

Fifteen years ago an old battleship named the *Godiva* was retired by the Solon Impyre's Galactic Navy. It was purchased in a private auction by a noted scientist, Dr. Orli Noblessar. It went missing, along with the doctor and his daughter, soon after.

Since then, every space salvage outfit in the galaxy has been looking for that ship. There have been a several sightings of the vessel over the years, but only one has been considered reliable. A corporately owned freighter ship was destroyed in a remote solar system by a “ghost ship” that matched the description of the *Godiva*.

Now, the search may be at an end.

John Hiro and his crew may have just located the *Godiva* after searching for her for years. They believe that there is technology hidden on that ship that could either save or ruin the Impyre.

But, there's a problem. Hiro's former best friend and business partner has just been released from prison, and he has plans of vengeance after what he claimed was a false conviction.

Also furthering the difficulties with recovering the *Godiva* is the fact that a galactic civil war has just ended and the entire infrastructure of the Impyre is crumbling. Fuel is such a rare commodity that interstellar space travel has been suspended.

Can Hiro and his team bring back the *Godiva* in time to save the galaxy from total economic ruin, or will an unknown dark force rise up and replace the benevolent Solon Impyre with the evil Scoryn Hegemony?

Hegemony

A novel by

Christopher Wittkugle

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Published by Christopher Wittkugle

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ISBN: 978-0-6151-6070-2 (Hardcover)

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First paperback printing: April 2007
First hardcover printing: June 2007

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For Angel

Thank you.

For everything.

Contents

Prologue:	The Namarri Incident	11
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Part One The Fruits of Endeavor

Chapter 1	Citizen Lawless	25
Chapter 2	The Battlefield of Kazaar	35
Chapter 3	An Evening at Amyrica	44
Chapter 4	The Tale of the Amber Rose	57
Chapter 5	The Young Captain	67
Chapter 6	Waiting at Temple	75
Chapter 7	The Search of Orajeb	79
Chapter 8	Rotting on the Vine	86

Part Two Ghost in the Machine

Chapter 9	The Priorities of the <i>Parallax</i>	101
Chapter 10	Aboard the Ghost Ship	106
Chapter 11	Amber's Hospitality	114
Chapter 12	Lament	124
Chapter 13	The Testimony of Orli Noblessar	129
Chapter 14	Revelation	135
Chapter 15	A Rose by any Other Name...	145
Chapter 16	Rahji Comes to Namarri	152
Chapter 17	The Betrayal of Rahji	160

Part Three Opus Denique

Chapter 18	Deception of the <i>Maduza</i>	171
Chapter 19	The <i>Jaeger</i> <i>naut II</i>	182
Chapter 20	The Synchronicity at Kazaar	188
Chapter 21	The Chaos of Battle	198
Chapter 22	The End Draws Near	208
Chapter 23	The Final Disposition of the <i>I.N.V. Godiva</i>	216
Chapter 24	Legacies	223
Epilogue	The Woman from Humalia	238

Hegemony:

he•ge•mo•ny \hi-jem-uh-nee\ n : forceful influence :
domination

Prologue

The Namarri Incident

Captain Rahji's footsteps echoed down the long, dimly lit corridor that bisected the *Lucillia's* oval shaped observation deck. His late night walks were a common occurrence, and the crew took little notice of his passage, other than to give a few quick salutes. He found the peacefulness of the "after hours" soothing. His footfalls were steady and rhythmic, which also helped to sooth his nerves. He would walk slowly, but with purpose, touring all the decks of the Delico Star-cruisers Unlimited deep space freighter. His arm came up in a motion made automatic by years of repetition, as he glanced at the antique timepiece he wore on his left wrist. Time always seemed to move so slowly these days.

Dr. Filippi, the personal physician that had been assigned to him by the company, had told him that his insomnia was incurable. The most likely cause of it was his lifetime of service in the Impyrial Navy. Always being awake, never able to relax and waiting for the next enemy to launch an attack had taken its toll on him. In forty-seven years of service, Omar Rahji had seen one hundred sixty-eight ship to ship battles with pirates, dissidents and various other non-conformists. He had survived them all without so much as a scratch or contusion.

Now, however, there was only the blasted insomnia to grapple with. Even though he did get the amount of sleep required by regulation in the hyper-sleep chamber, he rarely felt rested these days. This fact showed in his haggard and worn face.

He looked at the watch again; thirty-two seconds had passed since his last glance. He walked on.

As usual, he re-lived old battles in his mind as he walked. The events that happened in his life between those battles seemed almost trivial and useless to him. His marriages, and subsequent divorces, even the birth of his only son had paled when compared to the sense of purpose he had gotten from doing battle. Dr. Filippi had tried to explain this as Rahji's way of coping with the horrible things he had seen in the worst of those battles. But Rahji didn't want it explained, he was perfectly happy with his memories. He had always viewed himself as a born commander, and felt that his exemplary record attested to that fact.

But there were no more battles now. He had retired, or rather had been forced to retire, a little more than four orthodox years ago. He had received High Honors of the Impyre, but his age disqualified him from field command. Rather than enter the lower echelons of Impyrial Fleet Command, he opted for his retirement package and decided to travel the galaxy that he had spent so many years of his life defending. He even spent a little time on his home world of Akhara with his son, Vherjai.

But it wasn't long before he became restless and accepted command of the *Lucillia*.

The *Lucillia* was a mid-sized bulk cargo carrier, specially equipped with large fuel storage capabilities for making deep runs to far removed parts of the galaxy. Owned by the Far Star Carriers Company, she was a fast and nimble ship, especially for one of her size and intended purpose. Her firepower was above and beyond what most cargo ships carried, so Rahji liked her well enough, to be sure.

The Far Star Carriers Company, or FSCC, was a small corporation owned and operated by retired naval officers. They, in turn, only hired ex-Navy personnel. The fleet that

they had amassed might have been small, but the number of skilled sailors aboard and the modifications that were made to the ships made them undesirable targets for pirates and brigands. This was a necessity for the multitude of deep runs for which they took contracts.

The *Lucillia* was on one of these deep runs now. She was en route to some desolate, out of the way planet on the very frontier of the Southern Galactic Arm named Namarri. Her cargo was one hundred seventy thousand mega-grosses of medical supplies. It seemed that the residents of Namarri had accidentally released a vicious and virulent biological weapon. Rahji gave it little thought; it was just another drop-off for him, then he would be off to the next planet. Even though things like this happened quite regularly all over the galaxy, it was more common out here on the edge of the Impyre. Law and Order held little sway in these parts.

He detested that.

Even in a few of the core solar systems that mentality was showing through. The Seven Impyrial Fleets had their hands full dealing with the uprising. Several of the dissident noble houses had banded together and formed the Coalition of Houses Scorned. Conflicts were breaking out all over the civilized galaxy, almost on a daily basis. Of the three and a half thousand planets known to be colonized, the number the Impyre was in control of stayed right around two and a half thousand. This number fluctuated daily, for various reasons, but since the uprising, it had been slowly dropping.

Rahji saw the reports of the battles on the holo-casts whenever he would “go ashore” at any of the *Lucillia*’s ports of call. These reports would trigger the memories of his own battles, long since past.

He was beginning to understand that he had not only grown accustomed to the fighting, but had come to expect it. To live for it, really. He had realized one day that he

missed it dearly, and somewhere deep down, he longed for it constantly. A part of him felt that he should die as he had lived: in battle with the evil of non-conformity.

He had never told Dr. Filippi about that, afraid that he might lose his command.

He reached the end of the corridor, and the doors of the personnel lift opened automatically when he approached. They closed behind him with a barely audible "thunk". The brain-wave sensor on the control panel sent out an invisible beam, and scanned this latest occupant. In a matter of microseconds, it had determined that Captain Omar E. Rahji wished to return to his cabin on deck twenty-two, and the lift's motor engaged. With a movement that happened so quickly that he barely perceived it, the doors opened again and the main corridor of deck twenty-two lay before the Captain.

As he walked the few meters to the door of his cabin, he thought back on the battle of the Xidis Rift, and of how the explosions had looked spectacular against the backdrop of the rift— a huge gaping tear in space and time that sizzled with electrical and nuclear energy. He couldn't remember why there had even been a battle. Just that he had helped win it. He had helped win them all. And that thought not only comforted him, it also was more or less how he defined himself.

In his cabin, he prepared a Tarkijuan cocktail and sipped it as he paced the floor. He was waiting for the alcohol to calm his nerves a little more. His walk had done little to quiet his thoughts this evening.

He stopped in front of the mirrored glazteel window that looked out over the hull of the *Lucillia* and stared at his reflection. His dark skin was creased with deep wrinkles, and heavy bags hung low under his eyes. His hair, silver and flowing, framed it all with an ironic perfection. His bright blue eyes, however, glinted with vitality. Their brilliance could only be rivaled by the various medals and

decorations he wore on his breast and lapels.

He hardly recognized that old man's face anymore and shook his head. The brain wave scanner in the window controls adjusted the tint, and the old man faded away, replaced by a splendid view of the cosmos.

He thought that the stars looked dim way out here on the frontier. Only one was shining brightly. It was the star that Namarri orbited, and it was growing brighter, if only ever so slightly, by the minute. His naked eye could barely discern this, but he knew it wouldn't be long until they reached their destination, only a few hours at the most. The navigator had shut down the star-drives a few minutes ago, and was slowing the ship for a standard approach to the temporary dock set up at the edge of the inner planetary ring. The quarantine on Namarri had yet to be lifted, and so all deliveries were to be dropped at a controlled and centralized location.

He stood at the window, engrossed in his memories for quite some time, until he was stirred by the soft but very noticeable beep of his comunit. He looked down to where it hung on his belt. The priority indicator light was flashing red.

Trouble.

He activated the comunit with a thought and it clicked on. As it hummed quietly, a life-sized hologram of his Executive Officer, Commander Francis Ralvekió appeared a few feet away from him. The holographic Commander saluted him. After the Captain returned the salute, Ralvekió began to speak.

“Sir, our long range scans contain data that suggests that there may be a derelict vessel drifting in this sector. The data is not conclusive for a ship, it could be a small, heavy-metal asteroid. There is, however a small radiation source, which could be a depleted fuel cell. A probe has been launched, and we should have visual conformation in a few moments.”

“Put the coordinates on my screen,” Rahji responded. As he spoke, the tint on the window turned silver, and then was replaced by a stellar chart of the local solar system. A green delta indicated the position of the *Lucillia* on the map, and then a red delta appeared, marking the location of the unknown object. It was far out, away from the inner ring of planets, and Rahji did not see a threat to their present course. If it was a ship, the *Lucillia* could easily avoid it.

“Sir, the probe has confirmed that it is a ship,” Ralvekiio informed him. “There is not enough power for life support, it is most likely an uncharted derelict. The identity broadcaster is not functioning, there is no way of identifying the ship without—”

“Commander,” Rahji interjected. “Our present course shall not bring us into any range of threat from this derelict. If it were closer, I would say that it’s pirates, with their life support down and using EVA-suits. I know there’s still a few old buccaneers who still use that trick.” He placed his hand to his chin as he considered the order he was about to give.

“Continue to Namarri. When we arrive, we will inform the local garrison commander about the ship. It’s none of our concern. If there is any change, notify me at once.” Rahji started to turn away from the display, but stopped when Ralvekiio spoke again.

“Sir, we have a visual of the vessel now,” he said, and the stellar chart disappeared and was replaced by an image of a darkened ship floating in space.

Rahji’s blood ran cold for the first time in years as he recognized the retired battleship on the display screen. Its long sweeping bow and narrow aft were unique to the *Diable de Mer* battleship design. And the dark red hull told Rahji exactly what ship he was looking at.

“By the Cosmos,” he whispered. “It can’t be.”

He could see no damage to her and her engines,

although without power, showed no signs of failure.

“Belay that last order, Commander,” he spoke quickly. “Set a course to bring us within shuttle range of that ship,” he said as he turned to the door of his personal lift to the command deck.

“And,” he added, “get those two Impyrial merc fighters out. Now!”

“Aye, aye” Ralvekió responded, but Rahji did not hear it. He was already in the lift and within moments, he was stepping onto the command deck. Everyone here was in a flurry of movement that appeared chaotic to the untrained eye. But Rahji knew that his crew were preparing for the orders that they expected their captain would soon give. They all stopped momentarily and saluted him when the Weapons Engineer announced his arrival. He returned the salute and they all went back to their duties. Rahji’s faith in his crew was great. They knew it, and took pride in it.

“Alert status Three, Commander. I want reports from all shipboard systems immediately. Navigator, make sure you approach that ship with extreme caution. CommOff, get the garrison commander on a secured channel and brief him to our situation. Also, have them bounce that report to Far Star dispatch, if their GalCom station is functioning.” Rahji stopped speaking, and began listening to the reports that began to come to him from all the system engineers on the *Lucillia*.

Ralvekió watched in reserved silence as Rahji and the crew exchanged information for orders. He was slightly confused as to what his captain was doing. In the past two and a half orthodox years serving under this captain, Ralvekió had never seen him do anything brash, unconventional or without direct orders. This sudden preparation for joining, or possibly starting, a battle was highly irregular. When the tumult of the change in alert status dwindled down somewhat he leaned in close to the Captain’s ear and spoke quietly.

“With all due respect Sir, may I inquire as to what our objective here is?”

Rahji smiled and said “You mean to ask, of course, what in Hell we are doing, correct?” Ralvekió’s face reddened slightly from embarrassment only for a moment then he brought his emotions under control with a quick and silent Huy-Tan chant he learned in the Academy. Rahji clapped his hand on his subordinate’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Commander. I realize that I am acting in a fashion you are not accustomed to. But, it is simply explained, you see. I know that ship.” He paused for a moment.

“She’s the *I.N.V. Godiva*,” he finished.

When Rahji spoke the name, the command crew fell silent, and slowly all turned to face him.

“The *Godiva*? Are you sure, Sir?” Ralvekió’s voice was almost a whisper when he asked.

“I was her Gunnery Commander twenty years ago, I would know her anywhere. She’s the *Diva*, to be sure.” Rahji was staring, appearing almost entranced, at the visual display of the old battleship.

“The *Godiva* isn’t a large ship,” Rahji informed the crew. “But she is big enough to put a serious hurt on the *Lucillia*, if it comes to a firefight. Extensive automation and superior cannons compensate for her lack of size. But we have no way of knowing what sort of modifications may have been made over the past few years. I’m sure that some of you are aware of this already, but that ship went missing a few years ago, shortly after being de-commissioned. I do believe that this is the first credible sighting of her since that time.”

The two Dauphin Mark VII heavy fighters that were on hired combat duty from the Impyrial Navy streaked by the view screen. They completed their fly-by and then proceeded to approach the supposedly derelict ship. When they got into close range with it, they flew in a methodic and pre-planned surveying pattern around it.

“This is Alpha Wing One,” the wing leader called in his report. “There is no power to any of the main systems, only a faint radiation signature, source unknown. And no signs of life.”

“There wouldn’t be any on a ghost ship, now would there?” the wingman cut in.

“Stow it, Lieutenant” ordered Rahji in a harsh tone. “Are you sure there’s no signs of life, Alpha One?” He leaned forward, one hand on his knee.

“Positive, Sir. She’s dead. Going to a holding pattern to await your orders, Captain.” The two fighters of Alpha Wing then formed up and slowly circled the crimson-hulled derelict. As they circled, no change could be seen in the state of the *Godiva* by any of the probes and scans that were continually monitoring her.

Rahji stood, and looked around the command bridge at every crewman and officer. They all appeared to be ready for action.

“All right, let’s get to work,” he said with a nod to everyone in general. “We are going to tow her into Namarri, and with any luck, collect a nice bounty or reward, which will be split evenly amongst the crew.”

The *Lucillia* slowly edged closer to the *Godiva*, with Alpha Wing giving regular reports on the condition of the target. Finally, the navigator announced that they were within towing range and that all systems were ready for contact. Rahji nodded to him and gave the order.

“Latch on to her.”

Within a only a few seconds, four red beams of light shot out from the underside of the *Lucillia* and converged on the *Godiva*, enveloping the battleship in a glowing red field. The holding-field flickered once, then turned green, signifying that towing operations could now commence.

And it was in that very instant when Captain Rahji’s rather hastily made plan fell apart.

The engines of the *I.N.V. Godiva* came online, filling the

space around them with a brilliant yellow flash. Without hesitation, Rahji gave the order to engage.

“Fire!” he yelled, his eyes ablaze with intensity. “All fore and dorsal ballistic stations fire! Alpha Wing, time to earn your money, take out her engines!”

For only an instant, something deep down inside him stirred, and thanked the Cosmos for this opportunity. Then in the next instant, he wondered if perhaps he should have told Dr. Filippi that thing about needing to die in battle. *No matter*, his subconscious decided in the next instant, *it is too late now*.

The four turrets on the forecastles of the *Lucillia* and the six that sprouted from her dorsal hull opened their hatches and rained a hailstorm of titanium slugs into the *Godiva*'s hull. They ripped through the crimson metal like it was nothing. The cannons of the *Lucillia*, as well as those of every ship in the Far Star fleet had been modified beyond standard design, firing more rapidly and with more intensity and using a larger bore.

The two fighters of Alpha Wing swooped low over the *Godiva*'s bow, attempting to target active gun mounts. When they realized no cannons were operating, they veered off and set up to make a run at her engine exhausts. As they came back around, the retired Navy ship's shields came online and their plasma cannons would do no good. They would have to wait for the ballistics to open a tear in the protective energy shield. They moved off to a reasonably safe distance, to await an opening.

“Captain,” Ralvekiio was standing over the console of the Recon Officer's station. “There seems to be a large energy build up in the main power plant. Possibly a weapon charging up.”

Rahji watched the cannons of the *Lucillia* tearing into the shields of the *Godiva*. He looked at the recon readings on his own display. A dark, cold feeling crept into the pit of his stomach.

“Of course it is,” was all he said.

A brilliantly bright beam of white light shot from the *Godiva*'s bow, followed immediately by an immense and intense beam of red energy. The green field of the tow-beams evaporated as the second beam passed through it.

So did the *Lucillia* when it was struck by that second, red beam. In an instant, the powerful cargo carrier had been obliterated with only a single shot.

The star-drives of the *Godiva* were fully powered now, and with a bright flash of yellow light, they tore open the interstellar rift they were designed to create.

The *Godiva* entered the warp tunnel and disappeared.

All that remained were the two Dauphin Mark VII fighters of Alpha Wing. They were not equipped with star-drives, so they sent out distress calls, pointed their noses toward the temporary docking station and headed in.

Only a faint cloud of minute and slowly dispersing metallic particles was left to mark the spot that the *Lucillia* and her crew had occupied only moments before.

Part One

The Fruits of Endeavor

Chapter One

Citizen Lawless

The sun's rays warmed Drake's tanned and chiseled face. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was deep and rhythmic as he performed the Exercise of Anticipation, as taught to him by his friend and cell-mate, Shonu. Drake had been waiting here by the trees at the edge of the meadow for quite a long time now, and his patience was wearing down a little. Shonu had agreed to meet him here at midday, which had already come and gone. Drake opened his eyes slightly and took a quick look around.

Drake was standing near the south perimeter gate of Camp Eleven on Impyrial Penal Colony Seven, or as it was called by the inmates here, Cayge. His muscular frame was no longer clad in the standard issue dark gray inmate's uniform, but in his old blue pilot's EVA-suit. The pressurized suit kept his body temperature at a comfortable level, whether he was in deep space or standing in the sunlight of this meadow. It still fit him well, even though he hadn't worn it in over five years. He held the lightweight helmet under his left arm in a fashion that was very similar to the pilot that graced the recruiting posters that were commonplace all over the Impyre.

He took a deep breath and looked at his chronometer. He was being released today; he was only waiting to hear something from, or about, Shonu. His brown eyes surveyed the countryside beyond the fence.

For the most part, Cayge was very pleasant world. Clear

blue skies hung over vast fields of green grasses and trees. Wild flowers of all colors could be found everywhere, even at the various camps scattered over the planet's surface. Drake had only ever been in Camp Eleven, but he had been told that the other three hundred fifty camps were just as nice. If one happened to be going to prison, Cayge was the world of choice. The inmates had given IPC7 the misnomer of "Cayge" as a joke. It was by far no place for hardened criminals, and those sent there would rarely be able to survive a "real" prison colony. The name caught on, and most everyone in the galaxy had heard of the posh, resort-like prison world.

IPC7 had been established in order to lessen the punishment for those criminals whose crimes were non-violent in nature. An intense screening process had been created to keep maniacs, sadists and other dangerous deviants out of the population. On occasion, however, special cases were made. These special cases were generally made for influential politicians or popular citizens of the Impyre.

One such case had been made for a young inmate named Andy LaCroix. He, unlike most of the convicts here, would be spending the remainder of his life on this colony. His father was an affluent member of the Bureau of Science and Religion and Andy was a lunatic, pre-disposed to murder. He had been convicted of killing one of his professors at the University of Ciripico.

Andy had written an essay titled "Gravity: The Universal Conspiracy to Hold You Down" for his planetary science class. Upon receiving it, Professor Fulinar thought it was a witty title, and hoped that the paper might be more of a pleasure to read than most of the work given to him by typical science students.

After reading it, however, he realized that the work had been that of an extremely disturbed mind and the author really did hold to the idea that the concept of gravity had

been invented to facilitate some sort of scheme of domination and conquest over humanity. He felt that he had no choice but to alert the Dean of Mental Wellness that Andy may have suffered a psychotic break.

Andy had felt that he had no choice but to then bludgeon Professor Fulinar to death with his own hover chair, screaming the whole time: “You’re in on it! You’re in on it!”

Andy LaCroix was a lunatic, and everyone on Cayge knew it, and stayed clear of him whenever possible.

Drake’s conviction for kidnapping with intent to extort placed him among the more violent offenders on Cayge. Not on the same level as Andy, but he had some notoriety, given his crime and his former profession as a fighter pilot in the Impyrial Navy. It was that service in the Navy that had swung the Penal Board in favor of allowing his application to IPC7 to be accepted. The Judge’s recommendation had helped as well. He had said that in light of this being Drake’s first conviction and certain mitigating circumstances that had not been allowed in to evidence that he did not feel Drake was a danger to society. He also went on record as recommending Drake should be allowed to serve his minimum term of five years in the relative safety of Cayge.

From where he now stood, Drake could hear the gill-birds singing in the bushes down by the little stream that flowed just outside the camp’s perimeter fence. A slight wind blew through his shoulder length black hair. His mouth curled up in a smile as the smell of *hosita* grass caressed his nostrils. He was standing with his back to the guardhouse, facing the landing pad where his most prized possession awaited him.

His ship, the *Maduza*, was resting on the square concrete pad. Her hull was painted a dark green and blended into the foliage that surrounded the camp almost perfectly.

Quite odd for a spacecraft, Drake noted to himself.

The *Maduza* was, in fact, an odd and unique craft. Designed and built by Drake and his old Navy buddy and business partner, Johnny Hiro, she was a conglomeration of salvaged parts, but was a very attractive ship nevertheless. Her bow sloped forward, coming to a triangular point. Her navigation instruments were packed away in her stern, in a boxy fuselage. The pilot sat in a capsule-shaped cockpit that was separated from the main hull on a pylon on the port side of the ship. The cockpit doubled as living quarters and lifeboat. Her massive fuel cell storage unit was located on another pylon on the starboard side.

But it was her engine that made her special. Running under her entire length was an old Sinoram Shipyards star-drive taken from a wrecked Galactic Transit Group luxury cruiser. Not many ships that were small enough to be crewed by one person could travel between stars under their own engine power. Most had to use chartered carriers, Galactic Transit Group being one of the companies offering that service.

And that big engine also allowed her to carry a weapon turret that was almost unheard of on a craft that small. A ten-barrelled Plaztech plasma cannon hung from under her nose, and much to the chagrin of several pirates who had crossed Drake, all ten barrels could fire simultaneously. One hit on an unshielded hull would be disastrous. Most fighter craft carried a single plasma cannon, and possibly a ballistic cannon with limited ammo. The *Maduza* carried two one hundred twenty-five mil slug-guns, with a typical Navy payload of five tons of ammo. Drake could see the muzzles of those cannons peeking out from under their protective hoods on her nose.

He could also see that Grant, the old off-world mechanic that he had hired to look after the *Maduza*, had made the modifications that Drake had ordered to be done during his incarceration. The new projection unit sticking out from the navigation array would go unnoticed unless some one

was looking for it, like Drake was now.

He turned back to look at the guardhouse. The little gray building squatted close to the ground, windowless and drab. The two Impyrial soldiers that stood on either side of the titanium door were armed with Grimm automatic plasma rifles and covered by protective nylar body armor over their blue uniforms. Drake smiled and waved at them cheerily, glad that he was on his way out. He only wished that word of Shonu's whereabouts would come soon.

Shonu was a follower of an obscure religious sect known as Bhudapai-Dan. Most space travelers throughout the galaxy had encountered students of this religion without even knowing it. They tended to loiter about in busy spaceports and pass out holographic flowers and wishing passers-by a safe journey. Their reserved demeanors usually left these passers-by with only a mild feeling of annoyance, and very few of them even bothered to listen to what the missionaries had to say. The central theme of the religion was re-incarnation and rewards for living a good life, treating others well and forsaking material possessions. There was no punishment for evil or deviant behavior, only the promise of the next life unfolding with the sinner being victimized in a similar way.

Drake had thought it to be perhaps the most passive-aggressive punishment he had ever heard of the first time Shonu had preached it to him. But, he also found its perfect simplicity appealing.

He had thought Shonu to be a con-artist on the first day of their shared habitation. But after only a few hours, he could see that Shonu believed in his religion with all of his heart. He honestly wanted to preach the word of Bhudapai in order to help others attain enlightenment. Drake had to admire him, even if he hadn't believed in it himself. Drake wondered what this seemingly pure soul had done to be imprisoned.

When Shonu told him, he didn't know whether to laugh

or cry, or both.

“I wanted,” Shonu had said “to be of more service to my religion, so I asked to be incarcerated. I thought that if I could be among the deviants of society, I could set a shining example for them and show them the way to eternal light. When the officers at the space station I was on declined, I smashed out one of the windows of the Police offices with a chair. They agreed to send me away after that.” As they got to know each other better, Drake realized that for Shonu, destroying a window would be as hard as taking a life. His cell-mate’s aversion to violence was both admirable and pitiful in Drake’s eyes.

The two had been bunking together now for a little more than two planet years, which equated to almost three orthodox years, (an orthodox year being three hundred fifty days, the same length as the year on the capitol planet, Kazaar). Shonu had preached the word of Bhudapai every day of those three years. Under normal circumstances, this would have driven Drake insane. But thankfully, Shonu was a gifted storyteller. He had traveled far and wide across the Impyre, and even beyond. His stories of peculiar worlds and cultures had kept Drake and some of the other inmates entertained for hours on end.

One story was of particular interest to Drake, and he listened to it time and time again, committing it to memory. The first time Shonu had shared it with him, Drake began to get an idea. That idea that eventually formed into the plan that Drake knew would give him his revenge.

Revenge against the one who had put him here, had taken the past five years away from him. He spat as he thought of Johnny Hiro, his supposed friend who hadn’t even bothered to show up at the trial. He had done nothing to help Drake, and was as much to blame as the Impyrial officer who had set him up. They both would see their mistake when Drake had finished.

It had been an innocent remark from Shonu that had

gotten Drake's mind working on this plan of revenge. A remark about something that he had once seen in a removed and practically deserted solar system. He had not known the significance of what he had seen, but Drake recognized it immediately. At first, he acted uninterested, but over time, he kept Shonu's stories coming back to this one. Drake's plan formed and he began to make preparations to execute it when he got out.

But he had to be careful; this needed to be kept very secret. If anyone else knew what Shonu had seen in that asteroid field, there would be no way to draw his prey in to the trap.

Shonu was due to be released in a month, which posed a problem for Drake. Although Shonu had no idea that Drake was planning anything, he might unwittingly tell someone else about the thing in the asteroid belt, and Drake's plan would be ruined. One month was not nearly enough time for Drake to set his plan into motion, so Shonu needed to be kept here a bit longer.

Drake had listened to Shonu's preaching for a long time now, and had actually semi-converted to his religion. He wasn't ready to shave his head, or give up his vengeance, but he thought that he might someday be a better person because of Shonu's teachings. He knew that Shonu's devotion could easily be used as a tool to extend his stay on Cayge. Shonu loved to preach, and had left this morning to meet with a prospective convert that Drake had told him about.

Drake had watched him leave and thought to himself, *He's a fanatic.*

Which was unfortunate, because Andy LaCroiux was a lunatic.

Unfortunate because Andy was the "convert" that Drake had spoken of. On top of being a lunatic, Andy had gotten the idea that Shonu would be arriving shortly to attempt to brainwash him. He had gotten this notion from Drake, on

the previous evening at mealtime.

Unknown to Drake, Andy's psychosis had also created the fantasy that Shonu would try to devour his soul, and Andy wasn't about to allow that to happen.

Drake had gone back to admiring the *Maduza* sitting on the landing pad when Warden Berregar's personal transporter glided up and stopped within a few meters of him. The Warden was a fat, middle aged man with a receding hairline and oily skin. He groaned loudly as he stepped off the hovering disc and walked the few meters to stand by Drake's side.

"Drake," the Warden spoke in a practiced and even tone, one that was non-committal enough not to elicit unwanted emotional responses from inmates. "I'm afraid that there has been an incident involving your friend Shonu." Drake turned to face him, trying to look surprised.

"Oh, yes?" Drake had not expected the Warden himself to inform him that Shonu would not be able to attend his departure. He had expected the news that he needed to return to the infirmary to come from a guard. Something was wrong, and Drake wanted to leave as soon as possible. Had Shonu and Andy figured out what he had done? He needed to be tactful with the Warden in order to find out.

"There was a confrontation with another inmate," Berregar continued. "Mr. LaCroiux, it would seem, took a severe and sudden dislike for Shonu's preaching. How does one put this delicately? He struck him repeatedly with a chair in mid-sermon. Shonu did not survive his injuries. I'm sorry, I know the two of you had become friends."

Drake contemplated his response. He had not intended this, he had only expected Andy to report Shonu to the psychiatrist. Then Shonu would be held longer to evaluate the possibility of him being a danger to society for his religious beliefs.

"Well, he did good in this life, and I'm sure that his next life will be even better." Drake tried his best to smile as he

spoke, and was only able to do so when he saw the dark humor in Shonu's coming to and leaving this place had both involved a chair. Even Shonu, with his devout stance against violence would have appreciated the ironic serendipity. Drake stood there for a few moments, waiting to see if the Warden had anything to add. The fat man was silent, except for his heavy breathing and occasional grunt of discomfort from standing outside in the sun.

Drake finally spoke, sure that he had not been connected to the incident.

"I'm ready to go now, Warden."

Berregar walked with Drake to the gates of the camp. When they reached the closed gates, Drake and the Warden faced one another while the guards went through the elaborate protocol that was involved with opening those gates.

"Drake Lawless, you are hereby released back into the lawful society of the Solon Impyre. It is with great pride that I declare you rehabilitated, and with great hope that you will live out a peaceful existence among the other citizens of that society." The Warden placed his hand on Drake's shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"Welcome home, Citizen Lawless."

Drake thanked him and strode out of the prison camp through the now open gates, which closed behind him quickly and with a loud clanging noise. He never turned back as he crossed the landing pad to the *Maduza*. A guard whose name Drake did not know stood at the ready beside the hatch that opened into the cockpit. He nodded at Drake as he approached.

"Where you headed to first, Lawless? The prostitutes of the Januse System?" he asked, with a lecherous laugh.

Drake looked at him and smiled. "I have found religion, my Brother. I'm going to Temple."

Drake stepped into the cockpit and sat down behind the familiar control panel. He took a deep breath and started

his pre-flight preparations. He had missed his bird, and had waited on this day to come for five long years. Drake felt as if his soul trembled in unison with the engine when it fired up. Drake was alive with passion now. He quickly punched in the code to activate the launch sequence as if he had never been away from his beloved ship.

In a few moments, the *Maduza* cleared the launch pad and disappeared into the atmosphere with a roar of her single, powerful engine. Drake was finally free, and the reckoning was soon to come.

Chapter Two

The Battlefield of Kazaar

The light of the distant sun glinted off the blue and gray hull of the wrecked PJ-Eleven fighter ship. The open canopy suggested that the pilot had made a clean get away. Johnny hoped that he had anyway, it was an Impyrial fighter. He could see the insignia of the Impyrial Navy painted on the hull of the ship. It was a golden trident on an oval of purple carried by eight golden wings, one for each of the eight controlling Houses of the Impyre, the Unity Combine.

The soft blue light from the holo-display of the scanners on the panel in front of him illuminated Johnny Hiro's face as he examined the wreck. Not much damage had been done to the hull or internal systems, but the power plant had been blasted away. He smiled when he found what he was looking for. The small fighter still had a full load of fuel cells. That alone was reason enough for him to mark the wreck for salvage, so he jettisoned a beacon. He looked back to the holo-display as the little robotic beacon took a position floating in empty space next to the ruined gunboat.

"Good old Praxon and Jinx Shipyards. If they did anything right, it was triple plating those rod holds," he said aloud to himself, still grinning. He would bring Bobby and Sue out here and grab those precious fuel cells before they headed back to the nest. The red light on top of the beacon flashed as it began transmitting its encrypted signal. Johnny widened his scanning range and peered intently at

the display.

All around him, space was black and empty, with the exception of the derelict fighter and his own tiny ship, the *Flit*.

The *Flit* was nothing more than an old F-Lite model shuttle craft used to carry personnel and small cargo loads from a logistics transport to a station or planet's surface.

He was alone right now, he had left Bobby and Sue at a wrecked frigate a few thousand kilometers away to remove some rare Flortian steel armor plates.

His brown eyes stared at the scanner display and his closely cropped black hair reflected the blue light. His skin was tanned slightly from exposure to starlight that was un-filtered by an atmosphere. He preferred not to use heavily shielded or tinted visors on his EVA-suit, which he wore anytime he was working a salvage site. The scanner blipped, and he ramped up the throttle on the *Flit's* engines and headed to the next wreck, which was about three hundred kilometers away.

Johnny's crew, which included his partners Robert Strong and Sue Briggs, were working salvage at the Battlefield of Kazaar. They were joined by two other crew members who, although they weren't partners, were integral parts of the team. They were Arty, the resident computer specialist, and the newest member of the crew, a young woman named Lanalai. Both were on board the main vessel of the salvage company, an old Salva-Tug whose moniker was *Ramona's Litany*. They were away at the capitol planet of the system, and of the Impyre itself, selling off a load of the Flortian armor.

They had been working way out here, around the seventh planet, for several weeks now. It was isolated here, so they had no competition from the other few salvage companies. Their small outfit could pick and choose their wrecks. If they were to move to the inner orbits, they would have to work on whatever derelicts the bigger outfits

passed over. At least there were only six other companies operating here in Kazaar, so that kept everyone spread out fairly well. It had been days since they had encountered another ship, other than the battle-torn wrecks.

They had unanimously agreed, and wisely so, to work the outer orbits. They had made more than enough to retire on with the inflated prices of fuel. Now that the civil war with House Scoryn was over, most small businesses were going bankrupt because of these fuel costs. The war had devastated the galactic economy anyway, and the destruction of the mining colonies all over the galaxy had driven the main staple of the trade commerce, fuel cells, through the ceiling.

There were well over ten thousand wrecks from this battle alone, and the salvage companies had been concentrating on recovering the fuel cells from these ships. But it was a slow process for some of the other “bigger” outfits, many of which were under-staffed at this location or ill-equipped for such a large endeavor. The crew of *Ramona's Litany* was used to working small and fast, so they had gathered a stockpile of the radioactive rods used to power starships rather quickly.

The wrecks ranged in size from small, one-person fighters like the PJ-Eleven Johnny had just marked, all the way up to the massive dread-naughts that were the pride of both the Impyrial Fleets and the Scoryn Armada. Even Scoryn's enigmatic and elusive leader Baron Vaaz Bleudthoryn's flagship, the *Jaegernaut*, was here. It had been picked clean within a week of the war's end. The leader of the Impyre, Imperator Bonnaparte had escaped with his life, and his ship, the Impyrial Naval Vessel, *I.N.V. Lion's Mane* during the final counter-assault. That battle had been the last, and had ended the uprising of House Scoryn.

The operation at Kazaar, the capitol of the Impyre, had only been the second major offensive launched by the rogue

Baron Bleudthoryn. A few orthodox months earlier, his massive fleet had split up into several large assault groups, each of which had enough firepower to eradicate a planet. These groups then simultaneously jumped into every major mining colony in the Impyre. Each colony was either destroyed completely, or rendered inoperable beyond repair. Over the next few days, these groups continued to appear in more remote and less significant colonies, systematically destroying the Impyre's fuel supply. With no new raw materials, there could not be any production of the radioactive rods that powered all interstellar spacecraft and most interplanetary ones as well.

Moving through space at the speeds necessary to maintain order and revenue flow in the Impyre required massive amounts of fuel. The star-drives of a long range interstellar vessel traveling from one end of the Impyre to the other once consumed enough fuel to power the conventional drives of a few thousand interplanetary freighters on a journey from any standard yellow star to its outer orbital ring. Even those freighters and other smaller, vessels consumed enough fuel so that within an orthodox month, the only ships making interstellar runs were military vessels, either patrols or an increasing number of relief and rescue missions. The economy, whose life's blood had been a robust trading commerce, began to collapse even further. Colonies began running out of supplies that could not be acquired locally.

Almost immediately, the colonies on desert-like worlds, along with several of the major orbiting colonies were evacuated. Even now, the evacuations were still happening with the Navy using as many ships as it had to spare. It still wasn't known if all the colonies would survive. Estimates of deaths by attrition were in the low billions. The war was over, but a dark cloud of uncertainty hung over the Impyre as it began to collect itself and begin the process of rebuilding.

Johnny hadn't seen much of the war himself. He had been discharged early in the conflict, several orthodox years ago, when no one realized that the small, seemingly random incursions on remote colonies were the beginnings of a galaxy wide civil war.

Johnny had been a Navy pilot, with a few years of service under his belt when he and his wingman, Drake Lawless had been ambushed while on escort duty. They had received honorable discharges, but there had been speculation that they may have been involved in planning the attack. After an investigation by Impyrial agents, they were cleared of any suspicions and their files had been closed.

The two pilots then went on to form a small salvage company with Bobby and Sue. The four had been stationed together on the *I.N.V. Gauntlet*, a battle-carrier in the Fourth Fleet. Bobby and Sue had been the mechanics assigned to the fighters flown by Johnny and Drake. They all had been close friends during their service, but it wasn't until after the two mechanics had finished their tour of duty and had been discharged that they revealed their romance to the other pair. Neither Johnny nor Drake had been surprised by the revelation, and they were quite pleased.

They then began making a modest living going out and cleaning up after the small battles and skirmishes that were breaking out more frequently. Their contacts in the lower levels of Fleet Command had afforded them a few advantages, among those being highly valuable fuel-vouchers issued by the government. They also usually received the first commission for any clean up operations headed up by the Navy itself. They weren't becoming wealthy by any means, but they were staying in the good graces of the government, which was often hard for an ex-fighter pilot to do. Their skills were more often in demand by the industries closer to the edge of legality, such as smuggling or piracy. Salvagers weren't looked upon as a

trust worthy bunch either, but Johnny's crew had been an exception. They had never fallen into any sort of conflict over ownership or territory, which was quite unusual.

Along the way they had met up with Artemus Blackstone, or Arty, as he liked to be called. Arty was a computer systems specialist with amazing gifts and talents. He could modify any computer system to perform practically any function imaginable, given enough time. He had modified the scanners of the *Ramona's Litany* and the *Flit* to be much more sensitive to variations in space density. As a result they could, for all practical purposes, see the mass of a ship from quite a long distance, rather than relying on the old method of picking up emissions from exhausts or waveforms from electrical components. The technology wasn't new, but required very expensive equipment, all of which Arty was able to construct physically at a lower cost, or simulate with software.

And his hard work was paying off now. Johnny cut his speed as he approached the new wreck, another fighter with full fuel cells. These tiny craft would take most other salvagers much longer to locate and mark. This fighter was bearing the white cross with the red diamond in the center and five green bars of the Scoryn Armada. He smiled and dropped another beacon and swung the nose of the *Flit* around toward his next stop. He had been making a wide circle around the frigate that Bobby and Sue were working on. Their shift was almost over, so he was going to go back and pick them up. They would make quick run around and grab up the fuel cells he had found then head back to their "field base".

This "field base" was actually a small cargo ship they had located a couple of days after they began salvage work here, aptly named "*Charity*". She had been relatively unharmed, although her engines had been destroyed. Her main point of interest was that she still had fully functioning life support systems. So the crew of *Ramona's*

Litany had set up shop here, using the *Litany* as a shuttle for salvaged goods. This allowed them to make continual runs to and from the stations at Kazaar. The crew was working in sixteen-hour shifts. And now that they were several days into it, they were all becoming fatigued. But no one complained, knowing that as a small operation, they had to operate around the clock.

Johnny wondered if this boneyard would ever be completely cleaned. Right now, with next to no interstellar travel and very few ships operating in the solar system, the hulks weren't anything more than a vast stockpile of recyclables and waste. But if and when the economy ever got rolling again and Kazaar once more became the central hub of business, the wrecks would be extremely hazardous to the thousands upon thousands of ships that would be operating in the system at any one time.

About two months ago, Johnny and the others on board the *Litany* had decided to play a bit of a gamble and come to Kazaar. They had surmised that the crippling blow to the fuel supply would have long lasting and far reaching effects, so they decided that being close to the Emperor, his council and Fleet Command might prove beneficial if times were going to get hard. They also thought that if the Scoryns did attack here, the salvage prospects would be good.

They had no idea how right they were.

No one imagined that the Baron would assemble his entire armada for an epic final assault.

But two weeks after the *Litany* arrived in Kazaar, the Baron arrived as well. And all Hell had broken loose.

It appeared that the fuel crisis had hurt House Scoryn as much as it had the Impyre. The carriers, battleships, and all the other heavy ships had only enough fuel on board to make the jump into Kazaar. There was to be no return trip for any of them. The smaller logistics vessels and the tactical ships, such as transports and fighters, were fully

complemented with fuel, as if anticipating a long battle. It had been a long battle indeed.

Although the Scoryn Armada was massive in size and scope, it was primarily made up of older and outdated Impyrial vessels. The majority had been modified with newer technology, but in the end the Impyre had barely pulled out the victory using superior tactics and slightly more advanced ships.

The Impyre had suffered heavy losses though, and the few remaining ships were busy with the relief efforts to the isolated colonies that had depended greatly on outside support. The stockpiles at most colonies were getting dangerously low, and refugees were quickly filling up neighboring colonies beyond capacity. There was a large number of these refugees here in Kazaar, but most of the evacuations were taking place far away from the literal, and figurative, center of the Impyre.

The *Flit's* scanner was only picking up the beacons that he had dropped, so Johnny gunned the engines and quickly made his way back to the ruined frigate to pick up Bobby and Sue. He called them on the comunit and they both agreed that they were ready to call it quits for a few hours. He swung into the small cargo bay of the frigate. The two mechanics were wearing EVA-suits, so they got into the exterior personnel capsules. He then shot out of the hold and they went on to pick up the two loads of fuel cells from the fighter ships. Then, finally, they got back to the *Charity*.

The *Charity* had been used by the Scoryn Armada as an ammunition transport. She had carried a load of missiles and other ammunition that would have been delivered to a gunboat when it called for a re-load. Apparently, that call had never come for the *Charity*. When Johnny found her, her hold was still fully laden with weapons. They had sold those off fairly cheap, and began stockpiling the fuel cells.

They were selling a third of the fuel to the stations,

donating a third to the Navy for the relief efforts and stashing the remaining third here, for their own use. The *Litany* was an old ship, and her fuel economy wasn't as good as it once had been. They had set up a few other hidden caches around in case other salvagers, or any one else for that matter, discovered this one. Quickly, the trio unloaded the newly procured fuel cells with the others in the hold and made their way to the "de-briefing room".

The "de-briefing room" was actually just a makeshift decompression room. It was here that the crew would shed their EVA-suits and decompression pumps would get their bodies ready for the pressure of the ship's atmosphere and artificial gravity.

As they all sat around in the big soft chairs in the center of the room, each listening to the near silent popping of their ears, Bobby began to speak.

"Boss," he said with the peculiar accent that was common among citizens of his home world, Dwinit. "We need a bit of shore leave, and quite badly I think. We've been at this for days and days now. How about we head to *Amyrica* when the *Litany* makes her next run back? I could use a shot of the ol' Ramses' Revenge right about now. I know a great place on Deck One-Eighteen"

Johnny yawned and stretched his arms high above his head.

"Sure," he said between yawns. "I could do that." And within a few seconds, all three were asleep, each with a sort of half smile on their lips. They rested peacefully for several hours until the *Litany* returned and Arty called them on the comunit.

Chapter Three

An Evening at Amyrica

Lanalai took another look at the holo-mirror as the image of her own slender body rotated in front of her, giving her a full view of her new green and blue outfit. It clung nicely to her small frame, and complimented her violet shoulder length hair. She smiled at herself, glad that she looked nice. Tonight was going to be her first opportunity to socialize with her new ship-mates.

She wondered to herself why she had been so concerned with looking good tonight. She wasn't normally vain at all, nor was she too modest. She was somewhere in the middle, more confident than egotistical. But for some reason she thought that tonight she should look good.

Who was she trying to impress, though?

These folks were all her co-workers. Bobby and Sue were already involved with each other, and she thought Arty was the sweetest old man she had ever met. That just left Johnny. She laughed at that idea.

Johnny, who had been very stand-offish with her since she joined the crew, was certainly not her type.

Certainly not, she repeated in her mind. Then she looked back at the holo-mirror.

Still, she thought, *it never hurts to look nice*.

Now most men, and women for that matter, would have found it hard to imagine Lanalai not looking nice. She was, by most standards throughout the galaxy, a very beautiful woman. Her violet hair was highlighted with a very subtle

shade of pink. Her blue eyes were each accentuated with a pink sclera instead of white. Her fingernails were a deep, glossy purple.

But it was her lavender hued skin that garnered her the most attention.

Lanalai's unusual pigmentations were a result of her being from a small out of the way planet in the Eastern Galactic Arm known as Humalia. All native Humalians were pigmented the same as her.

Humalia had been discovered about one hundred fifty orthodox years ago, and the news that first intelligent life other than humanity had been found created a controversy that divided the Bureau of Science and Religion and almost brought the Impyre to civil war.

But it was quickly learned that the Humalians were in fact a branch of humanity, somehow separated from the rest of the species long ago. But there was something peculiar about them. Their DNA matched other humans almost completely, but not exactly. It was still being researched as to what this extra bit of genetic coding was for, but nothing new had been announced for well over one hundred years. The debate over whether Humalians were human or not had ended when the Emperor Vinorio II declared all Humalians full citizens of the Impyre about one hundred thirty orthodox years ago. Although it was relatively rare to see one away from Humalia, they were not followed by any sort of stigma or stereotypes.

Lanalai, like most other Humalians, never gave the debate much thought. They knew that no matter what that little bit of extra DNA was for, they were still people just like everyone else.

She had come to be in the employ of Johnny Hiro because of the war, indirectly. She had been attending the University of Parcet here in Kazaar when the fighting had gotten bad and the mining colonies were attacked. She ended up stuck here when all non-military travel had been

suspended. The University had temporarily closed, and Lanalai had found herself with a lot of free time on her hands. Not wanting to be idle, and desiring to make a difference, she began volunteering as a relief worker on the planet of Kazaar itself. Mainly she helped to find shelters for the refugees that were coming in from nearby planets in the solar system and from some of the orbiting colonies as well.

Her specialization in school had been communications and languages, which was of limited use to her as a volunteer. After the assault on Kazaar, life on the planet became unbearable with a lot of the living space either destroyed or filled with new refugees. She began to feel like a refugee herself. So she decided to see if life was any better on *Amyrica*. When she arrived there, she realized that in order to have a comfortable lifestyle, she was going to need an income. Although the station was neat and orderly and extremely secure, the inflation rate was enormous. But at least there was money to be had there, the planet's economy had resorted to the barter system in several regions.

She had found it very easy to find employers needing workers. It was, however, hard to convince them to hire someone who had yet to finish a course in a field like hers. Most of the work was for laborers and pilots. She didn't look like she could carry much, and she certainly wasn't a pilot.

So, it was with little hope that she had contacted John Hiro when she saw his want ad for a "sales agent". She was a little intrigued when she read that his salvage company was a part of the relief effort here in Kazaar. After a single meeting and a short discussion about percentages, he offered her the job, and she accepted.

That had been a few weeks ago, and she was happier with her decision than she ever imagined she would be. Everyone on the *Litany* was honest and hardworking. All

were easy to get long with, it seemed. She could tell that they had a long history together, and was hoping that tonight she would learn some of it. She had already developed some good opinions of her crew-mates, and thought that she could only end up liking them more after tonight.

First, there was Arty. She had spent most— well, all really— of her time with him. He was an older gentleman that reminded her of a caring and friendly uncle or older cousin. He was very patient and understanding with her as he taught her some of the finer points of price negotiating on their trips to sell off salvage.

Then, there was Bobby and Sue. Or, it could have been said “Sue and Bobby” just as easily. Lanalai found that you almost could not say one’s name with suffixing the other’s to it. The pair were excellent mechanics, and an even better romantic partners. They fought and argued while working so viciously that it could have been easy to think that they hated each other with a passion. But after seeing them together away from the job, it was easy to see that the passion they held for each other was loving. They treated each other with a kindness and respect that only true soul-mates could share.

Lastly, there was Johnny. She had learned very little of him other than that he might have been ruggedly handsome but hid it under a scruffy beard and shabby clothing. He may have been handsome but he was not attractive.

“No,” she said aloud. “Definitely not attractive.” She made a final adjustment to her flowing green blouse, turned and walked out the door of her cabin.

She walked down the barely lit corridor to the stair well that led down to the main deck. The interior of *Ramona’s Litany* looked much like the exterior. It was gray, utilitarian and all together dreary. Lanalai figured that she would get used to it after a while. Before this she had only traveled on commercial liners, which were at the very least painted a

clean, crisp white. Gray just always looked dirty to her. After she walked down the spiral stairs, she followed the short corridor that ended at the forward egress hatchway. She tapped the old control panel and the door slid open to reveal the docking collar that attached the *Litany* to the space station *Amyrica*.

Amyrica was one of the largest space stations in the Impyre. It stayed in a high orbit over the planet of Kazaar, and could be seen from the surface of most of the northern hemisphere both day and night. It was the central location for practically every major corporation, organization and affiliation in the galaxy. At least it was before the final part of the war. The fuel crisis had caused some of the less prosperous groups to dissolve into locally controlled subsidiaries.

Lanalai summoned a transport-bot with a call box mounted to the wall after she walked down the tubular docking collar and came aboard the station. It arrived within a few seconds. She stepped up onto its riding platform and it read her brain waves to sense her destination. It quickly plotted the fastest route to La Tribute, the small theme bar where she was meeting the others. The T-bot sped through the maze of corridors and hallways, darting around pedestrians and various other robots. It crossed several large open areas where vendors had set up mobile shops, much like an outdoor marketplace.

Finally the bot reached the levitation column and entered the fuzzy, pale blue light that shot both up and down through large holes in the floor and ceiling. Lanalai could see several other bots with passengers rising up in this column and the occupants of the other column were descending.

Ramona's Litany had been docked on Deck Sixty-Two. La Tribute was located on Deck One-Eighteen. It only took a few seconds for the bot to rise up to that level. After it

exited the column of blue light, it resumed its mad dash toward the destination.

Amyrica was one hundred and fifty-two levels in all; seventy-five of those were open to public use. The others were either government facilities or housed the station's support staff and their families. The seventy-five public levels had each, over time, developed their own ethnicity. Most decks were completely self sufficient, and had all the facilities of an independently operating station. Stores, restaurants, hotels, bars and clubs were the main draw for each, but they also all housed wholesalers and distributors of every product imaginable. After a person was on *Amyrica* for a short while, they could identify the level they were currently on by the clothing of the other people there and the names of the businesses.

The common decor of Deck One-Eighteen was red bricks on the outside walls of the shops and gray stones covering the walkways. Black wrought iron bars and fences accented the doors and windows. La Tribute was no exception. Lanalai stepped off the bot's small platform, and waved her hand over the electronic reader on the side of the robot, transferring the money from her bank account to the account of the taxi company. She looked in mild amusement at the holographic images that covered the walls and floor of the storefront that now stood before her. The bricks almost looked real, but not quite. But cheap holograms were better than dirty, dreary gray, she decided. She walked through the open door into the darkened bar.

Her eyes adjusted after a moment and she could see that inside, the place was really quite nice. The lights weren't hovering, but actually hung on chains from the ceiling. And the walls, floor and furniture were made out of real wood. The only holographic projections she could see were two large faux windows in the back of the place. They lent to the illusion that the bar looked out upon some vaguely familiar city. Lanalai guessed it was an ancient city of

Earth, with low-rise brick buildings whose faces looked very similar to the holographic storefronts outside the bar. She noted that the framework of a large, and apparently unfinished, steel tower of some sort dominated the skyline. It looked vaguely familiar to her as well, but she couldn't remember where she could have seen it before.

Lanalai took a look around the bar's patrons and saw Bobby, Sue and Arty seated at the far end of the long wooden bar that ran down the right side of the room. They were all seated on stools that had one central leg that ran all the way down and was actually connected to the floor.

How quaint, she giggled to herself. The trio was laughing about some joke that had just finished when she came up and hopped onto the stool beside Arty.

"Lanalai! Finally!" Bobby Strong's voice boomed over the din of the bar room. "What are ya drinking, girl?" She leaned over close, so she could be heard over the little four-piece band that had just started playing in the corner.

"Whatever you're having will do just fine," she said.

Bobby motioned for the bartender to set Lanalai up with a Ramses' Revenge, a very potent drink. She took a sip and then threw back a large gulp, and they all applauded her and laughed. After that, they all sat and drank for awhile, chatting mostly about the state of the Impyre. They wondered where all the refugees would end up, when would interstellar travel resume without restrictions and what measures the Emperor himself was taking to make things right. They postulated and put forth theories, but they all knew it was just idle talk.

Finally, after the subjects began to be too morose, Lanalai asked where Johnny was tonight. Bobby told her that the Boss usually made his rounds at the seedier bars near the hangars, trying to get some gossip about wrecks and derelicts.

"Why doesn't he spend more time with the crew?" Lanalai asked, setting her drink down.

“He used to,” Sue replied. “Back before Drake went away.” She glanced at Bobby and Arty, who both nodded in agreement.

“Drake? Who’s Drake?” Lanalai had never heard mention of the name before.

It was Bobby who answered. “Drake was Johnny’s best friend until a few years ago. They went to the Academy together, then got stationed together. They were wingmen in the cockpits, and in life. The two were inseparable. It was like that for years.”

Sue cut in as Bobby lifted his glass. “We were their mech-techs on the *Gauntlet*. The four of us spent nearly all of our time together. Those two were a blast to be around. Non-stop fun and excitement.” She chuckled and took another drink.

Bobby picked up the narrative once again. “Yeah, they were all about flying and females, as they used to say. I can’t recall the times I had to bail them out a jam with some girl, usually two.” He smiled at Sue, who was glaring at him over the top of her glass. “You know,” he quickly continued, “by making up a little lie about where the two Casanovas were.”

Sue was still looking at him menacingly, “That better be what happened, or so help me, I’ll tear off your-”

Bobby ended her threat by planting a big kiss on her mouth. “I love this woman!” he exclaimed, and they all laughed heartily.

“So, what happened?” Lanalai asked, still smiling at the two lovers. “Where did Drake go?”

“Prison,” Arty answered. He turned to face Lanalai “I only knew Drake for a short time, so I don’t have the same image of him as the others do. Don’t get me wrong, I liked him well enough, but I can’t say whether I think he was guilty or innocent. The friendship he shared with the others gave them insight enough to make their own judgments.”

“What did he do?” Lanalai was intrigued by this story,

it was some of the background she was hoping to learn about tonight. She never imagined anything this personal or dark to come out.

Sue waved her hand in a gesture of dismissal.

“That’s open to debate,” she said. “He was accused of kidnapping an admiral’s daughter and holding her for ransom. The girl ended up dead, but Drake wasn’t convicted of her murder, only for contributing to her death. It’s all bullshit, though. He didn’t do it, if you ask me. He said he was set up, and I believe him.”

Bobby motioned to the bartender and ordered another drink. Then he turned back to Lanalai.

“I don’t believe him,” he told her. “I think he did it. I saw how unhinged he was after they got discharged. He didn’t know what to do with himself, so he went out thrill seeking. He got wrapped up with some shady characters, and things got out of hand. But make no mistake, he was fully aware of the risk. That makes him responsible. There wasn’t much excitement in flying escort for a salvage outfit, and he got bored. But that doesn’t make him a bad guy.” Bobby took another drink and Arty spoke up.

“I don’t know if he did or didn’t do it. I can’t say how much he knew about what was going on. I can’t say if he was bored or unhinged, as Bobby puts it. But I can say that there wasn’t enough evidence provided by either side to make a solid case for any theory. We just simply don’t know enough. We weren’t there with him that night.” Arty swirled the contents of his glass around as he finished. “It’s unfair to Drake and to the memory of that girl to say anything with any certainty.”

Lanalai took a long drink, letting what the others had said digest in her mind.

“So, what does Johnny think?” she asked after taking another drink. “It must have been hardest for him to deal with, right? His best friend implicated in a murder, it’s enough to break anyone’s ability to trust others.”

Sue's eyes were focused on the top of the bar. "It's kind of sad, actually," she said. "Johnny never questioned it. He assumed from the very beginning that since Drake had been accused, then he was surely guilty. He hasn't spoken to him since the day he got arrested. He didn't even go to the trial, and hasn't talked about it since."

Arty shook his head.

"I asked him about it once," he admitted. "It was a couple of years ago. Johnny looked me directly in the eye and told me that Drake Lawless was dead. I decided to leave it at that." He made a lateral motion through the air with his hand, signifying the finality of the statement.

"How awful," Lanalai said softly. "I never imagined anything so sad. It had to be like losing a brother for him." She could tell that they were all still a little upset by the whole situation. She sat quietly, waiting for someone to change the subject.

They didn't.

It was Bobby who broke the silence. "I guess he would be out by now, right?" Sue nodded.

"Yeah," Arty said. "He got out last year. I read about it in the news. Five years away, almost six now. You would have thought that he would have tried to contact somebody." He took another drink with a look of thoughtfulness on his face.

"I was kind of hoping that he would have tried to come back," Sue replied. "Hoping that maybe he and Johnny would, I don't know—reconcile, I guess." Her voice was a mixture of both disappointment and hopefulness. "They still could, I suppose," she looked around at the others to gauge their reactions.

"No," Bobby said. "Johnny has written Drake off completely. If he were to show up now, one of the two would end up dead. Probably both." He motioned for another round for all four of them. As they drank, they sat quietly for awhile. Lanalai finally spoke up, with what she

hoped would be happier subject.

“So Sue,” she said, turning to face the other woman. “Tell me how you and Bobby fell in love.” Sue’s face lit up as she began telling the story. Lanalai was happy that the mood quickly turned light again as she listened to Sue’s tale. She thought it was one of the most wonderful love stories she had ever heard.

After a while, the dour mood from earlier lifted fully, and the subject of Drake and Johnny was forgotten. They all laughed and shared more stories. Lanalai looked around at the faces of her new friends, and decided that coming to work with them had been a good move for her. Any reservations she might have had disappeared as she got to know them more and more. To add to her pleasure, they seemed to be glad she was there with them. She felt for the first time since leaving Humalia that she was with the sort of people that she should be with.

As she looked around the bar, Lanalai noticed Johnny sitting alone at a table near the back of the bar. He was staring down at several empty glasses, lined up in a row on the tabletop before him. Evidently, he had been there for quite a while, unnoticed by the rest of the crew. He was sitting motionless, apparently lost in thought. She caught Sue’s attention and motioned with a nod of her head toward their boss. Arty saw the gesture and leaned over to speak.

“It’s all right,” he told her. “He usually drinks alone for a while, then he’ll make his way over when he’s ready.” Lanalai nodded that she understood. The foursome continued to talk and laugh, but the amount of drinking lessened. The night was getting old, and they were all still tired from their heavy workload. It wasn’t long, however before Johnny proved Arty right and made his way over to them, staggering a bit as he navigated his way through the tables and chairs. He came up behind Bobby and grabbed him playfully by the shoulders.

“Well hello there, Johnny!” the big man beamed. “It’s

about time you came over to be social with civilized human beings!”

“Heya Bobby,” Johnny said, leaning into the other's ear. “You playing nice with Lanalai? Looks like you all are getting along pretty good. I would have came over sooner, but I didn't want to interrupt your fun.” Johnny's eyes met Lanalai's for a brief instant. He looked as if he were about to say something, but instead quickly looked away. Lanalai wondered to herself what he might have been thinking, but quickly decided to put it out her mind. For now, anyway.

“Set me up, Robert,” Johnny said as he sat down next him. He waited on his drink, took a long pull from it, then turned to the others.

“I have been down at the Tavern,” he said, meaning Cavern's Tavern. The Tavern was a popular bar for deep spacers and miners and was operated by an ex-mercenary named Gregory Cavern.

“I spoke with an old prospector down there,” he continued. “It was a very interesting conversation.”

Arty looked up quizzically. “How so?” he asked. Johnny's face quickly became very somber and stoic.

“He told me where she is,” he replied, and took a drink.

Arty, Bobby and Sue all looked shocked, and almost as if choreographed, they took simultaneous drinks from their glasses. Bobby finished his first, and so he spoke first.

“By 'she', you mean—” He paused for second to take a hard look at Johnny's face. “Amber Rose?” he finished the question. His voice was quiet now, and his face was serious. The smiling and funny Bobby Strong had completely disappeared.

Johnny nodded that Bobby's guess was correct.

Lanalai was at a complete loss as to who this Amber Rose woman was, and why the mention of her had exacted such a drastic change over her friends. She sat quietly while they continued to talk.

“How can you be sure?” Arty inquired. “And, is it

worth it to go out looking for her now, of all times? In case you've forgotten, interstellar travel is suspended.” Sue and Bobby nodded in agreement. Johnny drained his glass, and sat it gently on the bar.

“Meet me on the *Litany* in one hour,” he said very quietly. “I’ll already have our course to Orajeb plotted. Sober up gang, time to go to work.” With that, he stood and strode purposefully out of the bar. He did not turn around to look at his crew, but if he had, he would have seen three looks of astonishment and one of bewilderment.

Chapter Four

The Tale of the Amber Rose

Johnny stood in front of the display panel on the bridge of *Ramona's Litany*. With a quick flick of his hand, he brought up the chart for the Orajeb solar system. He punched in a few numbers and commands using the old and very outdated keypads. The *Litany* was an older ship and had never been re-fitted with the thought controlled sensors that were commonplace on newer vessels and stations.

Johnny, along with Drake, Bobby and Sue, had purchased the Jeckney Salva-Tug 55 from an old deep space junker named Apo. The semi-deranged old man had used her for well over one hundred years, and before that she had been in the service of the government of a small planet whose name Apo could not recall. The shipyard that had produced the Salva-Tug models, Jeckney Manufacturing Company, had gone out of business several years before, and parts for the ship were becoming harder to find. Many of them had to be fabricated as one-offs. The *Litany* was an old girl, and it was beginning to show. Her hull looked like a patchwork quilt fashioned from steel and hyberron.

When questioned about her unusual name, Apo merely commented that Ramona had been his wife, and that she had died long ago.

The ship's main hull was trapezoidal in shape, measuring roughly fifty meters across the bow, seventy-five meters across the stern, and thirty meters thick. Eight large

Model Fourteen-M engines mounted atop the dorsal hull provided the sub-light-speed propulsion. For interstellar travel, four FTL-Lambda star-drives hung from the keel hull. The twelve engines provided a lot of power, but it wasn't used for speed. The *Litany* could tow, albeit rather slowly, vessels of weight classes right up there with the bigger battleships. The power was also needed to supply the array of equipment used in salvage operations.

The command deck was upraised from the fore section of the dorsal hull and protruded slightly in front of the bow.

The mis-matched hull had been painted several shades of dull gray long ago, and was beginning to oxidize in places from exposure to exhaust vents of space stations and salvaged ships. The cargo hold and shuttle hangar opened to the rear of the ship. It was here that the *Flit* was docked. The cargo capacity of the *Litany* was about five cube-shaped megaton containers. The hold was currently filled with fuel cells, encased in their protective canisters.

Johnny had already finished the calculations for fuel consumption of making a journey to Orajeb. There was just enough on board to make it there and back.

He looked up again at the display. The three dimensional model projected by the holo-display unit rotated slowly before him.

Orajeb, he mused to himself, *that's where Sorano told me. Could it really be there?*

He lifted his hand and placed his finger in the little gray cloud that represented the asteroid field between the fifth and sixth planets orbiting the yellow sun. Unfortunately, that asteroid field had never been charted. It was madness to think that they would be able to find anything in that floating labyrinth.

But the *Litany* wasn't equipped with standard scanners; she had Arty's modified systems. They would be able to comb those billions of cubic kilometers in a matter of a few orthodox months, where it would take most other single

ships years to complete the task. Johnny marveled at the fact that Arty worked for him rather than making a fortune with some spacing corporation.

But then again, he knew why the old man was here.

Orajeb was a yellow star just beyond the Southern Frontier border. The Impyre had laid claim to the system long ago, but no governor or any other representative had ever been sent. So it was really more of a “wilderness system” than anything. There were eleven planets, but only one had any chartered settlements, the third planet, Orajeb Tri. Johnny ordered up the information about the small world.

Orajeb Tri had three major cities. The central of these being Middleport, an equatorial city and the only place that large space vessels could find a port. Not that many space vessels came to Orajeb, however. Due to it’s distance from the center of the Impyre, only two types of visitors sought passage to the out-world.

The first type of visitor, hunters and sportsmen, usually headed to the second settlement, Zoic.

Zoic was also in an equatorial region on the edge of a vast rain forest. Hunters prized the strange and large animals of the forest as trophies. The rarest and most revered of these animals was an ape-like creature known as a Dalangore Beast. The sportsmen most often got their thrills by rafting down the Zoic River, which snaked its way deep into the rainforest. No one had ever made it all the way to the end and returned to tell about it.

The other type of visitor was the pilgrim, who always traveled on foot from Middleport to the far removed city of Temple. It was estimated that only about half those who started the journey ever finished it. Most of them died along the road, which wound its way high into a mountain range in the temperate zone to the north of Middleport.

Temple was the home of a religious sect known as Bhudapai-Dan and was the central base of worship for the

entire religion. There were no modern conveniences—*contrivances*, as they were called—in Temple. There were no electronics and only hand-crafted machines made of wood and stone. Johnny chuckled to himself as he read about the quaintly primitive lifestyle the denizens of Temple had adopted.

He was still reading when Lanalai knocked quietly on the doorway. He looked up and motioned her in.

“It’s open, Lanalai,” he said as he turned away from the display. “By the look on your face, I’m guessing that you want a word with me?” He now moved over to take a seat in the captain’s chair, and Lanalai was suddenly struck by the realization that Johnny never referred to himself as “Captain.” The thought escaped her quickly when he motioned her over to take the seat beside him.

“Yes,” she was looking at the holo-display as she spoke. “I was wondering why we would desert the relief effort here, which is benefiting millions of people, just so that we can go look for this one woman.” Johnny smiled as she talked. The dim lights of the display panels were reflecting highlights her lavender skin, giving her an angelic appearance.

An angel of mercy, he thought.

She was still scowling at him.

Or maybe not, he amended to himself as he looked into the hard stare of her blue and pink eyes.

“Who,” Lanalai continued, “is this Amber Rose? An old girlfriend or something? How could she possibly be worth losing the time and money here, especially when we are doing some real good?” Her face showed a mixture of concern, irritation for him and a compassion which Johnny could only assume was for the refugees here in Kazaar. He wanted her to come with them for some reason, unknown even to him, really. But since she was new to the crew she didn’t understand what was happening. He would have to explain it carefully if he really wanted her to stay.

“She’s not a girlfriend,” he said after a few moments of collecting his thoughts. “She’s not even a person, she’s a ship.”

Lanalai looked at him crossly. “A ship? A damned spaceship? No wonder everyone else told me to come talk to you about it. What in the Cosmos could be so important about this ship that would make me want to leave our responsibilities here?”

Johnny was looking at her questioningly now. “You’ve never heard of the *Amber Rose*? The most famous, or infamous, ghost ship in galactic maritime history?”

“Ghost ship? What in Hell are talking about, John?” In that one sentence, Lanalai’s expression had gone from irritation to incredulity to ire almost instantly. Before her question could be answered, a voice broke in from behind her. It was Arty.

“I think perhaps you should tell her the story, Johnny. The whole story.” Arty’s small build was silhouetted in the doorway as he stepped onto the bridge. He moved over to take a seat in the navigator’s chair, in front of Lanalai. He swiveled it around to face the other two as Lanalai agreed with him.

“Yes,” she told Johnny, “tell me the whole story.”

“Okay, from the beginning then.” Johnny reached up to the control panel and brought up a holo-picture of an Impyrial battle cruiser on the display. It rotated slowly as he began to speak.

“Fifteen years ago, a *Diable de Mer* class battleship named the *I.N.V. Godiva* was de-commissioned, to be replaced by a new design, the *Basilisk*. The *Godiva* was sold in a private auction, as opposed to being relegated to a local system patrol ship. The buyer was a noted scientist named Dr. Orli Noblessar. He was, by all accounts, a genius with propulsion and computer systems and he was a philosopher.

He took the ship back to his research facility, a platform

orbiting the planet Durami Du, and began to modify her heavily. Most of these modifications were highly secret, and only whispered about even after. The only thing he did that was generally known to the public was to have her painted a deep crimson. Well, he also changed her name. From then on, *Godiva* was called *Amber Rose*.”

Arty interjected here, giving Lanalai a meaningful look. “Amber Rose was his daughter’s name. She had recently died after a long battle with Remaux Syndrome. It was conjectured that he missed her so much that he wanted the ship to be a memorial to her.”

Johnny nodded at the older man, half-smiling. “At any rate, the ship stayed there at Durami for about five years before she vanished.”

“Vanished?” Lanalai asked, her interest apparently peaked. “What happened?” she asked, leaning forward slightly in anticipation.

“No one knows,” Johnny said, noticing that he had her attention now. “The research team and station crew were planet-side for some shore leave, and when they returned, they found that there was nothing to return to. The base and the ship were both gone.

At first, it was presumed that either a pirate attack had destroyed them or that an experiment had gone terribly wrong, and—well, you can see what I mean.” He held up his arms in a gesture of ignorance. “They were just gone, without a trace. There was no debris and no transmissions were sent. A real mystery, but hardly anyone noticed,” he was still shrugging. “The galaxy is full of mysteries, as they say.

A few months later, more people got exposed to the story when a lone miner reported seeing a crimson *Diable de Mer* hiding in an asteroid field in the Vindeez system. Then a few months later, another sighting occurred in Laku. This went on for a couple of o-years, the story always the same. She would sit quietly, like she was adrift,

then—Boom!— her star-drives would light up and she would be gone. And it was always some old, half crazy deep spacer that saw her. Most everyone assumed that they were either completely crazy or just plain liars.” Johnny had been looking at Lanalai as he spoke, but now he glanced at Arty, who nodded. Lanalai thought that he was agreeing with Johnny on some point that she had evidently missed.

“The last reported sighting,” Johnny was looking back to her now, “was also the only credible sighting. It was in the Namarri system seven years ago. A cargo hauler named the *Lucillia* was attacked and subsequently destroyed by a ship that was positively identified as the *I.N.V. Godiva*, the *Amber Rose*. The only survivors were two Navy pilots who had been flying escort duty. Before they could disable the rogue warship, she activated her star-drives and was gone. She had only fired on the *Lucillia* once.” Johnny paused here, as if in quiet thought.

“The weapon” he continued, “was an energy beam of such magnitude that nothing like it had ever been seen before. Or since. That's what makes that ship so important. That weapon must be accounted for and contained.”

Lanalai had a look of concern on her face now. Arty leaned toward and pointed at the still rotating image on the display.

“Countless salvagers, treasure hunters and mercenaries have been looking for that ship ever since,” he said quietly. “Not all of them are as scrupulous as our benefactor here. If the weapon were to fall in the wrong hands, to turn a phrase, the consequences would be disastrous.” His expression was one of sincerity and compassion.

Johnny quickly entered some figures into the computer, and the display changed to a star map. A green line traced its way from a tiny point of light labeled “Namarri” to another labeled “Orajeb”. He nodded, with a smile. “The heading she had when she left Namarri fits for an Orajeb

drop, but with low probability. The low odds are because of distance. That's probably why I've never considered that system before." Johnny got to his feet and stood in front of the display for a few minutes, pondering. He looked to be lost in thought, so Lanalai spoke quietly to Arty.

"So, it's not fame and fortune we are seeking at Orajeb?" Arty shook his head no.

Johnny did not turn to face her, but he did answer her question. "No, that weapon was unlike anything—" He ended his thought abruptly, then added "That technology must be dealt with responsibly."

He then looked at Arty and nodded. Then he excused himself, saying that he was going to the engine room to finish the preparations for the jump. After a few moments, Arty spoke.

"I knew her, you know," he told Lanalai.

"Pardon?" she said, obviously surprised by the revelation.

"Amber Noblessar, I knew her, a long time ago. That's how, in a round-a-bout sort of way, that I met Johnny and the others." Arty turned the holo-display off and leaned back in his chair slightly. "It's not an interesting story, really. Her father, Orli, was a colleague of my father, Davis Blackstone. I was a teenager, and so was Amber, when we met. We weren't really friends, but since our families attended parties hosted by the other, we came into contact several times. We were friendly, but never really close at all." Lanalai nodded that she understood, and he went on

"The last time that I saw her was right before she went into the Navy. I remember that Orli was livid. He was determined that no child of his was going to be a grunt pilot. But he eventually came to understand and respect her decision. He loved her very much, and could not remain angry with her for long. It devastated him when she was diagnosed with Remaurx. My father told me then that Orli had taken Amber to the research platform at Durami, in the

hope that he could find a way to prolong her life, without letting her suffer. She died soon after that, however.”

Lanalai leaned forward and put her hand on his. “I’m sorry, even if you weren’t close with her, it had to be hard because of the family friendship.”

Arty nodded. “I only have good memories of her, so it’s better than it could be, I suppose. But you’re right; the family friendship did affect how I felt about it. After I heard about the ‘ghost ship’, I decided to investigate for myself. I guess I wanted—and still do—to put some closure on the whole ordeal.

Johnny and I started moving in the same circles, and we eventually met. It was right here, as a matter of fact, in Cavern’s Tavern, now that I think about it. We talked for a while, and found out each other’s connections to the ship. After meeting the others, I agreed to join the crew of the *Litany*.”

Lanalai looked as if she was trying to solve a puzzle in her head when Arty finished speaking. She looked at him questioningly and asked “What connection does Johnny have to the ship? I see yours, obviously. But you said that you both had connections to the ship. I’m missing something, Mr. Blackstone.” She smiled as she wagged her finger in a mock-accusing fashion at him. The two had become comfortable with each other over the past weeks, so Arty knew that she was playing.

“My dear, you have missed it,” he replied in mock reproach. “Remember when we told you that Johnny and Drake were discharged after their escort mission failed? That mission was to protect the—”

“*Lucillia!*” Lanalai interjected. “That’s how, a few minutes ago, he knew the exact heading the *Amber Rose* took from Namari. He was there!” Arty nodded at her.

“That’s the whole of it, Lanalai.” Arty stood and walked over beside her. He leaned down to speak into her ear. “I hope that we’ve helped you decide to come with us. But if

you still aren't sure, look at it this way: we will have only lost a few days of salvage time if she isn't there. No big concern." He paused briefly. "But if she is there and we don't go, who knows who would find her. And if *we* are the ones to find her, well, then there's a chance to make a real difference in this galaxy. But if I were you, I would make up my mind soon. We are going to be leaving rather quickly." He patted her on the shoulder and walked out in to the corridor, leaving Lanalai sitting alone on the bridge.

"What the Hell," she said aloud and waited for the others to join her.

Chapter Five

The Young Captain

The young Captain did not look like an officer, much less a captain, tonight. His heavy Akharan leather jacket and matching black pants were more like the garb one would expect a pilot, perhaps one with a shady reputation, to be wearing. His royal blue uniform was hanging in his closet; medals still pinned to the lapels. His age too, might have seemed young for a captain. He wasn't quite thirty orthodox years old, and already had his own command for two and a half of those years. His dark skin and striking blue eyes contrasted each other wonderfully. Whenever he had the need or desire to discipline any crewman who stepped out of line, he would stare at them with those icy blue eyes. Whatever the transgression might have been, whoever received this stare would kowtow instantly. It had been a technique that his father had used when he had been a captain. It served them both equally well it seemed.

His moderately sized battle-carrier, the *I.N.V. Parallax*, was docked here at *Amyrica* for a six-hour shore leave. He had been with the rest of the fleet for several days now, running rescue missions to the troubled colonies. Only one vessel in the Impyrial fleet was allowed shore leave at a time, and it was pure luck that he had found what he had been looking for in the drinking dens this evening. He had held little hope that he would even see any of the *Ramona's Litany* crew members at all. But, that little hope had paid off, and his decision to come here instead of sleeping might

just pay off as well.

He moved through the small crowd near the bar in Cavern's Tavern with ease and sat down on a stool next to the old man that he had seen that no good scavenger rat Hiro chatting with earlier. He felt slightly disgusted that he was sitting on the same seat that bastard of an excuse for a pilot had used. Every time he saw Hiro, he wanted to stride right up to him and choke the life from his worthless carcass. But he never did. He would have to wait to get him, just like he had gotten the other bastard pilot, Lawless.

That had been a major screw up from the beginning, but at least he had gotten Drake out of the way for a while. He had hoped that LaCroiux would have finished him off, but Drake had left IPC7 on that damned green ship of his and disappeared. The only clue that he had given to where he was headed was some reference about going to a temple, chapel or some other religious building. The *Parallax* had been waiting for Drake to arrive at the pleasure planet Januse after he had been released. The deportation guard had given Lawless the suggestion as instructed. The guard had been wearing a subliminal transmitter, implanting the desire to go to Januse in Drake's mind, but Drake must have been concentrating on something else. Something very important and consuming.

Something like a religious conversion, perhaps.

It was inconceivable to him that Hiro and Lawless had been allowed to go free after what happened in Namarri. They had allowed the ship they had been hired to protect to be destroyed, and by a derelict no less. The level of incompetence they had demonstrated had been inexcusable. But, after a lengthy investigation that had continued years after they had been relieved of duty, they had been pardoned of any wrongdoing.

Pardoned by the Admiralty, maybe, but not by the young Captain.

No, he would never forgive them for what had happened

at Namarri.

Conspiracy against the Impyre or not, they would taste his wrath. Lawless had been given a small sampling of it, but there was more to come as soon as the Captain located him. It would be easy to take care of Lawless now that he was an ex-con.

Lawless, Hiro and that damnable ship, the *I.N.V. Godiva* would all pay for Namarri. He came here tonight more to listen for rumors of the '*Diva* being sighted anywhere more than he had come for Hiro. But one was as good as another, he supposed.

He had seen Hiro many times over these past few years of searching for the *Godiva*. He had never tried to set Johnny up the way he had Drake because it had been more satisfying to watch their friendship crumble and disintegrate. One day he would get Hiro, and when he did, the Captain would explain to him how he had sent that girl to Drake's hangar so that the security holo would disprove his claim of having never met her. Then the Captain would tell Hiro how two of his hired thugs were waiting in that hangar with stealth suits and took her away.

What had happened after that, no one really knew for sure. The girl died and the thugs had vanished without a trace. The Captain really didn't care, but the courts had. There was only enough proof from the security holo to convict Lawless of conspiracy in connection with the girl's death. It wasn't what he had planned but the Captain had accepted it, for the time being.

He had never spoken to Hiro, but the salvage rat had spotted him several times over the years, and had often nodded to him in recognition, thinking that the Captain was another low-life pilot like himself. That left a bittersweet taste in his mouth, but it was better than Hiro knowing the truth of things.

The Captain had watched Hiro with contempt for quite some time this particular evening; he was in a foul mood

from having to shuttle those ignorant refugees back and forth. It was not befitting of a battle-carrier, or her captain. He had been staring coldly over the rim of his glass when the old man had sauntered drunkenly over to sit at the bar beside Hiro. The two had struck up a conversation that had lasted for over an hour. When it had ended, Hiro had paid the drunkard's tab and left abruptly. The Captain had considered following him, to see why he had left in such a hurry. He thought better of it and decided that talking to the old man would probably tell him more than he would learn from spying on Hiro. He had waited only a few moments before he had pushed his way to the bar to this stool, not giving the old man a chance to leave.

"What are ya drinking, old timer?" he asked as he motioned for the bartender, who nodded and signaled that he would be over to them in a moment.

"Whut are ya buyin'?" The smell of alcohol, prevalent as it was in the bar, was even more pronounced on the old man's breath when he answered. His hair was curly and gray, as was his beard. The skin on his face looked dry and cracked from the large number of wrinkles that criss-crossed it. His forehead was furrowed deeply, which drew attention to the massively thick eyebrows that crowned his eye sockets, which were deep and sunken. If the Captain had ever met an older man than this, he could not remember it.

The bartender, an adequately plain and non-descript fellow, made his way over to the pair. The Captain ordered a Tarkijuan Cocktail for himself. He pointed to his new companion, who simply ordered "Anudder." When they had been handed their drinks, "anudder" turned out to be a very cheap and very potent whiskey. The Captain raised his tumbler in a salute to the old man seated next to him and took a drink. The old man raised his glass and drained it rather unceremoniously. The Captain scowled, but the old man did not notice. His eyes were closed and he was

singing an old space miner's song under his breath. After a moment, he turned back to the Captain.

"Sorano's the name," he put forth his hand in greeting. The Captain shook it and wiped his hand on his trousers under the table afterward. Sorano smiled widely. He had no teeth and as a result his lips were as nearly sunken as his eyes. White whiskers jutted out from his cheeks and his nose was had several small abscesses on it.

"You can call me Vhee," replied the Captain, without returning the smile. For all his diplomatic training and education, he could never bring himself to fake friendliness. His interest here was information, not popularity. "I could not help but notice that you were just conversing with an old friend of mine," said Vhee as he took another sip of his Tarkijuan Cocktail. "Well, let's say that he's an acquaintance. Or perhaps competitor is more suitable." Vhee now smiled, attempting to appear disarming rather than threatening in his role of "competitor." He rightly guessed that no matter how good—or poor—his acting skills were, Sorano was too drunk to even notice.

"You lookin' fer that ship too then?" Sorano's speech was slurred from the alcohol. Vhee leaned in close to hear him better.

"That ship? Yes, I am." Vhee could hardly contain himself on hearing Sorano's question. Could it be that this old miner knew the whereabouts of the *Godiva*?

"Well, I'm not spozz'd to tell nobody 'bout that ship, now that I been paid." Sorano's glass had been re-filled and he emptied it quickly.

"Well, seems to me that if you've been paid, that you can pretty much tell whoever you want." Vhee motioned for the bartender to fill Sorano's glass again. "Don't you agree?"

"Maybe, maybe" said Sorano as the bartender poured more of the light brown liquor into his glass. After it was

emptied again, Sorano turned to look at Vhee. “I spoze that if I were to ferget who paid me, I might be drunk enough to tell the wrong feller.”

“What would it take to help you forget?” Vhee now wore a genuine smile upon his face. This was starting to become a very good shore leave indeed. He had been waiting for a break like this for years, with the knowledge that if Hiro ever did find the *'Diva*, that he would most likely not be there to witness it. But Vhee had always hoped that he would be, and now here he was.

“Ten thousand should do it,” replied Sorano, who was more than a little wobbly, and was perched on his stool like a drunken bird. He steadied himself with his hands on the edge of the bar. Vhee looked at him curiously, and reached into the pocket of his jacket.

When he withdrew his hand and placed the contents of his pocket on the bar, the old drunk’s eyes grew wide with surprise. Vhee had just placed ten small silver disks in front of him. The old man could barely speak, but he finally managed to ask “Are those what I think they are?”

Vhee nodded as he moved his hand away from the small but very valuable pile of coins.

“Ten yinlars, worth more than ten thousand credits,” he said.

Yinlars were once the hard currency of the old Terran Empire. They were made of hyberron, which was once considered to be the rarest metal in the galaxy. Over time, more and more of these coins were minted, countless billions upon billions and as man explored more of the galaxy, it became apparent that hyberron was far from rare. It was in fact quite common. So common that now several shipyards used hyberron to armor plate some of their lines of war-faring vessels.

But now, a thousand years later, the value of the yinlar had increased, due to the fact that they were no longer minted. But of course, no place of business accepted them,

either. For that reason, and the fact that they were untraceable, only one group of people used yinlars as currency.

Pirates.

If Sorano didn't have any inclination that Vhee was a man who walked on the darker side of the law before the coins appeared, he certainly had one now. He needed to tell this character what he knew, and vacate with his money quickly. He peered into his glass, his gaze shifting to the stack of coins every few seconds. He nodded after a few moments and began to speak.

"The ship, she's red, like blood. Drifting in an asteroid field in the Orajeb system. Only one field in that system, so, it shouldn't be too awful tricky to find." Sorano put his left hand over the pile of coins as he gave drunken, but detailed, instructions on how to find the ship.

Vhee was staring at him now, a very hard and stony look upon his face. He was doing everything in his power to mask the excitement he was starting to feel. He had been waiting for three things for years now. And all three of those things might just be within his grasp, and two of them may come in one package. The ends of existence for Hiro and the *Godiva* were close at hand, and soon he would find Lawless as well.

Slowly he spoke. "And what did the scavenger pilot have to say about that?" He didn't really care what Hiro has said, but needed to know if he had believed this rattle-brained old drunk.

"He thanked me and went to get his ship, I guess. He really didn't say much, ya know?"

The Captain smiled, his teeth bared wide. "Thank you Sorano, enjoy the money." He stood and stepped closer to the old man. "I, too, must be going to get my ship." He clamped his hands firmly upon the frail shoulders of the old man, who was still seated. He leaned in close enough that his cheek brushed against the wiry gray hair on Sorano's

head and whispered harshly into his ear. “Ya know?”

He pushed the old man forward roughly, pinning his arms on the bar. He let out a chuckle as he picked up his drink and drained it. He slapped the empty tumbler onto the bar and with a wild-eyed expression pointed at the obviously shaken Sorano. He winked and turned to the door, leaving the bewildered old man to stare at him as he walked out of the bar.

When he stepped out into the corridor, the Captain's face went stoic again as he activated his comunit.

“Commander, get the *Parallax* ready for departure. Call back all personnel, we are departing *Amyrica* within the hour,” he barked as his paced quickened. The character of Vhee was gone now; he was once again a Captain of the Impyrial Navy.

After a brief pause, he added “Also send a security squad to a place called Cavern’s Tavern. I tagged a criminal with a tracer. He must be a pirate as he is carrying several yinlars. Have him brought aboard, and we will detain him until the Galactic Space Faring Commission can be contacted.”

The Commander’s reply came strong and loud, “Aye, Aye. All will be in order upon your return, Captain Rahji.”

Chapter Six

Waiting at Orajeb

The *Maduza* hung in a low orbit over Orajeb Tri. Her massive engine was powered down, but life support and the scanning computers were active. Drake was reclined in the pilot's chair, watching those scanners as they peered into the far reaches of the solar system. His search was concentrated mainly on the navigation buoy that marked the most commonly used drop point, but he directed his attention to other areas every few minutes. He had been waiting up here for two days, since right after he had received the GalCom message from Sorano that the old miner had passed on the information just as Drake had paid him to do.

Drake had been here at Orajeb for months now, ever since his release from Cayge. He had lived on the planet among the followers of Bhudapai-Dan. The large compound the monks had built, Temple Prima, had impressed Drake with its efficiency. As well traveled as he was, he had seen very few examples of a primitive society working together to build something so advanced as Temple Prima. The streets were finished with hand-quarried paving stones, and the wood and stone structures were as sturdy as steel and concrete. His own dwelling had been far from the utilitarian abode he had expected, based on Shonu's tales.

He had located Shonu's mentor, Dhama Irozu, with relative ease. When he had docked the *Maduza* in

Middleport, he had inquired around the spaceport about how to get to Temple Prima. A short and attractive female bounty hunter had sent him to a small square just outside. There he had found the Dhama, clad in the standard yellow robes of his faith, preaching to a group of three or four tourists. They had seemed more interested in the sermon as a tourist activity rather than a spiritual one. Irozu hadn't seemed to care.

Drake had introduced himself as a pilgrim, and explained that Shonu had instructed him for several months. He made no mention of prison, or of Shonu's death. He had felt some considerable guilt about that, and neither cared to relive those emotions nor explain the situation to Shonu's friends. Luckily, the Dhama had asked no questions, and invited Drake to come to Temple Prima. This had been what Drake had been hoping for, so he readily accepted. Together they had made the seven-day hike to the compound, which stood at the foothills of a large mountain range.

There were no technologically advanced devices in the compound, but since Drake was a guest, he had been allowed to keep his comunit in his room, but nothing else. The *Maduza* had to remain in Middleport's spaceport, where Drake had paid one local year's storage fees in advance.

Drake had lived among the believers, and slowly came to realize that had things been different, he could have easily converted to this religion that not only preached of brotherhood, but also practiced it. He had been treated better and was living more comfortably than he ever had. Better than his enlisted days even. He sometimes felt a twinge of remorse for his deceitful purpose in being here, but he pushed those feelings aside, and concentrated on his plan. He had recited his speech to Hiro over and over in his mind, wanting it to be perfect when he set things right.

Then, the message from Sorano had arrived. He had

located Hiro on *Amyrica*, and had offered the bait for Drake's trap. It was up to Drake now to go spring that trap. He needed to get back to Middleport, back to the *Maduza*. He had another moment of guilt when he had vanished from the compound without telling Irozu he was leaving, but he didn't have time to explain.

He had been on a strict exercise regiment since he had arrived, and was in better condition than he had ever been. He made the trip, on foot, back to Middleport in four and a half days. He had been exhausted, but took no time to rest in the spaceport. He retrieved his flight suit from the storage compartment on the side of the *Maduza's* cockpit and climbed aboard. Within minutes, he had taken off and sped into the upper stratosphere.

There he put the ship into a low geosynchronous orbit so that any other vessel that might pick him up on a scan would likely think the *Maduza* was on the planet's surface. He had started scanning, and had been doing so around the clock ever since.

There wasn't much traffic out here, the Orajeb star system was so far from the Inner Realm of the Impyre that only wealthy pilots traveled here as tourists. Most of the people living on Temple were self-sufficient, so very few off world shipments were needed. Drake had found no ships roving about when he had finally gotten up into orbit. If *Ramona's Litany* dropped in, he would see her quickly.

Drake reached over and picked up the dermal applicator that lay beside an opened packet of Forlasian cinnamon wafers. He placed it on his thigh and pressed the button on the top of the device. He could feel the stimulant enter his bloodstream and almost immediately his mind cleared and his muscles were filled with energy. He hadn't slept for days now, and had no intentions sleeping until after Hiro had arrived.

At almost that very instant, a ship dropped out of an interstellar tunnel near the navigation buoy. Drake sat

straight up as the *Maduza*'s scanners compared the new arrival's identity broadcaster to a list of all ships that had ever been associated with Hiro or any of his crew-mates.

A big smile crossed Drake's face when he saw that it was the *Litany*. He began checking and double-checking all the *Maduza*'s systems. The moment he had been waiting for was almost at hand, and he was ready. Everything with the *Maduza* was in order, but he had to wait for the right time to leave orbit.

He needed to be patient.

Drake picked up one of the reddish-brown wafers and munched on it as he watched the scanner displays with anticipation. *Ramona's Litany* was making her way to the asteroid field between the fifth and sixth planets of the solar system, right where Shonu had first seen the crimson ghost ship.

Chapter Seven

The Search of Orajeb

Lanalai was only half-heartedly watching the display of graphs and sine waves that floated in front of her. Her initial enthusiasm had been worn away over the past five days. That's how long the crew of the *Litany* had been searching the asteroid field. They had encountered absolutely nothing noteworthy in that entire time. Any interest that had been sparked by Johnny and Arty's story about the ghost ship had waned considerably. She had decided to talk to Johnny about it on the fourth day, but her argument that they were needed more in Kazaar than here was met with a staunch refusal.

She had weighed her options and decided that she really didn't know Johnny or the rest of the crew all that well, especially when it came to the subject of this ship. They might be just as apt to maroon her, or worse, if she caused much trouble about it. It was obvious to her that the *Amber Rose* was of the utmost importance to everyone on board but her. She had joined their crew, and it was her duty to follow them where they deemed necessary, so she had let the subject drop. But even though she had resigned herself to this task, she wasn't overjoyed with it by any means.

She looked up and watched the others at their workstations. Bobby and Sue were operating the navigation and sensor controls. Arty was analyzing data through his cerebral-linked computer. Lanalai herself was monitoring all waveform transmissions and signals. Or

rather, she was monitoring as many as possible; this field was filled with intermittent radioactive signals and echoes of signals. If it hadn't been for her training as a communications specialist, she would have never been able to manage the task. Johnny was outside in the *Flit*, setting up the network of probes that was feeding all the information to the bridge of the *Litany*.

She instinctively looked back to her display. She had caught something out of the corner of her eye. She thought she had seen a spike in one of the lower frequencies. She watched closely now. After several seconds, she saw another spike in the amplitude at the same frequency as before. She kept a mental count and waited. She got to twenty and saw it again. Now her disinterest had vanished. She counted again, and once more the amplitude spiked slightly at twenty. A small bead of perspiration formed on her forehead and her heartbeat increased. She watched the cycle complete five more times, using a computerized timer to mark the spikes. She cleared her throat and spoke into her comunit.

“Johnny, I think I have something here.”

Johnny pressed the fire button on his control stick and launched the five hundred nineteenth probe of this new grid. Each grid consisted of one thousand probes, and covered millions of cubic meters. This was the fourth such grid that he had set up in this section of the asteroid field. The crew of the *Litany* would examine the data and if nothing was found, he would retrieve all the probes and move systematically to a new area. He had decided on this particular side of the field based on what Sorano had told him. The old man's mind had been muddled by age and drink, but he had been specific about a few points. He had told Johnny that the *Amber Rose* was hiding behind a rather

large rock, with a concave side facing away from the sun. This section of the field was home to several large bodies, more than twice the amount found in other regions.

Johnny set the autopilot to the next waypoint, which had been plotted into the navigation system during pre-flight. He watched the robotic probe move itself into position and start its dual tasks of listening and transmitting. Lanalai would be listening too.

Lanalai.

He knew that she wasn't happy out here at all. But he was glad that she had decided to come along. Her skills were proving most useful in reading the probe data. That was why he had hired her, really. But there was something else; he had come to realize that he liked her. Talking to her made him feel foolish and jumbled up, but he always looked forward to being around her. She was a smart woman, and self-reliant too. She had been blunt with him, and with Arty, from what the older man had told him about their final conversation at Kazaar. She was a fine addition to the crew.

And a fine looking one at that, he added in his thoughts without realizing it. He decided that he would talk with her some more after this grid had been exhausted.

The autopilot slowed the *Flit* and then stopped the shuttle at the waypoint. Johnny went through the probe's prep and launch routines for the five hundred twentieth time. He knew that he would be doing that sequence in his sleep later. He chuckled aloud as he joked to himself that he might never get to sleep again. Since arriving in Orajeb, he had not slept at all. He remained awake from the adrenaline of the hunt and with the aid of stimulants. The rest of the crew had been sleeping fours hours for every eighteen awake.

He could tell that Lanalai was not used to such a rigorous schedule, unlike the others. She had always taken rest and relaxation for granted, she had admitted earlier in

the search. Now she realized what a precious thing they were.

Johnny wondered what she looked like when she slept. He imagined her shapely face in a peaceful slumber. He closed his eyes as he waited for the probe to set up after he launched it. The image of her sleeping was still in his mind. Her lavender skin was highlighted by a soft, unseen light. She was half-smiling, her pink lips shining and moist. The image stayed in his head as he himself drifted off to sleep. He began to dream. Lanalai opened her eyes and spoke quietly to him.

“Johnny, I think I have something here.”

Drake sat up from his relaxed position when he heard Lanalai's words. He had been listening to their conversations with the *Maduza's* outlawed communications monitors. He had been moving from the cockpit to the cramped sleeping chamber since the *Litany* had dropped in, but had not slept at all. His fatigue was starting to catch up to him, but his frequent stimulant injections kept him going. He would laugh when Hiro would call for a break, so that his crew could get some rest.

During these breaks, Drake would sit in the darkened cockpit and listen to the static of the comunit while they slept, imagining how his plan would culminate once he got out there with Hiro in front of him. He hoped that he could somehow get face to face with his old partner and friend. He wondered what Johnny would have to say to him. Would he be afraid or apologetic? Would he be surprised at all or would he even care? Drake only knew that Johnny would care after he was finished.

Drake would make sure of it.

The crew of *Ramona's Litany* had been concentrating on searching out in the asteroids, so Drake had gone

completely unnoticed, other than when Hiro's new communications tech scanned the whole system for ships and thought the *Maduza* to be docked. This Lanalai girl had a very nice voice, and from time to time Drake caught himself trying to imagine what she looked like. It had been a very long time since he had been with a woman, since before he went to prison. His obsession for the Orajeb system and payback had over-shadowed his physical longings. He chuckled when remembered what the guard had said to him right before he left IPC7. Perhaps he should have taken his advice and visited Januse before coming to Orajeb. He had the sudden and inexplicable urge to go to there now, but it passed quickly.

"What have you got, Lanalai?" Hiro's voice crackled in the speakers, the signal was being interfered with by the large amounts of iron dust that floated around in the asteroid belt. Drake had constantly been adjusting the settings of the Gala-Had Frequency Espionage device to compensate for the interference.

"It's some sort of faint, low frequency radioactive signal." Lanalai's voice crackled too, and Drake adjusted the settings again. "Here, I've isolated it. I'm transmitting the display to you now." Her voice was smooth and clear now and Drake took his hand from the control panel.

"Do you see it there?" she was asking Johnny, but Drake nodded in response. He was receiving the transmission as well. The Gala-Had was certainly worth the exorbitant price that Grant had charged him for installing it while Drake had been on Cayge. Drake hoped that the other modification Grant had made would be as useful, and at the same time hoped that he would never *have* to use it.

"Yeah, that pulsing signal" Johnny answered and Drake nodded to him also. They had found it, and it wouldn't be long until Drake could reveal himself. His palms began to sweat as he reached for the dermal applicator again. He shot the drug as Johnny asked Lanalai if she knew what the

signal could be.

“I really can’t make a guess to *what* it is, but I can tell you *where* it is.” She answered.

“Send me the co-ords, and I’ll go check it out.” Johnny told Lanalai. Drake smiled when he heard it.

Go ahead, he thought, *you do that*. He was happy to see that Hiro still had a bit of that old gung-ho mentality left over from their years as fighter pilots. It might come in useful, when it came down to the final confrontation Drake had planned.

“Negative Johnny,” it was Bobby Strong’s powerful voice that Drake heard now. “You remember what that bloody thing did to the *Lucillia*, don’t you? There’s no way in Hell I’m letting you take that little cracker box of a ship out there.”

“It’s probably nothing, Bobby” Hiro replied, his voice was starting to crack and pop, so Drake adjusted the Gala-Had again.

“Regardless, we’re not taking any chances. Get back to the *Litany*, and we’ll all go check it out together.” Bobby’s tone implied that he was not prepared to discuss this any further.

“All right, Mommy” Johnny joked. “But if you’re worried about that big gun that the *Godiva* is packing, let me tell you that the *Litany* would fare no better than the *Flit*, or the *Lucillia*, for that matter.” Drake nodded in agreement to that, but he knew that it wasn’t the guns of the *Godiva* that would be targeting the *Litany* today. He could see that Hiro had changed the *Flit*’s course and was headed back to the old Salva-Tug.

Drake heard Bobby laugh at Johnny’s joke.

“Regardless, Son, we are going there together,” the big man said.

Drake waited until the *Flit* had docked and *Ramona’s Litany* began to move. If his luck held out, they would all be concentrating on the pulsing signal that was emanating

from the asteroid belt. Drake had found the signal when he first arrived in Orajeb was checking out Shonu's story, but he didn't know what the signal was. He hadn't bothered to investigate it any further, afraid that his presence in the asteroid field might draw unwanted attention. He only needed to know that there was something out there to draw his prey into the trap. The pulsing signal was perfect.

Grinning ever so slightly, Drake flipped a switch and powered up the engine. His course was already set to the source of the signal. The locations of all of the asteroids that were floating around that source were programmed into the navigation computer. He only had one last thing to prepare.

He flipped another switch and the Plaz-tech cannons that jutted out from the *Maduza's* nose came online with a sinister orange glow.

Chapter Eight

Rotting on the Vine

Johnny was standing next to Lanalai on the command deck of the *Litany* while Bobby and Sue slowly navigated the ship through the obstacle course of the asteroid field. Arty had left earlier to go to the “ready room” to start preparing the EVA-suits, just in case the signal was in fact coming from a derelict ship. They had been closing in on that pulsing signal for a little more than an hour now, their progress hindered by the increasing density of the asteroid clusters. The probe data had indicated that the signal was originating from the center of the most densely populated group.

All of the *Ramona's Litany's* sensors and guidance systems were concentrated on the immediate area surrounding the ship. The plotting of the position and course of each asteroid that was nearby was the ship computers' number one priority right now. Each tumbling rock had the potential for disaster. The *Litany's* hull was not heavily plated, and even a minor collision would result in a lethal breach.

Lanalai had yet to positively identify the signal, she had never seen anything like it before. Once she commented on it seemed almost organic or biological in terms of intensity and frequency. Arty had agreed that it was an unusual waveform to be emitted from a machine, but wasn't ready

to discount a manufactured or fabricated origin.

Johnny had been watching every display on the bridge with a level of attention that Lanalai found fascinating. He knew what every system was doing and reacted to every situation perfectly. She had marveled at this aspect of him, never really thinking of him as the Captain, but only as the unkempt junker pilot. She found herself staring at him from time to time.

And it irritated her.

Every time.

She would shake her head and begin concentrating on her task again. But soon she would find herself stealing a glance at him from the corner of her eye.

“Bobby,” Johnny said suddenly. “Slow it down a bit. The source is in close scan range now. Let me shoot a probe out there.” As Bobby complied, Johnny let a recon-probe fly from the launch tube. Within a few minutes, the display at Johnny’s station indicated that the probe had arrived at its destination and was transmitting. Johnny held up his hand, signaling Bobby, who cut the propulsion to zero. “Okay, Lanalai, get the data from that probe up on the main display.” She nodded and switched her station’s output to the main display that hovered at the fore of the bridge. She could feel the excitement and tension in the room rise a little, and had to admit to herself that she was feeling it too.

The display was a curtain of black, with the tiny points of star-light speckling its obsidian surface. Then, as the probe’s scanners swiveled on to its target, a ship came into view. It was a crimson *Diable de Mer* battle-cruiser.

Johnny drew his breath sharply and then, to Lanalai’s surprise, he let out a loud “Whoo-hoo!” and clapped his hands together once in celebration. He turned to her, smiling from ear to ear.

“That’s her!” he exclaimed. “Hot damn! It’s her!” He bounded over to Lanalai, and kissed her on her cheek,

surprising her once more. “Good job, if you hadn’t seen that signal—”

“No, it was you guys who did all the work,” Lanalai said before he could finish the compliment. She was caught up in the moment too, and found herself hugging the unkempt junker pilot. She looked over to Sue, who was smiling at them. Lanalai got the impression that she was smiling about more than just the discovery of the *Amber Rose*. She quickly broke the embrace and Johnny, sensing the encroaching awkwardness of the moment as well, stepped quickly away.

Arty walked onto the command deck as they parted, and stopped short at the sight of the derelict cruiser on the display. The rest of the crew fell silent too, as they all stood and watched the ship hanging motionless in the night of the asteroid field. They saw no signs of life, but the signal that they had followed here continued its pulsing rhythm.

After several minutes, Arty broke the silence.

“Um, well. I have the EVA-suits ready to go, if anyone feels like going for a little excursion.” Lanalai was surprised when Bobby leapt from his seat and pointed at Arty.

“Let’s go, old man!” he said and sprinted toward the doorway. Sue grabbed his shirttail and followed.

“Not without me, you won’t!” she called out excitedly.

Then the three of them headed out of the door and down the corridor at a full run. Lanalai was shocked by the sudden enthusiasm and apparent reckless abandon. This was the same crew that had exercised extreme caution in every aspect of the journey here, and now they had thrown that caution to the wind and were running like school children. Johnny was still on the bridge with her. He noted the look of concern on her face and walked over to stand close to her again.

“Don’t worry. They know what they are doing. We

have salvaged enough ships to spot the dangers pretty quickly. That ship is dead, and there's nothing to be concerned with until we get over there. Besides, this is what we have working so hard for all these years. I know you don't understand that, but you have to believe me when I say that all of us are feeling overjoyed and relieved. This is the time for us to reap the fruits of our labors." He put his arm around her and spoke quietly. "I'm glad that you're here, but you don't have to go over there if you don't want to," he told her.

Lanalai smiled and shook her head. She poked a finger into his chest and laughed. "Yeah, right! And let you guys have all the fun? Besides, someone needs to be over there who isn't starry-eyed and giddy."

Johnny laughed and said, "Okay then, let's go suit up."

Within a few minutes, they were all on board the *Flit*. The little utility vehicle sped toward the *Amber Rose* easily with Johnny at the helm. Each of them was suppressing their feelings of anxiety as they approached. Even though they had been searching for this ship, and knew as much about it as anyone possibly could, the "ghost ship" tales and the Namarri Incident weighed heavily on their minds.

Johnny swung around and brought the *Flit* in from the port side and slightly aft. They could plainly see that the engines were dead, darkness filled the exhaust ports. Lanalai was monitoring the signal again. It was definitely coming from inside the darkened ship, she also commented on the lack of any other signals that might indicate life forms or automatons on board.

Next, they passed by the main hull. Johnny brought the *Flit* in very close. The viewports of the tiny shuttle were filled with the dark crimson of the hull plates. Lanalai could see several holes of varying sizes punched through the armor plating. She caught Arty's attention and pointed them out.

"The *Lucillia's* guns," he said, nodding at Johnny. "The

main hull would have de-compressed and anyone on board would have been sucked out or suffocated. If she did in fact have a crew, that is.” Lanalai looked at him sideways at his last statement, but he ignored her and continued to look through the viewport.

They eventually made a full circuit around the floating hulk and Lanalai had been able to triangulate the point of origin for the signal. It was emanating from the command deck of the *Amber Rose*.

Johnny maneuvered the *Flit* to the *Amber Rose's* manual access and rescue hatch. He attached a temporary docking clamp and hovered over it as Bobby and Sue exited. They were going to work on opening the hatch while the *Flit* was making another survey pass over the derelict. Johnny informed Lanalai that it was their standard procedure for uncharted vessels. Before this, she had only seen them operating in the relative safety of the Kazaar Battlefield. Out here, help was very far away if anything went wrong.

As they completed the second pass, Sue informed them that the hatch was open and the ship was ready for entry. Johnny pulled the *Flit* back into position over the rescue port and told Lanalai and Arty to go ahead, that he was going to take the *Flit* to the docking hangar and see if he could get inside. They both looked at him quizzically.

“Go on, I’ll be all right,” he assured them. “You go work on finding the signal, and I’ll see what it will take to get the *Litany* over here to hook up an umbilical. I’ll dock the *Flit* in the hanger if possible, that way you won’t have to go EVA again.” He patted Lanalai on the shoulder, then turned his comunit onto the crew channel. “You guys be careful in there.”

Bobby laughed into the comunit. “Thanks, Mum,” he said as he reached up to help Arty down from the *Flit's* keel hatch. Lanalai followed, looking back once to Johnny, who nodded at her.

“Keep me posted guys,” he told them as he pulled away.

“Not to worry, Boss,” Bobby was still laughing. Johnny looked down at the hatchway as the *Flit* rose and he saw the others disappear into the black interior of the ship. Arty was the last in, he turned and waved to Johnny before entering feet first through the hatch. Johnny waved back and smiled. He piloted the *Flit* to the starboard docking bay and slowed down.

The protective shield that covered the hangar's entrance was disengaged. He slowly brought the little ship inside and touched down, using the magnetic locks on the landing struts. He wanted the others to enter through the rescue hatch because it led directly to the command deck. He did not know if they would have been able to force open any closed portals and hatches if they had entered from the hangar. The security measures on military vessels were strong, and Dr. Noblessar could have made any number of modifications that could have hindered intruders.

Johnny took a quick look around and then exited the *Flit*. He free floated to each of the five entry-ways that led from the hanger to the interior of the ship. Each of them was sealed and, without power, impossible to open.

He made his way over to the control panel that operated the barrier shield of the exterior door of the hangar. Most ships had a redundant generator system for this shield. If he could locate it, and power it up, he might be able to reroute the power to the doorways and other systems, like life support. This control panel had been customized however, and was very non-standard. Johnny guessed that the generator had either been disabled or removed in one of Dr. Noblessar's modifications. He decided to try and deduce the purpose of the panel.

After studying the various labels and notations on the control panel to no avail, he turned to go back to the *Flit*.

A wave of cold sweat washed over him and he stopped short, his breath escaping from his mouth in surprise.

There, hanging just barely a meter above the deck of the

hangar, and directly between he and the *Flit*, was the *Maduza*. Her nose was just a few meters from him, and he could see the orange glow of the plasma chamber of her ten-barreled turret. He had not seen her in over five years, but there was no mistaking that dark green hull. He could not see through the mirrored glazteel plates that protected the cockpit, but there was no doubt in his mind of who could be piloting her.

“Drake,” he said in a whisper.

As if in response, the fighter that he and Drake had built together nudged forward, closing the distance between them to about one meter. He switched his comunit to the frequency that Drake had always used. He raised his hands above his head to show that he was unarmed.

“Drake,” he repeated, this time the response came a little slower and it was Drake’s voice that answered.

“I see you found her, Johnny. You have no idea how happy that makes me.” Johnny could hear an angry pleasantness in his old partner’s voice. “For years, I had hoped that we would find her together. But I suppose that this will have to do. But, just for the record, I found her first. You found her only because I wanted you to. I told Sorano to search you out, and lead you here.

And now that you *are* here, we have some things between us that need settled.”

Drake paused for what, in his mind, was dramatic effect but Johnny took the opportunity to speak.

“Drake, listen to me. My crew, they are all on board the *Amber Rose*, and they have nothing to do with what’s between you and me. What ever you have planned, I ask you to please let them go.” Johnny’s voice did not waver as he stared into the open muzzles of the charged and ready cannons but Drake could hear the genuine concern Hiro had for his crew.

“Your crew,” Drake replied in a voice that he hoped sounded cold and merciless, “will meet the same fate as

you. And speaking of your crew, who's this Lanalai? She sounds absolutely delightful. I don't suppose that you would care to introduce us, would you?"

"You leave her the Hell out of this, Lawless." Johnny's hands were clenched at his sides, and he leaned forward as he spoke. Drake laughed into the comunit.

"Sounds like I struck a nerve there, old buddy. Got something going on do, ya? Well, I guess that I could find in my heart to—" Drake stopped talking for a moment, as if something had caught his attention. "Damn it, he's here this soon? Gotta put a move on now."

Johnny was starting to get a very bad feeling about this situation. Drake had obviously put a lot of planning and thought into this reunion. He had caught the crew of the *Litany* completely off guard, and they were practically dead in the water here. But try as he might, Johnny could not imagine whom Drake was expecting.

This isn't going end well, he thought. "Who's here?" he asked, not really sure if he wanted to know the answer. He was still looking down the barrels of the *Maduza's* guns.

"You aren't the only one that I baited here. I have brought someone who has been watching you for quite a long time and wants to see you dead. He's here now, Johnny. Here to get his revenge." Drake paused again, and Johnny thought that he had heard a tone of uncertainty in Drake's voice. Evidently the early arrival of this mystery person had upset some part of Drake's scheme.

"Who? Goddamn you, Lawless!" Johnny yelled into the comunit, hoping his sudden aggressiveness would make Drake more uncertain, to cause him to make a mistake. But before he could get a reply, there was a bright flash of light out in space, and Johnny realized that it had come from where they had left *Ramona's Litany*. Then there was a faint pop of static in his comunit. A feeling of heaviness settled in the pit of his stomach as he began flipping through the channels and got nothing but static. There were

only two active channels, the general broadcast and the link to the *Maduza*. That could only mean one thing:

He was no longer linked to the *Litany*.

He felt his heart drop. The flash of light had been an explosion and the *Ramona's Litany* was no longer there.

"What the Hell have you done?" Johnny yelled again. This time his anger was real. As real as the danger he knew that he and his crew were now in. At the very best, they could only hope to be marooned on this derelict battleship. He didn't want to think about the worst.

"It's not me, John. It's Rahji." The *Maduza* was turning to face the open hangar doors as Drake spoke.

Johnny didn't understand. He shook his head.

"Drake, Rahji is dead. You know that, he was vaporized with the *Lucillia*." If Johnny was worried about Drake's sanity before, he was convinced that his old friend was crazy now. However, someone had blown up the *Litany*, but Johnny doubted that it was a dead man who had come back for revenge.

"Not that Rahji, damn it. His son! He blames us for his father's death. He's followed you for years, waiting for an opportunity just like this. He has you and the *Godiva* in one place and he's going to come in for the kill." The *Maduza's* engine started to power up as Drake piloted her to the doors. "He thinks that there's nothing in his way, nothing to stop him. But he's wrong."

Johnny was thinking of his crew-mates who were about to die for something that they had nothing to do with. It was most unfair to Lanalai; she didn't deserve any of this. He was a little surprised to find himself thinking about her over his other friends, who had been by his side for years. He needed to do something to help her, and them.

"What's he wrong about, Drake?" he asked, hoping to buy some time.

"The bastard doesn't know that I'm here." Drake's voice was filled with venom. "I'll be right back, Johnny."

I've got something for that arrogant son of a bitch." The *Maduza* jumped forward and left the hangar bay in a blur. She turned slightly and took off toward the mid-sized gray Impyrial Navy battle-carrier that had just come into view. Hiro didn't know the ship, but Drake recognized it as the *Parallax* and the *Maduza's* gunnery systems began targeting the battle-carrier's vital systems.

"Well, now, what do we have here?" This new voice was unfamiliar to Johnny, but he could guess that it belonged to Captain Rahji. He floated closer to the open door of the hangar, to see if he could get a look at the ship that had apparently just destroyed his own. The Captain continued to speak as Johnny moved.

"I had been hoping to get a two for one deal, as they say. But it appears that three is my lucky number. You should have stayed on Cayge, Lawless."

"And you," Drake's voice was calm and cool as he replied, "should have killed me instead of framing me. Having me sent to that summer camp only irritated me. I'm going to give you the chance to do it right this time." Drake yelled a war cry into the comunit as the *Maduza's* cannons began blasting.

The blasts strafed across the *Parallax's* bow doing next to no damage at all and the carrier fired back. The *Maduza* was too small and quick to be easily targeted by the gunnery stations and Drake deftly evaded the shots. The homemade fighter spun and twirled away, a lightning show of energy blasts and projectiles followed.

Johnny's head was spinning as he tried to decipher what he had just heard. Rahji had framed Drake, and sent him to prison? Was that what he had heard Drake say? If so, then he knew that something much darker was going on here, and he knew absolutely nothing about it. He could now see that coming out here was foolish and that he had endangered the lives of his crew. He needed to get to the *Flit* and get everyone out of here, as soon as possible. He

switched his comunit to Bobby's personal link and called for him.

"You there, Big Guy?" he asked.

"Yeah," Bobby's voice came back on the private link. "What in Blazes is going on? I can't get anything from the *Litany*. And were those shots I just heard outside? And who was that on the general channel?" Johnny could hear the exasperation in Bobby's voice, mixed with a bit of confusion and relief.

"Long story," he said, wishing it wasn't.

"Shorten it, then. You got some confused mates here who are feelin' a bit cut off, if ya get my meaning." Bobby insisted tactfully.

Johnny nodded to no one in particular and quickly explained what was happening.

"Meet me at the rescue hatch," he added after he finished the brief narrative, "and I'll get us out of here on the *Flit*."

"That's great, Johnny, but where in Hell can we get to on a skiff?" Bobby's inquiry cracked with interference from the firefight outside.

Johnny was dashing for the *Flit* as he replied. "There's a few settlements on the planet Tri. We can reach one of them, provided we don't get slagged on the way by one of these guys."

Johnny reached the open door of the little ship and turned his head toward the hangar door. Outside, he saw the *Parallax* coming closer. Drake and Rahji were still hurling insults at each other on the comunit. With the star Orajeb behind them, he could make out the carrier's silhouette as it sent another volley of plasma after a small speck of green that Johnny knew was the *Maduza*.

"That ship isn't that big, Drake just might have a chance," he commented aloud, before ducking his head under the frame of the *Flit's* egress hatch as it swung shut. He knew that even though the *Maduza* was basically a long

range fighter, her engine and turret made her as powerful as a frigate, but her tonnage was low enough to keep her maneuverability extremely high. A skilled pilot like Drake could, with a fair amount of luck, take out some of the smaller cruisers in the Fleet.

When Johnny got to the pilot's seat, he started the launch sequence. He sat down and strapped himself in while the automated system readied the shuttle. After a few seconds, the *Flit's* navigation computer informed him that all systems were online. Johnny raised the small craft a few inches, just enough for the landing gear to clear any obstructions on the floor. The nose of the *Flit* dipped as he accelerated toward the open hangar door.

Through the front window of the *Flit*, Johnny saw the interior of the *Godiva's* hangar shudder. Before he could realize that the *Godiva* had been hit by a stray plasma blast, an alarm sounded. He stole a quick look at the navigation display screen.

The *Godiva's* hangar door was now sealed by its protective shields. The *Flit* would be obliterated if it attempted to pass through the energy barrier!

Johnny jammed on the reverse thrusters as he cut the forward thrusters. The nose of the *Flit* scraped the floor, tearing the front landing strut from its mounts. The little craft spun slightly as it came to a screeching stop only a couple of meters away from the door.

What Johnny saw happening outside his window both amazed and frightened him. Every light in the hangar was now activated, the previously dark and in-operative control panels were alive with color and movement. Johnny could hear the low rumble from outside as *Amber Rose's* star-drives came online.

The *Maduza* streaked past the hangar door, closely followed by the *Parallax*. The two combatants sped off, away from the waking battleship. Johnny watched as the *Maduza* banked sharply to the left and then back to the

right. The guns of the *Parallax* had anticipated the move, and a barrage of plasma slammed into the *Maduza* with a brilliant flash of fire and molten metal. The *Maduza* careened out of control for a second or two, then exploded with a blinding flash of white-hot light.

The *Parallax* was coming about on the *Godiva* as Drake's ship was exploding, but Johnny could see that the space around the *Godiva* was beginning to pale in a surreal light. Her star-drives were fully operational now, and she was opening a tunnel.

In the next instant, the view of the *Parallax* was replaced by a twisting and convoluted mass of stars and streaking lines of light. The *Amber Rose*, along with her five unwilling stowaways, left Orajeb far behind as they shot through the interstellar tunnel toward the unknown.

Thus ends part one of Hegemony.

To experience the rest of the story, visit

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Thank you for your interest in my debut novel!

I hope you enjoyed it,

Christopher