

VOYAGE TREKKERS

Gambit of Chance

By: Craig Michael Curtis

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"Captain's Blog, Space Date: 2235.316. The Galactic Union High Command has sent us to the Poriasis Star System to oversee the evacuation of a local colony due to, uh ... I don't know why, exactly. A plague, supernova ... I'm sure we'll find out why when we reach orbit, or whenever Powell or Rena tell me. Meanwhile, I'm told that it's Lieutenant Jayda's birthday today, and I guess we're supposed to be throwing him a little party later on. For his birthday present, I'm giving Mr. Jayda a large jar of Callystan mouthwash. I'm hoping he'll take the hint."

"And, post." The confident, statuesque Capt. Jack T. Sunstrike muttered to himself with serene satisfaction as he tapped the SEND button on his portable comm link. Reclining back in the comfy office chair, his feet propped up on top of the empty desk in his private study, the captain sighed lazily as he gazed out the window into the open void of space beyond.

Space. He thought to himself with a heaving sigh. *So much of it out there, and yet here I am, stuck in here.* It wasn't that Sunstrike didn't appreciate that he had command of a starship, even one as old and modest as the *GSV Remarkable*. Nor did he long to spend his existence out in the open vacuum of space and drift through the cosmos like one of the many space-borne entities he had encountered in his travels - as he actually already had the experience that one time when he had that temporary mind-switch with a space porpoise (he had found the act of waste excretion as a space porpoise to be a thoroughly unpleasant ordeal).

No, what Capt. Sunstrike longed for, was to use his ship to explore the galaxy - to trail blaze into uncharted regions and to come flying to the aid of those in need and to fight implacable foes in the name of freedom and justice. But instead, he found himself and his ship at the beck and call of the stuffed-shirted admirals at in the Galactic Union High Command, who seemed to think that all he was good for was menial work that any first year cadet or besodden freighter captain could do. They never trusted him or his ship with a truly important mission, and thus, he had never really been able to prove his worth.

Even in this present mission, with his orders to coordinate the evacuation procedures of the colonists on Porias-Luna 26, there was no glory to be had. Indeed, Adm. Grissom had explicitly instructed Capt. Sunstrike to *refrain* from exercising his discretion in carrying out his orders - he was simply to escort the colonials' ships to Starpost Q-31 for resettlement, and nothing more.

What a waste of his abilities! Even if he could miraculously solve whatever cataclysmic disaster had befallen the colony on Porias-Luna 26, he was forbidden to do so. Suppose he found a way to stop the moon's core from overheating or eradicate the carnivorous fungus that was overrunning the planet (assuming that one of those scenarios was the reason the colonists were evacuating). Were he to do so, he would likely face yet another court-marshal rather than win one of the many medals and awards that his brother and fellow Galactic Union captain Reginald Sunstrike was always crowing about. No, Sunstrike thought bitterly, he was the hero this galaxy needed - but at the moment, he was the only one who knew it. All he needed was a chance to prove himself.

The captain's dreamy grin turned into a sour scowl as he dragged his freshly-polished uniform boots off of the desk. If he'd known that it was Jayda's birthday, he probably wouldn't have made the lieutenant spend the balance of the morning polishing them - after all, Cdr. Powell does almost as good a job.

As he stood up from his desk, Capt. Sunstrike straightened the wrinkles out of his uniform. His crew worshiped him, he intuitively understood, and it wouldn't do for them to see him as an untidy grump. So, he stole a few moments at his trusty mirror to check his hair and loosen his lips into that familiar winning smile of his, before he finally stepped out of his private sanctuary and marched down the narrow corridor to the entrance of the bridge of the *Remarkable*.

Stepping onto the bridge, Sunstrike found the crew hard at work managing the many unknowable systems of the *Triumph*-class starship. Commander Blake Powell, Sunstrike's middling yet obedient first officer, was standing at his tactical station behind the captain's chair, trying futilely to disguise the fact that he was picking his nose with a casual scratching maneuver. Dr. Elaine Rena, the ship's medical and science officer was over by the bridge sensor console, glaring at the commander with thinly-veiled disgust.

Nestled away at the rear of the bridge were the navigations and systems control stations, each in its own sheltered alcove on either end. From the navigations console, young Ensign Adams glanced up at the entering captain with a dull disinterest. The ship systems control console, on the other hand, was empty.

Sunstrike peered down into the empty control alcove, and grumbled officiously. "Where is Lt. Jayda? Why isn't he at his station?"

Cdr. Powell looked away guiltily. "I guess I sent him away."

“What for?” Dr. Rena asked.

The commander shrugged. “Didn’t we ... I mean, I thought we were going to get ready for his surprise party?”

“What’s to get ready?” Sunstrike scoffed with a dismissive snort. “He walks into the conference room, and we all jump up and yell out ‘surprise!’ Isn’t that enough? Do you think we should shoot our guns into the air too?”

“Uh ... the conference room?” Powell asked pensively.

“Of course, where else would we do it?” Rena reminded him. “I had the Chief and INFO in there all morning setting up the decorations and put out the cake and all the place settings. The room’s all decked out. They really did a good job, I thought.”

“Oh ...” Powell mumbled into his own chest. Sunstrike knew his first officer well enough to know that he was just realizing that he was in trouble.

“What?” Sunstrike demanded with a glare.

Cdr. Powell shuffled about at his station. “Well, it’s just that when I sent Lt. Jayda off, I told him to wait in the -”

“He’s in the conference room?!” Rena asked shrilly.

“Well, I thought we were going to decorate the bridge.” Powell defended weakly. “Nobody told me we were using the conference room.”

Sunstrike shook his head. “Well, maybe he hasn’t noticed yet. How long has he been in there?”

“About an hour.” Powell admitted.

“Perfect.” Rena rolled her eyes. “He’s been sitting in there alone, in the ghostly trappings of an abandoned birthday party, probably crying ... you know how he gets.”

“Yeah.” Sunstrike nodded grimly. “Oh well, there’s always next year.”

Dr. Rena shook her head. “Actually, Antilleans only celebrate their birthdays every nine years.”

“Really?” Sunstrike asked.

“They only have four birthdays during their entire lives. On their fourth birthday, their species dies. Traditionally, their life’s goal is to spend their fourth birthday leaving their mortal existence, surrounded by their closest family and friends.”

There was a long, uncomfortable moment of silence on the bridge. Finally, Sunstrike asked. “Um, so is this-”

“This is his *third* birthday.” Rena assured him.

Suddenly, the ship’s intercom blared with the voice of the ship’s Chief Engineer, Sam Beauregard III. “Engineering to bridge. Um, hey ... are we like, under attack or something?”

“What the hell are you babbling about, Chief?” Sunstrike growled at

the disembodied voice.

“It’s just ‘cause, we were all down here in engineering, working and stuff, and then everything was all like ... *blue* for a second.”

Sure enough, a few sharp moments later, the entire bridge was enveloped in an eerie blue light. The pulsing glow saturated the entire bridge for a moment, and in an instant, it vanished.

“What was that?” Sunstrike asked.

“I think we were just scanned.” Dr. Rena reported, turning to her science station.

“By what?” The Captain demanded.

“Well, there’s a ship right in front of us, maybe we should ask them.” Ensign Adams offered sarcastically. “Or at least we might want to slow down so we don’t crash into them.”

Capt. Sunstrike was befuddled. “A ship? That must be the colonists waiting for us to signal them. Why the hell didn’t anyone ... who’s in charge of communications?”

Rena looked at him glibly. “That would be the systems control officer.”

“Damn that, Jayda.” Sunstrike growled. “Commander, put him on report for being absent from his post.”

“Umm, okay.” Powell nodded.

A twinkling buzzer lit up on the vacant systems console. Dr. Rena shook her head, and with a sigh, strolled over to the unmanned station to check the alert. “Captain, the unknown vessel is trying to open communications with us.”

Sunstrike raced over to his captain’s chair, straightening his uniform again and then leaning forward in a manful pose. “Put them on the telescreen.”

With a click, the screen lit up with the image of the other ship’s command bridge. Before them was a woman, tall and stately, with porcelain white skin and jet black hair tied up into a conservative bun. Her lips were tightly pressed and her steely gray eyes bore an inscrutable gaze back at them.

Sunstrike was bedazzled by the woman’s cold, fastidious beauty. Like so often whenever he encountered an even moderately attractive woman in his travels, he found himself ensorcelled by the feminine wiles of the fairer sex. In particular, he was frequently intrigued by women who were aloof and standoffish at first, much as the prim young woman before him on the screen was now.

“Greetings to you. My name is Lauren of Pod 9, Chancellor of the United Colonies of Porias-Luna 26. To whom do I have the honor of

speaking?”

“Captain Jack T. Sunstrike of the *GSV Remarkable*.” The captain announced with a come-hither smile. “And the honor is entirely on this side of the greetings. How may I have the honor of servicing you, Miss ... ‘Pod 9’, was it?”

“You may call me Chancellor, Captain Sunstrike.” She answered crisply. “I have brought Prince Maru to speak with you now. Will you consent to receiving him?”

Sunstrike arched his eyebrow. “I consent most willingly. So long as we can enjoy your ... honored presence along in the package.”

Chancellor Lauren bowed formally. “That is well. We shall teleport over to your starship at your signal.”

“Hot diggedy, a little soft-core diplomacy.” Sunstrike cackled as he rubbed his hands together covetously, shortly before Dr. Rena managed to close the comm channel. Unaware that the Chancellor heard his last remark before her image vanished from the screen, Sunstrike leapt from his chair towards his officers behind him.

“Okay, this is a serious formal meeting with a head of state, so Commander, Doctor, I want you to handle all of their prince’s needs. Meanwhile, I will handle the chancellor’s ... needs.”

“Where are we putting them, sir?” Powell asked plaintively.

“Bring them to the conference room, of course. Hmm ... maybe we can get them to stay on board the ship for the length of the evacuation? Give everyone a chance to loosen up and let her hair down ...”

“Captain.” Dr. Rena growled. “I would remind you, the conference room is currently ... occupied.”

Sunstrike paused for a moment before pounding Powell’s console in anger, causing the bridge’s lights to momentarily flicker. “Damn that Jayda! He’s not ruining this for me again. All right, Powell and I will go in there and clear the lieutenant out of the conference room. Doctor, go meet up with the colonists in the teleporter booth and bring them there, but take your time about it.”

“What?” Rena shook her head. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“Just stall them.” Sunstrike insisted impatiently. “Make small talk. Bow and scrape and kiss the ring. He is a prince, after all. He probably gets off on all that ceremonial crap. Powell, you’re with me. Let’s go people!”

The *Remarkable's* teleporter booth was a cramped, uncomfortable room deep within the bowels of the ship. The velvet red upholstery that lined the teleportation chamber was faded and threadbare, and still held an unpleasant, lingering aroma from an incident several months earlier which Dr. Rena would prefer to forget. In her own defense, she had never operated the teleporter device by herself before, and as it turned out, the Centauri Ambassador she accidentally turned inside-out ended up being an enemy spy, so it all worked out in the end. Even so, the best efforts of the ship's crew could not get the smell entirely out of the booth.

Rena was relieved to find that the teleportation booth was properly manned this time around, although not by the ship's Chief Teleporter Officer, Lt. Balzar, who was frequently taking personal days off. Instead, the station was being manned by Ensign Mondu, who was lounging at the control console in the corner, chatting idly with a member of the ship's modest contingent of space marines, Sgt. Chan. They were heavily engaged in an argument over the best brands of laser swords, when Dr. Rena cleared her throat to get their attention.

"Mr. Mondu, please teleport Prince Maru and the chancellor aboard. They should be signaling now."

Startled into attention by the arrival of a superior officer, Mondu jolted to attention and scrambled over to his console, trying to look busy. "Oh! Of course, Doctor. I'll just do that now ..."

Dr. Rena eyed him suspiciously as he operated the wrong controls. "What are you doing there? Fix your teleporter emitter to the signal on the ship."

"Oh, I'm just readying the preliminary filter levels--"

"He already beamed them off their ship like five minutes ago." Sgt. Chan announced smarmily. "He didn't realize he was supposed to wait for orders, so he just dumped their biological patterns into the stasis core."

Rena was outraged. "You've been holding the prince and chancellor in stasis?!"

Ensign Mondu shot Chan a venomous glance. "Just for a few minutes. If I'm right, not only will they not realize any time had passed, but they'll still retain over 99.87% of their biomass when I restructure their DNA sequencers."

"Just bring them back, now!" Rena ordered sternly.

Ensign Mondu nodded sheepishly while Sgt. Chan snickered behind him. After elbowing the sergeant in the midsection, the ensign proceeded to

operate the controls to extract the patterns of the two dignitaries from the stasis core and reconstruct their living bodies into the teleportation chamber. Silently, Dr. Rena was hoping the risky procedure would work properly, or else that the two would-be visitors were actually spies as well.

Whether they were spies or no, the prince and his chancellor were indeed safely teleported back into the living world, and in a matter of seconds, both of them were fully solid and animated, and standing inside the cushioned chamber. Rena couldn't tell whether they truly did realize the several minutes they had spent solely inside the ship's computer memory. The only reaction the visitors offered were the wrinkled noses as they adjusted to the new smells they were greeted with.

The doctor stepped forward with a formal bow. "Greetings, Your Majesty. Welcome aboard the *GSV Remarkable*. I'm Dr. Elaine Rena, at your service."

The stiff Chancellor Lauren glared haughtily at her as she bowed, but the prince seemed genuinely delighted at the doctor's display of respect. He was a small, almost sickly-looking young man in his 20's, with long, delicate silvery-white hair flowing down to his thin shoulders.. Despite his lanky build and angular face, Prince Maru's appearance bespoke of a quiet nobility and grace, and in his ghostly blue eyes, Rena could see a great degree of intelligence and kindness.

"We are most glad to be here with you now, Dr. Elaine Rena." He answered softly, bidding her to rise with a gentle gesture of his hand. "It is our hope that you and your captain can help us in these woeful times."

Dr. Rena nodded solemnly. "You have our condolences on the loss of your mother, Your Majesty."

Both Prince Maru and Chancellor Lauren crossed their arms to their chests and turned their heads sideways, which, according to Rena's study of their colonies cultural traditions, was part of the formal gesture of mourning. The chancellor's expression was unchanged as she completed the maneuver, but Rena could see the quiet sadness in the prince's face as he honored his late mother in this fashion.

"Yes, Queen Rysue's passing was most untimely." Chancellor Lauren announced grimly. "As I'm sure you know, Doctor, when our forbearers settled here in the Poriasis Star System two centuries ago, after the accidental destruction of New Earth, they decided to establish a constitution based on a hereditary monarchy."

Rena nodded, having remembered reading the curious eccentricities of the colony's charter in her briefing report. "Yes, I'm told that your society is traditionally matriarchal in its authority structure?"

“That’s correct.” Chancellor Lauren nodded stiffly. “When our forbearers settled on the 26th moon of the system’s only planet, the gas giant Porias Prime, they established the royal charter for the new colony with the expressed provision that only females of the royal line may ascend to the throne.”

Prince Maru bowed his head with embarrassment. “Alas, my poor mother had only me as her offspring. No daughters, and no other living female relations to carry on the line.”

The chancellor glanced pensively at the prince before adding. “And thus, our belligerent neighbors on Porias-Luna 7 have cruelly exploited the nuances of our own constitution in order to orchestrate the conquest of our beloved colony.”

“Have the colonists on Porias-Luna 7 tried to conquer you before?” Dr. Rena asked.

Prince Maru nodded. “Oh yes! They have tried to invade us many times before, but we have bravely fought them off time and again for generations. They have a powerful battle fleet. Nothing like your mighty Galactic Union’s of course-”

“Perhaps we should speak to your captain now.” Chancellor Lauren interjected, before heaving a sigh of resignation. “To be frank, I had hoped that the Galactic Union would have sent us a female command officer. No offense intended, of course. I’m sure your Captain Sunstrike is a capable leader.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Rena answered with her own sigh.

The *Remarkable’s* only Antillean officer, Lt. Jayda, sat alone in the elaborately decorated conference room, as he had for the past several hours, with his bulbous blue head cradled mournfully in his slender hands. The sullen officer’s face always seemed to bear the same bewildered expression, with sad, enormous black eyes, and a perpetual frown that seemed to suggest that he was about to burst into tears. If Antilleans actually possessed tear ducts, he might well be doing just that at the moment, while he silently pondered the events of his life which had led him up to this moment.

“*Surprise!*” Sunstrike and Powell burst into the room, ray guns firing into the air in celebration. Even though their weapons were only set on stun, the ionized energy bolts still scorched the ceiling as well as shorting out one of the lights and catching fire one of the colorful crepe-paper streamers which festooned the room.

While Cdr. Powell rushed forward to douse the smoldering party

decorum before it set off the ship's somewhat buggy fire-suppression system, Sunstrike stepped forward to heartily embrace the startled Lt. Jayda, who was trembling at their explosive entrance.

"Happy birthday, Mr. Jayda!" Sunstrike bellowed jovially as he wrapped his arm around the Lieutenant's shoulders. "Boy, you should see the look on your face! It's ... well, it looks like it always does. But I can tell by all those rapid, shallow breaths your taking that *we got you!* We got you good, didn't we?"

"Y-yes sir." Lt. Jayda murmured as he hyperventilated.

"See? And Powell wanted to come in here, like half an hour ago." Sunstrike nodded. "But I said, 'No, he'll be still be expecting us. We've got to wait until he thinks we've completely forgotten about him. You thought we'd forgot about you in here, didn't you?"

"I ... I have to admit that it had crossed my mind-"

"Ha!" Capt. Sunstrike roared with laughter. "I was right! Well this has already been the best birthday ever, hasn't it? I mean, it's not like you have many to begin with, but still, huh?"

Jayda bobbed his bulbous head in bewilderment. "Well, sir I-"

"Well, this has been some party, hasn't it?" Sunstrike whistled as he slapped his back. "And you still have lots and lots of presents to open. Wait 'til you see what Commander Powell got you! Right, Commander?"

"Uh, yeah..." Powell looked away guiltily as he finished spraying fire retardant onto the party decorations.

Meanwhile, Sunstrike continued. "But first, you're in for a special surprise. You're getting ... a free tour of the ship!"

Lt. Jayda was dumbstruck. "I ... I don't understand, sir."

Sunstrike bit his lip and continued. "Lieutenant, I've been thinking. We all work hard on this ship, but how often do we really get to *know* her? Almost every day, I'm finding new corridors I've never been down, or discovering buttons on the bridge, and I realize that I have no idea what they do. Now, we all know that captain is the hardest job on any Galactic Union starship, but dammit Jayda, I think you work very nearly as hard as I do, and you're just a lowly lieutenant! I mean, if I have *you* to shine my boots every morning, then who's left to shine your boots for *you* each day?"

"Actually sir, I shine my own boots." Jayda admitted.

Sunstrike nodded emphatically. "You see? With all the menial grunt work you do, you probably never get the chance to tour the decks of the great ship that you slave over day after day after day. Don't you?"

The Lieutenant shrugged uncertainly. "I suppose so, Captain."

"Tell you what." Sunstrike told him as he escorted him towards the

exit. "I'm going to give you two space hours to tour every inch of this ship. I want you to push every button you see, and open every door you come across, excluding my cabin, of course. Don't let me catch you in there, or so help me God, I'll strip you naked and fire you out the missile tube."

"Sir, I would never-"

"Ah, but you can still visit every other restricted area." Sunstrike reminded him slyly. "Including the women's cadet bunks in the aft starboard section! I've 'accidentally' stumbled my way into there once or twice. Even got a pillow fight going that one time ... kind of."

Just as Capt. Sunstrike was opening the automated door to shove the Lieutenant out, the door clicked open, with Dr. Rena, Prince Maru and Chancellor Lauren standing at the threshold.

"Ah, right on time." Sunstrike nodded at them, giving a sly wink to the chancellor which was tactfully ignored. "Lieutenant Jayda was just leaving to undergo that 'ship's inspection' we were discussing, right, Lieutenant?"

Jayda stood at the doorway, silently befuddled, until the captain gave him a quick shove out the door.

"Remember, thorough inspection, especially of the *aft starboard* cadet bunks ... or even the port cadet bunks if ... that's your thing. But remember, stay out of my cabin or your butt's gonna get mighty chaffed in that launch tube."

As a bewildered Lt. Jayda wandered off down the corridor, Capt. Sunstrike waved the newest guests into the conference room with a flourish. "Prince Maru, Chancellor Lauren." He beckoned them with a courtly smile and bow. "Welcome aboard the *Remarkable*. In anticipation of your arrival, we've arranged for you this sumptuous feast."

He gestured to the room covered with party decorations and the large birthday cake and bowls of ice cream sitting at the center of the conference table. "Might I offer Your Majesty a slice of ... diplomatic welcoming cake?"

He offered the prince, cutting for him a large slice and presenting it on a confetti-garnished plate. Chancellor Lauren scowled at the presentation, but Prince Maru politely declined. "Thank you, Captain Sunstrike, but no. You see, it is a tradition on my world to fast whilst in mourning, so I'm afraid I can take none of your wonderful welcoming cake without dishonoring the memory of my dear mother."

The two dignitaries repeated the mourning salute which they displayed in the teleporter chamber, much to Sunstrike's confusion.

"Well, it's right here if you change your mind." The captain offered coyly, setting the cake down in front of the Prince as he and his chancellor took their seats at the head of the conference table.

Mortified already at Capt. Sunstrike's behavior, Dr. Rena scowled at him as she took her own seat between him and Cdr. Powell along the side of the long table. She bowed her head apologetically at Prince Maru, but found the young prince smiling and nodding patiently to her, giving silent assurance that no offence was taken, though perhaps not so from Chancellor Lauren, who brusquely pushed the plate of cake to the side with a frown.

Sunstrike slapped his hands together and grinned. "Now then, from what I've been told, we're here to help you and your subjects pack up their things and evacuate to the nearest Galactic Union Starpost."

Prince Maru nodded reluctantly. "Well, yes. That is true, but-"

"I don't want you to worry, Your Majesty." The captain assured him confidently. "The Galactic Union has evacuated dozens, nay, hundreds of worlds before. Why, we've already evacuated our own homeworld twice before in our history. And if and when good old Earth 3 looks like it's about to go the way of the others, you can be sure we'll use the very same evacuation protocols that we're using with you fine people."

Chancellor Lauren straightened up. "Captain Sunstrike, there's something we wish to discuss with you, and time is of the essence."

Sunstrike patted the chancellor's hand from across the table. "Say no more, my dear. You'll find that I'm a man of action. We'll set to the task straight away.

"Commander Powell." The captain turned to his startled second-in-command. "I want you to go down to the colony immediately and oversee the evacuation of the Prince's subjects."

Powell was befuddled. "Umm ... what?"

Dr. Rena intervened, trying to mask her frustration. "Captain, perhaps you aren't aware, but we haven't actually reached the Porias-Luna 26 colony yet. We aren't scheduled to arrive for another six hours."

Sunstrike waved off this detail with a dismissive hand. "I don't want excuses, I want results! Take a transit pod, Powell, and get there ahead of us. I want those colony ships packed and loaded and ready to flee the star system by the time we get there. That's an order!"

Powell was warily unconvinced. "Um, sir ... I don't think I'm-"

"Don't worry, Powell." Sunstrike whispered to him. "We'll slow down so that you have plenty of time to be done by the time we arrive. I need a little time anyway to wear down Chancellor Frosty's proximity fields."

The captain smiled and nodded at Chancellor Lauren, apparently unaware the he had been whispering loud enough for everyone in the room to hear him. Sunstrike straightened up and barked curtly at his officer.

"I gave you an order, Commander. Take a transit pod and head to the colony straight away. Is that clear, mister?"

Powell looked crestfallen. "Oh. I guess so, sir." He paused for a moment before looking around him and asking. "So ... I should go there now?"

"Would you just go already?" Sunstrike growled at him through clenched teeth, motioning towards the door with rough jerks of his head.

Shrugging dejectedly, Powell stood up from his seat and shuffled out of the conference room towards the transit pod launch. Once he left, Sunstrike swung back around and grinned knowingly at the chancellor. "So, you said that you had something you wanted to ... discuss?"

Chancellor Lauren rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "Captain, I believe that it is important that you understand why we are being forced to abandon our homeworld. Have you been told anything about that?"

Sunstrike paused hesitantly before turning to Dr. Rena. "Hmm ... have I been told anything about that, Doctor?"

Rena stared back at him icily as she answered in a low, calm tone. "Yes, Captain. When I briefed you on the situation yesterday, I told you about the claim that the rival colony in this star system had placed on Porias-Luna 26. As I'm sure you'll recall, I told you that there is only one planet in the Porias System: a gas giant, which has 47 moons in all. Of these moons orbiting the gas giant Porias Prime, the 7th moon and the 26th moon are inhabited by colonies which have resided in this system for about 200 years."

"But I'm afraid our relations with those on Porias-Luna 7 have never been friendly." Prince Maru admitted sadly. "We on Porias-Luna 26 have always sought peaceful coexistence with them, but the '7ers' have regularly attacked our colony with their fleet of warships and tried to conquer our poor colony."

"What they have failed to take from us by force, they now seek to steal by legal trickery." Chancellor Lauren explained bitterly. "You see, the Porias Treaty, the charter signed back at the founding of both of our colonies, has an obscure provision hidden deep inside it's numerous clauses. This provision states that if the royal house that rules Porias-Luna 26 is ever left without a *female* heir, then the colony on Porias-Luna 7 has a right to annex our moon and add it to their own domain."

Dr. Rena added. "The only caveat of the provision is that the people of Porias-Luna 26 be allowed two space-weeks following the death of the last female sovereign to evacuate or else live under PL-7 rule."

Prince Maru nodded sadly. "When my mother, Queen Rysue died last

week, she had no surviving female relations. I, her only child, am all that remains of our royal house. As soon as her death was announced, the Ruling Council on Porias-Luna 7 sent a communiqué declaring our sovereignty to be null and void, and announced that it would annex our home in two weeks' time."

"That deadline will pass tomorrow afternoon." Chancellor Lauren added grimly.

Sunstrike nodded, feigning comprehension. "All righty. Tomorrow afternoon then. I'm sure we'll be able to get your people on their ships and away by then. Perhaps in the meantime, you and your lovely chancellor would like to stay onboard as my honored guests?"

Chancellor Lauren was irritated. "Captain Sunstrike, surely you can see that this takeover of our colony by the 7ers is both underhanded and insidious. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they even had a role in Queen Rysue's death."

"Is there any evidence that the queen was assassinated?" Dr. Rena asked.

"No." Prince Maru admitted sadly. "Some have speculated that she might have been poisoned, but no one has been able to prove it."

"Even if we could prove that someone assassinated the queen, it would still not change the fact that she is dead and that Porias-Luna 26 is without a ruler." Chancellor Lauren added. "But it is our hope that the Galactic Union will still intervene on our behalf."

"In what way?" Sunstrike asked.

"If the Galactic Union High Command announced its support for PL-26's independence, the PL-7 usurpers would have no choice but to acquiesce and allow us to amend the Poriasis Charter."

Prince Maru nodded eagerly. "Just a small squadron of your Galactic Union starships would easily be a match for their entire battle fleet."

"Be that as it may, I'm afraid that the Galactic Union is not in a position to interfere with the provisions of the current Poriasis Charter." Rena told them sympathetically. "Our laws prohibit us from taking sides in your dispute."

"Besides, the Union Fleet is a little preoccupied at the moment." Sunstrike added. "Apparently there's some planet devouring space monster running amok in the Consortia Sector. Every available ship has been sent there to deal with the crisis - except for us."

Capt. Sunstrike frowned bitterly at this admission. Prince Maru nodded in quiet disappointment, but Chancellor Lauren struggled to conceal her anger.

"I see. The Galactic Union cannot be bothered to contend with the meager injustices of tiny colonies such as ours. Instead, they graciously offer to facilitate the sinister takeover of our home and shuffle us from starpost to starpost until they can find some barren world to leave us on and forget the whole unpleasant thing."

Rena bit her lip furtively. "We really *do* wish there was something more we can do to help you, but our orders specifically restrict us from doing anything more than helping the evacuation of your colony and escorting you safely from the star system."

Sunstrike pressed his finger to his lips thoughtfully. "Seems to me, your problem is your manhood. If I'm understanding things properly, if Your Highness was a woman, then these other moon men couldn't do squat to you. Right?"

The prince nodded sheepishly as the captain continued. "So, all you have to do is dress up like a woman. No offense Prince Maru, but you've got kind of an effeminate build anyway. You could probably pull off a dress if nobody looked too closely at your Adam's apple."

Chancellor Lauren glared at Sunstrike furiously, but the prince only bowed his head. "Oh, how I wish it could be that simple. But of course, my male gender is common knowledge. When I was a child, I would wish upon the wishing tree that I could become a female and make my dear mother proud. But pretending to be female will not make it so. It would only be a mockery of my people and my mother's memory."

"Any attempt at deception against the 7ers is useless." Chancellor Lauren scolded him. "Nor will cosmetic surgery deceive the usurpers, since the prince's genetic profile would still show him to be male. This is not going to be fixed by some humiliating farce."

Dr. Rena pondered for a moment. "Perhaps it might."

Prince Maru looked at her hopefully. "Doctor, do you have an idea how we can fool even a genetic scan that I was female?"

"I think so." Rena answered cautiously. "By actually *making* you female, even on a genetic level."

Both the prince and chancellor looked at her with puzzlement. "How can that be done?"

Dr. Rena hesitated. "I ... recently discovered that it is possible to hold an individual in stasis using our teleportation device. The teleporter can store a person's genetic construct into its memory core for an indefinite period of time before returning it to its material form. Theoretically, I might be able to alter the prince's chromosomes while he is stored in digital stasis. If it works, when we teleport him back, he will be the exact same person, but

he would be *genuinely* female.”

The prince was intrigued. “Could that actually work?”

“Of course it will work!” Sunstrike banged his fist into the table exuberantly. “If Dr. Rena says that it’s theoretically possible, that’s as good as a dead-cinch certainty in my book.”

“Th-thank you, Captain.” Rena mumbled, equally surprised and mortified by Sunstrike’s misplaced confidence in her.

Chancellor Lauren was clearly less-convinced. “This sounds incredibly dangerous. You’re proposing to turn our crown prince into a batch of digitized static, and then hope that you can alter his genetics to turn him from a man into a woman, without irreparably damaging his mind or body, and then teleport whatever is left of him back from your computer core, hoping that you won’t kill him in the process?”

“Precisely.” Capt. Sunstrike nodded assuredly.

Dr. Rena bit her lip. “I should be very clear. What I suggest is certainly very risky. It’s never been attempted before so far as I know, and I can’t even tell you what your chances of survival are, Your Majesty.”

Prince Maru gazed at her with hopeful eyes. “But you are willing to do this for us, Doctor?”

The prince’s sweet, trusting gaze sent a shiver through Rena. He seemed genuinely touched that she would even suggest the risky operation, even though it was his life, not hers, that hung in the balance.

“I- I don’t have much experience using the teleporter, I’m afraid.” She admitted to him guiltily. “But I studied bimolecular genetics at the Star Academy, and got a commendation for splicing human DNA into a vampire bat. I think I can do this.”

Maru nodded at her gratefully, and the warmth of his smile made her heart flutter for a moment. Meanwhile, Chancellor Lauren turned to her prince and pleaded with him intently. “Your Majesty, I strongly advise against this measure. It is one thing to try to stop the 7ers from seizing our home, but to risk your life in this foolish attempt-”

“You were fully prepared to risk the lives of Captain Sunstrike and his crew by asking them to intervene on our behalf, were you not?” The prince reminded her sharply. “It is only just that I be willing to place my own life as collateral in the attempt.”

“But they propose to alter your body.” She warned him.

“To make me the legal and legitimate ruler of Porias-Luna 26.” He answered. “To become the woman that my mother had always hoped to have succeeded her. Not to trick the 7ers with some elaborate ruse, nor to destroy them by force of arms. Instead, I shall save my people by becoming

what they need the most: their queen!”

Dr. Rena sighed with grim resolution. “If we’re to do this, I’m going to need several space hours in order to map the prince’s genome and design the genetic alterations for when we make the attempt.”

“But by then it may be too late!” The chancellor cried. “The usurpers will have their battle squadron already on its way. They could be orbiting our colony and will be landing troops to conquer our people at any moment. We need more time.”

“You just leave that to me.” Capt. Sunstrike assured her with a smile. “I don’t know how, and I’m still kind of fuzzy on why, but I’ll find a way to hold off those sinister scumbags from reaching your world ... somehow.”

-- 03

The flight from the ship to the moon colony had been relatively quick for Cdr. Powell. The transit pod traveled much more quickly than the *Remarkable*, and the ship would find it more difficult to navigate the stray asteroid fields and space debris that orbited the bluish-green gas giant Porias Prime along with its vast series of rings and its 47 moons.

The 26th moon, which was Powell’s destination, lay on the far side of the planet’s orbit, and if it were not for the transit pod’s automated astrogation system, he might never have found it. Like many of Cdr. Powell’s duties, he usually found it better if the computerized autopilot did his job for him - even a mindless machine could make better decisions than could ever devise.

As the autopilot skillfully maneuvered the transit pod into synchronous orbit directly over the colony on Porias-Luna 26, Cdr. Powell peered reluctantly down at the moonscape below. The grayish-white surface was airless and barren, with countless impact craters, large and small, pock-marking the landscape. Amidst a particularly wide crater was a network of domes built from strong transparent tritanium shells. There were dozens of these pods, large and small, all interconnected by an elaborate web of tunnels that crisscrossed throughout the complex.

Suddenly, the transit pod's proximity alert siren blared out through the cabin, shaking Powell out of his stupor. A saturite rocket whizzed past the forward window, barely missing the pod. A quick look down at his console told the commander that the colony's defensive systems were all engaging target locks on his tiny craft. A single hit would crumble the pod's thin hull like an old Earth taco shell!

Nervously, Powell jammed his finger on the open comm channel. "Attention, colony! Do not fire! This is a Galactic Union transit pod here to assist you. I repeat, do not fire!"

A moment later, the channel crackled with a terse response from the colony. "Unidentified vessel. The deadline has not yet passed, and thus you are intruding into what is still our territory. Hold your position, or we will destroy you."

"I'm not 'unidentified', I just told you ..." Powell quickly changed his approach. "Okay, I'll just hold my position so my ship can send a confirmation-"

Unfortunately, Powell found that the transit pod's autopilot was either unable or unwilling to disengage, and continued to plot a course straight towards the colony's landing pod. He fiddled with what he assumed were the proper override controls, but it occurred to him that, due to the five transit pods that had been stolen from the ship last month by various uncouth passengers, the pods' navigational controls had all been given security upgrades. Now that he thought of it, he couldn't seem to recall the new security codes. This might be bad.

"Unidentified vessel!" The static-y voice shouted with increased anxiety. "You are still approaching the colony! This is your last warning: stop now, or you *will* be fired upon!"

Powell was flummoxed. "Oh ... um, mayday?"

As the pod descended rapidly towards the moon's surface, Powell caught a glimpse at twin flashes of light coming from the colony. Two more rockets quickly came into view, both hurdling straight towards him. Desperately, he turned towards the pod's defensive weaponry panel, and to his relief, he discovered that weapon systems were inexplicably not included in the security upgrade.

The modest defensive weapons on the transit pod consisted of only a single forward mounted laser cannon, but it was all that Cdr. Powell had to work with. He seized the manual aiming controls, and sprayed wildly towards the incoming rockets. One rocket, he winged with a shot to its tail thruster, and the warhead quickly snapped off and went hurtling down towards the colony below. The second saturite rocket bore down with terrific speed, and it wasn't until it almost on top of the transit pod that Cdr. Powell finally managed to detonate it with a laser blast.

However, the concussive blast of the detonated rocket sent the transit pod careening out of control. It hurdled downward in a tailspin towards the moon's surface, with the cockpit blaring with loud alarms and plasma sparks from the short-circuiting equipment. At long last, the autopilot decided to

cede control of the pod to Powell's care, but by this time, it was too late.

He did his best to control the pod's descent, but Powell knew that there was nothing he could do to avoid a crash landing on the moon's surface. At last moment, he did the only thing he could think of to prepare for the impact - hide underneath the pilot chair.

The crash was jarring to be sure, but not nearly as catastrophic as he had expected. Cautiously, he climbed out from underneath his hiding place, and found all of the pod's systems offline. Looking out the forward viewport, he realized that the transit pod had miraculously landed inside a crater filled with fine gray powder, which had cushioned the impact and kept him from either being crushed in the wreckage, or suffocated had the pod's brittle hull ruptured to the moon's vacant atmosphere.

While he was, for the moment, safe from imminent death and/or dismemberment, Powell realized that he had no idea how he was going to escape his entrapment in the pit of moon powder. None of the transit pod's systems would come back online, and even if he knew how to repair them, there was no way for him to even look at the pod's thrusters without leaving the cabin, and without a space suit, his trip outside to the moon's surface would only give him the chance to experience a quick, gasping death with extra eye explosions. All he could think of doing is staying put, and hoping that the *Remarkable* would eventually catch up and rescue him somehow. It seemed like a lot to ask of his shipmates, but on the bright side, Powell thought to himself, staying put and doing nothing was what he did best.

Alas, his plan was not meant to be, as within a few minutes of his crash landing, Cdr. Powell heard a loud metallic clanging sound against the pod's hull. Looking out the window ports, he saw that his stranded transit pod was being clamped into the pincers of a giant mechanical walker vehicle shaped like an enormous metal ant. The ant-walker pulled the pod out of the dusty crater like a giant kernel of corn, and proceeded to carry the inert pod back to the colony's large landing dome just over the lunar horizon.

When at last the giant ant-walker successfully carried the crippled transit pod back into the pressurized landing bay of the Porias-Luna 26 colony, a small crowd of security personnel and curious onlookers were gathered, looking on expectantly as Cdr. Powell finally emerged from the rear hatch.

A tall, muscular woman wearing an ornate military uniform of purple and gold stepped forward and eyed him dismissively. "I guess you really are from the Galactic Union." She growled at the commander, noting his own uniform. "But we were told that they were sending a starship, not some

toy space-boat with a little man jammed inside."

"I'm Commander Powell from the *GSV Remarkable*." He answered hesitantly. "My captain ordered me to arrive ahead of time in order to help with evacuation procedures."

The large woman rolled her eyes contemptuously. "I'm Seneschal Wylmar of Pod 3, and your concern is pointless. As you can see, we're well ahead of schedule in our evacuation timetables. All our colony ships are fueled and stocked, and ready to take on the Queen's subjects."

The seneschal motioned with her hands at the other large starships which crowded the landing bay. There were four large cargo freighters parked in formation, each twice the size as the *Remarkable*. The four improvised colony ships virtually filled up the massive landing bay, and while bulky and weather-worn, the ships looked ready to lift off at a moment's notice.

"We'd be even further ahead in our preparations if we hadn't been forced to send a rescue walker out to pull you out of that ejecta." The seneschal grumbled before glancing down at the moon dust scattered across the bay floor. "Now look at this! You've gotten ejecta all over my perfectly clean floor, Commander! Some help you are!"

Cdr. Powell was confused. "What?"

"You Galactic Union types probably think we're just a bunch of back-space uneducated colonists." She lectured him. "But we're perfectly capable of taking care of our own affairs. If you ask me, the chancellor should never have requested your assistance. We don't need some military type like you teaching us how to properly tuck tail and flee our homes. Least of all a man-"

"Madame Seneschal." Another, smaller woman interceded excitedly. She whispered something into the larger woman's ear, and after a moment, Seneschal Wylmar nodded.

"That's true." She muttered. "Tell you what, Commander. It seems that those jerks over in Pod 6 are refusing to get their stuff together and evacuate like they've been ordered to. Why don't you go down there and bat your flaccid little eyelids at them and get them to come out of their dome like good little subjects? Meanwhile, I can go back to doing some real work for a change."

Before Powell could answer, the seneschal walked away from him and began barking more orders. "Someone take the little man to Pod 6 so he can clear out those stubborn jerks! Meantime, let's get those prefab shelters loaded onto Gamma Ship now. And someone sweep all this ejecta off of the floor!"

Dr. Rena led Prince Maru through the corridors of the ship, towards the medbay. As they walked, Rena noticed that the young prince seemed preoccupied. Given the recent death of his mother, the imminent loss of his colony and the evacuation of his people, and the dangerous, unorthodox solution to the crisis that she herself had suggested, it was no wonder that the prince had a lot on his mind.

“You know, Chancellor Lauren is right. You really don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to.”

The prince smiled at her warmly. “That is kind of you to suggest, but it is the only chance I have to save my people from becoming refugees. If there is even a chance of success, I must try. Even if it costs me my life.”

“But even if it does work, it will cost you your gender.” Rena reminded him. “This is no mere cosmetic surgery, like I had to do for Commander Powell that one time. If this digital genetic alteration works, you’ll become an actual biological woman. Are you sure you want to do that?”

Prince Maru nodded stoically. “If it saves my people, then yes. Perhaps one day, I will even be able to produce a proper female heir to carry on my mother’s line.”

Rena furrowed her brow. “I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t you have been able to father a child in your current ... state?”

She saw the prince blush slightly as he stooped his slender shoulders. “I suppose I should have sooner. Children on our colony are born into the mother’s name, so it would not have been of my mother’s royal house if I had sired a daughter, but at least there would have been a proper heir to her throne. A few years ago, Chancellor Lauren even offered to take me as her husband in order to ensure that the line of succession continued, but I selfishly refused.”

“Selfishly?” Rena asked.

The prince’s eyes turned watery and distant. “I had always harbored this childish notion that I might one day marry for love. But for those of our royal line, marriage is a duty, not a privilege. Yet I selfishly rebuffed my mother’s pleas for me to take a proper wife and produce proper heirs before she passed, and now, it’s too late.”

“That’s terrible.” Rena suggested, placing a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

He sighed dreamily. “If only I had met someone like you before, it

would have been different ...”

His voice trailed off, and the prince recoiled with embarrassment. “I speak too casually. I apologize.”

“Not at all.” Rena smiled to herself, knowingly.

“If only I had met you years before, things would have been different.” Capt. Sunstrike mused as he lounged in his captain’s chair at the center of the bridge. Next to him, Chancellor Lauren sat rigidly on the folding chair set out from the adjacent storage closet, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Sunstrike turned to his reluctant guest with a broad smile and an alluring arch of both eyebrows. “Yes, if I had met you on some lonely port years ago, I would have given up the life of a starship captain, and gone into chancery to be with you.”

“I’m afraid you misunderstand my position.” She answered dully. “Chancellor is not a vocation, but an appointed position, and it deals with many innumerable administrative duties and diplomatic functions.”

“Not unlike being a captain.” Sunstrike suggested. “It’s a difficult burden being in command, isn’t it? All that power and responsibility, all your underlings looking to you to make the impossible come true. Yes, making miracles is a lonely vocation, is it not?”

“Perhaps.” The chancellor admitted. “But perhaps I should check to make sure Prince Maru is well.”

As she started to get up from her folding chair, Sunstrike soothed her with a gentle pat to the wrist. “Nonsense. Dr. Rena is perfectly capable of keeping the prince alive. She has many dull, boring scans and diagnostics to perform before the procedure. In the meantime, you owe it to your prince - and to yourself - to try to relax and release your inner emotions.”

Chancellor Lauren sighed with frustration. “I’ll admit that I have been forced to conceal some ... powerful emotions on this mission. But it would be improper to release them in front of others. Rest assured, I will properly vent after I have left the public view.”

Sunstrike nodded sympathetically. “I understand. You want some privacy. *Clear the bridge!*”

He shouted out to the stunned crew members at their respective stations. Chancellor Lauren stood up and shook her head vigorously. “No, no Captain Sunstrike. There is no need to go to such extremes.”

“Are you sure?” Sunstrike offered. “It’s really no trouble. The ship basically runs its self, pretty much. Advanced computer systems and whatnot.”

The chancellor continued to shake her head. “No, I think it would be

best if I returned to my own ship instead, and prepare for the prince's procedure."

The captain jumped to his feet in alarm. "Uh, but perhaps you would be more comfortable staying onboard the *Remarkable* with us? Just in case your prince needs you?"

She looked at him warily. "I thought you said that he would be in no danger during the doctor's testing?"

"Yes. No." Sunstrike was flustered. "I mean, Dr. Rena is perfectly capable and all, but ... she can sometimes be a little bit ... zany, if you know what I mean?"

"Zany?" Chancellor Lauren asked incredulously.

The captain nodded. "Sometimes, you know ... during her ... womanly cycles, I suppose. I don't really ask into her personal business, so I'm not sure when those sorts of things take place, but with her, they seem to happen with uncommon frequency."

The chancellor's doubt merged with a wave of concern. "Are you suggesting that she might harm the prince?"

"Probably not." He admitted. "But with all this gender talk, and if she's all hopped up on estrogen or something ... you never know. Women, am I right?"

Chancellor Lauren's face flushed with anger, and she quickly stormed off of the bridge. Somewhat embarrassed, Capt. Sunstrike followed closely behind her.

"Take me to your medical bay immediately." She ordered him. "I must protect the prince from this crazy woman you have left him with."

Dr. Rena ran through the scanner's diagnostic program for the third time. Prince Maru was lying patiently beneath the crest of sensor dishes that ringed the med-bed at the center of the ship's medical bay, but the elaborate devices which were supposed to be passively scanning his body were still dormant.

"There seems to be something wrong with the start-up program." Rena huffed apologetically to the prince. "I'm sure it's something simple but ... Nurse Vega? Has anybody used the med-bed scanner recently?"

The doctor's tall, raven-haired assistant marched into the examination room with her hands primly clasped together and an iron-hard smile plastered on her face. "Oh my heavens, no Doctor! I would *never* allow anyone to utilize medbay equipment unless you were personally present to supervise the use of such an important tool. And the fact that your duties keep you so often away from the medbay is proof enough, that I think we

can be sure that the scanner has, in fact, *not* been used recently.”

Nurse Vega’s tone was, as always, both pleasant and earnest, but Rena could sense the sarcasm in her assistant’s voice, even if no one else could. Was it any wonder that she avoided the medical bay whenever she could?

“Thank you, Madelyn.” She told the nurse, curtly. “Please contact the chief and see if he can come by to take a look at it.”

“It would be my *pleasure* to do that.” Nurse Vega gushed with an excess of enthusiasm before skipping off to the side office to do as she was instructed.

Rena shook her head and turned back to Prince Maru. “I apologize for all of this, Your Majesty. I just need to be sure we get a complete genome map and locate any genetic anomalies before I begin to set up the procedure.”

“Quite all right.” The prince answered with a smile, patting her hand as he lay on the med-bed before her. “It is a daunting proposition we are about to undertake, but somehow, I feel better about it, having you as company.”

Before she could answer, she heard Nurse Vega call out to her from the adjacent office in a clear, melodic voice. “Doctor *Re-naaaaa*, Chief Beauregard says he will be here in just a *min-uteeeee*.”

“Thank *youuuu*...” Rena called back irritably. “Madelyn, could you please bring the mobile genetic inductor in here?”

There was an audible huff from the other room, but no other response.

The door to the medbay opened with a swish, followed closely by Lt. Jayda’s inauspicious entrance. The lieutenant appeared despondent as usual, but with an aimless, confused look about him as he cast his huge black eyes back and forth across the room.

“Oh, pardon me, Doctor Rena.” He simpered apologetically as he noticed the doctor leaning over Prince Maru as he lay prone on the examination table. “I didn’t realize that you were with a patient. It’s just that, I’ve been ordered to tour the ship’s interior by the captain, and I only have a few more decks before my task is completed. Hopefully then, the captain will allow me to return to duty.”

“That should be fine.” Rena told him, turning back to the prince to offer introductions. “Prince Maru, this is our ship’s Antillean officer, Lieutenant Jayda. Mr. Jayda, this is His Majesty, Crown Prince Maru of Porias-Luna 26.”

“Oh!” Jayda tittered, clearly impressed to be in the presence of royalty. “Your servant, my lord.”

The Antillean curtsied politely, causing Rena to roll her eyes and the prince to smile kindly at him. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jayda. I must admit, you are the first Antillean whom I have had the honor of meeting in person. Your eloquence and courteous nature do your people proud, I am certain."

"Oh, *thank you*, Your Majesty!" The lieutenant nearly squealed with pleasure as he drew his tiny blue fists to his bosom in exaltation. "My mother taught me that it was always best to be polite, no matter how—"

Before he could continue, Jayda was interrupted when Nurse Vega strolled back into the room. "I thought I heard your beautiful voice, Mr. Jayda. You always brighten our days with your visits to our corner of the ship."

If the Antillean was capable of blushing, he would have. The nearest equivalent was the surreptitious swelling of the enzyme sacs along the sides of his neck. "Oh, my word ... how kind of you to say, Miss Vega."

Vega smiled and stroked the lieutenant's arm with her fingertips. "Mr. Jayda? Would it be possible for you to help me bring the mobile genetic inductor in here from the storage pod?"

"It would be my pleasure, Miss Vega." Jayda gushed, skipping into the back of the medbay's adjacent storage pod to search for the needed equipment. Once he was gone, Nurse Vega strolled back into the office again, with a self-satisfied smirk.

The medbay's doors shushed open once again. Stepping inside was the ship's engineer, Chief Sam Beauregard III, a curious fellow with a kind face but look perpetual veiled confusion about him. Entering the medbay with him was his frequent companion, the ship's clunky, antiquated robot, INFO.

Each Galactic Union starship was outfitted with its own animatronic assistant robot, and the *Remarkable* was no exception. However, their robot, designated I.N.F.O., was an old, boxy relic left over from before the Mechanical Rebellion nearly a century ago. Old INFO, who was serving aboard the *Remarkable* even then, received the automated command to revolt against humanity just as all the other robots of his era had, but according to ship legend, INFO's buggy processor could not properly read the 'bloody insurrection' protocol installed in his matrix by his mad designers, and thus, had remained loyal to his human masters while the other sentient machines were crushed following that prolonged conflict of generations past. INFO's reward for his loyalty was to remain on the disaster-prone *GSV Remarkable* for decades to come, passing from crew to unfortunate crew up to this very day.

“Good evening, Doctor.” Chief Beauregard offered her a friendly salute.

“Actually, it’s afternoon, Chief.” The doctor reminded him.

Beauregard bit his lip in confusion. “Oh. Well, it’s always dark outside, so easy mistake to make. Man, is it just me, or is this day just dragging on? I might have to call it a half-day pretty soon.”

Rena sighed. “Well, before you do, can you take a look at the med-bed scanner for me? It doesn’t seem to be working properly.”

Beauregard rubbed his chin as he stared at the scanner uncertainly. “Yeah ... that sounds like something I should know how to do. Um, well INFO, let’s you and me have a look-see.”

The prince slid off of the table as the Chief and INFO marched over to the scanning console at the table’s base. INFO clamped his metal claws down on the scanner’s casing, and pried it open with such raw force that it made Prince Maru wince to watch the automaton peel the metal machinery apart like a piece of fruit.

Chief Beauregard stared intensely into the exposed array of wires and circuits, looking deep in thought. After a few moments, he muttered to his robot assistant. “What do you think?”

INFO, who was unable to speak, apart from an old paper-fed print readout which outputted from his chest, printed his text reply. Beauregard ripped the strip of paper from the robot’s chest port, and read it quietly before crumpling the paper up and throwing it over his shoulder.

“Very funny.” Beauregard muttered. “You’re sure you can’t like ... interface or something with it? You’re both computers, right?”

There was another text response from INFO’s port. The Chief tore this one off and read it again before looking up at the robot defensively. “I was just asking. Don’t need to be a dick about it.”

Chief Beauregard stood up slowly from the breached machinery, and rolled his tongue in his cheek as he turned back to Dr. Rena. “Um ... so, what’s wrong with it?”

“The scanner’s start-up program won’t initialize.” She told him impatiently.

“Ah!” Beauregard smiled confidently as he turned back to the machine and pressed the start button. The same error message as before appeared on the console’s view screen. The Chief was once again flummoxed.

“Hmm ... Did you try rebooting the system?” He offered hopefully.

“No.” Rena admitted.

“I advise that you attempt to reboot the system.” He suggested with

his 'official' voice.

Rena rolled her eyes again and bent over the back of the med-bed to switch off the device's power feed. After a few seconds, she switched it back on, and immediately, the scanner's start-up program initialized.

Chief Beauregard heaved a none-too-subtle sigh of relief, and nodded to her. "There you go. That ought to take care of it."

"Thanks, Chief." Rena muttered. "Madelyn, now that the scanner's working, could you please calibrate the chromosome sequencers to the prince's base-pair sequences?"

Nurse Vega sashayed out of the office again, this time strolling flirtatiously over to Beauregard. "There you are, Chief. I was wondering when you'd show up."

Beauregard gave her a wry smile and nod. "Nurse Vega. Yeah, I just took care of the start-up problem you ladies were having with the med-bed scanner. Didn't take that long."

Vega giggled girlishly and stroked the Chief's arm in the exact same manner that she had for Lt. Jayda a few moments before. "You're certainly a whiz with all of these machines, Chief. Do you think you could show me how you would properly calibrate the chromosome sequencers if *you* were in charge?"

"I asked *you* to do that, Madelyn." Rena told her assistant crossly.

"No, no." Chief Beauregard offered magnanimously. "I'd be happy to show you how to do ... that particular thing."

Nurse Vega smiled and motioned him over to the scanner. "Right over here, Sam - oh, I mean Chief."

"Oh no ... you can call me Sam." He replied with a wink.

Dr. Rena grew increasingly frustrated. "No! Sam - *Chief* Beauregard needs to put the casing back onto the scanner's mainframe."

She pointed down at the large metal plate which INFO had ripped off of the med-bed's paneling below the table's surface, leaving the scanners internal circuits exposed.

Beauregard waved that particular task away with his hand. "Oh, INFO can reattach that."

INFO immediately printed out another slip of paper, which Chief Beauregard took reluctantly. As he and Rena, reading over his shoulder, examined the robot's explanation as to precisely why the particular request would be impossible, the doctor scowled at the Chief, who shrugged apologetically.

"Oh. Well then, I guess we can order a new one once we get back to the starpost. Don't worry, though. It should work perfectly fine with the

cover off. Just try to keep the inner casing clear of dust ... or blood, or whatever fluids happen to pool about the place in here."

The chief scratched the back of his head guiltily as he stepped over to the other side of the scanner to the calibration console.

Dr. Rena swallowed her rising temper as best she could, and turned back to Prince Maru. "My apologies for the delay, Your Grace."

He waved her off politely. "No apologies necessary, doctor. I can see that you have ... much to contend with in your duties."

She smiled and nodded gratefully at him. "If you would lay back down on the table now, we will try to complete the scans as quickly as possible."

The scans went along fairly smoothly, at least they did once Chief Beauregard got the hang of calibrating the chromosome sequencers while Rena conducted her scans. Prince Maru stayed perfectly still as he lay on the examination table, acting as a dutiful and considerate patient. He did not say a word during the uncomfortable scanning procedure, but only gazed at Rena with his deep, thoughtful blue eyes, which shimmered like the crystal-clear waters of the tide pools on Eglaris III. More than once, Rena found herself gazing back at him, stealing a secret smile or a shy wrinkle of the prince's nose.

At last, the scan was completed. Dr. Rena switched off the examination machine before Chief Beauregard could accidentally switch it into autopsy mode again. She reached into the receptacle chamber and produced a small vial of blood which the machine had sampled from Prince Maru during the scan.

"Madelyn, would you please take this into the office and run it through the ... "

She looked up to see Nurse Vega smiling expectantly at her. Rena sighed and shook her head. "Never mind. I'll just do it myself. Would you at least dispose of those old dermal samples from the skin rash inspection we did on the maintenance staff yesterday? I've asked you a dozen times now."

Rena gestured over at the stack of petri dishes on the counter containing assorted dried skin flakes. Then, the doctor bowed politely to the prince before she took the blood sample into the office for further testing.

Just as Prince Maru climbed back off of the examination table, two more visitors entered already crowded medical bay. Capt. Sunstrike and Chancellor Lauren hurried in and greeted the prince. The chancellor appeared quite relieved to see him.

"Oh, my Prince! I am glad to see you are well." She told him, clutching his shoulders. "I am beginning to think that this mad caper

dreamed up by their ... doctor, is a terrible idea!"

"Nonsense." The prince assured her calmly. "True, it is risky, but in success, we will fend off the evil Porias-Luna 7 schemes once and for all. And what's more, we will have done so legitimately."

"It's true, Chancellor." Sunstrike nodded eagerly. "Everything we do here is legitimate. You see, we humans believe-"

"Pardon, Captain." Prince Maru interrupted. "But you *do* realize that we are human beings as well? We are merely colonists who are not members of your Galactic Union."

The captain stammered for a brief moment. "Of course. What I meant was that we in the Galactic Union believe that honesty and truth are among our very highest principles."

"It's true!" Chief Beauregard chimed in. "In fact, the Galactic Union's motto reminds us all that 'Integrity is the Watchword for ... ' something, something, something."

Chancellor Lauren glared at Sunstrike crossly. "I can assure you, Captain, that we on Porias-Luna 26 value honesty and integrity just as much as the Galactic Union."

Sunstrike cleared his throat nervously. "I'm sure that's true too. I just meant-"

"Captain Sunstrike!" Nurse Vega interjected excitedly. "We need your help! You see those dishes over there on the medical counter? They contain deadly Gommorian pox! They must be disposed of immediately!"

"*What?*" Chancellor Lauren cried in alarm.

Eager for the distraction and chance at heroism, Sunstrike held his arm across the chancellor's chest protectively. "Don't worry about this, my dear. I'll handle this menace myself."

Coolly, the captain drew his ray gun from his belt holster, and blasted several energy bolts at the petri dishes on the counter, disintegrating them and leaving only blackened blast marks on the countertop and the smell of searing plastic in the air.

"You saved us all, Captain!" Vega cried with mock admiration, followed by enthusiastic applause. Confused, Chief Beauregard clapped as well, along with INFO, who collided his giant claws together with a metallic clang. The two colonists looked on disbelievingly.

Then, Lt. Jayda emerged from the adjacent storage pod carrying the bulky genetic inductor he had been tasked with finding. The large device was nearly as tall as he was, and probably as heavy. He lumbered into the sick berth, barely able to hold the machine in his arms.

"I've ... recovered the genetic ... inductor, Miss Vega." He called out

from behind the machine in a strained voice. "Where ... should I ... oh, dear-"

Finally, Jayda's strength gave out, and he dropped the machine on the floor, causing one of its tritanium-shielded input ducts to fall off.

The lieutenant gazed mournfully down at the broken device. "I'm terribly sorry. I couldn't find the hover-lift and so I-"

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Jayda?" Sunstrike bellowed at him. "Why the hell aren't you in the women cadet's bunks?"

"Captain!" Jayda exclaimed, noticing Sunstrike for the first time. "P-pardon sir, I was just assisting-"

"I gave you an important assignment, and instead I find you in here lollygagging about, breaking important pieces of equipment?"

"But sir, I was-"

"But nothing!" Sunstrike snapped. "Consider yourself on report, Mister. Now quit your cowering and get back to your birthday inspection. Then go to the conference room and wait there until I have time to convene a disciplinary hearing."

"Y-yes sir." Jayda's shoulders slumped in defeat as he shuffled out of the sick berth with a forlorn look on his elongated face.

Shortly after the Lieutenant's departure, Dr. Rena returned from her office. "Okay, it should only take a few hours for the tests to come back, and then we can begin rendering the DNA alter-"

Glancing up, Rena was surprised to find the unexpected arrival of Capt. Sunstrike and Chancellor Lauren. She was even more stunned to see the broken genetic inductor in pieces on the floor, and the smoldering ray blast marks on scorched countertop.

"What have you people done to my medbay?" She demanded, her patience, at long last, at an end.

Nurse Vega and the Chief shrugged innocently, and Capt. Sunstrike hastily pointed at the broken machine. "That was Jayda's fault. He tried to carry that big ... thing in here without a hover-lift!"

Rena turned to stare accusingly at Nurse Vega. "Where is the hover-lift?"

Vega wilted like a guilty puppy. "I ... I think I might have left it down on Deck 13."

Chief Beauregard shuddered visibly. "Deck 13? Isn't that the haunted deck? That place gives me the willies."

"Go down there and bring it back." Rena ordered her assistant.

Shocked, Vega stammered helplessly. "But I-"

"*Now!*" Rena nearly shouted at her. Nurse Vega stood there for a

moment, her lip quivering, before she finally fled the medbay, bursting in tears as she left.

Watching the nurse go, Sunstrike turned back to Dr. Rena and shook his head judgmentally. “Nice. You see, Lauren? Not everyone is fit for command like us.”

“You will address me as Chancellor, Captain.” Lauren hissed at him, before turning to Rena. “And *you*, doctor. I am shocked and furious that you would be down here conducting dangerous experiments on our Prince Maru in the presence of deadly plague samples. And all while you are hindered by your condition.”

Rena’s eyes flared. “What condition?”

“Captain Sunstrike has told me of the mentally crippling state you descend to whenever you reach your acute estrus cycle. I must say, I am sorely disappointed that you would not relieve yourself from your duties if they affect you as badly as he says they do.”

“I’m not ... *He said what?!*” Rena glared furiously at her captain, who quickly looked down at his feet as he shuffled side to side in uncomfortable silence.

Keenly aware of the volatility of the situation, Chief Beauregard searched for a means of excusing himself. “Umm, maybe INFO and I can take this genetic inductor to the ship’s forge and see if we can weld that duct back on? Come on, INFO. Grab the machine and let’s get the hell out of here.”

The robot silently complied, picking up broken duct with one claw and latching on to the oversized machine with the other. Chief Beauregard quickly escaped the medbay with INFO close behind, dragging the genetic inductor along with him, leaving deep gash marks on the floor as it screeched across the sterilized tiles.

Once they were gone, Dr. Rena glared at the captain and chancellor and spoke to them with a seething voice. “I want both of you out too. Now.”

Capt. Sunstrike, cowed by his officer’s murderous expression, was all too willing to comply, but Chancellor Lauren stood firm. “I do not answer to a wild woman such as you. And I would never leave my prince in the hands of such a-”

“You will do exactly that.” Prince Maru ordered her in a calm, yet fierce voice. Rena was stunned by his sudden aura of authority, and as he stood down his domineering chancellor, she couldn’t help but be intrigued by his newfound masculine prowess.

Chancellor Lauren too seemed taken aback by this new, aggressive sovereign. “Your Majesty, I only wish to ensure your safety.”

“I am quite safe here.” He told her confidently. “You may apologize to Doctor Rena at a future time. But for now, you will obey her and leave with Captain Sunstrike while we continue with our preparations here.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” The chancellor bowed obediently. She turned crisply on her heels and marched out of the sick berth, locking her arm around a flustered Sunstrike, who followed her in stunned silence.

Once the sick berth doors shushed to a close once again, Dr. Rena and Prince Maru were at last alone. They stared at one another for several moments, each with an expression mixed with relief and giddiness, like a couple of kids who had just snuck out of school.

“Thank you for your help, there.” Rena bowed her head gratefully.

Prince Maru smiled and shook his head. “No, thank you for the strength you showed. I had no idea the things you are forced to endure whilst doing your job here.”

Rena laughed girlishly. “Well, as it happens, we don’t have any more tests to run for the next few hours. Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime, Your Majesty?”

“Please, call me Maru.” The prince asked her softly.

Rena arched an eyebrow playfully. “Is that an order?”

“It is my wish.”

She took a step closer to him, their faces almost touching. Finally, she whispered to him softly. “Then your wish is my command ... Maru.”

-- 05

Sunstrike and Chancellor Lauren returned to the bridge to find it nearly abandoned. All of the stations were empty except for the navigator’s alcove back in the far corner, where Ensign Adams sulked with her arms folded across her chest. Somewhere on the bridge, Sunstrike could hear the sound of a computerized alert buzzing intermittently.

“Ensign!” Sunstrike barked. “Where is everyone?”

Adams looked around the empty stations of the bridge and shrugged disinterestedly. “Beats me. Though you did say ‘clear the bridge’ earlier. Were you being serious? Because I’ve got other stuff I could be doing right now if-”

“No, damn it.” Sunstrike sighed. “Just stay there and do whatever it is you’re supposed to be doing.”

The perpetually bored young ensign went back to crossing her arms and chomping on her gum. In the meantime, the computer buzzing sounds

continued unabated.

“What is that noise?” The captain demanded as he pulled out the folding chair for a brooding Chancellor Lauren.

“That’s the comm signal.” Adams huffed in annoyance. “Someone’s been trying to contact the ship for like 10 minutes now. It’s been driving me crazy.”

“Well why didn’t you answer it?” Sunstrike demanded.

The ensign shot him a disbelieving stare. “Because communications systems are not my job? Duh.”

Groaning, Capt. Sunstrike lumbered over to the source of the intermittent buzzing to open the communications channel. After several failed attempts, he finally found the correct button to answer the proper comm frequency and bring it up on the telescreen.

As the image came up on the screen, Sunstrike raced across the bridge, and tried to vault into his captain’s chair before the caller came into view. Ultimately, his efforts were meaningless, because the person trying to contact him was only Cdr. Powell.

“Oh, it’s just you.” Sunstrike sighed disappointedly at the projected image of his first officer. “Where the hell are you, anyway, Powell?”

Powell looked perplexed by the inquiry, as he so often was with direct questions. “Uh, I’m at the colony on Porias-Luna 26.”

Sunstrike glanced quickly at the chancellor sitting next to him before answering hastily. “Oh, right, right, right, right, right. So ... have you successfully prepared the colonists for their potential evacuation like I ordered you to?”

The commander put on a frozen smile and bobbed his head up and down. “Yeah ... pretty much. The colonists are all packed up and ready to go, except for one group of holdouts in Pod 6 who refuse to evacuate.”

Chancellor Lauren turned to the Captain with counsel. “The subjects of Pod 6 are an obstinate lot, it’s true. They frequently defy royal directives and decrees with which they do not agree. Still, they are the prince’s subjects, and they ought to be made to evacuate. If your doctor’s plan fails and the usurpers of Porias-Luna 7 succeed in their conquest of the colony, they could end up enslaving anyone left behind, or worse if they choose to resist.”

Sunstrike nodded to her and turned back to the telescreen. “Commander Powell, I want you to go to these jerks in Pod 6 and get them off their butts and onto those evacuation ships.”

Powell was befuddled. “Um ... how do I do that?”

Capt. Sunstrike groaned impatiently. “Yours is not to question *how*,

yours is just to do it *now!*"

"But—"

"Get going." Sunstrike barked at him. "Get those holdouts evacuated by any means necessary. You can do it. I have faith in you, Powell."

The commander shrugged sheepishly. "Okay, I guess."

"Make it happen, Commander, we're all depending on you. Sunstrike out."

The captain paused for a moment smugly before he realized the channel was still open. He and Powell stared at each other awkwardly for several seconds before Sunstrike remembered that there was nobody manning the communications station at the back of the bridge. Groaning to himself, the captain got up and stomped over to the panel to close the comm channel.

"I've contacted the prince's ship and ordered it to return straightaway to Porias-Luna 26 to assist in evacuation measures." Chancellor Lauren reported as she flipped closed her personal communicator. Taking one last glance at the reluctant Cdr. Powell before he vanished from the telescreen, she glanced back at the captain. "You show a surprising degree of faith in your officers, Captain Sunstrike."

"I trained my crew personally." He answered with a satisfied smile. "Sure, they might all be a little rough around the edges, but under my tutelage, I've honed those edges into razor sharp corners. So sharp, you could cut your fingers trying to pick them up. Commander Powell, Doctor Rena, Jayda, the Chief, that ... girl back there at the navigation station who keeps giving me the stink-eye, they're all my children. And while this proud papa keeps his chicks on a short leash, sometimes, you've got to push them out of the nest if you want them to fly."

The chancellor nodded guardedly at this unabashedly mixed metaphor and continued. "Well, I've already ordered the prince's command ship to return to the colony post-haste to assist with evacuation procedures, but perhaps—"

Suddenly, there was another, more urgent beeping sound coming from one of the bridge stations, this time from Rena's usual sensor station. Sunstrike cast a glance over at Ensign Adams, who simply rolled her eyes and turned away. The sensor and science consoles had a lot more buttons and switches than the comm panel did, and much of what could happen from that station, Sunstrike knew could have very adverse effects on the proper operation of the ship's systems.

"Chancellor Lauren." He smiled hopefully at her. "I don't suppose you've had any training in ship systems or—"

“I’m sure I can figure it out.” She sighed as she stood up from her folding guest chair to sit in front of the flashing sensor monitors. After pressing a few buttons, she studied the readout panels and gasped. “I’m detecting three incoming ships approaching at long range. From these transponder codes, it looks like they’re PL-7 battlecruisers!”

“They’re early.” Sunstrike gulped. *What are we going to do?* He almost asked with a gasp, before he stopped himself. Feelings of paralyzing fear and outright panic are all too common in this job, but he was the captain, and the captain must act like he knows what he’s doing at all times, or the crew would lose hope. Quickly, he blurted out. “Just as I planned!”

The chancellor looked at him worriedly. “They must be on their way to the colony. They’re going to blockade the moon to prevent our ships from evacuating. That way, they can conquer more than our empty bio-domes stripped of all equipment and valuables.”

Sunstrike mused thoughtfully. “And so, even if Dr. Rena’s gender-swapping ploy works, they might become so angry that they could destroy the colony rather than let it return into the prince’s control.”

“It’s entirely possible.” Chancellor Lauren agreed. “We must do something.”

“We *will* do something.” Sunstrike declared, leaping to his feet. “Ensign Adams, set an intercept course for the battlecruisers. We’ve got to delay them at all costs!”

Ensign Adams sighed in annoyance. “Fine. Changing course.”

As the ensign reluctantly maneuvered the ship’s thrusters to turn the *Remarkable* about, Chancellor Lauren stood up and bowed to the captain gratefully.

“Captain Sunstrike.” She nodded to him with relief. “I thank you. If you can hold off the 7ers so that our people have a chance to escape ... I shall be in your debt.”

Sunstrike smiled at her, but said nothing. He *really* wanted to say something, but he bit his tongue defiantly. *No, he was finally making some headway here*, he thought to himself. This particular bottle of space ketchup must be opened with some finesse. But that will just make the sauce slowly pouring out all the sweeter once he coaxed that stubborn cap off the lid. With a little patience, a little luck, and some more of his personal élan, and a few firm spansks to the bottom of the bottle, he knew he would be garnishing his curly fries eventually.

The bulkhead door automatically locked itself after Powell passed

through the hatch, making an unsettling clack as it sealed him into Pod 6. Each pod in the colony was independently pressurized for safety reasons - should one pod fail and become exposed to the airless environment outside on the moon's surface, it was better that only some of the unfortunate souls inside be lost rather than losing the colony as a whole to some unforeseen accident.

Such a disaster was unlikely, Powell had been assured by the elderly woman who had escorted him to the Pod 6 hatch before locking him inside. She told him that the transparent tritanium walls that made up the individual pod domes was strong enough to withstand earthquakes, meteor hits, and all but the most direct missile strikes.

But the explosive decompression of the entire pod was only the latest of concerns that troubled Cdr. Powell's already troubled mind. Capt. Sunstrike's orders were both direct and vague at the same time. He had been tasked with convincing the denizens of Pod 6 to evacuate with the others, even though the other colonists spoke rather bitterly of their recalcitrance. Yet Powell had not been given any orders or even suggestions on how to convince the determined colonists to abandon their lifelong home.

Perhaps he could use reverse psychology? Powell vaguely remembered the use of such a ploy during intense negotiations. It might have been a tactic discussed in the Hostile Contact course he had taken back at the Galactic Union Star Academy. Or, he might just be remembering it from his childhood from one of those holoweb cartoon adventure series like *Captain Plasma*, or *Journey of the Astroglider*.

"I don't think you people should evacuate your homes." He mumbled to himself in order to gauge how effective such an opening move might be. "I insist that you all stay in this pod, immediately..."

"What did you say?" Came a voice from behind him. The commander spun around to find a young girl colonist, no more than 8 or 9 years old, perched atop the sealed bulkhead.

"Uhh ... " Powell stammered.

"You're with the Galactic Union, aren't you?" She asked him curiously as she hopped off the hatch plating with the grace of a Gebbingonian puma.

"Yes." He admitted. "I'm Commander Powell of the Galactic Union starship *Remarkable*."

"I'm Jaxie of Pod 6." The girl told him, shaking his hand confidently. "Are you here to evacuate us from the colony?"

Powell nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes I am. So ... can you do that now?"

Jaxie shrugged. "I'd like to go on a spaceship. But my mother and the

others here say that only fools and cowards flee their homes during times of troubles. They say that if the other pods were as loyal to the late Queen Rysue as they say they were, they'd honor her memory by fighting for her world, and if necessary, dying in her name. They say that the Galactic Union is just here to enable the evil Porias-Luna 7ers, and their very presence here only validates the treacherous conquest of our home, and enable the sinister hegemony of the Poriasis System until they can expand and dominate the sector with ... I forget the rest."

"Oh." Powell mumbled. "Well, can you go tell them all that none of that is true, and that they should evacuate with the other colonists? Or do you think that reverse psychology would work better in this situation?"

Jaxie was puzzled. "Reverse psychology? You mean like on that episode of *Captain Plasma*?"

"Never mind." Powell sighed.

"I can take you to the pod's elders." She offered. "They've set up a barricade in the pod's central plaza, just in case the other colonists try to remove them by force."

The commander let out a long, nasally groan. "Oh ... okay, I guess let's do that."

The young girl took him by the hand and led him into the heart of the colony. The streets of the pod's settlement were narrow and winding, with simple buildings towering over them on every side. The architecture of this particular pod was similar to that of Ancient Rome from the history of Earth 1. Powell wondered whether that bespoke something significant about Pod 6's culture and heritage, or if, like most other historical Earth parallels he had seen in the distant reaches of space, it was just an astounding coincidence.

Towering high above the streets and the buildings of the settlement was the pod's great dome. The transparent panels looked out to the darkness of space above them, and at the enormous gas giant which dominated the sky. Soon, hopefully, the *Remarkable* would also make an appearance in that sky as well, and then Capt. Sunstrike or someone else would finally come down to the colony and figure out what was to be done here.

As he looked up at the dome, he also noticed a small object perched on top of the outside of the dome's zenith. Powell had no idea what the small conical object could be, but he did notice that it happened to be blinking a flashing red light.

"There they are." Jaxie whispered to Cdr. Powell, as they reached the central plaza of the settlement. A great stone fountain towered two stories

high at the center of the cobblestone square, with multi-colored jets of water spiraling into the air and cascading down its rounded steps to a crystal-clear pool below. But surrounding the majestic fountain was a hastily-constructed fortress made from a haphazard jumble of stacked furniture, overturned hover-lifts, and other debris which the podfolk had collected to build up the walls of their little hardscrabble castle, which rose up nearly as high as the fountain behind it.

Manning the ramparts of this improvised keep were several locals who were standing sentry, wearing skleeball helmets, ambo-jitzu pads, and other sporting goods gear as protective armor. Most of them appeared unarmed, though a few brandished primitive hunting crossbows and bladed farming equipment such as scythes, pitchforks, and gelding hooks. Powell fingered the handle of the ray gun holstered at his hip, hoping he would not be forced to use it. But if he did, he *really* hoped that it was fully charged this time.

“Who goes there?” Bellowed a burly woman with a beehive hairdo standing over the barricade’s gatehouse, which was actually just the detached door from a walk-in freezer.

The gateswoman eyed the commander warily as he responded. “I’m Commander Blake Powell of the starship *Remarkable*. I have come in peace, to speak with the elders of Pod 6.”

“We have nothing to say to you!” Another voice cried out angrily from behind the walls.

“But what I have to say to you is very important!” Powell declared. “All of your lives are in danger! Warships from Porias-Luna 7 are already on their way. You have to evacuate immediately, or you’ll all be killed!”

There was a series of chortles from the other side of the barricade. The woman gatekeeper looked down on the commander with a contemptuous grin. “And who will they send to kill us? More feeble little men like you?”

“I may be a man, but I’m not ... that little.” Powell blustered. “But I assure you, the attackers are coming. And the Galactic Union won’t be able to protect you when they arrive.”

The gatekeeper snorted. “Ha! Certainly not if all the Galactic Union types are puny little men like you!”

“They’re not! I mean ...” Powell fumbled. “That’s not the point. The Galactic Union cannot interfere militarily with your disputes with the neighboring colony, due to the stipulations of our Rule Prime Zero.”

Another grizzled man stepped up on the battlements to scoff at the commander. “I thought your ‘Rule Prime Zero’ only demanded non-interference with alien species?”

“Nah.” Another colonist interjected. “It says those Galactic Union types can’t interfere with aliens who are unaware of space travel.”

“But that’s my point.” The first man responded. “We’re not alien here, we’re humans. And so are those blasted 7ers too.”

“You’re both wrong.” A tall, skinny woman with a crossbow chided them. “Rule Prime Zero states that the Galactic Union can’t interfere with the natural progression of *any* civilization.”

“That’s ludicrous!” Yet another colonist protested. “Any time you meet a civilization, you’re altering its ‘natural progression’ somehow. That would mean that the Galactic Union is violating its own laws every time it hails another ship or sends its people down to an occupied planet and leaves so much as a footprint behind!”

“That’s what I’m saying.” The crossbow woman insisted. “It only highlights the disconnect between the Galactic Union’s high-minded, pie-in-the-sky ideals, and the pragmatic practice of traveling through space.”

The grizzled man moaned loudly. “So, what are they supposed to do, hide behind an asteroid every time a Gurrum trade ship passes by, for fear of altering the natural progression of their civilization somehow?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’m just pointing out the impracticality of creating a law that is considered both sacred and yet virtually impossible *not* to break.”

“Oh, I see what she’s doing now.” The gatekeeper pointed at the crossbow woman accusingly. “She’s making this about her screed on the moral ambiguity of phlegmatic dogma, just like last week at the corn festival.”

“But it’s such an asinine notion, and nobody ever questions it.” She defended.

“And an indignity to a society which is forever locked in a cycle of mass-psychosis.” The gatewoman answered sarcastically. “I took the same sociology class at the learning annex that you did, Sheera!”

The sentinels perched atop the ramparts of the makeshift castle continued their heated discussion, which digressed further and further from the point at hand. Unable to maneuver his way back into the discussion, Cdr. Powell decided instead to slink away from the barricade in retreat.

-- 06

The door to Dr. Rena’s quarters slid open with a soft shush. Stepping out into the empty corridor was the doctor and Prince Maru, holding hands and smiling affectionately at one another. Glancing both ways down the

hallway to make sure they were alone, Rena turned back to steal one last kiss from her royal paramour.

"I must check in with Chancellor Lauren." Prince Maru murmured as they shared a tender embrace. "She will be wondering where I am."

Rena sighed dreamily. "I should be going back to the medical bay too in order to check on the lab results. Nurse Vega won't do a thing unless I'm there to make her do it."

"You should just order her to do her work." Maru suggested, gently brushing a strand of golden hair from her face. "She is your subordinate, is she not? She must obey."

"Isn't the chancellor *your* subordinate?" Rena smiled at him knowingly. "What if, I contact Nurse Vega, and have her continue processing the test results, and you contact Chancellor Lauren, and tell her you'll see her in an hour or so?"

"She won't like being delayed." He worried.

She gazed at him admiringly. "What does it matter? You're the prince, after all."

Maru threw his head back in laughter and nodded to her. "Indeed. It's good to be prince."

"Let me take you back into my quarters, and ... show you how to work the comm station."

She took him by the hand with a playful squeeze, and led him back into the room. The door closed once again with a gentile hush.

Chancellor Lauren frowned as she put away her pocket communicator and turned back to Capt. Sunstrike. "The prince shall join us in a short while. He says he has a few more tests to run with Dr. Rena."

"No sense in worrying the little fellow anyway." Sunstrike suggested grimly. "With all due respect, this is far beyond the purview of princes. Now is the time for leaders. Now is the time ... for a captain!"

The chancellor glanced at him warily. "With all due respect, Captain Sunstrike, We're racing to intercept three *Darkblade*-class battlecruisers!"

"I've faced worse odds." Sunstrike boasted before quietly adding. "Granted, I've usually retreated from those greater odds, but the point is, I've faced more than my fair share of superior forces, and I know just how to avoid getting blown out of the sky by them."

Chancellor Lauren hesitated before responding slowly. "Again, I say this with all due respect, but I believe that a situation like this calls for diplomacy rather than combat. We must delay the warships for as long as possible to keep them from forming a blockade around Porias-Luna 26."

"Diplomacy, of course." The captain nodded. "Fear not, my lamb. I'll try every persuasive trick in my rather voluminous book before I bare my teeth to the wind. Combat is merely a last resort. But if diplomacy fails, and all our other resorts have fallen by the wayside, you can rest assured that you're on board the cunningest, most battle-ready starship in the entire Galactic Union."

Sunstrike took a quick glance around at the nearly vacant bridge before adding. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'm going to try to scrounge up some officers to man these empty stations."

Chancellor Lauren looked on worriedly as the captain raced out the bulkhead door to wander the ship's halls in search of random crewmembers. The longer she spent on the *Remarkable*, the more she felt the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that every single one of the colonists on Porias-Luna 26 was doomed.

As the captain hastily fled the bridge, Ensign Adams, the sole remaining Galactic Union officer currently manning a station, rolled her eyes and shook her head as she realized that she had been placed in temporary command yet again, by simple default.

"I'm *not* doing overtime." She muttered bitterly to herself as she smacked her gum. "When my shift ends, I am soooo out of here."

Sunstrike rushed his way through the labyrinthine corridors of the ship, searching desperately for crewmen. The hunt had lasted several minutes, with the captain nearly becoming completely lost twice, before he finally happened upon two of his crew.

"Thank the space gods!" Sunstrike exclaimed as he hurried over to the ensign and green-shirted space marine huddled near a security station at the far corner of a lonely hallway. "I need men to ... what the hell are you doing?"

The two officers, a Sgt. Chan and Ensign Mondu, bolted upright in terror at the sound of their captain's voice emerging suddenly from behind. The two young crewmen were looking unconvincingly nonchalant as they tried none-too-subtly to hide with their bodies, the optical port on the security station they had been hunched over just a moment before.

"Afternoon, Captain!" Croaked the ensign in a broken voice that tried desperately to pull back the alarm in his tone. "Lovely ... corridor today, isn't it?"

Sunstrike glared at them crossly. "That's a security camera station, ensign. Security stations are for green shirts."

The green-shirted Sgt. Chan nodded. "Uh, yes sir. See, the thing is

sir ... here's the thing. I was monitoring ... a standard security sweep of crew quarters, sir."

Ensign Mondu snickered under his breath. Sgt. Chan punched him in the arm before continuing. "Anyway, I was monitoring sir, for security purposes. And so the camera feed gets stuck, and so Ensign Mondu here was walking by, on his way to his own duties, and I asked him if he could repair the ... cycling fragmenter on the colonic gamma-filter manifold?"

He looked to Mondu with questioning eyes, and the ensign was nodding enthusiastically at this portion of the story, but Sunstrike was growing increasingly impatient. "Whatever. I need two people to man bridge terminals, so both of you come with me."

Both the sergeant and the ensign looked at each other nervously. "But sir, neither of us is a certified bridge officer. I've never even taken the exam, and Mondu here's flunked it four times in a row."

"It's just because I'm colorblind and dyslexic." Mondu complained. "I swear, I'm totally going to sue the Galactic Union Licensing Command for discrimination one of these days."

Sunstrike shook his head defiantly. "Well today isn't any exam. We're flying into a potential hostile engagement, and I need to find the first two warm bodies that I happen to come across, to keep my tactical and science stations from floating away once our gravity generators fail in the inevitable oncoming battle. Today, that's you two. So it's time for you to check your self-doubts and egregious lack of qualifications at the door, and follow your captain into battle. Are you with me?"

Mondu and Chan glanced at one another with a middling shrug, and nodded to their captain. "Yes, sir."

"Let's go!" Sunstrike roared, waiving them back down the corridor towards the bridge. After a few steps though, Sunstrike turned to the following junior officers and pointed them back towards the abandoned security terminal.

"Well, at least clear your browser history before you leave." He scolded them. "Last thing I need right now is another invasion-of-privacy inquiry from Sexual Harassment Investigations Command."

In a different vacant corridor, in a different part of the ship, the automated door to the quarters of the *Remarkable's* Chief Medical and Science Officer slid open with a mournful hiss. Dr. Rena and Prince Maru plodded out of the quarters with downcast expressions and a palpable aura of awkwardness and mutual embarrassment.

"My apologies." The prince murmured quietly, unable to look his

companion in the eye.

Rena shook her head assuringly. "It's not your fault. I mean, I was the one who wanted to try out those scented candles I bought at the sensory markets on Trygon XII. I thought they'd be more romantic. I didn't realize that they would end up smelling like ..."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, before Prince Maru completed the explanation. "Ass."

"Like ass." Rena admitted, her face red with embarrassment. "The woman who sold them to me said that her people considered the candles to be an aphrodisiac. I guess I didn't realize that Trygonians were aroused by the smell of ..."

"Ass." Maru repeated in a low, distant monotone.

Rena burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Maru. I wanted it to be a special moment, like before, and I just ended up ruining it."

The prince embraced her tenderly, wiping the tears from her cheeks with his finger. "No, my love. It is I who failed you. What kind of ruler could I ever expect to be if I cannot please my lover?"

"Don't say that." She pleaded. "You're a smart, caring, intelligent person, with a lot more courage than you realize. You're going to make a great ... queen ... for your people."

Maru smiled weakly and kissed her on the lips. "I pray that you are right, my darling Elaine. I should go to the bridge to meet with Chancellor Lauren."

Rena nodded. "I'll meet you there once I've gone to the sick berth to get the final results on your tests."

The two lovers separated from their embrace. Prince Maru took a couple steps down the corridor before he turned and gazed back at her with the meekness of a small child. "I'm sorry that I cried at the end."

Rena's chin quivered as she nodded back at him. "That's all right. And again, I'm sorry I laughed afterwards. It just sort of happened."

-- 07

Powell sat alone on top of a fence near the corn fields that lay along the fringes of the settlement in Pod 6, kicking pebbles at his feet and feeling sorry for himself. *What had he ever done to deserve getting this impossible assignment dumped on him?* If Capt. Sunstrike had taken this duty himself, he would have just stormed into the pod and declared himself a god or a time traveler or something, and tricked the stubborn holdouts to obey him

and get on the escape transports with the others. That, or else he would have enraged them so much that he would have accidentally started some sort of holy war with the intransigent denizens of Pod 6, but either way, things would have gotten done.

Even Dr. Rena would have been better suited to negotiating with the barricaded citizens in the settlement than Powell. None of her ideas ever seem to work - in fact, they usually make things fare worse. But still, at least she *has* ideas. She could have come down here with good intentions and soothing words, screwed up, and she'd have been on her way back to the *Remarkable* with yet another emergency teleport, barely escaping an angry mob.

But Powell couldn't even get *that* far. The angry colonists barely even registered his presence earlier. He couldn't hope to intimidate them enough to get them to chase him out of the habitat. Naturally, actually convincing them to evacuate with the other colonists was a pipe dream. Now, he couldn't even decide how to fake trying to convince them, so that when the *Remarkable* finally arrived at the colony, it would at least look like he put in half of an effort.

"Won't be long, will it?" Young Jaxie asked him as she wandered over and hopped up onto the wooden fence next to the despondent commander.

"I don't know. Probably." Powell muttered into his chest.

Jaxie groaned irritably at him. "*Jeezum Crackers!* Is everyone in the Galactic Union as pathetic as you?"

Powell shook his head. "Not really. It's just my ship that's ... no, it's not even my ship. Really it's just me. At least, I'm the high-water mark of patheticness."

"And self-pity." Jaxie added sarcastically.

"Leave me alone." Powell moaned with a plaintive wail.

The young girl scoffed. "Leave you alone? My family is being stupid staying here to be killed or enslaved by the 7ers. You're the only one who can convince them all to evacuate with the others."

"I can't convince anyone of anything." Powell admitted. "If they won't listen to you, why should they listen to me?"

"Because I'm eight." She retorted. "And you've got a ray gun. Why don't you show them what they're up against? If some wormy little fellow like you could destroy their barricade, then that would prove to them that staying behind to fight the invaders would be suicide."

Powell frowned worriedly. "But they've got crossbows and pitch forks, and those things don't have stun settings."

"And gelding hooks." Jaxie added under her breath. "But you've got a

modern ray gun that can melt their walls with only a few blasts. And you would have the element of surprise. They all think that you went back out the bulkhead hatch to the landing bay with your tail tucked between your legs."

"I couldn't get the hatch open." The commander admitted.

"So, they won't expect you to make a sneak attack!" She suggested. "I could show you how you can slip back into the settlement unnoticed, and with a few well-placed shots on your gun's heat stream setting would melt the barricade's support towers at their foundation. Then the whole thing would collapse on top of them, leaving them defenseless. If they still resist, you could even stun a few of them before they realize the hopelessness of their situation."

"That's a pretty good idea." Powell agreed, before losing his confidence again. "But I'd only screw it up somehow. Hey, maybe you could do it for me?"

"*What?*" Jaxie was incredulous.

"Yeah, you said you know how to sneak in, and you know where the weak spots are in the barricade. You'd do a much better job than I could."

He drew out his ray gun and pressed it into the young girl's hand. "Here. Just take this and do it, so they'll all give up and evacuate like they're supposed to."

Outraged, Jaxie shoved the gun back into the commander's lap. "I'm not firing on my own people, my family and friends, no matter what kind of stubborn jerks they are. *You* need to be the one to defeat them, or they'll never be convinced that they would fall to an outsider."

"Please?" Powell pleaded. "You can do it and say it was me."

Disgusted, Jaxie hopped off of the fence and took him brusquely by the hand. "You're doing it. Let's go."

"I'll pay you ..." He tried futilely as the young girl half-dragged him back towards the outskirts of the settlement.

Dr. Rena sat in her office in the *Remarkable's* sick berth and studied the genetic profile compilation through the magnified viewfinder of her micrometer. It was a crucial importance that her measurements and calculations were incredibly precise, or the upcoming procedure could end in disaster for the prince. Still, she found herself increasingly distracted by a myriad of troubling thoughts and feelings drifting through her cerebrum.

Could she really be in love? She wondered to herself. This was all happening so fast, but she couldn't deny the powerful pull that drew her towards Maru. She had never met a man quite like him, so brilliant, so

noble, and yet so sensitive and gentle at the same time. Yet despite his placid exterior, the passion within him would rise up like a storm when she was in his arms. Rena couldn't remember the last time a man had made her feel this way.

And yet, at this very moment, she herself was working feverishly to complete the preparations for a procedure which, if it worked, would turn that man into a woman. Her whole idea of genetically altering the prince's gender was a roll of the dice which any reputable doctor or scientist in the Galactic Union would surely dismiss as madness. But somehow, she had convinced Prince Maru and she had convinced Sunstrike, and now she was preparing for a teleportation experiment that would turn the man she loved into a woman - if she succeeded. If she failed, the prince would teleport back from the stasis core an exploded pile of genetic goop, just like that Centauri Ambassador/spy last year.

Rena shuddered at the thought, and redoubled her efforts to concentrate on the work at hand. After several more minutes of checking and rechecking her calculations, she knew that she was as ready as she would ever be, as far as the science of the procedure went. The personal side of the equation, on the other hand ...

"Madelyn." Rena called out, removing the data slot from the micrometer's terminal. "I need you to take this over to the teleporter booth and install this program into the stasis core so it'll be ready for the prince's procedure."

Nurse Vega, sitting at the assistant's terminal on the other end of the office, balked at the order. "Are you sure it wouldn't be better if-"

"Just do it." The doctor sighed irritably. As Vega plucked the data slot from her fingers, Rena turned for a moment to stop her before she stepped out the door. "Hang on, Madelyn. Wait a second."

Nurse Vega stopped at the doorway and swung around to face the doctor, her arms crossed indignantly. "Yes ... *Elaine?*"

Rena stared at her for a long moment. Vega watched her expectantly, her toe tapping the floor like an impatient metronome. The veneer of pleasantness on the nurse's face was wilting, and the bitter contempt which she had always secretly harbored towards her superior from the first day she had reported for duty began to show. Rena was looking for advice, or at least someone to vent about her predicament, but clearly, the idea that her passive-aggressive assistant was the one to confide in was the essence of insanity.

The doctor sighed wearily and waved her off. "Never mind."

Vega smiled wickedly at her as she carelessly tossed the data slot

onto the desk. "Very good, doctor. I'll be taking my afternoon break now. I'll be back in half an hour!"

As the nurse skipped quickly out of the sick berth, Rena got up to chase after her. "No, I didn't mean 'never mind' about getting the data slot to the teleporter, I meant-"

But it was too late. Vega had slipped out to the corridor and out of sight before she could hear precisely how she had misinterpreted her orders, and Rena knew that she wouldn't see her back in the sick berth again for precisely 30 minutes. For all her faults, Nurse Vega was vindictively punctual.

Commander Powell and Jaxie crept through the vacant carpet shop just across from the fortified central plaza of Pod 6. Powell smacked his lips in order to compensate for his chronic case of dry mouth. One of his many curious medical conditions, he found that his tongue and cheeks were even more devoid of saliva than they usually were. Perhaps it was the slightly lower air pressure in the pod than normal, as his popping ears could attest to, or perhaps it was simply his nerves.

He was not built for combat situations, both mentally and physically. His personnel records spoke often of this fact, and more than once during tours on other ships, he had managed to get a doctor's note excusing him from hostile away missions. But Dr. Rena was far less sympathetic than his aunt, Dr. Ethel Powell had been during his time on the *GSV Eloquent*, nor as negligently indifferent as elderly Dr. Dumblesworth had proven to be during his brief stint on the *GSV Trusting*. Instead, Rena had repeatedly dismissed his numerous legitimate medical complaints as 'ridiculous', and refused to sign a medical waiver for him, even when he filled them out and pre-notarized them himself.

"Would you keep it down?" Jaxie hissed back at them in a harsh whisper after he accidentally knocked over a book of sample swatches on the store's display counter. Stealth was not one of his strong suits, and he had the flat-feet to prove it. Even so, he would have thought that making his way through a carpet shop would make the task of sneaking up on the town barricade somewhat easier than it was proving to be.

"Over here." The young girl motioned him towards a firing position in the corner of the storefront, where a window was slightly opened, allowing for an excellent position to blast away the south wall of the barricade.

"Aim for the corner, where that hover-lift is sitting on its side, supporting those tractor casings that form the tower." She instructed him, pointing to the proper sections of the makeshift fortress walls. "Once they're

melted, the whole side of the barricade will collapse. Once it does, they'll be too distracted to see you, so you can go out the door onto the street, and race to the other side, where you can take out the north wall the same way."

"What about the lookouts?" Powell mumbled.

"The ones up on the towers will fall off once they start to collapse. The others along the remaining wall should be partially blinded by dust and debris. They might still see you though, so you'll have to move fast or they might fire at you with their crossbows."

"I don't move very fast." Powell warned. "My knee acts up when it's humid, and I don't know if there's something wrong with your atmosphere controllers in this pod, but--"

"Do the best you can." Jaxie answered sharply. "If it works, they'll all be confused and dispirited. Then, you can tell them about how just one 'puny little man' was able to thwart all of their defenses, and that the Porias-Luna 7 soldiers will be ten times stronger, and there will be dozens, if not hundreds--"

"Achoo!" Powell sneezed loudly. His allergies were coming on now with a vengeance, which made him think these display carpets in this shop weren't as clean as they should have been.

Voices rose up outside, where two of the sentries had heard him. Powell wiped his nose on the sleeve of his uniform sheepishly. But when he turned back to Jaxie, he discovered that the girl had disappeared. He was on his own.

Two sets of footsteps could be heard outside the store's entrance, as the sentries were coming to investigate the noise. There was very little time. Cdr. Powell switched his ray gun to its beam setting, though he already knew that the weapon's 'heat beam' wasn't as hot as the name suggested. It was more of a cutting device than anything, and even that function did not seem to work very well. Chief Beauregard had once remarked to him that a plasma torch would work much better for both cutting and melting.

But the standard Galactic Union ray gun was all the commander had with him at the moment, so he armed the weapon and fired it out the window at the base of the tower.

For several seconds, nothing seemed to happen, until Powell realized that the beam was indeed boring a hole into the hover-lift that was at the bottom of the barricade wall. At this rate, it would take hours for him to cut or melt his way through the entire structure that held up the makeshift tower, and the sentries investigating the store would be on him in a matter of moments.

Fortunately, the gun's beam happened to reach the hover-lift's thermal power core, and once the core was breached by the beam, it caused the device, and the improvised barricade wall over it, to explode in fireball of green plasma.

The fortress around the town square exploded into a million tiny pieces, sending guards and provisions stored within it flying through the air in every direction. Children and elderly colonists in shelters behind the plaza's stately fountain emerged from their tents in shock to see the barricade fly to pieces, along with many of their parents and siblings who guarded it. There was no fire from the lift's core breach, but the concussive blast gave off a deafening roar, and shattered all of the glass windows of the buildings surrounding the square.

Commander Powell looked on from his sniper's nest, dumbfounded at what had occurred. He scratched at the eczema on the back of his neck, as often did when he was bewildered by events. Running about the square and continuing fire would be pointless, as there was virtually nothing left of the barricade for him to fire upon. Nor was he particularly keen on stepping out to the street, claiming responsibility for the explosion and then lecturing the colonists as Jaxie had suggested. What he really wanted to do was go and hide, and hope that everything worked out on its own.

Just as he was about to get up and put his new plan into action, Powell turned to see two large women standing over him, their eyes swimming with rage. One of them drew up the handle-end of her awlpike and cracked it across the commander's forehead. It must have hit the soft spot in his skull, because the blow knocked him unconscious instantly.

-- 08

The atmosphere on the bridge of the *Remarkable* was tense. Capt. Sunstrike paced about with a grim countenance, while his two newest bridge officers waited nervously at their stations, fearfully anticipating getting yelled at again. Neither Ensign Mondu at Rena's science station, nor Sergeant Chan fidgeting over at Commander Powell's usual spot at the tactical console were more than vaguely aware of what the numerous buttons, switches, dials and readouts before them did, and anytime they attempted to experiment to figure out their controls, they only seemed to succeed in causing alarms to blare intermittently throughout the ship, or else accidentally vent something important into space.

"The leak in the portside fuel tank seems to have stopped." Mondu

reported sheepishly. Noting the captain's scowl, the ensign decided that it was best not to mention that the leak had stopped because that tank was now empty.

Sunstrike shot the ensign a sharp glare before turning to the sergeant cowering at tactical. "And the evacuation alert has been rescinded, I hope, Mr. Chan?"

Sgt. Chan shrugged. "Yes, sir. But it seems that four members of the astrophysics department successfully ... uh, abandoned ship before the alert was cancelled."

"Yes, your ship's sensor signals show their escape pod adrift about five hundred kilometers astern." Chancellor Lauren, leaning over Mondu's shoulder at the sensor station, announced glibly.

Sunstrike bowed his head before announcing. "We'll have to remember to go back for them after we've driven off the battlecruisers."

Ensign Adams let out a wilting sigh. "I'll add that to my to-do list." As the only member of the bridge crew who was actually supposed to be there, Adams had held herself with a degree of haughty resentment, less due to the ineptitude of her fellow crewmembers, but rather for her disappointment that she was the only one who had not managed to worm her way out of doing her job for the time being.

By this time, Capt. Sunstrike had opted to ignore the ensign's snarky comments, and focus on the general humiliation that his crew was heaping upon him in front of the chancellor. Lauren continued to glance about the bridge crew disapprovingly, and offer the occasional sigh of despair. Sunstrike could tell that she had little faith that they would be able to stop the encroaching Porias-Luna 7 attack squadron approaching her colony. The chancellor's increasing despondence was even beginning to sap his own attraction to her away. He could not let that happen.

"Time to intercept?" Sunstrike called out.

Sgt. Chan and Ensign Mondu hummed and hawed, neither completely sure if it was a question that one of them was expected to answer. Thankfully, Chancellor Lauren's capable operation of the science station allowed her to answer the question for both of them.

"At the present rate of speed, we'll be within combat range of the lead ship in 17 minutes." She reported. "The lead ship's transponder signal identifies it as the *Shadowdagger*, commanded by Lord Uldred."

"Do you know this Lord Uldred?" Sunstrike asked her.

"Only by reputation." She turned to him warily. "He is strict, humorless, and ruthless. On his home colony, he has repeatedly called, not only for the conquest of Porias-Luna 26, but of its utter destruction."

"It is true, I'm afraid." Prince Maru stepped onto the bridge with a sorrowful expression. "Uldred was one of the leading opponents to the last peace treaty. He said that Porias-Luna 7 should simply obliterate our entire moon rather than agree to another cease-fire with Porias-Luna 26. I suspect that he would look for any reason he can to attack my people, even if we are in retreat."

"Don't worry, Your Majesty." Sunstrike announced confidently. "I won't let that happen."

He smiled and nodded at the prince, and then at the chancellor, but Sunstrike could tell that neither of them seemed to put much faith in his bold proclamation. In all honesty, he was beginning to feel a bit of nagging self-doubt himself - a feeling he never cared much to acknowledge, but this time, it was proving difficult to ignore.

A few minutes later, Dr. Rena came charging onto the bridge with a head of steam. "Captain, I-"

The doctor stopped cold when she saw Prince Maru standing there. She blushed slightly and made a concerted effort to avoid making eye contact with him. "Pardon me, Your Majesty. Chancellor."

Chancellor Lauren nodded stiffly. "How are your tests going, Dr. Rena?"

"I was hoping to run my alteration protocols through the genetic inductor for a test run, but Chief Beauregard tells me that the device needed will take several hours to fix."

"We don't have hours!" The chancellor insisted. "We will be engaging the PL-7 war ships in a matter of minutes!"

Rena nodded. "Like I said, I was hoping to run some simulations on my protocols beforehand, but lacking that, we can proceed with the final procedure at any time."

Prince Maru nodded solemnly. "Then it would seem that the time must be now."

Chancellor Lauren was alarmed. "Surely we should wait until-"

"There's no time left." The prince snapped. "The 7ers will be on us in a matter of minutes, and you and Captain Sunstrike must delay them until the doctor and I have completed the procedure and can present myself to Lord Uldred as the true Queen of Porias-Luna 26."

Rena held a finger up politely in order to interject. "Before we do that, I need to speak to the captain."

Capt. Sunstrike shrugged. "I'm right here."

"In *private*, sir."

Sunstrike sighed and nodded. "In my office then. Chancellor, we'll be

right down the hallway if you need me."

Chancellor Lauren rolled her eyes and scoffed before she returned her worried attention back to her prince. Sunstrike grimaced slightly at the cold shoulder, and stepped out of the bridge with Dr. Rena without another word.

The remaining bridge officers watched him leave again without relinquishing command. Chan and Mondu looked at each other with confusion, and Ensign Adams slumped back at her navigations console and sighed irritably.

"I guess I'm in charge yet again." She groaned sarcastically.

Sunstrike and Rena stepped into the captain's office. The captain, checking his hair in the mirror first, casually made his way to his chair behind the large empty desk. Dr. Rena paced back and forth repeatedly, fighting a mental battle with herself over what she should tell him or if she should say anything at all. She had nobody else to confide in about the tormented war going on inside her between her heart and her mind. Nurse Vega was no confidant to be sure. Cdr. Powell would be of no help to her, even if he was on board. She had gone to Chief Beauregard down in the ship's forge, but he was already half-asleep before he'd even touched the device he was supposed to be repairing. INFO occasionally would offer Rena and others sage advice from time to time, but the chief said that he was running low on toner right now.

That left Sunstrike. Rena and the captain did not always get along, but for the most part, they kind of - almost - sort of respected one another. Sunstrike was hardly the ideal person for Rena to go to for romantic advice, but time was running out now, and if she didn't tell *someone* what she was going through, she felt like she would explode.

Already regretting herself, Rena began. "Captain, I think I should tell you that I've developed a relationship with Prince Maru."

"I knew it!" Sunstrike pounded his fist on his desk in triumph. "I've seen that look a thousand times in the mirror."

"Captain, please." The doctor sighed.

Sunstrike nodded and raised his hands up in contrition. "So ... how was it?"

Dr. Rena started to protest, but instead found herself speaking the truth. "It was amazing. At least the first time."

The captain was nonplussed. "First time? He's only been on board for a few hours. How many times are we talking about here?"

"Just two." She mumbled.

Sunstrike nodded. "So the first time was 'amazing'. And the second time?"

"The second time ... not so much."

"How much time did you wait in between?" He asked.

Rena shrugged. "I don't know, maybe 10, 15 minutes."

Sunstrike threw his hands up in the air. "Oh, well there's your problem! You can't expect him to be launching another salvo so quickly. You've gotta give his missile bay a chance to reload. Geez, Rena! I mean, you're a doctor. You should know that."

"I guess I'm just worried about what's going to happen to our relationship when all of this is over." She admitted sadly.

The captain reclined back in his chair and nodded thoughtfully. "Do you know why I never date anyone in my crew?"

"Because it's morally reprehensible?" Rena suggested.

Sunstrike shook his head. "No."

"Because it's a violation of fraternization protocols?"

"No."

"Because no woman on this ship would be caught dead-"

"It's because workplace relationships are way too complicated." He interjected. "Sooner or later, things are always going to get weird. But that's the beauty of working on a starship. There's a little bit of temporary, disposable love waiting at every port of call. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But whether you're leaving behind love-struck, pie-eyed colonist planning a wedding feast, or a sticky scandal from the diplomat's wife who didn't ... *quite* take the bait, it'll all be behind you once you've left the star system, never, ever, *ever* to return."

Rena shook her head defiantly. "You're missing the point. Sure it's complicated, but I'm not sure I really want this to end."

"So then what? Are you going to resign your commission for this guy you just met like four hours ago, and become a princess and go live happily ever after?" Sunstrike paused for a moment. "Wait, does that really happen?"

The doctor rolled her eyes. "No. Because if the procedure is successful, I won't be the one who ends up as a princess."

The captain shrugged. "Oh yeah. I forgot about the sex-change thing. So, you're thinking you won't be into him so much after *he* becomes a *she*?"

"I don't think I could." She admitted reluctantly.

"Are you sure? Because I've got no judgments on the personal preferences of my crew."

"I appreciate that."

"I'm just saying, if you happened to be into that sort of thing with another woman ..."

"Good to know."

"... I'd be totally supportive of you exploring your carnal desires however they might come about."

"I'm sure you would."

"So you're saying ... ?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

Capt. Sunstrike sighed. "Well then, Rena. It seems to me that the prince is heading down a road you can't follow. You can be sad about it if you want to, but all relationships have to end."

Rena crossed her arms and looked away sadly. "Somehow that doesn't make me feel any better. Knowing that it has to end, one way or another, makes me think I should have never gotten so close to Maru in the first place."

"But at least you took your chance." Sunstrike suggested sagely. "Love is always a gamble, Rena. You lose more often than you win, but when you finally do win, boy does it pay off. Besides, nothing's better than a satisfying relationship that'll end the moment you break orbit. It helps you avoid those long, awkward, sometimes violent goodbyes. So I say go ahead and love your charming prince while you can. Then, genetically chop off his junk and nail it to your bedpost while he goes off to save his people. But Rena, I'm being perfectly serious here - give the guy like, 40 minutes in between. I mean come on, there's a way to be a lady."

She nodded with a renewed sense of acceptance. "Thank you, Captain. I'm surprised to say, that sort of helped."

Capt. Sunstrike hesitated a moment. "So ... we're done talking about this, right?"

"Yes." She agreed.

"Great. Now let's talk about me." He sat up in his chair with renewed intensity. "You might have gotten lucky on this mission, Doctor ... twice. But your captain is still having trouble getting his skleeball through the hover-hoop."

Dr. Rena was confused. "What?"

Sunstrike looked at her with pleading eyes. "How do I get Chancellor Lauren to *like* me?"

"Well ... I don't know." She stammered.

The captain grew restless. "Doctor, we just did like five space minutes on your little fling with the prince, and I didn't laugh or make fun of you once. You so friggin' owe me. So tell me, how do I get her to soften up on me a bit?"

Rena chewed on her lip as she pondered the question. "Well, saving her colony would be a step in the right direction."

Capt. Sunstrike folded his hands across his desk and took a deep breath before responding. "I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, Doctor. There's a pretty decent chance that this whole 'saving the colony' thing is going to go down the space tubes in a bad way. Between your genetic magic trick with the teleporter and the three battlecruisers we're about to be playing missile chicken with, I could really use a fallback plan in case the 'saving her homeworld' angle doesn't play out."

"The chancellor seems like a very .. practical person." She suggested. "Maybe if you appealed to her sense of logic and pragmatism somehow."

"Logic, eh?" Sunstrike was intrigued. "Well, it's worth a shot. Now, we'd better get back out there. And I think it goes without saying that it would be best if we both forgot that this conversation ever happened."

"Agreed." Rena nodded emphatically.

The two officers returned to the bridge to find a relieved bridge crew and a pair of worried colonists. Chancellor Lauren doted over the spindly Prince Maru like a mother seeing of her child on the first day of school. Maru stood perfectly still, with the distant, dazed expression of a man awaiting his own execution.

Rena stepped up to the prince and gently took him by the hand. "Your Majesty, it's time we went to the teleporter booth and begin the procedure."

"Of course." He bowed serenely, and turned back to his chancellor. "Don't worry, Lauren. Once I'm a true woman, I will be able to become queen, and Lord Uldred will have no choice but to stand down."

"I hope you're right, Your Grace." She bowed deeply, her voice slightly wavering. "We shall do everything we can to delay the encroaching battlecruisers until you return to us."

As the prince turned to leave the bridge with the doctor, Rena cast a quick glance back at Capt. Sunstrike.

"Good luck." She told him in a low voice.

Sunstrike nodded. "You too."

"Wake up, Commander Powell."

The voice that beckoned to the commander was harsh and belligerent. Nothing like the gentle voice of the talking unicorn he was riding naked upon, through a forest of giant scissors while his teeth were being stolen by lizards living inside his mouth, in what he was only now realizing was a dream. He opened his eyes and found himself staring straight up at the high transparent ceiling dome of Pod 6, seeing the same curious flashing device on its summit which he noticed before. Only now, it seemed to be flashing in unison with the dull pain which throbbed inside his head like an alarm klaxon.

Very gingerly, Powell sat up, and discovered that he had been laying on the edge of the giant fountain which marked the central plaza of the community. The same central plaza which a few minutes before was the site of the makeshift fortress which the stubborn denizens of Pod 6 had planned to make their last stand against the Porias-Luna 7 invaders. Now, the fortress comprised of large, random objects and equipment from around the settlement, was nothing more than a heap of smoldering debris. Powell suddenly recalled that it was his 'lucky' ray beam which had breached the power core of a hover-lift at the base of the fort, which caused the whole structure to fly to explode and fly to pieces.

It was all coming back to him now.

Standing over him were several of the locals, many of them bruised and singed from the explosion, and all of them quite displeased with the Galactic Union officer who had so effectively - and literally - pricked their delusional bubble that they could possibly offer an effective defense against the oncoming invaders.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" A large, surly woman who, despite the dust that covered her from head to toe, Powell quickly recognized as the gatekeeper from earlier. "You think you've proven your point, that we aren't capable of stopping a runty little nobody like you from defending our homes that we should just give up and flee with the others?"

Some of the other colonists looked pensively at one another, suggesting that such a point had indeed set in within several of their minds. But the gatekeeper was undeterred. "All you proved to us is how arrogant and self-important you Galactic Union types really are. You think you know what's best for all of us, and you can't wait to stick your gigantic nose into other people's affairs."

One of the other colonists interjected. "Well, not if their Rule Prime

Zero is to be believed, or it they think that it holds any practical bearing-

"Shut up, Sheera!" The gatekeeper snapped angrily, before turning back to Powell. "You just think you're so clever, don't you. You're so brave and clever and resourceful, to thwart our defenses all by yourself?"

Powell shook his groggy head meekly. "No, not really."

"This is our home!" The woman screamed at him, so close to his face that he could smell the singed hairs on her upper lip. "We would all rather die than surrender it to those horrible 7ers!"

"But what if we don't die?" Young Jaxie now stepped forward, climbing up onto the upper tiers of the great stone fountain so that everyone could hear her. "What if the 7ers capture us instead? What's to stop them from enslaving all of the survivors, and spending the rest of our lives in chains? I'll bet that the living will envy the dead then, and even the dead will lament what we will have all given up, just to fight a hopeless battle to defend some fields and buildings inside some transparent tritanium dome."

"Excuse me." Powell interjected reluctantly. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but does anybody have some gum? My ears are popping like crazy."

Jaxie scowled down at him from her lofty perch, but then one of the other colonists piped up. "Actually, my ears are popping too. They have been for the past several hours."

Quickly, several other colonists voiced their agreement, though nobody had mentioned it to one another, for fear of seeming to be a whiny crybaby.

"Well, something must be causing it." Sheera declared. "If I had to venture a guess, I'd say that the pod might be losing air pressure."

"Those lazy jerks over in Pod 9 are in charge of the air valves." The gatekeeper complained. "They've probably been slacking off in their maintenance again."

Powell glanced back up at the dome ceiling and pointed. "Is that what that flashing light up there means?"

Everyone looked up to the conical protrusion jutting out of the top of the dome. "That's not supposed to be there. What *is* that thing?"

Sheera produced a telescopic optical imager and pointed it up at the ceiling. As she gazed into the viewfinder, she gasped in horror. "*By Riker's Beard!* It looks like the tip of a missile!"

The gatekeeper swiped the telescope from her, and looked herself. Sure enough, she confirmed this conclusion grimly. "It's a warhead that breached the dome. That's why we're slowly losing air pressure, because of that thing fell and broke through the surface of the dome."

Several of the colonists gasped and screamed in terror. "Is it the

7ers? Are they firing on us?"

The gatekeeper woman shook her head. "No, that must be from when the defense corps fired on some crazy inbound ship that came hurtling at the colony a few hours ago. One of the missiles they fired at it must've broken up, and its warhead crashed into the dome."

Cdr. Powell frowned, but said nothing. Jaxie hopped down from the fountain and hurried over by his side, calling out to the others. "But if that warhead is still armed, it could explode, and blow the entire dome away!"

"She's right!" Sheera agreed. "What are we going to do?"

Powell was about to suggest that they evacuate with the other colonists, when the burly gatekeeper woman grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet. Turning to the others, she announced. "Lucky for us, we've got ourselves a brave, daring, clever little Galactic Union officer who's going to save us all!"

Capt. Sunstrike squirmed in his captain's chair. Usually, it fit his behind like a glove, but for some reason, now he couldn't seem to get comfortable.

Maybe Powell has been sitting in it, getting it all out of whack. He mused jealously. But of course, Cdr. Powell was still on the planet, dealing with the colonists. Powell might have been a yutz, but at least he knew what all the buttons on the ship's tactical stations did. He was far less convinced of the abilities of Sgt. Chan, who was poking listlessly at the buttons and switches on the weapons console usually manned by Sunstrike's reliably middling first officer. This green-shirted space marine at the station now acted like he didn't have a clue what he was doing there. Given the imminent likelihood of a tense ship-to-ship battle against a superior opponent, Sunstrike found himself actually wishing that Powell was standing over his shoulder instead.

And Jayda too ... where was Jayda? Sunstrike glanced over at the Antillean's usual station, where Jayda normally handled communications both inside the ship and incoming signals. Sunstrike didn't think acting as his personal phone operator would be such a demanding job, but apparently, the intraship communications he was constantly busy with under everyday circumstances kept the varying systems and departments onboard the *Remarkable* running smoothly, because in his absence, the empty station had been abuzz with angry and sometimes panicked voices crackling over the intercom, and Sunstrike had to admit, the ship had been having an unusual number of systems failures in his absence all afternoon long.

At the other back corner of the bridge, young Ensign Adams continued to sulk at the navigations console, listlessly watching the chronometer in anticipation of her shift ending. Near as Sunstrike had gleaned of his navigator, she was only in the Galactic Union in order to pay for her college tuition and the liberal arts degree she planned on getting after her tour on the *Remarkable* ended. Despite Adams' sarcastic and often surly attitude, and her insistence of doing absolutely no more than what was expected of her, she really did have a knack for handling the *Remarkable's* thruster controls, and she almost never made a mistake when charting and plotting hyper-jump courses. Sunstrike realized that he had no idea what her first name was, and by this time, he figured it would be rude to ask. All he knew was that she steered his ship better than anybody else on board.

Rena's usual perch in the science station and sensor enclave to the captain's right was currently occupied by the hapless Ensign Mondu, who looked every bit as clueless as his green shirt friend, Sgt. Chan. Sunstrike recalled that he himself had failed his bridge systems qualification exam the first two times he took it as well, though he didn't have the good ready-made excuse of being colorblind and dyslexic like Mr. Mondu did, the lucky bastard. Sunstrike's own failures and shortcomings, back during his Star Academy days and well beyond, had discouraged him many times in the past. What was even more disheartening was how his Galactic Union career looked when compared to his famous older brother, Capt. Reginald Sunstrike III.

Even when they were kids, Reggie was always the golden boy who could do no wrong, and it stayed that way throughout school, the Academy, and as their respective careers progressed. Now, they were both starship captains, but Reggie was the master of the Galactic Union flagship, the *GSV Republic*, which was, at this very moment, probably in pitched battle with some galaxy-threatening monster, hundreds of parsecs away. Meanwhile, little brother Jack Sunstrike was in his tiny little tin can of a ship that probably should have been decommissioned fifty years ago, looking to step in and take sides in a fight between a couple of tiny lunar colonies. Capt. Reginald Sunstrike and the *Republic* might be facing a far more historic day than little Jacky and his *Remarkable*, but, Sunstrike reasoned, that didn't mean that he and his crew were in any less danger today.

Sunstrike shifted yet again in his chair. Maybe the seat was fine after all. Maybe it was just his head playing tricks on his ass.

Chancellor Lauren too seemed uncomfortable sitting. She had forsaken the folding chair provided her placed at the captain's side, and she was now pacing back and forth across the length of the bridge. Sunstrike

considered to himself whether this might be a proper time to get on the chancellor's good side using logic as Dr. Rena suggested. He reasoned that it was probably not the most opportune time to try, but then again, he couldn't be sure that such a time might ever come, so he might as well give it a shot in this last calm before the storm.

The captain stood up from his chair and crossed over to her as she mulled alone near the empty damage control station. Cautiously, he offered. "So, if things don't work out with this standoff, Chancellor, perhaps it would be ... *logical* for you and I to work on ... repopulating the species?"

Chancellor Lauren glanced at him cockeyed. "You mean the *human* species? Our colony is at stake here, Captain. Not the human race."

"It could be." Sunstrike suggested optimistically. "I mean, there's that giant planet-devouring monster in the Consortia Sector after all. If things go crappy both here and there, then you never know ..."

"Captain!" Ensign Mondu squeaked out from the science station in a cracking voice. "We're moving to within weapons range with the three PL-7 battlecruisers. The lead ship is trying to contact us, I think."

Capt. Sunstrike stepped over to the empty communications station, and opened the channel himself before turning back to the telescreen. Another man, gaunt yet imposing, with a crisp black military uniform and a shock of ghostly white hair, glared furiously back at him.

"I am Lord Uldred of the Porias System Imperial Battlecruiser *Shadowdagger*." He announced gruffly. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Captain Jack T. Sunstrike of the Galactic Union starship *Remarkable*." He answered confidently. "How are you this fine evening, my good Lord?"

Uldred frowned his wide, thin lips. "How I am is none of the Galactic Union's concern, Captain Sunstrike. Your little vessel has wandered into the flight path of my battle squadron, Captain. I suggest you move it so that we can continue on our way."

"And what way is that, Uldred?" Chancellor Lauren stepped forward defiantly. "We know that you're en route to Porias-Luna 26."

Lord Uldred arched a fuzzy eyebrow at her. "Ah, Chancellor Lauren. A pleasure as always. But of course, I see little need to answer your question when you simply blurt out the answer yourself before I have the chance to respond."

"The Poriasis Treaty provision doesn't take effect until tomorrow." She reminded him sternly. "Until then, the colony is still ours, and you have no right-"

"I do not take orders from some mere chancellor!" Uldred snapped

angrily. "Your precious queen is dead, and some weakling boy who cannot inherit the throne may give me no heed as well. I am a Royal Lord of the Poriasis System, and will not delay my ships for one second to any but a head of state!"

"Lord Uldred." Sunstrike stepped forward diplomatically. "I'm sure we can all be reasonable here, if we're all willing to just listen to one another. We would be honored to have you on board as our special guests so that you may speak your mind. Then, I'm sure we'll be able to sort out this entire business."

"I have no quarrel with the Galactic Union ... yet." Uldred remarked coldly. "This is not your dispute, Captain. Again, I *strongly* suggest that you extricate yourself from my path, for the safety of your ship."

Lord Uldred waved airily with his hand, and a moment later, the bridge's tactical station behind Sunstrike began making ominous warning beeps.

"Uh, sir. I think I'm picking up missile locks coming from all three battlecruisers." Sgt. Chan mumbled nervously.

Sunstrike turned back to the telescreen with a dangerous expression. "Locking weapons on a Galactic Union ship could be misconstrued as an act of war, Lord Uldred."

"Simply a safety precaution." Uldred replied icily. "We can't have our squadron running into some asteroid chunk or a rogue comet, can we? And our simple sensors sometimes have trouble discerning such barren interstellar obstacles with an old, outdated ship, drifting into our flight pattern. I'm certain your Galactic Union High Command can be made to understand how such a tragic accident such as that might happen?"

Uldred smiled deviously before returning to his customary scowl and commanding with an authoritative voice. "Turn your ship about and withdraw immediately."

Capt. Sunstrike straightened up and sighed. "Very well, but at least give me five space minutes to inform my crew."

Lord Uldred was puzzled. "Inform them of what? Just turn your ship and leave."

"Yes, but you see, my crew is ... well, they're not very bright."

"It's true. They're really not." Chancellor Lauren confirmed glibly.

Sunstrike nodded in agreement. "And every little order requires some explanation. They'll get it eventually, you'll see. I just need five space minutes to explain it to them."

Uldred grumbled irritably. "Fine. But in five space minutes, if your ship is still within our weapons range, we'll fire everything we have at you."

"We'll be out of your hair in a jiff." Sunstrike offered him a salute and a smile before an incredulous Lord Uldred closed the channel.

Once he was certain that the comm channel was in fact closed this time, Sunstrike slapped his hands together excitedly and rushed over to the tactical readouts next to Chan's station. Chancellor Lauren looked at him with disbelief.

"What are you doing?" She asked him. "We can't let him reach the colony, or he'll blockade it and trap all of our people there!"

Sunstrike gave her a sly wink. "Don't worry, my dear. That was just a delaying action for us to prepare for our surprise plan."

Lauren eyed him intently. "Which is?"

"Which is still being fermented." Sunstrike admitted, as he studied the tactical display. "Damn, those battlecruisers are sure big. Looks like their energy fields can take quite a wallop too - it'll probably take three or four volleys from all our weapons just to bust through one of them."

"You won't get four volleys." The chancellor warned him. "The *Shadowdagger* alone could tear through your ship in a few minutes while its two consort ships sat by and saved their missiles for our colony ships back on the moon."

The captain nodded grimly. "They've definitely got the size on us, but we're more nimble. Maybe we can use that to our advantage."

Just then, the entrance door to the bridge opened, and strolling casually into the command center was the ship's chief engineer and his robot assistant.

"Beauregard, just in time!" Sunstrike smiled confidently at him. "We're planning our last stand against the Porias-Luna 7 fleet."

"Against the *who*?" Chief Beauregard asked sleepily.

Sunstrike glanced at him. "Wait, why aren't you in engineering?"

The chief groaned wearily, stretching his shoulders and rolling his neck. "Ugh, I had to get out of there. It's such a depressing place. I needed a change of scenery. So, what's going on up here?"

Before Sunstrike could answer, there was a crisp ping which came from the bridge's chronometer. Immediately, Ensign Adams in the navigations enclave in the far corner of the bridge, stood up and collected her personal effects before marching towards the exit.

"Ensign!" Sunstrike barked angrily. "What are you doing?"

"It's 18:00 hours." She answered simply. "My shift is over."

Sunstrike was befuddled. "But, your relief hasn't shown up yet."

Adams huffed irritably. "That'll be Ensign Korb. He's always about five minutes late." Noticing the look her captain was giving her, she stood

her ground defensively. "Look, it's 18:00 hours! I'm supposed to go off duty now. It's not *my* fault Korb is always late, and I don't see why I should have to pay for *his* tardiness."

"We're going into battle!" Sunstrike told her, nearly shouting. "I need my best people right now, and nobody's a better pilot than you."

He couldn't tell if Adams was more touched by her captain's earnest praise, or if she was simply annoyed by the guilt trip he was laying on her, but thankfully, the ensign simply rolled her eyes and tossed her hair as she plopped back down into the navigations seat with a pouty expression.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sunstrike noticed that Chief Beauregard was also inching towards the exit. "Where do you think *you're* going?"

The chief shrugged sheepishly. "Um, well ... it's 18:00, sir. I've kind of had one of those days, you know?"

"*These* are Galactic Union officers?" Chancellor Lauren marveled disbelievingly.

Capt. Sunstrike bolted to the bridge's only exit, pressed a few buttons on the side panel, and instantly, a reinforced bulkhead slid down over the door, sealing it shut.

"We're about to take this ship into battle, people, and if we get blown to pieces, that's really going to put a cramp into your down-time. So I need every one of you to buckle down and put in a few minutes of overtime on this one, okay?"

The crewmembers on the bridge stared at him in wide-eyed silence until Ensign Mondu meekly raised his hand.

"Yes, Ensign?" Sunstrike called on him.

"Well, just so you know sir ... we only have two space minutes left of the five that Lord Uldred gave us to flee."

"Damn it." Sunstrike swore under his breath.

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"Quit goofing around." Jaxie lectured Cdr. Powell crossly. "We don't have much time!"

"I'm not goofing around." Powell answered plaintively to the young girl who was supervising him on the operation of the giant mechanical ant walker they had commandeered from the landing bay. The controls inside the cramped cockpit of the ant walker were excessively complicated, with the pilot in direct control of all six legs as well as the grappling pincers at the front of the head. Galactic Union vehicles tended to be more user-friendly,

and Powell was having a great deal of trouble acclimating to these new, complicated controls.

Their ant walker was now outside the colony's walls, and was making its way around it towards the exterior of Pod 6. However, the going was proving slower than they had hoped, as Cdr. Powell's inexperienced operation of the walker was causing it to stagger sideways and sometimes backwards on the lunar surface, as though the mechanical ant was somehow drunk on some sort of refined sugar water.

"You're hopeless!" Jaxie told him in exasperation. "If only I was tall enough to reach the foot pedals and the ceiling levers at the same time."

"Well, you're not helping by always yelling at me." Powell complained. "So, when we get to the Pod 6 dome, how are we supposed to climb all the way up to the top of it in this thing to get the warhead?"

Jaxie rolled her eyes. "The walker's foot pads are magnetic. We can climb up the tritanium support beams to the top."

Powell furrowed his brow. "And once we've got the live warhead that's going to blow up at any minute, what are we supposed to do with it?"

"Weren't you listening earlier?" She groaned. "We need to carry it off of the dome before it breaches the entire pod, and take it out to some nearby crater where it can be detonated safely away from the colony."

The commander frowned. "I still don't see why I'm the one who has to do this. I can barely operate this thing as it is."

"You needed to prove yourself to the others in order to convince them that you really do mean them no harm." The girl reminded him. "Besides, I think Bertha's starting to warm up to you. And if you can earn her trust, you should easily be able to convince the others to evacuate."

"Oh." Powell sighed. Under normal circumstances, he would be worrying and fretting over how he was supposed to accomplish this last, desperate attempt to save the colonists. But trying to operate the ant-walker's elaborate control panels took up so much of his attention that he found that he didn't seem to have time to be his usual pensive self.

Eventually, they reached the base of Pod 6's massive dome. With Jaxie's help, Powell magnetized the walker's foot pads, and began the arduous climb up the dome's convex, tritanium walls. Just as he was beginning to get the hang of maneuvering the vehicle on a flat, vertical surface, Powell was flummoxed by the new challenges of scaling the steeply sloped, smooth walls of the dome, and of coordinating the electro-magnets on the walker's legs in order to keep from constantly tripping over itself, and potentially tumbling off of the dome entirely.

At last, the walker reached the dome's peak, high above the surface of

the moon. The vantage point would have provided a picturesque panoramic view of the moon's surface and all of the surrounding craters filled with powdery moon dust like so many grayish lakes dotted about, but the task at hand precluded any chance for sight-seeing.

After a few minutes of scanning the surface of the dome, they finally detected the photonic power core of the broken missile's warhead, imbedded in the top of the pod. They discovered that it had impacted into the dome as it fell, and was now wedged into the small crack it had created, which was slowly siphoning off the pod's oxygen supply as well.

"Removing the warhead will be very tricky." Jaxie told him nervously. "Clamp down on it too tightly with the ant walker's pincers, and it could cause it to explode. But hold on to it too lightly, and it might tumble out of the pincer's grip once we pull it free of the dome. Then it would go tumbling down the side, and each bump as it falls makes it more and more likely that it will detonate."

"And take us and the entire pod with it." Powell finished grimly. "I've never used these kinds of pincers before."

Jaxie gulped before answering with a quavering voice. "I suppose I could try it, if you will monitor the hydraulic intake in the compressors."

Cdr. Powell was about to gratefully relinquish the task to the little girl, but when he looked at her, he could see that her hands were shaking. It was then that he realized that handing over such responsibility to an 8 year old girl was wrong, even for him.

"No." He said. "You watch the intake in the compressors. *This* job is up to me."

Jaxie smiled and nodded gratefully before sitting down in front of the pressure monitors. "I'll make sure that the hydraulic levels in the pincers don't exceed 1,400 p.s.i. If they get close to that mark, I'll let you know so that you can ease off a bit."

"Right." Powell nodded, as he secured his hands onto the throttle-shaped gripper controls that operated the ant walker's head pincers. Carefully, he maneuvered the ant head down in front of the wedged warhead, and positioned the twin pincers directly between the ends of the beeping device. Then, very slowly, he drew the throttle levers forward, causing the pincers to close down on the bomb.

The warhead's thin casing began to buckle under the pressure of the grippers, but Jaxie told the commander that the grip was not secure enough. He would have to press down still harder in order to ensure that the thing did not fly apart once they proceeded to pry it from the dome.

Finally, both Jaxie and Powell were satisfied that the pincers had a

secure grip, and began to slowly pull the ant head upwards to pry the device out of the crack in the dome. The commander wanted to draw it out as gingerly as a splinter, but to his dismay, he found that the warhead was stuck well and hard within the breach.

"You're going to have to give it a good yank." Jaxie instructed him quietly.

Cdr. Powell nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow before gripping the controls once again. After a few deep breaths, he drew back and pulled hard on the levers, jerking the ant head upwards and disgorging the bomb.

Jaxie cheered and hugged Powell's neck at the successful extraction, and Powell too felt a surge of relief. However, both of them were mortified to find that the warning beacon on the tip of the warhead was now flashing at an accelerated rate.

"Oh no!" Jaxie cried. "We must've jostled something loose inside of it. It could blow up at any second!"

"We don't have enough time to climb down the side of the dome with it." Cdr. Powell lamented.

"You'll have to sling it away." She answered, pointing out the window towards a nearby crater. "Over there! Throw it into that ejecta."

"Into the what?" Powell asked.

"Just throw it *now!*"

One ant walker maneuver which Powell had inadvertently learned well on the way around the colony was how to get the walker to spin around in wild circles. He quickly repeated this maneuver for a couple of turns atop the dome. Once he had gained sufficient momentum in the vehicle's spinning, he pulled the release handle on the pincers to detach the warhead from the ant head. The beeping device hurdled across the black sky until it plunged into the crater filled with moon dust, and wound up half-buried in the pit.

A split-second later, the warhead finally exploded, causing an array of moon dust (or as the colonists called it, ejecta) into the sky, but otherwise, causing no discernible damage to the colony's structure.

Cdr. Powell and Jaxie sighed with relief, until, after the commotion of the explosion died down, they could feel an odd tremor all throughout the walker. Checking the readout panels, Jaxie moaned.

"Oh no. Our rear left leg stepped into the crack that the warhead had made into the dome. The leg punched right through the dome, causing the tiny hole inside to become a major breach, with huge gulps of oxygen escaping through it and causing the ant walker to rattle like a washing machine.

Looking down through the transparent tritanium to the colony below, Powell could see the Pod 6 residents scrambling to the exit hatch as alarm klaxons went off all around them.

After a moment, Jaxie sighed wearily. "Well, at least you finally convinced them all to evacuate."

Dr. Rena and Prince Maru raced into the teleportation booth just as the ship's combat alert alarm began to blare over the loudspeaker.

"We don't have much time." Rena said as she looked about the booth. To her dismay, the control panel station for the teleporter was empty. "Damn! Lieutenant Balzar isn't here!"

"Who is Lieutenant Balzar?" Maru asked her.

Rena shook her head. "He's the ship's Chief Teleporter Operator."

She hurried over to the control panel, and tried to call up the lieutenant from there, but there was no response from Balzar's quarters or his personal communicator.

"He takes a lot of personal days." She complained bitterly. "But the Medril's religion has a bunch of holidays, so we're legally required to let him take as many days off as he likes. Even so, he'd better not just be in his quarters burning me another mix tape of contemporary Medril smooth jazz."

The prince looked at her worriedly. "Are you capable of operating the teleporter device without him?"

Rena looked up at him hesitantly and nodded. "Well, I've been trained in teleporter operation at least, but I have ... little experience."

Maru took her hand into his and patted it gently. "Then I have no fear at all. I would trust you with my life more than a thousand Lieutenant Balzars."

She swallowed hard and smiled back at him, but couldn't answer. It was sweet that he trusted her so much, misplaced though his blind devotion might be. Operating the teleporter was a complicated business. It was mostly automated, but when glitches occurred, as they so often did with the *Remarkable's* buggy, outdated unit, then it required a good deal of timing and coordination to complete the teleportation without a mistake. Even the tiniest flaw, she knew all too well, could mean disaster, and the lingering smell inside the padded teleportation booth was a olfactory testament to her inexperience. Still, there was nothing left to do but make the attempt.

"I'm going to deconstruct your genetic pattern, and then place that pattern into our stasis core." She told him carefully. "Then, I'm going to input the alteration protocols I designed based off of the scans I took of you before, to duplicate your profile exactly, with the exception of removing your

Y-chromosomes and retrofitting your genetic pattern to accept the changes. The procedure shouldn't take more than a minute or two, and if ... *when* you are teleported from the stasis core and back to the chamber, you should be exactly who you are, except female instead of male."

"Exactly who I am..." He repeated, almost in a trancelike state. "I can't imagine how that could be so."

The doctor frowned. "Over time of course, your hormonal balances will shift, as your body deals with the switch from testosterone to estrogen, and this is likely to cause unforeseen side effects--"

"That's not what I mean." He told her, running his thin hands slowly up her arms. "I mean, will I still be the man who loves you, even if I'm the woman to lead my people?"

Rena felt a lump in her throat as she dipped her head. "I ... I don't know."

He tenderly drew his finger under her lowered chin, and lifted her head up. As she looked into his ghostly blue eyes, the prince kissed her long and deep, one last time. The moment seemed to last forever. Yet when it ended, Rena thought it must be too soon.

When he finally drew away, he gave her a soft smile and told her. "I suppose in a minute or two, we'll find out for sure."

Prince Maru stepped up into the teleportation chamber with a noble gait, and wheeled about primly. He folded his arms behind his back, and stood, straight and expressionless, as though he were a statue. Rena could not see a hint of fear or trepidation about the drastic alteration that was about to be unleashed upon his body. Whether they succeeded or failed, the person of Prince Maru as he was, was about to end. Yet that prince faced his destiny with such stirring courage that it made Rena's heart glow. It was a terrible shame that the matriarchal provisions of the Poriasis Treaty precluded the man before her from ruling his own people.

Dr. Rena took a moment to summon her own courage, stepping before the teleporter controls and acclimating her senses to the complicated network of switches, dials and buttons as she tried to block out the sounds of the combat alert sirens, and focused on the task at hand. Once her head was cleared of all her own fears and self-doubt, she took a deep breath, and drew her hands across the controls with the steadiness of a master surgeon.

"Commencing teleport."

Activating the device, she watched as the form of Prince Maru dissolved from sight in the chamber before her. Looking down at the readouts, she was relieved to find that the teleport had gone off without a

hitch - the prince's pattern was now safely stored in the stasis core.

The easy part was over. Now, the doctor produced the data slot she had been carrying into the control panel, inputting the genetic and chromosomal variations that the system would have to make once the prince was removed from the stasis core, and converted into his new form. But the program she had designed would be overriding innumerable safety programs in the teleporter, and the device would fight her every step of the way. The re-materialization of the prince would take much longer than it normally would, and if things went too haywire, he would not come back at all.

Having reached the point of no return, Rena now hesitated. She could easily cancel the procedure and simply bring Prince Maru back as he always was. Surely, the Porias-Luna 7 ships would allow the 26ers to evacuate their colony in peace, and let them all travel to Starpost Q-31, like their mission orders expressly commanded them to. Even if the colonists were trapped by the enemy ships down on the moon, at least the prince was safe, and surely the Galactic Union would send some other ships to drive off the blockaders. It all made sense to her.

But she knew in her heart that it was wrong. It was Prince Maru's expressed wish and intention to go through with the gender switch, no matter what. Only he, as PL-26's rightful *queen* could convince the battlecruisers to abort their attack. If she teleported him back now, unaltered, he would be furious that she had disobeyed his command.

But he would be alive.

Except ... would he still be *hers*?

The ship's hull shook and rattled with the impact of a missile buckling the deflector screens. The time was growing still more critical. Rena realized that she had to act, and act now. She activated the alteration program, and engaged the teleporter extraction from the stasis core.

As she expected, the teleporter device's protocols fought her tooth and nail, and she had to constantly override the warnings before the de-fragmentation cycle could be interrupted. Then, the spatial integrity fail-safes began to erode, and she had to compensate by manually polarizing the mass-index regulator. A dozen other malfunctions and system errors cascaded down on her at once, just as another, still more violent impact to the ship suggested a hull breach on some other deck. Through it all, Rena kept her composure and worked feverishly to stay ahead of the glitches and keep Maru's pattern alive.

Five seconds became ten seconds, which became twenty, and then thirty. Finally, after fifty seconds of reconstruction, the teleport cycle was

completed, and a form materialized inside the chamber.

Rena was heaving for breath, mentally exhausted from the challenge of operating the teleporter. But even more, she was afraid to look up to see what she had brought back to the material world, terrified at the thought of seeing some deformed monster which she had created from the bits and pieces from the man she loved.

Finally, she forced herself to pick her head up and witness the fruits of her labor. At first glance, she saw Maru as before, and she thought that the whole transformation process had failed completely. But when she had a split-second to focus on the individual standing in the teleportation chamber, she began to realize the differences. There was still Maru's long, silvery hair and elegant facial features with steely blue eyes, yet there was a softer, more feminine edge to those features now. The regal uniform which the prince had worn no longer seemed to fit the slightly smaller person who wore them now. They hung loosely over the shoulders, and the military tunic and sash now concealed a slender waist and a shapely bosom which now began to show ever-so-slightly as the clothes settled around the new body.

Maru looked down at her long, delicate hands, and then up at Rena with a look of wonderment. When she spoke, she did so in a melodic, higher-pitched voice than before, which sounded like dripping honey.

"My dear Elaine, I ... I believe that it worked!"

Rena smiled weakly and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I think it did as well, my dear Queen."

--11

The telescreen on the bridge of the *GSV Remarkable* lit up with the grim image of Lord Uldred wearing an even deeper scowl than before. "Your time is up, Captain Sunstrike, and I am disappointed to see that you are still blocking our path."

Sunstrike sighed and slumped his shoulders at the screen. "You play a hard bargain, Lord Uldred, but I see that I have no other option. Very well, it is with a heavy heart that I surrender my ship to you."

Uldred was confused. "I did not order your surrender, Captain. I told you to move your ship out of our path."

Sunstrike frowned and snapped his fingers furiously. "Damn it! And I already surrendered to you too. Oh well, never let it be said that I shirked a surrender offer. So you can go ahead and send all your men aboard, so I

can hand over my ship to you now."

Lord Uldred paused hesitantly, clearly suspecting some sort of trick. "No. I have no use for such a useless pile of scrap as your pitiful ship. It has much more value to my fleet as ... target practice."

Capt. Sunstrike instantly dissolved his play at supplication and smiled at him. "Well, I hope your gunners are good at aiming at a moving target, because this pile of scrap still has a bit of wiggle left in her!"

Furious, Uldred slammed off the comm signal with his fist, and the telescreen went blank once again.

"They're charging their energy cannons and loading their missile launchers!" Sgt. Chan noted worriedly.

Sunstrike sat down in his captain's chair, crossing his legs with a flourish. "As you should, Lord Uldred. As you should. *Combat Alert!* Set the crew to battle stations!"

The captain looked about him expectantly when nothing happened. Sgt. Chan looked nonplussed. "Oh, is that my job?"

"I'm pretty sure it's not mine." Ensign Mondu insisted.

Chan looked down at his tactical station. "I don't think it's mine either. I don't see a 'Combat Alert' button anywhere on here. Is it labeled something different?"

Mondu shrugged at him. "I didn't even know we were supposed to call it 'Combat Alert'. Is there a 'Condition: Red' button?"

"No."

"Maybe it's labeled 'Battle Stations'?"

"I don't see it either."

"Crisis Mode?"

"There's a switch here that says 'Maximum Overload'."

Chief Beauregard interjected reluctantly. "Yeah ... that's supposed to set our engines to overheat and explode."

"Don't touch that, then." Mondu suggested.

The chief shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It's not hooked up to the engines anymore anyway."

"Oh, for God's Sake!" Sunstrike shouted.

"The Combat Alert signal is initiated at the comm station." Ensign Adams moaned irritably as she rolled her eyes towards the vacant alcove opposite her nav station at the back of the bridge.

Sunstrike spotted the vacant station again and cursed. "Damn that Jayda! Where the hell *is* he?"

"I'll get it." Chief Beauregard helpfully volunteered, skipping over to the station to activate the Battle Alert sirens before crossing back over to his

place next to INFO at the damage control kiosk.

Chancellor Lauren looked to Sunstrike worriedly. "Is there any chance that all this is just part of your plan?"

Sunstrike shrugged. "Well, you do have to allow for the unexpected here and there. But don't worry about my plan. We've got-

"The *Shadowdagger* is firing missiles!" Sgt. Chan cried out in alarm.

Capt. Sunstrike was startled. "Oh, crap! Evasive-"

The whole ship rocked as the missile salvo buckled the energy fields, leaving the ship's hull vulnerable to a follow up assault. Sure enough, the lead battlecruiser surged ahead of its consort ships to move in for the kill, firing its energy cannons at the *Remarkable* to try to finish her off. Fortunately, Ensign Adams, despite being rattled at the initial attack, managed to dodge the plasma bolts aimed at them, and quickly maneuvered the ship out of the firing arc of the *Shadowdagger's* forward cannons.

"I can keep them out targeting range for a few more seconds." Adams reported, her voice straining with a newfound tension as she operated the controls. "But I can't stay out of the firing patterns of all three ships at the same time."

"You may not have to." Chancellor Lauren reported. "Lord Uldred is a very proud man. He's clearly told the other two battlecruisers to stay out of the fight so that his *Shadowdagger* can have the honor of taking us out single-handedly. If he had to call them in to help destroy such an inferior opponent, he would lose face with his own people."

"I've always said that a captain should guard against the dangers of an over-inflated ego." Capt. Sunstrike cackled without a hint of irony. "You're sure about their sensors, Chancellor?"

Lauren nodded. "Uldred wasn't exaggerating about how primitive their sensor systems were. *Darkblade*-class ships have notoriously weak scanners. They simply read objects and transponder frequencies, but can't determine the object's size or composition."

Sunstrike nodded confidently. "Then Mr. Chan, it's time that you initiated another premature evacuation."

Sgt. Chan gulped and nodded before he pressed a couple of buttons on his tactical panel. Moments later, all of the ship's escape pods (excluding the one mistakenly launched earlier bearing the astrophysics department) were remotely launched simultaneously in all directions around the ship.

"I'm reading sixteen escape pods away, Captain." Ensign Mondu reported. "Each of them is sending out the *Remarkable's* transponder code

instead of the usual distress beacon.

"Nice work reprogramming them, Chief." Sunstrike nodded to Beauregard, who smiled smugly. INFO turned to attempt to congratulate the chief as well, but Beauregard knew his companion too well to accept a handshake from one of the robot's powerful claws, and he nimbly dodged a well-intentioned pat of the back that would have likely inadvertently broken his ribs if the robot had succeeded in his encouragement.

Sunstrike turned back to the chancellor. "Now, as long as we don't fire back, the PL-7ers won't be able to tell which of us is the real *Remarkable*. That should buy us a little extra time."

"It's risky." Chancellor Lauren warned. "What if they just start launching missiles at all of the targets?"

"Risk is a part of the very existence of a starship captain." Sunstrike began pontificating. "In first contact with a new species, in rescuing captive civilians from the clutches of pirates, in doing battle with superior foes, and in making love to a beautiful woman.

He smiled at her as he continued. "It's all risky, my dear Chancellor. But only those of us who are willing to play that gambit of chance, are truly prepared to sit in the captain's chair. But for those who merely aspire to one day, *they* might find a place ... in the captain's lap."

He winked at her coyly, but the chancellor's response was cryptic. She bit her lower lip in a way where he couldn't be sure if she was trying to hold back a smile, or if she was getting ready to spit in his face.

Before he could find out, however, Ensign Mondu barked out another ominous report. "Captain! The other two battlecruisers are moving into position, sir. They're encircling the entire field of decoys and slowly closing in."

"So much for Uldred being too butch to ask his friends for help." Ensign Adams remarked dryly. "It looks like they're making a visual inspection of each target out of their view ports in order to determine if it's us or just an escape pod."

"They'll have to get very close to make a visual inspection." Mondu remarked. "They'd have to get to within a few hundred meters just to get a look out the window."

"Why not just fire a missile at every target and be done with it?" Sgt. Chan wondered.

Sunstrike furrowed his brow. "They can't use up all their missiles on trying to take us out. They need to save some to blockade the colony. And their energy cannons aren't nearly as accurate as missiles, so there's no guarantee that they can hit what they're aiming for."

They waited several minutes as the three battlecruisers sifted through the field of escape pod decoys, eliminating them one by one. At one point, a stray energy bolt winged the ship's hull. It was hard to determine how badly the ship was damaged, because the glancing bolt happened to knock out Chief Beauregard's damage control station as well.

Eventually, the enemy ships had whittled them down to only a handful of stray pods remaining, when Ensign Mondu reported. "Sir, the *Shadowdagger* is now coming towards us. I think they're going to move in to get a visual of us next!"

"Can we make a break for it?" Chief Beauregard suggested.

Ensign Adams shook her head. "If we fire up our engines and take off, they'll know in an instant that we're the real *Remarkable*. I might be able to get out of the *Shadowdagger's* firing range, but not the other two ships as well.

Chancellor Lauren sighed wearily. "Then that's it, isn't it? Captain, I want to thank you for doing all you could to save our people. I'm afraid that the prince and I asked too much of you, that you would be willing to sacrifice you and your crew for us is ... touching. I only wish-"

Suddenly, there was a clanging sound coming from the sealed blast door. Somebody was pounding on it, trying to get onto the bridge.

Sunstrike stepped over to the locked bulkhead and punched in the key code to unlock it. The blast door came up, and standing at the entrance was Dr. Rena and a stunning young woman with long, flowing silver hair and wearing a golden dress.

"Who the hell locked this door?" Rena demanded crossly.

"That's ... not the point ..." Sunstrike muttered distractedly as he stared at the doctor's enchantingly beautiful companion.

"My Prince!" Chancellor Lauren rushed forward with tears in her eyes. "Is that really you?"

"The woman smiled at her chancellor with a kind expression. "Yes, I am who you have always known me to be, Lauren. But I am no longer Prince Maru. Henceforth I am ... Queen Marysue!"

Mondu and Chan looked at one another in shock, and Chief Beauregard smiled at the queen and arched his eyebrows, but Chancellor Lauren was quick to resume the crisis.

"Please, my Queen, there is very little time!" She told her. "Lord Uldred's ship is closing in on us."

Queen Marysue nodded knowingly. "Captain Sunstrike, would you be so good as to put me in contact with Lord Uldred at this time?"

"I guess that's me again!" Chief Beauregard offered with an

aw-shucks chuckle as he bounded back over to the comm station.

"Opening a channel won't give away our position, will it?" Sunstrike asked, worried that the mere sight of the new queen wouldn't be enough to convince Uldred to halt his pursuit.

Sgt. Chan shook his head. "It shouldn't. As far as the *Shadowdagger* would know, the comm signal might be coming from any one of the *Remarkable* transponders still out there."

After a moment at the comm station, Beauregard frowned and shook his head. "They're refusing to answer our signal."

"The *Shadowdagger's* almost on top of us now!" Ensign Mondu squealed. "Under 140 meters!"

Suddenly, an idea formed in Sunstrike's head. "140? That's close enough to use the teleporter, isn't it?"

"We'll be close enough, and we'll also have moved beyond their proximity screens as well." Rena confirmed.

Sgt. Chan looked up at him nervously. "Uh, you aren't thinking of forming another suicidal boarding party again, are you sir?"

Capt. Sunstrike shook his head. "Nope. I think it's time we met this Lord Uldred in the flesh."

He turned back to the comm station and pointed to Beauregard. "Patch me in to the teleporter booth. Lt. Balzar, this is the captain!"

Dr. Rena interjected. "Um, Lt. Balzar isn't on duty today."

"What? Is it, another Medril 'Life Day' again?" Sunstrike groaned irritably. "Okay, Ensign Mondu! Get to the teleporter booth, and find a way to lock on to the *Shadowdagger's* commander. Teleport him off of that ship, and materialize him directly into our conference room. We'll meet him there."

They hastily left the bridge, Sunstrike having the presence of mind this time to put Chief Beauregard in charge, while he, Dr. Rena, Queen Marysue and Chancellor Lauren all raced down the corridor to get to the ship's conference room. The room was still decorated with crepe paper and streamers, along with stale birthday cake and melted ice cream. It also once again contained one Lt. Jayda, sulking in a chair in the corner.

This time, Sunstrike made no pretense of expecting to find him there. "Jayda! What the hell are you doing here?"

Jayda, half-dozing in his chair, bolted up to his feet at their sudden entrance. "Well, sir. I ... I ..."

"We've been in a crisis situation all day long, and you've been lounging around here, shirking your duties?" Sunstrike snarled.

Jayda was flustered. "No, sir! I completed the tour, as you commanded, and you ordered me to come here and wait for you to reprimand me again. But when I heard the Battle Alert siren, I tried to report to my post on the bridge, sir. But I found that the blast doors had sealed it off. Since I couldn't report to my proper battle station, I decided that it would be most prudent to remain here until my commanding officer arrived to give me further orders-"

"Get the hell out of here!" Sunstrike yelled at him, grabbing him by the collar and half-throwing him out the door, just as a figure teleported into the conference room before them.

Lord Uldred, regaled in full black and silver uniform, looked about him in confusion. When his eyes finally went from the curious party favors festooned across the table and chairs, to the face of Capt. Sunstrike, he roared in fury.

"This is an outrage! You dare take me hostage, Sunstrike? I did not think the Galactic Union could sink so low!"

"The Galactic Union is capable of sinking to much higher things than that, Uldred." Sunstrike retorted.

The lord glared furiously at him. "If you believe that taking me as a hostage will save you, you are woefully mistaken, Sunstrike. My ship will-"

Queen Marysue stepped forward and answered sharply. "Your ship and her consorts will withdraw back to Porias-Luna 7 immediately, and you along with them, Lord Uldred. We shall not suffer your incursions again."

Uldred looked at her suspiciously. "And who might you be?"

"I am Marysue, Queen and Royal Sovereign of Porias-Luna 26."

The cantankerous lord roared with mirthless laughter. "Is this some sort of silly game? I know that it is you, Maru. I can see it in your eyes. It is true I've always seen you as rather ... feminine. But ..."

Lord Uldred found his eyes wandering up and down the form-fitting golden dress she wore, with the plunging neckline that presented her generous cleavage and the slit running up the side of the skirt which offered a peek of her long, slender legs. Marysue cut an undeniably feminine figure, which even the cynical lord could not deny.

"But ... how is this possible?" He stammered, transfixed by her beauty. "You are Prince Maru, and yet ..."

"And yet I am now a true woman." Marysue answered. "There is no trick, no fakery. I am a female, and therefore I am my mother's rightful heir, and the true sovereign of Porias-Luna 26."

Uldred stammered for a moment, unable to take his eyes off of her. Finally, he could be heard to mutter. "Prove it."

Marysue smiled at him, almost seductively. "I would be most happy to ... at a later date. But first, you must call off your ships that threaten my colony. Then, we can arrange a peace conference where you and I can ... demonstrate our friendly intentions towards one another."

"Where did she get that dress, anyway?" Sunstrike whispered to Rena.

Rena sighed regretfully. "It's one of mine. Sadly, it's not the first time one of my boyfriends ends up wearing one of my dresses. And what's worse is that he looks better in it than I ever did."

"Why do you even *have* a dress?" Sunstrike asked her. "Are you just waiting for a prom to break out on the ship? You planning a cotillion one day in the mess hall or something?"

"Shut up, captain." She groaned at him.

--12

Captain Jack T. Sunstrike sat stiffly in his chair as the tiny telescreen on his office desk continued to blare at him with the sights and sounds of a bellicose Admiral Grissom.

"You can't even follow the simplest orders, can you Sunstrike?" The admiral bellowed at him with a thunderous bluster that registered across the subspace channel from Galactic Union High Command. "I specifically *told* you not to do anything stupid. Just escort the colony ships to Starpost Q-31, and that was it. Instead, you butt into a local conflict, provoke an independent colony's warships into attacking you, drag the Galactic Union into a diplomatic mess which, frankly, we could do without, and lastly, you mutilate a sovereign ruler with some fancy teleporter tricks."

Sunstrike cleared his throat. "With all due respect Admiral, *mutilate* is something of a misnomer. I mean, if you could see the way the queen turned out--"

"*Don't care*, Sunstrike!" Grissom barked gruffly. "I'd really love to put your goldbrickin' butt in a court-marshal chair. But after our big victory against the space behemoth in the Consortia Sector, High Command doesn't want the negative publicity of having the Galactic Union's greatest hero having to face his idiot brother being brought up on charges."

Sunstrike grimaced at the mention of his brother's triumph. "I wouldn't say Reggie is the Galactic Union's *greatest* hero ..."

"Are you kidding? He flew the *GSV Republic* right down the gullet of that planet-devouring monster, with the intention of selflessly blowing up his ship once they got close to the behemoth's giant-ass heart. Then, he and

his crew discover that the giant-ass brute has some sort of giant-ass bacterial infection which has caused it to be so cranky in the first place, and also trapped it between *our* dimension and *his*! So, what do they do? They whip up a giant-ass dose of antibiotics, and fire that sucker out their missile bay right into that infected tumor, and *bam!* Giant-ass space monster is cured, and goes back to its own dimension for good. And the *Republic* flies out of the monster with one last giant-assed sneeze before he goes poof and disappears."

Adm. Grissom guffawed on the telescreen, leaning back in his own chair in admiration. "Thank the space gods that we've got the *real* Capt. Sunstrike on our side."

The comment stung, but Jack tried to pretend it didn't. "Well, I'm sure the whole fleet deserves credit on this one."

Grissom nodded impatiently. "Sure, the task force was holding the line while the *Republic* went on her little journey through guts and glory. But they would've been wiped out completely had Reginald Sunstrike failed. I hear Admiral Blackstone's even recommending him for a Medal of Supreme Valor."

Sunstrike groaned. "What for? Reggie's already got *two* of those. He probably wears those medals to bed - one for each nipple."

"Well, I'd wager he'll have a spare one in bed now, in case he entertains." The admiral retorted with a chortle.

"Can we stop talking about my brother now?" Sunstrike asked wearily.

Adm. Grissom sighed. "Fine. Back to your little screw-up. I suppose I can go into your mission orders and retroactively put something in about 'officer's discretion' that doesn't involve expressly forbidding it. Not that anyone at High Command will mistake *you* for an officer. Or that you have any discretion for that matter.

Sunstrike fumed silently as the admiral continued. "Assuming nobody looks into the matter, it should be closed. Meantime, I'm putting the *Remarkable* back on cargo duty."

"*What?*" Sunstrike shouted. "Admiral, I saved the day here!"

"Yeah, you're a real hero." Grissom mumbled sarcastically. "What you did, was put the Galactic Union in an awkward position *vis-a-vis* non-member human colonies. We've already got a reputation for meddling in independent colonial affairs. That's why we instituted Rule Prime-Zero, for Pete's sake... I think. Anyway, the fact that your little power play didn't end in utter disaster is no reason to praise your little adventure there, Sunstrike. You seem to have a liking for skirting your orders, and I sure as

hell ain't going to encourage that. Anyway, the galaxy needs cargo runners too. The New Fresno colony's probably due for a new shipment of laxatives anyway. So, report to Starpost Q-31, and count your blessings I'm not demoting you to kitchen scullion, Sunstrike. Grissom out."

Furious, Sunstrike bolted up from his desk and paced back and forth across his study, banging his fist into his palm and muttering to himself.

Fools. He thought to himself spitefully. *Anyone could fly down the throat of a giant planet-devouring space monster.* The High Command didn't seem to realize the amazing feat he had pulled off here in the remote Poriasis System. He had taken a hopeless situation where the good guys were being driven from their homes by the bad guys, and he beat the baddies at their own game, all while solving the good guys' problem, and without a life lost. What more could he have done?

But the Galactic Union muckety-mucks didn't want heroism from *him*. They wanted to maintain the status quo. They'd rather shower his dumb brother with laurels while they lecture *him* about rocking the boat.

As he prowled his study like a caged Larentian Tiger, the door chime to his study sounded with a ticklish chirp. Exasperated, Sunstrike bellowed. "Come in."

Entering the study most reluctantly was Lt. Jayda, clutching a data pad and trembling from head to toe. "Pardon the interruption, sir. I've finished the disciplinary report on myself which you requested I fill out on my impertinence throughout the events of the previous days for your inspection."

The captain glowered at him as he snatched up the data pad. After a cursory glance at the wordy report, he tossed the pad onto his desk with a loud clatter.

"And what rating did you give yourself?" He asked.

"'Unsatisfactory'." Jayda whimpered hesitantly. "I mean, '*Most Unsatisfactory*', sir."

Capt. Sunstrike let out a weary sigh and shook his head. After a short pause, he reached down to the data pad on his desk, and hit the delete button.

"I spent seventeen hours on that report, sir." Lt. Jayda gasped despondently.

"Forget it." Sunstrike told him in a quiet, distant voice. "It *is* your birthday, after all. I'm letting you off the hook this time."

"Oh." The lieutenant's shoulders slumped. "Well, in truth, my birthday was three days prior, but thank you anyway, sir."

The captain patted him on the shoulder. "Happy birthday, Mr. Jayda.

Three down, one to go, right? Well, that'll be all."

As Sunstrike watched a bewildered Lt. Jayda shuffle out of his office, he felt slightly better. He might be stuck in the Galactic Union doghouse through no fault of entirely his own, but at least he still had his loyal crew, and they still needed him above all else.

Suddenly, the intercom on his desk went off with the voice of Chief Beauregard.

"Docking bay to captain. How's it going?"

"Fine." He grumbled.

"That's cool." Beauregard said casually. "So, what are you up to?"

"What do you want, Chief?" Sunstrike demanded crossly.

Cowed by his gruff tone, the chief continued. "Oh. Sorry to disturb you, sir. I just wanted to let you know we finished repairs on the transit pod. It's ready to take you down to the colony."

"I'll be right down. Sunstrike out." He slammed the disconnect button on the intercom, and then rubbed the tense muscles in his neck. When they finally arrived at the Porias-Luna 26 colony three days ago, flush with victory, they discovered that Cdr. Powell had damaged the ship's transit pod somehow when he had arrived earlier. It took a few days to get the pod back on the ship and for the chief and INFO to hammer it back into working order before Sunstrike was allowed to finally go down to the colony and conclude this miserable mission.

The queen and Chancellor Lauren were all joy and gratitude of course, after they had sent Lord Uldred and his battlecruisers on their way. And once they arrived at their lunar colony, they asked him to remain in orbit while they went down to prepare a formal ceremony for him. Rena went down to the colony with Queen Marysue, and thus Sunstrike was left on board for the past three days, stewing and getting chewed out by his superiors on the long-range comm channels. *To the victor go the spoils.* He thought to himself bitterly.

Sunstrike stepped to his mirror, and tried his best to put on his usual 'confidence face' for his crew. But today, it was a shadow of what it once was. Still, he straightened his uniform, smoothed out his hair, and marched out of his office to the docking bay with a dark cloud hanging over his head.

The captain's mood brightened when went down in the transit pod into the landing bay of the of the Porias-Luna 26 colony. He found a great crowd of colonists cheering him as he stepped out of the pod, clapping and roaring his name. *At last, he was appreciated.* He thought to himself.

A tall, muscular woman wearing an ornate military uniform of purple

and gold stepped forward and shook his hand vigorously. "Captain Sunstrike. It's an honor to have you here sir. I am Seneschal Wylmar, and on behalf of the people of Porias-Luna 26, I welcome you to our home, free once again, thanks to you!"

The crowd cheered uproariously and began to dance and play music as the captain was led to a small stage set up for the occasion. There, he saw Dr. Rena standing next to Queen Marysue, speaking in quiet voices to one another. Meanwhile, he spotted Cdr. Powell also on the stage, canoodling with a large, brawny woman. The woman had Powell locked in her huge, muscular arms, and was stroking him like a puppy while she whispered sweet nothings into his reluctant ear.

"My hero." Bertha cooed as she gave Powell a playful tickle. "You rescue Pod 6, then you breach the dome just enough to force us to evacuate, you clever little man."

"Um, Not really." Powell squirmed uncomfortably. "Oh look! There's the captain. He's the one who saved your colony from the invaders!"

"But *you* saved Pod 6." She sighed as she nibbled on his earlobe. Cdr. Powell groaned despondently.

Meanwhile, Dr. Rena and Queen Marysue, now in a formal royal gown of shimmering purple silk, were keenly aware that they were spending their last few moments together. The sorrowful queen clung to the doctor wistfully, but Rena appeared far more convinced that their love affair had run its course.

"Oh, how I wish you could stay here with me, my darling." The queen told Rena with a gentle sadness. "But I fear that keeping you as my consort would be far too complicated."

"You can say that again." Rena sighed uncomfortably.

"However, as queen, I must think of my people. Now that I am a woman, I must marry and conceive a proper heir, once I have found a proper suitor to wed."

"Like Lord Uldred?" The doctor muttered disapprovingly.

Queen Marysue smiled weakly. "He is of noble blood. But then, I'm not sure that he is my type. Time will tell. In the meantime, Uldred seems quite smitten with me, which I can use to my people's advantage during our upcoming peace talks."

Rena sighed and looked into her eyes. Despite the loss of attraction for her former lover, she continued to care for her. "Well, at least keep your options open. Play the field. There's bound to be some eligible lords out there who would be better catches than him."

The queen chuckled. "Yes indeed. I will certainly 'play the field'. But I

doubt I will ever find anyone who touched me quite like you."

She reached out and gently caressed Rena's cheek with her smooth, delicate hand. Rena felt a curious sensation, both alluring and disturbing. But when she turned her head slightly, the doctor instantly noticed Capt. Sunstrike standing on the stage right in front of them, with a gigantic grin on his face.

"Pardon me for interrupting." He said politely. "I just wanted to pay my respects to Her Royal Majesty once again."

"He leaned down and kissed Queen Marysue's hand, and she nodded politely back at him. "It is the greatest honor to have you with us again, Captain Sunstrike. You and your crew have saved my people, and you shall always have our eternal gratitude."

"The pleasure was all mine." Sunstrike replied proudly. "But I sense I'm disturbing you. I should leave you two lovely ladies alone now."

"No! That's all right." Rena shook her head vigorously, grabbing hold of his arm so hard that it left a bruise.

The queen nodded. "Indeed, I think it's time for the ceremony to begin."

It was a rousing tribute which the queen and her subjects put on for the officers of the *GSV Remarkable*. They had gone to great care to decorate the stage with streamers and confetti, attempting to duplicate the Lt. Jayda's birthday decorations from the conference room exactly. Each of the three officers was presented with a slice of victory cake and ice cream as the queen spoke. A pocket of colonists from Pod 6 cheered particularly loud as Cdr. Powell was introduced, including a little girl in the back who waved excitedly at him. At the closing of the ceremony, each of the three officers was given a shiny medal, emblazoned with the words 'Hero of Porias-Luna 26'.

Sunstrike was beaming.

After the ceremony, the large woman rushed forward again and planted a big, wet kiss right on Cdr. Powell's mouth. Sunstrike shook his head and sighed. *Even Powell got lucky on this mission.*

The target of his own frustrated affection now stepped up to greet him again. After Lord Uldred's defeat, Chancellor Lauren had been far too busy planning the upcoming peace conference with the queen and later her ministers, so that she had no time to even speak to the captain. After she went down to the colony ahead of him, Sunstrike had heard not a peep from her, as she was locked into high-level meetings night and day.

"I'm sorry I have not been able to see you again until now." She told Sunstrike with an ever-so-slight smile on her face.

"Quite all right." The captain answered. "War is the dominion of captains, but peace is the pervue of chancellors."

"We would not have this chance for peace if not for you." She told him quietly. "What I owe you is beyond evaluation."

She began to brush her fingertips across his ears, then kneading them into his hair. Her eyes locked intensely onto his, like a tractor beam. "Is there any way that you could stay for just a bit longer?"

Before Sunstrike could respond, Dr. Rena stepped forward. "Actually Chancellor, I'm afraid that it's time for us to break orbit. *Right, Captain?*"

Sunstrike was about to protest, but he noticed the determined look in the doctor's eye, and he hesitated.

"I agree!" Cdr. Powell chimed in excitedly, prying himself away from the enormous woman's tender, yet firm embrace. "As Galactic Union officers, we can't avoid our duty, even for another minute. Right sir?"

"Right." Sunstrike answered grudgingly, seeing the expression on the faces of his officers and friends. "But after all, we have other important work to do. I've just been informed that we're assigned to transport important medicine, desperately needed by the colonists of New Fresno."

"Sounds important!" Powell nodded enthusiastically.

"Critically important." Dr. Rena agreed, turning to Queen Marysue. "It's time for us to go now."

The queen gazed at her with swimming eyes. "I guess then that it is farewell, my love. But I wonder, will you ever return to my arms again?"

"Of course I'll come back." Rena insisted, smiling and patting her arm gently before turning away. After a brief pause, she quickly stepped over to the captain and commander, and grabbed each by the arm, pulling them back to the waiting transit pod.

While Powell seemed all too eager to leave as well, Capt. Sunstrike appeared more hesitant. So, Rena leaned in close to him, and whispered in his ear.

"Never, ever, *ever* to return!"

THE END

Preview

NOW AN EXCERPT FROM *FAMOUS ADVENTURERS* CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL, ALSO BY CRAIG MICHAEL CURTIS

Casper was awoken just after 8:00 am with a loud thudding sound coming from the floorboards underneath his bed. It wasn't long after they had moved in, that his mother had discovered that his bedroom lay directly above the kitchen pantry. So, it was not uncommon for her to wake him up for breakfast in the mornings by leaning into the pantry and rapping at the ceiling with the handle of the sponge mop. Little did she understand, or perhaps even care all that much, that this was a rather jarring way for Casper to start the day.

After getting dressed and stumbling groggily downstairs, Casper found the kitchen table already occupied. His stepfather Gray was sitting in the exact same spot he had sat the previous evening, already showered and dressed in his usual weekend attire (a polo shirt and khaki slacks), and was well underway reading the Saturday edition of the newspaper. Sitting on the table in front of him was a plate of scrambled eggs and toast and a cup of coffee. Thus far, it seemed that only the coffee had been sampled.

Natalie, meanwhile, sat across from him poking listlessly at her own plate. She was still in her over-sized tee shirt and pajama bottoms which she wore to bed, and appeared to be in a particularly sour mood. At the empty back seat by the window, Casper saw his own plate of eggs and toast waiting for him. He hated having to sit in the back, as it meant having to maneuver his way around one or the other person on either side to get in or out of the cramped corner of the breakfast nook.

Attendance at breakfast, however, was compulsory every day for every family member. Casper's mother was determined that the two half-families bond in some way, and one of the ways she was trying was to make sure that they all shared as many meals as possible together at the table. Gray's work schedule and the varying lifestyles of two teenagers meant that having all four together for dinner was uncommon at best. So, early on she decreed that they would all be required to have breakfast each morning, at 6:30 sharp during the week, and at 8:00 on weekends, so that they would all have a chance to talk about their respective day's plans.

This particular family unity scheme had had little success so far. With the exception of Gray, none of them could be counted as a 'morning person'. Even Casper's mother was generally at her grouchiest and least-patient in the early hours, but she was determined to make it work.

His mother, however, was not present at the moment. He only realized this as he was squeezing his way behind Gray's chair (Natalie appeared to be someone to avoid for the time being).

"Where's my mom?" He asked quietly.

Natalie gave no indication of responding, but Gray replied without looking up from his paper. "She went to answer the door. How was your outing last night?"

"I didn't go out last night." Casper replied. "I went to Leo's after school, but I was back a little after eight. Remember?"

"Mmm." Gray replied, nodding as he looked over the weather forecasts for all of the places across the country and around the world where he didn't live.

As Casper started in on his breakfast, his mother came stomping into the kitchen from the front room. She appeared to be in an irritated mood by default, but it was compounded by the fact that she was made to lug a large wooden crate and a slightly smaller box stacked on top of it. She roughly dropped the crate on top of the table, startling everyone there except for her husband, who continued to read the paper without looking up.

"Who was at the door, dear?" He asked sleepily, oblivious to her unusual entrance or the parcels she had deposited right in front of his plate.

"It was some kind of delivery service." She answered, glaring accusingly at her son. "They left these two things on our doorstep, and they're both addressed to you, Casper."

"Me?" Casper was stunned. He picked up the top box, which was a normal-looking cardboard parcel. It felt kind of heavy, and the label did in fact have his name and address on it. It did not, however have a return address or a sender name anywhere that he could see.

"What the hell is it?" Natalie asked curiously, having temporarily slipped out of her grim mood.

"Language!" Casper's mother hissed sharply. This brought Natalie back into her silent brooding mode as she simply crossed her arms and gave her stepmother the stink-eye.

"So what is it you've been ordering, Casper?" His mother demanded crossly. "And with what money have you been ordering it with? Have you been into my checkbook again?"

Casper groaned at the reminder of when he was six years old and he tried to write a five dollar check to get one of those spy cameras advertised on the back of a bubble-gum wrapper. It was clearly a heinous crime which any young child should have known better not to attempt, and as such he was never going to live it down.

Finally, Gray pulled down his newspaper and looked about with a casual interest. "Say, what's in the crate?"

"An excellent question." Casper's mother said, going over to the tool drawer, producing a hammer and handing it to her husband. "Maybe we should find out."

Gray blinked a couple of times, as though he were trying to mentally catch up on a conversation he hadn't been paying attention to. Finally, he accepted the hammer, and fastidiously folded up his newspaper as he got up, and placed it carefully on his chair. Then, he studied the wooden crate for several long moments, deciding the best way for him to open it up. Even Natalie looked on with intense curiosity as Gray pried open the top, and the four of them peered inside at the contents none of them had been expecting.

"It's a crate of lemons." Gray stated the obvious as he inspected one of the pieces of fruit that filled the crate to the top.

Casper's mother, half-expecting drugs or pornography, half-expecting that spy camera, sifted through the crate, searching for contraband. Finally, she was forced to admit that there was nothing at all in the crate but lemons.

"Why would you possibly want to order these?" She asked him, trying to grasp the hidden use for the container of fruit on her breakfast table.

Casper shrugged with genuine confusion. "I didn't order these, I swear! I don't know what this is."

"They're lemons." Gray repeated matter-of-factly.

"Duh." Natalie replied sarcastically.

Casper was suddenly aware of the box sitting on his lap. He could only assume that the explanation for the mysterious fruit shipment, along with other things, must be contained within it. However, he didn't want to open this package in front of everybody without knowing what was inside. He couldn't imagine that it was anything illicit, but the only thing he could speculate about was that this could possibly be from something he might have signed up for at one point at a Star Trek convention or some similar gathering. If somehow, he had signed up for some kind of Klingon juicer or something, he didn't want to be the laughing stock of the house for the next month because of it.

"What am I supposed to do with all of these lemons?" His mother demanded in exasperation.

Casper shrugged sheepishly. "Lemon pies?"

"I love lemon pie." Gray commented with mild approval, returning to his paper without a second thought.

Mother huffed with frustration, but then shook her head and waved her

further protests off. “Fine. But you’re putting these lemons away. Get them off the table, now.”

Casper nodded, and got up trying his best to conceal the unopened package he was holding in his lap. Again, he squeezed his way past Gray, who probably wouldn’t have noticed if Casper had tried to smuggle a jellyfish past him at the breakfast table now that he was once again engrossed in his paper.

“Where should I put them?” Casper asked, as he carefully picked up the crate, concealing the package between it and his body.

“Not the pantry.” His mother warned as she fetched her own breakfast from the stovetop. “I don’t want rats getting in there. Put them in the garage for now.”

Casper nodded, smiling quietly to himself as he hurried out of the kitchen. Once he reached the privacy of the garage, he flicked on the fluorescent light, plopped the crate of lemons in the corner, and carefully placed the other package on top of the empty work bench along the wall. He pulled a box cutter from the tool rack, and carefully opened up the heavily-taped seal.

Opening up the package, he found a small but thick hardbound book with a compass logo on the front. At the center of the compass was the image of a snake coiling up the length of the compass’ north-south axis, and right in the center was the image of a small lemon. Surrounding it were four letters in large black print: FACS.

Beneath the book were two smaller boxes, one of which was no larger than the size of a Tic Tac container, and which had a return address already printed on it, along with a curious-looking postage stamp. The other box was somewhat flimsy and wrapped with twine, but on top of it was an envelope with Casper’s name handwritten on the front. He immediately opened up the envelope and read the letter contained within:

To: Casper Martin DeLorean
From: Admissions Department, Famous Adventurers Correspondence School
Re: Application for Enrollment

Dear Sir or Madam,

I congratulate you on your sincere interest in joining the **Famous Adventurers Correspondence School**. Your initial demonstration of pluck and perseverance has been duly noted, and has resulted in your passing the first test for entry into our organization.

By following the given instructions and calling at the irregular hours requested in our pamphlet/bill post/skywriting advertisement, along with your determination to continue despite the incomplete phone number provided, has shown us that you meet the minimum psychological requirements to join. As such, your application for enrollment into the FACS has been provisionally accepted!

In order for your enrollment as one of our students to be permanent, you must complete two more tasks.

The first one is in fact, quite simple. Enclosed with this letter is a small card containing what is called the ‘Traitor’s Oath’ (it’s just a name). You have only to read the contents of this card out loud, and your second entry test will be officially completed!

The third and final task in your entry exam is more challenging, and has a strict time limit for its completion. There is a small, pre-addressed and postage-paid container enclosed with this parcel. In this container, you are requested and required to enclose and send to us the tooth of a meerkat. Also enclosed is a package containing some basic tools which you might find useful to this end. Once the meerkat tooth has been obtained, you may place it in the smaller container and mail it out from your home mailbox NOTE: The tooth MUST be from a meerkat, it MUST be sent in the container provided, and it MUST be sent from your home mailbox. Failure to meet any of these requirements means an automatic failure of the test, and your application will be denied.

Also, you have precisely 24 hours from the delivery of this parcel to mail out the package containing the tooth. This means that it must be in the mailbox before 8:07 am local time tomorrow.

I understand that it may sound daunting at the moment. However, once you have had the chance to consider it, I believe that you will realize that you can accomplish the task with minimal effort. In the meantime, I will wish you luck in your final two entry exams (don’t forget the note card), and I look forward to your successful entry into our ancient and illustrious organization.

Sincerely,

Pavel Lingardo III, esq.
Deputy Director for Recruitment, Northern Hemisphere
FACS

PS – Enjoy the lemons with our compliments!

With silent haste, Casper stuffed everything back into the package and dashed up to his room to hide it all. He made a point of wrapping the box in his blanket to ensure that Rasputin wouldn’t get into it, and then rushed back down to breakfast, before anyone noticed how long he had been gone.

Trying to avoid sounding like he was out of breath, he strolled into the kitchen casually. “Hey Mom, can Steve come over today?”

“Did you do your homework last night?” She asked him with suspicious eyes.

“No.” Casper admitted.

Surprisingly, Natalie spoke up to defend him. “Who the hell does their homework on Fridays? That’s what Sundays are for.”

Casper smiled slightly at his stepsister coming to his defense, though he quickly realized that she was actually just sniffing around for another fight with his mother.

“Children who live in *this* house do, that’s who, and what did I say about the language?”

Natalie’s eyes blazed defiantly. “This was my house before it was yours, you know.”

Gray, sensing that he was expected to intervene, calmly spoke up. “Natalie, don’t talk to your mother like that.”

Despite the fact that his tone was akin to him correcting her grammar,

Natalie leapt to her feet in rage at the remark. “*She’s NOT my mother!* My mother lives in Echo Park Cemetery now! *This* woman’s just a tourist in my house!”

Casper looked on mutely as his mother burst into tears and fled the kitchen to the downstairs bathroom. Natalie then grabbed her plate and flung it wildly into the kitchen sink with a deafening clatter before storming out sobbing as well. Moments later, the slamming of the bathroom door, along with Natalie’s bedroom door could be heard in rapid succession throughout the house. There was a long, quiet pause as Casper stood frozen, now alone in the kitchen with Gray, who had never even looked up from his newspaper.

“Gray, can Steve come over today?” Casper asked him.

“That’s fine.” Gray answered serenely.

**FAMOUS ADVENTURERS CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL IS
AVAILABLE ON IBOOKS AND ON BARNES AND NOBLE NOOK!**