watch was over. Five probes had been affected by the gas and he had deposited them in a gas-proof container in the ship's lab. Although this ship was not as large as the Great Sphere, his first day's investigation had delineated only a very small segment of the total ship. But there was enough to cause every science and specialist officer on all three ships to spend the rest of the day analyzing and rendering drawings. The gas had done its work thoroughly: only such stores as had been encased in metal survived.

As Rojer reported the probes further inboard, printouts became blurred where the gas was thick. There came a point of no input. Sufficient data had been gathered to give the squadron some idea of the interior layout of the vessel: someone called it a "spaghetti-macaroni network of tubes, tunnels and conduits." There were features in the ceilings and along the floors of the queens' quarters which gave rise to considerable speculation. Was each of the queens responsible for one aspect of the ship's operations? Or were the controls mutual?

"The Rowan said she met a 'Many Mind,'" Rojer said, trying to sound impartial while reporting his grandmother's action, "a nexus of the queens which is what she immobilized when she was focused for her merge."

"So it's likely the queens moved in concert?" asked Osullivan.

"That's consonant with the hive mentality: all working for the same objective," the xenob officer replied. Lieutenant Sedim Mehmet had been asked to sit in on a primarily engineering conference.

"Those control panels are undamaged," Metrios said, switching the screen to that set of printouts. "But I'd need a ladder to reach 'em and which would control what!"

"Don't seem to be any touch-type arrangement," Yngocelen remarked. "But perhaps when back-lashed we'd identify controls."

"The queens' palps are odd-shaped," Mehmet reminded them. "Palps end in different-sized triangular joints."

"The problem," Osullivan said, "is not so much the shape as the function."

On that they were all agreed. Captain Prtglm seemed to sink deeper onto its stool, spreading its bulk noticeably. Rojer thought it was depressed by this current impasse. Gil and Kat said their Great Captain had already achieved many battle honors but it wanted one more significant award to add to its career that had spanned over a hundred Human-length years. Rojer could sympathize with that wish, knowing that Prtglm's color would bask in glory for centuries more if it could bring back to Clarf an empty Hive ship.

Rojer and some of the lesser staff members were politely thanked and dismissed from the conference. Since it was likely he'd be called to send back a report at the conclusion of the meeting, Rojer took the opportunity to grab something to eat. The sort of mental work he did made him ravenous. Rather than appear to eat more than was considered polite on shipboard, Rojer often secreted food in his cabin for emergencies. He always had something for Gil and Kat, too, and so they were indulging in an illicit feast when his com unit clicked on.

"Require Talent assistance return," said Prtglm's unmistakable tones. "Talent to return, too."

"WE COME, TOO?" Gil asked, and Kat was hanging on Rojer's response.

"RJ SEES NO REASON NOT. PRTGLM NEVER NOTICES YOU ANYHOW." While Rojer knew Prtglm was a Great One, he had been slightly peeved that it was too great a personage to notice his dear friends. He took Gil and Kat across to the *KTTS* whenever possible because they did enjoy visiting among their own kind. "WE USE BIGGEST CARRIER ANYWAY. YOU HIDE IN DARK."

Knowing it would take the 'Dini captain time to make its ponderous way from the bridge area to the transfer pod in the cargo bay, Rojer stripped out of his rumpled shipsuit and donned a clean one, buckling on the formal belt and pouch he rarely bothered to wear. He was in awe of Great captain

Prtglm and a “uniformed” appearance bolstered his morale.

~~Gil and Kat were so excited they squirmed in his arms as he gathered them up for the 'port.~~ Actually, he landed neatly right at the hatch to the cargo bay, and in an empty corridor. He could, however, feel the vibration in the deck plates of a heavy tread.

“QUICK, YOU TWO,” he urged, adding body language to his words, opening the hatch and thrusting the two warm furry bodies ahead of him. “THE GREAT ONE COMES. FEEL IT?” His two friends scurried to the large pod that would be used. They opened it and were disappearing inside as Rojer explained to the deck officer that he'd be taking the captain back to the *KTTS*.

“You sure know when that biggie's coming, doncha,” Ensign Menburia said as the vibration through the deck plates was even more discernible. “No disrespect intended, but it can barely get through that hatch. Oops!” And the ensign ducked back to her engineering board as the massive figure of Prtglm appeared.

The captain required time to settle itself in the pod while the cargo bay crew appeared extremely busy at their stations. Finally Rojer could enter.

“Is power up, Ensign?” Rojer called, and received a thumbs-up from Menburia. He closed the hatch and tried to compress himself so as not to touch the captain. A Great One did not appreciate tactile contact.

Rojer picked up the pulse of generators he was now as familiar with as Xexo's at Aurigae Tower. He knew where he was going and 'ported them on board the *KTTS* so lightly he was sure that Prtglm wasn't even aware the transfer had taken place until the hatch was opened by one of its own officers, and it was officially welcomed back on board. Prtglm rattled several phrases off so quickly that Roje didn't follow the sense of them. Something about “new probes” and “decision.”

“COME,” Prtglm said curtly to Rojer as soon as it had its back legs on the deck. Rojer scrambled on to see Prtglm making its way to an opening that led to the interior of the 'Dini ship, not to the bridge as Rojer had expected.

It was as well Prtglm made its way without a backward glance for Gil and Kat suddenly clung onto Rojer's hands.

“WHAT'S WRONG?” he asked, but each made the sudden quick head movement that told him to keep quiet. He could feel their digits trembling despite the strength with which they held on to him.

They were alone as they followed Prtglm down the corridor, which was just wide enough to accommodate the massive body of the captain. Then a hatch slid back and Prtglm entered, pausing to gesture to them to hurry. Rojer obeyed despite the fact that both Gil and Kat seemed to impede his forward progress.

“What's wrong?” he muttered, bending down to their ear holes.

Kat managed a quavery noise and, taking a breath as if steeling itself, stepped over the hatch and into the big hangar facility. Rojer and Gil followed. Rojer knew his dear friends were awed by any proximity to Prtglm, but there was some new quality in their manner now that began to infect him with doubt and anxiety.

The hangar was dark, but Rojer could make out racks of long slim shapes that had a metallic shimmer to many of them. Light came up and Rojer blinked to adjust to the glare. Gil and Kat audibly moaned.

These were not probes, Rojer instantly noted: they had a deadly precision of line that made their purpose unmistakable even before his horrified stare took in the deadly bulb of a warhead on the pointed end. And there were an awful lot of them.

Prtglm's digits flashed over a terminal and the multiple screens above it flicked on, each with a different view. Three depicted the orbiting sphere ships, another the flat surface of the space field, and the rest were split, sometimes in three separate scenes, showing the largest of the square buildings his probes had found.

The sick feeling in Rojer's guts developed rapidly into a certainty that was no precog. If he had not been so immobilized by fear and shock, he would have 'ported himself and his friends out of the hangar. But he couldn't move. He couldn't *believe* that Prtglm would make such a devastating unilateral decision. Somehow he had to stop it from happening.

"TALENT!" Prtglm turned and it had never appeared so massive or forbidding in aspect.

"GREAT ONE," Rojer managed to say before he had to swallow convulsively to wet his dry mouth and throat.

"YOU SEND MANY THINGS TO WORLD BELOW. YOU SEND THESE. TO THESE PLACES! THEN SQUADRON TAKES SPHERE AND RETURNS WITH TRUE HONOR."

"Sir, these are bombs?" Rojer forgot all 'Dini.

"OF COURSE," and the captain's body made the massive surge from bottom to top that was an angry reaction to the question: indeed, to any questioning.

"I am not permitted to destroy, sir." Rojer concentrated on speaking clearly and firmly.

"YOU 'PORT MANY THINGS. BOMBS ARE BEST!" Most 'Dini voices expressed little emotion but Prtglm's intonations were rich with satisfaction and righteous vengeance.

"I AM NOT PERMITTED TO DESTROY, SIR. MY ORDERS ARE STRICT." Rojer fell back into 'Dini, hoping he could make his point better in that language. "YOUR ORDERS ARE TO WATCH, NOT DESTROY. ORDERS WHICH CAME FROM COORDINATOR GKTMLNT AND ADMIRAL TOHL MEKTURIAN. THIS LOW PERSON CANNOT DISOBEY ORDERS."

"LOW PERSON RJR OBEYS THE ORDER OF PRTGLM NOW! OBEY." Prtglm began to pulse and expand, a frightening aspect that rooted Rojer to the deck but did not alter his determination to disobey.

"I am not permitted, Great One," he repeated, dropping to one knee in an attitude of respectful subservience.

"GREAT ONE PRTGLM, RJR IS FORBIDDEN BY HUMAN GREAT ONES TO DESTROY ANYTHING," Gil said, inching forward with the greatest respect it could display.

"THE HUMAN IS TO OBEY OR HUMAN WILL BE ON THE LINE." Rojer could not believe what he heard.

"I CANNOT OBEY CAPTAIN PRTGLM!"

Fury engorged the captain now and, in a movement so swift Rojer could have done nothing to intervene, Prtglm's top arms descended on Gil's poll eye and smashed its immature body to the deck.

"OBEY!" roared Prtglm and, lifting its great gory forearms, began the downward swing that would have also killed Rojer.

"'PORT," Kat cried, shoving Rojer to one side and taking the blow meant for him, which crumbled it beside the mangled body of Gil.

'Port Rojer did, out of the *KTTS*, and to the one place automatic reflexes could take him without conscious thought!

CHAPTER

TWO

“WHERE the hell could he get to?” Captain Osullivan said, scowling with annoyance. “He knows the time he’s due here for the daily report.”

“Sir?” Doplas said from his com station, “Ensign Menburia says that Rojer ’ported Captain Prtglm back to the *KTTS* at 1130. She logged that and saw them depart.”

“’Porting doesn’t take Rojer more than thirty seconds. Where’d he go then? Did the ensign see?”

“Sir, log says that Rojer accompanied the captain. At its request evidently. He had his ’Dinis with him.”

“So?”

“Com officer of the *KTTS* says that neither the Human Rojer nor his ’Dinis are on board.”

“Is there a record of when Rojer ’ported back here?”

“According to their records, the captain’s pod is still in place and the Human Rojer has not approached anyone on the *KTTS*. The big pod did not return here.”

“Aw, now wait a bleeding minute...” Metrios began in total disgust. “If the pod is over there, on the *KTTS*, Rojer has to be there. Talents don’t generally ’port themselves about in a space vacuum. Dangerous. And what’s he been doing there for over eight hours anyway?”

“I should very much like to know,” the captain said in a tight controlled voice.

“This isn’t like Rojer,” Anis Langio said.

“Dammit, Anis, I know that,” Osullivan said, shifting about in his command chair, his face grim. “Metrios, any power use consistent with a long-distance ’port?”

“No, sir,” the engineering officer said with only the briefest of glances at his station printout. “And there’s no way Rojer could ’port all the way back to Aurigae, or even Clarf, which is spatially nearer.”

Osullivan stared grimly at the digital time display as the seconds and hundreds turned over rapidly. His fingers rattled an agitated tattoo on his hand rest.

“Sound a yellow alert. Ship’s crew to locate Mr. Lyon. This ship is to be searched stem to stern. Alert Captain Quacho. Doplas, I want to speak to Captain Prtglm.”

“It hasn’t been available, sir,” Doplas said in a semiapologetic tone.

“It’ll be available to me, Doplas!” Osullivan’s icy tone made Doplas’s fingers skip over the touchplates.

“Prtglm is not available for speech,” the ’Dini com officer said. “PRTGLM IS NOT AVAILABLE,” it repeated in its own language to be sure the information was understood.

“We search for Rojer Lyon,” Doplas said.

“RJR LN REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THIS SHIP,” Osullivan added to be sure the ’Dini officer also understood.

This time the ’Dini officer shook its upper body and then directed its poll eye fully at the screen. “NO HUMAN ON THE *KTTS*.” The screen went blank.

“What’s all this about young Lyon disappearing?” demanded Captain Quacho, his image illuminating the main screen. “We’ve supplies to come in and I’ve two crew needing to go back on the carrier. I’ve been waiting for Rojer’s signal to bring them over.”

“A full ship search is under way, Quacho. I understand Lyon’s disappearance no better than you

do. And he's not on the 'Dini ship!" Osullivan grimaced and he rubbed his jaw. If the boy had gone to the 'Dini ship, why hadn't he come back aboard the *Genesee*?

"Sir?" an excited voice immediately captured his attention. "Sir, one of the escape pods is gone."

"Which?" Osullivan snapped the query out in such a hard voice that even Doplas recoiled.

"One-oh-eight, starboard, sir. And the controls were altered to make it appear to still be in place."

No one on the bridge needed to remark that the one-oh-eight pod was the one assigned to Rojer Lyon.

"Has there been *any* activity *towards* the planet?" Osullivan demanded. When he received a negative reply, "Or toward that damned empty hull?"

"No, sir. And I'm scanning for a recent ion trail."

"The boy wouldn't have had to use the escape pod engine, Metrios," Osullivan said, puzzled, angry, and half-despairing. He had grown quite fond of young Lyon. The boy had conducted himself extremely well and been as helpful as he could, way beyond the scope of his original assignment.

"Something happened while he was on board the *KTTS*," Metrios said in a quiet, intense tone of voice.

"His 'Dinis went with him?" Osullivan knew that they had but he grasped at that one possibility of finding out what happened.

"Yes, sir, Ensign Menburia now reports that they slipped on board the probe before Prtglm or Lyon did."

"They often went with him," Anis said softly.

Osullivan waved his hand to cut off discussion. The boy had used an escape pod after a trip to the *KTTS* in Prtglm's company. The 'Dini was determined to return home in honor. Suddenly, Osullivan jumped to a conclusion he did not like, not any aspect of it and not for any reason.

"Let us hope he can reach his family safely."

Everyone on the bridge turned to stare at their captain and then began to exchange shocked glances. Metrios propped his head in his hands and stared down at the lights running their normal patterns on his board. Just then, they gave him little consolation.

* * *

Captain Osullivan, this is Jeff Raven. Why is my grandson not in touch with us?

Etienne Osullivan had been expecting some form of contact from the FT&T Prime ever since the time for the usual daily call had passed, and still more seconds ticked by.

"Earth Prime, he is no longer on board the *Genesee*. We had hopes that he has made his way back to you, or his homeworld." Osullivan spoke aloud so that the bridge crew would understand that he was communicating with the Prime.

Surely you realize, Captain, that Rojer is not able to make such a long distance 'portation without assistance. What has happened to my grandson?

"We do not know, sir, and we are extremely worried." The captain then detailed the known sequence of events leading up to the discovery of the missing escape pod. Then he cleared his throat. "Prime Raven, it is my belief, unsupported though it is, that Captain Prtglm may know either where Rojer is or why he left so abruptly. But the captain is unavailable. I request formal permission from GkmtgInt to board the *KTTS* and investigate."

That will be unnecessary, Captain, though the offer is certainly appreciated. I am informing the High Council of Prime Lyon's disappearance. You may expect assistance shortly. Have the courtesy to await it.

"Of course, Prime Raven." Captain Osullivan inclined his head in obedience to that directive and

then sighed.

~~Ask your medic for an analgesic, Captain. A direct send to a non-empath will produce an intense headache.~~ Raven's advice was kindly, and something unknotted in Osullivan's midriff.

"Someone's coming," he added, remembering no one else on the bridge had heard the message.

"Soon?" asked Anis, her pretty face flushed with concern.

"Can't be soon enough," Metrios said in a growl.

"Aye!" The single word of accord came from many directions around the bridge.

The sound reverberated with acutely felt echoes and Osullivan retired briefly to his ready room to find a painkiller before his brain burst through his skull.

* * *

Precisely three-quarters of a very long hour passed before a glad message was relayed from the cargo deck.

"Passenger pod aboard, sir."

"Escort the passenger to the bridge immediately, Ms. Menburia."

"No need, Captain," said a curt feminine voice, and the Rowan, a large dark grey 'Dini beside her and Afra Lyon with a smaller 'Dini pair flanking him appeared on the bridge upper level.

Osullivan shot to his feet and was halfway to the Rowan when she held up her hand to restrain his impulse. Once again he felt a mental touch and almost recoiled from a second experience.

"Sorry, Captain," the Rowan said with a fleeting smile. The pain went as quickly as it had begun. "It was the quickest way for me."

"We apologize for taking so long getting here," Afra went on. "We stopped at appropriate intervals to listen."

"Ohhh," and Osullivan breathed one single despairing note of denial.

"My grandson *is* alive," the Rowan added, her expression severe. Afra nodded a brief reinforcement of her statement. "We would know if he was not, if that affords you any consolation."

"It does."

"We must go aboard the *KTTS*. Do you have any pictures of its bridge configuration?" Afra asked.

"Here," Doplas said, pointing to his screen.

"That's enough," the Rowan said and turned toward the engineering position. "You are Commander Metrios? I thought so. We will need a touch of power."

"All you want," Metrios said, throwing his hands up in exaggerated relief at being able to do something. Their air of competence and determination revived him from the despair which had engulfed him since Rojer's disappearance became known.

The generators surged briefly and the group was gone. Someone breathed a "Wow!" of awe.

"The Rowan?" Yngocelen asked in a low voice.

Osullivan nodded.

"I thought she never left Callisto."

"Not often, but she's the clout needed," Osullivan said, encouraged in spite of his pessimistic fears.

"Sir?" Ensign Menburia's voice sounded almost apologetic. "They brought the supplies, too."

"That boy *must* be found, safe and unharmed!" Osullivan said, bringing both fists down hard on the armrests. He had personal as well as professional reasons, and a few which would have repercussions that he didn't want to think about, even clear-headed.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

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- <http://aseasonedman.com/ebooks/Reappraising-Political-Theory--Revisionist-Studies-in-the-History-of-Political-Thought.pdf>
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