

**STEVE WHITE &
CHARLES E. GANNON**

EXTREMIS



Extremis

A Starfire Novel

Steve White &
Charles E. Gannon

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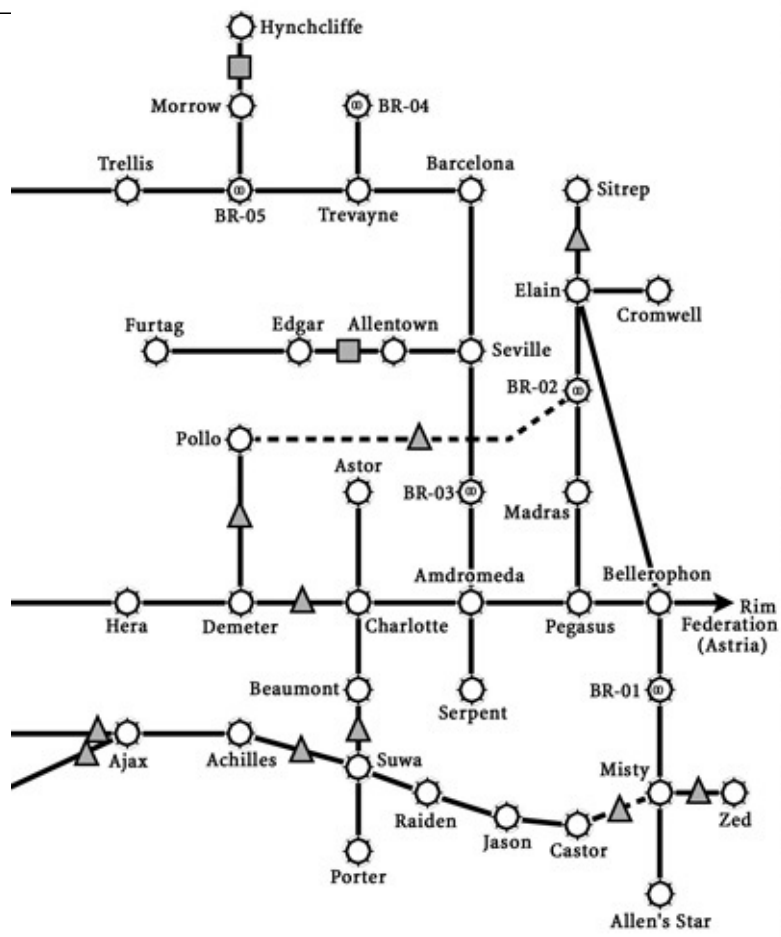
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▲ *Impossible to DT*

■ *Impossible to SMT and DT*

PROLOGUE

Sandro McGee dove sideways into the dirty alley just as the rooftop defense blister spun and fired flechette round in his direction. The corner of the alley was immediately and ferociously flayed by a swarm of zipping and spatting high-velocity micro-darts.

“Damn, those alien gizmos are fast,” commented Harry “Light Horse” Li.

McGee rolled up into a crouch, readied his assault rifle, prepared to lunge toward the corner for a peek-around. “They’re not faster than *me*.” He ducked his head around the now-ragged masonry—and flinched away from the blast of automatic gunfire that greeted him.

“Yes, they’re faster than you.” McGee could hear Harry Li’s satisfied smirk.

“No, they’re *not*.” McGee tugged off his helmet. He rose to his feet and toed it around the corner. That elicited a slightly different greeting: individually fired slugs. McGee smiled at the uneven intervals between impacts. *Ah, now that’s being fired by meatware.*

McGee swung around the corner—just weapon and eyes—and let the Serrington Arms sight do its work. The “Serrie sight” was the one relatively modern device on McGee’s obsolete battle rifle. Its combined audio-optical “threat-trackback” system instantly assessed the directionality and intensity of sound waves from enemy fire, did a quick laserscan of all objects moving in its front 120 degrees, and threw a targeting solution into the scope. Which McGee followed, elevating the barrel until the crosshairs lay on a partially seen Baldy, hunched low in the cupola of the town hall. The Baldy looked almost human as he profiled himself for a moment—but then McGee registered the absence of ears and nose: he squeezed the trigger. The venerable 8.5 mm battle rifle began hammering against his shoulder—just as the Baldy’s smaller, higher-velocity slugs started gouging at the concrete next to McGee’s left cheek. For one surreal moment it was more like a personal duel than a firefight: the baldy human’s denser, slower stream of metal punched at the Baldy’s armored rooftop cupola; the Baldy’s intermittent counterfire stabbed down at the human, fast and vicious. Neither would cede the advantage.

McGee counted through another second, knew his clip was about to burn dry—and then the incoming fire ceased. Shifting down to a clear view over his iron sights, McGee saw a hint of faltering movement. He popped his eye back up to the scope—just in time to see his adversary duck unsteadily down beneath the lip of the cupola.

“Move! Move!” McGee shouted to his rear as he started sprinting toward the front steps of the town hall. “Get tight against the building—under their field of fire!”

Li was right behind McGee, but Varazian, the guy from the Resistance cell out in Lemnos, wasn’t. Probably delayed by another snafu with his civvy com-set: the store-bought system occasionally skipped a beat while syncing with the milspec rigs. Whatever the reason, Varazian was the last on his feet and trailed Li by four meters as they charged across the square.

McGee reached the heavy concrete balustrade of the front stairs, looked back to check his team’s progress—and saw an antipersonnel rocket rush down and catch Varazian square in the chest. The forty-one-year-old reservist corporal was blown clean off his feet and backward, out of sight.

McGee suppressed a sigh as he put his hand up to his com-rig. He was surprised to feel the wrist flare of his Kevleuron gauntlet graze his ear roughly. *Oh, yeah—I left my helmet behind.* “Varazian report. Varazian—?”

“Biorelay indicates Varazian is KIA.” Captain Falco’s voice boomed into the link; there was no mistaking a milspec command set. “Cestus 3, proceed to objective.”

“Olympus, Cestus 3 is down to two combat effectives, I repeat, two combat effectives. Request—”

“You’re on your own, Cestus 3. Everyone’s up to their asses punching through Baldy weapon blisters. No help to send your way. Advise when you have taken objective Alpha to receive new orders. Olympus out.”

“Well, ain’t that special,” McGee grunted as he swapped magazines: only two left. *Damn.* “What with this shitty load-out, Harry?”

“Old guns and spare ammo is all we’ve got for local raids.” Light Horse Li shifted his AK-74 so that when he started running again, it would rise directly into an easy assault carry. “Think you’ve got bad? Look at this antique.”

“You ain’t joking. Where’d you get that? Museum?”

Harry shook his head, gathered his legs under him to lead the rush up the stairs. “Nope. From a reenactment group. Here we go.”

And Light Horse was off, bounding up the stairs two at a time. McGee’s treelike legs launched his 1.9-meter frame after the smaller man, whose shorter limbs cycled faster and had the advantage over short distances. While Li bounded toward the entry, McGee followed him upward at a fast, crabbed crouch, keeping his Alliant-Rimstar battle rifle sweeping across the upper-story windows. He’d just finished sweeping right when he caught a hint of movement to the far left. *Typical: wait for the sucker to be facing the other way. But I’m no sucker.*

McGee spun down into a tight kneel: two Baldy rifle rounds spat over his head. He sent a matching pair of five-round bursts back at the offending window; the second blast of 8.5 mm discarding sabot rounds chewed through the facade, and a Baldy rifle tumbled down into the street.

“I’m clear!” yelled Harry. “Covering you!”

McGee lurched up and took the remaining steps three at a time. Light Horse had come out a bit from the building’s double-doored entry, sweeping the upper-story windows at an impossibly narrow angle but ready to hit them with suppressive fire even so. McGee bounded abreast of Li—who peeled off and joined him in a two-step rush-and-spin that ended with their backs smacking firmly against the wall.

“Well, that was fun,” Li observed.

“And I’m sure it gets better.”

“Probably so. You take point.”

“Me?”

“Of course, Sandro. Age before beauty.”

“You little shit—”

“The truth hurts doesn’t it, Tank?”

And “Tank” McGee had to admit that Light Horse’s semi-Sino features were smoother and finer than his own, and that the little corporal was three years his junior. But these trivial idiocies had only meant something back in the Real World—which they, and the rest of Bellerophon’s human populace, had left behind months ago.

“Laser sensors on,” snapped McGee.

“Baldies don’t use booby traps,” began Light Horse.

“They’re sure to start. Maybe today. So—laser sensors on, pip-squeak.”

“Yes, Your Immensity. Laser sensor is on.”

“Right. Follow me.”

And together they rolled around to shoulder open the double doors, going in low and working either side. The wide, marble-floored hall was empty, apart from a few scattered papers and a forgotten umbrella lying in the center of the floor. Here all activity had stopped the day the Baldies

had invaded.

“Looks clear,” commented Li.

“Looks can be deceiving—and on battlefields, they usually are.” McGee rose to a half crouch, started forward. “We go slow, give the laser sensors time to find any trip wires that the Baldies might have—” That was when his sensor went off.

“I guess I owe you a beer,” grumbled Light Horse, who used his sensor to accelerate the triangulation on the laser “trigger beam” that McGee’s own sensor had detected. Together they worked toward the signal—and discovered a laser trip wire across the broad, main staircase that was the central feature of the entry hall.

“Hah—Mr. Baldy’s locked his cellar door,” Li observed, misting the lasers and finding the pattern too tight to wriggle through or under.

“But he didn’t use too tricky a lock.” McGee pointed up into the stairwell: a pair of directional mines—human—angled downward.

Li came over to look. “So they’re using our old munitions against us now.”

“That was only a matter of time.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Any biosigns on this level?”

“My crap-grade civvy scanner reads a definite no. Which means probably not. Which really means maybe.” Li put away the bargain-store biosensor.

“Still, that agrees with intel and the prior thermal-imaging sweep. I say we pop the lock and head upstairs fast. Weapons in assault carry, shoot whatever moves.”

“Sounds like a plan. But Tank . . .”

“Yeah?”

“What if they’ve put in more mines?”

“We keep the laser sensors running, and our own five senses alert. And every second we talk about gives them one more second to organize a reception. We move.”

They fell back, away from the staircase, McGee picking up the umbrella as he took cover behind a bank of chairs. “Ready?”

“Yah.”

McGee aimed, flung the umbrella at the base of the stairs, dove for the deck.

Even as he dropped prone, the downward blast from the directional mines gnashed shrapnel teeth against the first five risers and sent marble and metal bits sleeting out into the lobby.

Before the roar had died out, the two Marine Reservists were on their feet, weapons ready. They sprinted through the smoke and the dust, then pounded up the stairs—which split into two narrow flights on either side of an atrium shaft that rose through the remaining two stories of the building. McGee went right; Light Horse left.

Li came to the top of his staircase a moment before McGee, who saw him check his laser sensor and then swing around the corner into the second floor’s hallway.

As Li went forward, McGee heard a thin, metallic, almost musical snapping sound—like an impossibly fine piano string breaking. *An old-style, hair-thin trip wire. Damn.*

Because the events that followed were expected—were part of every soldier’s waking nightmare—they seemed to unfold with surreal slowness. Li looked down, realized what he’d done, looked back at McGee—maybe for help, maybe to say good-bye. From the hall behind Li, McGee saw a Bouncing Betty—a spring-ejected mine—pop up on a slanting trajectory that would put it waist high when it went off. And from the corner of his right eye, McGee saw its twin clearing the hallway corner he had

yet to reach. McGee knew that, being a few meters farther away, he might be lucky enough only to be blinded, his face torn into a hideous shredded oval.

The Bouncing Betty next to Li went off. The blast did not just bisect him: Light Horse Harry Li was completely and utterly blown apart—

blown apart

blown apart

blown apart

And again and again and again and—

“Shit and damn this sim,” roared Falco, his voice sharp and furious in McGee’s headset. The Bouncing Betty Marine opened his eyes, which he hadn’t realized he had shut. The Bouncing Betty on his side of the staircase was suspended in midair, three meters ahead, a bit fuzzy at the edges, as was often the case with VR sim images frozen by a program error.

“What now?” asked McGee.

“Sit tight, McGee,” snapped Falco. “We’re working on it.”

Harry Li had rolled over on his back, hands behind his head. “Hell, I don’t have to hold position—I’m dead.”

“Lucky you.”

“You have no idea. The last time they actually tried to resume a crashed sim, we all had to play ‘freeze in place’ for twenty minutes.”

“Long time to wait to continue a drill.”

“Huh. We didn’t get to continue. They crashed the program and had to reboot. Game over.”

Falco was back on the com-rig. “All right, stand down. The damned computers are well and truly fried for the day. Police your gear and expendables.”

“What expendables?” McGee whispered to Li.

“Casings from your blanks; we’re actually shooting brass, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

Falco’s voice came back. “You can take off your VR rigs now. We’re shutting off the feed.”

And suddenly the world was gone: just gray static and muffled silence. *Purgatory for computer* McGee mused, recalling his great-gramama McGee’s wondrously Byzantine conviction in the particulars of the afterlife and its convoluted theology. She had been part of an obscure Christian sect—Roman Catholicism, it was called—that had all but died out with her generation.

McGee removed the VR rig—eyepieces, earplugs, mandibular vibration transducers—and stared around: the interior of the cavernous warehouse yawned back at him in its shabby emptiness. Scattered along its length were other framework sets of prefab walls and staircases, all marked with reflective and transponder-beaded tape. These were the digital guiderails upon which the computer hung and superimposed the detailed images of a virtual world. An odd collection of workers—mostly hunter’s camos—were already folding up the constructs with the brisk efficiency of professional stagehands breaking down a set in a live theater.

Li’s voice startled him. “Hey, Sandro, you just gonna stare all day? Let’s get going.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” McGee walked over to join Li, Varazian, and Battisti in policing up their brass—well, not Battisti, since he’d been given the fireteam’s one caseless weapon. McGee snagged his helmet, helped scoop up and sort the various, mismatched cartridge casings.

“Sheesh—5.54 mm Russian. Isn’t that a . . . a twenty-first century round?”

“Twentieth, Alessandro,” corrected Battisti. “When you are done here, not only will you become part of an action team, but a curator of ancient weapons, no?” Battisti’s strong Hispa accent marked him.

coming from the Kreta Archipelago, where many old Latin-based Terran languages were still spoken at home.

“Damn, acquiring an expertise in obsolete slug-throwers wasn’t part of *my* plan,” McGee admitted.

“Nor mine.” Varazian shrugged as he dug the last of his own 8.5 mm brass out from under the wide footed base of a modular wall-flat. “I figured we’d spend more time training and less time cleaning the garage.”

“The garage needs cleaning every time we use it, Corporal Varazian.” The voice that came from behind them was Falco’s. They all stood, turned, and faced the captain. Although the service formalities had been extremely lax since McGee arrived at the secret training camp yesterday, he snapped a salute now: after a combat-training exercise, it seemed to him that they *must* be on duty.

Falco noted the salute with a smile. “Leave it to the new guy to figure out we mean business up here.”

Abashed, Li, and then the other two, matched McGee’s salute.

“That’s better. And Li, since you are already a member of the teams, you should have known better.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“That’s the last ‘sorry’ I want to hear from you, Corporal Li. You’re active now, and that means you set the pace and the example.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then carry on. Debrief in five. Don’t hold us up.”

Battisti let Falco get out of earshot before asking, “You keep secrets from your friends, Harry? Where did you get word you were activated to the teams?”

“Uh . . . just now, when Falco said it. Damned strange notification protocol.”

McGee nodded. “Everything here seems a little strange, if you ask me.”

“Yes, it is,” agreed Li. “And nobody asked you.”

McGee smiled. “True enough. But can’t we at least practice with milspec gear? Even if it’s the old stuff?”

Li frowned. “There’s good reason we don’t, Sandro. First, we don’t have as much milspec as you might expect. Second, and more importantly, we have to save it.”

“Save it? For what?”

“For an operation that really counts. If we start using—and losing—the good gear in day-to-day harrying operations, before you know it the Baldies will have an accurate measure of what we can do and what we do it with. That’s two pieces of intel we want to hold back until the last second—so that we get them to underestimate us right when we’re ready to spring our nastiest surprise.”

“Okay—I get that, but then what’s with all the cloak-and-dagger nonsense?”

“Cloak and dagger?”

“You know, the coded invitations for these readiness assessments. The double cut-outs for sending our replies. The fact that none of us Reservists really know who’s on the faceless command staff that issues the orders and invitations. And what’s with bringing us to Upper Thessaloborea to run through these VR sims? It’s cold as hell up here.”

“And very remote.”

“Yeah—so remote that the extra traffic we’re putting on these backroads must be attracting the same Baldy attention HQ was trying to avoid.”

“Maybe, but the way I hear it, the Baldies don’t keep track of much that goes on beyond high population centers—particularly their own.”

Varazian nodded. “And even then, they just try to avoid us.”

“Not all the time.” McGee knew his grim tone would shatter the group’s jocular mood like a stone thrown through stained glass, but he just didn’t care. Unlike the other Reservists—who did not live next to the Baldies—Alessandro McGee knew that the alien invaders were not always so distant and aloof. It was in McGee’s own hometown of Melantho that the aliens had established their own city, had taken schoolchildren hostage, had executed noncompliant humans on the spot, and had ultimately barged unannounced into McGee’s own living room. They had snatched his beloved (and very pregnant) Jennifer right out of his arms and, almost as an afterthought, bashed around a thoroughly uncooperative McGee—enough to put him in the hospital for two weeks.

The group had grown quiet: they all knew the story. Quite possibly, it was known to every member of the Resistance by now. Battisti rubbed his hands on his coveralled knees. “We are done policing this practice area. Let us go to the debriefing.”

“Yes, let’s,” said Light Horse, who reached up to put a gentle hand on McGee’s very large shoulder. “Ready to go, Tank?”

“Ready to kill some Baldies,” McGee amended.

“Ultimately, I think that’s the key requisite,” Li affirmed with a nod. “Let’s go.”

* * *

Van Felsen stood almost inhumanly straight—possibly because she was almost comically short. “Brothers and sisters in arms, congratulations on your activation, and welcome to the special action teams.”

Those who had already earned these honors—seated around the periphery of the small prefabricated cafeteria/auditorium—applauded long and seriously. No wild enthusiasm, no catcalls: this was a commission to actively and aggressively kill alien invaders, not a fraternity initiation, and the somber tone was a reminder of the mortal resolve that bound them together.

Besides, McGee reflected with a quick glance at the doors leading to the parking lot, a full third of the invitees had been sent their way with thanks, confirmation of their status as alternates, and new orders for their local Resistance cells. But they left without the honor of having been officially reactivated for military service—and without the proud encumbrance of the many duties, risks, and responsibilities attached thereto.

Van Felsen let the applause die before continuing. “So, now down to business, ladies and gentlemen. Most of you are Marines, since that’s what our world specializes in producing at Camp Gehenna—our little vacation spot in the Charybdis Islands.” A few chuckles, and a few reminiscing groans, were elicited by her reference to the sun-scorched, basalt-fanged, insect-plagued expanse that was the Bellerophon Arm’s primary Marine training camp. “However, until such time as Allied fleet elements make a permanent return to this system, all activated personnel are under a joint services command invoked under the authority of Article Seventeen, paragraph three of the Rim Federation’s Code of Military Procedures. No matter your original branch of service, rank structures will follow Marine norms. Accordingly, rank equivalencies will be issued to anyone coming to us from other services before you leave this facility. In all cases, so as to maintain the continuity of our prewar command structure, all reactivated personnel will assume a temporary rank equal to that which they held when they mustered out of active service.”

A few surprised noises—including a few grumbles—arose.

Van Felsen snapped into a stiffer, and decidedly fiercer, posture. “Stow that. I know that some of you—particularly those who’ve been in the Reserves for a long time—are going to lose a lot of rank. Here’s my message to you: you’re here to serve, not be served. And I can’t have a person who climbed up to major in the Reserves, but who hasn’t been qualified on new Marine gear in ten years.”

commanding folks who were active when the Baldies showed up. It's not practical, and it will get people killed. As it is, we're going to have a lot of Reserve officers who, as staff sergeants, will be issuing orders to twenty-four-year-old corporals. Problem is, those corporals have already forgotten more about the latest milspec gear than any preinvasion weekend warrior ever got the chance to learn." The room was decidedly reserved—particularly when she used the term "weekend warrior."

"And if I've said anything that offends you," she went on, steering straight into the eye of the potential storm of resentment, "then you can do this unit a favor by letting us know, and we will accommodate your wishes—and escort your sorry, ego-bruised asses right off these premises. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," came the mollified mumble.

"Either you are mute or I am deaf. I'll ask it one more time. Is that *clear*?"

"Sir, yes, *SIR*."

Van Felsen—who could barely see over the top of the lectern—smiled. "That's better. You almost sound like a bunch of leathernecks who are ready to march on hell itself—and whom I might consider to lead down that fiery hole. Is that who you are?"

"Sir, yes, *sir!*"

She's good, McGee admitted, his throat raw with the primal affirmations he'd bellowed along with all the rest.

"Your orders and team rosters will be in packets passed out after this meeting. They are 'read and burn.' No exceptions, no excuses. Read and burn. What did I say, you knobheads?"

The answer was a chorus. "Read and burn."

"Outstanding. I must say that today you have proved yourself to be pretty damned fine Marines—*a* lot of you, even the 'honorary Marines' from lesser . . . er, 'other' . . . services." Van Felsen smiled: it was half joke and half serious. "And since you have all been such good boys and girls, we figured we'd give you a treat and let you watch a holo before bedtime—which in your cases means a day-long drive to your scattered homes."

"A holo? What the . . . ?" murmured Li, who looked over at McGee, then Battisti, then seemed ready to look for Varazian as well—but instead dropped his eyes. Varazian had not made the cut and was already driving home.

The murmurs of curiosity and anticipation grew louder when a decidedly archaic holoprojector—the size of a two-ton shipping container—was wheeled ponderously into the room. Van Felsen stepped away from the lectern and stood before them. "Ladies and gentlemen, this war could well be a fight to the finish. Either our efforts to communicate with the invaders are completely flawed, or they are ignoring everything we say. However, we know that they are interested in at least two things: the conquest of our worlds, and the subjugation of our populations. And once they have finished with those former objectives, we cannot know how they might deal with so many populous, captive worlds. They might allow us to live on as their slaves"—

A grim atavistic rumble arose.

—"or they might simply want us out of the way. We can't tell which, but the Baldies do seem both amoral and eminently practical. So unless they have some purpose for us in their vision of a postwar scenario, it is possible that their picture of the endgame is a picture in which humanity no longer appears."

The silence was absolute, tense. McGee looked to either side, saw lips stretched back from teeth, knotted hands, rigid shoulders. He looked down, saw his own immense fists clenched into white weapons of alien annihilation. *Okay, so I guess I look like the rest of my mates right about now*

Nothing wrong with that.

“The holo you are about to see is self-explanatory. For sake of clarity, I will say what I should not need to. Under no circumstances are you to divulge the specific or even general content of the communiqué or its existence. Please give it your full attention.”

As if she had to ask for it, thought McGee, who, with dozens of others, craned his neck to see what he knew must be coming: a face and a voice from human space, from beyond the warp points that led out of Bellerophon.

But neither he nor anyone else in the room was prepared for what they saw: the stationary head-and-shoulders figure of a young man—unthinkably young for all the chest-borne fruit salad that bespoken several decades of campaigns, decorations, and ascension through the general ranks. But stranger still was his face—a face so young, and yet so oddly familiar. Viewing it left McGee with the same haunting disorientation he had felt when seeing teenage and college pictures of a friend he had once known as an adult. This was no different: his brain struggled to connect the young, unfamiliar features to the more mature face of a person he knew now. . . .

And McGee suddenly knew who, impossibly, he was looking at—in the same moment that Li and Igor Danilenko hesitantly murmured the corresponding name: “Trevayne?”

Other voices took it up hesitantly. “Trevayne? Ian Trevayne?”

“But he’s . . . he’s dead. Killed at Zapata, eighty years ago.”

“Naw—not dead. They stuck him in suspended animation.”

“Like I said, he’s *dead*. Those meat-lockers are death traps. Everyone knows it.”

“Yeah, well, there he is.”

“Nah, can’t be. That guy is too young, way too young. Wasn’t he something like, eh, one hundred forty when he—?”

Van Felsen cleared her throat. “Admiral Ian Trevayne, who fought for and saved the Rim Federation during the—secession—of the Terran Republic, was in fact severely wounded during the war’s concluding engagement, the legendary Battle of Zapata. His body was cryogenically preserved again with the hope that one day medical science might advance to the point where it could repair his injuries. While we do not have the details on how that has been accomplished, or why he appears so young, we have confirmed that this is indeed Ian Trevayne, not a modified image or holosim representation of him.”

“Commander”—it was Major (now First Lieutenant) Peters, who had been the senior Reservist at activation age—“are you at liberty to reveal *how* you got this message?”

“A long story, Tibor, but you asked for it. When the aliens approached Bellerophon on the generation ships, two professors at Philomena University—Doctors Gerard and Duane—detected the exhaust flares of their reaction drives.” Van Felsen’s voice dropped half a register into a more conspiratorial tone. “However, I have it on good authority that the catch was actually made by our very own Toshi Springer, who was one of the first Reservists we reactivated.”

“*Marines lead the way*,” solemnized a voice in the front row, invoking the service motto.

“Yes, indeed.” Van Felsen smiled. “Although the Baldies then blasted every single one of our orbital arrays, it seems that there was an old ground-based optical telescope that the faculty had built into the roof dome, and that the Astronomy Department also had an old radio-telescope array in storage. So we ordered Lieutenant Springer to return to her duties at the university, teaching a class in the methodological history of astronomy. Using that cover, she surreptitiously organized a small but skilled group to get both instruments operational and to observe our system’s warp points on a 24-hour rotation. I’m pleased to report that they’ve been plenty busy.”

“So the amateur astronomers *did* see something,” breathed Danilenko.

“Yes, Igor. Since the Baldies occupied Bellerophon, there have been at least two major fleet clashes at the warp point leading into the Astria system. Lieutenant Springer and her team detected multiple antimatter-warhead detonations that blotted out all other radiant energy coming to Bellerophon along those vectors. Both events have been fairly brief—which leads us to conclude that they were either probing or aborted attacks. Had a pitched battle taken place, the energy intensities would have been higher, more saturated, and far longer in duration.

“During both engagements, there were also sustained bursts of coded broadband radio transmissions. The Baldies did their best to jam it, but every single ham operator here on Bellerophon heard and recognized it as a signal of some kind—but whose, and what it meant, were a mystery to them.

“But once we had been alerted by the astrophysical fireworks, and had a full record of the radio emissions, our coding protocols told us how to do the rest. I can’t detail how we sifted the necessary data out of the transmissions. I can tell you it was broken into chunks that had to be pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle. Different languages were used, as were variations in transfer rate, prearranged trapdoor codes, and, in some cases, segments of the signals were transmitted in reverse. When we were done extracting, decoding, sorting, and recombining all the pieces, this is what we came up with.” Van Felsen nodded at the holo operators.

Ian Trevayne’s stationary face became mobile, the pensive expression transforming into a grateful smile.

“To all our brothers in arms in the Bellerophon system: our daily thoughts are upon your safety, your health, and your resistance against an invader that came—quite literally—out of the depths of space. And although there is no precedent for a sublight-driven interstellar invasion, I must begin by apologizing to each and every one of you. The collected militaries, commanders, and nations of civilized space failed you. It does not matter that we had no reason to envision interstellar travel that did not rely upon warp points, nor that we lacked the means to detect the invaders’ approach. It is a commander’s job to think the unthinkable, to foresee the unforeseeable, to imagine the unimaginable. For this, for our failure in foresight and imagination, we offer you our most sincere apologies and confess our bitter shame.

“Because of the passive sensors we left buried in asteroids before we withdrew, and the automated tightbeam updates they send to any of our ships that enter the Bellerophon system, we know something of your sacrifice and losses.

“We know, for instance, of the widespread dislocation and privation of many urban residents, particularly around the city of Melantho. We learned—with horror—of the pitiless killing of parents who were only trying to control their children’s terrified reaction to the invaders, as well as the execution of several who simply attempted to prevent the summary immolation of their children’s corpse. But most of all, we were filled with a terrible resolve when we discovered that, in reprisal for a similar incident, the invaders mercilessly and mutely incinerated the entirety of the town in which the act of defiance occurred.

“In consolation of all you have suffered, I can only say: look to the sky, for we are coming. And when the combined forces of the Rim Federation, the Terran Republic, and the Pan-Sentient Union return, be ready to rise up with us and drive the invaders from your land, your seas, your skies.”

McGee almost missed Trevayne’s next sentence over the glad noises elicited by the news that the Rim’s nominal adversary—the one-time “rebels” of the Terran Republic—had joined their cause. The further news that this unprecedented alliance would be buttressed by the enormous (if sadly distant) industrial power of the Pan-Sentient Union was better still.

However, Trevayne's next words engendered frowns of confusion on at least half the faces in the audience. "On a related note, we presume that those of you who were involved in the highly secret creation of modular hull sections for a classified warcraft have now been compelled to reveal their participation under intensive interrogation or other forms of duress. For any of you who might still be resisting the invaders' attempts to extract details on your activities in that program, or for those of you who may have elected to go into hiding to avoid just such interrogation, I implore you: please do not endanger yourselves by trying to keep this information a secret any longer. We have determined that the enemy has independently deduced that these hull modules were actually designated for the construction of a string of megafortresses of unprecedented size and firepower. Based upon the marked operational caution of the invaders, we must presume that they have learned about the existence of these impregnable battle stations and have adjusted their strategy accordingly."

"What the hell?" muttered Maotulu, a third-generation Marine legacy. "I did space construction systems, six systems, and I never—"

But Danilenko let out a surprised bark of laughter and evidently slipped back into his family's traditional language. "Maotulu, don't you get it? Is all disinformation—and *bozhemoi*, is *horosho!*"

"You mean . . . ?" whispered Battisti uncertainly.

"All theater for the Baldies," McGee hissed sideways. "Just to make 'em wonder if we've got the megafortresses or not. The Baldies aren't interrogating anyone as far as I've heard, but if they believe Trevayne doesn't know that . . ."

"Then they will believe that his warning is genuine." Battisti finished the thought.

"Or they might still suspect that it's a ruse. But then again, if they guess wrong . . ."

Li nodded. "Head games."

McGee strained to hear again, having missed a few general exhortations. ". . . which means that our forces are growing daily. So remember. Although you are hundreds of parsecs—and a year's worth of warp transits—away from the planet that gave birth to humanity, Earth has not forgotten you. Earth abides, but she does not abide passively."

"Here we go." Peters folded his arms with a smile. "The stirring wrap-up."

"Eh?" inquired Maotulu.

"Just like De Gaulle to the French. MacArthur to the Filipinos."

"Who the hell is—?"

"Not to worry, Matto. Like me, those stories are ancient history—literally," said Peters.

Holographic Trevayne took no notice of Peters's abortive history lesson. ". . . meaning that, at this key moment, all the forces of humanity and her allies are united as never before. So look to the skies. All the races of the Pan-Sentient Union—and most particularly, our war brothers the Orions—have demonstrated their solidarity not only by producing needed ships and supplies, but by sending units to the front. We can say nothing more without also furnishing our enemies with strategic intelligence. But you may rest assured of this—just one warp point away, humanity and its many allies wait to bring you to avenge your dead and be rejoined with you.

"And when we arrive, it will be at the head of the greatest armada of ships that has ever been witnessed by any race, in any war, in the long history of the known precincts of this galaxy. Yet that strength in numbers pales beside our strength of purpose, for these many fleets of many races are united in one cause—to liberate you. Brave men and women of Bellerophon, you have our solemn pledge: we are coming. So, each day, every day, remember that pledge . . . and look to the sky."

Trevayne concluded on a smile that was a promise of rescue to humans . . . and death to the Baldies. There was a moment of utter silence—

—and then bedlam. Men and women, having lived for months without any message from beyond the immense prison camp of the Bellerophon system, had heard words of deliverance from one of the greatest heroes of their era—or, more properly, from the era just before their own. Ian Trevayne himself had risen up at their hour of need, like the ancient British myth of the Pendragon, who would ever and again return to save the Green and Pleasant Land in its darkest hour.

McGee watched the happy tumult seethe around him, wanted to join in—but a face rose up and stilled any joy he might have felt: Jennifer. His dear, sweet Jennifer. Who he had pushed away for months before the bastard Baldies had taken her. Pushed her away to save her. Save her from the knowledge that he was conducting unauthorized bombing attacks against the Baldies in Melantho. Save her from the fear that he'd be killed on those missions. Save her from the faintest connection with his activities so that, even if they came for him, they would pass over her. But in some manner, reversal of anything vaguely like a sensible unfolding of events, the Baldies had come and taken her for no apparent reason—and left him, bleeding and unconscious, on the doorstep of Melantho General Hospital. Unable to move. Unable to find her. Unable to rescue her. Or to hold her. Jennifer. Jennifer. Jennifer—

Who was suddenly Van Felsen. Who was looking up at him, literally waving in his face. “Hell McGee? Command to McGee—are you reading me?”

“Uh, yes, ma'am . . . I mean, sir. I heard you loud and clear, sir.”

“Sure you did, McGee.” Van Felsen quirked the left corner of her mouth at his flustered return to the here and now. “Walk with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

With Falco in tow, and two others in uniform blacks—signifying they had been on active duty when the invaders had arrived—Van Felsen led him out of the cafeteria and back into the six-acre warehouse. The five of them walked for a while. No one spoke. Grit and sand rasped underfoot.

“Recovered from the aliens' little visit to your house, McGee?”

“Yes, sir. And in fighting shape, sir.”

Van Felsen smiled; so did the others—except the thin, reedy one who looked more like a bookkeeper than a Marine.

“Glad to hear it,” Van Felsen said with a nod. “I'm sorry about having to send you back to the noncom ranks, McGee, I really am.”

“Not any concern to me, sir. I'm ready to—”

“McGee, my regret isn't about any damage done to your delicate ego. It's about sheer practicality. You've got double the logged training time of any Reservist. You've even managed to squeak in a few exercises with the active-duty forces. I can hardly spare you out of the officer cadre—but, damn it, I can't make an exception. Not until you do something that would warrant a promotion. Then I can reinstate your commission.”

“Sir, I am fully ready to—”

“Steady, McGee. This is not an encouragement to go off half-cocked on some kind of personal vendetta or renegade bombing spree.”

McGee gulped and tried not to look like the kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar: a half-cocked renegade bombing spree was exactly how he had been bringing his private and wholly unauthorized war to the Baldies.

But if Van Felsen knew anything about it, she didn't pin him down or give any other intimation that it was her intent to criticize him. On the other hand, perhaps she *did* know—and this was her way of warning him off further attacks. But why?

“McGee, we’re finally getting to the stage where we can think about larger operations, something bigger than the intermittent sniping we use to keep the Baldies off guard. So what I need from every Marine now are disciplined, by-the-book operations, and no lamebrained screwups. You read me?”

“Louder and clearer still, Commander.”

Van Felsen looked at him; McGee had the distinct impression that she was trying very hard not to smile. She almost looked like she wanted to pat him on the head. “Glad to hear it,” was all she said and then resumed walking, hands folded behind her rather generous posterior.

“You know, McGee, we’d have invited you up here a long time ago if it wasn’t for . . . for . . .” Van Felsen trailed off.

“For my personal situation. I know, sir.”

Van Felsen sighed, evidently relieved that McGee had made it possible for her to avoid naming her missing, pregnant girlfriend. “Now, because of what’s happened to your—family—we have need of your special assistance.”

“Anything, sir. Just name it. I’m your man.”

Van Felsen stopped and turned to look up—way up—at him. “I know that, Alessandro. More than you can guess. So here’s what I need. I need to come for a visit.”

“A—a visit, sir?”

“Yes, son, a visit. Me and the rest of the joint forces command. Well, all but two of us. We can’t put all the cadre’s eggs in one basket, no matter how quiescent the Baldies have been to date. But the rest of us need to get on-site in Melantho, have some specialists look at your house, study where your—where Jennifer worked, socialized, shopped.”

“To figure out why they disappeared her, you mean?”

“Well, yes—but *disappearing* often has the context of a permanent disappearance. As in an undisclosed execution.”

McGee wouldn’t let his head sag. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, that’s not how we’re seeing Jennifer’s disappearance. Since you were laid up in the hospital and then came straight up here, there’s some news you’re probably not aware of. On the day that Jennifer was taken, twenty-two other persons were disappeared in Melantho. Same approach, same methods.”

“What?”

“And there’s only one connection we’ve been able to establish among them.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re all artists.”

McGee’s thoughts chased around purposelessly, like a dog in vigorous pursuit of its own tail. “They’re all *artists*?” he echoed.

Van Felsen nodded. “Yes. All twenty-three of the abductees were artists.”

“But why—”

Van Felsen stopped and looked at him again, firmly but with a touch of gentleness. “Despite the official line I barked out during the general briefing, our theory is that the Baldies are trying to communicate with us. Art is nonverbal communication—and the whole verbal approach has been a nonstarter for them. And us.”

McGee found the theory vaguely intriguing but was unsure where Van Felsen was heading. “I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t—”

“Did you *hear* me, Lieut—apologies: I mean, Sergeant? Our theory is that they want to try to *communicate* with us.”

McGee heard the broader implication but had spent so long suppressing the uncertainty, the fear, the regret, the self-recriminations, that he didn't dare embrace it all at once. "Communication. They told Jennifer to communicate. So, she might be alive."

"It's only a theory so far. But there *is* something else."

McGee's heart felt like it wanted to soar and plummet, to race and die, all in the same instant. He could only nod and parrot, "Something else?"

"Yes. There has been only one subsequent abduction incident. It happened just recently. The Baldies snatched up two nurses with the OB/GYN unit in Melantho General when they left their overnight shift two days ago. Neither one had any prior contact with the Baldies or the Resistance, and no explanation was given by the abductors."

McGee's heart finally decided on a direction: it leapt up. "You mean . . . ?"

Van Felsen closed her eyes and made a palm-down calming motion. "We have nothing more than that, McGee. But Jennifer was the only one of the twenty-three abducted artists who was pregnant. Then Van Felsen opened her eyes and smiled. "And something tells me the Baldies don't need our help birthing their *own* babies."

Van Felsen had handled a lot of unexpected situations in her years as a pint-sized Marine officer, but she had no experience with, was untrained for, and quite frankly baffled at being snatched up by an immense Marine sergeant into a joyous, smothering bear hug.

Undeceived

We are never deceived: we deceive ourselves.

—Goethe

RFNS Gallipoli, Main Body, Further Rim Fleet, Raiden System

“Here they come,” breathed Vice Admiral Erica Krishmahnta of the Rim Federation. She leaned forward to get a better look as the first enemy ship made its appearance.

However, Krishmahnta was not looking out a viewport of her flagship, the *RFNS Gallipoli*, but into a hot tub-sized holotank display snuggled into a dip at the foot of the captain’s chair. There, tiny green arrow points were clustered about a purple circle that floated upright like the hoop of a lion tamer: the green icons depicted her fleet’s current deployment around the purple-coded warp point, a hole in space-time that—if entered properly—led to and from the Jason system. As she watched, she felt Captain Yoshi Watanabe leaning over her shoulder for a better look of his own.

The first enemy craft—signified by a bright red mote—blinked into existence, seemingly spat out by the purple ring like a drop of blood. An arterial gush of further enemy contacts was sure to follow.

Krishmahnta leaned sharply forward. “Sensor Ops, what kind of—?”

But before Erica could voice the question, the red icon was gone—and with it went two of the eight nearly invisible cyan latticeworks that indicated the minefields Krishmahnta had laid down to defend the warp point.

“What the hell?” Watanabe’s surprise diminished into an angry hiss.

“It wasn’t an anti-mine missile.” Helmsman Ensign Witeski’s voice cracked, but he sounded sure of himself nonetheless. “It’s too big. You could fit ten, maybe twenty of our own into it. So it’s not a standard AMBAMM.”

“Maybe not,” said Captain Velasquez from the Engineering console, where he was hurrying his computer through its analysis of the sensor data, “but the first EM-spectrum results say that some pretty big antimatter warheads went off—bigger than the ones on our HBM ship-killer missiles.”

Krishmahnta drummed her fingers. “So what was it?”

“We, uh . . . we don’t know, sir. It was gone too quickly for us to get any good data on it.”

“Not even images?”

Velasquez shrugged. “Sir, this warp point is pretty big, and from what we can tell, that ship was pretty small. We’d need at least a hundred dedicated imagers running in fast-capture mode if we wanted to get a picture—”

“Then get a hundred imagers aimed at the warp point, running in fast-capture mode, and do it *now*, Captain, if—no, *when*—another of those ships appears, I want to learn as much as we can about it.”

“Yes, sir!”

Krishmahnta waited for more enemy arrowheads to emerge. None did. But then, after a few moments, a swarm of much smaller red motes danced through the purple hole. “Let me guess—recognition drones.”

“Dead-on, sir,” confirmed Commander La Mar at the Tactical station. “Dozens of ’em. We’re burning them down.”

And Krishmahnta’s first line of ships did just that—but two of the bright scarlet gnats seemed to think the better of suicide. They spun about and dove back into the purple circle, which swallowed them.

She leaned back. “Well, they got a look at us, and at the effect of their AMBAMM equivalent. Fin-

We were expecting them to probe us before attacking anyhow. La Mar, reconfigure the fleet into intercept formation Myrmidon. Make it a phased redeployment. I don't want to be caught in the a between dance steps if they decide to rush through. Now," she said, changing tone as she looked at Commander Samantha Mackintosh, her chief of operations and resident expert on damned nearly everything, "how in Vishnu's name does that minesweeper of theirs work, Sam?"

"Uh, sir, as Paulo—er, as Captain Velasquez pointed out, we just don't have any technical specs on ___"

"Sam, I know you've got blank data screens right now. I'm talking theoretically. How could they manage an *immediate* discharge—of *anything*—right after warp transit? Everything we've got—and everything we've seen of theirs—spends at least half a second realigning itself after going through a warp point. But that damn thing's discharge was well-nigh instantaneous."

"To be precise, 0.002 seconds after arrival," supplied Velasquez.

Samantha did not look up from her screens. "Sir—I'm sorry. I don't have the faintest idea how they're doing that. It shouldn't be possible."

"No," agreed Watanabe, "it shouldn't be. But we just saw it."

"And stood by while it started blasting a path through our mines." Krishmahnta frowned, set a sharp incisor down on her lower lip, then winced away from the swollen blister that had already arisen there in reaction to her habitual biting. "Next time, we'll have to lay the mines back farther from the warp point."

"Which is just what they want, I imagine."

"Then we'll have to find a way to make them wish they'd never wanted it." Krishmahnta rubbed her lip. "Sam, how long—*exactly* how long—does warp-point transit disorient a ship?"

"Well, sir, it depends."

"On what?"

"On a whole lot of variables. Such as the gravitic signature particular to each warp point, the angle of entry, time elapsed since the warp point was last used for a transit, organic systems versus electronic systems, the size of the—"

"Wait a minute. Organics versus electronics—can you detail that?"

"Not much. A little. Back before the Fringe Rebellion, the old Terran Federation did some studies but they never amounted to much, since you can't—"

"The details, Sam."

"Uh, yes, sir. There are two rules of thumb. First, organics reorient faster than electronics. Second, simple systems reorient faster than complex ones."

"Fastest and slowest rates?"

"Without researching the data, sir, I'm guessing—"

"Then guess, Sam—and hurry it up."

"The simplest organic object, a unicellular organism, would probably reorient in under one-tenth of a second. Conversely, complex electronics like a third-generation quantum computer would take up to two seconds."

Krishmahnta stared at the holotank for a moment. Then: "Lieutenant Lachow, fleet signal direct Lieutenant Commander Mikopolous, commanding RFNS *Balu Bay*. Have her advance to three light-seconds' distance from the warp point, offset from its center axis by sixty degrees opposite the direction of the ecliptic's rotation, and sixty degrees beneath its zero-reference."

"Sixty trailing by sixty declination. Aye, sir."

"*Balu Bay* is to take up that new position at better than best speed. Once on-site, she is to run a

sensors active, full gain.”

Lachow looked up from his console. “Sensors *active*, sir?”

“Active, Lieutenant. If we’re going to get a look at one of these things, we’ll have to have our eyes wide open the instant it transits the warp point.”

Watanabe leaned close to Krishmahnta’s ear. “Admiral, with sensors active—”

“Your reservations are duly noted, ’Nab—and yes, if the next thing the bastards send through is a SBMHAWK, *Balu Bay* doesn’t have a chance. She’s too small, too close to the warp point, and will be too bright a target not to take a contact hit.” Which, given the antimatter warheads carried by almost all ship’s missiles, meant a certainty of instant vaporization. “But we’ve got to get a better look at the thing they just used to clear our minefield. And besides, I don’t think they’re going to switch gears into a full scale attack just now.”

“No?”

“No. They tried their new toy, sent RD’s through to see how well it worked against our mines. My guess is that right now they’re deciding how best to step up the pace of their operations. Which is to say, they’re going to clear a path with more of these anti-mine systems and then send their main assault in.”

“Or maybe they’ll cat-and-mouse us. Keep us on edge with intermittent probes and jabs and wear us down.”

“There is always that possibility,” agreed Krishmahnta. “Although the Baldies haven’t shown much interest in that kind of tactic before.”

Witeski looked up, his thin face a mass of confused crinkles. “The ‘Baldies,’ sir?”

Krishmahnta smiled but kept one eye on the tactical plot in the holotank. “That’s what the folks back on Bellerophon are apparently calling the invaders.”

Witeski looked around at the unsurprised senior staff. “Eh . . . I thought we were cut off from Bellerophon and its news, sirs. By about four systems.”

“We *are* cut off, Wit,” Marian Nduku tossed over her shoulder as she crossed the bridge to finish installing new command relays in the engineering console. “But ‘Baldies’ is what they’re called back home.”

Witeski, clearly annoyed that even a fellow junior officer should be more in the know than he was, aimed his impatience at her retreating back. “Oh, and how’d you find that out? Did the Baldies tell you themselves?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, they did, Mr. Witeski.” Krishmahnta’s answer calmed the ensign, although he might have been made anxious all over again had he seen the soberly assessing look in her jade-green eyes. “While our Intel people were picking through the wrecks they left behind after the first visit to this system”—fierce, satisfied grins sprang up around the bridge—“we found snippets of human com chatter in some of their computers. They must have recorded it when the Home Fleet evidently tried to break into Bellerophon from Astria.” The grins gave way to grimly set mouths. “Our best guess is that the aliens kept our chatter in their computers as some kind of reference base for analyzing our signals. And in it, our people were calling them Baldies.”

“I can see why,” put in Mackintosh. “Did you see the post-action forensic reports on the remains they scooped up after their first attack? Not a hair on their bodies. Three eyes, no nose, tentacles where their fingers ought to be.”

Krishmahnta closed her eyes to help her concentrate. “And if I remember correctly, Doc Sadalla made note of how strangely unevolved their vocal apparatus was. Much less neurological complexity than we expected.”

Sam studied the backs of her hands as they rested lightly on her reconfigurable touchpad. “I wonder what made Sadallah decide to examine their vocal structures.”

Watanabe leaned back from watching a green chevron sidle up to the wormhole in the holotank. RFNS *Balu Bay* was almost in position. “Sadallah told me he saw a note in the technical intel report about how the Baldy computers had little or no provision for voice input.”

Krishmahnta watched the icon of the *Balu Bay* sprout a bright silver stalk: her sensor arrays were active. “So, if they don’t talk much, could they be—?”

Mackintosh’s face lost its ruddy tone. “Telepathic? A hive mind? Like—”

Krishmahnta shook her head. “They’re not like the Bugs,” she heard herself say, while her conscience countered with: *C’mon, Erica, you don’t really know that. But you’re leader enough to know that you can’t afford to have that spectre looming in the Fleet’s mind—now or ever.* The Bugs—humanity’s most dangerous enemy to date—had initially seemed as unstoppable as they had been inscrutable. No communication had ever been established, and the price of defeating, and ultimately exterminating, them had been horrific. “No, they’re not the Bugs. We know the Baldies asked—crudely—for Bellerophon to surrender. And they’re not using us as a food source. They just want to push us aside.”

“They don’t take surrenders in the field,” countered Mackintosh. “And they kill our wounded on sight.”

“True. But, oddly, they seem to eliminate their own wounded as well, and they ignore disabled ships or those which pose no threat. No, they are not the Bugs—but they’re sure not us, either.”

Mackintosh had recovered most of her color. “So, if they don’t talk much, how do they communicate?”

“That’s just what I was wondering, Sam.”

“Light? Pheromone emissions?” offered Witeski.

“Could be, but there’s nothing in any of their command-and-control technology that has an interface for those media. But what if—” And Krishmahnta stopped herself, wondering how to proceed without reinvoking the memory of the Bugs. “What if they do have some kind of mind-to-mind contact? *That* could travel at light speed, couldn’t it?”

Mackintosh frowned. “For all we know, and given the myriad of ways in which quantum entanglement produces phenomena which seem to exceed the cee limit—”

“Warp point is hot, Admiral,” announced Velasquez tightly.

Postures straightened. Eyes became intent on screens, on the holoplot, or both.

A red blip popped out of the purple hoop, edged forward a bit—and was then gone. Another two of the cyan-lattice minefield icons disappeared with it. There were plenty more, but—

“*Balu Bay* is relaying data. A mother lode of it, Admiral.”

Krishmahnta leaned back. Fair exchange. Maybe better than that. “Commander La Mar, signal *Balu Bay*. ‘Well done. Choose a new vantage point, this time at four light-seconds’ range, your discretion regarding position. Passive sensors only.’ ”

Thirty seconds later, the green delta of the *Balu Bay* lost her silver mast and began to move.

Ten seconds after that, three red motes—smaller—tore out of the purple hoop, headed toward the *Balu Bay*’s old position—and promptly disappeared from the plot the moment they paused as pondering the unexpected emptiness before them.

“RFNS *Anzio* reports three Baldy SBMHAWKs destroyed, Admiral.”

Of course. And they did just what I would have done—because if I hadn’t repositioned Balu Bay. “Where’s that data on their minesweeper, Mr. La Mar?”

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