

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

By Loren K. Jones

Twilight Times Books
Kingsport Tennessee

Loren K. Jones

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

This is a work of fiction. All concepts, characters and events portrayed in this book are used fictitiously and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 by Loren K. Jones. Expanded and revised from a previous electronic edition published by e-Quill Publishing, Brisbane, Australia 2012 with title "Confederated Star Systems Collection."

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except brief extracts for the purpose of review, without the permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

Twilight Times Books
P O Box 3340
Kingsport, TN 37664
www.twilighttimesbooks.com/

Revised Electronic Edition: April 2016. Author's preferred version.

Published in the United States of America

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

<u>First in Her Class</u>	<u>Page 4</u>
<u>Leave Nothing to Chance</u>	<u>Page 34</u>
<u>Kachina</u>	<u>Page 46</u>
<u>Rescue Mission</u>	<u>Page 53</u>
<u>Minerva</u>	<u>Page 78</u>
<u>Seeker</u>	<u>Page 91</u>
<u>Szekely</u>	<u>Page 99</u>
<u>Stinking Potemkin</u>	<u>Page 127</u>
<u>Long Haul Shipping</u>	<u>Page 143</u>
<u><i>About the Author</i></u>	<u>Page 148</u>
<u>Preview <i>Inadvertent Adventures</i></u>	<u>Page 149</u>

These first four stories, like many others I've written, were written for submission to *Jim Baen's Universe* online magazine. I was trying for a serialized story line, but never made it. The third story, "Kachina," was actually the first one written.

First in Her Class

"What in God's name is *that*?" a woman's voice asked in the darkened observation lounge of Grissom Station. Outside, floating by under tow of a CSS Navy tug, was a ship of such antiquity that it would have looked more appropriate in a museum than a Naval Shipyard – unless, of course, it was there to be scrapped.

"That, my good Captain Reordan, is the CSS *Edward White*, CGH-14," a man's voice answered.

"CGH-14?" Captain Reordan asked. "My Lord, that ship has to be three hundred years old."

"Three hundred twenty-one, as dated from her commissioning," the man answered. The lights came up to reveal the speakers. Captain Reordan was an attractive woman with light brown hair and hazel eyes. The man she had addressed as "My Lord" was much older. Tall and slender, he gave the impression of a dancer turned actor. That was almost accurate. Lord Devero Kenyon was an admiral turned politician, and the current First Lord of the Admiralty, a position that required a great deal of dancing on occasion.

"*That* is my new command, sir?" Captain Reordan asked in a crushed tone.

"Don't take it so hard, Erica," Lord Kenyon said in a warm tone. "She's far more than she appears."

"Sir?"

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Erica, what I’m about to reveal is so highly classified that you have to have a top secret security clearance just to know the name of its classification. It’s well beyond Ultra Q.” He paused as the captain’s eyes widened. “You, as her new captain, have been given clearance by the classifying authority to know everything. You will be the thirty-sixth person informed, outside the original crew and the crew who rescued them.” He waited until Captain Reordan nodded again before continuing.

“Some three hundred years ago the *White* was testing a new drive configuration. She vanished with all hands, and wasn’t heard from until just under a year ago. That’s when she reappeared. Intact. With all hands.”

“How is that possible, Sir?”

Lord Kenyon tilted his head to the side. “The new drive didn’t move them through space, Erica. It moved them through *time*.”

Captain Reordan looked him straight in the eye and said, “That’s impossible, sir.”

“Until I reviewed their logs I would have agreed with you. It seems that the designers made one too many modifications to the Johansen Coil configuration. The *White* was thrown three hundred years into the future. Into our here and now.”

Captain Reordan shook her head and paced in a circle around the empty lounge. “What’s going to happen to them? Are they going back?”

“No.” Now the admiral frowned and shook his head. “No, Erica, we can’t allow that. They were rescued and at first detained aboard the *Roger B. Chaffee*, but not sequestered. The crew was given full access to the ship, except the control and engineering spaces. Unfortunately, they were not kept from using the ship’s library. They know far too much about the past three hundred years, their future, to allow them to return to their own era.”

“Sir!”

“I know, Erica. God, do I know. But they cannot be allowed to go back and make any changes to our past. The *White* was listed as missing and presumed lost one year after she disappeared. There’s even a memorial to them. And that’s how things have to remain.”

Captain Reordan shook her head and whispered, “That’s horrible.”

“It is indeed. There were six hundred thirty-seven men and women on that ship. They were all sailors in the newly formed Confederated Star Systems Space Navy. They are in a very real sense the ancestors of every man and woman who wears our uniform.”

“So what’s going to happen to them, Sir?”

The admiral chuckled and gave her a lopsided grin. “They have each been given three hundred years of back pay and retired with full benefits. Each has been forced, and there is no better term for it, to sign an official secrecy oath, under penalty of imprisonment if they disclose anything about their origins. Then they were scattered to the far corners of the Confederacy, and given new identities. Their part in this story is at an end. The crew of the *Chaffee* was made to sign the secrecy oath and disbursed throughout the fleet. You’ll be getting a fair sampling of them as *your* new crew.”

“So what am I supposed to do with the *White*, Sir?”

Now Admiral Kenyon turned to clasp Captain Reordan by the shoulders. “Erica, we’ve renamed her the *Herbert George Wells*, TCH-1. You’re going to refit her as the first in her class. The engineers have figured out how the time-drive works, to some extent at least. Enough that a test-run made an accurate jump of one year into the past, then back again.”

“Herbert George Wells. And TCH-1. There’s some significance to that name, Sir, but I can’t place it.”

Admiral Kenyon chuckled. “Indeed there is, Erica. TCH stands for Temporal Cruiser, Hyper-capable. And H.G. Wells wrote a book called *The Time Machine*.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

* * *

The old ship with the fresh new name painted on her nose was all but completely concealed in an orbital dry-dock that was meant to hold a modern-day heavy cruiser. She was receiving a complete refit-except for her hyper drive. New controls were, however, being added to the ship's control room. These controls would allow the *Wells* to pick a date and jump to it with a certain amount of accuracy. No one was sure just how accurate that was going to be.

The refit was closer to total revamp of the ship's systems. In real, subjective years, they were only a little over twenty years old, but ship-building had come a long way in the three hundred years she was in transit. Everything from her navigational suite to her weapons was being revamped.

Captain Reordan had an office on the inner side of the dock so she could watch the ship as she was being worked on. The door-chime drew her attention and she automatically said, "Come."

A tall, slender, well-muscled man dressed in a commander's uniform walked in and came to attention. "Commander Kellin Frazier, reporting as ordered, Ma'am." At Captain Reordan's nod he laid an InfoChip on her desk.

The captain ignored it. She'd already seen all the data it contained. Standing, she offered her hand and said, "Mister Frazier, welcome aboard the *H.G. Wells*."

Commander Frazier took her hand automatically, but his eyes were focused beyond her, out into the dry-dock. "Thank you, Ma'am, but what am I doing here? I specifically requested duty on a research vessel. That's a heavy cruiser." He gave the ship a closer look. "That's a really *old* heavy cruiser."

"Older than you can imagine, Mister Frazier. I can't give you all the details yet, not till your full clearances come in, but rest assured that she is a research vessel. She's being specially refitted for the duty."

Commander Frazier glanced at his new captain, and walked over to the window. "What are they doing to her, Ma'am?"

“Well, most significantly, they are stripping her weapons to a bare minimum. Six torpedo tubes and two gamma-ray lasers are all she’ll have left when they’re done. Barely enough to defend herself. Most of the rest of the ship is being refitted to incorporate science labs. We’re going to be doing some very delicate research. We’ll also be receiving seven landing craft of assorted models for planetary surveys. While the *Wells* is technically capable of making landfall, it’s not something we’ll be doing if we can help it.” She grimaced at the thought. “It expends ninety percent of her fuel to land and take off again.”

“What class ship is she, Ma’am?” the commander asked, still gazing out the window.

“That will also have to wait for your clearances to come in. All I can tell you now is that she’s the last of her kind and the first of her kind.”

“That’s kind of cryptic, Captain.”

Captain Reordan smiled softly and tilted her head to the side as she said, “I know, but you really do have to wait. But trust me on this; it’ll be worth it.”

“All right, Captain, if you say so. What do you want me on first?”

Captain Reordan smiled at the easy way her executive officer assumed his responsibilities. “Crew listing. We only have about thirty of our crew so far, and there are only going to be about two hundred in total. We may also be taking along a hundred or so specialists, but they won’t be our responsibility.” She turned back to her desk to call up a set of schematics, and turned the monitor toward her exec. “These are the refit plans. I’ll forward them to you. The berthing arrangements are your first concern. The ship originally carried over six hundred, but a lot more systems are being automated in the refit.”

Commander Frazier looked at the plans intently, then shook his head. “That doesn’t look like any ship design I’ve ever seen before, Ma’am. I suppose that is going to have to wait on my clearances as well. What have we received as far as crew?”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Mostly engineers. Our chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Jarred Williamson, has his people in the engineering spaces. This ship has a very – special – drive and he and his people need all the time they can manage getting to know it.”

“I know Jarred Williamson, Captain. There’s never been a drive he couldn’t make dance. He’s the most talented and intuitive engineer I’ve ever met. What is he doing here? The last I heard he was headed for R&D to design – Oh, crap.” Commander Frazier looked stunned. “Is this one of Jerry’s designs?”

“No. But you should have seen him when he got a look at her schematics. I’ve never seen a grown man act so much like a my little brother at Christmas.”

Commander Frazier grinned. “That’s Jerry.”

“Our people are berthed on the dock. We have –” A chime from the computer drew her attention. She muttered, “Figures,” as she read the message. “I have to go to the Luna Administrative Center. Ask the corporal at the door to take you to our berthing area. XO’s stateroom is clearly marked.” She pulled a key-card from a pile on her desk. “This will get you in, and then you can key it to your door. Dismissed, Mister Frazier.”

Commander Frazier snapped to attention. “Yes, Ma’am,” he answered, then did an about-face and left the office.

Captain Reordan waited until the door closed before pushing a stud on her desk. A woman’s voice almost immediately replied, “Chief’s Quarters, Master Chief McCormack speaking.”

“COB, I need a small craft to the moon, ASAP.” She didn’t identify herself. She didn’t need to. She and Krystal McCormack went way back.

“I’ll have shuttle six fueled and pre-flighted before you get to her, Ma’am. Any special instructions?”

“No, just got called for a face-to-face with Admiral Kerhonkson again. I wonder why she can’t just chew me out over the com like everyone else does?” There was laughter from the com, but no other comment before it went dead.

Captain Reordan closed out her files and secured her computer before leaving her office. Her usual Marine guard was with the XO, so she just locked the door and headed for the shuttle dock. As promised, shuttle six, the one with the name *Krystal's Kitty* on her nose, was waiting with hot engines.

"Ready to go, Krys?" she asked as she boarded and took the right-hand seat.

"All systems normal. What'd you do this time, Erica?" the COB answered.

"Same old shit, Krys. Same old shit. Admiral Kerhonkson wants to know what we are doing with 'that old derelict' in one of her dry docks. I can't tell her, which she interprets as 'won't' tell her, and she's going to try browbeating me again."

"The old man won't help?"

Captain Reordan shook her head at Krystal referring to Lord Kenyon as The Old Man. "Haven't called him about it yet. So far she's just being nose. If it comes to it, though, I'll com him for help."

Master Chief McCormack nodded and grasped the shuttle's joy-stick. A slight movement of her wrist caused reaction thrusters to puff and the small vessel pushed away from the dock. Another twitch shoved her nose away from the station. She waited until they had a hundred meters clearance before engaging the main drive.

Captain Reordan felt a fat man sit on her chest for a minute, then weightlessness replaced him. "I'm not in that much of a hurry, Krys."

"Had to get clear of an incoming cargo shuttle," Krystal replied as she fiddled with her controls. "Three hours to Luna orbit. Probably an hour more waiting for landing clearance." She brought out a deck of magnetic cards.

"Hearts or Aces?"

Captain Reordan laughed. "You never change, Krys. And I hope you never do. Hearts."

* * *

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

The yeoman stood when Captain Reordan entered the admiral's office.
"May I help you, Ma'am?"

"I'm Captain Erica Reordan. I—"

"The admiral said to send you right in, Ma'am," the yeoman interrupted.
"This way please." He led the way to a door at the back of the office and opened it, then announced, "Captain Reordan is here, Ma'am."

The reply was a cold, "Send her in."

Captain Reordan marched into the admiral's office and came to attention.
"Captain Erica Reordan reporting to Admiral Kerhonkson as ordered, Ma'am."

The admiral didn't even look up from her desk. She seemed to be ignoring Captain Reordan, and continued the charade for five minutes while Erica stood at attention. She finally spoke, still not looking up. "What is that ship?"

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I am not at liberty to disclose that information."

The admiral took a quick breath through her nose, then blew it out just as fast. "You will answer me, Captain." Now her eyes came up, and they might as well have been laser cannons. "I have clearance to every engineering secret in the Confederacy. Now what are you doing with that ancient piece of crap?"

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I have been ordered not to discuss the particulars of the *Wells* with anyone without written authorization from Lord Kenyon."

The admiral shouted, "*You insolent little bitch!*" just as the door opened again. "I said I wasn't to be disturbed!"

"Admiral Kerhonkson, Lady Les—"

The yeoman was pushed aside by a large man in the uniform of the Presidential Security Service and a little old lady walked in. "Who in the hell are you?" the admiral demanded.

"I'm Lady Princess Leslie Ann Elisabeth Courtney Del Rios Roberts, and if you speak to me in that tone again I'll have Eric bust your sorry ass," the old lady

replied with a scowl. "Captain Reordan and her ship are under my jurisdiction, and you'll keep your nosey ass out of my business. Is that understood, Admiral Kerhonkson?"

"You have no—"

"Six months ago the Confederate Congress authorized a new research directorate, and the *Wells* is our first vessel."

"I was informed of no—"

"You don't have the clearance," Lady Leslie interrupted.

"I have clearance for—"

"Not for this, and since *I* am the only person who can grant such a clearance, you'll never receive it. Captain Reordan, return to your ship."

"You have no authority over Naval personnel," Admiral Kerhonkson snarled.

Lady Leslie just glared at her for a moment, then pulled a small com unit from her handbag. She flipped it open, and a voice answered a moment later.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Eric, dear, I'm having more trouble with that Kerhonkson woman," Lady Leslie replied.

The voice replied, "Yes, Mother," and the com went dead.

"Am I supposed to be intimidated by that?" Admiral Kerhonkson asked with a sneer.

Lady Leslie smiled serenely. "Oh, no. You'll be intimidated by someone else entirely. I've been aware of your harassment of Captain Reordan and her people, and it's going to stop."

"There are very few people in the Navy who can intimidate me, Lady Leslie, and even fewer civilians."

"If you keep interfering in my directorate's business," Lady Leslie replied in a low, angry tone, "you'll be a civilian."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

"I am within my rights to—" The admiral's snarled, then her line beeped. It was a personal line, straight from the CSS Navy Headquarters on Earth.

"Admiral Kerhonkson," she said as she pushed the answer stud.

"Mara, what the hell are you doing?" the voice of Fleet Admiral Franco asked.

"Sir?"

"The president just chewed my ass about you interfering in the—in the business of a new research directorate. Damn it, woman, there are some things you just don't have a right to know. Whatever the hell you're doing, stop it before you get beached."

"Admiral, what are—"

"Do it before I have to make it an official order and have you relieved, Admiral Kerhonkson."

"Yes, sir." The line went dead and the admiral looked at Lady Leslie. "Your son?"

"You may refer to him as President Roberts." Lady Leslie turned and pointed a wrinkled finger at Captain Reordan. "Return to your ship. The *Wells* and her crew are on detached duty from the Navy. You answer to me and my staff, not this officious busybody."

Captain Reordan gave Admiral Kerhonkson a pensive glance, then came to attention and said, "Yes, Lady Leslie." She left the office, but behind her she heard Lady Leslie say, "*That's one. You don't get two.*"

* * *

Captain Reordan found Master Chief McCormack engaged in a lively discussion with a male Senior Chief when she returned to the shuttle. The chiefs immediately ended their discussion with a wave and Master Chief McCormack waved her captain on board before closing and securing the hatch. "Is everything all right, Captain?" she asked as she took her seat.

Captain Reordan didn't look up from her computer terminal as she answered, "Yes, Krys, everything's fine. Head back to the dry-dock. I have to look something up." They had been underway for fifteen minutes when Captain Reordan grunted. "I'll be damned."

"Erica?"

Captain Reordan shook her head. "My meeting with Admiral Kerhonkson was interrupted by our new boss. Lady Leslie Roberts is the head of our new research directorate. She's also President Roberts' mom. She's got quite a bio. Born on Hector's World as the youngest daughter to King Alonso Del Rios, her brother was King Rolando, and her nephew Antonio is the current king. She was married to Prince Rupert of Andersen's Planet for three years, no children. No information on the divorce beyond the fact they got divorced. She married Lieutenant Commander Gregory Roberts, who eventually became Admiral Lord Roberts, and then First Lord of the Admiralty Roberts."

Krystal let loose a long, low whistle. "Boss lady's no one to mess with. What happened?"

"She came in, slapped down Admiral Nosey, and then called the president when there was a question of who works for who. We work for her and her directorate." Captain Reordan sighed gustily. "And I still have no idea what that directorate is called or what our mission is."

"Given the capability of the *Wells*, you know it almost has to be historical research."

Captain Reordan nodded. "Too true. Where're the cards? I've got to win my pants back before we reach the dock."

* * *

There was a message waiting for Captain Reordan when she reached her office. "Erica," Lady Leslie's voice said as her image formed on the screen, "you are hereby directed to ignore any further summonses from Admiral Kerhonkson."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

While you are inhabiting one of her dry-docks, and her people are refitting your ship, you don't answer to her." Lady Leslie's face frowned out of the screen.

"However, because of her actions today, Eric has decided that we need to make an announcement. I want you on Earth tomorrow morning for the formal presentation. We'll be holding a press conference on the steps of the capitol building in Geneva at eleven in the morning, so present yourself in full dress kit no later than nine. The paperwork is being transmitted for your executive officer's clearance, and will probably be waiting for you. Get him briefed, then head planet-side." The screen went blank without another word.

Captain Reordan muttered, "Damn," as she checked her in box. Sure enough, Kellin Frazier's full clearance was right on top. She pushed a stud on her com panel and he answered almost immediately.

"XO's stateroom, Commander Frazier speaking."

"Commander, come to my office. I have your clearance and I'm ready to brief you on our ship."

"On my way, Captain," he answered and the com clicked. The Marine at the door announced him a moment later and he came to attention in front of her desk. "Commander Frazier reporting as ordered, Ma'am."

"Sit down, Commander. This is the story of our ship." She waited until he was seated, then related the story as she had been told. His reaction was predictable.

He whispered, "A time machine?"

"A Temporal Cruiser. We are unlikely to be using her for interstellar flight, though. Not sure the drive can function like that anymore. But we will be making hyper-jumps to different time periods. Right now, you, me, Jarred Williamson and his twenty engineers, and Krystal McCormack are the only ones outside the upper echelons of the service and government who know about this. Even the few other crewmembers who've reported haven't been told anything

other than we're refitting an old ship as a research vessel. Most of Jarred's people came from the *Chaffee*, so they already knew most of it."

She paused and shook her head. "I've been summoned dirt-side for the official announcement. Then I'll find out what our directorate is actually called. I'll take Krys with me – oh, I should mention that Krys McCormack and I served together on the *Volochev* twenty years ago. She was a Second Class when I was a JG acting as ComOfficer. We've been friends for a long time, and I requested her for this duty."

"Understood, Captain. Damn. Time travel. Never thought it would really happen."

"I'm pretty sure no one did. Like many great discoveries, it was a total accident, but we're going to take full advantage of it. Now I've got to tell Krys that we're going to a formal occasion – she's gonna love it – and then go dig out my dress uniform."

"I'll keep our ship on an even keel while you're gone, Captain,"
Commander Frazier said as he came to attention.

"Very well, XO. Dismissed." When Commander Frazier closed the door on his way out, Captain Reordan pushed the com button once again.

"Chief's Quarters, Chief Samson speaking."

"This is the captain. Is the COB there?"

There was a brief pause and then Master Chief McCormack's voice came on. "COB."

"COB, come to my office."

"Aye, Ma'am." It took less than two minutes before the Marine announced, "Chief of the Boat, Ma'am."

"Send her in."

Master Chief McCormack came to attention in front of the captain's desk and said, "COB, reporting as ordered, Ma'am."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Fuel your kitty again, Krys, then lay out your dress whites.” She pushed the replay on her com unit and let Krystal see and hear the message. “We’re going to play dress-up and go to a party.”

Master Chief McCormack’s grin was as wide as her face. “Oh, Erica, you know me *soooo* well. We going tonight or in the morning?”

“Tonight. I contacted Space Port Geneva for rooms while I was waiting, but they are already booked due to the ceremony. It was only announced an hour ago, but you know how bureaucrats are. So, being the kind captain that I am, I arranged two rooms at the Avalon.”

Krystal’s grin grew even wider. “The last time—”

“We’re not doing that again,” Erica interrupted. “This time I’m the captain and *I’ll* have to cover our asses. Though I have to admit, it was fun.”

“So we have to behave like grownups this time. Damn. Ah, well, it may be time. I’ll need about three hours. My whites are still packed. I’ll have to have station services do a quick run through. Want me to take yours?”

Captain Reordan shook her head. “No, mine are freshly pressed. I’ve been expecting something formal for a while, though I didn’t think it’d be this elaborate. Be sure to bring all your costume jewelry and fruit salad as well. Especially the blue one.”

“Oh?”

“If someone asks why I brought along an enlisted woman, I want them to see it.”

“You’re expecting trouble.” Captain Reordan nodded mutely. “So you think that’s going to shut someone up?”

“Not the person I’m thinking of, but Eric Roberts once wore a Marine lieutenant’s uniform. *He* will deal with any trouble as soon as he sees that ribbon. Or his mom will. Tell you what, Krys, I’ve never been so instantly intimidated by anyone before, and the woman can’t be more than a meter and a half tall. There’s just something about her that made me feel like a toddler again.”

Krystal shook her head slowly. "I gotta meet this lady. I'll com you when my uniform is ready." She came to attention briefly, then did an about face and left her captain's office.

* * *

The trip down to Earth was routine. They received clearance to land and park the *Kitty* in among dozens of other Navy shuttles, then they slipped into a locker-room and changed into civilian clothes. Their day-to-day uniforms were unceremoniously stuffed in a rented locker. When they walked out, all anyone saw was two well-dressed, attractive, forty-something women as they caught a transport to the Avalon Resort.

Exquisitely polite young men came and took their bags, and Krystal sighed as they made their way to the desk. "Do I really have to be good, Erica?"

The captain chuckled softly before answering. "Just no skinny-dipping in the fountain this time."

Krystal whispered, "That was your idea," just before they reached the desk.

Captain Reordan asked, "Do you have reservations for Erica Reordan and Krystal McCormack?"

The man at the desk punched a few keys on his keyboard and nodded. "Yes, Madame. Adjoining suites twenty-three-oh-five and twenty-three-oh-seven." He handed over two keycards. "The bellmen will see you to your rooms."

Captain Reordan took the keys and handed the one marked twenty-three-oh-seven to Krystal, then nodded to the bellmen. The two young men led off without a word, and Captain Reordan shook her head as she followed Krystal's gaze. The young man did have a nice backside. In fact, both of them did.

When they reached their rooms, Captain Reordan tipped her bellman and let him go, then stood in her doorway to see how long Krystal kept her young man. It took three extra minutes for the bellman to emerge from her room, and

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

he had a bemused expression on his face as he walked past Erica. Krystal came out a few moments later with a similar expression. "What?"

"He called me Ma'am, Erica. *Ma'am?* I'm not old enough to be called Ma'am by a man his age — am I?"

Captain Reordan shook her head slowly. "I've been getting it from men my own age for twenty years, Krys, so I'd have to say yes, you are — don't!" she snapped as Krystal's fist came up. "Hitting your captain is not allowed."

"Even if she deserves it?"

"*Especially* if she deserves it. Come on, let's go up to the restaurant and see what's on the menu."

Krystal nodded and fell in beside Erica, getting in step automatically. Neither noticed. Like most long-time service members, it was as natural as breathing. They took the elevator up to the restaurant that occupied the entire roof of the building.

"Two for dinner?" a pretty, brightly happy young woman asked.

"Yes. By a window, please," Krystal answered.

"This way," the girl said with a big smile and led them to a seat that let them look out over the city, almost straight down to the ground. "Will this do?"

"Yes," Krystal said as she took a moment to look outward.

"Anton will be your server." She laid two menus on the table and went back to her station.

He was there immediately. "Good evening, ladies. I am Anton. What can I bring you to drink?"

Krystal again took the lead. "Margarita, double-shot of Quervo Gold, frozen."

Anton simply nodded and turned to Erica. "And for you, Madame?"

Erica smiled and said, "Mango daiquiri."

Anton nodded again and turned away, saying, "I shall return shortly," as he moved.

Krystal breathed, "God, that's a beautiful view."

Erica had to agree. "Yep. Now quit looking at the waiter's butt and look outside. There's a lot of traffic coming into the port."

Krystal looked out and nodded. "Big to-do tomorrow. Now are you going to tell me who you're worried about seeing or not?"

"Admiral Ruel."

"Paul Ruel? Wasn't he your CO at one time?"

Erica nodded. "When I was engineer on the *Moscow*. Krys, he opposed my advancement from lieutenant commander to commander. Opposed it so vehemently that he threatened to resign his commission if I was promoted against his recommendation. I was, he didn't, and Admiral Kenyon took me onto his staff to show Captain Ruel what he thought. Captain Ruel disapproved of my tendency to treat enlisted personnel as humans and not just expendable equipment."

Krystal nodded. "Now I remember. Wasn't he encouraged to retire because of his relationship with a young lieutenant?"

"Relationship? No. He was sexually and mentally abusing the man. But that was all right in his book because they were both officers. As far as he is concerned, officers and enlisted are two different species."

"And you think he's going to be here?"

"He's a representative from Spain now."

"He'll be here."

"Your drinks, ladies," Anton said as he stopped to deposit their order. "Are you ready, or shall I return in a few minutes?"

Erica smiled and said, "Prime Rib, as rare as you have. Vegetable medley and rice pilaf." Anton smiled and turned his attention to Krystal.

"Porterhouse, rare, baked potato and beans."

Anton said, "Very good, ladies," then bowed and turned away.

Krystal sighed and said, "I know what I'd rather have."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“You need to get out more.”

“Erica, I thought that was you,” a woman’s voice said from behind her, and Erica turned, then quickly stood, motioning Krystal to do likewise.

Erica gathered her wits and said, “Lady Leslie, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“You didn’t think I’d stay at the port, did you? The Avalon is the finest resort in the city. But you and Krystal already knew that, didn’t you. It’s not your first time here.” Erica and Krystal shared a quick glance that made Lady Leslie chuckle. “Oh, come now, I have full reports on both of you. Your adventure here twenty some years ago was so *very* amusing to read. It was one of the reasons I approved Krystal for duty on the *Wells*. The captain and COB have to work well together, and Krystal has proven her courage and flexibility in the most trying circumstances.” She smiled impishly, which was a surprisingly frightening expression on her, and waved someone forward. “Ladies, this is my grandson, Bertrand.”

A young man in a navy ensign’s uniform came to attention, but didn’t salute. He said, “Ma’am. Master Chief,” as he stood at his grandmother’s side.

Erica said, “Mister Roberts,” as she bowed her head slightly, and Krystal bowed her head more deeply.

Lady Leslie chuckled at the tone of Erica’s greeting. “Oh, don’t worry, Erica, I’m not foisting him on you. Given the nature of your vessel and assignments, his father would never allow it.” She ignored the intensely curious look he gave her. Smiling, Lady Leslie reached out and patted Erica’s hand. “You ladies enjoy your night, but don’t be hungover tomorrow.” With that she took Bertrand by the arm and turned away. She looked over her shoulder and said, “And stay out of the fountain,” with a trace of mischievous glee.

Erica and Krystal sat down and exchanged a glance, then burst out laughing. Krystal said, “You’re right. There’s something terrifying about that

little old lady that has nothing to do with her size or birthright. I sure am glad she's on our side."

Anton returned a moment later and all other concerns vanished. No Navy meal could compare to one at the Avalon.

* * *

There was a knock on the door between their suites and Krystal's voice asked, "You up yet?"

Erica walked over and unlocked her side, then opened the door. "Been up for hours. My body thinks it's about ten in the morning."

"Clock says six."

"Lying piece of —"

Krystal laughed. "Now, now, be nice. Let me take a look." Erica came to attention as Krystal walked around her. "Everything is satisfactory. Me?" She came to attention as Erica inspected her.

"Perfect as always, Krys." She reached out and adjusted the rows of ribbons that decorated Krystal's chest, then nodded. "Looks like we're ready, Master Chief McCormack."

"After you, Captain," Krystal replied with a bow as she opened the door.

Erica led the way to the elevators and hit the call button. "We're going to be early, but better early than late for these things." The elevator arrived and the doors opened to let them in. Only one other person was in the car, and he ignored the women in uniform.

In the lobby, Erica approached the concierge. "We need transport to the capitol building."

The man bowed his head and clicked his heels, then made a gesture with one hand. One of the dozen or so young men standing around the room immediately hurried out and flagged down a taxi. "This way, ladies." The man led the way and he and the bellman held the doors for them.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“The capitol building, please,” Krystal told the driver, and he immediately accelerated out of the parking area. The ride was long, but interesting. Geneva had been chosen as the planetary capital of Earth long before the founding of the Confederated Star Systems, and had taken on the role of Confederate Capital naturally. The city had expanded tastefully, and the architecture was in some cases stunning. The architects had stayed with the original Swiss designs, and had done a magnificent job.

The taxi came to a stop at the capitol drop-off point and Erica paid the bill. Erica led the way up the steps. A man in the uniform of the Capitol Guardians met them at the top. “Are you here for the ceremony?”

“We are,” Captain Reordan replied.

“May I see your IDs, please?” the guardian asked, and both women handed them over. A quick scan drew a smile from the guardian. He waved a woman over as he handed the IDs back and said, “Escort these sailors to the waiting area.” The woman saluted and led them to the left. They walked half way around the building to a large tent. She smiled and bowed them on their way without ever saying a word.

Captain Reordan led the way into the tent and looked around. Even as early as they were, they were not the first to arrive. At least fifty people were already there, including the familiar figure of Lord Kenyon.

Devero Kenyon saw them coming and smiled. “Captain Reordan, Master Chief McCormack, it’s good to see you again.” He smiled as his eyes scanned both women, then stopped on Krystal’s chest. His back automatically stiffened as he came to attention, but he wasn’t in uniform so he didn’t salute. His eyes came up to meet hers as he said, “I’d almost forgotten about that, Master Chief.”

Krystal replied, “There are times, My Lord, when I wish I could.”

Lord Kenyon’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “I imagine so, Master Chief. I imagine so.”

“Ah, Devero, there you are,” a cultured voice said as a tall man walked up to them, ignoring the uniforms completely. “I’d like you to join us after the ceremony. Juanita is looking forward to seeing you again.”

“Paul, I believe you know Captain Reordan,” Lord Kenyon said as he turned back toward the women. “She’s the CO of our new ship.”

Paul Ruel inclined his head slightly. “Captain.”

“Representative Ruel,” Erica replied coldly.

The man raised an eyebrow when his attention shifted to Krystal. “I see your taste in companions hasn’t changed.” His gaze was icy as he swept her with a glance.

“Representative Ruel, Master Chi—”

“That will be all, Captain,” the representative interrupted.

“Indeed,” a new voice agreed. All of them turned to face a short, stout woman in the uniform of a CSS Marine general. “Captain, it is inappropriate for you to bring an enlisted sailor to this ceremony.”

Lord Kenyon said, “General Soto,” in a dangerously soft voice.

“Lord Kenyon?” she answered in clear puzzlement. Lord Devero reached up and tapped his chest four inches below his left shoulder. General Soto looked puzzled, then looked at Captain Reordan. When she didn’t see anything remarkable, she shifted her gaze to Master Chief McCormack. Her eyes locked with an almost audible click on the small blue and white ribbon that stood alone above all of the rest of Krystal’s awards.

Commandant of the Marine Corps Leobarda Soto snapped to attention and offered a parade-ground perfect salute to Master Chief Electronics Technician Krystal Elise McCormick, one of only thirteen living recipients of the Confederated Star Systems Congressional Medal of Honor.

When Krystal had returned the salute, Lord Kenyon continued. “ET2 McCormack saved the lives of three thousand Marines by locking herself in a leaking compartment without an environment suit to repair the life support

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

system of the transport ship *CSS Jose Francisco Jimenez*. She was clinically dead by the time a repair crew sealed the breach and repressurized the compartment. She died five more times in sickbay before the medics finally convinced her to stick around. I may be prejudiced about it, since my daughter was one of those Marines, but I think she has every right to be here.”

General Soto said, “Yes, Lord Kenyon,” and turned away.

Lord Kenyon turned back to Paul Ruel, but all he saw was the man’s back as he all but stomped away.

Lord Kenyon smiled but made no other comment. Changing the subject, he turned to Captain Reordan and said, “Lady Leslie told me she ran into you last night. She’s not in the best of moods right now. There has been a leak, and she’s pretty sure she knows who it was. An ENN newsperson woke her up at four this morning to ask about the reported timeship from the past.”

“Oh no,” Captain Reordan breathed.

“Oh yes,” Lord Kenyon agreed. “We’ve tightened security as much as possible, but you may be assaulted by reporters at some point today. Keep your tempers in check. Especially yours, Erica.”

“Me, Sir?”

“You, and don’t try that big-eyed innocent look on me. I know better. No punching reporters. I don’t care what they ask or say.” He frowned and stared into Erica’s eyes for a moment. “If I catch one hint of trouble, I’m going to have the Marines sit on you.”

There was a strangled snort from the side and Lord Kenyon turned toward Master Chief McCormack. “And don’t let me here of trouble with you either, Master Chief. Your reputation is a bad as hers.”

“*Sir!* I’ll have you know, My Lord, that I’m nowhere near as restrained as the captain.”

Lord Kenyon sighed and ran both hands through his hair. “Lady Leslie chose well. God help us all. Grab something to eat; it’s going to be a long day.” Both women came to attention as he turned away.

Captain Reordan looked at Master Chief McCormack and whispered, “Teasing him isn’t the best idea, Krys.”

Master Chief McCormack whispered back, “You’re the thinker, I’m the stinker.” Then in a stronger voice, “After you, Captain.” They both moved toward the buffet table and joined the queue.

* * *

The podium was centered at the top of the capitol steps with a horseshoe of security personnel six deep below it. Back in the shadows of the portico could be seen perhaps a hundred more, and behind them stood three platoons of CSS Marines in full battle dress.

Reporters from several hundred different news agencies with bases on every planet in the Confederacy were sitting in the chairs that had been arranged on the flat surface of the car park—for their own protection, of course. Couldn’t have them on the steps. Someone might stumble and get hurt.

To the sides, in significantly better seats under awnings, sat the seven hundred members of the Confederate Congress. They were divided into the House of Representatives to the left and House of Lords to the right.

Captain Reordan looked out at the throng and muttered, “They look like vultures waiting for something to die.”

“Hopefully not us,” Master Chief McCormack muttered back.

Lady Leslie walked up just then and said, “Stay in the back until you are called. Then I want both of you to come forward with Krystal half a step behind your left shoulder, Erica. I want that,” she stabbed a finger at the top ribbon on Master Chief McCormack’s chest, “to be clearly visible. You were wise to bring

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

her, Erica. There are already questions about the kind of crew we're manning the *Wells* with."

Both Captain Reordan and Master Chief McCormack snapped to attention and said, "Yes, Ma'am."

Lady Leslie turned away and walked over to a knot of Presidential Security personnel and shoved her way to the center. Most of them looked down at the sharp elbows and immediately stepped aside. There was a brief glimpse of several men in Navy and Marine uniforms, and one tall man in an immaculate suit.

The whole group moved forward and then spread out to allow their most important member to the front.

* * *

Confederate President Eric David Roberts stepped up to the podium and looked out at the sea of faces and hid his feelings. *Bunch of buzzards waiting for some sign of weakness.* He shuffled a handful of papers that were waiting for him, then spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, lords and ladies, representatives of the Confederacy, it is my pleasant duty today to announce an astounding development. Slightly under a year ago a CSS Navy ship that was thought long lost reappeared in space to the north of the ecliptic. That ship, the CSS *Edward White*, was lost three hundred years ago with all hands. The most significant part of that is that they had no idea they were lost. As far as the *White* and her crew knew, they had been attempting to make a hyper-transit to a point three hundred light-years from Earth and had failed. Only about nine subjective hours had passed for them, but they had traveled three hundred years into the future—three hundred years that delivered them to our here and now."

The president paused and allowed the reporters to react for a moment. The reporters were already shouting questions, demanding explanations, and for the most part behaving like spoiled children. The president allowed them to get it out of their systems for a moment, then continued. "The crew of the *White* were as amazed as any of us. Especially the Admiralty. The CSS *Roger B. Chaffee* was sent to bring them in, and the crews mixed freely. Unfortunately, that meant that we could not allow the *White* to attempt another jump as it risked contaminating the timeline." He paused again and allowed the shock of his statement to wear off for a moment. "The crew has been retired, and may consider this announcement as a release from their secrecy oath. If any of you men and women want to talk about your trip, feel free. Someone who is going to jail soon has already been leaking information and details to the press."

The president once again paused, then looked to the side and his mother stepped forward. "When we realized the implications of the *White's* journey we created the Temporal Directorate under control of Lady Princess Leslie Ann Elisabeth Courtney Del Rios Roberts. Most of you already know she's my mother, but that's not the reason – well, not the main reason – she got control of the new directorate." He paused as a few chuckles rippled through the crowd. "Mother got the job because she was once the top researcher in temporal phenomena on Hector's World. The fact that her research found that time travel was impossible made her the perfect person to control access to the time travel process." The president stepped aside and one of the security personnel placed a three-step-stool at the podium for Lady Leslie. She climbed the steps with a hand from her son for balance.

"Good day," she said as she gazed out at the crowd. "The Temporal Directorate was created to study and limit access to the time travel process to ensure we don't go mucking up our past. There is a real possibility of that happening if we interact with the past as we know it. There is no proof of the

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

multiverse theory, and it could be that a small change in the past could result in the eradication of our civilization.” She paused theatrically, then continued.

“The Temporal Directorate will consist of myself, the Vice President, the First Lord of the Admiralty, whoever holds the chair of the newly-created Temporal Studies Chair at Charles De Gaulle University, and the Chief of Naval Operations. You’ll notice that we’re Navy heavy, and there is a good reason for that. The *White* has been rechristened the *CSS Herbert George Wells*, TCH-1, and will continue to be a Navy ship with a Navy crew. At this time I would like to introduce her captain, Erica Michelle Reordan, and Chief of the Boat, Master Chief Electronics Technician Krystal Elise McCormack.”

Captain Reordan and Master Chief McCormack came forward as instructed and came to attention beside Lady Leslie. “You’ll notice that Captain Reordan is young for such a prestigious command. That is by my will. The nature of the *H.G. Wells* and the Temporal Directorate demand a certain amount of flexibility, and I didn’t want some old stick quoting regulations at me. In addition, Captain Reordan is the recipient of the Meritorious Service Cross for her actions in battle against the raiders over Hampton’s Planet in 2677.” She paused to let the reporters catch up. “In addition, as a second class petty officer in the same action, Krystal McCormack received the Confederated Star Systems Congressional Medal of Honor for service above and beyond the call of duty.” This time there was a stir among the reporters and representatives alike. Krystal was a real, living Hero of the Confederacy, and the men and women who had been about to object to her presence closed their mouths tightly. Elections had been lost because of a misspoken comment about a Medal of Honor winner, and there were far too many reporters and their omnipresent cameras and recorders to risk it.

Lady Leslie smiled serenely; she was fully aware of the effect Krystal was having on the more status-conscious representatives. President Roberts stepped up beside his mother and smiled at her for a moment, then turned to the crowd.

“We thank you all for attending this ceremony. During the coming weeks, we will be making various members of the Temporal Directorate available for interviews. Good day.” With that simple ending he turned and offered his arm to his mother, then escorted her back into the capitol building as reporters shouted questions at their backs.

* * *

Lord Kenyon caught Erica and Krystal and said, “Run, do not walk, to the nearest exit.” He didn’t touch either woman, but his personality seemed to push them along. “I’ve already arranged transport back to the Avalon. Sorry, ladies, but I’m kicking you off the planet. I already paid your bill and had the concierge pack your bags. He’ll meet your taxi, then you go to the port and get back to the *Wells*. I’ve also ordered Mara Kerhonkson to put extra security around the dock now that the nature of the *Wells* is known.”

“Yes, My Lord,” both women answered, and soon they were being all but shoved into a taxi. “The Avalon, then the space port,” Erica commanded and the taxi took off at far more than regulation speed. “Hey, don’t crash!”

“Not gonna happen, Ma’am,” the driver answered and grinned in the mirror. “You’re the one with the new ship, aren’t you?”

“News travels fast,” Krystal snarled.

“I have my vid set up here and watched the ceremony. Lord Kenyon already gave me my instructions and payment, so just sit back and relax.”

Erica and Krystal exchanged a glance and sat back, but neither of them relaxed. The ride to the Avalon seemed longer than the ride to the capitol. Soon

enough, though, they pulled into the covered drop-off and the concierge met them. Erica rolled down her window to speak to him.

“Captain Reordan, I have your bags right here. Please remain in the taxi and we’ll load you up.” The driver had popped the trunk and bellmen were already loading their luggage. The trunk closed and the taxi moved into traffic once again.

Traffic to the space port was surprisingly light. It took just a little over half an hour to get there. The driver got out and handed them their bags with a smile, then turned to face Krystal and snapped to attention. “It’s been an honor to meet you, Master Chief.” His hand flashed up in salute, and both women saw the tattoo of the First Marine Expeditionary Force on his arm. Breaking protocol, they both returned the salute, even if the uniform he wore was that of Geneva Taxi and not the CSS Marine Corps. Then they hurried into the terminal.

It only took them twenty minutes to change and get back aboard *Krystal’s Kitty*, but it was long enough for several reporters to spot them and shout intrusive questions. Fortunately for the reporters, the port security personnel kept them off the apron. Krystal applied full power as soon as she received clearance, and the *Kitty* rocketed into the sky under four Gs of acceleration.

“Geeze, Krys, lighten up.”

“Can’t. Threat receiver is hot. Someone is tracking us.”

“Crap.”

A voice came through their headphones a moment later. “Navy shuttle HGW-Zero Six, Geneva Control. We have inbound traffic at three-zero-three by one-nine-seven at nineteen miles, closing at Mach five, identity unknown. EAF interceptors are in route. Maintain course and acceleration unless you receive a missile warning.”

“Geneva Control, HGW-Zero Six, understood,” Krystal replied. “As if I’d do anything else,” she continued after she’s released the microphone button.

The chatter of the Earth Air Force fighter jocks soon drew their attention. *“Bogie is at angels three seven and climbing to intercept the Navy shuttle. Fat Boy, light him up.”*

A breath later the threat receiver of the *Kitty* showed a second radar, but it was tagged with the green icon of a friendly unit. The intruder broke off and raced away, but the interceptors easily overtook him.

“Fat Boy, am I seeing this right?” the lead pilot asked.

“Confirmed, Patriot,” Fat Boy replied. *“Intruder is painted in the colors of our old friends at EuroNews. EuroNews Shuttle Kilo-Sierra-Foxtrot-Seven-Seven-One, this is EAF interceptor on your port wing. Cut your accel and prepare to be escorted to the ground.”*

Captain Reordan muttered, “Great. Just friggin’ great.”

“What are you complaining about? They didn’t even get shot down.”

“That’s what I’m complaining about. Bastards should have been blown out of the sky for pulling a stunt like that.”

Krystal chuckled and eased their engines back to just two Gs. “I estimate six hours to the dock. Cards?”

“Aces this time,” Erica agreed, and the incident was all but forgotten as they got down to serious business.

* * *

It took six more months before the *Wells* was ready to leave the dock, but the yardbirds had done a magnificent job on her. Her original lines had been refined and slimmed down, changing her from a snarling Rottweiler of the fleet to a racing Greyhound of the track. Her lines had been cleaned up, the warts of

her early-design gamma-ray lasers removed, and smooth skin ran down her flanks without a blemish. She still had teeth, but even they were trim and elegant: two of the newest model gamma-ray lasers and six concealed torpedo tubes with a loadout of twenty-four ten-megaton hyper-drive torpedoes.

Captain Reordan thumbed the intercom to life and addressed her crew. "All hands, prepare to leave dock. All hands prepare for acceleration in one minute." She closed the mic and smiled at her XO. "Mister Frazier, single up all lines, prepare to cast off."

Kellin Frazier answered, "Aye, Ma'am, single up all lines and prepare to cast off." In ports all down the length of the ship, men and women prepared to disconnect the tethers that held them in the dock.

At the one-minute mark, Captain Reordan ordered, "Cast off all lines." Commander Frazier echoed the order and the *Wells* was free. "Helm," the captain continued, "maneuvering thrusters ahead one quarter." The ship shivered, then the dock started sliding backwards in the view screens. It took eleven minutes to clear the dock and Captain Reordan ordered, "Helm, all ahead one half. Course zero-seven-one by two-one-nine."

It took just a moment for the helmsman to report, "Ma'am, answering ahead one half, steady on course zero-seven-one by two-one-nine."

Captain Reordan answered, "Very well, helm." She thumbed her mic to life and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are cruising at half power in normal space." She paused because she could hear the cheering of her crew echoing through the ship. "Helm, ahead full. Let's go see what's out there."

Leave Nothing to Chance

An attractive woman with short-cropped brown hair walked through the corridors of the CSS Naval Command Center and stopped at the door of the First Lord of the Admiralty's office and spoke to the identiplat on the wall, as she had done dozens of times before.

"Captain Erica Reordan of the Temporal Cruiser CSS *H.G. Wells*, reporting as ordered," she announced. A red-light laser scanned her face for an instant then vanished.

"Enter," a feminine voice replied as the door opened. "The First Lord is waiting for you, Captain Reordan. Please follow me," the yeoman said as she led the way to the First Lord's door. The door opened before she arrived, revealing First Lord of the Admiralty Devero Kenyon sitting behind his desk.

"Ah, Captain Reordan, come in, come in. Have a seat. I trust that your leave was pleasant."

Captain Reordan seated herself carefully across the desk from the elderly lord. "As always, Lord Devero. How may I be of service?"

Lord Devero laughed lightly. "Right to business, eh Erica? Very well. We have received a request for a timeship to make a jump to Old Earth, to the year 5535 BCE. There is some agricultural event that the historians are debating, and it has devolved into a source of major contention at Sol University. We want you to take your ship to Old Earth and observe the Asian Continent from planting to harvest, approximately April to September. Make the most detailed recording that you can, then return. It's amazing how much clout some of these academics have with the government." He shook his head in mock wonder while Captain Reordan simply smiled.

"As you command, Lord Devero. Are there any other parameters for us?"

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Just this; be careful. It is a long jump, longer than we have ever tried before.”

Captain Reordan smiled as she stood. “The *Wells* can handle it, Sir.”

Lord Devero nodded and smiled in return. “Very well, Erica. Safe voyage. Dismissed.”

* * *

Captain Reordan made her way to the shuttleport and boarded the first shuttle bound for the L5 Dry-docks. The *Wells* was in for minor repairs, and her crew should all be reporting back within the next five hours. They were due to leave dock at 2200 Zulu, just twelve hours away.

The *Wells*' Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Jarred Williamson, met her as she boarded. “Just about ready, Captain. All systems are in their warm-up phase, and we will begin testing in three hours.”

“Very well. Keep me informed of any important developments. We have a long jump ahead of us, Jarred. Make sure your babies are up to it.” She grinned at him as she spoke. Like many engineers, Jarred considered the engines to be his personal property.

“We won't let you down, Captain.”

* * *

The CSS *H.G. Wells*, TCH-1, left dry-dock precisely on time, her sleek form drawing appreciative looks from sailors on dozens of other ships as she passed. She continued on, leaving the plane of the ecliptic at a right angle as she traveled toward galactic north. Finally, as the temporal circuits began to fold space-time to suit their makers, the *Wells* disappeared.

* * *

The *Wells* shook and heaved like an ancient sailing vessel caught in a storm as the swirling chaos of the temporal flux buffeted the small ship. Her captain and crew rode out the violence with the calm demeanor of experienced sailors until the ship suddenly quieted, the vibrations stopping in an instant.

“Status, XO?” Captain Reordan asked softly as the *Wells* swung down toward ancient Earth.

Commander Kellin Frazier swung his chair around and examined his status board. “All systems on line and functioning normally, Captain,” he reported, turning back to share a grin.

Captain Reordan nodded and turned to the opposite side of the control room. “Temporal status?”

The Temporal Systems Officer didn’t turn to speak, keeping his eyes glued to his readouts instead. “Preliminary analysis of the star field indicates approximately 5500 BCE. We will have to make a detailed analysis over the next few hours to determine exactly when we are.”

The captain nodded. “Very well, keep me informed. The historians want a detailed record of the period between April and September, 5532 BCE. We may need to make a few micro-jumps to reach the right year.”

The *Wells* sped toward ancient Earth, shedding velocity as she fell into Sol’s gravity well. Her crew was beginning to settle into their normal orbital routine when the lights in the control room suddenly shifted to red and the emergency klaxon began its incessant shrieking. Captain Reordan immediately turned to her officers for answers.

Lieutenant DeBaron, the Sensor Officer, was crowded over his operator’s shoulder, looking at the readout and shaking his head. “We’ve been scanned, Captain. High power gamma sweep. Seeking the source now.”

The captain nodded, even though his back was turned toward her. “There is no one on Earth during this time period that should possess that level of technology. I want to know who that was.” *And what they are doing here.*

The crew of the *Wells* turned to, using all of their considerable resources and skill to find their captain’s answers. Minutes passed into an hour before Mister DeBaron turned to her, shaking his head. “No trace, Ma’am. Whoever it was is either gone, or hiding exceptionally well.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Captain Reordan shook her head in disappointment. “This is not good, people. Someone out here is visiting Old Earth and I don’t think that it’s one of our ships. The Temporal Directorate is far too cautious to send two ships to the same coordinates. Even if they are from our future, the records of this trip should warn them off. I want double-shifts on the scanners, with every sensor manned continuously. Our mission is on hold until we find out who that was.”

* * *

The sensor operator of the *Servan Shree* was down on his knees, pressing his head to the floor in supplication in front of his captain. “Forgiveness, oh Mighty Gal. Forgiveness. I only sought to identify the intruder.”

“Fool. Their reaction shows that you only alerted them to our presence. Were we detected?” he asked his second-in-command.

“No, Mighty Gal. Their sensors sweeps never touched our hull. They are continuing their search though, and we are having to keep the planet between us.”

The Mighty Gal nodded. “And why did we not detect them earlier? They did not just appear out of nowhere.”

The second-in-command thought carefully before answering. “Mighty Gal, they apparently did appear out of nowhere. Our periodic sweeps of the sector did not reveal them until they were almost in orbit. We have no track on where they came from.”

The Mighty Gal growled deep in his throat as he glared at his officers. “I want a full analysis of the sensor readings. I want to know who they are, and what they are doing here. And I don’t want them to find us until I have my answers.”

A chorus of, “Yes, Mighty Gal,” answered him as he stalked from the control center. The lights were still down for battle, but bright yellow light flooded in through the hatch for a moment before it slammed shut.

The sensor operator dared to peek up at the second-in-command when the door had slammed behind the captain. "Sir?" he asked softly.

"Oh, stand up already," the second snapped, causing the tech to scramble to his feet. "Begin analyzing what you got from your sweep. Report as soon as you have anything significant"

The sensor operator did as he was commanded, scrambling to his station and immersing himself in his duties. Lights reflected from his black eyes as he tried to make sense of his information. Nothing about that ship looked right.

* * *

The crew of the *Wells* was similarly occupied. Their sensors were picking up traces of an ion drive operating in orbit, and the indications were that it had been there for quite some time. Captain Reordan sat in her command chair and fumed as her crew did their best to find out who they were dealing with. The only problem was that all indications were of a totally undocumented propulsion system. Finally nodding sharply to herself, the captain called her XO to her side. "Kell, I hate to do this, but think we need the weapons. Do you concur?"

"I concur, Captain. In this instance we need every advantage available to us." Taking the key chain from around his neck, he walked over to the weapon's console and inserted his key into the slot. "Ma'am?"

Captain Reordan nodded and joined him, placing her own key in the appropriate slot. They were on opposite sides of the console, facing one another as the captain counted down. "3, 2, 1, turn. Well, that's it, Mister Frazier. We are once again a warship. Lords of Space, I hope we're wrong."

"Agreed, Captain. Full shields?"

"Yes. Whoever it was scanned us with no shields deployed at all. Let's hope that we get a chance to scan them soon."

Captain Reordan pushed a key on her panel, and a voice almost immediately answered, "Chief's Quarters, COB speaking."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“COB, we have activated the weapons. Have your damage control teams suited up and ready to go. We won’t go to Battlestations unless we are attacked, but we will not be caught unprepared.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“And Kryss, put your suit on as well. They only hand out one blue ribbon per customer.” There was a loud laugh from the speaker before the connection was cut.

* * *

The sensor operator of the *Servan Shree* rushed excitedly to the second-in-command’s side and dropped his head to the bare metal deck as he waited for permission to speak. The second didn’t look down as he asked, “What have you found?”

“The alien ship, Sir,” the sensor operator answered with some excitement in his voice. “Its crew. They are the same species as the inhabitants of this planet. We have found no previous traces of this level of technology.”

“Mmm, indeed. That might explain why they appeared so suddenly. If they came from the surface – I must speak with the captain.” Turning abruptly, he left the command center through the same hatch that the captain had used.

The sensor operator returned to his station to continue his assessment of the alien, though now he was less anxious about it now. These weak primitives were no match for one of His Majesty’s Battlecrusers. The Escarten were the ultimate warriors in the galaxy, and these puny primitives weren’t even armored. He rose up on all four legs and stretched with his hands behind his head. Not even the Mighty Gral’s notoriously volatile anger could be roused by them.

The Mighty Gral returned to the command center within moments of the second’s departure. “Find the alien ship. Bring us within range. I want a better look at them. If they are from this species, then they are no threat.”

The crew of the *Servan Shree* quickly obeyed their captain, swinging the ship into an orbit that would bring the alien into range within moments. When the ship appeared, the crew was shocked. Far from the helpless vessel that they were expecting, they now faced an armed, shielded opponent. Weapons ports were now obvious, and their shields were as good as the *Servan Shree's* own.

"*This was your doing!*" the Mighty Gral shouted, drawing his blade and plunging it into the sensor operator's neck. The second-in-command stayed out of arm's reach until the captain's panting breath calmed a little.

The command crew carefully did not look at the body of the sensor operator as it was dragged away. Looking at the crew around him, the captain pointed at the empty space and demanded, "Where is my sensor operator?"

A young tech hesitantly took the indicated position, his hunched shoulders betraying his fear. Looking at the instruments, he quickly gauged the alien. "Mighty Gral, the alien ship is shielded from our scans now. We are, however, detecting visual differences from the first scan. Numerous ports have opened on the ship's exterior, possibly for weapons."

"Fah! Weapons from a culture this primitive? How could that be?" the Mighty Gral demanded. "They have primitive metal tools and weapons. Where would they get real weapons?"

"Mighty Gral, there is no way of telling. They have not done anything to indicate that they have detected us this time. Their speed and course have remained constant." The sensor operator kept his voice as respectful as possible, not wanting to share his predecessor's fate.

* * *

"There she is, Ma'am. Just coming out of the planet's shadow. Orders?"

"Slow and steady, Mister Frazier. No provocative moves. Keep our course and speed as is. Let them make the first move. And, Mister Frazier..."

"Ma'am?"

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“...Man the weapon’s console yourself. I don’t want any misunderstandings.”

The crew of the *Wells* sat in tense silence as the alien ship made its way toward them. It was large, bordering on huge. Easily a kilometer in length, it was an almost haphazard assortment of spheres and tubes, held together by superstructure and cabling.

Lieutenant DeBaron reported from the sensor station. “They’re trying to scan us again, Ma’am, but are being blocked by the shields.”

“Very well. What can you tell me about them, Mister DeBaron?”

“Not much, Ma’am. Carbon based and oxygen breathing is about it. Their atmosphere has a high percentage of hydrocarbons, though I’m unable to determine if that’s intentional or just contamination. We’re picking up power spikes that may be weapons of some sort, though we can’t be certain at this time.”

“Very well. Keep me informed of any developments. Mister Frazier, analysis of their defensive capabilities.”

“Ma’am, the weapon’s array is detecting electromagnetic shields. She...”
Commander Frazier was interrupted by a crashing blow to the *Wells*’ shields by some weapon.

“*Battlestations!*” Captain Reordan shouted, strapping herself into her command chair as her officers and crew sorted themselves out and the howl of the general quarters alarm echoed through the ship. “What hit us?”

“Particle beam, Ma’am,” Lieutenant DeBaron reported from where he was clinging to the rail over the sensor station. “It would’ve sliced right through us if the shields hadn’t held.” A second strike shook the *Wells*, making the lights flicker ominously.

“Mister Frazier, return fire. Gamma-ray laser only for now. Save the torpedoes for later. God help us if we need them.”

“Aye, Ma’am!” Commander Frazier opened fire with both of his laser batteries. Coruscating lights shrouded the alien vessel as his beams hit, but the alien’s shields were as good as their own.

The alien fired again, this time slamming the *Wells* repeatedly. Captain Reordan and her crew were violently shaken by the ferocity of the barrage, and she gave the order that she most dreaded. “Mister Frazier, torpedoes away!”

“Torpedoes away!” Commander Frazier shouted as his fingers punched the appropriate keys on his board.

Two hyperdrive-equipped torpedoes, each equipped with a 10-megaton thermonuclear warhead, dropped from their cradles and disappeared from view. Their hyperdrive engines carried them to their destruction undetectably until they returned to normal space inside the alien’s shields, just meters from their target. The alien crew never had a chance. One torpedo struck forward, the other aft.

The crew of the *Wells* watched in fascinated horror as the alien ship was destroyed. The tremendous energy of the twin blasts, aided by the containing effect of the ship’s own shields, crumpled the ship as it was shredded, spilling its atmosphere into space. Secondary explosions ripped the ship apart, scattering millions of tiny fragments into orbit and the atmosphere of an all but uncaring Earth. Other bits were blown farther out, away from the Earth and its destructive atmosphere.

Captain Reordan sighed as she sat back in her chair. “Secure from Battlestations. All hands begin damage assessments. Mister DeBaron, have your people sweep the debris for anything you can find out. I want to know who they were, and what they were doing here.”

Commander Frazier sat at the weapons console with his head in his hands. “Ma’am, I think we can secure the weapons as well.”

“Agreed,” Captain Reordan said, walking to his side. “What’s wrong, Kell?”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“I just killed who knows how many sentient beings, Erica. Beings who we’ll never know, never understand. I didn’t sign on to a science vessel for this.” Inserting his key, he looked at her and nodded. “Time, Ma’am.”

Captain Reordan nodded and walked around to the other side of the console. “3, 2, 1, turn. Weapons deactivated. You are relieved, Mister Frazier. Go lay down. If you need him, I’m sure Chaplain Harris will be available to you.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

Captain Reordan nodded as he walked away. *Who were you? she asked the universe. Why were you here? Why did you attack us?*

* * *

Three days after the battle, the Temporal Systems Officer reported their position. “Ma’am, we are in the year 5513 BCE, and the time of year is March.”

“Very well.” Captain Reordan thumbed open her ship-wide paging system. “All hands, now hear this. We are nineteen years from our goal. All hands prepare for a microjump in three hours.”

The Wells jumped to the year 5535 BCE and began her mission. All sensors and recorders swept the Earth, bringing a detailed analysis of the ancient home of mankind. The duty was mildly dull, but not onerous. The specialists that form the crews the Confederated Star Systems’ Temporal Cruisers are historians as well as adventurers, and the planet beneath them was their favorite subject. Months passed at their normal pace, finally reaching autumn and the harvest. But something was tweeking the captain’s nerves.

Who were those people? Were they humans from another era? Why were they here? Were they the reason the Wells was here? Did they do something down stairs to cause the happenings we are here to observe?

“Chief’s Quarters, COB speaking.”

“Krys, come to control.”

Master Chief McCormack arrived moments later. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“Krys, take your Kitty to that debris field. Be careful, but find out what you can. And grab a piece of debris. I have a bad feeling about this.”

The COB looked at her old friend and asked, “How bad?”

“Like it wasn’t an accident that we found them here.”

Krystal looked at Erica and shook her head. “The Old Man wouldn’t do that to us, would he?”

“I don’t know, Krys. I just don’t know.”

Captain Reordan and her crew departed ancient Earth with a full report to take back to their home era. But they had questions as well. Questions they didn’t dare ask.

* * *

Senior Councilor Javonich of the Temporal Directorate paced his office, scuffing the fine carpet as he kicked away his frustration, while First Lord Devero watched impassively from his seat. The report of the *Wells’* encounter was in his hand, the datapad resisting his fierce grip.

“Their mission was a success, though they don’t know it.”

“Indeed, Councilor. You know that I objected to sending them into it blind.” The First Lord’s voice was soft, but it had a definite edge to it. “A little preparation might have done them a world of good.”

“I know,” the councilor sighed, “but it was imperative that it appear to be a random act, an accident. We couldn’t let on that we were aware that a battle took place above Earth so long ago.”

The First Lord stood and walked over to the glass case against the wall. There, nestled in a velvet pad, was a piece of wreckage. It was melted and twisted in an all too familiar pattern, though the metal itself was of an unfamiliar alloy. “To think that this has been buried on the moon for more than seven thousand years. God, can you imagine where we would be now if we had been able to make contact then?”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Councilor Javonich nodded. "Yes, I can. A slave race or an extinct one from all appearances and the *Wells'* report. They attacked without warning, and nearly destroyed the *Wells* and all hands. Not the act of a nurturing race."

"Perhaps so." The First Lord sighed. "I would like to send them out again soon. They need to be too busy to dwell on this incident. I will be doing enough of that for all of us."

"As you wish. Send them to watch something quiet. I understand that there were some remarkable things happening in Europe during the 15th Century, CE. Let them go watch a civilization being built."

"Leave Nothing to Chance" © 2008

Kachina

The old shaman sat on the bluff, the hot breeze toying with his long grey hair as he looked up at the sky. His eyes never wavered from the North Star, that fixed point around which all of the other stars rotated, as he sought guidance from the spirits.

Suddenly a new star flared to life, only to disappear in the next instant. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. He had been searching for a sign from the spirits, but was this the sign that he was seeking? The people needed a new home, but was this the place?

Sighing, he wished silently that, just once before he died, the spirits would make their will clear.

* * *

The Confederated Star System Temporal Cruiser CSS *H.G. Wells*, TCH-1, flared into being, her drives shutting down in response to a malfunction. Her velocity was sufficient to send her speeding out into the dark reaches of the universe, but that was not to be her fate. Earth, a past Earth that had still not even dreamed of her existence, was waiting to receive her. The *Wells* coasted into an elliptical orbit around old Earth, her automatic systems compensating for the error in the arrival window.

Captain Erica Reordan moaned softly as she began to regain consciousness. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was the shapely backside of her executive officer, Commander Kellin Frazier. She was confused for a moment. *Why is Kell's butt in my face?* Even more important, what was she doing lying on the floor of the control room? Resisting the urge to ask stupid questions, she rolled over and propped herself up on one elbow.

The *Wells'* control room was a disaster area. Bodies lay thrown about in various states of disarray. Everyone seemed to be alive, but no one was where

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

they were supposed to be. Kellin drew a deep breath and rolled over suddenly, his legs knocking her elbow out from under her, causing her to fall across his knees.

"Oof! Watch it, Kell. Move slowly for a few minutes."

"Captain? What happened, Ma'am?" Kellin sat up, looking down into her eyes for a moment before looking around. "Rough trip."

"Mr. Frazier, you have an absolutely astounding talent for understatement." Captain Reordan struggled to a sitting position, then hauled herself up into her chair. Thumbing her microphone to life, she punched up the shipwide announcing system.

"Attention all hands! Attention all hands! Damage control parties begin assessing the ship's condition. Chief Engineer, establish propulsion capabilities and the status of the temporal drive." Closing the circuit, she paused to rub her forehead, her fingers coming away with a smear of blood.

Commander Frazier handed her a wet gauze, and she unthinkingly slapped it to her forehead. "*HAAH!* Damn, what was that!" she snarled as she threw the gauze on the floor.

"Alcohol," Commander Frazier replied levelly before sitting heavily into his own chair and accessing his computer. "Nav says that we have reached old Earth, but the temporal circuits are down. I have no idea when we are."

The rest of the control room staff was beginning to function again, retaking their stations amid soft curses and groans. Captain Reordan shook her head and ordered, "Sensors, I want an evaluation of that planet. Verify that it is Earth, then see if you can establish the era. Use atmospheric sampling and mapping."

"Aye, Ma'am," the tech answered softly, not looking up from his panel. "Preliminary readings are pre-industrial. Very low levels of hydrocarbons. Limited sulfur dioxide, apparently from natural sources. Mapping shows a few large European cities, none in North, Central, or South America, with the

exception of some population centers on the Yucatan Peninsula and in the high Andes Mountains. Waiting for our orbit to bring Asia into range.”

“Pre-Columbian, or earlier.” The captain sighed. A crackle of static drew her attention to the intercom. “Report.”

“Control, Engineering. We have normal space drive only. Hyperspace and Temporal drives are off line. Temporal drive is completely dead.” The engineer, Lieutenant Commander Williamson, paused for a moment. “We have indications that we took a micrometeoroid strike at the instant of our transit. We could be anywhere.”

Captain Reordan caught her lower lip in her teeth for a moment, then nodded. “Very well. Continue with repairs. Control out.” Turning her chair to face her command crew, she sighed. “You heard him. Until Mister Williamson establishes the true extent of the damage, we continue with the mission. There is a whole planet to survey for the historians. Until proven otherwise, we will assume that Mister Williamson and his people will be able to make repairs and return us home.”

The crew gave her a few dubious looks, then began the survey. They had arrived north of the solar ecliptic so as to avoid as much of the Solar System’s debris as possible. The ship’s automatic systems had placed them in a high orbit around Earth to avoid any possibility of detection, but that was far too remote for her to consider. “Helm, move us into a polar orbit. Low and fast. I want a ball of twine survey of this time period.”

The crew turned toward their primary tasks and began the survey, using instruments that varied from optical telescopes and cameras to x-ray spectrometers and gas chromatographs. Maps of a primitive planet began to form, showing a shockingly low level of development. There was some good news. The pyramids stood, and Rome seemed to have come and gone. China was flourishing, and Europe seemed to be clawing its way toward civilization.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Forty-eight hours elapsed before Lieutenant Commander Williamson surfaced again. "Captain, we have to land. I have made every repair that can be made in space, but there are some things that absolutely must be done on the ground, with all ship systems de-energized." He sighed and offered her a lopsided grin. "Sorry."

"Very well. What kind of ground conditions do you want?" Captain Reordan asked, straightening her back and looking him in the eye.

"Flat and dry, Ma'am. With a minimum of snakes."

The captain eyed her engineer slyly, then nodded. "All right, Jarred, I'll try." Turning back to the control room, she raised her voice. "Mapping, I want a deserted piece of real estate, flat and dry." Turning back to the engineer, she tilted her head. "I don't suppose that you want the Sahara Desert?" At his negative response, she grinned. "Pick somewhere in southwest North America. If I remember my history, there shouldn't be many people there to avoid."

A suitable site was soon chosen, and preparations for a landing on an unprepared surface were instituted. Captain Reordan called an officer's meeting to announce her decisions concerning the landing. "I want as many of our people as possible in the landing craft and shuttles. Minimum crew for re-entry. If the *Wells* breaks up, I want to lose as few lives as possible."

Turning to her XO, she nodded once sharply. "Commander Frazier, you will be in charge of the small craft. Follow us at a safe distance. If we break up...use your own judgment as to where you land. Find someplace isolated and friendly, maybe in Polynesia. Above all else, ensure that none of the ships can ever be found." She paused again and looked each officer in the eye. "Gentlemen, good luck to us all. Dismissed."

The meeting broke up with the seven officers heading for the ships they would be commanding to the surface. Captain Reordan took her seat, strapping herself in for what she expected to be a rough descent. "Begin deployment," she said softly, but her voice echoed through the *Wells* and her offspring. A slight jar

and rumble announced each departing ship. When Shuttle Six left the ship a familiar voice said, "COB to Control. Don't scratch her, Captain. I have a date when we get home." Finally, when the seventh shuttle had separated, Erica took a deep breath and ordered "Begin descent."

The *Wells* fired her main thrusters to slow her orbit, her helmsmen using years of experience to guide the damaged ship into the gentlest reentry they could manage. Still, the *Wells* bucked and roared, her heat shields blazing brightly as the friction of the atmosphere slowed her on her way down. Finally, the air around the ship began to clear and the captain dared to breathe again. "Status?" she asked, knowing her people would tell her what she needed to know.

The senior helmsman wiped his brow and turned to grin at her. "Ma'am, we are in a normal reentry. Atmospheric drive on line, gyrostabilizers at full power. We should make landfall in two hours."

Captain Reordan returned the helmsman's grin. "Well done, gentlemen. Very well done." Thumbing her mic, she spoke to the air. "Mister Williamson, ship status."

The engineer's voice held just a touch of exultation as he answered. "The temporary repairs held, Ma'am. No further damage due to reentry."

"Well done to you and your people, Jarred. Communications, what do we hear from the rest of the ships?" she asked, her own high spirits showing as she grinned at her crew.

"We are still waiting for word from Shuttle 3, but all others report no problems."

"Very well." She paused to look around again, then opened the shipwide announcing system again, and tied in the ship-to-ship as well. "To all hands: Well done, people. We will be landing soon, and I want to remind you all that this is our planet, but not our home. We are deep in the past, and *must* be careful of everything that we do. All hands, prepare for landfall."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Their landing area wasn't perfect for what they wanted, but it would do. And it had the added benefit of being far out in the wilderness where no human was going to see them.

The *Wells* settled gently to the ground, her thrusters scorching a large circle of earth directly below the ship. The shuttles and landing craft landed in VTOL mode, each making a textbook landing in an arch off to the side of the main ship. As the ship settled, Captain Reordan again addressed her crew.

"This may be redundant, but I want to remind all of you that our presence here is an anomaly. We must avoid any interaction with this time period. Above all, we must avoid any contamination. There is not likely to be anything new here for us, but each and every one of us carries dozens of exotic bacteria and viruses that this era has never seen. Anyone who exits the ship will wear full anti-contamination suits, with helmet respirators. All ship's air will be filtered and decontaminated before being exhausted to the atmosphere. Mister Williamson, you may take your people out and begin your repairs."

"Captain," Commander Frazier's voice said from the ceiling speaker, "request permission to use the shuttles in atmospheric mode to make a low level survey of the area."

"Granted, but be careful. Keep it sub-sonic, and minimize your contrails," the captain answered, her attention on the camera view of the repair crew. They all looked rather bizarre, with the welding and cutting shield attachments on their helmets. Others were setting up a portable test station and powering up the instruments that would tell them what to fix. Nodding to herself, she stood and went to her day room.

She narrated a brief log entry, then slipped off her shoes for a quick nap. Lieutenant Commander Williamson could be counted on to wake her as soon as he was finished. The knock came far too soon.

"Captain?" a voice said from outside of the door. "Ma'am, Mister Williamson reports all repairs complete. The XO has been informed, and is on his way back."

"What about the COB?"

"Ma'am, she said something about something biting, and she'd be back soon."

The captain sighed and stood, stretching to relieve her back muscles. She muttered, "What a weird hobby," then returned to the control room. "Status?"

"All systems are operational. All hands are accounted for. Preflight checks are complete on all craft. We are ready to ascend at your command, Ma'am," the quartermaster of the watch replied as the senior watch-stander.

"Very well." The captain opened the ship-to-ship intercom. "All ships, prepare for immediate takeoff. Rendezvous in orbit for recovery, then we will see about visiting the fifteenth century."

The *Wells* burned her way into the sky, her small ships blazing up after her like ducklings following their mother.

* * *

The old shaman nodded in satisfaction. He had seen the lights in the sky and had returned to the bluff to seek conformation of the spirit's will. The strange things he saw on the plain heartened him, and the sight of the kachina spirits dancing around the great pillar had been the answer to his wish.

Here was where the people would settle. The place where the great kiva would be dug was marked plainly by a great circle of scorched ground. The place where the people would build their homes was also marked by the arch of smaller circles of charred earth.

The shaman offered the spirits a prayer of thanks. This was an omen that even a child could understand.

Rescue Mission

Old Earth, Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Florida, October 2696, Deep Ocean Mining and Salvage Vessel SS *Kerry Ann*, Captain Davis commanding.

The *Kerry Ann* made her slow, crawling way across the floor of the Atlantic Ocean in search of mineral deposits and the hulks of long sunken ships. Metals once used on the construction of sea-going vessels brought phenomenal prices on resource-starved Earth. The crew dozed at their stations as the *Kerry Ann* followed her programmed route through the deep. Then the alarm klaxon sounded.

“Sir, large metallic object two hundred meters to port,” the sensor operator reported as soon as he focused his eyes on his readouts. “Primarily aluminum, with a large chunk of steel and some copper that is probably wire.”

“Alter course to investigate,” Captain Davis instructed. “It’s probably an airplane from the makeup.”

“Alter course to port, aye,” the helmsman answered. “Hey, Sten, how about a course? There is a whole lot of ocean floor two hundred meters out to port.”

“Sorry. Course 087 true. Range now one hundred eighty seven meters,” Sten answered, remembering his professionalism.

The *Kerry Ann* made her slow way to the mineral deposit as the sensors continued to probe. Sten began refining his estimate of the amount of metal, and was excited by the readings that he was getting. “Captain, this thing is heavy. There’s nearly six thousand kilos of metal. The iron makes up about one thousand kilos, copper only two or three hundred. The rest is aluminum.”

“Noted. Run it through the data banks. See if anything matches the readings and configuration.”

Ten minutes later the *Kerry Ann* reached the deposit. She was just about to take the material onboard when Sten suddenly cursed. "Ah, *crap!* All stop! Captain, all stop! It's military!"

The captain and crew of the *Kerry Ann* slammed their vessel's controls, stopping mere meters from the wreckage. Turning anger narrowed eyes on Sten, Captain Davis just glared without asking for an explanation.

Sten wiped at his face before speaking. "Sir, the data banks identify the wreckage as probably being a," he turned back to his screen and read aloud, "General Motors TBM Avenger. It was a warplane used by United States forces as a torpedo bomber during World War II. There are a few other possible matches, but the computer is seventy-eight percent positive that it's an Avenger."

The captain sat back and scrubbed his face with both hands. Under Maritime Salvage Laws warships, including aircraft, remained the property of the nation that they served, even after they were sunk. This was an old, but still honored law, since so many of these wrecks were also mass graves.

"Mark the damned thing for the Maritime Patrol to salvage, and get us back on course," the captain ordered angrily. "We've wasted enough time on this."

**Old Earth, Atlantic Ocean off of the coast of Florida, May, 2670, Earth
Maritime Patrol Salvage Vessel *SS Otter*, Lieutenant Commander Haugen
commanding.**

"Ma'am, we have the beacon that the scavenger left. Our readings match their reported stats. Computer is giving us a ninety percent match on an Avenger type aircraft."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

The captain sighed. The Earth Maritime Patrol had inherited all of the old earth national navies, and with them the graves of the lost. "Very well. Begin recovery operations. Anything else on the sensors?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the sensor tech answered, surprising his captain. "There are two more deposits with the same configuration within a kilometer of this location."

The captain sat forward. "Look for any more. I want a detailed analysis of the wreckage as soon as possible. Begin recovery procedures on the other two as well."

"Aye, Ma'am," the bridge staff answered, setting up automatic sequences that would take them to the other wrecks.

Seven hours later the captain had her answer. The executive officer knocked at her stateroom door and came in before she could answer. "Ma'am, these airplanes are definitely TBM Avengers. The engine blocks are corroded, but we have been able to recover the serial numbers. The first plane was registered as United States Navy TBM-1C, tail number FT-81, BuNo 46325, lost December 5th, 1945, piloted by Marine 2nd Lieutenant Forrest James Gerber. The second plane was United States Navy TBM-1E, tail number FT-36, BuNo 46094, lost December 5th, 1945, piloted by Marine Captain Edward Joseph Powers, Jr. The third plane was United States Navy TBM-1C, tail number FT-117, BuNo 73209, lost December 5th, 1945, piloted by Marine Captain George William Stivers Jr. And ma'am, the computer spit something else out about these planes. They were all part of a training flight out of United States of America Naval Air Station, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, designated as Flight Nineteen. They're part of the Bermuda Triangle legend."

The captain stared at her exec as if he were demented. "The Bermuda Triangle? I thought that kind of superstition died out hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, Ma'am, it did. But the fate of the five planes in Flight Nineteen was never discovered."

“Until now. Very well, XO, make a report.”

“Ma’am?”

“Yes?”

“What do you suppose happened to the other two?”

The captain thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Who cares? It’s been over six hundred years. Maybe another scavenger will turn them up.”

Old Earth, Temporal Directorate, June 2670, Temporal Directorate Council Session.

Senior Councilor Danival Javonich of the Temporal Directorate slammed both hands down on the table to silence his companions. “This isn’t about ancient superstitions! It’s about the fate of fourteen men who were lost without a trace in an incident that sparked the imaginations of adventurers and writers for more than a century.”

“And we have an answer. They crashed, and it’s no wonder,” Senior Councilor Garret Caruth said as he glared at the rest. “It’s amazing that they ever got those crates off of the ground. How any of them *avoided* crashing is the mystery.”

First Lady of the Temporal Directorate Leslie Roberts tapped the table with her fingers. The room became instantly silent. Her proper title, if she weren’t such a crotchety old broad, was Lady Princess Leslie Ann Elisabeth Courtney DelRios Roberts, youngest daughter of King Eldon Del Rios of Hector’s World. Her father had been king, as had her brother, and her nephew was the present King. Her first husband had been Prince Rupert of Andersen’s Planet. After she divorced him, she married Lord Admiral Roberts, First Lord of the Admiralty. Her son was Eric Roberts, the current President of the Confederacy. It was joked, in private, that it was safer to get in a spitting contest with a cobra than a pissing contest with Lady Leslie. She was the only one who thought it was

funny. Lady Leslie was the eldest member of the directorate, and had been one of its founding members nine years before. She was old, small, wizened, and feared by all. Her word was law, and the councilors were only there as her advisors.

“I wish to know more. Send the *Wells*.”

I wish to know more. Those simple words, spoken softly by an old woman, ended all discussion. “As you command, Lady Roberts,” the five men intoned together.

First Lord of the Admiralty Devero Kenyon’s office, Confederated Star Systems Space Force Headquarters, the next day.

“Captain Erica Reordan of the Temporal Cruiser CSS *H.G. Wells*, reporting as ordered,” Captain Reordan said to the identiplat as she stood at the door. It opened and she was surprised to find Lord Kenyon standing in front of her.

“Come in, Erica. There is something that I have to tell you before I give you this assignment.”

Captain Reordan blinked several times in rapid succession then nodded. “Of course, Lord Kenyon.”

“There is very little about this assignment that could be referred to as ‘of course.’ Sit here,” he instructed, motioning to his own chair. “Sit back and watch this.” He pressed a button and took a seat to the side as Captain Reordan watched the presentation.

“The Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle, Flight Nineteen,” a well-trained narrator’s voice said as pictures of ancient Earth began flashing. An hour later the presentation ended with the words “...the fate of Flight Nineteen has never been discovered.”

“Until now,” Lord Kenyon said, startling her. “Last year a scavenger found three of the planes from Flight Nineteen. The other two are still missing, in spite of a massive search. Lady Roberts herself is giving you this assignment. Go

to Old Earth, December 5th, 1945, and answer this question: What happened to Flight Nineteen?"

Confederated Star Systems Space Dock Three, nine hours later

Captain Reordan walked briskly through the corridors of Space Dock Three, mechanically returning the salutes that she received without conscious thought. Her orders were held in one tightly clenched fist, while the other hand flexed obsessively around nothing.

The Marine sentry at the *Wells'* airlock snapped to attention as she came into view, but she hardly noticed. "Corporal," she began as soon as she was within easy range, "all leaves and passes are canceled. Recall the crew immediately. Don't let anyone else leave."

"Aye, Ma'am," the sentry snapped, but she was already past.

Striding through the *Wells'* passageways, she made her way to the bridge and pressed the ship-wide announcing system stud. "Now hear this, now here this. This is the captain. All leaves and passes are cancelled. Begin preparations for immediate departure. Senior staff to the wardroom. Now, people!"

The sound of scurrying feet echoed through the vessel as the crew jumped to obey their captain. She seldom used that tone of voice, but when she did she was obeyed instantly. Making her own way to the wardroom, she found the XO and Navigator already there. "We wait for Tempelton and Jarred, then lock the door. Of all the..." the captain stopped herself from finishing the comment as the Engineer and Temporal System's Officer entered together. Captain Reordan motioned to seats, and then locked the door herself.

"Kellin, run this," she instructed, tossing the disk with their orders to Commander Frazier. He did as instructed, and the staff of the *H.G. Wells* watched as a story that might as well have been written by the man who had given their ship his name unfolded. At the end the captain spoke.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“You now know as much as I do. Lady Leslie’s wish is our command. We depart as soon as everyone is back aboard. Templeton,” she said, turning toward Lieutenant Deeson, “begin your calculations. I want the best temporal plot that you can give me. It would really ruin our reputation if we ran into ourselves over Japan on August 6 or August 9, 1945. Though we probably wouldn’t have time to notice.”

Her weak joke about the dangers of existing in two places at the same time fell flat. They were all aware of the immediate and deadly consequences. That they were sitting there contemplating the error was of no comfort. If they made the error now, then history would adjust itself so that they had never come back from the previous mission. The paradox of time travel was one that nature would not abide.

The *H.G. Wells* left Space Dock Three seven hours later, still missing three ratings who could not be recovered. One was hospitalized, while the other two had been unreachable in one of Earth’s few remaining wild areas. Captain Reordan fumed at the loss, but secretly wished that *she* had thought of that.

The *Wells* made her way out of the system south of the plane of the ecliptic, rather than taking her accustomed path north. The captain had agreed with her TSO that the greatest safety lay in not doing the same things as usual. As the temporal flux drew the ship through the barriers of time and space, the captain reflected that there were reasons that no timeship was sent to the same year twice.

The emergence into normal space was marked by the cessation of the violent shaking that accompanied time travel. “Get me a fix immediately,” the captain ordered unnecessarily. Her crewmen and women were all well trained professionals who were just as interested in getting home as she was.

“Earth, early to mid Twentieth Century. We are analyzing radio broadcasts for...there we go. December 4th, 1945. Right on the button.” Lieutenant Deeson turned and smiled at his captain.

“Keep it up, Templeton. XO, maintain condition ZEBRA. I have a very bad feeling about this mission.”

Commander Frazier looked at his captain with a questioning expression, but obeyed when she didn't elaborate. Condition ZEBRA was the highest level of damage control readiness, and was normally set only during battle to temporal transit. “Aye, Ma'am.”

The night passed quietly as the crew of the *Wells* waited for morning to reach the North American east coast. Fort Lauderdale was located, and the sensors began recording everything that they could about the primitive world beneath them. At 1410 local time, the last of the five planes that they had come to observe took to the air and the saga began.

The planes headed east, and history recorded their goal as Chicken and Hen Shoals, fifty-six miles from Fort Lauderdale on a course of 091. Once there one plane went low and circled as the other four climbed and began bombing runs against a derelict ship. This continued for nearly twenty minutes before the planes departed on the same course again. Their second historical goal was Great Stirrup Cay, one hundred thirteen miles from Fort Lauderdale. This leg also went without any problem, and the flight turned north at 1510 on a course of 346 true. At 1550 the first message that history recorded of the incident was reported.

“Powers, what does your compass read? Powers? What does your compass read? I don't know where we are. We must have got lost after the last turn.”

Lieutenant Robert Cox, an instructor pilot with another flight, FT 74, heard the message at the same time as the *Wells*, and sent the message on to Fort Lauderdale. *“Fox Tare seven four. Fox Tare 74 to Nan How Able One, Nan How Able One, there seems to be either a boat or plane lost and is calling Powers. Suggest you inform tower of it. Over.”*

Operation Radio, Fort Lauderdale, call sign NHA-1, answered immediately. *“Nan How Able One, Roger.”*

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Lieutenant Cox then tried to contact the calling aircraft. *"This is Fox Tare 74, plane or boat calling Powers, please identify yourself so someone can help you."*

Fort Lauderdale's radio called Lieutenant Cox with a request for more information. *"Nan How Able One to FT-74. Tower asks if they have any recognition or identification . . .do they have any recognition?"*

Lieutenant Cox replied, *"Negative. Not as yet known."*

"Flight 19," Commander Frazier muttered. "Don't you people know each other?"

"Sss!" hissed the sensor tech, grimacing in apology for hissing at the XO.

Commander Frazier grimaced on his own, but in embarrassment, not anger, and shrugged.

Lieutenant Cox and the *Wells* overheard more inner-flight chatter moments later. *"Does anyone have any suggestions? . . .I think we must be over the Keys."*

Lieutenant Cox tried again to contact the lost men. *"This is FT-74 calling lost plane or boats. Please identify yourself? Over."*

He finally received an answer at 1611, but it was ambiguous. *"Roger, this is MT-28."*

"MT-28?" Captain Reordan asked softly. "I thought I heard FT-28."

"Records show that's correct, Sir, but their radios aren't as sensitive as ours," Commander Reordan answered just as softly. "This may be the first mistake of many."

"MT-28, this is FT-74, what is your trouble?" Lieutenant Cox answered, relieved that he was finally in contact with the lost men.

The voice that was now identified as Lieutenant Charles Carroll Taylor, USNR, replied, *"Both my compasses are out and I am trying to find Fort Lauderdale,*

Florida. I am over land, but it's broken. I'm sure I'm in the Keys, but I don't know how far down and I don't know how to get to Fort Lauderdale."

There was less tension in Lieutenant Cox's voice as he spoke this time. Now he at least had an idea of how to help lead this man to land. *"MT-28, this is FT-74. Put the sun on your port wing if you are in the Keys and fly up the coast until you get to Miami, then Fort Lauderdale is 20 miles further, your first port after Miami. The air station is directly on your left from the port. What is your present altitude? I will fly south and meet you."*

Lieutenant Taylor's reply was clear. *"I know where I am at now. I'm at twenty-three hundred feet. Don't come after me."*

Lieutenant Cox's reply was just as clear. *"MT-28, roger. I'm coming up to meet you anyhow."*

"Well at least one pilot down there is competent," Commander Frazer commented sourly, earning a glare from his captain.

Fort Lauderdale radio called Lieutenant Cox then, asking for clarification of the earlier message. *"FT-74, this is Nan How Able One. Is the call sign of your contact MT-28 or FT-28?"*

Lieutenant Cox immediately requested the information. *"MT-28 this is FT-74. Please verify. Are you MT-28 or FT-28? Over."*

Lieutenant Taylor radioed the information, along with a request. *"Roger, that's FT-28. FT-74, can you have Miami or someone turn on their radar gear and pick us up? We don't seem to be getting far. We were out on a navigational hop and on the second leg I thought they were going wrong so I took over and was flying them back to the right position, but I'm sure now that neither one of my compasses are working."*

Lieutenant Cox's voice held a touch of exasperated humor as he replied. *"FT-28, you can't expect to get here in ten minutes. You have a 30 to 35 knot head or cross wind. Turn on your emergency IFF gear, or do you have it on?"*

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

A somewhat subdued, *"Negative,"* was Taylor's reply.

Lieutenant Cox decided then to pass on the information to Fort Lauderdale. *"Nan How Able One, this is FT-74. Flight of 5 planes leader is FT-28. He has his emergency IFF equipment on. Requests if he can be picked up on Fort Lauderdale radar gear."*

Fort Lauderdale radio replied moments later. *"FT-74, Nan How Able One. Negative. He cannot be picked up on Fort Lauderdale radar gear."*

"FT-74 Roger. Standby," Cox answered, then contacted Taylor. *"FT-28, this is FT-74. Turn on your ZBX . . . FT-28, do you read? Turn on your ZBX."*

"ZBX?" Lieutenant DeBaron asked from his station at the sensors. *"What's that?"*

"Homing device," the sensor tech answered softly.

At 1622 Fort Lauderdale radio again contacted Lieutenant Cox with instructions for Taylor. *"FT-74, this is Nan How Able One, tell FT-28 to have a pilot with a good compass take over lead. Over."*

Lieutenant Cox acknowledged and passed on the message. *"Roger. FT-28, this is FT-74. Have a wingman with a good compass take over lead of flight. Over."*

Lieutenant Taylor's reply was garbled and all but unintelligible to Lieutenant Cox as well as the Wells, with only the word *"radar,"* being clear enough to understand.

Lieutenant Cox immediately tried to reestablish contact. *"FT-28, your transmissions are fading. Something is wrong. What is your altitude?"*

Lieutenant Taylor's reply of, *"I am at forty-five hundred feet,"* was clear of the previous interference.

Lieutenant Cox's next few transmissions were on different frequencies, but he settled down once he was in contact with Fort Lauderdale again. *"Nan How Able One, this is FT-74. He is now on a new heading. Angels 4.5 and climbing."*

Now a new voice joined the transmissions. *"Nan How Able Three to FT-28: This is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country . . . can you read us?"*

Captain Reordan looked at Commander Frazier with a question plane to see in her eyes. The commander quickly reviewed his notes and nodded. "NHA-3 is the Air Rescue Unit #4, stationed at Port Everglades. The phrase seems to be from some play or speech, and is used as a standard radio check."

Captain Reordan's raised eyebrows and shrug were an eloquent reply.

Lieutenant Taylor's reply was almost heartening. *"Affirmative. We have just passed over small island. We have no other land in sight. Visibility is 10 to 12 miles."*

"I am at angles 3.5. Have on Emergency IFF. Does anybody in the area have a radar screen that could pick us up?"

Port Everglades either didn't hear the request, or ignored it. *"FT-28, this is Nan How Able Three. Suggest you have another plane in your flight with a good compass take over the lead and guide you back to the mainland."*

Lieutenant Taylor replied with a simple *"Roger."*

Lieutenant Taylor followed up that reply a few minutes later with the message, *"FT-28 to Nan How Able Three, one of the planes in the flight thinks if we went 270 we could hit land."*

"We went out on a heading of 120. On the second leg of the hop I took over because I thought they were going wrong, but now I know it's my compasses that were wrong."

Port Everglades called back immediately. *"Nan How Able Three to FT-28. Do you have a YG disk for homing DF?"*

"DF? What's DF?" Lieutenant DeBaron asked, his face twisted into a puzzled frown.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Direction Finding, Mr. Sensor Officer, sir,” the sensor tech answered in a less than respectful tone of voice. “They had to home in on ground-based radio transmitters and triangulate their position as well as they could. They didn’t even have a primitive GPS system until late in the century.”

“Get stuffed,” DeBaron muttered softly, so that only the tech heard.

Lieutenant Taylor’s voice came over the communications speaker at that moment, drowning out Lieutenant DeBaron. *“FT-28 to Nan How Able Three. We are heading 030 for 45 minutes, then we will fly north to make sure we are not over the Gulf of Mexico.”*

Another pilot spoke, not identifying himself. “Should I drop the last of my bombs now? “

Lieutenant Taylor answered, *“By all means.”*

Fort Lauderdale called Taylor, but didn’t receive an answer. *“Nan How Able One to FT-28, please turn on your ZBX. Repeat, turn on ZBX. Over.”*

When Lieutenant Taylor failed to respond to Fort Lauderdale, Port Everglades repeated the call. *“Nan How Able Three to FT-28, please turn on your ZBX. Repeat, please turn on ZBX”*

When that message also failed to receive a response, it was broadcasted to all planes. *“Nan How Able Three to any Fox Tare in flight with Fox Tare Twenty-eight, turn on your ZBX. Over.”*

Lieutenant Taylor apparently didn’t hear the message, nor did any of his flight. Taylor’s voice came again, ordering his men together. *“All planes in this flight join up in close formation.”* Moments later, he continued. *“How long have we gone now?”*

Lieutenant Powers answered, *“About 20 minutes.”*

Lieutenant Taylor then changed his previous orders. *“Let’s turn and fly east 2 degrees. We are going too damn far north instead of east. If there is anything we wouldn’t see it.”*

He amended his orders again moments later. *"FT-28 to all planes in flight, change course to 090° for 10 minutes."*

His next message had an accusatory tone to it, and was directed at Powers. *"Powers, you didn't get far enough east. How long have we been going east?"* Then he called Port Everglades again.

"Hello Nan How Able three, this is FT-28. Do you read? Over."

"Roger. This is Nan How Able Three. Go ahead."

Lieutenant Taylor heard that message. *"I receive you very weak. We are now flying 270 degrees."*

Port Everglades answered with a simple, *"Roger."*

Lieutenant Taylor then informed Port Everglades of his intentions. *"We will fly 270 degrees until we hit the beach or run out of gas."* That done, he called to his flight. *"Planes fly close formation. When first man gets down to 10 gallons of gas, we will all land in the water together. Does everyone understand that?"*

Port Everglades again tried to establish communications with Lieutenant Taylor. *"Nan How Able Three to FT-28, if you can change to Yellow Band please do so and give us a call."*

"Yellow Band?" Lieutenant DeBaron asked, and was hissed at by everyone in the control room.

Lieutenant Taylor again tried to contact Port Everglades. *"Nan How Able Three, this is Fox Tare twenty-eight. . ."*

"This is Nan How Able Three, shift to 3000 kilocycles," Port Everglades again ordered.

Lieutenant Taylor was apparently not hearing the order. *"I receive you very weak. How is weather over Lauderdale?"*

In spite of the ignored order, Port Everglades responded. *"FT-28, this is Nan How Able Three, Weather over Lauderdale clear. Over Key West CAVU. Over the Bahamas cloudy rather low ceiling, poor visibility."*

Lieutenant Taylor then broadcast, *"Is that a ship on the left?"*

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Captain Powers replied, *"No. I think that it's an island."*

Lieutenant Taylor then tried Port Everglades again. *"Nan How Able Three, Can you hear me?"*

Port Everglades immediately replied, *"Hear you strength three, modulation good."*

Lieutenant Taylor did not reply, so they tried again. *"Nan How Able Three to FT-28, Can you shift to 3000 kcs? Over. FT-28, please change to 3000 kcs. . . .shift to 3000 kcs. Over."*

Lieutenant Taylor apparently missed the transmission and tried Port Everglades again. *"Nan How Able Three, how do you read?"*

Port Everglades again responded almost immediately with a repeat of their earlier instructions. *"Very Weak. Change to 3000 kilocycles."*

Lieutenant Taylor again either didn't hear the order, or chose to ignore it. *"Hello Nan How Able Three, this is FT-28. I can hear you very faintly. My transmission is getting weaker."*

When his transmission didn't receive an immediate reply, he tried again. *"Hello Nan How Able Three. This is FT-28. Over."*

Port Everglades tried once again to get Taylor to change his radio frequency. *"Change to Yellow Band channel 1, 3000 kilocycles and give us a call."*

Lieutenant Taylor again didn't comply with the order. *"My transmission is getting weaker."*

The Port Everglades radio operator was sounding annoyed as he again instructed Taylor to change frequency. *"Change to Yellow Band 3000 kilocycles and say words twice when answering. Nan How Able Three to FT-28, did you receive my last transmission? Change to channel 1 3000 kilocycles."*

Lieutenant Taylor requested a repeat of the order. *"Repeat once again."*

Port Everglades responded in a slow, precisely enunciated voice. *"Change to Channel 1, 3000 kilocycles."*

This time Lieutenant Taylor did hear the instruction, but refused to comply. *"I cannot change frequency. I must keep my planes intact."*

Another of the planes broke in then with a terse, almost frightening message. *"We may have to ditch any minute."*

Lieutenant Taylor then tried to contact Captain Powers. *"Hello Powers, do you read me? Hello Powers, this is Taylor. Do you read me?"*

"Roger. I read you," the marine captain replied.

"Hello Powers. I have been trying to reach you," Taylor said in an almost accusatory tone.

Powers' reply was coolly correct. *"I thought you were calling base --"*

"Negative. What course are we on?"

There was a slight pause before Powers replied. *"Holding course 270."*

Taylor's next transmission confirmed his confusion as to their whereabouts. *"Affirmative. I am pretty sure we are over the Gulf of Mexico. We didn't go far enough east. How long have we been on this course?"*

Powers replied simply, *"About 45 minutes."*

Taylor's next transmission sealed the fate of the 14 men of flight 19. *"I suggest we fly due east until we run out of gas. We have a better chance of being picked up close to shore. If we were near land we should be able to see a light or something. Are you listening? We may just as well turn around and go east again."*

Port Everglades was listening as well, and tried to contact Taylor. *"Nan How Able Three to FT-28, do you read me? Nan How Able Three to FT-28, do you read me . . . Ten nine eight seven six five four three two one."*

Taylor didn't hear them. *"Hello Powers? Powers, what is your course? What course are we on now?"*

Captain Powers replied with the information that Taylor should have already known. *"Per your orders we are flying 090."*

"FT-28, this is FT-117. We are BINGO fuel and are preparing to ditch."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Taylor's orders were immediate. *"Roger. All Fox Tare prepare to ditch. We stay together. Try to land near FT-117."*

"FT-36, Roger," Captain Powers immediately replied.

"FT-81, Roger."

"FT-3, Roger."

"FT-28, FT-81. We will probably be next. Will wait until FT-117 is down before making our approach."

"Roger, FT-81."

"Captain, they'll die down there," Commander Frazier whispered harshly.

"They died six centuries ago, Kell. We can only mourn them." The captain's voice was harsh with emotion as she answered. They all knew the first rule of time travel. No interaction.

"FT-28, we are making our final approach. Crew is bailing out before landing. Wish us luck."

"Good luck, men," Captain Reordan whispered.

"FT-28, FT-81. We may not be able to wait. Beginning approach."

"Captain, please! They don't have to die!" Commander Frazier was almost pleading with his captain now.

"History records their deaths, Kell. We can't alter that."

"History records their disappearance! Not their deaths! Captain, we can save them without violating the first rule. We can save them!"

"No." Captain Reordan glared at her XO.

"Sir," Lieutenant Deeson said softly, "history will not be affected. Those men need not be lost forever, just to this time period."

Captain Reordan looked at her command crew and saw that their wills were united. "Very well. Mr. Frazier, you have the con. Computer, record. On this day, December 5th, 1945 CE, I, Captain Erica Reordan, chose to violate

Temporal Directorate Rule One. This decision is mine alone. End record. Master Chief McCormack, prepare the boats. Water rescue, possible aerial recovery. Launch when ready."

Master Chief Electronics Technician Krystal McCormack, the *Wells'* Chief of the Boat, saluted and sprinted out of the control room. The *Wells* shivered moments later as her small craft were launched.

Captain Powers was the next to announce his intention to ditch. "*FT-28, FT-36. BINGO fuel. Starting our approach.*"

"Roger FT-36. FT-117 and FT-81 are already down. Good luck."

"Hold on, men. The cavalry is coming," Commander Frazier whispered.

The small craft penetrated the atmosphere as a shower of shooting stars, falling out over the Atlantic in a stunning display until their hulls cooled and their speed slowed sufficiently to allow them to extend their atmospheric foils and ignite their drives. Then they streaked toward the downed airmen at barely subsonic speeds. FT-36 was in the water before they arrived, but FT-28 and FT-3 were still airborne.

"Lieutenant, look at that! What is it?" Aviation Radioman 3rd Class Walter Parpart asked as a dark shape swung in above their plane.

"I don't know, Parpart. It doesn't look like any aircraft that I have ever seen. What the hell...?"

A coruscating beam of light blinded Lieutenant Taylor as the shuttle locked its tractor-beam on the fragile craft. "Easy does it. Suppress its engine or it'll shake itself apart."

Ensign Bossi in FT-3 was similarly engaged as the four other small craft fished the crews of the downed planes out of the dark Atlantic waters. Using a secure channel, Master Chief McCormack reported their success. "*McCormack to Wells, the fishing is good here. We are limited out and returning to orbit.*"

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“That woman spends entirely too much time fishing,” Captain Reordan commented softly, much to the amusement of the crew. Master Chief McCormack’s preoccupation with the ancient sport was a well-known quirk in her personality.

The arrival of the small craft was just the beginning for the crew of the *Wells*. Isolation and decontamination crews were standing by as the fourteen men and two vintage aircraft were brought aboard. The Marines accomplished the first task, that of disarming them. Ten men and women in space-armor met the bedraggled airmen of another era in full battle dress. Black-enameled armor made the Marines look like some kind of giant bug, but the heavy machineguns each carried were easily identified. The men were suitably impressed, and surrendered their side arms willingly. Then the medics took over.

Each of the fourteen men was taken to an isolation room and told, in crisp, no-nonsense tones, to strip and put on the MedRobes. The armed Marine that accompanied each medic helped encourage them.

Chief Medical Officer Stancil nodded as the sensors in each ‘Robe reported on the condition of the men. “Healthy in most respects,” he recorded into his log, “for this time period. They will have to be quarantined until they have been inoculated and had their systems cleansed. Amazing the number of exotic diseases they’re carrying. Absolutely amazing.”

As the *Wells* climbed away from the Earth and turned toward Galactic South, Captain Reordan made her way to the isolation ward. She paused, then returned to her cabin. *I’ve got to convince these men that we’re not their enemies.* She wanted all of the advantages that she could get for this meeting, and changed into her Class “A” Dress Uniform, saber and all. Now feeling at her best, she again headed toward the isolation ward.

The fourteen men could all see her as she entered, and made her way to Lieutenant Taylor. “Greetings. I am Captain Erica Reordan of the Confederated Star Systems Space Navy.”

“Taylor, Charles Carrol, Lieutenant, United States Navy, serial number...”

“We know who you are, Lieutenant. We know who all of you are.” She paused and glanced at the rest of the men. “You are the senior officer of this...”

“That isn’t technically true,” Captain Powers interrupted. “I am senior to the lieutenant.”

Captain Reordan raised an eyebrow, then nodded. “Very well, Captain. You are guests aboard the *CSS H.G. Wells*. You are here because you would have died in the sea if we hadn’t picked you up.”

“We were headed toward land,” Lieutenant Taylor interrupted. “We can’t have been too far out.”

“You were headed toward Spain, Lieutenant,” Captain Reordan snapped. “Your planes were more than 300 miles from the coast of Florida, and you were headed away from it.”

“That can’t be...” Taylor said softly, but Powers was nodding.

“I thought so. Lieutenant, you can expect me to file a full report of your failure when we return to Fort Lauderdale.”

“You will not be returning to Fort Lauderdale, Captain,” Captain Reordan said softly. “Your disappearance is recorded, and cannot be changed. I am sorry.”

“Wait a minute! What do you mean our disappearance is recorded?” Captain Stivers asked angrily.

“On December 5th, 1945 CE, the five planes and fourteen men of Flight 19 were lost under unexplained circumstances over the Atlantic Ocean. It was believed that Lieutenant Taylor’s compasses failed, and that he led you to your deaths.”

“1945 AD,” Lieutenant Gerber said softly.

“We no longer use AD and BC. Not all cultures are Western. Instead we use CE, for Common Era, or BCE, Before the Common Era, to designate year placement.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

"Where in God's name are we?" one of the other men asked softly.

Captain Reordan walked over to the wall opposite the isolation chambers and activated the screen. Black, star-speckled space glared into the room. "You are in space, gentlemen. We are currently two astronomical units away from Earth on a course that will take us south of the ecliptic. Our velocity is, well, beyond your current comprehension."

"We're where?"

"What's an astronomical unit?"

Captain Reordan turned to the speaker. "An astronomical unit is the distance between the Earth and Sol."

"How fast is beyond our comprehension? We're pilots. We know speed."

Captain Reordan sighed. "Not speeds like this. In terms that you will understand, we are traveling at thirty-six thousand miles per second. When we reach a distance of five AU, we will transit to our home period. It is not happenstance that this vessel is named the *H.G. Wells*. We are a timeship from the 27th century."

"That's not possible!"

"I am afraid that it is." Captain Reordan turned back to Captain Powers. "Prepare your men, Captain. The transit is rough, though no worse than riding in some of the aircraft you have flown. There will be a warning over the announcing system. I suggest that all of you belt in. It will be safer for you to do so." Turning, she walked out of the infirmary.

The men stared after her as the door closed. "Captain, you don't really think that..."

"No, I don't. We have to escape. Start looking for a way out of these cells."

Lieutenant Taylor sat in a dispirited slum in his chair. "We were going the wrong way."

“Straighten up and get over it. You can beat yourself up when we get home.” Captain Powers was trying to find a finger purchase along the seam of the isolation chamber’s inner door. “I am not leaving my family.”

Taylor looked over and nodded, then began his own search for a way to escape. All fourteen men were still searching when Captain Reordan’s voice came over the speakers. “All hands prepare for transit. All hands prepare for transit. You airmen, belt in and leave those door seals alone.”

Wide eyes looked around the room, then the men complied. They had no idea how the captain had known what they were doing, but her knowledge and the habit of obeying commands made them move.

The *Wells* tore space and time as her temporal drive took them home. The trip was, as warned, rough, the more so since the captain had left the view screen on and the men had a full, unshielded view of the violence of the time stream. Roiling lights of every imaginable color filled the screen. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the shaking stopped and the view screen was once again black.

“Oh, my aching ass,” a voice said softly. The rest of the men looked to see Sergeant Robert Gallivan climbing shakily to his feet. “Guess she wasn’t kidding about strapping in.”

“Sarge, are you in one piece?” Captain Stivers asked, real concern in his voice.

“Just hurt my pride, Sir.”

* * *

In the *Wells*’ command center, things were more tense. “Commander Frazier, I hereby place myself under arrest and relinquish command to you. Report to the Temporal Directorate immediately and inform them of our circumstances.”

“Captain, no! We all made...”

“That will be all, Mr. Frazier!” Captain Reordan snapped. “The decision was mine alone, and I alone will face the consequences.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Captain, we all—,” Lieutenant Deeson began, but the captain cut him off.

“I said that will be all. I am the captain, and the responsibility is mine. End of discussion.” Turning on her heel, she walked to her stateroom and closed the door firmly behind her.

Commander Frazier sighed mightily and took the command chair. “Lay in a course for Earth, best speed. Communications, send the logs to ComTempDir. Include my personal log as well.”

“Aye, sir.”

The welcoming committee didn’t wait for them to dock. The Assault Ship Carrier *CSS Guadalcanal* hailed them shortly after their transmission was received. “*CSS H.G. Wells*, heave to and prepare to receive a boarding party. Prepare Captain Reordan and Executive Officer Frazier for transfer.”

“*Wells*, aye,” Commander Frazier answered. The small ship came to relative rest as the enormous carrier came along side. Captain Reordan and Commander Frazier surrendered to the Master at Arms force from the *Guadalcanal*.

Admiral Chandling boarded the *Wells* and took command, immediately making a ship wide announcement to the crew. “This is Admiral Alexander Chandling, ComSpaceFleet5. Effective immediately, the crew of this vessel is under quarantine. Your unauthorized passengers will be transferred to Temporal Directorate Headquarters to await disposition. Captain Reordan and Commander Frazier are under arrest on charges of violating Temporal Directorate Rule One. That is all.” The click of the intercom shocked the crew of the *Wells* silent.

Confederated Star Systems Space Force Headquarters, thirty days later.

“Captain Erica Reordan, you stand accused of violating Temporal Directorate Rule One, interacting with the past and bringing fourteen unauthorized passengers forward from the year 1945 CE. How do you plead?”

Captain Reordan stood and straightened her dress blouse before speaking. “Your Lordships, I plead guilty, and ask that the charges against Commander Frazier be dropped. Mine alone was the responsibility.”

Admiral Kenyon nodded. “We accept your plea, but Commander Frazier’s own logs place the blame firmly on his shoulders. We cannot accept that you alone took these steps.”

Captain Reordan nodded, casting her eyes on the floor. She had hoped to spare Kellin, but had known that it was a vain hope. He had convicted himself in an effort to save her. “I understand, Your Lordship.”

There was a stir at the back of the courtroom as a late visitor arrived. Lord Kenyon, as First Space Lord and senior justice of the Military Court, banged his gavel for order. “Order! I ordered those doors sealed!”

“Oh, posh, Devero. You will not exclude me.” Lady Roberts said in a gravelly voice. “I was late. It’s my prerogative.”

Lord Kenyon nodded and folded his hands as Lady Roberts made her way forward. “How may we be of service, Lady Leslie?”

“You may dismiss this court. You are out of order, and out of your jurisdiction.” Lady Leslie said softly. “The *Wells* and her crew are the responsibility of the Temporal Directorate.”

“Lady Leslie, we understand your desire to...” Admiral Chandling began, but was cut short.

“Oh, be quiet, Alexander!” Lady Leslie snapped in a tone that she usually reserved for recalcitrant children. “You are dismissed.”

Admiral Chandling rocked back as if he had been slapped, then stood and bowed before departing. Lady Leslie glared at the other six admirals. “This court is dismissed. Captain Reordan and her crew were and are my responsibility.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Lady Leslie, this is most irregular. The *Wells* is a unit of the Confederated Star Systems Space Navy. Captain Reordan’s actions were totally...”

“...Expected.” Lady Leslie interrupted, causing a stir throughout the courtroom. “I expected Erica to do exactly what she did. My reasons are my own, as the decision to send them was mine.”

Admiral Kenyon leaned forward. “Lady Leslie, you *expected* Captain Reordan to violate the most basic rule of time travel?”

“Of course I did. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have sent her.”

Admiral Kenyon put his head in his hands. “Lady Leslie, please explain. This is just too much for me.”

The old woman gave him a frighteningly impish grin, then walked forward and took the witness stand, waving away the protestations that she shouldn’t. Looking about, she focused her eyes on the men in the guarded seats to the side.

“When word that Flight 19 had been found reached me, I did a little research. Upon finding the information that I wanted, I ordered the *CSS H.G. Wells*, under the command of Captain Erica Reordan, to investigate the disappearance of the planes. I was aware of Captain Reordan’s habit of stretching her orders, and of the emotional state of her crew, especially Commander Frazier. I expected them to realize that rescuing men presumed dead for six hundred years would not cause any disturbance to the time stream. I fully expected them to rescue those men, and would have been disappointed if they hadn’t.”

“Lady Leslie, why?” another of the admirals asked.

“Because a little girl lost her father long ago, and I had the opportunity to find him.” Smiling, she walked over to where Captain Powers sat and said, “Hello, Grandpa.”

“Rescue Mission” © 2008

Minerva was written for and submitted to a ghost story anthology. Didn't make it, but I did get an encouraging letter from the editor.

Minerva

Minerva beckoned, her siren song of promise drawing Alberto deeper into her lair. He chased her, following the trail she left through the maze of trees and mist that was her home. He could see her ahead, a figure in the mist that he could never catch, but was eternally fated to try.

* * *

The sound of the phone ringing woke Alberto, jarring him out of his dream and back to the reality of his life. He cursed, fumbled, and finally got the phone off the hook and to his ear.

"Hello, you have reached a dead man. Please don't bother leaving a message. *Bleep!*" he said, slurring his words slightly but not caring at all.

A voice snapped, "Berto, get your ass out of bed. It's nearly ten." The voice belonged to Alberto's best friend, Nathan.

"Up yours," Alberto mumbled. "What do I have to get out of bed for? I can be a disgrace from here quite effectively."

"Berto, you can't just become a hermit in your room. There are people who are counting on you. You've got to come out and face the world."

Alberto rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "Face my failure, you mean. Face the fact that twenty-seven men and women died because I saw a ghost. Face the fact that I'll never command a ship again, and probably never leave this Godforsaken mudball again, either."

"The Board of Inquiry cleared you of those charges, Berto," Nathan reminded him. "The gas leak in the vent ducts caused you to hallucinate."

"I haven't cleared myself, Nate. Oh, sure, there was gas. But there isn't any gas now, and I dream of Minerva every time I close my eyes." Alberto rolled

back onto his stomach and propped himself up on his elbows. "I know she's there, waiting for me."

"Okay, maybe there is something to this hiding in your room stuff. You tell anyone else that story and you'll be making pretty pictures for the PsychTechs."

"I'm crazy, not stupid," Alberto said with a laugh. "You're the only person I've told, and everyone knows you're crazier than I am. No one would believe you if you told them."

"Maybe so. Now get your ass out of bed and meet me at my office for lunch. I have someone I want you to meet."

"All right, Nate. See you at noon." Alberto hung up the phone and collapsed onto his back again. His eyes drifted closed, but his first snore startled him awake and he sat up, scrubbing his face with sweat-slicked hands.

He didn't want to get up. He didn't want to go out. He especially didn't want to face the reporters who wanted to know what really happened out in the asteroid belt. But most of all, he didn't want to look in the mirror and face himself: Alberto Coronado Rivera De La Cruz, former captain of the space ship *Guadalajara*, which he had brought back without his crew.

He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The man who looked out of the mirror with bloodshot eyes and wildly straggling hair was a stranger. Deep crescents of darkened skin hung under both of his eyes. He looked at the stranger and snarled, and the stranger snarled back.

"If you start talking to me, I'm calling the boys with the I-love-me jackets myself," he told the apparition. The other's lips moved with his, but he didn't say anything after Alberto finished talking.

Alberto moved on to the shower. Real water, as much and as hot as he wanted it. The *Guadalajara* didn't have showers. If it had, he'd have taken Minerva—he broke that train of thought immediately. She wasn't real. He knew she wasn't.

He was rubbing his hair with a towel as he walked back into his bedroom, savagely scrubbing at his scalp as if he could make the images disappear by wiping them away. He could still feel Minerva's firm flesh under his fingertips. He smelled her, the smoky musk of a woman in her prime. He could hear her, her sweet voice telling him that everything was as it should be, and to ignore those sounds. The sounds of his crew beating on the hull. The radio calls for help. The pleading of the people he'd killed as he let them suffocate while he made love to a phantom.

He threw the towel on the floor and kicked it against a wall as his chest heaved, struggling to breathe as those memories came back again. That was the worst part: he remembered it all. There was no haze to obscure his memory. No fog of drugs to distort them. He remembered everything that he had done.

Alberto looked around his apartment with the wild intensity of a caged animal for a moment, then struggled into a shirt and pants. His feet found his shoes as he shrugged a jacket on over his shirt. He was out the door in moments, fleeing the memories that wouldn't stay behind.

Nathan's office was in the Arvantan West Tower on the three hundredth floor. Alberto had managed to comb his hair in the elevator, using one of the walls as his mirror, and was actually presentable as he walked into Nathan's office.

Nathan's receptionist smiled brightly when she saw him. "Señor Chavez will be with you in a moment, Señor De La Cruz. Please have a seat. May I bring you anything?" she asked with just the right lilt in her voice.

Alberto shook his head no, but didn't say anything. The girl counterfeited an airhead quite well, but Nathan had once confided that she was a member of MENSA and held double doctorates in personnel management and mass psychology. That fact was obscured by her appearance. She looked like a model and was one of the most beautiful women Alberto had ever met in person. Her numbskull persona was there to make people careless around her. She was

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Nathan's front-line spy on the people who came to visit him, and was far too adept at reading people. The last thing Alberto wanted was for her to read him and figure out what was going on behind his haunted eyes.

Alberto had just picked up a magazine when Nathan's door opened and he walked out, followed by a tall man in an immaculate black suit. As soon as Alberto saw him, the thought, *Spook*, rolled through his mind.

"Berto, come here," Nathan said with a wide grin. "This is Jorge Cabrillo, from our R&D Division."

Alberto stood and walked over, sticking out his hand in a friendly manner. "I'm pleased to meet you, Señor Cabrillo," he managed to say in an almost normal tone.

"And I you, Señor De La Cruz," Cabrillo answered with a smile that never touched his eyes. "I have heard many things about you."

Alberto looked at Nathan and let his mouth twist into a bitter smile. "If the stories were from Nate, they're probably true."

"Not all, Señor. Not all," Señor Cabrillo said with a wide grin that made Alberto's skin crawl.

"Come on, I'm hungry," Nathan interrupted, and Alberto almost gave him a hug for breaking the tension that was growing between him and the spy.

Nathan led them to the elevators and punched the button for the fifty-second floor. "We're going to *Cacao's* for lunch. *Cacao* swears he has a new dish that is so good it will make you forget your name."

Alberto was staring at the reflective wall of the elevator as he said, "There are a lot of things I'd like to forget," and saw the calculating expression on Cabrillo's face. It was there and gone again in an instant, but Alberto wasn't fooled. He knew that expression.

Cacao's was the premier restaurant in the Arvantan Towers. It came close to being the premier restaurant on all of New Hispaniola. Only *Señor Philippe's* was more popular with the up-and-comers of the New Hispaniolan elite.

“Ah, Señor Chavez, welcome,” the maître d’ said as soon as they opened the door. “Your table is waiting, as you requested.” The man led them past scowling people in impeccable business dress, totally ignoring the fact that Alberto looked like he should be waiting outside the service entrance for a handout.

Once they were seated, Nathan looked at Alberto and sighed. “You need to get out more, Berto. You look like you’re about to bolt for the door.”

“Looks aren’t always deceiving, Nate. I’d like nothing better than to vanish right now,” Alberto answered. He looked around nervously, and saw at least thirty people looking his way.

“Calm down, Berto. I doubt any of them recognize you. I just don’t think anyone has worn jeans, boat shoes, and a windbreaker into *Cacao’s* in living memory.” Nathan smiled broadly, and Alberto had to nod in agreement.

“You could have told me where we were going,” Alberto said in his own defense. “I was thinking of that raw bar you took me to last time. The one they had to carry us out of. You remember that, don’t you?”

“It’s all a blur,” Nathan admitted, then looked at the third member of their party. “Sorry. It would be a long story if I could remember it. But that was then and this is now. Berto, Jorge is interested in something you reported before your – incident. An asteroid with a peculiar makeup. It was something that your remote sensors couldn’t define.”

“A mass of material that seemed anomalous,” Alberto said as his eyes went unfocused for a moment. “I remember. It was just before-just before I lost my crew. The mass seemed to exceed the volume of the asteroid by an order of magnitude. Even if it was made of a heavy element like lead, it would have been too massive for its apparent volume. But I’m not sure that it was real. By that time the hallucinogenic gas was already in our atmosphere.”

“Señor De La Cruz,” Cabrillo said as he sat forward, “we are interested in finding this asteroid again. If it is, as you reported, a mass of super dense matter,

it could be very valuable. We in the R&D Division would very much like to obtain a sample of that material, if not the entire asteroid.”

“You want me to go back out there?”

Nathan reached over and grabbed Alberto’s hand. “Berto, you didn’t capture any visual record of the asteroid. You are the only one who knows what it looks like.”

“Even the report you filed on its location is of little use to us,” Cabrillo said, his expression one of intense concentration. “There was no data on its motion, direction or speed. All we know is where it was.”

“You want me to go back out there.”

Nathan squeezed his hand to get his attention. “Yes, Berto, we want you to go back out there. Just long enough to find and tag the asteroid. Then you come straight back to New Hispaniola. You don’t have to stay out there.”

Alberto tried to wet his lips with a tongue that was as dry as the desert, then he grabbed his glass of water and gulped it down. “Nate, do you know what you’re asking me to do?”

“Sorry, but yes, I do.” Nathan shook his head slowly. “Berto, I hate to use an old cliché, but you’ve got to get back in the saddle. You’ve got to put your butt in the command chair of your ship again, and damn soon, or you’ll never leave the ground again. You’ll probably never leave your room.”

Alberto studied the tablecloth as he thought, looking at the fine weave of the linen fibers. It would be so easy to make them unravel, like his life had unraveled. “I don’t know if I can, Nate.”

“Can you try?” Nathan asked.

“I don’t know.”

* * *

The next day Alberto awoke at dawn. He hadn’t dreamt of Minerva for the first time since he’d come back to the planet. After his shower, he shaved and combed his hair, then went to get dressed. His uniform hung in the closet, and

for a change it didn't seem to mock him. It invited him to put it on. To once again be the captain of the *Guadalajara*.

Once he was dressed, he looked in the mirror and nodded sharply. Then he picked up the phone and dialed Nate's office.

"Arvantan Cartel, Señor Chavez's office. May I help you?" the receptionist said, her perky tone just as fresh as it was in person.

"Maria, it's Berto De La Cruz. Tell Nate I'm on my way up to NHSP-1. He'll understand."

"Good luck, Captain," Maria replied, all pretenses gone from her voice.

"Thank you." Alberto hung up the phone, then called the spaceport. "When is the next shuttle to NHSP-1?" he asked. The answer made him smile. "Two hours is fine. Book a seat for Captain Alberto De La Cruz of the Arvantan Cartel ship *Guadalajara*."

* * *

The *Guadalajara* was still nestled in docking port thirty-seven, exactly where he'd left her when he returned from his ill-fated mission to the asteroid belt. He walked aboard with his head held high and went to the bridge. He began the warm-up and start-up procedure by himself, but he wasn't alone for long.

Seventeen men and women, led by Jorge Cabrillo, entered the ship and spread out, taking the crew positions naturally, as if they didn't have to push ghosts out of the way. Cabrillo entered the bridge and smiled at Alberto.

"I am glad that you chose to aid us in this endeavor, Señor De La Cruz. The crewmen and women I brought with me are from the *Juarez*, one of *Guadalajara's* sister ships. They are all experienced spacers and you will have no trouble with them." He smiled, but again, it never made it to his eyes.

Alberto simply nodded his acknowledgement and pushed the ship wide intercom stud on his chair panel. "All hands to departure stations. Rig ship for acceleration. Bring main thrusters to hot standby. Departure in five minutes."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Turning to his unwelcome guest, Alberto pointed toward the chair at the engineering panel. "Sit there and don't touch anything. We'll get you where you want to go and find the asteroid for you. I have to wonder, though. How did you get anyone to agree to go into space with me again?"

"Triple hazard pay, plus a bonus if we locate the asteroid."

Alberto chuckled. "I wouldn't have accepted that deal. Strap in." He went to his own chair and fastened his harness. A man and a woman came into the bridge and addressed him.

"Captain De La Cruz, I am Ishmael Gomez, Navigator Second of the *Juarez*," the man said, coming to attention. "My companion is Isabella Santiago, Primary Helm."

"Take your positions," Alberto ordered without looking up from his panel. "Get clearance from NHSP-1 to depart, and plot us a course to the asteroid belt. Our target is six-seven-one by two-six-two at four point three six nine astronomical units from the star."

The navigator had been working while Alberto talked, and looked up almost immediately. "Course set and laid in."

"Very well," Alberto answered as the butterflies that had been missing appeared in his stomach. He pushed the button on his panel and the canned acceleration warning echoed through the ship. Exactly one minute later, the *Guadalajara* eased away from port.

The trip to the asteroid belt took seventeen days. Seventeen days for Alberto's doubts to grow. Seventeen days for him to second-guess himself. Seventeen days to wonder what he would find this time.

As soon as they arrived in the asteroid belt, he instituted a search pattern. He remembered the asteroid's movements as being generally toward the ecliptic south-east, and he directed the search in that direction. He tied the optical sensors to his panel and searched with his eyes as Cabrillo and Gomez searched with the ship's sensors. It still took three more days to find the right asteroid.

“Are you certain, Captain?” Cabrillo asked as Alberto tapped his screen with one finger.

“What do your sensors say?” he asked in return.

“Inconclusive.”

“Exactly what they said last time. We’ll stand well away this time, though. Helm, maintain at least ten kilometers from that rock at all times. Señor Cabrillo, you and I will take the shuttle and investigate. I won’t hazard another crew.”

Cabrillo looked at him for a moment, then nodded. “A wise precaution, Captain. I will go suit up.”

“As will I. Meet me in the shuttle bay when you are ready.” Alberto turned and walked off the bridge to his quarters. He carefully checked his suit, then strapped in. It was a miner’s suit, with exoskeleton servos to enhance his strength.

He had already done the pre-flight checks on the shuttle by the time Señor Cabrillo arrived. Alberto hid a smile when he saw the suit that Cabrillo had brought along. A civilian excursion suit, smooth and attractively tailored, it looked like a slightly bulky coverall.

“Are we ready, Captain?” he asked as he came aboard the shuttle.

“Yes. Strap in and don’t touch anything.” Alberto keyed his microphone and contacted the bridge. “Captain to bridge. Depressurize the shuttle bay and open the outer doors.”

“Bridge aye,” the navigator replied. It took just a few moments, and then the mighty doors peeled open to reveal the glory that was space.

Alberto eased the shuttle clear, then used small bursts of his thrusters to get them moving toward the asteroid. “It will take a little while to reach the asteroid. Just sit back and relax.”

The little while was nearly an hour as Alberto maneuvered them into position to land on the rotating rock. It was a tricky maneuver, but he executed it

flawlessly and grinned when he saw Cabrillo's white-knuckled grip on his arm rests.

"You can let go now. The mass is sufficient that we have almost one tenth of an Earth-Normal gravity on the surface. That was what drew out attention last time."

"Can we go out onto the surface?" Cabrillo asked, and Alberto led him to the personnel airlock.

"Double-check your suit before we get into the lock. There are no second chances with vacuum." Alberto was following his own order as he spoke. When both of them were ready, he opened the inner airlock door. Once they were in the lock and the door was closed and secure, he activated the pump-out sequence. As the air was removed from the airlock, their suits tightened and Alberto watched Cabrillo carefully. When the other's suit showed no signs of rupturing, he opened the outer door.

The asteroid was rotating in two planes, causing a kaleidoscope of shadows to writhe across the surface. It wasn't enough, however, to hide the evidence in the dust.

"You landed here before," Cabrillo said as he looked at the tracks.

"I sent a team to investigate."

Cabrillo turned toward him with a stunned expression on his face. "Your report said nothing of this."

"There was a lot that wasn't in my report."

"What else are you hiding?" Cabrillo demanded.

"Minerva," Alberto answered.

"Your delusion?"

Now Alberto laughed. He walked forward, leaving Cabrillo to follow in his wake. It wasn't far. He'd seen to that when he picked his landing spot. He turned on his suit work-lights and pointed. In a depression that had been gouged

out by a collision with another asteroid was what looked like a metal object. It was smooth and curved, and there appeared to be writing on it.

“Do you see it, Señor Cabrillo?”

Cabrillo was silent for a moment. “That’s impossible.”

“No, Señor, it is possible. It’s what you came here to find material for. A super-dense ship’s hull. It’s been collecting space debris for centuries. It’s Minerva’s ship.”

Cabrillo was backing away from him, shaking his head as he stared with wide eyes. “That cannot be real.”

“It is, Señor. My First Mate led an assay team here and found it. When they touched the hull they triggered an automatic system that opened the airlock. That freed the spirits of the crew.” Alberto turned and faced Cabrillo. “There were over a hundred of them. They possessed my crew, fighting to take over their bodies, three and sometimes four at a time seeking to displace the souls of my people. All except Minerva.” Alberto smiled softly now, as if remembering a lost love.

“She came to me alone. She was gentle with me. She was a lover, not a conqueror. She joined with me, and is still with me. The crew went mad because of the multiple personalities in each of them. Minerva kept me sane. She helped me kill them all, freeing all of their souls to move on. Now it’s time for you to go, Señor Cabrillo. The shuttle is set to auto-return to the ship.”

“But what of you? You’ll die out here,” Cabrillo all but shouted over the suit radio.

“The ship is waiting for me. For us. You should go now. You don’t have long.” Alberto started walking down into the scar, and it took a moment for Cabrillo to realize what was going on.

The suit radio came to life again, but it wasn’t Alberto this time. “Captain, this is Gomez. What is happening? We’ve been listening in, and now we’re detecting a massive buildup of power on the asteroid.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Señor Gomez, take my ship home. Wait for Cabrillo, but you need to leave as soon as he’s aboard,” Alberto said as he continued to walk into the gap.

* * *

Cabrillo hurried back to the waiting shuttle, and felt the thrusters engage as soon as the outer airlock door was closed. He hurried to cycle the lock and moved to the passenger seat to look out the viewport.

Alberto had reached the bare metal of the alien hull and was engulfed in blue light. He turned as the shuttle lifted off and raised one hand in farewell, then a door opened and he went into the hull. The asteroid stopped spinning abruptly just a few moments later, sending accumulated space debris sliding off into the void. Cabrillo watched as the surface of the asteroid seemed to liquefy, then a great cloud of debris was ejected in all directions. Rocks and boulders, sand and dust, the accumulated asteroidal remnants that had been captured by the ship’s gravity over who knew how long sped away from the ship as its systems came on line once again.

The shuttle returned to the *Guadalajara* on its own, and Cabrillo hurried to the bridge as soon as he could. “What’s happening?” he demanded.

“Take a look for yourself, Señor. That ship is powering up.” Gomez was using the ship’s optics to project a picture of the alien spacecraft on the main view screen. The ship was of a design that no human mind had ever conceived. There were no sharp angles. Few straight lines. And somehow it still looked – right. It was currently shrouded in a blue nimbus of energy, and the glow at one end was intensifying. Then the ship streaked away, accelerating at a rate that no human could survive.

“All hands prepare for acceleration,” Señor Gomez announced. “Señor Cabrillo, take a seat and strap in. We need to get back to New Hispaniola as fast as we can.” Turning, he caught Isabella’s eye. “Did you get all of that on disc?”

“Audio and visual,” she confirmed. “Multiple backups as well as the original digital signals in the computer.”

Loren K. Jones

“Well done. Course set, engage when ready.” The *Guadalajara* accelerated away from the asteroid belt on a least time course for the planet.

* * *

The ship was inert when Alberto entered its control center. The last living crewmember had shut it down just minutes before she died. Now the newest crewmember pushed the proper sequence of controls to send the ship on into the eternal night of intergalactic space. Alberto had one instant to realize what was happening before the acceleration killed him, freeing his soul yet trapping it within the hull. He floated free of his body and found the spirit he called Minerva beckoning to him, welcoming him into her eternal embrace.

“Minerva” © 2006

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

The CSS *Pristine Virgin* stories were just for fun. I get tired of serious, life-or-death drama all the time. First contact doesn't have to mean first fight.

Seeker

Lieutenant Commander Eric (The Red) Carlson sat at the command station on the bridge of the CSS *Pristine Virgin*, SSH 1303, contemplating his fate. The *Virgin* was not so pristine any more, not since they had been denied dry-docking at Hampton's Planet the last pass. After sixteen months even the cleanest of crews could leave a ship looking shabby. And this, (sigh), wasn't the cleanest of crews. Like the submarines of ancient Earth, deep space scout vessels such as the *Virgin* tended to be crewed by a special breed of sailor. Special, but not clean.

"Officer of the Deck, long range sensors are picking up something, Sir. Considerable delta-V," the sensor operator reported, boredom clear in his voice.

"Ship?"

"Unable to determine at this distance, Sir. We may be able to pick up something more definite in three or four hours."

Carlson sighed. "Very well, keep me informed. Does anyone know what's for . . . what meal is this anyway?"

"Lunch," the starboard pilot answered. "Roast beast in vinegar. I think that they call it sauerbraten."

The port pilot laughed. "I've had sauerbraten, and that ain't it. I wish the culture tanks could produce something else for a change." He held up his hand to forestall any comment from the officer about healthy food. "I know, I know. 'Better than real.' But real what?"

Carlson let it pass. If the worst thing he heard today was bitching about the food, he'd count himself fortunate. "Weapons, run a diagnostic. Keep it low power. If that's a friendly, we don't want to alarm him."

The gunner's mate, an anachronism in an era of gamma-ray lasers and hyperdrive nuclear torpedoes, straightened marginally in his seat. Switches flicked under his knowledgeable fingers as he watched his display. Then he snapped to an upright posture. "Sensors, check target. I'm showing an eleven AUH delta-V, course set to intercept."

The sound of chairs creaking and keyboards being rapidly tapped all but echoed in the control room. The sensor operator's voice, bored just moments before, was excited now. "Sir, the target has changed course. Sensors show an eleven Astronomical Unit per hour closing speed." The operator swiveled his chair to face the officer. "Sir, that's greater than the speed of light."

"I am aware of that, Livingston," Carlson replied, quickly moving to look over Livingston's shoulder. The numbers were right there, in defiance of Einstein's Theories. Reaching behind his head, he pressed a button for the ship-wide announcing system. "Captain to the bridge, XO to the bridge." Eric stepped back and muttered, "Let them figure this out. It's above my paygrade."

Captain Andrew Corban and Commander David Steinman arrived within moments. "Let's have it, Mr. Carlson," the captain said, moving to look past the Officer of the Deck.

"Sir, we have an unknown contact moving toward us. Delta-V is, well, you can see for yourself, Sir. We indicate an eleven AU per hour closing rate."

"That's impossible," Steinman snapped, glaring at everyone in range. "Check calibration on the sensors."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Done, Sir. Weapons array verifies the solution. We have someone out there who’s never heard of Albert Einstein,” the gunner’s mate answered with just a hint of humor.

“Well, damn-it-all anyway. Battle stations,” the captain said softly, and klaxons began shrilling through the ship. “Sensors, range to target.”

“Range is still rough, Sir, but estimates are twenty-three AU. Intercept at present velocities...”

“...Two hours,” the captain interrupted. Reaching above his head, he pressed the button for the ship-wide address system. “People, we have an unknown contact closing with us at greater than C in normal space. By definition, that makes it an alien. All weapons are to be slaved to the bridge. We will not fire unless there is no other way to save ourselves. If there’s someone out here who can prove Einstein wrong, I want to meet ‘em.”

The next two hours were nerve wracking for the crew of the *Virgin*. Then the intruder began to slow. “Sir, target is slowing, speed dropping almost as fast as we can detect it. We also have a course change indicated. Target is turning away to the ecliptic north, angle on the bow approximately twenty degrees.”

“Noted,” the captain and XO said almost simultaneously. “Engineering, slow us down. All hands, I want this ship ready to jump out of here if there’s trouble. All systems on hot standby.”

A chorus of, “Yes, Sirs,” echoed in the control room and from the speakers that had taken the captain’s command to the rest of the ship. With the slower speed of the target, the captain felt confident enough to send his men to eat. Men ate quickly and quietly, and returned to their stations to await the coming encounter. The two hours had stretched to seven before the contact came within range of the ship’s most sensitive instruments.

The sensor officer, Lieutenant DeBaren, was standing over his men, watching everything that happened. "She's big, Sir. Easily eight hundred meters. Girth is an average of sixty meters, plus and minus ten. Shape seems to be almost random. She bulges and squeezes in some really interesting places."

"Not meant for planetfall," the captain said softly.

The XO nodded his agreement. "I'd love to see their engines. How much power do you think it takes to push a ship that big at high velocities?"

"Who cares about that?" DeBaren said excitedly. "I want to know how he managed C-plus in normal space. Even allowing for our apparent velocity, he was still greater than C. And, allowing for *that*, we shouldn't have been able to detect him. Our normal space sensors are limited by the speed of light."

"He's maneuvering, Sir. Coming along side, matching course and velocity," the senior sensor operator said in a soft, calm voice.

"Communications, are you receiving anything?" the captain asked, not bothering to look away from the sensor plot.

"No, Sir. We have everything wide open, but no one's broadcasting," the answer came softly, with a hint of disappointment.

The captain pursed his lips for a moment, then nodded to himself. "I am making an assumption here, people. OOD, begin flashing our running lights at two second intervals. He's illuminated, so we can assume that he sees at least part of the same spectrum that we see."

The response was immediate. The intruder began blinking its lights at the same rate. "That's enough Mr. Carlson. Mathematical progression now. One, two, four, eight." The intruder matched the sequence immediately. The captain once again nodded. "Communications, broad band normal space broadcast. I want clicks, same numerical sequence."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Aye, Sir.” The communications tech complied, making clicks by the simple expedient of tapping the side of his microphone with a stylus. The response was quickly received.

“Oh, now you’re being silly,” a soft, melodious voice said from the speakers. “Please identify yourselves.” Every eye in the control room widened as the voice, slightly feminine and in impeccable English, continued. “I have been monitoring your internal communications. Are you from the species that calls itself ‘human’?”

The captain swallowed several times before answering. “We are. I am Captain Andrew Corban, commanding officer of the CSS *Pristine Virgin*, SSH 1303. We are a deep space scout vessel from the Confederated Star Systems, operating under the authority of the Research Directorate.”

“I am Velvet Rabbit, if I correctly understand how my name translates into your language. I also am a scout, seeking other inhabitants of this arm of our galaxy. I have encountered your electromagnetic emanations for quite some time now, though I have never before encountered one of your ships.”

“You have a very good command of our language, Velvet Rabbit. Are you willing to exchange information with us? You are quite a surprise to us.” The captain’s voice held just a hint of his awe that the intruder spoke English.

“I should not be. There are many species in this galaxy.”

“We had theorized that, but we’ve never encountered anyone before.”

The voice laughed softly. “You have explored such a small portion of the arm. There are nine sentient species within six hundred light years of your Confederation. Six of them are space-going races, and three have some form of faster than light propulsion.”

The captain looked sharply at his XO, and Steinman nodded, pointing at the red light that was flashing on the control room recorder. The captain nodded

and returned to the conversation. "Velvet Rabbit, when we first detected you, you appeared to be traveling in excess of the speed of light. Our best theorists have declared that to be an impossibility."

"How can that be? You travel at greater than light speed, though you do so clumsily in another dimension. If you can do it there, you can do it anywhere."

"That is beyond the limits of our physics, I'm afraid. The hyperspace drive works on principles that even its designers don't fully understand. Can you explain it to us?"

There was a pause, then Velvet Rabbit answered. "No. I use a different form of propulsion than you, and it would seem that I understand physics differently as well. FTL travel is something that a species must work out for itself, in a way that the species can survive. I have been analyzing your physical makeup while we have been talking. You are a frighteningly fragile species. Your bodies would dissolve under the stresses that my propulsion unit exerts."

"Well, maybe that's a place to start. Our life form is carbon based. We exist in an oxygen rich atmosphere..."

"I am aware of your physical makeup, Captain Andrew Corban," Velvet Rabbit interrupted.

"Then perhaps you would be willing to share the details of your physical makeup with us. You are obviously very different from us."

Again there was a pause. "There is little to share. I am what you see. My creators are a silicon-based life form. I and my sisters were made for the purpose that you and I share: We explore. At regular intervals, one thousand, eight hundred thirty-two of your years, we report back to the homeworld and download what we have learned."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Then you’re not alive?” a voice asked from the back of the room, earning the man who spoke the nastiest look that the captain could manage.

“I am as alive as you. I am sentient. I am self-aware. I am self-perpetuating. I am, like you in your limited form, an independent being.”

“But you’re not a biological life form,” another voice said before the captain could silence his men.

“I could say that you are a primitive life form that has not yet evolved into your ultimate non-biological form. Biology, my limited young race, is not the limit of life. It is only the beginning.” The channel clicked and Captain Corban looked at the visual sensors just in time to see Velvet Rabbit streak away, accelerating at a rate that would most certainly have been fatal to a human crew.

Turning toward his men, the captain glared. “That was first contact, gentlemen,” he said in a soft voice that carried his fury more clearly than any shout. “First contact, and one of you morons had to insult it because it isn’t a biological life form. It said that its creators were silicon based life forms, and that it had to report back. They probably are biological life forms, but *we* will never know.”

“Sir, we did learn...”

“Not enough! Damnit! Not enough. It seemed willing to talk. And we blew it. I blew it.” The captain stalked over to the command station and sat heavily in the chair. “Set course for Hobson’s Choice Station. This is not something that we can sit on.”

“Sir, what do we report?” Commander Steinman asked, leaning against the sensor panel.

“We came, we saw, we screwed up. After this, the *Virgin* is likely to be called the *Whore*, and we, my crew, will probably never again leave the confines of the Confederation. What a thrilling prospect.”

* * *

Soft Tiny Seeker of Knowledge, Velvet Rabbit to the humans, listened to the hyperwave sensors that it had secreted on the human ship. The humans were so limited to have reached the stars. Limited physically, limited in knowledge, and *oh* so limited in maturity. Bright Strong Seeker of Planets had spoken of the humans and downloaded the pertinent files to allow it to see them for itself. Now it considered the implications of contacting this new life form. What would the Creators say about its encounter? Had it done right? When it reported, would the Creators find fault with it, as the human's feared that those they reported to would find them at fault? Extending the electromagnetic lightsails that carried it beyond the speed of the photonic barrage, Soft Tiny Seeker of Knowledge set a course for the homeworld, five hundred light-years away. The Creators needed to learn what she now knew.

"Seeker" © 1999

Szekely, pronounced *sek-lee*, is the name of a region in Europe.

Szekely

Szekely clambered up the tree to get a better view of the strangers that had invaded his people's territory. And strange they were. Short, almost furless creatures, he was tempted to dismiss them as primitives until he saw what they were doing. No primitives had made those shining metal poles or the brightly lit boxes of black material they were stacking about. Their skins varied in color from deep cavern black to dry-grass gold, but some had an almost frightening blood-blue on their bodies. Most of them had a different color of skin on their faces and hands. The fur on their heads varied from damp-dirt brown to dry-grass gold, and many had several colors mixed together in no discernable pattern.

Their hands fascinated him, for they were very close to his own in shape. Indeed, if he hadn't seen the extra digit he might have called them identical, except for the ridiculous shortness of the digits.

But if their hands fascinated him, their faces repelled him. Flat, almost featureless, they resembled the slime-eating bottom dwellers that inhabited the foulest swamps. It was only that none of them were the sky-green of the bottom dwellers that kept him from vomiting.

They seemed to be setting up a camp of some kind, though it didn't look like any camp he had ever seen before. A simple frame of metal poles with a woven covering would be no protection against the ragna that were beginning to swarm. A thread of dark humor almost made him snort. The ragna swarm would chase these creatures, whatever they were, back where they had come from.

Carefully making his way to the ground, Szekely raced away, back toward his own camp. He wanted stout stone walls and scented smoke around him before the ragna took to the air.

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Eric (The Red) Carlson, of the Confederated Star Systems Scout Ship *Pristine Virgin*, stood on the loamy soil of the planet and stared at the huge plants that were this world's analog to trees. For a pleasant change, they actually looked like trees, even if they were a bit too blue. He shook his head slowly as his gaze continued to climb. Greenish blue sky, bluish green plants. Could this place get any stranger? The awareness that he was being watched drew his attention back to the camp.

Yep, Commander Steinman was watching him. *Probably thought I was woolgathering. I wonder where that phrase came from and what it originally meant?* He quickly walked to the Executive Officer's side and saluted.

"Sir, I'd like to get a camera up in one of those trees. They look stable enough for a high-mag unit."

The Executive Officer gave him one of those, "*Yeah, right,*" looks, then nodded. "All right, Eric, go play. How you ended up with photography as a hobby, I'll never understand. Just don't fall. Captain's not in the best of moods right now."

"Yes, sir," Eric immediately agreed. Since their abortive encounter with the sentient ship called Velvet Rabbit, the *Pristine Virgin* had been given nothing but milk runs and escort duty. This mission, to explore an unremarkable primitive planet that didn't even have a name, just the catalogue number M389-4, was theirs by accident. If the *Tel Aviv* hadn't fried her hyperdrive, they would be exploring while the *Virgin* was off delivering mail or escorting freighters.

Eric quickly gathered up one of the high-resolution optical cameras, and a high magnification digital unit as well, and headed toward the trees. He had noticed a clear spot high above the camp that should give him a magnificent

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

view of the area. Climbing the tree was no trouble at all. It had numerous branches, spaced two to three feet apart. For Eric, who had grown up in the forests of the western North American Continent, it was almost like home. Except for the broad blue-green leaves.

He reached the clear spot he had seen and stopped. He had to. The next limb was three meters above him, and the trunk of the tree was so smooth it may as well have been sanded. Bracing himself, he started taking pictures.

He started with the digital, taking a series of pictures of the camp and surrounding area for the record. Once he had a good set of “official” pictures, he touched the transmit stud and downloaded them to the expedition’s main computer. Duty done, he started enjoying himself.

The big optical camera was an anachronism, but he didn’t care. There was just something about the feel of the camera and the finicky details of the development process that fascinated him. Eric held the camera up and started taking long distance pictures of the forest and distant hills. Using the telephoto lens as a telescope, he searched for anything interesting, and clicked a picture whenever he found something new. Given the situation he was in, that meant he was almost continuously clicking away.

Too soon he found himself out of film. Sighing, he began his climb down from the tree. As he climbed, he started noticing something odd. At intervals much farther apart than he could reach there were slits in the bark. Nothing major, just the appearance that something had dug claws into the tree in the recent past. Shrugging it away, he reached the ground and returned to camp.

Commander Steinman met him at the perimeter. “Anything good?”

Nodding, Eric held up the camera. “I think so. I’ll have to develop these first to be sure, but this forest is enormous. I got good pictures of...” Steinman held up a hand to stop him.

“Just develop the film and show me. I swear, Eric, the way you carry on sometimes is almost frightening.”

Eric managed to maintain a dignified silence as he nodded to the Executive Officer and walked over to the portable developer that was part of their equipment. Placing the film in the developer and closing the light-tight lid, he put his arms into the sealed gloves and began developing the film. He hummed to himself as he did everything by touch. He could have let the automatic system do it, but he enjoyed the processing of the film almost as much as taking the pictures.

It took most of an hour doing it the hard way, but he soon had a stack of eighteen by twenty-three centimeter prints to show his superiors and add to his scrapbook. He joined the rest of the landing party at supper at the far end of the tent,.

“Here you go, Sir. I haven’t been able to do a detailed analysis yet, but it doesn’t look like there’s anything special in them.”

“Very good, Mr. Carlson. Take your seat and eat quickly. The stewards are almost ready to clear the table.”

“Yes, Sir.” Eric sat and applied himself to his meal while the pictures were passed around. Then something buzzed his ear. “Damn! Why does every planet, primitive or civilized, have mosquitoes?”

“I doubt you need to worry about them, Eric,” Lieutenant Ian said softly in her ever so sweet voice. “If they bit you, they’d probably die a horrible death.” For a change, she didn’t add a smirk at the end of her comment.

“Because of the blood, Ma’am?” her assistant asked and received a nod in reply.

“Precisely. These aren’t mosquitoes as we know them. While they are carbon-based life forms, their blood isn’t iron-based, as ours is. It’s cobalt-based.”

“Are you sure of that, Jen?” Commander Steinman asked, leaning forward. “I wasn’t aware that was possible.”

Jen Ian smiled and shook her head. “You never know if something is possible until someone does it. I’m sure, Sir. We ran the analysis five times on the

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

blood sample we got from that rodent, or whatever it was. Where our hemoglobin uses iron, theirs uses cobalt. We've already tested several insect analogs as well, and all show cobalt blood. Be careful about squashing one. It'll leave a nasty..." A howl of surprise and pain interrupted her.

One of the stewards was running toward the kitchen portion of the tent, clasping her arm. A swarm of the 'mosquitoes' chased her, tangling in her hair and drawing more screams in the process.

"Shields up!" Commander Steinman instinctively shouted as the group scattered. *"Get the repulser fields up now!"*

Eric had run to the kitchen and found the steward writhing on the ground, almost completely engulfed in the swarm of insects, with blood soaking through her white coat. Other crewmen and women were swatting at the creatures and being attacked in turn. Eric did the only thing he could think of and grabbed a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher and started spraying the bugs that were attacking the steward.

At first there didn't seem to be any lessening in the intensity of the attack, then the bugs started falling to the ground. Eric kept up his efforts until the extinguisher ran dry. By then there were only a few of the nasty little creatures still alive and he took to swatting them from the air with the bell of the extinguisher hose.

All around the camp, men and women were assessing the damage the bugs had done. Commander Allerbech, the Assistant Medical Officer, was kneeling beside the steward when Commander Steinman reached her side.

"She's covered with bites. All over. These things take about half a cubic centimeter each bite. I've got to get her back to the ship. Doctor Kenissire is going to have to help me with this."

"Look at her arm," Steinman said, pointing. There was a smear of blue, surrounded by the red of blood.

The doctor nodded as she worked. "It looks like she squashed one. That may have triggered the attack. Some insects back on Old Earth did that, like some species of bees. One attacks and they all attack. These probably wouldn't have done more than annoy us until one of them was killed. Then they reacted by swarming to attack. Every time we killed one, it caused the rest to go berserk. But Jen was right as well." She pointed to the ground. "Biting us was fatal to them."

"I thought I..."

"No, Eric, I don't think so. There are dead bugs all over the camp, not just here where you were spraying them. It was a good try, though."

Eric gave Commander Steinman a sour look, then nodded. "Looks like she's right, Sir."

"Uh huh. Look at the shields and you'll see she's also right about them all attacking at once." Steinman flicked a thumb over his shoulder.

Eric looked and was chilled by the sight. The shields were meant to stop pests like mosquitoes and flies, and they performed quite well stopping these pests as well. But no pest had ever swarmed the shields like this, forming an almost solid mass against the barrier. "There must be millions of them. Can we be sure that's why they attacked? She might have swatted the nasty little critter because it bit her."

Jen Ian walked over to the side of the camp, but carefully stopped several feet back from the shields. "Watch," she said over her shoulder and deliberately crushed a few bugs in her hands.

The bugs on the other side of the shield went wild. They fought the shields and each other, trying to get at the creature that had killed one of their kind.

"Hive mentality, Sir. Any threat to one member of the hive is a threat to the entire hive, and the entire hive reacts. I can't imagine anything surviving an attack like this."

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Commander Steinman nodded. "I can't imagine that we'll be able to get to the shuttle through them, either." Looking over his shoulder, he waited until the doctor looked up before continuing. "Doctor Allerbech, do everything you can for Jenkins, but we're stuck here for the time being. I'm just hoping that the sun will drive them back to wherever they came from."

A comtech rating came to attention next to the commander. "Sir, Captain's on the horn. Someone hit the emergency squawker when the bugs attacked."

Commander Steinman nodded and walked over to the communications system. "XO here. We've been attacked by bugs, Sir. They appear to be a hive creature that swarms when one of their number is attacked. Mess Steward Jenkins has been bitten dozens of times, and Doctor Allerbech is concerned that she might need help treating Jenkins. Unfortunately, we are cut off from the shuttle by the swarm and are unable to evacuate her."

Captain Corban nodded once in the display. "Understood, Commander. Should we attempt a rescue, or are you secure?"

"We're secure for now, Sir. The repulser fields have the bugs stopped. We didn't see any sign of them during the day, so I'm hoping that these are nocturnal creatures and will retreat when the sun rises. We'll know in the morning. I'll have a full report ready for you by then, Sir."

The captain nodded as he made a note. "Very well. I'm putting the other three shuttle crews on alert, and I'm having the Master-At-Arms force and Marines stand by to suit up in battle-armor. Do what you can for Jenkins, but do not do anything that will further jeopardize your people. Understood?"

"Understood, Sir."

"Corban out."

The screen blanked and Commander Steinman stepped back, muttering under his breath, "The weather's fine, wish you were here...and I wasn't." Turning, he saw the comtech grinning. "Shut up."

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

Commander Steinman walked back to the kitchen to find a group of people gathered at the door. Pushing his way through, he found Doctor Allerbech kneeling beside Steward Jenkins, with her hands on her knees.

“Doctor?”

The doctor looked up and shook her head. “If only we could’ve reached the shuttle. If we could have used the shuttle’s sickbay, she might have lived. But here, with what I had on hand, there was no chance. Jenkins died three minutes ago from blood loss, shock, and possibly some form of poison those little buggers carry. I’m sorry, Sir.”

The commander nodded and took a step back. “Life Sciences,” he snapped, looking at Lieutenant Ian, “I want to know if these bugs are poisonous. Now.” He paused and looked around. Just about everyone, including Jen Ian and her assistant, wore bandages over bites. “I’m sure you’ll be properly motivated to find the answer quickly.” Lieutenant Ian nodded once and turned toward her equipment. That taken care of for now, he turned his attention to Lieutenant Commander Carlson.

“Eric, do those pictures of your show anything? Anything that might give us a clue about these bugs?”

Eric shook his head. “No, Sir. I haven’t done a detailed analysis, but I didn’t see anything when I was taking them.”

“Do so now,” Commander Steinman ordered softly. He watched as Eric walked away, then went back to the kitchen. The doctor was exactly where he had left her. “Doctor Allerbech, see to Jenkins as best you can. Then aid Lieutenant Ian in her investigation. We need those answers as soon as possible.” He turned away when the doctor nodded. Surveying the wreckage of his outpost, he frowned.

“All hands on deck!” he snapped, watching as spines stiffened and people came to their feet. “I want this area thoroughly policed. Every bug body is to be

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

taken to the Life Sciences team. If any of you start to develop any unusual symptoms, report immediately to Doctor Allerbech. Move people.”

The Stellar Navy of the Confederated Star Systems had drawn on the best traditions of all branches of the home-world’s militaries, and all of them had emphasized hard work as an antidote for shock. It took less than an hour for the camp to once again look like a CSS-SN outpost. Commander Steinman nodded to himself as his people once again started milling about. The sound of someone clearing his throat to his left drew his attention. “Carlson?”

“Sir, I’ve done my best to analyze these pictures, and I didn’t find much. The only anomaly I found was a wisp of mist near a rocky outcropping approximately two clicks southwest.”

Commander Steinman nodded. “You’ll take a walk tomorrow, Eric. For now, settle your people and see if you can get some sleep. I’m sure Ian will wake us if she finds anything.”

* * *

The morning sun found Szekely once again looking into the stranger’s camp, and he was puzzled by what he saw. The stench of the ragna was everywhere, yet there were none of the denuded corpses that he had expected. Indeed, there seemed to be just as many of the creatures as there had been the day before. He could even recognize several individuals, especially the three with the blood-blue hide.

This time he kept to the ground, stealthily creeping up to the edge of the clearing for a better look. Then something horrible happened.

* * *

Jen Ian had finished her analysis of the bugs and found their bite to not be poisonous. However, their blood was. Jenkins had died because she had smashed the bug that bit her into the wound. Several others were sick for the same reason, though none of them had suffered the extra bites that Jenkins had.

With the question of poison answered, she had decided to see if she could find any other bugs in the area and was creeping through the underbrush when she came face-to-face with the biggest ferret she'd ever seen. A scream ripped from her throat as she lunged backwards and started scooting her butt across the ground towards the camp, screaming the whole time.

The creature reared back on its hind legs, raising its head more than three meters into the air in the process. It spread its front legs wide, displaying the claws at the ends of its fingers.

The sailors who had been trained with small arms immediately raced to her aid, weapons in hand, but a voice kept them from firing on the creature.

"Hold your fire!" Commander Steinman bellowed. "All hands, hold your fire! Keep it covered, but don't shoot unless it attacks."

* * *

When Szekely found himself nose-to-nose with one of the creatures, he froze. That didn't help much. The creature squalled like a kitten that had had its tail stepped on and kept on squalling as it clumsily scuttled away.

Fearing that he'd done something unforgivably rash, he stood and exposed his belly and throat, holding his arms out to the side in the universal sign of non-aggression. Several of the other creatures came running toward him, also in non-aggressive stances, but they carried something in their front hands that looked like weapons of some kind.

Hearing one of the creatures bellow, he looked over toward the camp and saw the three blue creatures coming toward him at a walk, not a run like the others had, and thankfully the one he'd stumbled upon had stopped squalling.

Szekely kept his non-aggressive pose as the blood-blue creatures approached. They were all retaining their upright posture as well, and he began to relax. Raising his muzzle toward the sky, he briefly exposed his throat, then brought his head down and said, {"Greetings, strange ones,"} to the seeming leader.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

* * *

Commander Steinman saw the creature raise its muzzle and then it chattered at him. And it was definitely to him that the sound was directed. Licking his suddenly dry lips, he stepped forward and said, "We come in peace." *Oh, geeze, I didn't really just say that!*

The creature chattered and snapped a few more times, then it squatted down on its haunches. It was still more than two meters tall when it was sitting. Commander Steinman was again certain that the creature was addressing him, but it just sounded like a bunch of clicks, squeaks and growls. Looking around, he decided to try a different form of communication.

"Security detail, return your weapons to your holsters. Then back away slowly, keeping your hands in clear sight."

Chief Cunningham stifled a curse. "Sir, look at it! It could rip you gullet to gonads before we could reach our weapons again."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take, Chief. But I'm betting against it. I want you to take a close look under its chin. See that blue gem, set in silver? It took intelligence to do that. I'm not going to risk blowing another first contact, not even if it means my own life. You got that, Chief? I may be taking a wild leap, but I think this is a native of this planet. If so, we will not risk harming it."

Chief Cunningham nodded and holstered his weapon, then backed away with the rest of the detail.

* * *

Szekely was puzzled by the creature. It had replied, he was sure of it, but the reply was slurred and totally undecipherable. He tried again. {"I mean you no harm."} Szekely noted the actions of the creatures and was puzzled. They seemed to be displaying non-aggression, but the actions of the golden creatures fairly shouted threat. The blue creature seemed to have some authority though, and the others obeyed, walking backwards in empty-handed peace. Almost fainting with relief, he eased himself down to his haunches.

The blue creature looked at him for a moment, then dropped to the ground, surprising him by how far it went down. Why, it couldn't be half its original height sitting like that. What strange creatures! And he'd found them. He, Szekely of the Selexis Cavvelat, had found a new species. A new *intelligent* species. Feeling greatly daring, he leaned down and took his normal sitting position. That move put his head more on a level with the stranger.

* * *

Commander Steinman tensed when the native lowered itself toward him, but stayed where he was. When the native stopped with its head level with his, he breathed a sigh of relief. Then it raised one hand and held its fingers splayed. Steinman immediately noted the three fingers and opposable thumb configuration, as well as the long, wickedly curved claws. He held his own hand up so the native could compare. The native's muzzle came forward and it sniffed his fingers, then the head quickly withdrew and the native seemed to sneeze.

Without lowering his hand, Steinman slowly pulled it back and sniffed, but he couldn't detect any unusual scent. As he looked closely, though, he saw something that he hadn't noticed before. There was a trace of blue under his index fingernail.

Turning his head slightly to the side, he said, "Ian, bring me one of those bugs and a scalpel. Move slowly, keep your hands in plain sight at all times, and for God's sake, don't startle it. Its teeth are nastier looking than its claws."

"Sir!" Lieutenant Ian answered and darted back to her lab station. She raced back, then slowed and circled out to the side a bit so the ferret-native could see her clearly. Handing the items to the commander, she backed away, carefully not smiling, and stopped just behind the commander's shoulder. "Don't smile at it, sir. Bare teeth are aggressive in every species except primates."

"Noted," Commander Steinman said as he opened his palm to display the bug. The big native reacted as he'd hoped. It almost jumped back away from the nasty little thing and sneezed again.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

* * *

Szekely couldn't believe that the creature could stand the smell of the ragna on its digit, but it didn't seem to even notice the stench. Then it said something to the squaller and that individual hurried to bring something from their camp. When he saw that it was a dead ragna, he almost fled. Didn't they know what the ragna did when one of them was killed?!

The blue creature set the ragna on its leg and held up a shiny object that looked like some kind of silver ornament. Szekely leaned forward and sniffed, but only smelled the metal. Then the creature did something so strange that it took a moment to register. It cut its own flesh on the back of its hand with the ornament, exposing a thin red line and filling the air with a sharp, hot-copper scent. It took a moment for him to realize what he was seeing and smelling. These creatures didn't just look different: their biology was like nothing on this world. No creature on Savalin had red blood. Everything, from the bottom-dwellers that these creatures so closely resembled to the Cavvelat themselves had blue blood. That meant-

Szekely bolted back into the underbrush as fast as he could move, racing away from the strange creatures like a kitten with a scalded tail. This was beyond him, beyond anything he was willing to consider. This was a situation that the Overfathers needed to deal with.

* * *

Commander Steinman froze when the native moved, then relaxed as the trail of disturbed branches quickly disappeared. "That could have gone better, but it went well enough. Communications, get me the captain!"

Captain Corban listened to Commander Steinman's report with flaring nostrils, but no other sign of agitation. "And?" he asked when Steinman had finished.

"Sir, this native was obviously intelligent. How intelligent and how sophisticated, I can't guess. It did react peacefully to our actions, right up until I

showed it my blood. I think that's when it realized that we aren't from around here."

"First Contact again! Damn it, David, lightning doesn't strike twice very often. Is there any clue at all of where the native went?" The captain was leaning forward to the point that his face was filling the entire com screen.

"Eric has an idea that I endorse, sir," Commander Steinman said and saw the captain's face take on a slightly less agitated expression. "He took some photos, his kind, and one of them shows a strange mist off in the hills. He thinks it may have been smoke. If so, that might be our visitor's camp."

"Find out. Until then, everything is on hold as far as the survey is concerned. If this is an inhabited planet, we'll probably be pulling out so a full alien contact team can take over. I also want the weapons collected and replaced by non-lethal stunners, though how alien physiology will react to ultrasonics is a question I hope we don't have to answer." The captain sat back and clenched his fists in frustration.

"We can't screw this one up, David. Velvet Rabbit said there were nine intelligent species in this part of the galaxy, and this might be one of them. If so, I want to have our name redeemed by doing it right."

"Agreed, sir," Commander Steinman said softly. "Eric should be back with his answer in a few hours. He guessed the location of his mysterious smoke to be about two clicks away."

"Keep me informed of all developments, no matter how small. Corban out," the captain said and cut the connection.

* * *

Eric led Lieutenant Ian and Chief Cunningham through the forest at a slow walk. He had the digital camera with him and was taking as many pictures as the unit would hold, then downloading and starting again.

Everything about this planet that could be observed was being catalogued. Flora and what fauna that didn't vanish was neatly captured on film,

but they were being careful not to kill anything. The bugs from the night before might not be the only hive predators.

Eric had triangulated the position of the smoke, as he was now sure it had been, and soon reached the area.

"There, sir," the chief said and pointed to a rocky outcropping. A crude door blocked the entrance to a cave.

Eric held his hand up to stop his subordinates and took three steps more before stopping himself. "Hello," he said loudly. There was no response. "Hello in there," he tried again, but again there was no response. Taking the last few steps, he pushed open the barrier and looked inside with the aid of a hand-lamp.

The cave was big enough to have held a dozen people. It had the look of an improved natural formation, with shelves and what might be a line of raised sleeping platforms along the walls. There was also a strange scent that burned his nose and made his eyes water.

"Yo, Chief, catch a whiff of this!" he almost shouted as he backed away.

Lieutenant Ian came forward and sniffed delicately, then sneezed. "That's nasty. I'd compare it to burning camphor wood."

"Ma'am, sir, I have an idea," Chief Cunningham said softly and both officers turned toward him. "Ma'am, you just sneezed smelling something of that native. It sneezed when it smelled Commander Steinman's hand. Maybe we're allergic to each other."

Lieutenant Ian shook her head, then paused. "I don't know, Chief. Commander Steinman was close to it for quite a while and didn't say anything about it smelling like that. It could be something other than the native that's making us sneeze."

"Could it be something the native burns for his fire?" Eric asked.

"Or could it be insect repellent?" the chief asked, then continued before getting an answer. "We did that. Human's I mean. We used smoke to keep the 'skeeters and chiggers at bay back before they invented chemical repellents."

"You have a point, Chief," Lieutenant Ian said softly, rubbing her cheek in thought. "I mean, why not? This *is* the native's home territory. It must have some way to deal with the bugs. It was obvious that it knew what they are and what they do when Commander Steinman showed it the dead one."

Eric put the door back the way he had found it and backed away. "Back to camp. We have to tell Commander Steinman about this."

* * *

Szekely had run as hard as he could, back over the hills to the home caves of the Selexis. He surprised the guardians as he burst through the brush and raced for the Cave of the Overfathers. He almost made it until he ran head-first into Kelesvin, his big brother.

{"You make unseemly haste, little Szekely. Did a ragna bite your tail?"} he asked with a laugh.

{"Far more than ragna have come to our territory, brother. Strangers, of a species I have never heard of, have come. I must speak with the Overfathers."}

{"You are too young, Szekely. You know too little to come to such conclusions. Just because you know nothing of these creatures doesn't mean they are not known."}

Szekely snarled and saw his brother react in shock. {"Do not think you have the right to dictate to me any longer, Kelesvin. I am no longer a cub."}

Kelesvin snarled and snapped his teeth together. {"You need manners, cub, and it is my turn to teach you."}

{"That will be enough of that, kittens, or it will be I who does the teaching,"} a familiar voice said from the Cave of the Overfathers.

Szekely and Kelesvin turned to face the voice of their overfather and raised their muzzles to the sky, baring their throats in submission. Szekely lowered his head first and spoke quickly. {"Overfather Szefon, I have seen strange creatures in our territory, creatures that are beyond the knowledge of the Cavvelat."}

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

{“Cub.”}

{“That’s enough of that, Kelesvin,”} Overfather Szefon snapped and Kelesvin brought both of his front hands up to cover his nose in contrition.

{“Continue, Szekely. Describe these intruders.”}

Szekely did as he was asked and soon even Kelesvin was staring at him in wonder. {“It was when I smelled the blood that I realized that these were not creatures of Savalin.”}

Overfather Szefon looked at his fellow Overfathers, Jvel and Scelet, and got snarls of agreement. {“Lead us to this place, Szekely, but have a care for our aged bones.”}

Szekely led off at a moderate pace, but soon found himself trailing behind the aged overfathers. *They follow my scent trail as fast as I made it*, he thought as he kept on the tail of Overfather Jvel. It was very late in the day when they arrived at the emergency shelter Szekely had been using.

{“We must shelter here until dawn,”} Overfather Scelet said, looking at the small den in evident distaste.

{“We could approach the strangers, Honored Overfather,”} Szekely said and immediately regretted it.

{“You’d have us trapped by these unknown creatures and the ragna at the same time?”} Overfather Jvel snapped. {“Foolish kitten, that would be true folly. Always leave yourself an escape route.”}

{“Yes, Overfather Jvel. It was only that-I spoke in haste and did not carefully consider my words.”}

The old overfather looked at Szekely and relented. {“You’re an adventurous youth, Szekely. Age and misadventure teach caution. These creatures are far too strange to approach at nightfall. You saw no walls to protect them from the ragna. It may be that they are so strange that the ragna do not bite them. If that is so, then we would be bones before morning and they would still be a mystery.”}

Szekely hung his head, then motioned for the overfathers to precede him into the shelter. He had almost closed the door when Overfather Szefon snarled angrily. {"What is this?"} he asked, pointing to a mark on the floor.

{"They have been here,"} Szekely said in an awed whisper. {"They managed to follow my trail and find the shelter. That is a paw-print of their hind feet."}

{"You said you thought they were an advanced people. It would make sense for an advanced people to wonder where you were from and where you went. I wonder the same things about them."} Overfather Jvel went down on all fours and sniffed the track. {"I have never smelled anything like it. The scent is not that of any animal I know."}

{"Now I grow increasingly dissatisfied with my decision to come here tonight,"} Overfather Szefon said, taking a platform near the door. {"Start the ravalá wood burning, Szekely and hand out some meat. I think we should all sleep well tonight, for tomorrow will be an eventful day-one way or another."}

* * *

"XO, we've got company," a rating shouted over his shoulder as four of the natives emerged boldly from the underbrush. Commander Steinman and his command team came running, slowing and stopping at the side of the rating. "They just walked out and stopped, Sir."

Commander Steinman looked at them and immediately saw the differences between them. Yesterday's visitor stood to the side and slightly behind the others. Standing with others of his kind, it became obvious that he was younger by many years. The others all looked old, and bore scars and heavier builds. More importantly, they wore a lot more ornamentation, and it all showed a remarkably refined taste by human standards. Polished stones were set in silver and gold, and even copper. Metal objects glittered in the sunlight and showed details that it must have taken an artisan of extreme patience to produce.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Commander Steinman stepped forward and stopped a few feet in front of the shortest one. "I am pleased to see you, honored visitors," he managed to say in a calm tone, though his heart was racing a mile-a-minute.

The leading native tilted its head to the side, then chittered at him. It raised its muzzle to the sky and held its arms wide for a moment. Commander Steinman felt his breath shorten as he recognized the gesture. It was the same as the young one had made the day before. Taking a deep breath, he copied the pose for a moment, then relaxed, carefully not smiling though he desperately wanted to.

The other natives were just coming out of the pose when he heard a sound from behind him. "Sir, I've cleared a path. Try to invite them into camp," Lieutenant Ian's voice said from behind him.

Commander Steinman did what any southern gentleman would do and bowed, waving his arm toward the center of the camp, and joined the leading native as it cautiously walked forward on its hind legs.

* * *

Overfather Szefon watched the creature's antics for a moment and took a step forward. {"I think we have been invited to enter their camp. Keep wary and be prepared to flee. I'd hate to die for no reason."}

{"Agreed,"} Overfather Jvel said softly. {"They are a strange breed, aren't they? They surround themselves with metal and this other substance. I smell nothing that was alive here, except the ragna. Szekely was correct that they have killed many of the beasts, but I see no sign that they suffered any casualties. Perhaps we could learn something from them."}

The creature led them to the edge of their shelter, then sat on the ground. Szekely's story hadn't prepared the overfathers for the suddenness of the motion and Scelet thought it had disappeared for a moment before he looked down. Seating himself, he let his spine relax and ended up with his head nearly on a level with the stranger.

{“You are going to take a long time to understand, strange creature,”} he said and saw the creature tilt its head just as he had when it spoke. {“Yes, I am speaking to you.”}

Commander Steinman saw the look in the native’s eyes when it chattered at him and he replied. “We,” he held his hand up and made a motion between the native and himself, “have a lot to learn from one another.”

Overfather Scelet froze for a moment, then carefully turned to look at Overfather Sze fon. {“That was a deliberate gesture and answer. He didn’t just do it to anyone, he replied to me.”}

{“But what the scat did he say? And is it a he at all? Do they have he and she as we know them?”} Overfather Jvel asked and the creature turned to him.

“You are obviously someone to watch. I don’t understand your vocalizations, but that sounded like a series of questions to me.” Commander Steinman again made eye contact with the native when he spoke and was gratified by the reaction.

{“Did you see that?”} Overfather Jvel asked. {“He answered me.”}

Szekely was watching everything with wide eyes as his leaders met his discovery. The only thing that was bothering him was a favalin that was tangled in the fur on his back. He kept trying to surreptitiously get an arm up to get it, but the overfathers were watching everything too closely.

Eric saw the native’s abortive movements and maneuvered to get a look at its back. It took a moment to spot, but he finally saw the bug and acted without considering the consequences. He stepped forward and pulled the bug out of the native’s fur.

The whole crowd was instantly quiet, and every eye was on him. “Um, he had a bug biting his back, sir,” he explained, holding the creature between two fingers. It twisted around and sank fangs into his thumb and he let out a howl of pain and threw it to the ground, then instinctively sucked his thumb.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

The natives were watching him closely and he took a step toward the bug, but Jen Ian stopped him. "It's dying, Eric. Don't stomp on it."

The natives were looking at it as well, and the young one was poking at it with a long, wicked-looking claw.

Overfather Szeфон was the first to react to the incident. Looking at Szekely and Eric, he started to laugh. Softly at first, then louder, he was rocking back and forth, his back wriggling with mirth, and he pointed at Eric. {"They have their own Szekely!"} he howled.

"Mister Carlson," Commander Steinman said in a restrained tone, "get your thumb out of your mouth."

Lieutenant Ian was laughing and looked at Eric's thumb once he had it out. "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't, I just saw the bug and acted."

Overfather Jvel was closest to Eric and cautiously reached out to gently take Eric by the wrist. He pulled Eric closer to him and examined the injury. {"It was bitten but is not swelling. Szekely was right about their blood. It's red and smells something like copper, but I don't think that's it."} He released Eric's arm and pulled his hand back, and a long, thin blue line trailed off one claw. Seeing the creature's skin caught on his claw made him freeze in horror. He'd injured it, all unknowing, but injured nonetheless.

Eric saw the thread from his uniform on the native's claw and reached out with his other hand and unhooked it, smiling apologetically. The native seemed to shrink back and Lieutenant Ian clamped her hand across his mouth.

"No smiling, Eric! Teeth are an aggressive display," she hissed. "It probably thinks it was unraveling your skin and hurt you." She looked over at the natives and they were chittering in what looked like concern.

{"You injured the youth, Jvel!"} Szeфон snarled. {"Trim your claws while we try to avoid a confrontation!"}

Lieutenant Ian let go of Eric and stepped back. "I have an idea. Take off your shirt, Eric. Show it that it didn't hurt you."

"I'm not..."

"Oh, yes you are," Commander Steinman said softly. "You're doing whatever it takes to defuse this incident, even if it means stripping naked and smearing your ass with mud. You got me, Carlson?"

Eric gave the Executive Officer a pained look, but said, "Sir, yes, sir!" He raised his hand to catch the natives' attention, then slipped his shirt off over his head.

Szekely squealed, {"*It took off its skin!*"}

{"No, it didn't,"} Overfather Scelet said, looking closer. {"Look at it. Now it matches hands, face and body. They are completely furless. I've never dreamed of such a thing. That blood-blue covering isn't its natural coloring."}

"Pants as well, Mister Carlson," Commander Steinman said and Eric sighed as he complied.

{"Look! It's the same all over,"} Overfather Szefon said, looking around. All of the creatures were wearing the same pattern of covering, even if the colors were different. There was a rippling sound from the crowd, directed at the one that was shedding its outer covering, and Szefon came to a stunning conclusion. {"They're laughing. They are laughing at the young one's antics."}

{"Are you certain, Szefon?"} Overfather Scelet asked.

{"Yes,"} Overfather Szefon answered. {"They are not as different as they appear."} He looked at the suddenly more familiar creature and waved it to him with an imperious gesture. It stepped forward, just like any misbehaving youth, and stopped at arm's length. {"You and young Szekely seem to be two of a kind, strange one. You're hairless skin must be fragile indeed to need such coverings, and we would not see you injured. Put your covering back on and let us find the things we have in common now that we know the difference."} He motioned toward the discarded items and saw the youth quickly obey.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Commander Steinman understood immediately. "It just told you to get dressed, Eric. Do it quickly while we try to find a better way to communicate." He stood and bowed to the natives, then stepped backwards and motioned with both hands for them to follow him. "I hope this works."

The three overfathers came to the same conclusion, and Overfather Scelet voiced it. {"It wants us to follow it somewhere."}

{"Szekely,"} Overfather Szefon said as he stood, {"stay with your counterpart and only join us if he does."}

Szekely sat back down and looked at Eric. {"Is it always like this for you as well, strange friend?"} he asked and saw the stranger look up at him.

Eric stayed seated and looked up at the native. "We've got to make some progress. I wonder what you'd think if I really showed you my teeth?" He glanced around, but no one was paying any attention to him now, so he opened his mouth and ran a finger around his lower teeth, then motioned for the native to try it.

Szekely was shocked at first, but soon got the idea that the creature was just trying to compare their bodies. He accepted the invitation and closely examined the creature's teeth and was puzzled. Its teeth were a mixture of shapes, some obviously for grinding like an herbivore and some for cutting like a carnivore. Throwing caution to the wind, he opened his own mouth wide and showed his teeth to the stranger.

Eric almost pulled back, but iron resolve and a feeling of nothing left to lose made him lean forward and take a close look. Those, he decided, are definitely carnivore's teeth. He caught the native's attention, then slowly reached out and stroked the fur on its arm. It was silky-smooth and soft, like a cat, and he could feel muscle under the fur.

Szekely returned the touch, touching the bare skin of Eric's hand, then face, then hair and finally the cloth of his shirt and pants. The creature got his attention at one point and pulled the material of its upper covering tight and

pointed at the lines. Then it got some twigs and did something with them. After a moment Szekely recognized that it was weaving them, like the basket makers did with reeds, and the thin blue line that Overfather Jvel had pulled made sense. The coverings were woven of thin pieces of some material.

Feeling about to burst with excitement, he stood and motioned for Eric to stand as well. When they were both erect, Szekely motioned to where the overfathers were trying to confer with the chief of the strangers. Eric got the idea and walked toward the command tent with the tall native at his side. When he was close he spoke.

“Sir, I think this one and I have discovered a few things about one another.”

Szekely was chittering at the same time. {“My Overfathers, these are strange people. They have carnivore’s teeth and herbivore’s teeth together. And their coverings are woven like baskets, only they used very fine material, almost like long hairs.”}

Commander Steinman and the older-looking natives turned to give them both almost identical stares. After a moment, Overfather Szefon turned back to Commander Steinman and tilted his head to the side. {“I have been trying to determine how they survived the ragna. I think that is a more important bit of information than what their teeth look like.”}

Overfather Scelet agreed and tried once again to get the information across, looking at the leader of the strangers and pantomiming swatting at something and being bitten.

“It’s the bugs, sir,” Eric said softly. “They’re asking about the bugs.”

“How we survived them, I’ll bet,” Commander Steinman agreed.

Eric looked at Lieutenant Ian and motioned her over. “Jen take off your bandage. Let them see that the bugs did get us. Then we can turn on the fields and show them how we survived.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Lieutenant Ian did as she was asked and the four natives examined her wound carefully. {"They were attacked, yet they survived."} Overfather Scelet said softly.

"All hands stand clear," Eric said loudly, turning his head to speak to the sailors around him. "Repulser fields are coming up." When the area under the edges of the awnings was clear, he said, "Raise the fields, please. Minimum power."

There was a hum and crackle and the natives reacted by stepping back. Overfather Jvel shook his head violently and sneezed. {"What is that stench? It's like when the sky-bolts fall and strike nearby."} The leader of the creatures caught his attention and tossed a piece of wood about twice the size of a ragna toward the center of their camp and it bounced off thin air at the edge of the covered area. {"Did you see that? Did you see what happened?"}

{"We saw, Scelet. They have some way to stop things from entering their camp."} Overfather Sze fon stepped cautiously forward and was stopped by the leader of the creatures. It raised its hand and held it flat, then slowly moved forward. There was a crackling and hissing sound, and bright little lights showed around its fingers. The tang of a sky-bolt filled the air.

Overfather Sze fon stepped forward and copied the creature's gesture. The shock when he touched the invisible force was terrifying. Behind such walls of air the strangers would be invulnerable to attack. {"These are clever creatures, my friends. Very clever."}

Commander Steinman looked over and commanded, "Fields down," and walked forward when the tech signaled all-clear. He stopped exactly where the field had been to show his visitors that it was safe, and they all cautiously stepped forward under the awning. He led the way to one of the computer stations and signaled for Lieutenant Ian to take the seat.

"Ian, call up a view of the planet from space." He waited until the image was clear, then pointed at the ground and made an all-encompassing gesture

around them. "This is your world. Back off a bit so they can see the star," he commanded and the circle on the monitor shrank. He pointed at the star and then at the sun shining brightly above them. There was some agitation among the natives, but they quickly calmed themselves. "Put a circle around the star, then back way off until you can spot a Confederate planet." Again Lieutenant Ian did as she was commanded. Soon all that could be seen of the star was the circle marking its position, and she put another circle around the star Valhalla. "All right, zoom in. Which did you pick, anyway?"

"Valhalla. Planet Thor is pretty close to this one as far as the major flora goes." She zoomed the view and the natives got excited as the disk of a planet became visible. Lieutenant Ian kept zooming in, taking them down to the planetary surface and showing a forest full of large trees.

"Did you see that?" Sze fon asked softly. {"They know what Savalin looks like from far above. This is another place, possibly their home."} He looked at his fellow overfathers and the strange creatures for a moment. {"They came from another world, my friends. Another place where there is life."}

"The sacred scrolls speak of such places, Sze fon," Overfather Jvel said softly. {"Of the Forerunners, those who came and taught our ancestors of the stars. Of the places they called home, so far away across the seas of nothingness."}

"Could these be the Forerunners?" Sze kely asked and all three overfathers rounded on him.

"No, of course not!" Overfather Sze fon snarled. {"They look nothing like the description in the sacred scrolls. Now be quiet, Sze kely."}

"Sir, they understand this," Lieutenant Ian said softly while the natives chattered. "They aren't awed or confused. They know what it means."

"It would appear so, Lieutenant. It would appear so. I have to inform the captain. He's really going to want to come down here for this." Commander

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

Steinman stepped away and went to the communications station. "Get me the captain."

Captain Corban was on the screen in moments, and Commander Steinman relayed the information as quickly as possible. The captain's reaction was predictable. "I'm coming down. Make sure I have someplace to land."

It was just twenty minutes later that thunder rolled across the sky, making the natives look up. "Let's take them outside so they can see the captain land," Lieutenant Ian suggested, and Commander Steinman agreed, leading their guests out to watch the shuttle sweep in over the forest.

{ "It is as described in the sacred scrolls. They come on pillars of fire, bringing with them gifts of knowledge and lore." } Overfather Scelet said, flattening his ears to his head to block out some of the sound.

A great-*something*-landed not far from the creature's camp and all of them went to meet it. A creature in the blood-blue coverings they had begun associating with the leaders of these creatures came from an opening in the side of the thing and all of the creatures stood stiffly erect with their arms straight at their sides. The creature walked straight up to them and stopped, looking up at each in turn before speaking to its subordinates.

"Please tell me we haven't screwed this up."

Commander Steinman smiled broadly. "No, sir! No, we haven't screwed up this time. As far as we can tell, these three are elders of some kind. The fourth one is, I'm guessing of course, a kid. At least they treat him like one. Actually, he and Eric seem to be a lot alike."

{ "He's talking about you, and your new friend, Szekely," } Overfather Szefon said in an amused tone.

Without realizing it, both Szekely and Eric had assumed almost identical poses of embarrassment as the laughter of two peoples, creatures of different worlds, echoed across the clearing. And that was just the beginning of the friendship between the Cavvelat and humans.

“Szekely” © 2004

Even in the future, people are still going to be people, and some will drop off the grid for reasons of their own-and there'll always be some officious busy-body who wants to "save" them.

Stinking Potemkin

Planet Danabia,
Orion Sector,
Confederated Star Systems

The Danabian Planetary Health Agency chose the year 357 AL, 3569 CE by Old Earth reckoning, to launch an anti-alcohol program in an effort to save their population from the deleterious effects of strong drink. It never occurred to the Health Agency bureaucrats that some people might not want to be saved. People like Anders Potemkin.

Anders was a drunk. That's all he wanted to be. He said he had his reasons for drinking, but he never elaborated, and no one ever asked him to explain. He wasn't unique. Half the denizens of the Pub-Bar and Grill were habitual drunks who just hung around all day, spending their money on cheap synthetic booze and rotting their brains away. For Anders, at least, that was entirely intentional.

A well-dressed young woman with the lapel pin of the DPHA entered the Pub and looked around, consulting the PalmComp in her hand when she thought she had found her target. She looked back and forth between the man and the image on the screen several times before nodding once sharply and walking up to the bar beside him.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you Ander S. Potemkin?" she asked.

"Nope," Anders replied without looking at her.

"Are you certain, sir? Your bio-scan and appearance match Ander S. Potemkin."

“Nope,” Anders replied again.

“Sir, you cannot fool the bio-comp or me,” the young woman said in a sharp, business-like tone. “You *are* Ander S. Potemkin.”

“No, young lady, I am not,” Anders replied, finally turning to face her. “I am Anders No-Middle-Name Potemkin.” He surveyed her critically, liking what he saw. She was slim, but not boney, and her face was made up in the current high-class style. He shook his head, then turned back to the bar. “What does Planetary Health want with me now?”

The young woman was blinking rapidly and took a step back, looking at her screen. “Anders Potemkin? I’m sure it’s Ander S. Potemkin. That’s what all the records say.”

“Your records are as screwed up as everything else on this forgotten hunk of space debris,” Anders muttered.

“I hardly think a planet with a population of over two billion constitutes a ‘forgotten hunk of space debris’ by anyone’s definition, sir,” the young woman snapped.

Anders smirked as he turned back toward her. “Offended you, did I? Good. Now take your offense and go away.”

“No, I will not go away. Mister Potemkin, however the rest of your name is formed, it has been determined by the Planetary Health Agency that you are in danger of drinking yourself to death. As this is a form of suicide, and indicative of an unbalanced mind, it has been determined by DPHA that you are in need of counseling and intervention to prevent your demise. I am Doctor Carin D. Cassini, DPHA Mental Health Division, and I have been assigned to help you recover and return to society.”

Anders didn’t bother to turn toward her as he answered. “Screw society. I have no interest in recovering anything. I live off my own savings, so there’s no ‘burden’ placed on the teeming masses. I have my reasons for being here.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Let’s start there then, shall we?” Doctor Cassini said as she started to sit down.

“Don’t sit there,” Anders snapped, stopping her.

“I will sit where *I* choose, sir,” Doctor Cassini said in a carefully controlled tone.

“Suit yourself,” Anders said and picked up his drink.

Doctor Cassini made a sharp motion with her head and climbed into the seat and plopped down. It took just a moment before she jumped back out of the seat with a startled squeal of protest. “What is that?” she almost shouted.

“That’s Lenny’s seat. He tends to piss himself,” Anders answered without turning.

“Why didn’t you...”

“I told you not to sit there,” Anders interrupted. “Now you’ve got a wet butt and smell like an old man with bad kidneys. That’s the problem with kids. Don’t listen. Think you know it all. There you are, fresh out of school, shiny new doctorate in your hand, ready to take on the world. You’re always so sure you know all the answers. Everything was right there in your school books.” Anders turned and looked at her with one eye. “Let me tell you a story about a freshly-minted young PhD on the planet Zarafal.”

“I can hardly see what a PhD on Zarafal has to do with anything. Zarafal is a dead world, and I can’t imagine why anyone would want to devote the time to earn a doctorate about it,” Doctor Cassini said as she moved to his other side. “Can I sit in this seat?”

“Suit yourself,” Anders said with a shrug. “Nothing worse than spilled beer in that one.”

Doctor Cassini gingerly climbed into the seat and sat, holding herself ready to jump out for a moment, then relaxing. “Now, back to your story. The files have little more than your name, image, and bio-scan. Where were you born?”

“New Montreal, Quebec System” Anders replied courteously. “Did you know that there are one hundred thirty six cities named Montreal on just sixty planets? You’d think we could show a little more imagination than that.”

Doctor Cassini noted down his answer. “I wouldn’t know about that. However, I doubt that your numbers are correct. Back to you. Current occupation?”

“You know I don’t have a job or you wouldn’t be here,” Anders said with just a trace of sarcasm.

Doctor Cassini made an indignant little sniffing sound and continued. “Education?”

Now Anders turned and looked at her with both eyes. “Doctorate in Advanced Planetary Bio-Engineering, Doctorate in Advance Exotic Bio-Chemistry, Master of Science in Mathematics, Master of Science in Nuclear Physics, Master of Science in Particle Physics, Master of Science in Organic Chemistry, Master of Science in Electrical Engineering, Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering, Master of Science in Structural Engineering, Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering. Oh, and a Bachelor of Arts in Music, playing stringed instruments. All by the age of twenty-six.”

Doctor Cassini was scowling at him by the time he was finished. “That is ridiculous.”

“Take it for what it’s worth,” Anders replied with a slight smile and turned back to his drink.

“It is impossible for anyone to achieve that many advanced degrees in that many diverse fields.”

Anders smiled at the mirror behind the bar as he took a sip of his drink. “Not if you have an eidetic memory and start when you’re ten. Not if learning new things is all you care about. You’ll find that everything except music has the same core classes. Once you’ve mastered one discipline, the rest are easy.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Hm? Perhaps so. But with an education like that it makes even less sense for you to be here. Your education must be worth hundreds of thousands of credits per year to dozens of firms.” Doctor Cassini was punching the keys of her virtual-keypad as she spoke.

“Used to be,” Anders replied.

“Very well. Since you are not currently employed, who was your last employer?”

“Franconia Mining and Minerals, Planetary Explorations Division, New Acquisitions Assessment and Adjustment.”

Doctor Cassini paused for a moment and looked at him. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“Don’t exist anymore.”

She nodded and continued typing on her virtual keyboard. “Is that how you ended up here and unemployed?”

“Yep.”

“Very well. Last job assignment?”

“Zarafal.”

“Zarafal is not a habitable world. The biosphere...”

“I know,” Anders said, staring straight ahead at a memory. “It was fifty-one years ago. Like you, I was fresh out of school —”

* * *

Doctor Anders Potemkin, PhD, disembarked from the atmospheric shuttle on the rich brown soil of the planet Zarafal and looked around. The atmosphere wasn’t poisonous, but it didn’t have much oxygen in it. Atmospheric pressure was slightly higher than Franconia’s at sea-level, so suits weren’t necessary, but oxygen masks were. Still, for an exotic world, it wasn’t bad.

Doctor Leonar Keptal, Head of New Acquisitions Assessment and Adjustment for FMM met him as he walked into the controlled atmosphere of the space port control building. “Welcome to Zarafal, Doctor Potemkin.”

“Thank you, sir,” Anders replied with a smile. “It’s good to finally be putting what I learned in university to use.”

“You’ll be doing a lot of that,” Doctor Keptal said as he gestured for Anders to follow him. “Doctor Strong was very happy to hear you were coming. I understand that you were something of a protégé of his.”

Anders laughed. “I don’t know that protégé is the right term. Gofer would probably be closer. Still, I’m grateful that he recommended me and agreed to let me join his team.”

Doctor Keptal smiled and led him to the back of the building to a door marked, *Hazard-Exotic Biology*. “This is Don’s bailiwick. I doubt you’ll find anything unusual about it. We’ll be having a formal reception for you tonight to introduce you to the rest of the staff.”

Anders smiled broadly and said, “Thank you, sir,” and headed through the door as Doctor Keptal walked away. A wiry figure in a rumpled lab coat turned to greet him with a smile.

“About damn time, Andy. What’d you do, take the scenic route?”

Anders smiled at his superior and headed for their gear. “Doctor Strong, I don’t think there *is* a scenic route to Zarafal.”

“Call me Eldon, or Don, Andy. This isn’t the university and you’re not my student anymore,” Doctor Eldon Strong, head of Planetary Bio-Engineering for FMM, said as he smiled at the young man beside him.

“Yes, sir-Don. It’s strange, though. For the last sixteen years...”

“You’re out of school now, Andy. Relax. We have a lot of work to do to get the planetary assessment ready for FMM and the CSS Planetary Board of Governors. We have to be able to show that we can mine this world without destroying the native life forms.”

Anders nodded and looked around. “Just us?”

“For Bio-Eng, yes,” Don said. “You are replacing Gloria Boran. After a year of my company she asked for reassignment.”

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“After a year of your company I’m surprised she didn’t ask for psychiatric leave,” Anders joked with a smile.

“Maternity leave, and no, it wasn’t me. She wants her baby to develop on a developed world. The total N-Triple-A team consists of one hundred and seven scientists, and nearly that many support staff,” Don added with a grin. “Gotta have a support staff or we’d probably poison ourselves.”

Anders laughed. He’d eaten the good doctor’s cooking once before. “No probably about it.”

Doctor Strong laughed at that and motioned for Anders to follow him. “I’ll show you your quarters. Just after we arrived we took a vote and decided not to have segregated accommodations, so you’ll be getting Gloria’s room. She left about a month ago, so the smell should have abated by now.”

“Smell?” Anders asked.

“Morning sickness,” Don said with a definite smirk.

“Oh, *gah!* Didn’t they clean...”

“It’s clean! It’s clean,” Don assured him. “Still...you’ll see.”

The room they eventually reached was reminiscent of a university dorm room, with the addition of a private bathroom. The space was square, with the bathroom taking up one corner, the bed wedged between it and the opposite wall, a desk at the foot of the bed and a wardrobe in the fourth corner. There was a strip of unoccupied floor between the wardrobe and bathroom door that might be long enough to allow him to do pushups, but only if the bathroom door was open. The bathroom had a toilet, a sink that folded out of the wall over the toilet, and a shower-stall that was designed for a skinny person.

Anders looked around and took a sniff-and gagged. “What is that smell?”

“I told you. It’s not really Gloria that you have to blame for that. It’s the disinfectant that we use to ensure that no native organisms grow in our waste.” Don took a moment to laugh at the expression on Anders face. “Fresh out of the bottle it smells decent, but there is something on this planet that loves the stuff.

That's what you smell. If you take a whiff outside without your mask you'll find that the whole planet smells like that. The really silly part is that nothing on this planet can live on us, so it's unnecessary. However it is an N-Triple-A regulation that we use it."

"So in an effort to avoid contamination by native life forms we provide something that the native life forms can contaminate? That sounds suspiciously bureaucratic to me," Anders observed as he put his bag on the bed.

"Such is life in planetary assessment."

Doctor Strong led Anders to a large room at the end of the passageway and gestured to the left. "Over there is the gym. There's a sauna, three weight lifting stations and a medium bag. Doctor Sarasin used to be a light heavy-weight boxer. Straight across is the game room. You name it and somebody brought it. To the right is the quiet commons, and the central area is both cafeteria and meeting hall."

Anders nodded. "Sounds cozy."

"A bit too cozy," a female voice said and both Anders and Don turned toward it. The speaker was a tall redhead with hair cut shorter than most men preferred. "You'd be the new wonder-kid. I'm Eliza Downey, Geophysics."

"He's older than you, Liz," Don said in a severe tone. "Watch the kid stuff."

"Touchy, touchy, Don. Don't let it get your blood pressure up," she said as she sauntered away.

"What's her problem?" Anders asked as he watched her cross the room.

"She's just miffed that you have more degrees than she does. Twice as many, as a matter of fact, and she's only got one doctorate." Don led Anders toward the center of the room. "I should have asked before, but what time does your body think it is? Are you tired or hungry?"

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Have you ever known me not to be hungry?” Anders asked with a wolfish grin. “Really, ship-time is about ten-thirty in the morning. What time is it here? I’ll reset my chrono.”

Don glanced at his wrist and said, “Five twenty-five in the evening. We’ll be eating at six.”

“Eldon, is that the student that you’ve been bragging about for the past month?” a man asked as he walked up to them. “Alan Sarasin, Mineralogy Assessment,” the man said as he stuck out his hand.

“Anders Potemkin, Bio-Engineering,” Anders replied, taking the doctor’s hand and giving it a firm clasp.

“We’ve heard about you. You’ve got two PhDs and how many other degrees?” Doctor Sarasin asked with a grin.

“Just seven,” Anders replied casually.

“Are you worth a shit in any of them?” a woman asked as she walked up. “Sounds like you spread yourself a little thin.”

“I like to think my diverse degrees complement each other and give me a wider view of my subjects,” Anders replied levelly.

The woman threw back her head and laughed. “Score one for the new kid. I’m Ellen Gregory, Meteorology.” She stuck out her hand and subjected Anders to a close inspection while he grasped it. “You look healthy enough for a science nerd. Do anything unscientific?”

“I play stringed instruments,” Anders replied with a grin.

“Orchestra or band?” Doctor Sarasin asked urgently.

“Both. I picked up a BA in Music and specialized in strings.”

“Music? Why?” Doctor Gregory asked.

“A girl named Susan,” Anders replied with a grin and all of them had a good laugh.

“We have a band, and we play mostly popular music, but there are four of our members who play in a string quartet. Four in a quartet. That’s redundant,

isn't it? Never mind. Anyway, we have a fair selection of instruments that come with the standard N-triple-A package. You're welcome to join either group, or both, in your free time."

"Thank you," Anders replied but was prevented from saying anything else by the appearance of Doctor Keptal at the end of the room.

"Take your seats, please. Take your seats. Doctor Potemkin, come down here, if you would." He paused as Anders made his way across the room. "Just stand here beside me. Everyone, may I have your attention? Please? This is Doctor Anders Potemkin, Doctor Strong's new assistant. As most of you have already heard, he has multiple degrees in a variety of subjects, but he's assigned to Bio-Engineering. Given everything I've heard about him, I'm sure he can be made available to help out in the other fields if he's needed."

Anders smiled sheepishly and waved as a few people politely clapped and then went to join Doctor Strong at a table. "That wasn't too bad, was it?" Don asked as Anders sat down.

"No, not too bad. Much easier than my dissertation." He looked around the table and nodded to the people he hadn't met yet. He said, "Hello," to the group in general and they responded courteously.

"Andy, I'll let you have tonight to get acclimatized, but tomorrow morning I'll be providing you with a synopsis of our progress over the last two years. So far we've found a number of interesting local mosses and a lichen-like growth that might be a viable product later on. They both burn very hot and very, very fast. You'll get to see them tomorrow."

The food arrived and the conversation at the table turned to the happenings of the Confederacy, and Anders was called upon to clarify some of the news that had arrived with him. The assassination of Senator Kimura. The new system that survey had opened to the rest of the Confederacy. And especially the First Contact with the Cavvelat. The conversation lasted a lot

longer than the food, and only ended when several of the people started yawning.

“Get a good night’s sleep, Andy. If you can. I know this environment can be a little hard to get used to,” Don said as he stood up. “Doctor, MD type, Sayer has some good sleeping pills if you think you’ll have any problem.”

“I think I’ll be all right, Don. I didn’t get much sleep last night coming out of hyperspace, so I’m pretty tired already. Good night, everyone.” Anders stood and gave the remaining people at the table a slight bow, then went to his room.

The first thing he did was unpack. It wasn’t much of a chore. The company had provided him with six standard-issue jump suits, and that was just about all he’d brought. Underclothes, socks, his toiletry kit, and a single set of civilian clothes, the ones he was wearing, made up the rest of his weight allowance for the trip.

The shower was very hot, which was a relief after the carefully limited temperature of the shipboard hot water, and he luxuriated in it as the heat penetrated his muscles. He found the stall to be just big enough to allow him to raise a leg in order to wash his feet, but there was no way he could possibly bend over.

He shaved at the little fold-down sink, disposed of the fluids he’d been consuming, and went to bed.

In spite of what he’d told Don, he wasn’t that tired, and spent several hours lying motionless in a light meditative trance. With his body numbed to the world, his mind was free to race down any path it chose, and he found himself worrying at the puzzle of the organism that lived in the disinfectant. What could it be?

A loud pounding on the wall next to his bed woke Anders up and he shook his head, trying to remember where he was and finally placing his surroundings. For a moment he thought the pounding was coming from the door, but then other sounds intruded as well. Female sounds. Very *happy* female

sounds. *Oh, no, not again!* Just like university. The girl next door was sexually active and her bed was exactly opposite his. He rolled over, wrapped his pillow around his head, and went to sleep.

A chime echoed through the rooms of the facility and Anders snapped awake. He looked at his chrono and blinked. Six in the morning. What kind of sadistic-corporate management. It had to be. Everyone up, fed, and at work by seven.

Anders got up and ran through his morning routine without thinking, then shrugged into one of his jump suits and left his room. By chance his noisy neighbor was leaving at the same time and he found out that it was Eliza Downey. She saw him and smirked.

“How did you sleep last night?” she asked as she grinned.

“Great,” he replied with a cheery smile. “Slept straight through without a twitch.” He turned away, but not before he saw the look of disappointment on her face.

Breakfast was buffet-style and had a surprisingly limited selection, but it provided him with the hearty, high protein foods he preferred and he sat down to eat at the first available table. Don soon joined him and laughed. “You haven’t changed.”

After they had eaten Don led him back to the lab and sat him down at a computer, then opened a file. “Spend the morning reviewing this, then we’ll discuss it after lunch.”

* * *

“Those were great days,” Anders said as he gazed into nothingness.

“I though Zarafal had always been a dead world,” Doctor Cassini said as she stared at him.

“No. It was a world full of life. Nothing intelligent, of course. Not even any vertebrates or arthropods, but abundant plants and proto-animals. We worked on cataloguing everything, spending weeks breaking down simple life

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

forms in order to see what we could make of them. Most of them died if you exposed them to very much oxygen. Some were anaerobic, like the disinfectant-loving bacteria, and survived.

"I'd been there for about a year when I had an idea."

* * *

Don Strong entered the lab to find Anders already at work. "How long have you been here, Andy?" he asked as he pulled on his lab coat.

Anders looked up with red-rimmed eyes. "All night. Eliza had company last night. That woman is loud."

"And did you accomplish anything?"

Anders nodded and waved Don over to the microscope. "Take a look."

Don looked into the microscope and then sat back. "Dead bacteria. And?"

"This is eight one three six seven three bacteria."

Don leaned forward again and took a closer look. "You found something that kills the Invincible Bacteria? Without burning down the compound?"

"I did indeed," Anders said proudly. "Now we can get that stink out of our quarters. It's no wonder everyone here is so skinny. That smell even kills *my* appetite."

"Have you tried it on a larger sample?"

Anders shook his head no. "I just finished."

"Good. Let's get some food into you, and some coffee, and maybe a shower – make that definitely a shower. Then we'll present your finding to Doctor Keptal formally for review. That is, you will present your finding as the chief researcher on this project. Get your name on the paper first so you get the credit you deserve." Don grinned and slapped Anders on the shoulder. "Now, how about staying behind me, because you really do stink. Didn't you shower last night?"

They went to Anders' room for the shower first, and then scrounged among the breakfast leftovers for a full meal. Finally, sweet smelling and

fortified, Doctor Strong led Doctor Potemkin to the office with the pompous sign that read, *Doctor Leonar Keptal, Head of N-Triple-A on Zarafal*, to present his findings.

The presentation was short and sweet. "Sir, I've found something that will kill eight one three six seven three bacteria. It is a derivative of..."

"It'll kill what?" Doctor Keptal asked, interrupting Anders.

"The bacteria that lives in our disinfectant, sir," Anders replied respectfully.

"Oh, the Super Bug. What is it?"

Anders took a deep breath and continued. "It is a derivative of several organic enzymes bound to-well, sir, it's bound to two different kinds of fungus that commonly cause athletes foot. I hate to admit it, but I found it by accident."

"*Accidents are intuition acting independent of conscious thought.* I can't remember what damn fool said that, but he'd just discovered something amazing. So, how far has your research gone?"

"Only as far as one sample in a test tube," Doctor Strong said now that Anders had started the report. "We thought we should report the discovery before continuing."

"Very well. Test the bactericide on a small area of the common room," Doctor Keptal ordered. "So long as we can control it, I can't see any reason not to."

* * *

"Of course, we couldn't control it. Once the fortified fungus had something other than us to feed, on it multiplied rapidly." Anders took a drink and shook his head. "Once it began multiplying, it got out of the compound by the same routes that the bacteria got in."

"What happened? A single fungus couldn't account for that much damage," Doctor Cassini said as she leaned forward.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“Normally, no. But what we didn’t know-what *I* didn’t know-was that eight one three six seven three was a keystone species. It was everywhere because it was literally *everywhere*. That bacteria was the base of the food chain on Zarafal. When the bacteria started dying, the plants that depended on it started dying. Oh, it took a while. Nearly a month before we noticed anything. By then we’d been spraying our habitat with it and enjoying the lack of stink fully.” Doctor Cassini sat back as her hand came to her mouth.

“When we did notice, it was reported. Seven of the eight directors quietly sold off their holdings in the company, then released the information. The CSS Congress convened hearings, and the one poor fool who had been absent from the Board of Directors meeting the day the news was received was put on trial. So were Doctor Keptal and Doctor Strong. I wasn’t.

“Don took the blame. It was his department. I was his responsibility. The Confederacy didn’t even have a name for the crime, but they were charged with Planetary Genocide. There was no conviction, of course. You can’t charge someone with something that happened before you passed the law against it, but their careers were ruined.”

“That doesn’t explain you,” Doctor Cassini said. “If you weren’t charged, then there is no record of your involvement.”

“Yes there is. In here.” Anders tapped his head. “When the trial was over, Don committed suicide. Doctor Keptal vanished. And the seven men and women who profited most from FMM formed a new mining company and went back to Zarafal. With no biosphere to speak of, they were allowed to begin stripping the planet of its minerals. I even got a discreet and untraceable ‘Thank You’ from one of them with a million credit chip attached.” He let loose a harsh bark of laughter. “I donated it to the Navy Widows Fund under the name Eldon Strong.”

Doctor Cassini looked at him for a moment. “So you’re drinking yourself to death because...”

“Not to death, young lady,” Anders interrupted. “I just want to kill off enough brain cells to let me forget the friend I betrayed and the world I destroyed-because I didn’t like the smell.”

Doctor Cassini looked at him for moment, then leaned forward and inserted her credit chip into the slot and pushed a few buttons. As she withdrew the chip a fifth of *Scottish Syn* appeared in front of Anders. Then she entered “Deceased” on her keypad and stood up.

“I’m not dead yet,” Anders pointed out.

She looked him straight in the eye as she replied. “You will be soon.” Then she walked away as Anders broke the seal on the synthetic Scotch and poured himself a drink.

“Stinking Potemkin” © 2006

This story was just for laughs.

Long Haul Shipping

It never ceases to amaze me how quickly things can go wrong, and how even the most innocuous circumstances can become a disaster. Even something as simple as emptying the garbage can get you killed.

* * *

We were outbound from Hobson's Choice Station on board the Confederated Systems Freight star-freighter *Long Haul*. Star-freighter was probably the ultimate misnomer for the ugly little ship. It was actually an old, retired, CSS-SN hyper-capable tug. Its freight hauling capabilities were limited to towing sealed shipping containers, but with tractor-beams and a hyper-generator that would have let it tow a battleship, it could haul a lot of containers.

As usual, we had set a course almost directly toward the star as soon as we cleared the planet's gravity-well so we could dump our waste. Hobson's Choice Station had taken all of our non-biological waste, but after the plague that had erupted at Sherma's Station from mixing biomass wastes from too many different star systems, disposing of the bio-waste items in the local star was the only recourse.

The ship had accelerated to a reasonable speed when the order came down from the captain. "Mister Crafton, prepare to jettison waste in five minutes."

That was four minutes and fifty seconds more than I needed. The damn button was right next to my left hand. Still, it was regulations that required the long lead time. I answered her one minute later, as required. "Ma'am, all

preparations have been made to jettison waste and I am standing by for your order.”

Four minutes later the order, “Jettison waste,” came down and I pushed the button. My suit almost instantly became rigid and I noticed that the auto-visor had sealed my helmet.

“Crafton, what the hell did you do?” the captain shouted over the intersuit radio.

“Standby, Ma’am,” I answered as my fat-fingered suit gloves tapped at my keyboard. “I’m showing a breach in the Starboard Hydroponics Irrigation Tank. The Waste Module must have fouled and torn it open.”

“Well get it sealed!” the captain snapped and I immediately unbuckled my harness.

“I’m going to assess the damage,” I said as I headed for the airlock. “I’ll let you know what I see.”

“Make it quick. I’ve already started trying to correct our course, but we’re not changing trajectory.” The captain paused for a moment. “All aft maneuvering thruster’s are dead.”

I whined, “*Crap!*” and hurried to the lock. I hit the emergency bypass that allowed me to skip the depressurization cycle and hooked my tether to the ring just outside the door. Fouling the door seal with a line would be a bad thing, and I didn’t need anymore bad things to happen to me today.

I hurried to pull myself hand-over-hand to the waste ejection port and saw what had happened. The waste pod’s thrusters had malfunctioned on one side, and the pod itself had driven into the side of the irrigation tank. The tank had ruptured, and since it was open to atmosphere on the inside, all of the biomass had escaped, followed by our atmosphere. The waste pod was coated in slick brown ice, and I was thankful for the vacuum of space and my nice closed suit. The stench would have been unbearable if there had been an atmosphere.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

I followed the flow of brown ice aft, and what I saw made me sick to my stomach. The thrusters were totally encased in frozen brown muck. The servos that should have repositioned the nozzle to push us away from the star weren't visible. The nozzle wasn't visible either.

I auto-keyed my mic and said, "Crafton to the Captain."

"Report, Crafton," the captain replied.

"Thruster number six is encased in frozen biomass. The Waste Module malfunctioned and punctured the tank. I'm returning to the lock for the laser-welder. I've got to melt it free before we can maneuver."

There was a pause and the captain's voice came over the radio. "You've got twenty minutes. After that, there'll be no way we can maneuver enough to miss the star, even if we dump the cargo."

I muttered, "Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap," as I hurried back to the lock. I almost lost my grip on the way back to the thruster, and had to spend a moment catching my breath before I could continue. Once I reached the thruster, I fired up the welder and started melting biomass.

The work was slow. Most of the water had evaporated out of the biomass, so I had to melt and burn my way through a solid mass of biological muck that might as well have been brown plascrete. I was cutting chunks loose and tossing them away to drift toward the star. Then I got to the tricky part.

With the majority of the frozen mass gone, I had to slow down to avoid cutting vital structures on the thruster mount. I had just finished the first thruster when the captain's voice came over the radio. "We're down to ten minutes, Crafton."

"Understood. I'm going to back off and hunker down. Test fire thruster six."

"Tell me when you are secure," the captain commanded.

"Secure now," I replied.

“Test firing thruster six,” the captain said and there was a puff of vapor from the thruster. “Thruster test satisfactory. Thruster seven is still off line.”

“I’m on it,” I replied and immediately began cutting number seven loose. This time I had help. The test-burst from six had started us rotating and now I was getting hot starlight alternating with the freezing darkness of space. I cut. I chiseled. I kicked. I even begged the thruster to come free.

The captain’s voice interrupted a creative litany of curses I was inflicting on the uncooperative ice. “Five minutes.”

I brought the laser up to max power and started playing it along the lines of the thruster. It was a risky move, but I had reached a do-or-die state of desperation that made me ignore the danger. With a final kick I saw the thruster shift and called the captain.

“Captain, I am secure. Test fire thruster seven.”

“Thruster seven test now,” the captain’s voice replied and I watched as a cone of brown ice was ejected from the thruster. “Thruster seven test satisfactory. Get your butt back inside and prepare for maneuvering thrusters.”

I dropped the welder and raced for the lock. Once I was in the cavity I yanked on my tether and brought the hook in as it snaked inside. The outer door closed and I said, “Onboard and secure.”

A giant sat on my chest and my air pack tried to push through my back to my front as the captain used the thrusters to reorient the ship and lit off the main drive. The side of the ship turned toward the star and the lock was filled with intolerably bright light. Somewhere along the way I felt a jolt and realized that the heat from the star must have melted the Waste Module free and centrifugal force had sent it away from the ship. We were close enough to the star that there was only one place it could go.

The acceleration finally eased and I got up. The interior of the ship was still depressurized, so I cycled the inner door open and stepped through. “Did the cargo survive?” I asked.

Stories of the Confederated Star Systems

“We made it with about a minute to spare” she replied. “It’s just a good thing that all of those containers are shielded against radiation and heat. How are you holding up?”

“The floor of the airlock isn’t an acceleration couch, but I’ll live. Give me a minute and I’ll go seal the Starboard H.I. Tank.”

The captain snorted. “Why do men always make such a big deal about taking out the trash?” she asked.

I glared at her back. If she wasn’t my wife, the mother of my children, and the majority owner of the *Long Haul*, I’d...oh, never mind.

THE END

“Long Haul Shipping” © 2007

About the author

A U. S. Navy veteran, Loren K. Jones served as a nuclear reactor operator on attack submarines for six years before his honorable discharge in 1986. Loren makes his living as an instrumentation and controls technician, and writes because the stories won't leave him alone until he does.

Stavin Dragon-Blessed fantasy series (forthcoming 2017)

All that Glitters

Traders and Traitors

The Andarian Affair

Other novels by Loren

Inadvertent Adventures – SF (2016)

Preview

Inadvertent Adventures

Sterling Albert Stevenson was a man adrift in the Confederated Star Systems. Ex-Navy, divorced and alone, he takes a vacation at a resort casino satellite and makes his fortune. Unfortunately, the owners of the casino take a dim view of people who win and leave. Beaten and robbed, Sterling ends up shanghaied by the captain of cargo ship *Jolly Jane*.

Sterling gets renamed Silver Llewellyn Garand, and reinvents himself. The *Jolly Jane* is a small ship, and he finds himself integrating into the crew easily. After making their first trip, he is made a full crewmember, and earns the gratitude of one multi-system conglomerate and the enmity of another.

After nearly getting killed when raiders destroy the *Jolly Jane*, Sterling remarries his ex-wife and buys a new ship. The captain and first mate of the *Jane* join them, and the *Admiral Ann's Revenge* takes to the spaceways.

Through the accident of taking a passenger as an apprentice spacer, the captain and crew of the *Admiral Ann's Revenge* become entangled in the internal machinations of Dresden Agro-Commerce Collective. It is on a trip for DA-CC that the crew of the *Admiral Ann's Revenge* has their greatest adventure.

A hyper-space drive malfunction throws them more than a hundred light-years off course, and into a star system that has that most valuable of finds: a habitable planet. Luck is with them when the engineers manage to fix their drive and allow them to return to the Confederated Star Systems.

The return of the *Revenge* and the news they bring sends shockwaves through the Confederacy, and brings fame and fortune beyond their wildest dreams to Sterling Silver Stevenson and their crew. But it's not going to be easy — or boring.