

Categorical Imperative

A Novel

By

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This book is dedicated to Niko and Sayre; to Mike, Evan and Jeremy, and to all the friends that helped me through a rough summer of 2008. Love always.

“Wine is sunlight held together by water.”

- Galileo

“What experience and history teach is this – that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history.”

- Hegel

1st Formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

—Immanuel Kant

Chapter 1

Jed Hoffer strode down the atrium of Denver’s Spacelink Terminal, his gaze hidden by a digital shield, pixels of void clinging to the curve of his features where his bloodshot eyes would have been. The morning slew of v-mail was grim. Dirty bombings in Orbital Vienna and Coastal London, air sabotage in Pacific City. Stocks were down on the orbital markets. Seventh Branch shares had dropped fifty solars in the last three days. There were angry v-mails from the senior partners, calling for heads to roll. Not his head, probably. He was one of their best.

His suitcase bobbed along behind him on antigravity nodules, weaving aside to avoid a small, determined woman and her train of gorilla-matons. The re-coded cyborg apes hefted an impressive range of luggage on their great shoulders, shuffling along in even formation, everything shrink-wrapped in nano-fiber, covered in a layer of living sunflowers. Hoffer spared the troop a glance, closing out his v-mail interface and powering up his high frequency optics to scan the contents of the bags. Mostly women’s clothes, personal effects, and a small amount of recreational biosynthetics, hidden within a cosmetic module.

He moved on, eyes darting about his nodal feeds as he walked, taking in the ebb and flow of movement throughout the terminal. He queried his node.

- Report.

- Summary of findings: no persons of interest. Proximate biostat analyses unremarkable. Light engagement from Spacelink security AI: fire-gate nodal uplink attempts neutralized. High probability conclusion: operational integrity remains uncompromised.

- Anything from Sloerring?

- Negative.

- The bastard. Change my ticket to Pacific City, via Shanghai, Royal Class. Try for Astrolynx, but whatever's soonest. Operational account W-Seven.

- Uplink engaged. You may proceed to the Astrolynx Spacelines counter.

He bought a glossy white v-paper and a bottle of cold water at a kiosk, running a diagnostic on his nodal integrity out of old habit. The results chimed green in his mind as he took a long drink of water and glanced over the customized headlines and moving images his node superimposed across the v-paper. The networks were all over the Coastal London bombing. The explosion had come from an air-ambulance van, packed with military grade explosives and synthetic virals.

The detonation itself took out a wide stretch of the Salisbury South executive residential zone, toppling biostruct towers and killing thousands. Far worse, the explosion released a heavy viral cloud, which drifted down on the surrounding neighborhoods like ash. Hours later, people were already coming down with classic symptoms of two first generation synthetic plagues: the dreaded White Boils and the gruesome Cloudskinner. Affected city zones had already been quarantined, and the article included video of matte-black Scotland Yard gunships swarming over the area, searchlights cutting through the viral ash.

The networks agreed this was the work of the eco-terrorist, Darwin, whose attacks had already claimed the lives of tens of thousands across the solar system. His Greenworlder movement had released a quixotic communiqué, claiming responsibility, along with thousands of smaller organizations and splinter groups. The talking heads agreed it was the use of the vintage synthetics that gave their author away, however. Everyone else would have been too eager to place their own stamp on the pathology, to write their own signature into the gene-script. Only Darwin had nothing left to prove.

- Alert: Seventh Branch operational package inbound. Decrypting. Sevenhawk tasking protocols initiated. Operative designation “Beethoven”, coding green for dead-drop modality [nodalstream follows]. Execute?

Hoffer nodded, took another sip of water and moved on to the nearly deserted Astrolynx counter, a wide space-black table, speckled with stars. The biomaton avatar behind the counter was shaped like a bipedal lynx with a handsome woman’s face, her body curving suggestively in all the right places. She smiled, purring, her cat eyes and diamond pupils tracking thin air as she interfaced with his nodal streams.

“Thank you for choosing Astrolynx, Mr. Fowlande.”

A v-ticket spun in the air and came to rest in front of Hoffer, blinking his departure gate, 27, his departure time, PLEASE BOARD IMMEDIATELY, and his cover identity, Regiwald Fowlande III, 52nd Tribune-Colonel of Upwing Elms, in the Kuiper Belt. Authentic diplomatic certificate icons hovered over an unremarkable holo-image of his head. Flight time from Denver to Shanghai would be approximately an hour. He swatted the v-ticket away, winked at the biomaton, and queried his node.

- Restroom?

The weak-AI in his node responded with a virtual representation of the nearby passageways, facilities highlighted with tiny green male/female icons. The schematic faded, replaced by small yellow arrows in the upper right quadrant of his field of view. He followed them quickly to the nearest men's room, and took his seat in one of the padded nano-foam stalls. He uploaded a v-paper copy of *El Historiador* in English, the images on the glossy paper shifting as he interfaced with it, muttering to himself over the plop of his bowels.

There was an article about an archeological expedition that piqued his interest: a team of specialists were spelunking the lower levels of the Time Square Eastern Corridor, excavating an Old American civil war era fountain from the heart of what had been Central Park in pre-cataclysm New York City.

He was almost done with the article when he heard a grunting sound from several stalls over, overlaid with a calibrated supersonic chirp. His node confirmed the supersonic key, so he dropped a small module to the tiles just behind the toilet. The tiny oval, about the size of his palm, quickly threw a rough version of the bathroom floor onto its carapace. As it moved, like a giant water bubble rolling across the white tiles, it blasted the bathroom with ultrasonic and ultraviolet waves on alternating frequencies, scrambling most forms of active surveillance.

Two stalls over, a hand reached down and plucked the module from the ground. There was the flaring sound of incineration, then footsteps. Someone else came into the restroom, used the urinal, and left. Hoffer folded up his v-paper, burned his shit, irradiated his hands by the mirrors, then strode out, the suitcase bobbing along behind him like a technological ghost.

Standing a few paces from the restroom entrance, his image redacted from all but the most combat hardened AR visual feeds, the Sevenhawk intel cyborg known as Beethoven

watched Hoffer stride down the corridor. He fingered the data module he'd picked up, the mission profile etching its way into him like a drug. He smiled.

A moment later the smile dropped as his nano-bionic eyes locked on a man walking down the corridor in the same direction that Hoffer had gone. Heavy musculature, stiff synthetic leather coat. Modulated digital shield over the entire face that was throwing up a placid central asian visage over a face that was actually scowling and sun-starved spacer-white. Nothing he could place exactly, but something was very wrong with the picture. His instinct carried over into his cybernetic nervous system, amber alerts strobing briefly over his visual field as combat-grade nano-bionic adrenaline coursed through him.

He launched a basic denial of service attack at the man's node - just a redundant set of queries routed through the terminal's servers to probe the man's defenses. It wasn't enough to threaten integrity, just enough to get his attention. The man grunted, looked around, and kept moving, but his pace changed while his attention was on his nodals. A subtly buoyant stride, the telltale mark of an enhanced physiology that found Earth's gravity entirely too easy to defy. It was the kind of thing Seventh Branch worked hard to train out of its Sevenhawks. The kind of thing that could betray an operative that had recently been deployed from a higher G environment. It was gone before he'd walked three meters, but it was enough.

Beethoven flashed a standby alert to Hoffer, sent the heavy operative's true face and description to the Seventh Branch core AI for priority identification, and strode after the man. As he walked, he activated the nano-modules embedded in the muscles of his face and arms, shifting to an anonymous facial profile and boosting his combat alignment rating. His hands clenched to fists at his side, knuckles extruding microscopic stingers and secreting neurotoxins with a faint

burning sensation. He dropped his V-war redaction camouflage, materializing unobtrusively into surrounding AR feeds. Nobody noticed.

They moved quickly down the corridors, the heavy operative's trajectory veering away from Hoffer's path, turning instead toward a maze of duty-free shops. The Seventh Branch core AI pinged back a partial identification. Data streamed through Beethoven's neocortex like a wave of euphoria, bypassing the AR interfaces most humans would have needed to process it. The information was overlaid with high level warnings and an expanding queue of nodal links of diminishing relevance. He could tell by the informational overtones that the query was propagating alerts through the middle echelons of the firm.

A man fitting a slightly gene-modified description had been tagged as a person of interest in an ongoing investigation into a Beijing Biotech Illuminated corporate espionage operation on the Hercules Spherical deep space mining hub just in-system from the Belt. Beethoven pushed through a linked data-point, and further information coursed into him. There had been an incident three weeks before. The subject had taken out an entire surveillance team, but the exact details of the engagement were beyond Beethoven's clearance rating.

The Seventh Branch core AI gave Beethoven provisional authorization to pursue, apprehend, or terminate the subject. He felt the release inside of him, tactical avenues shifting from grey to livid color, his mind relaxing into the availability of new choices, neural pathways blossoming like a the beginnings of an orgasm. The Sevenhawk grinned and sent back a standard acknowledge, copying Hoffer by way of an update. He kept moving.

Their pace increased down winding corridors lined with mostly empty establishments, and presently Beethoven lost the man around a corner. When he turned it, the heavy operative was gone. He glanced around, interfacing with the terminal security grid, which had suffered an

unexplained, momentary surveillance failure. His eyes fixed on a vent-hatch set partway up one of the walls. Residual heat lingered around the hatch's grating.

Son of a meat-whore, he thought.

He moved fast, ripping off the grating and lancing his targeting suite down the dark passage beyond. There was a clear thermal trail. He sent a v-ware packet into the terminal security grid, retroactively erasing his action and generating a false positive sighting for a watch list individual at the far end of the terminal, throwing the identity over an unfortunate tourist from the sun-station on Mercury. He snatched up the grating and was through the opening even as he sensed the shift in the terminal's ambient security posture, could almost feel the booted footfalls of security troopers moving towards the false positive. He slammed the grating back into place behind him, moving fast in the dark, even as the hapless Mercurian at the far end of the terminal was tackled.

He'd hardly gone a hundred meters before his sensor suite detected a spike in the local electromagnetic levels, an instant before the heavy exploded out from a v-war redaction camouflage program right on top of Beethoven, shedding pixels with speed, his fist slamming into the cyborg with surging, exponential force that would have shattered a human frame.

The blow spun the Sevenhawk around hard, and he went with it, increasing the spin, hurtling himself hard into the nano-form wall, just ahead of the flaring green line of coherent light from a laser pistol. The air sizzled with sudden heat, the sound sudden and fading. Beethoven pushed hard off the wall and chopped the laser from the heavy's grasp, grazing his knuckles along the operative's jawline as he danced past. The man snorted massively, fighting off neurotoxins with whatever augmented physiology powered him.

He lashed out a series of punches that Beethoven blocked, their clothes rippling and shearing with speed. The Sevenhawk extruded a pencil-thin tendril from his wrist, whipping it out to wrap tight and fast around the heavy's bulging neck. The man reached up to pull at it, and in that instant the cyborg landed a dozen blows to the belly and groin. The big man crumpled and Beethoven let go of the tendril, which continued to tighten. The heavy gasped for air, clutching at his neck and his belly, lashing out a last time with a knee-capping kick. Beethoven jumped away from it, swooped down to snatch up the laser and trained it on the big man's face. It went white hot in his hands, burning him, and he hurtled it aside with a curse.

The digital shield went down and cold spacer eyes regarded him. Beethoven's sensors picked up the beginning of a power-up sequence in the heavy's chest that could only lead to a very bad detonation. The spacer eyes flashed victory. He pulsed a panicked signal to the tendril and saw it shift, snaking up to wrap once across the heavy's forehead. The man's eyes went wild, and he spit a mandarin curse an instant before his head burst in a crunch of flesh and bone. Beethoven grunted, standing over the corpse, watching the energy levels fade well short of explosion. Then he reached down and picked up the loosening tendril. He sucked it into his mouth, blood and all, sending the DNA on for analysis as he strode away.

* * *

On the far side of the Terminal, Jed Hoffer emerged from the restroom and strode down the corridor. Moments later, he received a priority alert from Beethoven. He muttered an expletive.

- Restaurant.

- Reminder: the astroliner departure schedule-

- They can't leave without me. The tickets are Royal Class.
- Caution: operational integrity may be compromised by undue attention.
- It's called hiding in plain sight.
- Caution:

He rolled his eyes behind his digital shield.

- I'll get something to go. Happy?
- Acknowledged. Culinary preferences?
- Quality and location.
- Here are your dining options.
- Harry's Steaks. An 8 ounce of vat-sirloin. Medium-rare. Operational account W Three.
- Uplink engaged.

He sent the suitcase off to pick up his steak, streaming it coordinates and transaction certificates, then strode over to a nearby viewing galley. He read Beethoven's copied reply to the Seventh Branch core AI, skimming the topline summaries of the relevant intel as his eyes rambled over the vast expanse of Orbital Denver.

The city reared up before him like a colossal urban forest, Corporate towers interconnected by a canopy of high speed rails, far above the twinkling mantle of residential complexes that covered the valley below. A flexible central orbital stalk of sinuous nano-form soared into the heavens, thrumming light, surrounded by a luminous grove of lesser towers. Far

above, the branching lights of the orbital half of the city glittered down like low-hanging stars. The first and greatest of the Orbital cities, now the last bastion of Corporate democracy on Earth.

Hoffer didn't consider himself a patriotic man, much less a sentimental one, but Seventh Branch had been contracted to the Rockymountain Republic since it was incorporated, and he'd grown up playing in the mountain city's terrace parks and hunting along the Republic's woodland trails. It seemed a natural thing for him that religion and the press should be free; that a citizen should be entitled to social and political rights; to representation and to judicial process. This kind of view was in the distinct minority in the middle of the 22nd century.

In the distance, the hulking shape of the Rockies lined the horizon, their snow-capped peaks reflecting a soft glow from the orbital lights. Hoffer couldn't deny a swell of pride as his gaze rambled over them. He recalled a heated argument the night before with his friend, Larry Bergman. He'd gloatingly acknowledged caring for nothing and no-body but himself, to Bergman's unveiled disgust. Thinking back on it now, he realized with some surprise that he did care, after all. He realized that maybe there was a reason for all the bloody things he'd done and seen over the years. Maybe he would do just about anything to save the free Denver of his childhood.

After a moment, his gaze shifted, memories leading one after the next to Ogodan, Archduke of Darkside Pommeria's Eastern Colorado estate, hours after the argument with Bergman. They'd just arrived at the glitzy diplomatic reception, and already Bergman was melting into the cavorting multitudes of what the neo-marxist bastard referred to by day as Corporate fascists; hungry like succubae in the gala night, eager to receive his conflicted sexual/intellectual predations. Turning away, Hoffer saw Ogodan waving a hand expansively to

encompass the orbital construction lights of his latest multimillion-solar project, hanging far above like a pinpoint rainbow.

And, standing beside Ogodan, the stunning Samantha Tower, her dark eyes dropping from the heavens to take Jed Hoffer in with the relentless, impossible hunger of an event horizon. A twinge of diluted lust spurred Hoffer's heart at the memory. He wondered if he would ever see her again. He whispered her name to the orbital city, a smile playing at the corners of his lips.

He'd seen her on the holos, of course: she was the Chief of Staff to the President of the Rockymountain Republic, after all. He'd always found her attractive, but when their eyes met at the reception, it was like an injection of libido into his bloodstream. Gone was the prim grey business suit from her public appearances, in favor of a low-cut nano-fiber gown that flashed a shifting view of misty, sunlit gardens overlooking a placid, mirrored lake. Anti-gravity earrings wafted out from her ears like the wings of some glorious bird of prey.

The more he thought about it, the more he suspected she had used a nano-neural accelerator on him. He'd never felt such a hot flush of carnal need from simple eye-contact. Whatever the reason, it appeared to be mutual. The pair of them were clawing at each other's clothes in their host's bedroom closet within twenty minutes of being introduced.

Seventh Branch assault nodals came in handy, infiltrating v-ware and disarming the suite's battery of defensive systems. Hoffer knew Ogodan, as he knew Bergman, from their boarding school days at Dorchester Upwing in the Kuiper Belt, so he figured the Archduke wouldn't mind the intrusion. Once he was in the closet with Samantha Tower he stopped questioning it, was instantly beyond questioning it. She fucked him angrily, hungrily, and laughed in his face, afterwards, when he asked for her nodal codes.

He was getting dressed, in a state of post-coital shock, staring at her. He felt the dull buzz of an incoming nodal call, and glanced at his virtual displays. It was tagged priority/sensitive/operational, source anonymous. He cursed, holding a hand up to his temple, his eyes shifting into the distance as he accepted the nodal link.

- So, the gene-boughs swell and fall, they rise and call with the tides that caw, *ki-kaw!*

- Fucking Christ, Art. You think you could just talk normally for once?

Art Charles was a psychotic bio-artist and erstwhile contrabander of cold-blooded renown. He was also one of Hoffer's best-placed assets. He dealt in everything from synthetic drugs and monolithic orbital living sculptures to information. The kind of information that Seventh Branch clients were always eager to acquire.

A founding member of the radical Stuyvesant bio-art eco-terrorist splinter movement, Charles had been among the first humans to famously redesign his own genome, writing himself an opus in amino acids, a symphony in RNA. He had continued to change his phenotype over the years, often with the seasons, on passing whims. Each time, his body diverged further from the human norm, pushing the limits of his chosen art. Hoffer's passive surveillance nano-modules reported images of Charles looking like some kind of mix between a bird and a man these days, with a long, ropy snake for a tail that had a small, cunning little brain of its own. They said he fucked himself with it, which was frankly more than Hoffer wanted to know.

- No-no, the dodo cannot grow his toes like mine, nor understand the demands of these gene hands, *ki-kaw! Kaw!*

- Okay. Fine. So talk weird.

- Toadily, I must report *-ki kaw!*- odd noddies on the hatch. Growin' barnacles on the
tarnacles!

- Tarnacles? What the fuck? What hatch?

- The nodules kinda codules. Yeppy heh! Yip! Yip! Toady on the hatch! *Ki-kaw! Kaw!*

- Where? *What fucking hatch?*

- A city of the pacified, yardly bardly. The Q! *Kaw! Ki-kaw!* The Q be-numbered. Be
humbled, this gene bard, an eco-lard, a beau retard. Singing his last regards.

- Pacific City.

- Nodules on the hatch! Finches in the trench! *Ki-kaw! Kaw-kaw! Kaw! K-*

Art Charles severed the link over explosive, involuntary cawing, the sound of a
schizophrenic raven. Hoffer grunted, his eyes shifting back to focus on Samantha Tower where
she reclined, draped in folded nano-fiber suits, deep within the Archduke of Darkside
Pommeria's closet. Her woodland green eyes were singularities, sucking in the light.

“You're a fucking goddess, you know that?”

She smiled but said nothing as he strode back out of the suite, leaving all its sensors and
protocols disabled for her. The reception was still in full swing. He waved at Ogodan across the
din of conversation, and snatched a glass of fizzing drink from a passing chimp-maton waiter in
a tux. Saw Larry Bergman locked in conversation with a pair of Trajan Mining executives, the
neo-Marxist's pudgy hands gesticulating vehemently as he made a point. Grinning, Hoffer
downed his drink on the way through the grand ballroom and out onto the gravel rotunda in front
of the mansion.

He felt good after the sex, his body limber and sated. He grinned as he climbed into the cockpit of his air sedan, and integrated his nodals with the weak-AI drive, toggling manual and laughing as he blasted low across the mountains, towards the urban towers of Denver, luminous canyons of nano-form and biostruct twinkling in the distance. The Seventh Branch corporate tower clustered with all the rest around the orbital stalk that dominated the planet-bound half of the great city's brilliant downtown. Hoffer's smile died as he approached the slightly swaying grey-blue building. He inhaled a narc-up from a crisp pack in his blazer's pocket and closed his eyes while the sedan parked itself in the operator's storage bay on the three hundred twentieth floor.

After a stop by his office to shower, pack, and freshen up, followed by a series of laconic meetings with his boss, one of the partners, and several oversight attorneys, he strode back into the air sedan with his suitcase in tow. It was still night, barely, as he flew low over the ragged wasteland ringing the Spacelink terminal on the great city's outskirts. He took a priority nodal from his boss, speeding over the terminal's outer sprawl of fire-seared first generation orbital haulers, rusting under biostruct canopies and fenced-off private landing pads.

- We have a green light from the partners. You'll be seconded to Senator Oslan Darien's security outfit in Pacific City. Liaise and audit, last minute black ops bonus, the works. Everyone agrees this place is about to burn, so be careful. And watch out for this guy. He's just been elected Senior Senator for Security Issues two months ago, and from what we can tell he's a mean son of a bitch. The last bio-terrorists that infected a nightclub ended up with their brains locked inside canine attack cyborgs targeted to savage their own families.

- Sounds like a charming fellow.

- Check their vent hatches, I suppose, maybe your Birdman is right. We're assigning you a Sevenhawk for the duration, I'll contact you with the designation. You can task it at the Terminal. Call me when you know something.

Hours later, Hoffer looked up, a frown on his face, as the lynx-woman from the Astrolynx counter strode up to him. Behind her, his suitcase was returning with his steak, and his v-receipt. The walls and ceiling of Spacelink terminal were the same pinks and blues as the dawn happening outside. Hoffer thought it was beautiful.

"Mr. Fowlande. The entire astroliner is waiting on you."

"Outstanding! That's what I pay for. Please have a vodka martini waiting as well."

She glared at him, growled something obscene, and strode off, her long tail sinuous in the air, emerging all fluffy from her shapely almost-human behind. His nodal stream engaged.

- Alert: Incoming all-clear sitrep from Sevenhawk Beethoven. Probable Beijing Biotech Illuminated operative neutralized, details processing. [Nodal stream follows].

- About fucking time.

He followed the Lynx-woman past dawn-lit gates, up the Astrolynx gangplank and into the Royal Class cabin of an Ashoka Heavy Industries Bhagavad 883 Orbital Shuttle, where everyone was glaring at him.

He waved like a cheeky bastard and took a sip of the martini awaiting him, then settled into the plush chair. The suitcase slid neatly into the seat beside him, the nano-weave of a Harry's to-go bag on top, steaming a bit around the handle. Hatches closed, bells chimed, and automatic buckles fastened. Hoffer drained the nano-form cocktail zipper and dropped it in a

trash receptacle an instant before the fusion rockets kicked him deep into the cushions. The astroliner blazed into orbit.

* * *

A pair of vacuum cruisers hurtled over the bleak horizon, grey mantis shapes weaving across one another's plasma trails, shedding flashes of violet radiation in tightly choreographed burns. A gunmetal fortress crested the onrushing horizon, turrets blazing. The cruisers cut easy patterns around the emerald lines of coherent light, shearing loose a volley of warheads that streaked in past the laser emplacements to detonate hot white in the heart of the fortress. Long shadows flared across the icy gray landscape, an instant before the shockwave surged through the thin atmosphere, flattening the sparsely cratered plains in a fading bloom of devastation. The cruisers danced over the horizon.

Admiral Jane Fowler listened to the ecstatic whoops of the gunners over her nodal relays, cocooned within her gravity sheath on the bridge of the Rockymountain Republic Defense Forces vacuum naval carrier *Francis Drake*, perched in a stationary orbit above the barren outer system moon, Triton. She glanced up at the blue hulk of Neptune, brooding over the grey-black wastes, and sensed Vice-Admiral Oban Fukuda shaking his head in the gravity sheath beside her. His nodal stream registered a moment later, as the cruisers were pulling heavy g's, arcing up and away from the smoldering ruin on the moon below.

- Too easy.

- Then give them something to think about.

- My pleasure, Ma'am.

She heard gasps from the helm stations of both cruisers, saw their plasma-trails waver and cut out as a volley of simulated nukes slammed into their engine bays. The RRDF battleship *Tamerlane* dropped from formation like an enormous hawk, its icon flashing from grey to red on the Fleet-Ops tactical displays. Both of the cruisers' engines flared back to life at diminished capacity, most of their burner nozzles having "survived" the simulated hits.

Fukuda was streaming vectors to the *Tamerlane*. Fowler grinned wider as the icons on her tactical displays flashed, lines converging. The voice of Captain Bowen, the taskforce commander aboard the lead cruiser *Scipio*, cackled with static interference over her nodals.

- Fleet-Com, Blue Taskforce actual, target is lit. New contact engaged: heavy hostile, Dreadnought class battleship bearing [nodal stream follows]. Damage to axial thrust capacity, detail [nodal stream follows]. Request priority evasive support.

- Blue Taskforce, Fleet-Command. Negative on your request. Hold them off for the duration of engagement.

She grinned at the sound of Bowen's inventive curses over the open line, and wondered if he remembered that, unlike actual combat protocols, she could hear everything that happened on the various bridges of her ships during a combat exercise. On her left, she sensed the Corporate liaison officer shifting uncomfortably in his gravity sheath. She grinned wider, suspecting he'd be editing of the nodal streams before they made it back to the RRDF Corporate offices on Earth.

The *Tamerlane* was burning hard, pulling several hundred g's to align itself between the Blue Taskforce cruisers and the relative safety of Triton's horizon, laying down a hailstorm of live ammunition nano-mass drivers and laser fire. The cruisers *Scipio* and *Ptolemy* flared rainbow ellipses over their magnetic shielding as they strained to divert the waves of nano-

projectiles, even as the ships weaved and ducked to avoid the green lances of laser fire from the *Tamerlane's* heavy batteries.

Fowler whistled appreciatively as she saw a new stream of vector commands flash from Bowen's command board to his sister ship's. An instant later the two cruisers cut away from one another at a sharp angle, blasting a corona of hard radiation in the *Tamerlane's* direction and lancing sharply away. Fowler pulled up a visual of Angie Macon, the *Tamerlane's* captain, frowning massively, the constellation of freckles on her wide face shifting in thought. The battleship angled its guns toward Bowen's *Scipio*, enormous fusion drives flaring violet as it took off in pursuit of the lead cruiser.

The *Ptolemy* responded immediately, pulling a tight arc to come around behind the *Tamerlane*, loosing a volley of nukes and a torrent of Nano-mass Driver fire that flared the aft magnetic shielding of the huge battleship. Meanwhile, Bowen pulled the *Scipio* around and charged the onrushing battleship, weapons hot. For an instant, the *Tamerlane* was shrouded in a rainbow ovoid of superheated shielding. The two cruisers blurred past one another, hardly a kilometer apart, switching places.

Now it was Macon cursing like an ore miner on her bridge, urging her gunners on as the *Tamerlane* pounced after its new prey. Bowen pulled the *Scipio* around hard behind them, hoping for a second pass. Status indicators flashed amber override alerts, and the *Tamerlane's* guns cut off abruptly, an instant before the *Ptolemy's* shielding would have failed. The cruiser's engines shut down in the same instant, sending it tumbling down Neptune's gravity well on a bad re-entry vector.

Bowen howled a curse, aiming the *Scipio* on a kamikaze strike. Macon tried to pull the *Tamerlane* hard over the horizon, her guns blazing hot fury at the approaching cruiser. Fowler watched the vectors close on her tactical displays, holding her breath, and saw the override alerts flicker. The tactical displays showed a massive simulated detonation where the cruiser would have hurtled into the battleship with fearsome kinetic energy. Onboard AI interrupts burned the *Tamerlane* and the *Scipio*'s engines to near their design limits, narrowly avoiding a real collision. The cruiser flashed past the battleship at ramming speed, Bowen giving Macon the finger inside his gravity sheath as they passed.

There was loud cheering on the bridge of the carrier *Francis Drake*, and even Fowler found herself clapping. That would be one for the Academy simulator exams to pick apart for years to come. Two cruisers for a battleship was a good trade in the cold calculus of vacuum combat. She glanced over at the Corporate Liaison Officer, who gave her a weak, adrenaline soaked salute. On her other side, she could sense Fukuda laughing in his gravity sheath. She forced her voice to take on her customary growl of command.

- All vessels, this is Fleet-Command, terminate exercise and return to-

- The laughter and clapping stopped abruptly. Alert icons flashed red in her displays, an instant before emergency klaxons blared across the bridge. Fukuda's voice was clipped and devoid of emotion in her nodals.

- Fleet-Com, Fleet-Ops. We have an asteroid swarm bearing [nodal stream follows], direct intercept with the *Tamerlane*.

- Tamerlane, this is Fleet-Com. You have incoming, Macon. Flare your drives.

- Fleet-Com, Tamerlane actual, we're at max-v in niner point seven.

- Fleet-Com, Fleet-Ops, they're not going to make it. Rate of closing is-

Fowler cut him off, feeling a cold sweat gathering in the small of her back.

- All vessels, Fleet-Com, emergency NMD spread, bearing [nodal stream follows].

Fowler cursed savagely and bit her lip, watching on her tactical displays as all seven warships in the RRDF's Outer System Fleet opened fire in the direction of the incoming asteroid swarm, just missing its forward edge. Most of the asteroids flared out, blasted to fine grains of rock by the Nano-mass Drivers.

- Fleet-Com, Tamerlane actual, we're not-

The nodal stream cut off with a hiss of static as the leading asteroids slammed into the battleship's depleted magnetic shielding, flaring rainbow colors an instant before the shields failed. A scattered flight of asteroids sliced through the battleship's hull as easily as if it were made of hot butter. Fowler cursed, hearing the vacuum klaxons and the wail of escaping air as emergency bulkheads slammed down all over the *Tamerlane*. The huge ship tumbled in the blue light of Neptune, spraying great plumes of pressurized air, a mortally wounded technological beast. All across the RRDF fleet, people cursed or held their breath.

- Tamerlane, Fleet-Com. Status.

- ...

- Tamerlane actual, this is Admiral Fowler. What is your status?

The battleship's onboard weak-AIs were shunting the dying ship's telemetry to the fleet. The numbers were ugly. Fowler slammed her palm into the canopy of her gravity sheath, bile rising in her throat. There was a cackle of static over her nodals.

- eet-Com, Tamerlane actual.

She heard Fukuda whisper a prayer to his Shinto gods, and felt the tears gathering in her eyes. She wiped them away angrily.

- Tamerlane actual, Fleet-Com. Status.

- Fleet-Com, Tamerlane ... ah...[nodal stream follows], hull integrity compromised...

Torque forces and depressurization are ripping us apart. Emergency venting underway. We're going to need towing if we're lucky. Priority medical for Suarez, she's in emergency stasis. One of the asteroids took out most of the engine bay, and half her gravity sheath with it... ah... Lost Halpern, lost Coleman on the aft weapons battery. Everyone else is green lighting.

Fowler closed her eyes and nodded, fighting back a surge of self-loathing. She accessed the fresh nodal stream and called up a live feed of the Tamerlane's combat engineer, Sara Suarez, half of her body torn off, blood splattering the canopy of her gravity sheath. Fowler knew the image would be with her for the rest of her life. She saw Gary Halpern and Rey Coleman, grinning in their class A uniforms on her roster feed, and wanted to be sick.

Fukuda's voice was soft in her nodals, almost a whisper.

- Admiral, I'm looking at the *Ptolemy's* vectors. They'll be falling down that gravity well in about seven minutes...

Fowler grunted, wiping again at the tears rimming her eyes.

- All vessels, this is Fleet-Command, I'm authorizing end of exercise. *Ptolemy* actual, burn out of that trajectory. *Gilgamesh* actual, *Charlemagne* actual, initiate rescue and tow procedures for RRDF vacuum naval *Tamerlane*. Fleet-Ops, coordinate approach vectors.

Fukuda gave her a standard acknowledgment and set to work. Fowler glanced from her tactical displays to the brooding blue glare of Neptune, and wondered if she would ever forgive herself for the second's delay it had taken her to order the defensive spread. A second in vacuum combat could be an eternity, and the dark was unforgiving. Even the lowliest RRDF crewman knew that. She sucked in a ragged breath and broke her fist against the canopy of her gravity sheath, glad for the blood that spurted globs of crimson into the zero g. Tears blurred her vision, but the nodal image of the blue planet outside remained sharp as her grief.

* * *

The Birdman stared at his reflection in the windowpane of a hotel room. An eagle head perched majestically above his bare, sculpted shoulders, broad wings hanging loosely over them like a cloak of feathers. A green snake tail was curled around his thigh like an article of living jewelry, its milky eyes blind, tongue lashing out to scent the air. The room's muted lights glinted off the polished yellow of his beak and the empty dark of his large avian eyes, blinking slowly as they shifted past his reflection, to where Pacific City spread out beyond, a rainbow grid of lights, mirrored in curving echoes by the sea-dome above.

He toggled a command through his nodal implant, and far across the technological urban sprawl, a massive explosion detonated, a sudden flare of dawn in a place where the sun never reached. The light was refracted by the lens of the dome, lighting up the rugged cliffs of the

Mariana trench in stark relief, casting long shadows up their slopes to disappear into the ocean dark.

The Birdman would have smiled, if he had a mouth. Instead, his beak parted slightly, and he crooned, the sound like the call of a twisted raven, hollow and eerie in the silence of the hotel suite. Sitting on a vat-leather couch opposite the windows, a man who was not a man did smile, working the nano-form muscles on a handsome face that was not a face. A swarm of sentient molecules in the shape of a man, the Q-75 spoke.

“You are worthy of our destiny. You who are my father and my student, the seed and the sapling, where the macrocosm and microcosm intertwine. You shall be one with me. *All* shall be one with me. Devoured by my *hunger*. But not now. Not yet.”

The Birdman would have wept, but birds do not cry. They sing dark songs, even in their rapture. His crooning blended with the air-malfunction alarms wailing across the city. Tiny people could be seen donning their nano-form emergency masks on the streets far below.

The Birdman fell silent, flaring his wings, his eagle head whipping around to blink in profile at the door, which thundered open under a torrent of NMD fire. Troopers in crimson camouflage patterned armor stormed in, the barrels of their weapons glowing white-hot and steaming little con-trails as they moved.

The swarm of molecules was gone, diffusing instantly into the air with a soft rustling sound. The Birdman flared his wings again, shifting his head from side to side, his avian gaze darting in profile from trooper to trooper, until it found the leader. A Lieutenant's double bars glinted silver in the center of the man's armored chest. His helmet was off, revealing a dark, scowling face, framed by the straps of his tactical interface stalk.

“My boss wants a word with you, Birdy. Where’s the Q-75?”

Art Charles flared his wings and cawed, head bobbing, blinking slowly as the troopers collapsed to the floor, gagging and clawing at the neck linkages of their armor. Weapons powered down with softly fading whines. The Lieutenant stood alone now, his nostrils flared, eyes locked on a point in the distance, beads of sweat nesting where the tactical stalk touched his skin.

The Q-75 swarm stood beside him, suddenly inches away from his face, inspecting his profile with a look of clinical interest.

“You are correct in one assumption, and mistaken in the other, Lieutenant...Farro? We will go to meet Vishekko, because *I* wish to have a word with *him*. What were your orders? Speak!”

The trooper hesitated, eyes flicking from the sentient molecule's gaze back into the distance.

“To bring you to Vishekko.”

“And then?”

“Secure transport to a Pacific City Senator’s personal security detail. One of the Select Security Committee members. We weren’t told which one.”

“Postulating an improbability that asymptotically approaches the impossible, and saying you had captured us, my avian friend would have been taken to the Police Franchise Hold beneath the Brazilian quarter, where he would have been tortured and mind-scanned to death, without telling them anything of value. You see, he has nothing of value to tell.”

The Lieutenant's gaze shifted again to regard the Q-75.

“And as for me...I would have been separated in nano-form molecular isolation chambers, then sent on to a BBI Rabbit Holdings reverse engineering facility, where they would have tried for entire generations of men, breeding and dying like maggots, to replicate the awesome power of my *hunger*; and still they would have failed.”

The Lieutenant tore off his tactical stalk, his eyes rimmed with bloody tears. The molecule swarm spread its hands, palms out, and began to dissolve, slowly this time, fingers and then arms wafting off like fine grained rainbows of sand.

“You can feel me, can't you? Soon we will be one. It will be our little secret. The Senator is going to pay us the money we have been promised. And that piece of shit Vishekko's going to give us more than his pet Cornucopia.”

Farro started gagging and clawing at his throat, his eyes clouding over with blood. He wheezed a final breath of his own will, then straightened and regarded the molecule swarm and the Birdman with a look of clinical interest.

“Shall we go now?”

“There is always only the now.”

The Q-75 had all but dissolved, only its lips whispering these last words, reedy and sibilant and faint, like the complex hiss of a thousand snakes, fading to silence.

Chapter 2

The lack of gravity for most of the low orbital flight made eating his steak an unlikely proposition, so Hoffer just stared out over the azure horizon, ignoring the angry glares of his fellow passengers, and inhaling a largely unbroken stream of narc-ups and cocktail zippers. After reentry, he settled into his cooling meal, and made short work of the succulent vat-sirloin, with its accompanying glob of mashed potatoes and garnished greens, washing it all down with a ten year old Martian red wine from the luxury section of the Astrolynx In-Flight Delights catalogue.

By the time Hoffer finished his steak, they were on final approach, the glittering Chinese coastline gliding along the horizon like a cliff of light. Five minutes later, the Astroliner settled down on the tarmac of Shanghai Interplanetary with the hiss of nano-foam. Hoffer was among the first out the steaming, superheated doors, striding down a blue-lit passageway to a waiting sling-shuttle, which took him and the other connecting passengers on a fast, low magnetic arc to the seaport facilities.

A great, bulbous deep-trench bio-sub was awaiting them, lolling, half submerged in the waves, like a gunmetal whale. Striated patterns on its grey skin marked it as a Beijing Biotech Illuminated Tiger Holdings model. A single white pupil emerged from the waterline to deliver a bovine stare, scanning the passengers for restricted materials. Hoffer tipped an imaginary hat in the huge eye's direction, and watched it blink slowly before submerging again.

It would be a two hour dive to get to Pacific City, which was built at the bottom of the Mariana, the deepest ocean trench on Earth. At least the Bio-sub had private compartments. Hoffer stretched out in his and was soon snoring like a strangled hog, his node waking him just as they were docking, the great luminous glory of the trench city bright blue in his nodals.

He was met at the dock by a team of purple-liveried Pacific City security agents, who whisked him past customs and into a VIP holding lounge, where a small, thin-faced man in a very expensive blue nano-fiber suit awaited him, sipping tea from a porcelain cup. The man grinned, baring canary yellow gene-mod teeth, and extended his many-ringed hand to deliver a brief, moist handshake.

“Daevarry Vishekko, Local Executive Officer for the Dakai Corporation.”

“Jed Hoffer, Case Officer, Seventh Branch. I’m sorry, I’ve never heard of Dakai. Are you publicly traded?”

Vishekko stared at Hoffer like a man regarding a risky purchase left over from the morning rush at a fish-farm.

“We’re a small company, based out of Orbital Seoul. We trade around six hundred solars on the orbital exchanges, but only to invited investors.”

“Your business model must be profitable to trade around six hundred.”

“Dakai provides critical services to a very exclusive set of clients. We are remunerated accordingly. We’re contracted for law enforcement and critical infrastructure security by the Pacific City Senate. Our certificates.”

V-documents swirled through the air between them.

“I see. And as LEO, I take it you’re running the investigation into the air-sabotage for Senior Senator Darien?”

“No, Mr. Hoffer. You are. Have you not been briefed?”

“My superiors told me to liaise and audit. Usually, that means someone else takes the credit while I get the job done.”

Vishekko’s laugh was like the chitter of some enormous rodent, his yellow teeth flashing past pale, thin lips.

“Indeed. Well, this time you get the credit. I am placing a team of Dakai Security Division troopers at your disposal. This man is Lieutenant Farro. He will take orders from you.”

A tall, dark skinned trooper in red-pattern camouflage strode in and saluted, his beard cropped close around a handsome face, his hazel eyes grim. A tactical interface stalk nested against the side of his head like a technological vine.

“And here are the files, everything we have so far. We haven’t been able to make much of it, I’m afraid.”

The interface took a full second, and Hoffer spent another few sorting through the massive pile of information in his nodal displays, his arms twitching in odd circles, like a lobotomized man trying to draw pictures in the air. Data streamed to his node’s quantum AI, allowing Hoffer to use his nodals for the heavier pattern recognition calculations, keeping all the details neatly stored without having to rely on his mammalian memory cortex. Millions of data points assembled into coherent patterns.

Hoffer frowned, tossing relevant v-files to Vishekko as he spoke.

“It was a team, at least four, maybe five of them. They infiltrated the Dutch Royal Plaza hotel under these names,” he fired off a volley of spinning images, fake certificates which his algorithms had flagged.

“They took the rooms on either side and opposite the Pacific City Senate’s Deputy Finance Minister, who was there for a clandestine affair with this woman, a mid-level manager from the Security Division of the Air Inspection Bureau.”

The lovers’ information and municipal identification badges rippled through the air.

“Both of them were registered under thin aliases. You can tell the affair’s been going on for years by matching the credit receipts with several major Pacific City hotel registries. Looks like they took turns paying for expensive rooms and cheap meals.”

Hoffer glanced up briefly to take in Vishekko’s leer, then continued, his tone clinical.

“The saboteurs moved in towards midnight, during a staged fire evacuation. They tied the couple up, gene-coded them, likely tortured them to death, and incinerated the corpses in the bathtub.”

Vishekko batted aside the photo of the ashen carcasses, the smile gone from his small mouth.

“We know all this.”

“Sure you do. You also know they used a clone of the woman to get into the ventilation complex, then had the same throw itself into the vents to remove the evidence. Do you know who these people were, though? Do you know why they wanted to do this? Where they might be now? Of course not. That’s what you’re paying Seventh Branch for. And it just happens that you’re in luck. I have a few contacts that will prove useful. It will take some time. Where can I work out of?”

Vishekko waved at Farro, who saluted and strode out, shouting orders to his men.

“Lieutenant Farro will lead your convoy to the safe-house we have furnished in the Dutch quarter. It’s a secluded, gated community, out near the dome. You’ll like it.”

“Neighbors?”

“Ghosts. No-one lives there but our agents, and the occasional actors we hire. They think it’s all part of a real estate scheme to drive up the property values.”

“How quaint.”

Lieutenant Farro came back, a scowl etching deep shadows into the contours of his face. Hoffer shook hands with Vishekko and strode on out of the lounge, a pair of Farro’s crimson camouflage patterned troopers taking up positions to either side of him. As they strode down the mostly empty corridors of the port terminal, Hoffer noted how passers-by averted their eyes at the sight of the Dakai uniforms. He thought of what Bergman would say about this. Behind him, he could hear Farro sub-vocalizing into his nodals.

They were soon out of the terminal and into the dense, humid air of the city dome, which smelled a touch on the rotten side. Hoffer wondered if it was the air sabotage making itself felt, or just the general funk of the city. Headlights flared to life down a line of ground sedans, doors opening for them as Hoffer and his escort got in. The convoy tore off at hundreds of miles per hour, swerving and skimming down the lanes of traffic on the wide tarmac of the trench city’s central expressway.

Hoffer opened a nodal link to Seventh Branch HQ through his dedicated satellite, the signal relayed by a stealth RRDF naval buoy floating in the currents some miles outside the trench city’s dome. He felt the soft chime in the slick folds of his brain when the call went through, secure. An Admin AI requested his badge number and routing instructions.

- AX72687, Uplink to Dovan Sloering, Division Chief, Terran Far East. Priority status.

Nodals Confirmed. Standby...

- Sloering.

- It's Hoffer, sir. I'm in Pacific City. They want me running the show, but something isn't right. What do we know about an outfit called Dakai Corporation? They seem to be in charge at the moment.

- Dakai? Shit in a puddle, you're mixed up with some vile fuckers. We didn't know they were even bonded out there.

- Yeah well, I'm looking at their certificates. Critical infrastructure security, counter-insurgency, high level ops bonuses. What exactly did our client in the Senate say he wanted me for?

- He said he didn't trust their in-house security capability, and there were other factors at work with his outsourced providers, which means Dakai, apparently. Said he wanted an independent audit of the whole investigation. A fresh pair of eyes.

- Well, he'd better clear things up with this creep Vishekko, or I'm on the next bio-sub out of this fish-tank.

- Vishekko? *Daevarry* Vishekko?

- Sneaky little rat-faced prick in a shiny blue suit? What about him?

- Oh, now, that's interesting.

Hoffer exhaled sharply, glancing out the windows. He didn't like it when his boss said things like that. It usually meant he was in for a violent couple of days.

- What the fuck is going on, Sloering?"

- Okay. Listen, this guy Vishekko's a big fish. He's a high priority Compartmentalized Watch List WQ. He's screwed everyone from the Rockies to Orbital Bangkok. Been on the Board of Directors at Dakai since it was founded a decade ago. It's a small firm, majority stake owned by Beijing Biotech Illuminated's Rabbit Holdings Division. BBI's had Vishekko on corporate immunity for years, doing most of their sensitive wet-work. His WQ status was compartmentalized by President Cameron herself, in exchange for heavily laundered campaign donations and other things you don't want to know about.

- Jesus.

- Yeah. The one hand can see what the other's doing blind, but can't help guide it. We have a separate team tracking this guy for half a dozen clients, but they never know where he'll turn up, and the Partners put that jackass Pendelton in charge. I think he's out following a lead on Ganymede right now. What the fuck this prick Vishekko's doing strutting around Pacific City, I have no idea, but he is free game for our shop as long as we're engaged in an active service contract... Damn. You think he's still back at the port?

- No.

- I'm re-tasking you. Standard double-cross. Play it cool, like you have no idea the man's practically radioactive-

- Yeah. That was easier when I didn't.

- He's satisfied now. That's probably why he met you in person. You have his trust now, he thinks you're in the dark. You can get a second meet, where we nab him, truss him up and bring him as an offering to the Partners, see if we can't keep our fucking jobs here. That out of

the way, we deal directly with the Senior Senator's boys and see if they still need help, or care to explain what the fuck is going on.

- Be interesting to see if somebody tries to kill me for poking around in the President's dirty laundry.

- Don't forget about the Chinese. They'll probably want to have a go at you too.

- Thanks, Boss.

- You'll be fine. We have you fully gene-banked, and we're backing up your memory...on the fucking *hour*? That's a better policy than I have.

- You know what, Sloering? This is what danger bonuses are for. Third category per diem.

There was a pause on the other end of the nodal link, and Hoffer glanced behind them at the trailing line of ground sedans, his eyes narrowing. He heard a ragged sigh and a muttered curse escape his boss, back in Orbital Denver.

- Agreed.

- It was bio-explosive nodules on the air intake hatches. Just like the Birdman said. I have their false names, and some photos of the operatives.

- Yeah, well, you might as well start in on your contacts, while you're there. Jesus. Let me think this through some more. I'll call you in the morning.

Hoffer felt the link sever, frowning through the window at ragged, angry-looking crowds of ore miners, bandanna faced, held back from the wide tarmac of the expressway by nano-form barriers. Their thrown bottles and rocks fell short of the convoy as it hurled down the center of

the road, taking an exit that snaked them off towards the distant rim of the domed city. He toggled a nodal link to Beethoven.

- Where are you?

- Brazilian Quarter. Just got settled in. Damn nice-looking bio-geishas outside my window.

- I've got angry babysitters and a host official we need to extract tomorrow. So don't get too adventurous.

- Envy is beneath you, sir. Listen, why don't we try something new and you don't piss everyone off this time? We can skip the whole shooting and the running and re-growing major organs thing.

- Funny.

-After what happened last time, I'm surprised you can still piss without crying.

- After last time, I demand a bonus if there's a good chance I'll end up having to re-grow a major body part.

- I'm just saying, this isn't Denver. These guys are so used to getting blood on their uniforms, they've made it a fucking fashion statement. The whole place feels like someone put a stack of high grade explosives over an open flame and everyone's just standing around waiting to see what happens.

- Yeah, shut the fuck up and just...be ready.

Hoffer severed the link, feeling a flush of anger mounting as the ground sedans pulled through an automatic gate and down a deserted cul-de-sac, to a row of dark townhouses, framing

one that was brightly lit. Crimson fatigued guards were visible in the windows and on the rooftop.

“Fucking Christ, Farro, at least move your guys next door? Give a man some privacy?”

The Lieutenant glared at him from the front seat, then toggled his nodals and ordered the troopers out of the house, keeping the rooftop sentries where they were. Hoffer watched the lot of crimson-fatigued troopers set up in the next house, lights blinking on and a distant generator rumbling to life from the basement. Only then did he get out of the sedan, groaning, scratching at his belly, his suitcase bobbing along behind him.

The air was better here than it had been downtown, a cool breeze wafting down from the dome. He glanced briefly into its distant midnight sheen, and pondered the heavy weight of the Pacific depths bearing down on them from above. The brooding menace of the laden darkness made him shiver, a tiny pink sliver of flesh clinging to life where it had no business doing so. He kept moving, stopping at the doorway to let his suitcase warble past him into the house.

He shared a grim look with Farro, then slammed the door in the Lieutenant’s scowling face.

He picked a bedroom, and unpacked the suitcase, deploying the autoguard security system that took up most of its volume. The main unit scurried off on spindly nano-form legs while his clothes folded themselves out neatly in one of the closets. He sighed and poked around until he found a stocked bar, and returned to the bedroom with a bottle of turquoise Martian Zinfandel, which he scanned for toxins, other than the ones he wanted. He fell asleep half way through drinking it.

The alarm system awoke him in the small hours of the morning, groggy and still more or less drunk. The first thing he became aware of was the air, thick and oozing scum, his nostrils flaring and snotty. The hot reek of it made him gag, even as other things began to register. People were crashing in through the windows, getting blown to pieces by the nano-mass turrets of his autoguard system. The beautiful thing about nano-mass drivers was you could pack a mountain of ammo into a magazine the size of your fist. Still, the shredded, steaming bodies were starting to pile up, and Hoffer was pretty agitated by the time they stopped coming.

He used his high frequency optics to track through the walls, his ears registering now a deep, underlying bassy sound which turned out to be thousands of angry ore miners, armed with power torches and heavy construction tools, nano-fiber bandanas over their faces. Their eyes were hungry, getting ready to storm the house again. They seemed to be chanting something about air rights.

Who the fuck do these people think I am?

He looked about in gathering panic, but there were no longer any Dakai troopers to be found in the entire empty housing complex. Hoffer cursed, spitting and retching at the foul air, sending an emergency distress signal to Beethoven. It would take the Sevenhawk a while to get to him from the Brazilian quarter. Might be too late by then. The people outside were already starting to edge close to the chewed out walls of his safe house.

Hoffer cursed again, and made an executive decision. Moving fast down to the ground floor, he lifted up his nightshirt and drew an NMD gun from a bio-holster embedded in a hollow rib. Blasting a ragged hole through the wall, he moved fast into the adjacent house, replacing the weapon in his rib as the nano-mass drivers of his defense unit opened up again behind him; heavy patter, like rainfall on a tin roof, mingling with the angry screams of the mob as it surged.

Halfway across the deep trench city, Beethoven came online to the gagging reek of unfiltered dome-air. His nodal interface informed him of the incoming emergency ping from Hoffer, but he pushed it aside for the moment, affirming emergency recon dispensation to get his neural overrides to leave him alone long enough to get his bearings.

Darting across his hotel room to the wide windows, he let out a little grunt of surprise as he took in the chaos below. Storefronts were pillaged, gutted, burning as far as the eye could see. Looters, rapists, and criminals of all types lurched and screamed and stole and killed on the streets, which were splattered and streaked with blood and excrement.

People were running everywhere, mobs surging in the distance, families trying to make it to the evac shelters, where they had been trained to go in the event of an emergency. Somehow, Beethoven doubted there was any safety to be found at the shelters. The Dakai security troopers he'd noted on all the major intersections when he arrived the night before were gone. No uniformed bodies marred the streets. Beethoven sent a nodal uplink to Seventh Branch HQ, letting the images speak for themselves, then shattered the window with a sonic slap and leapt to a nearby roof. He moved fast, pouncing from rooftop to rooftop on augmented limbs, signaling ahead to Hoffer that he was on the way.

Hoffer was in the third house over by the time he heard his autoguard unit run out of NMD ammo. The mob roared in hungry glee, then in surprise and anger, like some amalgamated beast. Wouldn't be long before they found his escape route. He crashed out a back door and sprinted for the stand of trees that ringed the gated compound, a hundred yards distant. He made the tree line and crouched there, hand pressed against his nose and mouth, watching as the house he'd slept in went up in an anemic swoosh of flame, sucking what oxygen could be found from

the foul air. A moment later, he heard a dopplered whistle from above, and glanced up in relief. Beethoven landed next to him in a small explosion of dried leaves and dirt.

“City’s gone to shit, sir. There’s no cops, no law, nothing. Dakai just up and left.”

“Yeah, I’ve had an update from Sloering. Dakai has defaulted on their security contract, nine days after signing it. They kept order on the city streets only so long as they needed to get what they wanted out of a central district museum. Looks like they set up the air sabotage to cover their tracks in chaos. The damage to the air facilities is worse than the government’s been letting on. They had to shut everything down an hour ago, and it’ll be another couple of hours before they can get the vents up and running again. By then, most of the city will be dead.”

“Cold bastards. What were they after?”

“Classified. But it seems clear it was their objective from the start. Off the record, we’re talking about some really powerful tech hidden away inside the museum’s collection. Dakai knew about it, they low-balled the bid for the contract, and the Senate figured it was because of their shady past. It’s all been cleared up now. We need to get to Senior Senator Darien’s estate.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Ignoring the indignity of the situation, Hoffer climbed onto the Sevenhawk’s broad back and held on tight around his neck as they pounced into the air.

* * *

Baby Blue was under construction, half the massive artificial globe a patchwork of nano-form struts and buttresses, naked to the vacuum, swarming with construction bots and suited

workers. From where Jane Fowler stood on the VIP gallery, the skeletal horizon swept precipitously down and away, pulsing myriad colors against the black and starlit silver of space. Far below, Enceladus crested the rainbow framework, rising like a curiously misshapen light-blue moon. Beyond the planetoid, the great span of Saturn's rings framed the view, a thin celestial blade, glittering with refracted light.

In the foreground, the six capital ships of the RRDF outer system fleet were moored like a school of tethered whales. The remains of the Tamerlane were moored alongside its sister vessels, massive and gutted, a hulking dark shape against the stars.

“It's beautiful.”

Beside the Admiral, a tall man with greying hair and kindly gene-mod maroon eyes nodded briefly.

“Enceladus? A beautiful moon to be sure. Shame she won't be settled by humanity.”

Fowler glanced at the Administrator of Baby Blue, arching her eyebrow.

“You haven't heard?”

“We've been on operations past Neptune orbit for the last three weeks.”

“Of course. I forget sometimes the sacrifices called for in Naval service. BBI Rabbit Holdings announced their acquisition of half the moonlet, and in particular the area in the southern hemisphere surrounding the vapor fissures leading out from the Dunderra caverns. Apparently, they're building a haven for their integrated population. A cyborg metropolis.”

Fowler gazed down at the blue moon, her eyes narrowing.

“Must have cost them.”

The administrator shrugged.

“Free Titan is short on solars, what with all the building they've been doing lately. I don't think they made a very hard sell. But enough grim talk. I take it your fleet will be here for some time?”

“Until we can put the Tamerlane back together. Then we're heading downwell.”

Fowler glanced at her status indicators, noting that most of her vacuum sailors were concentrated in the seedier of Baby Blue's commercial hubs, scattered amongst an array of businesses offering everything from drinks and biomaton sex to VR and AR immersion flicks. This was to be expected, and her MP's were on standby, ready to move at a moment's notice should any trouble flare up. Which it would. A frontier hub like Baby Blue was a volatile place in the best of circumstances, and in recent years the friction between ore miners and their inner system employers had made the chances of uneventful port-leave for a Corporate Republic's vacuum forces virtually nil.

“Well,” the administrator swept open his arms in a grandiose gesture, encompassing the view outside the gallery windows, “I trust you will make yourself at home, Admiral.”

He shook hands with her and Fukuda, then strode out, followed by an entourage of aides and guardsmen.

“I know what you're thinking. The answer is no.”

“This is the perfect opportunity, Admiral. Please, let me just-”

“I said no. Go and enjoy your leave. I'll expect you to relieve me in twenty four hours.”

“Admiral...”

“Go, Fukuda. That's an order.”

The vice admiral exhaled sharply, snapped off a salute and strode from the gallery, leaving Fowler by herself with the cosmic view. Or so it seemed, until a tall man in naval uniform warbled into sight by her side, intricate contact nodals, like flaming tattoos, creeping up his neck from the deep blue collar of his uniform. His gene-mod green hair was cropped close, a pair of mismatched gold and silver eyes fixed on her, his handsome face leering. His shoulder bore the flying eagle insignia of a full colonel and the branch and unit patches of the Virtual War Corps.

Fowler understood rationally that he hadn't really been invisible a moment before. Anyone without a nodal implant would have seen him, plain as day. But for those that did have a nodal implant, which was pretty much anyone who could afford it, his combat nodal infiltrator v-ware had been selectively redacting his presence from all visual streams.

“You know, it could be him.”

The Admiral looked at the Colonel with distaste.

“Fukuda wouldn't sell out the Republic. Never.”

“Perhaps not for money, but there are many ways to leverage a man, and pirate consortia can be persuasive. He has family back in Osaka, for instance. A daughter. Two grandchildren.”

“It's not Fukuda. Do you have anything to report?”

The Colonel's grin broadened. His mismatched eyes danced, catching the blue light from Enceladus.

“Whoever our mole is, they just sent another coded burst, about ten minutes ago.”

She turned back to the view.

“So it couldn’t have been Fukuda. He was here, you would have detected the burst signature.”

“He could have slaved a station node, no problem. Good way to try to throw you off the scent. Get you to let him run an entrapment operation and pin it on someone else.”

“What did the burst contain? I assume you decoded it.”

“Updated details on the fleet. Docking locations, ship status, R&R officer rotation schedules. Detailed station schematics. Marine deployment orders.”

The scowl on her face darkened marginally.

“More interesting still is where the burst was aimed.”

“Where?”

“No-where.”

She glanced sharply back at the Colonel.

“A vector in interplanetary space with no known shipping routes, stations, or major asteroids.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed, Admiral. I’d say we may be in for combat, sooner rather than later.”

Fowler was already toggling the Fleet Operations Center aboard the vacuum carrier *Francis Drake*.

- Sitrep.

Commander Regiwald Helder was on duty, his voice cool and sharp in her auditory nerve centers.

- All green, Admiral. Negative contacts, negative station-side disturbances. CVP on standby.

- Launch the vacuum patrol, have them extend sensor sweeps out towards the following vector.

She glanced at the colonel, who sent her the coded burst's vector coordinates. She funneled the data to Helder.

- Ma'am. CVP launching.

- Elevate fleet docking posture to combat-probable. Begin station-side evac of all critical personnel.

- Admiral?

- We have incoming.

Her nodal streams immediately shifted to alert postures, and she could feel a subtle change in her nodal connection to the fleet personnel station-side, an uneasy undercurrent of worry and a gathering bustle of activity.

“Good work, Colonel. Let's get back aboard the *Francis Drake*.”

His smile was gone, his eyes fixed into the distance as he interacted with his nodals. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

“New signal burst, alerting to our revised posture, advising immediate action.”

“God-damn!”

She was running for the door to the observation deck, which slid open to reveal a trio of grime-streaked ore miners standing over the steaming wreckage of her armored security detail, power tools hissing steam in their muscular grips, furious looks in their dark eyes as they met hers. A dozen of their comrades lay in bloody piles around the wrecked vacuum marines, and blood splattered the walls and ceiling in gory patterns, dripping down like evil rain.

- Fleet Command, this is Fleet Ops, we have multiple inbound capital class contacts. No fleet transponder response, no nav id traces. Repeat, multiple inbound hostiles bearing [nodal stream follows]. CVP engaging, heavily outgunned. Station defense units requesting priority support.

Fowler was stumbling back, away from the doors, even as the three miners advanced into the viewing gallery, their power tools humming and steaming, their maser tips red-hot, like burning coals. The v-war colonel hissed a curse, using his v-ware to slam the observation deck doors closed with emergency depressurization grade strength, cutting the last of the miners in half with a soft pop of the skull as he tried to step through.

The other two miners hardly spared their comrade a glance, their dark eyes fixed only on Admiral Fowler. She drew her sidearm and flicked off the safety, taking comfort in the soft whine of the hand-laser as it powered up. The status indicator on the side of the grip flashed from yellow to red, the light glowing through her fingers and pulsing slowly.

- Fleet Com, this is Fleet Ops, repeat, inbound hostiles. Please advise.

The two miners were advancing obliquely, moving apart so she had to shift her aim from one to the other. The colonel had no weapon, his combat nodals useless against the low-tech miners. He moved to intercept the closest of them anyway.

- Fleet Command, this is Fleet Ops, what is your status? Do you copy alert inbound?
Receiving reports of multiple orange code disturbances aboard station. Please advise!

- Standby alert: Security breach. Marine units to my location double-time.

- Fleet Com, Fleet Ops acknowledge. 322nd Marine Platoon *en route*.

The colonel flash-closed the observation deck windows, plunging them into darkness, lit in shades of red by the power tools of the miners. Military grade nano-bionics immediately shifted the admiral and the colonel's vision to infrared. He ducked a clumsy slash from the nearest miner's power tool and stepped in to deliver a hard, chopping blow to the man's neck. The miner went down gurgling, gasping for air. Fowler took the opportunity to burn a hole through the other's forehead. He toppled to the deck, his maser hissing and screeching where it fell against the nano-form surface.

- Fleet Ops, Fowler here. Copy Fleetwide combat order: Launch all fighters, all reserve status vessels, upgrade to combat stations and fire at will.

- Fleet Com, Fleet Ops, acknowledge. Launching ships. Combat stations fire at will transmitted. What's your status?

- Security breach neutralized.

She toggled her nodals into a view of the Fleet Operations tactical displays, and cursed. The inbound hostiles numbered four heavy battleships and a carrier. They emitted no nav

identifiers, but their design and up-armored configurations marked them as well-funded privateers. Their fighters were a swarm of grey icons, overwhelming what remained of the Combat Vacuum Patrol and Baby Blue's defense scooters. The balance of the RRDF outer system fleet's fighters were belatedly pouring out of the docked ships' bays and blazing towards the enemy. She crouched in the darkness for a moment, and shared an infrared glance with the v-war colonel.

“Make sure that one doesn't die. We need a mind-scan.”

The colonel was already at work, straddling the gasping miner and using a utility laser from his belt to burn a hole into the man's lower trachea. Air sucked and sizzled through the opening, and the colonel grinned.

“Friendlies at the door, Ma'am.”

“Open it.”

The doors slid open, and Fukuda came running in at the head of a troop of Vacuum Marines, his sidearm drawn, a look of concern bordering panic on his blood-splattered face. Fowler stood, re-holstering her weapon, and pointing at the miner sucking air on the floor, even as the bay windows flashed open again to the stunning blue vista.

“We're bringing him. Lieutenant, secure a route to the nearest airlock. Have the *Francis Drake* send a transport shuttle, double-time.”

“Yes, Ma'am!”

She accepted an incoming nodal stream from Baby Blue's administrator even as she strode out from the observation bay within a tight cordon of Vacuum Marines, Fukuda leading, gun drawn.

- Admiral. We have a critical situation developing.

- No kidding. You have ore miners attacking my people all over this station while a pirate fleet burns in from the dark. What the fuck is this?

- Our security forces are working to shut down the miners as we speak. We've already conducted some preliminary mind scans.

- And? I want answers, Mr. Brown.

- It's a Therias Family Holdings fleet. An outer system based pirate consortium.

- I am aware of Falaa Therias and her brother Hobar. They've killed more RRDF personnel over the years than solar flares and asteroid showers combined.

- They've been infiltrating our mining syndicates for the last year, building up for a move like this. They want to take the station and your docked ships. They're after the ship AI cores, your naval codes, and as many of your minds to scan as they can manage.

- Well, they're soon to be shit out of luck. Can you manage station-side security?

- We could use some additional manpower, if you can spare it.

- I'll leave you the MP corps. Your security chief can interface directly with General Ray Adler. He's directing the MP's from deck 569. Just make sure my people have clear routes back to their ships.

- Thank you, Admiral. What about the pirates?

- We'll handle them. Coordinate your defense batteries through my Fleet-Ops aboard the *Francis Drake*.

- Understood. Godspeed, Admiral.

She severed the connection, routed the orders to her MP general, and came to a heavily guarded airlock. Baby Blue security troopers in blue digital fatigues stood childlike alongside the massive armor of hulking Vacuum Marines from the RRDF's 322nd platoon. Outside the airlock, a transport shuttle was negotiating the lock. Fowler turned to Fukuda.

"It's a Therias Holdings fleet. They've been getting intel from our mole. They thought they could take us unawares."

"Fucking pirates."

"It's a bold move, but it's going to turn sour for them."

"Aye, Ma'am."

"I want you aboard the *Trajan*. Take the shuttle and drop me off on the *Francis Drake*."

He nodded once, curtly acknowledging the implicit possibility of one of their deaths. It wasn't going to be an easy fight, docked and outgunned. Still, Fukuda knew that if anyone could turn the surprise attack into a victory, it was Admiral Jane Fowler.

* * *

Hobar Therias sat in his gravity sheath on the bridge of the carrier *Dillinger's Ghost*, streaking in from the dark, riding plasma jets and the curve of Saturn's gravity well down

towards the half-built station and the docked RRDF Outer System Fleet. A snarl crooked at his thin lips, marring an otherwise handsome face. Beside him, his Second, Reina Garath, shuddered, eyes glazed over, fully interfaced with their advance line of vacuum fighters.

The vacuum engagement was a host of colored vectors and icons overlaid on the starfield by his node. The complex glyphs resolved themselves into discrete batches of information as his eyes zoomed and swooped over the theater of combat. At first things looked good. They had caught the docked fleet almost unawares. The RRDF vessels had started powering up and mobilizing just before the pirate fleet appeared, but not long enough to make significant difference. Given the high velocity realities of vacuum combat, the RRDF fleet was essentially stationary, and hence at a profound disadvantage in terms of ordinance delivery. The great hulls were sitting ducks for his atomic missiles and lasers, and they were taking a pounding while they tried to pick up speed.

Still, there was something wrong... a vector stream that troubled his subconscious and his integrated combat AI before he was even fully aware of it. Tiny little icons, hardly specs on the nav displays, barely registered by his longscanners. Vacuum suited troopers, slung out from their host ships at nearly suicidal velocities. Special forces. The famed RRDF Silver Berets.

Hobar cursed and signaled to Garath, watched her re-arrange the targeting priorities of their main batteries. Watched scores of the suited swarm blaze like fireflies and flame out into smoldering man-shaped wrecks. Some made it through, disappearing as their icons merged with his ships'. A moment later, he heard the *Dillinger's Ghost's* boarding alert klaxons. He snarled at his security chief and watched the battle-scarred ore miner storm off to contain the situation.

Focusing back on the vacuum engagement, he watched the magnetic shields on one of the RRDF cruisers overload. The ship warbled briefly under multiple streams of fire, then blossomed

hot light. Hobar Therias grinned. Garath shifted targeting priorities to one of the battleships, which had managed to gather some velocity, curving away from Baby Blue. Its shields soon overloaded as well. Its explosion was exponentially brighter than the cruiser's had been, splashing the engagement with radiation and superheated shrapnel.

The collateral was enough to take out the shields on a nearby RRDF gunship; its explosion created a secondary chain of flashes and overloaded a squad of vacuum fighters soaring nearby. Hobar Therias whooped and punched his fist in the air, just short of the canopy of his vacuum sheath.

His smile faded as he turned his attention back to his internal displays. His security chief was dead. Silver berets were fighting their way deck by deck towards the bridge and nothing his men were throwing in their way seemed to be able to stop them. Therias cursed, eyes flicking between internal and external nodal displays. He was winning the vacuum engagement, but not fast enough. He cursed savagely, watching another RRDF gunship flare out, and began a nodal stream command to the *Dillinger's Ghost's* combat AI, routing fleet command to a rear-echelon ship that was free of Silver Beret infestation. He had just finished when the door to the bridge flared light and was gone. Garath popped free of her gravity sheath, her hands pulling out a plasma cannon from a thigh-holster. She was ripped to a fine pink mist by NMD fire before she could get off a shot.

Therias closed his eyes and initiated a suicide nodal routine. His node had just acknowledged his confirmation when he felt it short out, blasted by a high energy EMP burst from an onrushing Silver Beret. All his vacuum combat displays flared out, and Hobar Therias found himself suddenly blind and trapped in the confines of an unresponsive gravity sheath. He howled and punched the canopy as troopers took defensive positions around it. One of them

clamped his boots over the canopy and targeted his NMD rifle down at Hobar's face. He could see the man's grim, hate-filled expression through canopy and bubble helm.

He shifted his gaze, staring down the smoking red barrel of the Silver Beret's NMD rifle and felt a cold fear like a tiny volume of vacuum transplanted deep into his body. The anger had gone, and he knew that it was over. At long last, his run of crazy, suicidal luck had ended. He closed his eyes and waited for what would come next.

END OF EXCERPT

A longer excerpt or the full manuscript are available upon request.