ENDLESS SKY: NEW WORLDS

ENDLESS SKY

BOOK 2

DON JONES

DONJONES.COM

For Pete & Liz

FOREWORD

Endless Sky is perhaps not proper LitRPG. It is much more akin to *Ready Player One,* where being in a fully immersive game is part of the plot. Characters develop in-game to work through that plot, but there's a lot less focus on grinding, leveling up, and other video game elements than you'll find in most LitRPG novels.

I don't disparage the true LitRPG, because fans of that genre do indeed love it, and I've found a couple of series I do enjoy (The Completionist Chronicles is one). Instead, this is simply a note that I'm not writing what some genre fans would consider a "true" LitRPG.

That said, according to LitRPG Reads (https://litrpgreads.com/blog/what-makes-a-good-litrpg-book#1-7-signs-of-a-great-litrpg), *Endless Sky* ticks all the criteria for a "good LitRPG book," so opinions may vary!

This novel may in fact be closer to the GameLit genre, although I definitely borrow elements from LitRPG, such as showing in-game messages, carefully tracking characters' stat sheets, and so on. But the internet seems *super* confused on what GameLit is supposed to mean, so I dunno.

Regardless, I have tried to create an enjoyable, compelling, and

engaging story, strong characters, and a plot that hopefully keeps you hooked the whole way through.

I hope you think it's fun!

Don Jones

Las Vegas, 2023

DonJones.com

ESCAPE YOUR DREARY LIFE!

Join one of our Endless Domains™ and immerse yourself in a new world—and a new life! Starter Packs are available at Amaz-Mart.com.

Endless Sky®
Your spaceborne sci-fi dreams come to life
EndlessSkyGame.com

Endless Kingdom™
Sword-and-sorcery fantasy at its best
EndlessKingdomGame.com

Endless Industry™
Cyberpunk adventures await
EndlessIndustryGame.com

Endless Steam™
A gritty, steampunk world to explore
EndlessSteamGame.com

Endless Apocalypse™

Fight to survive, *Mad Max* style
EndlessApocalypseGame.com

Endless Deep™
Experience the wonders below the ocean's surface
EndlessDeepGame.com

Endless Frontier™
Shoot it out in the Wild, Wild West
EndlessFrontierGame.com

Endless Jungle™
Mysterious jungles and dangerous rivers
EndlessJungleGame.com

Endless Toons™
Reach into your hammerspace and pull out some fun
EndlessToonsGame.com

Endless Heroes™
Will you work to save the city . . . or destroy it?
EndlessHeroesGame.com

Endless Night™
Battle—and become—vampires, werewolves, and other creatures of the night
EndlessNightGame.com

Endless Paradise™
Relax at our infinite beachside resort
EndlessParadiseGame.com
Ready to move beyond playing just eight hours a day? Contact us about settling into an Endless Play™ immersion pod—with all costs fully covered by most rental and meal subsidies!

Also check out:

- *Endless War*™
- *Endless Desert*™
- *Endless Empire*™
- *Endless Kawaii*™
- *Endless Safari*™
- *Endless Crusade*™

Whoever you are, whoever you want to be—there's an Endless Domains™ world for you!

PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

Pretty, Pretty Princess

- Frank Kozina: Business Manager
- Bo Mi-Cha: Captain
- Jakob Stroman: XO
- Rashmi Lad: Pilot/Navigator
- Zuri Danjuma: Gunner
- Lukas Graves: Doctor
- Eto Tomiko: Chief Engineer
- Leone Napolitano: Engineer
- Renart Masson: Shuttle Pilot / Assistant Gunner

Bull

- John Starkiller: Captain
- Laura Alma: XO
- Alexandros Raguel: Chief Engineer
- Everette Brittny: Engineer
- Ricarda Tonka: Gunner
- Nylah Ougein: Pilot/Navigator

- Judita Markus: Doctor

Siren

- Themalast Christoforos: Captain
- Yehoyakhin "Yahoo" Eigyr: XO
- Freja Georgina: Chief Engineer
- Vaughn Concetto: Engineer
- Jenna Halim: Gunner
- Dalibor Harel: Pilot/Navigator
- Modou Gita: Doctor

Crush and Run

- Sarah Haskins: Captain
- Hermokrates "Hermy" Nefes: XO
- Pankratios "Pank" Francisca: Chief Engineer
- Ehecatl "Cat" Erwin: Engineer
- Victorine Aleta: First Gunner
- Guanyu Pradip: Second Gunner
- Lysander Bran: Pilot/Navigator

Chip

- Imani Juma: Captain
- Rubena Tomi: XO
- Volker Anđa: Engineer
- Áslaug Ágota: Gunner
- Basima Seo-Hyun: Pilot/Navigator

Dale

- Corentin Nolwenn: Captain
- Manoj Modestine: XO

- Tertius Hollie: Engineer
- Marcel Calisto: Gunner
- Annika Maj: Pilot/Navigator

Spot (Confed corvette)

- Amy Strong: Captain
- Mathis Simon: XO
- Zhanna Kulikova: 3O, Comms, Tactical
- Theopolous Orgyne: Chief Engineer
- Ettore Passero: Engineer
- Christiane Lange: Engineer
- Waiora Maunga: Combat Engineer
- Sirena Heath: Pilot/Navigator
- Antonin Sourd: First Gunner
- Shreya Bawa: Second Gunner
- Yoshioka Rie: Medic
- Giuseppina Oscuro: Cook/Dogsbody
- Nergis Selen: Chief of Security
- Robyn Caddick: Trooper
- Tisa Jakande: Trooper
- Jovita Orduna: Trooper

Buddah's Fart (former pirate corvette)

- Marsha Putnam: Captain
- Noor Woolf: Gunner
- Albine Akamatsu: Engineer
- Nyambura Klausen: Pilot

Bloody Toe (former pirate corvette)

- Lata Kylan: Captain
- Minenhle Burns: Gunner

- Hallel Dwerryhouse: Engineer
- Gerda Colin: Pilot

Bermuda Hexagon (former pirate corvette)

- Anastasia Matylda: Captain
- Katrien Guan: Gunner
- An Guerrero: Engineer
- Sibéal Medved: Pilot

Empowered Roach (former pirate corvette)

- Teodora Zillah: Captain
- Liss Elmer: Gunner
- Ilina Sneijder: Engineer
- Jevgeņija Chia: Pilot

Gently into the Night (former pirate corvette)

- Tanja Wekesa: Captain
- Zinaida Hodžić: Gunner
- Ciannait Valenta: Engineer
- Leta Ross: Pilot

Others:

- Eloise Adelson: Wizard
- Lapin Blanc: Rabbit
- Sean Bowden: Assistant Station Manager (UFW)
- Thomas Cadence: Nobleman
- Dwight Czarnowski: Lead Programmer for Endless Domains
- Hunter Dyson: CEO of Endless Domains

- Pattinson Harm: Grand Admiral of the Terran Confederacy (and a Jerk)
- Jeremy Knickerbocker: Nobleman
- Jerrod Litinski: King
- Orthion: Elven King
- Madris: Elven Queen
- Peter Sinsky: Admiral of the Terran Confederacy
- Chelsea Whitmore: Ranger
- Virion: Elven Wizard

1 / DUNGEON CRAWL

"Get our port side away from it!" Captain Mi-Cha shouted. "The armor's blown away!"

"Working on it," Lad said through gritted teeth. "It'd help if we could get the armor repaired" They were famously rude when we were in a tight situation.

"Working on it." Tomiko's voice floated through the intercom, relaxed as always. The ruder and more tense the navigator got, the more the chief engineer poked at them about it in an almost irritatingly calm tone. "The nanofiber is already repairing itself. I'm juicing it a bit, but it'll still probably need four or five minutes."

"Incoming," Stroman called from his position in the XO's seat.

"Jinking," Lad replied.

The ship's inertial dampers strained as Lad slid us sideways in space. On the tactical display, we watched as four deadly missiles, each moving under thousands of kilos of thrust, rushed by us, all but skimming our starboard side.

"Return fire," Mi-Cha ordered in her sharp, confident voice.

"Firing opticals," Danjuma announced. The gunner's hands danced across her console, and the tactical display painted bright-yellow lines between us and our attackers. Part of me missed having

an actual window on the bridge, but it wouldn't have mattered in this case: the lasers operated on frequencies well outside the visible spectrum. Also, windows were a terrible idea when people were lobbing missiles at you. "Direct hit to one pirate, but he's still coming."

"What the hell are these things shielded with?" Mi-Cha asked grimly. She leaned forward in her captain's chair, quickly tapping commands into her own control screen. "Zuri, run the railguns instead. I'll set the lasers to autocycle."

"The targeting algorithm sucks," the gunner protested.

"It'll keep them on their toes. We'll stand a better chance with the 'guns if you're targeting them. We're loaded for slugs, and they'll carry a hell of an impact."

"Fine," Danjuma muttered, swiping her console to switch to the railgun targeting system. Twin *thuds* announced the departure of her first two shots.

"Another volley inbound," Stroman announced, his eyes flicking back and forth on his tactical screen. "Man, these suckers are fast."

"RFLAMs are back online," I said from my seat between the navigator and gunner. Our bank of rapid-fire laser antimissile emitters—RFLAMs—had suffered a glancing shot and lost a power coupling, but the ship's hideously expensive autorepair systems had finally fixed the problem. "Firing. Splash one!" I shouted as the RFLAMs scored a killing strike on the incoming projectile.

The inertial dampers strained again as Lad jinked us in the other direction, and then the entire ship shuddered as if we'd taken a hit. "Not my fault!" the pilot snapped. "They had them on proximity!"

"Two of them, from the looks of it," I said, scanning my own console. "We've a crater in the starboard armor, and the railgun on that side is toast."

"Dammit," Mi-Cha growled.

"That's not all," I added. "We lost two RFLAMs and one of the missile launchers."

"I'm taking over the lasers," Danjuma announced. Nobody contradicted her. "Switching the remaining railgun to automated shot

spreads." A softer *thump* accompanied a round of oversized buckshot being ejected from the railgun.

"I've got missiles loading in all three remaining launchers," I announced.

"Fire everything," Mi-Cha ordered eagerly.

"Missiles away."

I kept my eyes on the tactical screen as the gunner stroked her fingers across the laser controls. The ten-gig lasers could get off a shot every four seconds if you ran them hot, but they couldn't keep up that pace indefinitely. On the tactical, I realized Danjuma was cycling them, firing one laser at a time every second. Intermittent yellow lines connected us to the enemy ships in a steady cycle. "Splash one!" I cried as the tactical announced the demise of a ship. "Bogey Beta is out!"

"Two left," Danjuma growled.

"Splash one!" I said again. "Missiles took out Alpha!"

"You're all mine, baby," Danjuma said, a fierce grin in her tone.

"What the hell?" the XO said.

I saw it too: the tactical icon for the final attacker was flickering. "Sensors show good," I said. "I've no idea what—"

"Throw a visual," Mi-Cha ordered. I tapped my console, and the bridge's forward bulkhead switched from the tactical display to a computer-enhanced visual of space in front of us, courtesy of a surviving camera array.

"Missiles loaded," I said.

"Hold," the captain ordered, leaning forward and peering at the screen. "What the hell is that?"

I kept my eyes on my console, struggling to interpret what our sensors were telling me. "Resolving. It . . . it got bigger, Cap. A lot bigger."

The remaining bogey had *unfolded* itself somehow. What had once been a flat, almost saucer-like fighter somewhat reminiscent of an old *Battlestar: Galactica* Cylon raider had become something . . . else. Its wings had extended, rotated ninety degrees, and

split in two, while the central hull had split and extended upward.

My console lit up red. "Massive power surge!" I cried.

"All power to grav mirrors!" Mi-Cha shouted. "Rashmi, get us head-on to that thing! Fire missiles, wide arc!"

Fingers stabbed at consoles as Lad adjusted our orientation. The bridge lights dimmed slightly as I directed the full output of both fusion plants to the light-reflecting gravity mirrors. Quiet *whumps* announced the departure of a dozen missiles, each arcing away from our ship rather than firing straight forward.

My console went wild. "They're firing. Cap, I'm recording at least a hundred gigawatts coming out of that thing!"

"Will the mirror hold?"

"Depends on how long— They're done," I amended quickly. "Dropping the mirror." The gravity mirror was an amazing piece of defensive technology, essentially deploying a perfect, energy-based mirror across a given section of the ship. It could reflect almost any kind of coherent-light attack, but it generated horrific amounts of heat and consumed absolutely every erg of power our plants could produce." How the hell did that little thing put out that much juice?" Stroman wondered.

"It must have been entirely the power plant," Mi-Cha said. "Frank, where are the—"

"Missiles hit," I announced happily. "Splash one. We're clear."

Everyone relaxed a bit. The *Princess* could take a pounding, but only do much—we weren't unkillable.

"Damage report," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Don't run the grav mirror again," the engineer's voice warned over the intercom. "In fact, we need to deploy the heat sink. We're redlined all over the place back here."

"Tactical is green," I said.

"Go for it, Eto," the captain said. The heat sink would help actively cool the ship's overworked systems in a quarter of the time.

"Deploying. So aside from the grav mirror almost melting itself,

as usual, we're going to need a solid twenty hours to get all the armor stitched back together. Starboard railgun is a total loss; we'll need to get a new one fitted in a yard. RFLAM repairs are underway, but with the amount of nano stock we're going through, I'd suggest we focus on the armor."

"Do it," Mi-Cha agreed, running a hand through her bright-blue hair. "Frank, expendables."

"We're down to twenty percent missile load," I said, scanning my console. "We've lost ten percent of the capacitors—probably feedback when those proximity missiles hit. Fifty percent on railgun ammo. But look, if we get another wave—"

"We won't," said the XO. "Look."

We all directed our eyes to the main display, which was still showing an enhanced visual feed. A small flicker of bright light rotated far in front of us.

"The drop!" Lad said happily. They goosed the ship's in-system drive, nudging us forward to collect our prize.

> » Mission Complete: Find a Nano Factory Core
>
> » XP awarded to all crew.

"Loot box in space, boss," Stroman confirmed as the remains of the NPC enemy ship drifted away from the glowing reward icon that had sprung into existence. "Looks like we got what we came for!"

"Move in and claim it," Mi-Cha said with relief. This system was one of *Endless Sky*'s substitutes for the traditional role-playing game dungeon crawl, a series of enemy attacks you simply had to burn through to get a major reward. We'd come here for one of the last things we needed to make our new ship complete. Now, we'd be able to—

Actually, I suppose I should introduce the ship.

Officially christened as the *Guillotine*, our transponder proclaimed us to be the *Pretty, Pretty Princess*, a name that left our captain wishing she'd never left the matter up to a vote.

Construction of the ship had taken months and months, but far less time than would have been required in the real world. In designing it, Cap had leveraged her familiarity with cargo transports in *Endless Sky*, and our gunner's experience with the game's weapons and defensive systems. We'd easily covered the ship's immense expense with our enormous fortune, the result of an unintended thirty-year absence from the main game. Compound interest on our investment portfolio, thanks to yours truly, had done its magic.

But don't even get me started on those thirty years. For us, the time had gone by in just minutes, thanks to some timeline trickery enacted by Endless Domains' CEO. We thought we'd been gone a day but returned to an entirely new version of *Endless Sky*, one where thirty years of game time had passed and entire alien species had come and gone.

In this new universe, we built the *Princess:* a dull gray brick, stuffed with more supplies, nano stock, and missiles than you could imagine. Equipped with roomy quarters for the entire crew and then some, a nifty shuttle-slash-cargo-container-tug, and a spacious bridge, the *Princess* was an incredible upgrade to our old ship, the *Eternal Optimist.* And we'd designed her for battle. The ship's bow was a huge, square block of solid nano-armor, something released as part of the *Endless Sky* v2 update. At a whopping six meters thick, the bow armor put the ship's total length just under eighty meters—not quite a third as long as the original Starship Enterprise from the 1960s TV show.

That shield could take enormous abuse, re-forming almost instantly after impact, provided we could feed it enough power. It could absorb terrific punishment from battle lasers—assuming our energy-gulping gravity mirrors weren't up, of course. Damage to the bow shield could automatically be repaired through spare feedstock,

which filled four of those two dozen cargo containers I mentioned before.

Power was, honestly, the *Princess's* biggest weakness. We'd gone with fusion generators before we'd realized that horrifically expensive zero-point energy generators were now an option. Money wouldn't have been an object, and we'd have had to go on a four-month mission to find the necessary parts, but ZPEs essentially produced an endless supply of clean, reliable energy. We just sighed, vowed to read the options catalog more carefully in the future, and made ZPEs as the first item on our wish list.

The *Princess* was sturdy but not especially pretty. We eschewed the needlessly streamlined designs favored by other players in place of . . . well, as I said, a flying brick. A heavily armored brick, but still a brick. In space, streamlined designs are really just an aesthetic choice.

For the record, I'd voted for *Flying Brick* as the ship's public name. I got no support.

The boxy exterior hull was comprised mainly of more nano-armor and studded with almost three dozen RFLAMs. The two rail-guns, one port and one starboard, moved independently, so we didn't have to point the entire ship precisely at our enemies. Both guns could fire fore and aft, although it took almost a minute for the internal mechanism to switch directions. They could fire either solid tungsten slugs or an oversized kind of buckshot, and we had two cargo containers apiece dedicated to each type of ammo.

Our four missile tubes were also on the starboard and aft sides, drawing their ammo from—you guessed it—more specialized cargo containers. We had full stocks of antimatter missiles and nuclear missiles, for a total of 360 of each. Yeah, the *Princess* might not have been pretty, but she packed a punch. It was a pretty complex arrangement, especially the automated system for getting the missles from the cargo containers to the guns, according to the engineering crew, but it was well-designed and worked smoothly.

And let's be honest, we just paid the fees, mass, and volume requirements in the game, and so it all just "happened." Nobody's

ever stuck their heads into those spaces to see actual ammo being moved from one place to another, and nobody ever will.

The ventral and dorsal sides of the ship each had two ten-gigawatt battle laser turrets, each one more than sufficient to give nearly any pirate a bad day. Each of the four lasers could fire every four seconds and maintain that rate for nearly ten minutes before they needed to recharge and cool off. And no, the fusion plant in the spine couldn't sustain that power draw by itself, so we set up two cargo containers full of capacitor arrays to back it up. If we needed to, we could redirect energy from the antimatter core to provide even more energy, although that meant deploying the heat sinks. Heat sinks? Yeah—a massive, half-circle heat sink that could extend past the hull to radiate excess heat from the antimatter core and our weapons and defensive systems. It was a vulnerable target of course, and it restricted the ventral lasers' arc of fire, but if we were careful, we could keep the lasers running almost indefinitely.

Oh, the laser turrets could rotate to fire in any direction. No more having to flip the ship just to get a bead on the bad guy chasing you.

Now for the rest of the cargo containers. The whole lot of them could extend forward out of the hull, and although it took about half an hour to move their bulk and the bow armor, it was easier to replace, repair, and restock them than most other options. Two of the containers were filled with ration trays, providing over two years' worth of food for an entire ship's complement. Not great food, but it'd keep you alive. Two more containers stored water and processed liquid waste, while two more stored breathable air and scrubed the carbon out of our air. Two were set aside for miscellaneous storage, and the final four were split between reaction fuel and antimatter fuel. Altogether, the *Princess* could keep us alive for over two years without docking, and indefinitely if we could find sources of food and fuel.

The hab ring started with the bridge at the twelve-o'clock position, an eight-meter-wide ring segment that could be ejected through the dorsal hull as an escape pod. It had its own environmental system

and rations, enough to keep most of the crew alive for a week. It even had its own thruster-based maneuvering jets. Moving toward the starboard side of the ship, we had two crew cabins, a double-wide recreation and mess hall, two more cabins, and a general storage space.

We had so much storage space.

The bridge was a marvel of comfort and efficiency. Riffing on humanity's best-known layout for starship bridges—the various Star Trek series had been endlessly syndicated throughout the decades—we'd centered the bridge around a pair of command chairs used by the captain and her executive officer, or XO. In front of them was an arc of three wide consoles: gunnery, tactical and defense, and helm. Ahead of us was a bulkhead, upon which we'd mounted a giant view screen. Behind the command chairs, on either side of the bridge door, were two long benches where visitors could sit. At the extreme ends of these were spare consoles where one could take over for nearly any of the ship's major tasks.

From the bridge going counterclockwise were four crew spaces, a med bay, and then all the remaining crew compartments.

The captain, XO, gunner, engineer, third officer (that's me!), assistant engineer, security chief, pilot/navigator, and gunner all got full-size quarters. Cap spared no expense: these were a full four meters wide, four meters high, and ten meters deep! Obviously, a lot of that space was taken up by independent, redundant life support systems and such, but it left a lot of nicely appointed space in which to live. I had a small public office space, a living space, my own micro-kitchen, a cabinet of meal trays, a bedroom, and my own private 'fresher. Two compartments that size were each given to four of our security troopers, who made do with bunk beds, lockers, and a shared 'fresher. The second pilot / navigator and assistant gunner shared another compartment, two engineer's mates another, and two gunnery mates another. That put our total complement at twenty-three crew—quite the jump from the days of the *Eternal Optimist.*

I'll note that, when I first started playing *Endless Sky*, I wondered why in the world the game's designers had included the need for

'freshers. I mean, we weren't real people, we didn't eat real food, and we certainly didn't need to deal with the consequences of a real digestive system. Turns out, the game's 'fresher units were basically sonic showers. If you didn't use one at least daily, you'd start to take debuffs on personal interactions, and after a week or so, you'd take a penalty on almost everything you do. I've been told that after two or three months, you lose most of your skills and nobody will talk to you, even over a video call.

We still had four empty crew units, although the captain had no immediate plans for them. Sitting empty, we outfitted them as backup passenger quarters that could readily house two people apiece in terrific comfort. If we filled them with a couple of people apiece, we'd have thirty-one souls aboard, with rations for around 650 days.

Obviously, we'd kill each other if we had to eat meal trays for that long, but it was comforting to know we wouldn't die hungry.

So there you have it: a unique ship class, designed and paid for by some of our billions in accumulated interest. A ship that could carry cargo, but which was far better suited to our collective new mission: kicking ass and taking names.

We don't actually take names.

"Okay, let's review," Mi-Cha said. She brushed her short, bright-blue hair back over her ears and grinned at all of us. "First, we're still insanely rich."

We'd assembled in our mess hall, which was a massive improvement over our old ship's. Our chairs were magnetically locked to the deck rather than bolted down, making it much easier to arrange a comfortable circle around the large table. The space was decorated with synthetic wood panels, something Mi-Cha herself had spent time crafting.

"Rich to the point that accumulating more wealth is boring," Stroman said, matching her grin.

"And so we've decided to aim for Legendary skill levels," I said.

"Which requires unthinkable amounts of XP," Tomiko pointed out. And she wasn't kidding: Legendary levels started at level 17, seven levels higher than the best of us so far, requiring a whopping 67,108,864 experience points. That reminded me: I hadn't checked my own sheet in quite a while. I pulled up the short version in my mind's eye:

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,123,672,626 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +80,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 13
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 623,800 (424,775 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Well, that last dungeon crawl had netted me some solid XP, but I

was still a *long* way from Legendary status. The game's skill levels started by requiring a mere 1,024 XP but doubled for every level you went. Hitting the Mythical levels—the step up from Legendary, starting at level 21—requires over a *billion* XP. There had been no word in the game of anyone reaching such lofty heights, but a few were rumored to be crawling into Legendary. Get there, and your skill levels apparently get a huge boost, and you become nigh invulnerable to ordinary weapons. I mean, anyone at that level would likely have a Body attribute of at least 20, giving them 340 hit points!

"At least this makes up for us not having Frank's Truthsayer power anymore." Graves, our ship's doctor, pulled my attention back to the conversation.

"Yeah. I kinda miss it, although the anti-cheating responses for refilling weapons were getting pretty serious," I said. When I'd gotten my *Endless Sky* Starter Pack, it had come with the usual white and black game pills, one to build the nano-net in your head that let you connect to the game, and one to actually put you into the fully immersive environment. But mine had also come with a bonus: a clear pill that had flagged me to receive a special, unique, one-person-only class: Truthsayer. In reality, that class was a back door engineered by one of the game's lead developers, and it gave me the ability to literally make anything happen just by saying it. Before we'd met Dwight—the aforementioned developer—I'd used the power to restock weapons, accomplish assassination missions, and more. When we'd finally confronted the CEO of Endless Domains, the company that ran *Endless Sky* and a bunch of other immersive games, they'd somehow disabled my Truthsaying power.

Oh, yeah—I'm also a registered Guild assassin.

Anyway, using my Truthsayer power to stock up on munitions had triggered the game's anti-cheat mechanisms, causing it to pull me into a white, featureless holding room while it investigated. But when the shipyard engineers designed the *Princess*, they thought to replicate my restocking ability within the rules of the game. Thus, our current mission. The nano factory core we'd recovered was the final

component of a munitions replicator of sorts, a machine that could convert nano feedstock—and, for antimatter missiles, some of our fuel supplies—into railgun rounds, missiles, and other expendable ammo.

"Anyone skill up?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Yes," Lad said, rubbing their temples. "Navigation and Combat at the same time."

"Ouch," everyone sympathized. Raising your skill level in any given skill required you to *use* that skill quite a lot, but it didn't require you to be an *expert* at whatever skill level you were aspiring to. When you finally did unlock a new skill level, the game simply downloaded any missing information into your brain, all at once. It gave you full proficiency at your new skill level, but it hurt like hell. I'd thrown up almost every time it had happened to me. Lad leveling up twice simultaneously meant twice the brain frying.

"I'm an inch away from leveling up Combat, but I'm capped," Danjuma said. The gunner was careful to move her various combat skills in sync, ensuring she didn't let any one of them get lopsided, but individual skills couldn't exceed your basic character level. "I need another few thousand XP."

"I'm surprised you didn't get that in the Xerxes system," Stroman mused. Jakob specialized in Combat Tactics and Strategy, a fitting set of skills for the ship's XO. He maintained a minor skill in Ship Repair, and Engineering as well, letting him pitch in when things got sticky.

"I'm surprised we *survived* Xerxes," Graves muttered. Lucas was the ship's doctor, and I nodded in quick agreement. Half of us had wound up in his med bay by the time we'd escaped Xerxes. Scuttlebutt had placed the system at a firm level 10, which should have been a bit of a stretch for some of us, but still within our capability. But the NPC alien fleet we'd encountered had been at least a level 15, if not higher. The *Princess* had escaped only after we'd expended three-quarters of our ammo, battered the nanite hull armor, and lost half our RFLAMs. Had we triumphed, the reward—both in loot and in XP—would likely have been substantial. Instead, we had accumu-

lated a few million in damages and expended ammo, and so we'd limped to the nearest shipyard and spent a week licking our wounds. Thus the decision to prioritize this particular mission and get our munitions autofactory running. "So, we're all set for Frank's contract?" Renart Masson asked. He was our shuttle pilot, security chief, and second gunner in major combat.

"So long as we don't need two railguns," Danjuma reminded everyone.

"We're actually really low on nano stock too," Tomika pointed out. "If we're expecting any kind of action, I'd feel a lot better if we could restock."

"We can stop at Atlantis," Stroman said. "We may even be able to get a new gun fitted pretty quickly."

"Yes on the resupply." Mi-Cha nodded carefully. "Frank, are we okay with the timing?"

"I think so, but only if we skip replacing the railgun. The deadline's getting tight." With the crew's permission, I had accepted a major assassination contract from the Guild, one of many we had taken on as a group. This contract was a big one: take out the operations head of a major Terran Confederacy system. "The plan was to go in as a freighter, maybe even fake a little damage. As is, the damaged gun will fit in perfectly. I'll be as stealthy as possible for the actual job, but there's still a solid chance we'll have to fight our way out."

"Intel still puts a full carrier group in-system," Stroman said grimly. "It's one of their new Hercules-class carriers too. We're looking at no less than four full squadrons of attack craft. Figure a hundred, minimum."

"But if we can afford to blow through feedstock, we can probably put a lot more ammo in the air," Danjuma said. "And if we pick up enough kills, we should all get . . . Rashmi, what's the XP estimate?"

Lad was our resident stats geek. "Figure ten to twenty thousand apiece, based on the sims I ran. Best was laying down a grapeshot field with a tight path out."

Grapeshot—the smaller golf ball-sized chunks our railguns could fire—was a simple but deadly tactical weapon. Ships moving at a respectable speed couldn't detect them on their sensors, but hitting even a couple could critically damage a small ship. Our own bow armor could take thousands of hits with ease, a number that moved to infinity if we fed the armor more power. Attack craft, however, couldn't mount substantial armor and still have the agility and speed they needed, making them vulnerable to sneaky tricks like grapeshot.

"Screw the escape path," Napolitano grinned, echoing my own thoughts. "Let's lay down a field and just bash our way out. We can fire the railgun aft. Full laser fusillade, too, for that matter."

"And missiles," Danjuma said with a fierce smile. "All the missiles."

"Since time's a concern, we should resupply those at Atlantis," Stroman said, nodding slowly. "It'll be faster than manufacturing our own."

"That's a good point," Mi-Cha agreed. "And it'll be death to be right on our six, which will force them to fan out and slam into whatever we've laid down."

"What about the capital ships?" I asked.

"Confed carrier groups have the carrier, two medium cruisers, and two destroyers. Although, they've been adding a dreadnought in some cases." He paused for a moment to do the math. "Figure four hundred kilotons, worst case."

"That's a pretty bad worst case, Jakob." Tomiko laughed. Danger rarely amused the chief engineer, unlike the rest of the crew, but she didn't shy away from it either. "Can we talk about a ZPE plant next, please?"

"Frank?" Mi-Cha asked. My main job was as the ship's Business Manager.

"They're not exactly affordable," I said carefully. "It's not just money—Cerise Yards would sell us one for about a hundred million, which we can obviously afford. But they also want some pretty specific loot so they can expand their facilities." The artifacts

required to build shipyards were painfully rare and laughably difficult to acquire. "I checked into it. We're probably looking at twelve waves of cthulus in at least a level twelve system." Cthulus were the name *Endless Sky*'s players had given to the various space-going alien monstrosities that populated about half of the dungeon crawl systems. Version 2 of the game had expanded the number and variety of them, and they were one of the best ways to get yourself killed and your ship eaten.

"That's not out of reach," Tomiko said hopefully. Most of the crew were level 11 or 12; I was the exception as a 10, but I'd had substantially less time in-game.

"It's not, but this assassination job should level up at least a couple of us," I pointed out.

"Okay," Mi-Cha said. "Resupply missiles and nano stock. Kill the Confed guy and blast our way out. Resupply the feedstock, let the munitions factory refill the ammo containers, resupply the feedstock *again*, and then see what Cerise wants from us in exchange for a ZPE plant."

"Sounds like a plan," Stroman chuckled.

"Most level twelve runs award fifty thou XP or more," Lad mused. "Apiece. That'd be a nice push toward Legendary." I personally would need around half a million XP to move from level 10 to 11, so fifty thousand didn't feel like a "nice" push at all. I knew Lad was a 12, the beginning of the Guru levels, and they'd need around *two million* XP to move to 13. Legendary began at level 17. I suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion as I realized how far away I was—almost 66.5 *million* XP. Still, it's not like I had anything better to do. Exiting the game wasn't even possible anymore; Endless Domains' primary goal, we'd learned, was to lure people into their full-body-care pods, scan their brains for a few months to develop a fully digital model of them, and then dispose of the bodies. The company's CEO and a million of Earth's other richest bastards wanted to make the planet into a garden paradise, once they'd composted of all our resource-consuming bodies.

But I mean, the games were awesome. Far better than my former life as a call center agent for one of the world's biggest banks. "I do have a bit of a concern about those capital ships," I said. Mi-Cha cocked her head to one side. "I mean . . . I get how the grapeshot helps with the attack ships. But a *dreadnought*?"

"Ah," Stroman said, nodding sagely. "Yeah. And we'd be running away, unprotected ass in the air, so to speak."

"Yeah."

"Hardly unprotected," Danjuma pointed out. "What with lasers, shot, and missiles flying out of us."

"True," Stroman allowed. "And those ships take a hot minute to get moving. The carrier will get a squadron in the air, maybe even all of them, but even that takes a minute. Those capital ships are in their home system, not under any major military threat, and not expecting us. They're going to have to go to red alert, fire up their engines, maneuver—the whole bit. We'll put the planet between us and as many of them as possible, then hightail it to jump distance. There's a risk of a battle laser or two catching us, but if we don't fly in a straight line, we'll minimize it."

"Nothing I do is straight," Lad proclaimed with a happy grin.

"There you go," Stroman said, leaning back in his chair. "Should be fine."

"The dreadnought *is* a bit worrying," Danjuma said with a frown. "Everything I've been reading on those is that they're *fast*."

"At a hundred k-tons, how fast could it possibly be?" Lad said.

"Rumor is that Confed developed a new antimatter engine," the gunner said.

"How is it, exactly, that Confed is developing all these advanced ship technologies?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's their size," I supplied. "You know how the research system works in v2, right?" A few heads nodded slowly, but most shook a negative. "It's man-hours. You set your research goal and designate a team. The game internally calculates how many man-hours will be required, and your team has to work through every one of those

hours. Solving puzzles on computers, mostly. A thousand man-hours can be done in one hour with a thousand people, or a thousand hours with one person, or anywhere in between. The result is a recipe for whatever you want, which you then have to craft."

"So, they're putting big teams on it," Mi-Cha said.

"Scuttlebutt is that every one of their *planets* is assigned a single research project. Massive populations of players, and everyone is required to put in a certain number of hours per day. Rumor is the nano-armor tech took twelve million man-hours. Every new generation of tech takes exponentially more."

"We didn't get the nano-armor from a Confed yard, though," Stroman pointed out.

"No, the recipe got leaked. Besides, the resources needed are so punishingly rare that even most Confed ships don't mount the stuff," Mi-Cha said. "I got to be good friends with the yardmaster while *Princess* was being built. That armor was almost half her total price."

"Worth every penny," Lad growled.

"Absolutely. But our access to money is far from the norm. The game has kept finances pretty constrained recently," I said. "We're unicorns. Most planets can't foot the kind of budget we can. It's why Confed taxes their planets so heavily for defense—it takes taxes from a dozen worlds to fund one dreadnought, I'd guess."

"Point being," Danjuma said, "we should try to make sure that whatever we do, the dreadnought is on the other side of the planet from us. It'll have a harder time catching us if we're running out hot while they loop around."

"Noted," Stroman said. "Anything else?"

"I need to do a bit of research once we're in-system to pinpoint the target," I said. "But otherwise, no. I'll leave the space battle part to you guys. The actual hit I have to do solo."

"Remind me of the reward on this one?" Graves asked.

I pulled it up in my mind's eye and read it off to them.

» Serve the Guild VII

> Take on a major contract and earn major rewards! You've been asked to assassinate Governor-General Pattinson Harm, leader of the Terran Confederacy's Atlantis system and senior officer of the Confederacy's Eighteenth Fleet.
>
> » Rewards:
>
> 25,000 XP minimum
>
> 50,000,000 Interrums
>
> » Bonuses:
>
> Undetected: x2 XP
>
> » Additional rewards will be assigned to collaborators based upon contribution to mission.

"The money's not chump change," I added. "It'd cover the ZPE plant."

"Undetected sounds like a stretch," Graves pointed out.

"True, but if we fight our way out, there's XP for that," Mi-Cha countered.

"We'll take a negative rep with the Confed," Tomiko said.

"We steer clear of them as much as possible anyway," Mi-Cha said with a shrug. "You can't play the game without making some enemies. The Confed has represented the opposite of what we've all wanted since we started playing."

"I technically don't take rep hits on Guild missions," I offered.

"I think it's us blasting out hot and destroying ships that'll earn us a negative," Graves said wryly.

"Point," I conceded.

"Are there instructions on how you have to off the guy?" Danjuma asked. "I favor a shot between the eyes, personally."

I scanned the mission dossier. "Nope. My discretion. Although obviously if I can make it look like an accident it'll better support the 'undetected' bit."

"Fair."

"I'm not hearing any hard objections," Mi-Cha said. Her eyes

tracked slowly around the table, and we each gave her a small nod. Nobody voiced any objections. "Then so mote it be," she said with a big smile. "Let's get the *Princess* refitted and restocked. Eto, you and Leone are in charge of getting the munitions factory online. Amaze me and I'll buy you a ZPE plant. Everyone else, to stations."

"*Princess* on three?" Stroman asked, extending his hand over the middle of the table.

"Absolutely not, Jakob, and don't make me say it again," our captain growled as she led us out of the room.

2 / ASSASSINATION

Our arrival at the Atlantis system was absolutely routine. A controller on Atlantis One, the system's primary space station, welcomed us in a bored tone and directed us to a berth after we'd authorized payment for our docking fees. I ran standard scans of the system—something any ship might run to check for navigational hazards, for example, but nothing that would alarm the military—and delightedly announced that at least half the carrier group was unaccounted for.

"I've got the carrier, CMS *Gallant,* and a destroyer, CMS *Fearsome.* No sign of cruisers, the other destroyer, or a dreadnought. We've got the usual complement of freighters, a half dozen corvettes, and a couple private yachts. No major threats. Also, this is the worst-named planet ever."

Atlantis was not, as its name implied, a watery planet. Quite the opposite: it was a dry, arid planet, with the majority of the arable land located in a tight belt around its equator.

"Confed mainly uses it for research and as an administrative headquarters, from what I understand," Mi-Cha said. "But I'd seriously have figured on at least two carriers."

"We can't possibly be that lucky," Stroman muttered as he tapped

his console. "Actually, maybe we are. According to the local net, that portion of the battle group is on the edge of this sector, in the Fortean system. Putting down an insurrection, says the newsfeed. They shipped out two days ago."

"We are blessed," Danjuma breathed. "That being the case, I recommend we hold the grapeshot. We can fire it behind us as we go, if needed, but there's a chance we won't even need to. I'll cycle the railguns to aft firing."

"Approved," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Frank, are you getting what you need?"

With the space around us scanned and inventoried, I'd started my own search of the news feeds. "Checking that the governor-general isn't off with a large chunk of his fleet."

"Good," she said. "It's crossed my mind."

"Looks like Harm made a systemwide announcement this morning," I said, rapidly scrolling through the news feed. "From . . . Atlantis One, if you please."

"The station? Oh, I please very much," Mi-Cha said, her voice suddenly merry. "That's going to make this all the much easier. Jakob, do the workup. And Frank, can I assume Harm is a PC?"

"Oh, absolutely. Assassination contracts never target NPCs. Besides, I don't think there's a lot of NPCs in the game anymore. Not human, at least. Maybe some of the alien species."

"System workup," Stroman announced as his console chimed. "The carrier is going to be our threat. *Fearsome* is on the other side of the habitable planet. We're berthing on the space side of the station, so we've got the station and the planet between us. But *Gallant* is holding a high orbit—depending on the timing, she could be right in our way when we need to run."

"Crap," Mi-Cha sighed. "Well, we knew it was a possibility. Rashmi, get a few escape plots ready, and we'll take whichever one puts our tail on that carrier."

"I'm running passive scans." Danjuma was bent over her console,

tapping intently. "Stroman, does she look like one of the Huntress class to you?"

Stroman took a moment. "Yeah, she does. You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"She can only launch ships off her bow," Danjuma said, looking up. "Rahsmi, if she's close and we need to run, take us across her stern. She'll have to launch away from us, and it'll force those ships to do a hairpin. We'll get a few extra seconds, and in the rush, they won't be looking for grapeshot. I'm configuring the launchers for the widest possible spread."

"Lasers?" Stroman asked.

"I've got the banks precharged, so we can get off quite a few shots without running the power plant up. Once we do that, we're going to bloom on every ship in the neighborhood, and they'll know we're up to something." Running a major power plant in *Endless Sky* was basically announcing your intention to attack. When a sizable plant went hot, everyone with ship sensors in local space automatically got a game notification. Lad complained about it incessantly.

"Vectoring in," Lad announced. The enormous forward view screen was filling with Atlantis One's bulk.

"I'm going to go get prepped," I said, sliding away from my console. "I'll let you know when I'm ready."

"The plan still to hit a bar?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It'd look weird if we didn't," I answered. "So yeah. I'll find a quiet nook, change, and sneak out the back. I've got maps from the Guild downloaded."

"We'll meet you at the sally port after we dock," Mi-Cha called after me.

Our "sally port" was the *Princess*'s one great compromise. Most ships would have one, if not two, airlock-style rooms where they'd latch to an umbilical extending from a station or

another ship that had matched velocities. Our all-over nanite armor meant we didn't have one of those conveniences—any such thing would have been a weak spot in the armor. Instead, our sally port was integrated into our shuttle bay. Docking required us to evacuate atmosphere from the shuttle bay, lift the heavy, armor-clad doors that protected the bay, and extend the sally port above the ship's dorsal surface. Once the station umbilical was secured to the port, we could then climb a ladder (in zero gravity, fortunately) into the port proper.

It was a total hassle. In fact, it was usually just easier to leave the ship in a parking orbit off-station and fly the shuttle back and forth. Given the likely parameters of our exit from this system, that felt like a poor option. As is, we could blow the station umbilical and fire our engines while the sally port was still retracting. The shuttle bay would be exposed to incoming fire for a painfully long couple of minutes, but it would at least get us moving.

"Comfy?" Mi-Cha asked, nudging me in the ribs with an elbow. The sally port could accommodate a dozen—barely—but even with a half dozen of us, it was tight. Stroman was staying behind to manage our escape, while the two engineers were double-checking power conduits and other systems. Mi-Cha, myself, Lad, Danjuma, Graves, and Masson were the away team for this mission, providing me with a cover story.

"Did they tell you who ordered the hit?" Graves asked as we waited for the sally port to extend.

"Nope," I answered. "But I have some guesses."

"Rival faction?" Mi-Cha asked.

I nodded. "That's my best guess. We know Confed has been splintering internally for ages. As far as I know, killing the guy above of you to get his job is still frowned upon, so I'm guessing this is 'weaken the competition.' Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering if we're going to make more friends or more enemies when we do this," Graves said with a shrug.

"Theoretically, nobody but the Guild knows I'm the one who took the contract," I said. "And they're pretty good about being

discreet. If we can get out of here without blowing anything up, we'd in theory stay neutral."

"Big *if*." Mi-Cha chuckled as the station's automated umbilical *clunked* home. "Ready?"

"We're going to a space station bar," Masson pointed out with a grin. "I'm always ready for that."

We clambered out of the sally port and into the station's umbilical, emerging into a broad concourse that led to other docking points. At the end of the causeway, we cleared a checkpoint for entry into the station proper, scanning our chip cards to pay the station's entry fee. I had, of course, created new accounts for each of us and transferred a modest sum into each. In theory, Confed didn't track people's identities, but we were all leery anyway.

"How long are you planning to be on-station?" a bored security guard asked.

"No more than a week," Mi-Cha replied easily. I'd prepaid our docking fees for that long, just in case.

"Business?"

"Hopefully," she said with a grin. "A bit of R&R first, of course, but we've meetings set up over the next couple of days to try and bid on some cargo routes."

Another guard chimed in. "You guys flying that brick that just docked?"

I snorted.

"We're the crew of the flying brick, yes," Mi-Cha said in a mock-stern voice. "Safest and most secure cargo transport in all of known space!"

The guards chuckled as they waved us through. I smiled as I walked past. It was uncanny to see so many actual players in the game—when we'd started, these guards would have been nonplayer characters, or NPCs. They could crack jokes, thanks to the powerful underlying code that ran them, but they'd never have chuckled.

The station was built to a standard Confed pattern: a squashed sphere with docking points around the perimeter at the thickest part.

Confed built highly segmented stations, and the docking points used by non-Confed ships always connected to an area of the station reserved for "untrusted travelers." This system was a huge crossroads for trade, and so the traveler segment was nearly the entire level that we'd docked to, complete with hotels, bars, restaurants, business offices, recreation facilities, and more. Access to the remainder of the station passed through tightly controlled security checkpoints, which would be the first obstacle I'd need to overcome.

We walked several hundred meters until we found a reputable-looking bar. Normally, cargo ship crews tend to go for something a little more run-down and less expensive, but those bars wouldn't attract any locals. Station personnel got standard pricing for things like drinks and commodity foodstuffs, meaning they could eat and drink anywhere for the same price, and so there was no reason for them to frequent seedier establishments. And we definitely needed a local for our plan.

Mi-Cha ordered the first round of drinks, and I watched carefully to make sure everyone surreptitiously added one of the tiny pills I'd given them. My Assassin-derived Poisoning skill was good for more than just killing: the little tablets I'd devised would neutralize about 80 percent of the alcohol in our drinks. We'd act more intoxicated than we were, but we'd still be sharp.

"Silly, isn't it?" Graves muttered in my ear as he swirled his beer to dissolve the tablet.

"What's that?"

"This," he said, raising his glass and taking a sip. "We all know there's no alcohol in here, right? It's all software. Software knows this is supposed to be alcoholic, and so it modifies our digital models accordingly. Yet another software knows about your little trick, so it modifies the modification." He took another sip. "It's all gloriously fake." Another sip. "Tastes good, though," he finished with a grin.

» Skill-up! Your Poisoning skill is now at level 5.

Excellent, I thought happily as I sipped my beer. My brain tingled as the rest of the skill level downloaded, subtly expanding my knowledge and abilities. The alconeutralizer was technically a level 3 trick, but I'd done some work to make the resulting tablets much smaller, apparently earning me a level jump.

We went through a second round of beer before we got into shots, which let us start acting a lot looser and happier than we had any right to. In reality, we'd had the equivalent of one beer in just over two hours. I caught the captain's eye and nodded behind her. She turned slowly to Lad leaning on the bar, who'd set their attention on a station crew member wearing a stevedore uniform. Mi-Cha turned back with a grin as Lad giggled loudly, gently stroking the man's arm.

Phase 1 complete.

We ordered and shared some passable nachos and a couple more rounds of beers as Lad continued flirting with the stevedore. He was matching them drink for drink, although he was obviously getting the full effect. Finally, I hear them say, "You know, I have enough credit for a hotel room if there's one nearby."

"I know just the place," the man said, slurring only slightly. He paid his tab—along with a couple of Lad's drinks—and let them take his arm as he maneuvered out of the bar. I nodded to them as they passed, impressed with the man's fortitude. He'd had a half dozen drinks in maybe three hours and was still able to walk more or less steadily out of the bar. His Body stat must have been well into the double digits.

Masson detached himself from us and fake-stumbled out of the bar just after them, muttering loudly about needing to find a place to lie down. He'd follow Lad and her mark just to make sure nothing unplanned happened.

"Y'know, that's not a bad idea," Mi-Cha said too loudly, plunking her empty mug on the bar and waving her chip card toward the bartender. "You still interested in the promotion?" she asked me, slurring her words and giving me a blatant leer.

"Thought you never ask," I said, matching her slur and running a

hand over her shoulder. "Hey," I called loudly to the bartender, "is there a room or something nearby?"

The bartender rolled his eyes. We were getting a bit too sloppy for this place, and he was clearly glad to see us go. "Out, right, twenty meters down on your left. Spacer's Friend. No views." Meaning it was an interior space and would be cheaper—perfect for our faux assignation.

"Thanks," Mi-Cha said, retrieving her chip card. "Rest of you, on your own," she said, waving one hand carelessly at Danjuma and Graves as she led me out of the bar.

"Fancy something a little more low-key," I heard Danjuma ask Graves.

"Delighted," he answered, carefully over-enunciating. The plan called for the two of them to lie low, keep an eye on the hotel, and warn us via our comms if anything seemed to be going wrong. They'd wind up at a wine bar directly across from the hotel's entrance.

Mi-Cha and I strolled lazily to the hotel, stumbling slightly as we went. We'd selected this place well in advance, based on information I'd pulled from the station's net directory. Lad and their stevedore should already be in a room. The directory had described the place as efficient and clean, which meant almost fully automated: Mi-Cha tapped her chip card to pay for the room, and the terminal added a room authorization directly to the card. A room number flashed on the screen, and we stumbled down a hallway to find it.

"Fifteen," Lad's voice came over our comms. We'd been assigned room 17, so we'd be directly next door. Perfect.

Mi-Cha and I stepped into our room, disappointed that there wasn't a connecting door into room 15. The room was sparse, consisting of little more than a nightstand, a full-size bed, and a 'fresher cabinet. The walls and floors were hard, smooth plas that could be easily and quickly cleaned and sterilized. The mattress was a plas-coated gel affair, just as easily sterilized. Linens came from a niche built into the wall, and when we checked out, they'd go back in

there to be broken down into their component molecules and recycled.

The captain quickly pulled the linens out and spread them roughly on the mattress. We wouldn't be using them, of course, but we wanted this to look real in case anyone came investigating.

"He's out," Lad said over the comms.

"Cameras in the hall?" I asked Mi-Cha quickly.

She shook her head. "Didn't see any. Place like this, they'd be pretty obvious. Two in the lobby."

"Wish me luck," I said as I stepped back into the hallway.

The door to Lad's room was already crackied open, and I slipped in quickly. Lad was already removing their jumpsuit, revealing a shirt-and-slacks combo that was an exact match for what I was wearing. We were of a similar height and build, and they'd be leaving in an hour or so with Mi-Cha. They helped me strip the stevedore, and I quickly changed into his uniform. The excess clothing went into the linen 'cycler to be broken down and turned into future sheets and pillowcases.

"How long will this keep him out?" Lad asked, pointing at the skivvy-clad stevedore on the bed.

"His build, probably ten hours. Maybe eleven. Plenty of time." Tranquilizers were straightforward level 1 drugs, but without knowing in advance how big a guy we were going to be working with, I'd had to guesstimate the dosage. This fellow was a bit bigger than me, but the loose uniform fit me well enough. I transferred a few tools to the uniform's spacious pockets and finished fastening the closures. "How do I look?" I asked, pulling his duty cap on my head.

"Boring and unremarkable," Lad said brightly. "You have his card?"

I felt around the uniform's pockets until I found the man's Confed ID. "Got it." I pocketed it and strapped the man's wrist comp to my forearm. I wouldn't be able to use anything more than basic functions without his passcode, but it'd look odd not to have one.

"Even in the real, we used implanted chips," Lad groused. "Cards are so stupid."

"Yeah, but the game wouldn't be any fun if there was no way for stuff to be stolen," I pointed out.

"I guess. Good luck and see you back on the ship."

"Fingers crossed." I stepped out into the corridor and headed toward the exit, remembering to stumble a bit here and there as I went.

My plan was to walk a great deal further down the concourse, past two of the security checkpoints that led into the rest of the station. That gave me time to gradually "sober up," and a reason to get to a checkpoint that would be much closer to my target. I made it to the selected checkpoint just as the station was shifting into night mode, the lights on the concourse dimming substantially as people headed to their quarters, docked ships, or hotel rooms.

"Long day?" The guard at the security checkpoint gave my card a bored once-over before tapping it on his console.

"You've no idea," I said in a tired voice. "These stupid indie spacers never have anything lined up to go, so it's double the work. And of course the boss breathing down our necks the whole time."

One of the man's eyebrows peaked.

» Skill roll: Disguise: SUCCESS

My heart clenched. The game only did skill rolls when you were pushing yourself to the edge of your ability in a situation where the outcome might be dire if you screwed up. Had I said something wrong?

"You guys are all union anyway, right?" the guard asked.

The successful roll meant the game could download a hint about what to say next. "Obviously," I said quickly. "Yay, overtime and all that. But is that going to stop the battle-ax from waging war when I get back? Nope." The guard's expression relaxed.

» Skill-up! Your Disguise skill is now at level 5.

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Impersonation.

Oh, nice. Those two would complement each other nicely, and having a specific skill—even at a low level—was almost always better than trying to fake it by leaning on a related skill instead.

"Good luck with that," the guard said, waving me through.

"Thanks, man," I said as I crossed the checkpoint.

I'd studied the station's plans carefully during our trip here and while we'd been resupplying our nano feedstock. Blueprints for the military portions of the station obviously weren't publicly available, but those areas were noted so that you knew where not to wander. The checkpoint I'd chosen let me into the exact section I needed to be in.

The corridor was wide and straight, leading from the station's outer rim all the way to its core, and then through to the rim on the opposite side—a spoke, if you will, to the flat wheel that this level of the station represented. Openings on the left and right led to more corridors that tracked the station's circumference, providing access to the lower-grade housing occupied by the station crew who worked in the spacer areas.

I quickly found a lift and descended two levels, exiting into a similar corridor that provided access to the station's higher-ranking residences were, including that of my target: Governor-General Pattinson Harm, the head of this station and the entire system. The station layout indicated that his residence spanned two levels, this one and the one below, along the outer hull. Doubtless he had impressive views.

I walked past the corridor to Harm's residence, casually taking the next opening. I wanted to get *behind* the governor-general's home.

When I first started playing *Endless Sky*, I'd been asked to select a character class. Basically, to pick a job. I already had the Truthsayer class, but that wasn't actually a job, of course, so I'd chosen Assassin. *That* was a hidden class, one most intended to keep secret, and so I'd

been promoted to select a third class that would be my public facade. I'd chosen Majordomo—basically, a household manager. Human majordomos were employed almost exclusively on the gigantic city-ships of the Aa'an, a lizard-like alien species. I'd stayed in that position for quite a while, even assassinating an Aa'an or two as the Assassins' Guild assigned me to. But I'd spent most of my time actually being a majordomo, helping run a large Aa'an household. My skills had eventually translated well to being a Business Manager, my current public class, but I'd never forgotten my household duties.

Want to break into a high-ranking household? Wait until the wee hours of morning and stroll in with the rest of the staff through the back door.

I quickly located Harm's rear entrance—more of a miniature loading dock, really. I didn't linger, but as I passed, I made a careful note of camera locations (just one), doors, trash receptacles, and anything else that might be of use. I estimated it'd be three or four hours before the early-morning deliveries began, so I needed to find someplace to be inconspicuous until then.

The answer came where the corridor intersected the next major station spoke—an all-night coffee shop. I stepped in, relieved to find it running in automated mode, with only one other patron in the place. I ordered a coffee from the machine at the counter, then settled into a small booth along one wall.

"Long night or early morning?" the other patron asked.

"I think it's both." I sighed, taking a sip of the ferociously bitter black brew. "Wow, that'll help."

She chuckled. "The machine stuff is strong, for sure." She took a swig out of her own cup. "You work deliveries in this area?"

I hesitated for a moment, taking a careful sip of coffee to cover. "Yeah," I said at last. "Second job. I work in the docks on day shift normally." I had no idea if the delivery personnel would use the same stevedore uniform or not, so I hoped the explanation would hold. "Normally I catch a power nap between, but . . ." I shrugged and sipped my coffee.

"Family troubles?" she guessed.

I nodded. "Last shift ran late. Damn indie spacers had their containers out of sequence. So she locked me out." I held my breath.

» Skill roll: Impersonation: CRITICAL SUCCESS

Oh, thank everything. I exhaled slowly. A critical success meant the game had rolled an exceptionally high value, at least 30 percent more than I needed to clear the task at hand. Critical successes gave you significant rewards.

"You said you do the morning stuff part time?" I nodded. "Hmm. So you're on-call, then?" My stomach tightened slightly as I nodded. "You know, we can maybe do each other a favor. Do you have any calls for this morning?" I shook my head. "Perfect. Here's the deal. I have my own troubles I'd like to take care of this morning, if you get my drift." Another nod. "Would you take half the pay to run mine for me?"

"Absolutely." I tried to look slightly desperate and slightly greedy at the same time.

"Here," she said, withdrawing her chip card and tapping its surface a few times. She walked over to my booth, holding the card out. I pulled mine out of my pocket, and we tapped the cards together, transferring funds. "Seriously, this is actually a huge favor. Thank you."

"Hey, the extra money is going to calm things down on my home front, trust me."

"Win-win."

"So, where's the work?"

"This level, further down J-2," she said, pointing to the corridor I'd come through, but in the opposite direction. "You'll get a pallet of produce from central disbursement, J-2-30," she continued. Level J, ring segment 2, space 30, I knew from studying the station's plans. "That goes to J-5-10, rear entrance to some high-and-mighty residence."

"That's it?" A single delivery for an entire morning?

"Hardly. I'm scheduled for six this morning, but they're all from Central. Just keep heading back there, and they'll have the orders for the rest."

"Got it," I replied. Obviously, I wouldn't be doing all of that work, but it would let me play along. "When's the first pickup?"

She checked her wrist comp. "Two hours. You don't mind hanging out until then?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, I'm locked out. I was going to hang out and head to disbursement and see if they had any no-shows."

She smiled. "It's rare down here, actually. You're probably used to working the commercial sectors?"

I nodded. "A guy there told me everyone had already checked in, so I headed here."

> » Skill roll: Impersonation: SUCCESS
>
> » Skill-up! Your Impersonation skill is now at level 2.

"Well, good luck," she said. "I'm Tamiss, by the way. If anyone asks, I had a personal emergency and you agreed to fill in. You guys in the docks are all union, right?"

"Yup."

She grinned. "Then they won't grief you. We're United Labor in here, not Teamsters, but we're courteous to our brothers."

I smiled back. "I appreciate that."

She tossed her cup in a 'cycler. "I'm off then. Good luck."

"To you as well." I leaned back in the booth, sipping my coffee as she left.

Now that nearly all of humanity was in one of Endless Domains' games, you could pretty much assume everyone you met was a real player, not an NPC. NPCs would never have thought up unions.

I spent the next half hour fussing with the stevedore's wrist comp, accessing station news and other functions that didn't require a login. I bought a second cup of coffee—I really needed the boost, but my

Health would pay the price in a few hours. Early-morning workers began straggling in. Most purchased a cup and left, but a few, like me, took their time and browsed their wrist comps as they drank.

Finally, the appointed time rolled around. I tossed my empty cup and headed down the corridor.

Central disbursement was a compact facility set into one of the back-alley corridors. It wasn't bustling yet, but the activity behind the tiny counter suggested it wouldn't be long. I walked up and said, "Hey, I'm picking up Tamiss's deliveries."

The man behind the counter was dressed in a uniform not unlike my own, just in a medium gray instead of the charcoal black I wore. His eyes gave me a fast once-over before he spoke. "Larry again?"

I offered a rueful grin. "I think so."

He shook his head. "She's one of my best porters, but she can't seem to get that man of hers under control. She's been on-station a year and some, and I'll bet she's gone before the month's out." He met my eyes. "I know you guys on the docks get paid more, but if you ever want something steadier, you should come see me. I'm a shop steward, I can facilitate a union transfer."

"I . . . you know, I'll keep that in mind. My last shift ran four over."

"Nice money."

I grimaced. "Not so good for the home life."

"Ah. Well. Did Tamiss work out the money with you?"

"Yeah, we're square."

"Okay. Here's your first, then. J-5-10. Think you can manage it in thirty?" A pallet mover slid out from an opening next to the counter, already loaded with a pallet of boxes.

I nodded confidently. "No problem. I'll come see you after?"

"Yup. I'll have your next one lined up. Don't be late. The leeches are already showing up," he said, nodding slightly behind me. I turned to see some roughly dressed men and women leaning against the far wall, clearly waiting to see if any work would become available. I'd have been with them, had the night gone according to my

original plan. "Once your load is out, I have to clear it to get the next one out," he explained, gesturing to the constrained space behind him. "Ten-second grace period, no more."

"Got it." I obviously wasn't concerned, and even this load wasn't headed for J-5-10. It was just an excuse to get back to Governor-General Harm's rear entrance.

"Off you go."

I grabbed the pallet mover controls. Fortunately, the Aa'an used something similar, so it only took a moment to familiarize myself with the simple controls.

That's when I realized this pallet's destination was in the opposite direction of where I needed to go, and the dispatcher behind the counter was still staring at me. I began pushing it in the correct direction, stealing quick glances over my shoulder. It wasn't a moment more that the gray-clad porters swarmed the counter, and I quickly reversed directions, slipping past the sudden crush of people.

I cranked the pallet mover to full speed—which wasn't more than a fast walk—and set off.

It only took me a few minutes to arrive at Harm's back entrance. There were people here now, including a man who, from his dress, had to be a household manager of some kind. I pushed the pallet mover up to him. "Load?" he asked in a tired voice, looking down at a data pad.

"You look exhausted already," I said with sympathy.

He looked up with bloodshot eyes. Definitely a PC. "Yeah. Bad call on my part. Decided to try doing my comp time before my shift. Won't make that mistake again."

"Comp—" I started to ask but stopped myself. "Right, the puzzles." Mandatory research contribution time. "What did it have you doing?"

"Sudoku." The man sighed. "I hate Sudoku. Two hours of that is torture."

"I couldn't agree more," I said earnestly, meaning it. "So where do you want this?"

He looked down at his pad again. "You're load two?" His eyes raked over the boxes but didn't seem to take in any of their markings. "You're down for door-to-door, so right here, I guess." He sighed. "I'll find someone to—"

"Hey, I've got a light load today," I said quickly. "I can take it wherever you need it."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"No problem, man," I assured him.

"Dude, I can't thank you enough," he said with evident relief. "Harm has been on my ass about everything this week, and we've got some kind of huge reception tonight. That's what all of this is for. And of course, three people called out already, and the temp agency won't open for four hours." He ran a hand through his hair. "I can't believe I left the real for this," he said quietly. "I thought it'd all be space battles and aliens, not . . . I ran a catering company, in the real. This is just, like, worse."

"Let me at least help with this bit," I said. "Where to?"

He gestured toward a slightly open wide door. "Through there, second right. You'll see the big walk-in. Just unload it in there."

"On it."

The kitchen staff hadn't started yet, so this service area was empty. I directed the pallet mover as he had instructed, leaving it fully loaded in the walk-in cooler. I quickly took off my stevedore's cap, tossing it in a nearby 'cycler, and ran my fingers through my hair. My dark jumpsuit might look out of place if anyone saw me, but it would help me blend into the shadows.

In my mind, I activated the game's silent notification mode. The last thing I needed now were glowing congratulatory messages distracting me. It would still inform me of any failed skill rolls and critical successes, but everything else would be suppressed.

A door at the end of the hallway led into the main residence—specifically, into a surprisingly large dining room with a long table. I quickly counted the chairs—this thing could seat twenty-two! Amazing to have that much room on a space station.

A wide double pocket door slid open to reveal an even larger room configured as some kind of sitting room, with small groups of chairs and tables neatly arranged throughout. Another wide pair of doors led to a foyer and the residence's main entrance. Frosted windows blocked the view of passersby from the corridor outside, and a narrow staircase curved upward.

I withdrew my needler, a tiny, silent weapon that fired clusters of —well, needles. They were common assassination weapons, but I had spent extra for one that could switch between two compact magazines. I thumbed the control for the first magazine, which contained needles coated with a mild sedative. Killing random people in *Endless Sky* was massively discouraged, so the first magazine would let me take out any bystanders without incurring the subsequent consequences. The second magazine was liberally doused with a fast-acting neurotoxin and was reserved for Harm himself.

I began creeping up the stairs.

This all felt easy, likely because Confed had little experience with assassination. It was incredibly common in the Aa'an Dominancy, where I had started the game, and in the Qiar Compact, the game's other original major alien species. Guild notices suggested assassination was pretty normalized in the Carbon Hegemony, a collective of four nonhumanoid races, and nonexistent in the weird Roknid Collective. I hadn't seen postings, but everything I had heard suggested that the Andromedan Clans were big fans of assassination as well, although they had authorized their own guild for the trade.

I imagined that once I finished this job and showed that the Confed was vulnerable to assassination, dozens of assassins would be on a near free-for-all within the Confed. The government had a reputation for being slightly unhinged. A lot of players had apparently defected to the newer United Federation of Worlds, describing it as a saner, human-centric option. But literally billions of players were all but trapped on Confed worlds and stations, since the Confed made emigration all but impossible. Gotta keep everyone focused on their research contribution, after all.

My first hurdle came at the top of the stairs, where I surprised a maid who had been filling a basket with linens from a hallway closet. She sharply inhaled and then gently collapsing on the floor as the sedative from my needler kicked in.

The upstairs was more compact than I had expected. I was in an interior hallway, which made sense—the rooms themselves would occupy the space along the hull here, providing views of space. The first room I checked was clearly the governor-general's office. I scanned it quickly, spotting an interesting-looking mini-crate on the antique-looking wood desk. You never knew what kind of loot you could pick up on an assassination job, and I quickly scanned the label to see if—

Holy everything. If this label was correct, this was a very literal jackpot. "Skills Modules," the label read. "General Adaptable, Levels 4 through 10, Assorted."

My heart sank when I saw the thumbprint lock next to the label. Those were bad news: try to open it without the correct thumb, and you were probably consigning the contents of the case to instant destruction. Still, I looked longingly at the box as I hustled out of the room.

The next room had to be Harm's bedroom. His public profile indicated he was single, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have a companion. I switched my needler to the second magazine but kept my thumb on the magazine switch in case I also needed to tranquilize someone.

I tested the door latch slowly and softly, suppressing my irritation when it didn't move. Locked. Of course it was. With staff wandering all over the place all the time, I would lock my bedroom door as well.

I dropped my needler back into a pocket and withdrew my lockpick set. This, I knew, was where I could seriously fail. I didn't have the actual Lockpicking skill—I had kept promising myself I would get to it, but I had kept putting it off. I could lean on my Advanced Assassination skill as a stand-in, but I would take serious negative modifiers. I had bought the best, most automated pick set I could get my

hands on, but that still didn't eliminate the need to actually know what you were doing.

I clenched my teeth and set the pick set's sensor against the door's electronic lock pad. I flipped a switch on the set's main control unit to turn it on and watched as it began scanning the lock.

Type 7, it announced. More details scrolled by on the tiny screen: *Primary authentication via biofield, secondary authentication via rolling code.*

Crap. That meant any staff authorized to open the door would get a code from their wrist comp. Harm's biofield was probably the only one programmed into the thing.

Factory programming code may still be active. Attempt?

Boy, that felt like a long shot. I tapped the menu to see what my other options were, but I honestly couldn't make sense of any of them. EM Override? US Bypass? Something called Mag Pull was grayed out. BF Attack? I closed the menu and tapped Attempt.

The lock immediately beeped a loud, shrill sound.

Factory programming code inactive.

Shit. I quickly tucked the set back into my pocket, withdrew my needler, and—

The door swung open, catching me completely off guard. There stood Governor-General Harm, clad only in boxers, blinking furiously. He held a sidearm loosely at his side, and he frowned as he saw me. "Who the hell are—"

My needler whirred gently as it emptied the second magazine into Harm's bare midsection.

The neurotoxin was fast acting indeed, and Harm stiffened and dropped to the floor almost immediately, his sidearm thumping softly on the carpet. I dragged him into his room and closed the door from the hallway.

Then I paused.

This was the first assassination I'd done since the *Endless Sky* v2 upgrade. With the new protocols, Harm wouldn't respawn. Death was *permanent* now, if it came at the hands of an Assassin. This

didn't hold for ship-to-ship combat, but the game at least had high stakes on a one-to-one basis. The realization crashed down on me. I'd killed someone. I had to force myself to focus.

I needed to get out of there, now.

But first . . .

Without running through the possible consequences, I ducked back into the bedroom, drew a small utility knife from my pocket, and sliced off Harm's right thumb. Blood jetted out of the stump as I tucked the knife and thumb back into my pocket. *Maybe this could be a good thing,* I thought as I dashed back down the hallway, grabbed the mini-crate, and tucked it under one arm. *Maybe they'll chalk this up to a theft gone wrong instead of assassination.*

Thumbing the needler back to the tranquilizer magazine, I moved down the stairs as quickly and as quietly as I could. I made it through the foyer and sitting room without incident, but in the dining room, two men were polishing the enormous table. Both looked up as I dashed in. "Sorry, sorry," I said, tucking the hand holding the needler behind my back. "Deliveries." I hurried past them and into the service area.

I quickly grabbed the pallet mover, freed it from the pallet, dropped the mini-crate in its place, and exited.

"What the hell took so long?" the household manager asked as I exited.

"A guy in white—Is he your chef?—was arguing about where to put the pallet," I replied.

"Jimenez? Oh, for pity's sake. Where'd you put it?"

"In the walk-in, like you said."

"All right. Thanks man. What's that?" he asked, nodding to the mini-crate.

"Jimenez said it was a return." I'd laid the crate upside down on the pallet mover, so neither the thumb lock nor the label were visible.

"Oh. Fine. Have a good night. Morning. Whatever." He turned toward another delivery porter and began arguing about the contents of a pallet.

I took my pallet mover down the corridor far enough to find someplace big enough to stash it. A niche between two structural supports served nicely, and I grabbed the mini-crate and headed back.

Rather than risking running into the same security guard again, I continued along to another checkpoint, one that would put me closer to the ship. Exiting into the spacer area invited far less scrutiny—little more than a nod and a grunt as I tapped the stevedore's chip card on a terminal. Even the mini-crate under my arm was passed without remark.

I made my way back to the little hotel, knocking on the door of room 17. It cracked open immediately, opening wider once Mi-Cha recognized me. "Lad's already back on the ship," she said. "Let's get you out of that uniform. What's in the box?"

I showed her the label on the crate, and her eyebrows rose. "Thumb lock," she noted.

"Thumb," I replied, lashing the digit on the bed sheets, along with my other tools. I began pulling the jumpsuit off.

"Wow, you're hardcore," she said in admiration. "Here." She handed me a silver-black, skintight shipsuit, the kind usually worn underneath an EVA suit.

"This is what you went back for?"

"This is what was available in the bar at that hour," she replied. Lad had left the hotel clothed as me, which left Mi-Cha free to go out and find another "date" for the evening. The plan had been for her to hit one of the cheaper, seedier spacer bars close to the docks. "It was this or some dude three times your size who smelled like feet."

"Shipsuit it is," I agreed, pulling on the stretchy one-piece. "Where's the body?"

"Next door with the other. I couldn't get them onto the bed, but I did manage to get them into an interesting . . . position." She smiled and her eyes twinkled. "You look great. Ready?"

"Yeah. You have my card?"

"Right here." She handed me the chip card I'd left in my original pants pocket.

"You'll need to take my tools," I said, pointing to the pocketless legs of the shipsuit.

"Got it," she said, bundling the tools into her pockets. "Your comm still off?"

"Oh, right." With a quick mental nudge, I reactivated the embedded device. "I'm on."

"Let's go."

We walked casually back to the docks, waving to the guards as they watched us walk through. Confed put zero security on other people's property, so while you had to pay a fee to exit the docks and access the station, anybody could stroll into the docks themselves.

We made it all the way to the umbilical entrance when the alarms began blaring.

"Well shit," Mi-Cha said quietly as we ducked into the umbilical and began hurrying down its length. "They made us," she said over the comm.

"Maybe not," I said. "They know something's wrong, but they don't know it's us."

"They will when we blow out of here in a minute," she argued. "There goes the double-points bonus."

She slid into the sally port, and I passed her the mini-crate before sliding in behind her. She closed the hatch on our side and said, "We're buttoned up. Release the umbilical and start pulling the port down."

Hydraulics hissed as the umbilical detached. We didn't wait for the port to fully retract, instead making our way forward to the bridge. "Stow this," she said along the way, handing the crate back to me. I kept it with me until I got to my bridge station, where I tucked it between my feet.

"What's in the box?" Lad asked from their position at the helm.

"Goodies, I hope," I said, switching my console into tactical mode. "Masson should take half the weapons," I suggested as my

console displayed a tactical plot of the system. "That carrier's not in the worst-case position, but she's coming up."

"He's already on the aux security station," Stroman said. "Any chatter?"

"Cargo hauler *Pretty, Pretty Princess,* please state your intentions," said a voice over the ship comms.

"Just that," I muttered.

"Sorry about the emergency," Stroman said easily. "We got a big tip on a dungeon crawl that just opened up, and we're gonna go check it out."

"Please hold, *Princess*," the station controller advised. "We've had an incident on the station, and we're asking all—"

"First ship in gets the biggest prize," Stroman interrupted, leaning forward to tap Lad on one shoulder. The *Princess*'s system drive fired up, and we began cruising away from the station.

We didn't make it far before we were hailed again. "This is the executive officer of the CMS *Gallant*," a stern female voice announced. "You are ordered to heave to and hold position."

"Is there a problem, ma'am?" Stroman asked.

"There's been an incident aboard the station. All ships in-system are on lockdown while we investigate."

"It's just that this new dungeon crawl opened up—" Stroman began.

"I was advised by station control. That is not our concern. Right now, no traffic is exiting this system until further notice."

In *Endless Sky*, you needed to be a good distance away from any major gravity wells—planets and stars—before you could engage your FTL drive. In theory, keeping ships well inside that perimeter was an easy way to make sure nobody left.

"Okay, well, we're not Confed citizens, so we're—"

"Any attempt to leave the system at this time will be countered with military force," *Gallant's* XO said. The channel clicked off.

"—gonna go ahead and leave," Stroman finished with a shrug. "You all know the plan."

Lad pointed us away from the system and began accelerating. "We're going to cross over her dorsal side, not her stern," they advised. "Any idea how fast she can scramble?"

"She'll have a half dozen on hot alert, no more. Maybe less, given that the system was on peace footing until a minute ago." Mi-Cha tapped her console a few times. "She's launching two."

"Start laying down fire," Stroman ordered.

Danjuma's fingers flew across her console, and successive *thumps* accompanied each discharge of shot. "They're on as wide a spread as I can get from one gun."

"Lasers hot?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Precharged, remember?" I reminded her, checking the charge state. "Missiles are loaded. RFLAMs are hot."

"Passing over *Gallant* now," Lad said.

"Thank you," Mi-Cha said. "Two fighters coming around behind us."

"Sensors show hot weapons, and their scanners are seeking a lock," Stroman said.

"They'll be ballistics," Mi-Cha said. "They're too small to mount lasers. Keep an eye on the RFLAMs."

"I wish someone would do something about those missile-lock systems," Stroman complained.

"They have," Tomiko said over the intercom, "but a hull of nano-armor makes it difficult. I have some ideas, though. We have enough charge in the hull that we should—"

"Perhaps later, Eto," Mi-Cha said, and I could hear the grin in her voice. Our chief engineer was mad for science projects.

We passed over the back of *Gallant,* breaking toward open space. The huge carrier couldn't maneuver anywhere near as tightly as we could, so she continued on her trajectory. She'd rely on her fighters to take us down, but they'd have no way of knowing how well defended we were. They'd already have made note of our weapons, but *Princess* could take a beating and survive.

And their sensors wouldn't pick up the grapeshot we kept spraying into space.

"Bogey Alpha is outgassing," I said. "He hit the shot field. Bogey Beta is rolling wide to try and get clear."

"Six more fighter launches," Mi-Cha announced. "That'll be their max capacity, but if their pilots wake up fast enough, they can get a whole squadron in the air in under two minutes."

"Shall we make this a fight, then?" Stroman asked.

"Might as well. Fire two at Bogey Beta," the captain ordered.

"Missiles locked and away," Danjuma said immediately.

"Hey, *Gallant* is close enough to get her big turret aimed at us," I said. "Specs says she mounts a five-gig laser."

"Get the grav mirror lined up," Mi-Cha said calmly. "We can take a few hits from that thing, but point one of our turrets at her just in case."

"Confirmed," Masson said over the intercom.

"Splash one, Beta is down," Danjuma announced a few seconds later. "Lad, can this thing move any faster?"

"Don't start with me," Lad mock growled. I could tell from my console that *Princess* was under full acceleration, but it would still take us a few minutes to get clear to engage our FTL drive.

The *Princess* shuddered violently.

"We're hit!" Stroman cried. "It's that damn laser! They boiled away a crater about a third of the through the armor. No other damage."

"Routing charge and nano stock," Tomiko said calmly. "I'd still recommend we hold off the grav mirror."

"Agreed," Mi-Cha said. "Lad, rotate us a bit while we're still in their arc, give them something solid to shoot at instead. Masson, return fire."

"Spinning," the pilot confirmed.

"Firing," Masson's voice replied. "Direct hit!"

"That turret's out of action," I confirmed. "Nice shooting, Renart!"

"Those six fighters are lining up in pursuit," Stroman said. "Does the *Gallant* have another turret I'm not seeing?"

"Ventral side, but we're well out of its arc," I said, scanning my tactical display. "She's not heavily armed. Probably meant to be with an entire carrier group."

"Speaking of which, where's that destroyer?"

"The *Fearsome* is behind the planet still, just coming around," I replied, interpreting the various plots on my screen. "If she fires her engines right about now, she can vector in behind us."

Mi-Cha's eyes narrowed. "How long?"

"She's a ways away—she'll only get a few seconds before we clear the well."

"Good. Fire missiles," Mi-Cha ordered. "Two apiece for the bogeys. They've got six more in the air, and they're looping around."

"Incoming," Stroman said. "Looks like a dozen missiles, boosting — No, make that ten, two must have hit shot. Nine now—another got caught in the blast from the first two. RFLAM range in ten."

"RFLAMs hot and tracking," I said, switching my console into defense mode.

"Splash two bogeys to shot," Stroman said.

"Still laying down cover," Danjuma said. "Hey, I can still get the 'gun on the *Gallant*. She'll be in our arc for another thirty seconds."

Mi-Cha considered it. "Pass. We can play this off as defending ourselves. No sense pissing them off more than necessary. Stick with shot."

"Destroyer is vectoring," I said. "RFLAMs firing." My console flashed a warning. "The destroyer is charging its weapons."

"Five more seconds to missile contact," Stroman said.

"Frank, what are we looking at?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Standard Confed destroyer build, Burke class. Four lasers that can fire in paired banks. They can lay down forty gigs if they focus them. Heavy missiles, but we should be just out of range. Oh, they've fired two anyway. Damn, they're big."

"Range on the lasers?" Mi-Cha asked, her voice now tense.

"Our missiles are engaging the fighters," Danjuma announced. "Splash . . . three. One left. He's jinking. Gassing! Shot got him."

"We're just outside laser range," I said quickly, "and they should be coming from nearly a cold start."

"Next wave of fighters is coming up behind," Stroman warned.

The *Princess* shook again. "Missile hit, mid—" Another violent shake. "Two, both starboard-aft." Stroman studied his console. "They're aiming for our engines, but it looks like the missiles went wide."

"Cap, the destroyer is pre-lasing." Large laser cannons often needed to warm up a bit, a need satisfied by firing them at low power while their supporting capacitor banks continued charging. "Missiles are moving fast, guys. They've made some upgrades."

"Final stretch," Lad said evenly.

"Unload," Mi-Cha ordered. "Send everything at them. Give them something to worry about. Target the two missiles as well."

"Railgun is offline," Danjuma said. "That's both of them. Firing missiles."

"Keep at it. Masson, get the lasers on those missiles if you can."

"That's like swatting a fly with a bomb," Masson said, amused. "On it."

"Splash one module to lasers," I said. A second passed as I waited for my tactical screen to clear and for Masson's laser cannon to recharge. "Splash two. Nice shootin', Renard! Missiles in six."

"The fighters are breaking formation," Stroman said. "Two more lost to shot. They're all breaking off now."

"I think they're going to take a shot with the big lasers," I warned.

"Three," Lad said calmly. "Two. One."

Our tactical displays cleared as we made the transition to FTL.

It was the absolute best effect in all of *Endless Sky*, and I will defend that statement to the bitter end. A shameless rip-off of an old twentieth-century movie series called *Star Wars,* the FTL effect looked like a million points of light rushing toward you, streaming

trails behind them and forming a kind of tunnel that your ship blasted through. It *rocked*.

The action over, the game exited notification quiet mode automatically, and my mind's eye lit up with glowing text.

» Mission Complete: Serve the Guild VII
» Rewards:
32,500 XP minimum
50,000,000 Interrums
» Bonuses:
Undetected: x2 XP
Total XP 65,000
» Deferred Level-Up: Your Advanced Assassination skill is now at level 5.
» Deferred Level-Up: Your Basic Assassination skill is now at level 5.
» Deferred Level-Up: Your Impersonation skill is now at level 3.
» Rapid-Growth Bonus: Impersonation
Awards 5,000 XP
» Reputation Change:
Your reputation with the Terran Confederacy, Strongarm Faction, is now –1,000.

"Wow," I breathed. "Did you guys all see that?"

"See that the game is now identifying the Confed factions? Yeah," Stroman said. "How'd you do?"

"Uh, three skills leveled up. XP bonus because one of them is one I just got on the mission. I'm still over a quarter million off my next level. The fifty mil in cash doesn't hurt, though."

"What'd we spend resupplying before we got here?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Only half a mil. I'd say our current damage level is maybe another two mil, if we use a friendly yard."

"I didn't get much," Lad groused. They were intensely focused

on leveling up, but this mission hadn't been very challenging for them.

"We didn't *do* much," Mi-Cha noted. "This was Frank's show. He's usually the one not leveling up."

"Actually," I said, sliding the mini-crate out from between my legs, "I'm super interested to see what's in here. We might *all* be leveling up a thing or two. Cap, do you still have that thumb in your pocket?"

"Did he say *thumb*?" Danjuma asked with a frown.

3 / SKILL RUN

"Okay, what are we looking at here?" Stroman asked.

We'd adjourned to the mess hall. Now that we were in FTL, we were completely safe while the game ran out our travel timer and plopped us at our destination.

I'd taken a minute to clean up a bit and put on some normal clothes.

"Here's the thumb," Mi-Cha said, handing me the pale, waxen-looking digit.

"Gross, Frank. Did you actually cut that off someone?"

"The governor-general wasn't using it anymore," I said, accepting the thumb. "Let's hope this works." I laid the thumb pad gently on the crate's biometric lock, which promptly gave a satisfying *click* as it released. I swung the lid open and grinned.

"Are those—" Stroman started. I hadn't let anyone see the label on the crate.

"Skill decks," I said with glee, tipping the crate over and pouring them onto the table we'd gathered around.

"There's so many," Lad breathed.

I quickly slid the plastic slabs around, counting them. "An even

hundred," I said with satisfaction. "That's eleven apiece, plus an extra."

"What are they for?" Napolitano asked, picking one up and reading the fine-printed label.

"That's the thing," I said, picking one up. "Yeah, look. They all say the same thing: 'General Adaptable, Levels 4 through 10.' I think these can be set to cover *any* skill within those levels."

"I've heard of these," Tomiko said, picking up a skill deck of her own. "They're a Confed thing. They're basically a prepaid skill deck, and you can pick which skill you want them to be when you use them. But you have to be *in* a Confed system so they can download the material."

I frowned. "Well, that sucks."

"No, wait," Masson said slowly. "How long, exactly, would such a download take?"

Tomiko shrugged. "In-system, maybe sixty seconds or so. Ninety as an edge case. In-system coverage is fast."

"And how do you select your skills?"

"Like this," I said, tapping one of the decks. "You'll get a game menu in your head."

"Oh-ho!" Mi-Cha chuckled. "I see where you're going with this, and I like it."

"I don't." Tomiko frowned.

"We make our selections, fly into Confed space, let the decks download their content, and FTL the heck out again."

"Wait, would it really be that easy?" Lad said, intrigued.

"In-system networks usually cover well out to jump clearance," Stroman said with a smile. "That's how they handle traffic control, right?"

"You're right," Lad said, their eyes sparkling. They tapped a card and glazed over a bit as they examined the options. "Guys, there's *everything*. Like every. Thing."

"Uh, that's not all," I said, flipping through my own menu. "Most of these aren't one-level jumps. It seems to be different with each

skill, but some of these are implying they can take you up three levels."

"Vomit city," Graves moaned, but I could tell he was scrolling through a skills menu of his own.

"Okay, I say we do this," Mi-Cha said. "Eto, how's the armor?"

"Oh, it'll be fine in a few minutes," the engineer said. "But we're still down at least one railgun, and Leone and I still need to see if we can get the other one working. And I don't want to use the grav mirror again until I've personally inspected its cooling coils. It heated up way faster than the manual says it should."

"Lad, which waypoint did you jump us to?" Mi-Cha asked.

Our crew was affiliated with the Alliance of Free Explorers. Standard procedure when returning to any Alliance system was to stop at a waypoint that wasn't affiliated with any major polity. Although it hadn't been possible in version 1 of *Endless Sky*, version 2 had introduced the possibility for FTL tracking, so a waypoint gave us a chance to make sure nobody was following.

"Omicron, I think," Lad said distractedly. "That and Epsilon were roughly halfway, time-wise." Version 1 of *Endless Sky* had also applied arbitrary FTL travel times; version 2 implemented a much more realistic set of timings based on the actual distance between systems.

"Okay, so what's easily reachable from Omicron?" Mi-Cha asked.

Lad laid her skill deck down and considered. "Confed? Huh. I'll have to check to be sure, but Cerulean is coming to mind. All gas giants, no habitable worlds, two major stations. Midrange value, nothing really rare."

"Meaning there shouldn't be a large military detachment," Stroman said.

"I'd have to check," Lad repeated.

I snorted. When star charts were in doubt, they checked with Lad's memory, not the other way around.

"So we bounce in, let these little beauties do their thing, and then bounce back to the waypoint," Mi-Cha proposed.

We all exchanged glances around the table. "I kind of like it," Danjuma said with a grin. "I already have just the skills in mind."

"Okay, but look," I said, waiting until everyone was actually looking at me. "We all make a stack-ranked list. Put at least fifteen skills on it. Then we go over what's best for the crew in terms of our growth. Unanimous decisions."

"One vanity skill," Lad said immediately. "Ten for the crew, one selfish one that might not align."

"That's reasonable," Mi-Cha said.

"And then we stay in that waypoint until we've all had a chance to level up and get over it," I added.

"Which brings me to a point," Graves said in an uncharacteristically stern voice. Everyone turned to him. "One-level upgrades are fine. A headache, but it goes away quickly."

"Nobody's doing one level with these," Lad pointed out.

"Exactly. Two levels at once, as well all know, causes major physiological responses. Vomit city."

"Small price to pay."

"I'm not saying not to do it, Rashmi," Graves snapped. "I'm saying that if you do two levels, you take the rest of the day off. Nothing more. And if you're doing more than two, you do it in the med bay, under my supervision, when I'm feeling my best."

"And who'll monitor you when you do it?" Stroman grinned.

"This is serious, Jakob," Graves growled. "Frank will. In fact, I'd like him to take a Nursing skill so we can have a backup on the ship."

I blinked but couldn't think of a rebuttal.

"Agreed, on all counts," Mi-Cha said. "And that's not up for a vote, if we go through with this. So bear it in mind if you're going to vote—"

"Yes," Stroman said, still grinning.

"I'm in, under those conditions," Graves agreed.

"In," Lad said.

"Yes," Tomiko said.

"In," Danjuma said.

"I'm in," I added.

"For certain," Masson put in.

"I have a question," Napolitano said. His expression was wary. He was the most cautious of us, but always for good reason, and everyone fell silent as he spoke. "Why do these even exist? How?" He looked around the table. "I realize that skill downloads are a game mechanic. But usually leveling up requires practice, field experience, study—"

"Not entirely," I said. "I've paid for skill dumps before."

"This just seems . . . sketchy."

"Look," Stroman said. "We know Confed is leading in tech research because they've got planets full of captive people to play the man-hours game. Stands to reason this is something they came up with."

"And as I said, Leo," Tomiko added softly, "I've heard of these. Engineers talk about them. They've been rumors. More than rumors, really. Now, what I heard of was more the usual one-level skill dump we've all seen before, but it's more than plausible that they've been able to invent a way to do more. And none of these offer more than a three-level jump, right?"

We all picked up decks, scanned the menus for several minutes, and agreed that they did not.

"So that's probably the safe level for human use, right? Otherwise, why not put together huge leaps?"

"I'm more concerned," Mi-Cha said slowly, "about Confed actually *using* these. They were the standard destination for noobs when this all started, and so they've got a ton of low-skilled people. Is this all so they can start just . . . leveling everyone up?"

"I doubt it," I said slowly. "Confed only survives because they're so broadly low level. They need numbers for safety and to get things done. If huge chunks of the population started leveling up all of a sudden, they'd all find ways to leave."

"Possibly," Napolitano conceded. "So who paid the price on these?"

"Someone who was there when the decks themselves were created. From here, it should all be automatic," Tomiko said. "That's why they were under bio-lock."

"In the governor-general's office," I reminded them.

"Okay," Napolitano agreed with a shrug. "I'm in."

"Okay," Mi-Cha said with a broad smile. "First things first. Engineering, get us as squared away as possible. Let me know on the second railgun. Frank, let's assume we're going to spend two full weeks at the waypoint once we jump back. We have plenty of rations, so let's break 'em out."

"Ugh," Lad complained.

"You're going to appreciate bland food, trust me," Graves told them.

"Still."

"Lad, get our plot figured out. We'll jump to Cerulean ready for a fight and hope it never comes to it. Everyone else, let's get the *Princess* shipshape. If we're all going to be hurling in our quarters for two weeks, we might as well get everything spotless ahead of time."

"Gross," Danjuma muttered.

"And draw up your skill lists before dinner tonight. Focus on your core occupational skills. One vanity skill apiece. Agreed?"

Everyone murmured in agreement. "Frank," the captain added, "join me in my office for a moment first?"

"What's up Cap?" I asked as the door slid shut behind us. Mi-Cha's office sat just off the corridor, offering a comfortable place for three or four people to meet. Her sleeping quarters were behind the office itself, in much the same configuration as my own quarters.

"I wanted to talk about your skill list," she said, sitting down. "Drink?" She poured herself a finger of bourbon from a decanter magnetized to her desk.

"Please. And yeah, I figured you might." I accepted the glass,

tilted it slightly toward her in toast, and then sipped the whiskey. Gorgeous. I'd never had the stuff in the real, so I had no idea if the game was simulating it correctly, but it was amazing regardless. "Mind if I go first?"

She raised an eyebrow, but nodded for me to continue. "I think it's time for me to be done with the Assassin thing. It's not furthering our mission, right? As a crew, I mean. I can stand down from the Guild with no hard feelings, so long as I give up the class."

The captain nodded slowly. "That was more or less the direction I was thinking, yes. Although . . . I hate to ask you to start over."

"Well, I'm not. I have a ton of business skills."

"But that's not really exciting for you, is it?"

I considered it. "This whole thing is exciting for me. Still. No, really. I know Business Management doesn't *sound* sexy, but it's part of running a successful ship. And it's aligned with the mission."

She sighed and drained her glass. "I've questioned the mission, honestly."

That caught me off guard. "Really?"

She shrugged and refilled her glass. "We all have, to some degree or another. We got into this game for the exploration, right? The battles, the strange new worlds, that whole thing?"

"Sure."

"And it's why we joined the Alliance and not the Confed."

"Obviously."

"But the Alliance . . . actually, tell me what you think about it."

It was my turn to sigh. "I get it. It got huge while we were out of the loop." Thirty years out of the loop, to be precise, courtesy of *Endless Sky*'s owner. "It's like . . . well, it's like a friendly Confed now."

"Exactly. Jakob and I have been discussing the idea of leaving. Of going independent. Going back to exploring, to dungeon crawls. We've got the ship for it, and it's the only way we're going to start getting close to Legendary levels."

"True," I acknowledged. "Which means Business Management

won't actually be as important." I drained my glass, and she refilled it. "Where's that leave me, then? We've got two gunners. You and Stroman have tactics locked down—"

"Which you're not so bad at yourself," she interjected, "which is really useful when things get hot."

"Fair. So leveling up there could get me to nine."

"Sensors. We really need a skilled analyst."

"I could also reach a nine there. Anything else?"

"Would any of those Assassin skills be useful if we needed to pretend to be someone else?"

I chuckled. "Funny you should ask. I just acquired Impersonation."

"At what level?"

"Two. So I could raise it to five."

She nodded slowly. "Then I have an unusual suggestion."

"Shoot."

"Focus on those three. Add Nursing—Graves is absolutely right. Take a vanity skill if you want, something fun. Maybe improve your Spacer skill. What level is it at?"

I consulted my character sheet. "Eight."

"Okay, and your overall character is at level ten?"

"Yeah, so I can raise the skill to ten."

"Do that. That's five skills plus your vanity. I'm also going to save the spare deck. Let's hold off on selecting the others. We can decide what we need once we see what the future brings. Maybe we can do a quick mission in some random Confed system."

"Huh," I said, considering.

"For what it's worth, I plan to save three. And I'm going to suggest the same to the others. If we're letting go of the support system the Alliance provides, then we may need some brand-new skills that we've never considered before."

"Fair enough," I agreed, sipping my glass.

"Okay. I appreciate your openness. I hope it goes this well with

everyone else." She grinned. "Go set up a menu for our two-week spa retreat."

I laughed. "You're going to regret saying that."

"I REGRET SAYING THAT," MI-CHA MOANED.

The entire crew had gathered in the mess hall on the last day of what we had dubbed the Skill-A-Thon. It turned out that most of us had decided to save about half of our skill decks, but we'd all used the rest for multi-level upgrades. As a result, we were all in a similar predicament—exhausted.

I had spent hours, in between bouts of vomiting and writhing in pain in the med bay, searching for the perfect vanity skill. I settled on Public Speaking. Everyone teased me for it, but I was determined. I had always felt uncomfortable speaking to more than a couple of people. Even crew meetings were a struggle.

"It might be somewhat work related," I admitted, "but I really want this for myself. It'll make me happier."

"Then go for it," Lad said firmly, shutting down any further debate.

They had chosen Fashion Design for their vanity skill. A few of us were taken aback when they announced it, but no one suggested they reconsider.

"Do the new skills feel different to any of you?" Danjuma asked.

"Do you mean how they're all marked on your character sheet?" Graves snorted. Eyebrows raised around the table. "You seriously haven't looked?"

"I was waiting until after this last one," Stroman said slowly. Everyone's eyes glazed over as we pulled up our character sheets in our minds.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)

Class: Assassin (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Guild Membership: Galactic Assassins
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,030,922,880 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +80,000
Terran Confederacy, Strongarm Faction: –1,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 13
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 703,800 (344,775 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Advanced Assassination: 5
Basic Assassination: 5
Business Management: 7
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 4
Disguise: 5

Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 5†
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 3
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Politicking: 3
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 3
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

"That's weird," I said. "I wonder what it means?"

"It's obviously artificially boosted," Graves said. "The real question is whether anyone else can tell."

"You can usually only see someone's class," Stroman pointed out.

"Still . . ."

"Are you going to stop now?" Mi-Cha asked.

"And give up Spirit Distilling?" the doctor replied. "Absolutely not. Besides, it's too late now. I didn't think to check until after the second one, so if there's any damage, it's already done. Might as well keep going. I assume all of you are doing a three-level jump on this one? Adding something completely new?" We all nodded. "I can accommodate three of you at a time. Captain, Jakob, and Frank, why don't you go first? Eto, Rashmi, and I will go second, and Frank can keep an eye on me. Leone, Zuri, and Renart can go last. The three-

level jumps have required about thirty-six hours of recovery, so we should finish within six days."

"Bit longer than we'd planned," Mi-Cha pointed out.

Graves huffed. "We've got years of those nasty ration trays, and we didn't realize how many three-level jumps we were looking at when we started this. Greedy bastards."

Masson bristled. "I don't recall you shying away from a three-level jump in Trauma Surgery, Lucas."

Graves shrugged. "I include myself in the Greedy Bastards cohort. Come on, sooner started is sooner done." He stood, and Mi-Cha, Stroman, and I followed him to the med bay.

"Home sweet home," I muttered as I climbed into one of the med beds.

"Face down, like last time," Graves ordered, and I rolled onto my stomach. The med bed shifted, creating a padded opening around my face, and Graves slid a bucket directly under the opening. "Try not to splatter."

"Ugh."

"Whenever you're ready. I'll have the beds hook up hydration IVs after your initial reaction subsides."

"Reaction. Hah." Mi-Cha's voice was muffled but her amusement came through clearly.

"Off you go."

I had my skill deck in my right hand, and I awkwardly reached around and under the bed, holding the deck in front of my face. I'd already selected the skill, and it had downloaded its data during our quick trip to the Cerulean system. All I had to do now was tap it.

» Install skill: Public Speaking at Level 3
» Confirm?

Confirm, I thought.

Years of public speaking experience slammed into my brain. Tricks—find three people in the audience to make eye contact with in rotation—and techniques—speak a bit slower than you normally do,

and lower your volume slightly when you're about to make a major point—flooded my consciousness. As with the other three-level skill jumps, I managed to keep on top of the torrent long enough to feel almost confident that, this time, I'd make it.

Which is when the world came crashing down on top of me.

My inner ears began spinning, my muscles began twitching, and my stomach evacuated its contents in a last-ditch effort at self-defense.

Most of it made it into the bucket, I saw before I blacked out.

"Let's never do that again," Danjuma muttered as we took our places on the bridge. We were all recovered, hydrated, and fed, although everyone's skin still looked a little waxen and their expressions a little drawn.

"Who are you kidding? We still have almost half of the things left. We'll definitely be doing this again," Lad said with false cheer.

"True," Danjuma conceded with a sigh. "Pity they're single use."

Once used, the skill decks promptly torched themselves in spectacular fashion, making any hope of reuse a nonstarter.

"Lad, lay in a course for Gather IV," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Laid in, Captain," the pilot replied.

"Get it," Mi-Cha said.

"New catchphrase?" Stroman asked warily.

"I'm trying it out."

"It's terrible," Lad said as they engaged our FTL drive. "Keep trying."

4 / A NEW ALLIANCE

When I first started *Endless Sky*, the Alliance's Gathers were pretty informal affairs. They basically picked systems that had little or no intrinsic value—often a lonely star without any significant planets, asteroid fields, or anything else. The game had plenty of those, and they were one reason exploring new systems was a gamble: you might spend a lot of time and money getting to one, only to find there was no payoff. But these systems made perfect sense for Gathers since nobody else would want them.

The Gathers started as nothing more than designated meeting places for Alliance ships and their crews, but they quickly evolved into ersatz bases of worn-out, welded-together starship hulls.

And, boy, had they grown.

Gather IV—one of ten Alliance Gathers in the game—now looked as polished and as busy as any Confed system I'd seen. The Gather itself was now an enormous space station, comprised of two-thousand-meter-across toruses that intersected at a right angle. Their outer perimeters were bristled with docked ships, and dozens more ships burst from FTL and slowly approached. Others departed and jumped to the black of space.

"Good grief," I said as my tactical display lit up with too many markers and flags for me to track.

"Seconded," Stroman muttered.

This was the first Gather we'd come to since returning to the game, and its enormity took everyone's breath away.

"This tracks with what we've been hearing," Mi-Cha mused.

"How so?" Lad asked as they slowed us to a near crawl and turned us toward the station.

"The Alliance. It's grown up," the captain said. "It's become a lot more like the Confederation. With so many crews joining up, it was probably inevitable. I mean, back in the day, there was no bureaucracy at all."

"That is definitely no longer the case," I grumbled as my console switched to administrative mode. "I have a dozen forms to fill out before we can even request a berth." I frowned as I began tapping my way through the paperwork. "For pity's sake, we have to go through a customs check. Slow down, Rashmi. I'm going to need a few minutes."

"We're already like a turtle," Lad complained.

"Park us, then," I suggested. "That's probably why half the ships here are just hovering." I continued tapping on the paperwork.

"Captain," Graves' voice cut in over the intercom, "why did I just get a ream of paperwork asking about our vaccinations? Does the game even *have* vaccinations?"

"Good grief," Stroman said. "Just tell 'em we're good and send it all in."

"Whatever."

"Bo," Tomiko asked, "are we okay giving these guys a complete inventory of our armaments? I just got a stack of digital forms down here."

"I think we have to," I said, peering at the form in front of me. "I have to give them permission to scan us, so we probably need to make sure it all matches."

"This is ridiculous," Lad groused.

"Couldn't agree more," Mi-Cha said grimly. "All hands, just fill out whatever they've sent. Copy Frank. Seems the Alliance of Free Explorers has evolved into the Alliance of Paperwork Fiends since we've been gone."

"Hey, is our shuttle built to the latest . . . it says, 'ADS four-hundred-and-twelve standard.' What does that mean?" Masson asked.

"Just say yes," Mi-Cha sighed.

"I'm pretty sure it is," I said as I poked my way through the forms. "I remember the shipyard saying something about it, and it cost us about five percent more."

"What does it even mean?" Stroman asked.

"I think it refers to the crash dampers and the emergency remote control function," I said with a shrug.

"I ripped that out," Masson noted.

"Don't mention that on the form," I replied.

Everyone fell silent, except for Lad drumming their fingers on their console, while I finished the paperwork. "Okay," I said after twenty minutes of furious typing, "sending it." I tapped a final button and waited as the ship transmitted everything to the station. "As a note, they're charging for Link service now. I'm going to need to use that to contact my Guild."

"Is it expensive?" Mi-Cha asked.

I scanned the schedule of fees the station had sent. "Not really. It's less than what Confed systems usually charge."

"Didn't it used to be free?" Stroman asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "But Confed has updated their tech like three times, and they charge a fortune for nodes now. I mean, the new systems are quantum entangled and everything, so it's nearly instantaneous uplink. The catch is everything relays through Confed hubs, so you pay by the minute."

"Whatever," Mi-Cha sighed. "It's not like we can't afford it, but giving money to those creeps annoys me. Keep it short. Are we good to go in?"

"Not yet—oh no, wait, there it is." I examined the response the station just transmitted. "Yeah, we're good. We have to go through customs checks individually when we board the station, but we're assigned to slip Zeta Seventeen."

"Where is that?" Lad asked.

"Um. Fifth quadrant. That's the ring that's horizontal to us now, at roughly the ten o'clock position from here." I scrutinized the station schematic we'd received. "I think. Here, take a look."

Lad leaned over, their eyebrows scrunching together as they looked at my console. "Yeah, okay. I suppose there's a speed limit?" I tapped the relevant section of the diagram. "That's ridiculous." They sighed, returning to their console and punching in a route.

"How long?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Forty minutes."

"Come on," Stroman muttered.

"Play along," Mi-Cha said with another sigh.

A mechanical voice cut in. "Alliance Starship *Guillotine*," it began. "Welcome to Gather IV. As enrolled agents of the Alliance of Free Explorers, you enjoy special privileges and pricing aboard the Gather. As you embark, please be sure to pick up an appropriate brochure, explaining all of the benefits available to you. Please note that your captain is expected to check in with Agent Control and Dispatch within twenty-four hours of Gather embarkation. If you are seeking a deployment, please note that you are thirty-seventh in the queue at this time. Also, please be sure to familiarize yourself with Gather customs policy, and particularly note that no fresh foodstuffs may be brought aboard. Amnesty bins are located just inside Customs Control, and you may use these to dispose of any prohibited items before attempting to clear customs."

Stroman was grinding his teeth behind me.

"You'll break a molar, Jakob," Mi-Cha muttered.

"What happened to the Alliance just being a friendly collection of independent operators?" he snapped.

"I could shoot at them," Danjuma offered.

"We play along for now," Mi-Cha ordered quietly. "Let's see how it goes, but I suspect there's going to be an all-hands meeting in our near future." She toggled the ship-wide com. "Is anyone planning on staying aboard at this point?"

"Frank, can you arrange for some medical supplies to be delivered?" Graves responded.

"Yeah. There are fees whether you pick them up or I have them delivered, so it's kind of a wash."

"Then I'm staying."

"Me too," Masson said. "I've got some reading to catch up on."

"I'd hoped to use their simulators to level up Starship Gunnery," Danjuma said slowly.

I scanned my console. "They literally charge by the minute," I said. "It'd honestly be cheaper to just put the *Princess* into sim mode. Unless you just want to stretch your legs."

"Pass," the gunner replied. "I'll stay."

"Me too," Lad sighed. "Zuri, want to sim with me, then?"

"Absolutely."

"I *have* to go aboard," I said. "They won't relay Link connections. I have to use one of their consoles."

"Jakob and I are going," Mi-Cha said.

"I'd like to touch base with a couple of people," Tomiko said. "Leone?"

"Staying. Sounds like more trouble than it's worth."

"Okay, so just the three of us," Mi-Cha said. "We'll look into getting a mission or something. Frank, any chance the *Bull* or *Crush and Run* or one of the other ships is in port?"

"Um," I said, tapping my console and scanning for one of the ships that had helped us on our last major mission. "No. Looks like *Chip* and *Dale* were here about a week ago, but they left. I could drop a message in a box for them if you want."

"What's that cost?" Jakob snarked.

"Nothing if we want it local. Link fees if we want it sent to the other Gathers."

"Go ahead," Mi-Cha ordered. "Pick someplace we can all meet. Fairly soon. I'd like to get their read on things."

"On it."

We sat in silence as our ship crept toward its assigned berth and nestled up gently to the docking ring. "Deploying the sally port," Masson said. Ten minutes later, a gentle *clunk* told us we were mated to the station's umbilical.

"Off we go." Mi-Cha sighed. "I'm locking the ship in sim mode for you two," she added, tapping her console.

"Locking?" Danjuma asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I sense that I'm about to get very, very irritated, and I don't want you able to follow orders when I inevitably ask you fire the battle lasers at the station."

"Ah."

I followed Mi-Cha and Stroman out of the sally port.

"Welcome to Gather IV, agents," a bored-looking older woman droned as we stepped aboard the station. "Please follow the blue stripe to Customs Control. Note that no—"

"We didn't bring food," Stroman snapped.

The woman blinked in surprise as we pushed past her, following a stripe of blue paint on the deck. This corridor ran alongside the station's outer hull, curving gently as we progressed. We passed two sealed airlocks, implying no ships were using those berths, and arrived at Customs Control.

A dozen or so spacers were already queued up, waiting to pass through a veritable gauntlet of guards, uniformed officials, scanners, and more. We waited patiently as an announcement about fresh foodstuffs played on an endless loop.

"What's the deal with the food?" I quietly asked the woman standing in front of me.

She turned, rolled her eyes, and said, "They want you to buy the hydroponics they grow here."

Mi-Cha stifled a chuckle.

"A few years back, this place had a huge fresh food trade. Cargo

haulers would bring in containers full of produce, set up on the market concourses, and do a booming business. Someone got the idea to grow their own stuff here, but the prices were too high. Now they ban bringing food on board."

"So much for the communal good," Stroman muttered as we slowly inched forward.

Finally, it came our turn to pass through.

"Carrying any fresh foodstuff?" the bored-looking official asked, not even looking up from his pad.

"You worried I have an apple crammed up my ass?" Mi-Cha asked archly.

The man looked up and realized we were wearing slim-fitting ship-suits and not carrying any bags. He jerked his head to one side. "Proceed."

We stepped past a more alert-looking guard who was sporting an impressive-looking blaster rifle, and into a ten-meter-long scanning tunnel. "Move at a slow walk," the guard advised. "Keep it steady."

"Seems like a lot of trouble for fruit," Stroman grumbled as we ambled along.

"Welcome, agents," another guard said as we exited the tunnel. His eyes quickly flicked across a display that was affixed to the tunnel's exit frame before he waved us on.

"What is this *agent* bullshit?" Stroman asked him.

The guard blinked in confusion. "Your identities have been verified," he said as if that explained everything.

"Meaning?"

"Uh . . . that you're enrolled agents of the Alliance of Free Explorers?"

"Agents," Stroman groused, shaking his head as we walked toward the station's interior. A dozen or so steps took us to a wider concourse that paralleled the first.

This was clearly a main thoroughfare for the station; I guessed it must run through the middle of the torus. The concourse itself was easily twenty meters across, and the walls were lined with shops,

bars, offices, and more. It reminded me almost exactly of Atlantis One.

"Feels more like a Confed station than anything," Mi-Cha said quietly, echoing my thoughts. "Frank, let's get you into a Link terminal so we can get that out of the way."

"There's one," Stroman said, pointing.

We dodged a few people as we crossed to the other side of the concourse. Mi-Cha and Stroman took up positions on either side of the Link terminal's privacy door, while I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. The terminal activated at once, requesting payment. I tapped my chip card.

Destination? it asked.

This was the tricky bit. The Guild of Assassins didn't exactly advertise itself, but they'd managed to plant back doors into the main Link directory. Using one of those incorrectly or incompletely would not only result in the call not going through, it'd draw a lot of unwanted attention to me. "Querel system," I told it. "Querel III. Gent by the name of Alastair Corpuscle in Garrote City."

Searching.

I waited nervously for a few moments.

Found. Attempting call.

In most systems, nobody used Link terminals like I was doing here. Instead, the local system network would just route calls via the Link when needed. In theory, my call was terminating in some kind of central data center in Querel—so the system name, at least, was genuine—and then the local net would carry the call to the central Guild offices.

The screen blanked for a moment and then resolved into the face of a stern-looking, dark-bearded bald man. "Authenticate," he said in a clipped tone.

"Frank Kozina," I told him. "Chartreuse pumpkin vomit." They'd let me pick my own authentication phrase.

The man smiled. "Love it," he said. "Great work on the last

contract, Frank. As far as we know, they still haven't connected it to us. What can I do for you? Looking for a job?"

"Actually, I've decided to retire."

His eyes widened, but then he nodded. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Word is you and your crew are pretty well off. Anyway, I have to read off a few terms and conditions, and you'll need to agree to them."

"Wait, you're okay with this?" I asked, surprised. The last Guild rep I spoke to had said, *You don't just quit the Guild, Frank.*

He shrugged. "Honestly, we've got more people than we know what to do with these days. You're in good standing, so if you want to step down, you can. Provided you're okay with the conditions."

"Shoot."

"Upon retirement, you'll be stripped of your Guild-related character class. You'll have an option to redeploy some skills, but otherwise, any skills you've acquired will remain with you."

My own eyebrows rose. I hadn't realized retirement would be so *thorough.*

"You'll lose any Guild-related privileges regarding harm to other players," he continued. "And you'll no longer be protected from other players taking out contracts on you." That much made sense. "Readmission to the Guild will not be permitted. All of that okay?"

A big step, but I'd thought long and hard about this. "Yes. I agree."

He looked down for a moment, typing commands into something. Then he looked back up. "Okay. That's done. The actual class stripping can be a little intense for some people, so you have a full-day grace period. They suggest you do it lying down."

"Okay."

"Nice talking to you, Frank." The screen went black for a moment and then displayed the fee for the call.

» ATTENTION

» Guild Membership removed: Galactic Assassins.

» Class removed: Assassin

» 24-hour grace period for skill consolidation.

When you are ready, invoke, "Proceed with consolidation."

No time like the present. "Proceed with consolidation."

» ATTENTION

» Skill consolidation in progress.

The Link terminal booth faded away as my vision went black, making the glowing letters in my mind's eye stand out more brightly.

» Skills eligible for consolidation or conversion:

Advanced Assassination

Basic Assassination

Disguise

Impersonation

Poisoning

"I'll keep Disguise and Impersonation," I said. Poisoning had come in handy for more than just assassination jobs—like creating the alcohol-neutralizing pills we'd used on Atlantis One. "I'll keep Poisoning. What can I do with the other two?"

» Skills can be redistributed into constituent skills:

Disguise

Impersonation

Knife Fighting

Poisoning

Stalking

Stealth

» Alternately, skills can be transformed into new, related skills.

"Can I keep them?"

» Skills not eligible for retention due to lack of aligned character class:
Advanced Assassination
Basic Assassination

"Okay. Let's boost Disguise and Impersonation to ten each." I thought about it for a moment—a five-level skill download might kill me, or make me wish it had. "Is there any way to have those trickle in over several days, rather than all at once?"

» Reassign skill:
Advanced Assassination
to
Disguise
» Reassign skill:
Basic Assassination
to
Impersonation
» Slow upgrade is possible.
» Confirm?

"Yeah, confirmed."

» Scheduling . . .
» Done
» Estimated completion in 8 days

Something changed in my head almost immediately. The two assassination skills were already vanishing, while the replacement skills likely just leveled up one apiece.

The blackness covering my vision faded, and the Link terminal booth came back into existence. I stepped outside. "It's done," I told Mi-Cha and Stroman.

"You okay?" Stroman asked, peering intently at me.

"Yeah. It just . . . it feels weird, is all."

"You check your sheet?"

I hadn't, but I pulled it up now.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,030,922,880 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +80,000
Terran Confederacy, Strongarm Faction: −1,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 13
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 703,800 (344,775 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Business Management: 7
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 4
Disguise: 10
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1

Negotiating: 3
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 3
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 3
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4

"Weird," I said as I read through it in my mind's eye.

"How so?" Mi-Cha asked, looking at me with concern.

"For one, it's weird that Truthsayer is still there. But . . . apparently, my special skills had to go," I said, looking quickly around us to make sure we weren't being overheard. "The points were distributed to other skills. The game said it could spread that out over several days so it wouldn't melt my brain, but my sheet is showing both of them maxed at ten, now."

Mi-Cha shrugged. "Gift horse."

"I guess. Not looking in it's mouth." We began strolling down the bay concourse.

"Never understood that phrase," Stroman said.

"Me either. What's next?" I asked.

"Drinks," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Preferably in the least sterile-looking place we can find."

"What about this one?" Stroman asked.

We stopped in front of a relatively seedy looking bar—dimly lit, scuffed floors, flicking neon signs on the walls, and a haze of artificial smoke eddying around the low ceiling.

"Perfect," Mi-Cha said.

The bar didn't have a bar; rather, it was liberally populated with tables, both low ones with chairs and high ones without.

"I'll be right with you guys," a middle-aged man wearing a rumpled white shirt and stained apron said as he passed us on his way to the back. "Order from the screens." They were built into tabletops, and we scrolled the menu.

"These are the most expensive drinks I've ever seen," I remarked.

"Oh, just order them without garnishes," the server called back over his shoulder.

"Come again?"

He sighed, turned around, and hurried back to the table we'd taken for ourselves. "Just tell me you don't want the garnishes. Station rules require us to use fresh fruit from the hydroponic gardens, and everything we sell has to have something. But you can order it without. Literally knocks two-thirds off the price."

"Ah," I said, nodding slowly. The man gave us a tired smile and scurried to the back of the bar.

"I think I hate this place," Mi-Cha said casually.

"It sure as hell isn't what it used to be," a patron at the table next to us remarked. We rearranged ourselves so we could face her across our table. She was a grizzled-looking woman, taller than any of us, with her long white hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. She wore a black canvas trench coat over what might have once been a gray spacer's uniform. "I take it this is your first time here?"

"In a very long time, yeah," Mi-Cha agreed, looking up after punching our order into the table. "You?"

"I've been coming here for forty years. Joined the Alliance right out of the training level. Captain Cochise. I fly the *Miserable Roger*, built to be a privateer vessel. Just a cobbled-together cargo ship now."

"Captain Mi-Cha, *Pretty Pretty Princess*. This is my XO, Jakob Stroman, and our Business Manager, Frank Kozina."

"Please to meet you," Cochise said with a polite nod. "So you're new here?"

"Not exactly, no," Mi-Cha said with a grin. "But we were out of it

for a long, long time. Used to fly the *Endless Optimist*, back in the day."

Cochise's eyebrows rose. "You guys were legends. What happened to you?"

"Special mission," Stroman said. "Took us out of the loop for a while."

"I'll say. All this must be a bit of a shock, coming all at once." The older woman waved a hand to take in the entire station.

"A bit," Mi-Cha admitted. "What happened?"

Cochise shrugged. "Accretion. It's tough for noobs to get by without a polity, and unless you want to go scaly, it's either Alliance or Confed. Confed is basically indentured servitude. The Alliance was supposed to be a cooperative, right? But once people started pouring in, they wanted training, missions, intel, the whole deal. So it became . . . this."

"And nobody just quit?" I asked.

Cochise quirked her lips. "A few. Freelancing exists. But you have to have a pretty big bankroll to make that happen, and you've got to be careful to stay on everyone's right side. Not everyone is up for it."

"I would if I could," a man's voice said. The man himself stepped around from behind us, plunking a mug of beer on Cochise's table. "Hope you don't mind. Bars aren't really for private conversations." He was short but powerfully built, his shoulders straining against his deep-red jumpsuit.

"By all means," Mi-Cha said with a smile.

"Jed McRory," he said, and we all introduced ourselves. "I'm XO on the *Antelope*. Tramp freighter, basically. Started Confed, managed to get the hell out of that shit show. She's right," he added, nodding to Cochise. "You need some solid financial backing. Alliance offers credit on repairs, cargo, all that. It's the only way I can function. But damn if it isn't just a step better than Confed."

"And they charge you for everything," I groused.

McRory snorted. "The worst is the damn Link. Expensive as hell

just to get jobs lined up without going through ACD, which is why we all just do that."

"ACD?" I asked.

"Agent Control and Dispatch," Cochise explained, rolling her eyes. "Used to be a job board, but these days everything basically funnels through them."

"What's with the Link fees?" Stroman asked.

"They're actually not bad if you're using Alliance Connect," McRory admitted. At our puzzled expressions, he added, "That's the Alliance's private quantum-entangled system. It's when you have to cross polities that you hit the Confed Link, and *that* is where the fees start to rack up."

"So wait, the Alliance has a private FTL message system?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Sure, but the nodes are huge. Way too big to carry on a ship. Confed got the jump on miniaturization recipes." McRory drained the last of his beer and punched in an order on the table just as the server arrived with our order—three whiskeys, doubles, neat. I noted Mi-Cha and Stroman surreptitiously slipping one of my alcohol nullifiers into their drinks, and I quickly copied them.

"So the money's all in hauling cargo now? No exploration, no escort gigs, none of the fun stuff?" Stroman asked as he sipped his whiskey. His eyebrows rose slightly in appreciation.

"Confed isn't opening new colonies as much, and they were always the big customers for new worlds," Cochise said with a sigh. "Alliance still doesn't have any planet-bound assets. Qiar Company was never big on colonies, they stick to their home worlds. Carbon Hegemony isn't expansionist at all. United Federation of Worlds is too damn poor; they're barely holding on to what they have, and the Confed hassles them constantly."

"Hauling cargo from Confed worlds is where most of the money is," McRory agreed. "Or trading in alien tech, if you have the contacts. The Qiar still pop out something new now and then."

"Thrilling," Stroman said.

I sipped my whiskey and recalled Stroman's initial reaction—this was really excellent stuff. "So these freelancers that do exist. What do they do?"

Cochise thought about it for a moment. "Cargo, still. Escort runs, especially in Roknid space. They deal a lot with the Andromedan Clans. Those guys don't much like the Confed or the Alliance. Very independent."

McRory chuckled. "Not to mention half their clans are pirates. They tend to pick at Confed ships a bit more than Alliance, so freelancers can pick up escort work there."

"And I suppose some of them could go exploring," Cochise said. "You could always unlock a resource-rich system, like ones with huge asteroid fields or something. Probably still a market for those. Expensive to back that kind of thing, though."

"Dungeon crawls? Leveling up? Anyone still into, you know, the actual game?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Not really," McRory said apologetically. "I mean, I was when I was a noob. But I'm a level twelve, at the start of the Guru levels. That's enough for me. Beyond that, I just enjoy the time in space with my crew and stop at the occasional station for a drink." He raised his glass in a silent toast, which we all followed.

We chatted a bit more with Cochise and McRory, mostly small talk about the different Alliance Gathers, the planets they'd been hauling cargo to and from, and a bit of gossip about other well-known players from "back in the day." McRory was just as surprised to find out who we were—"You guys opened up half the planets I've been to, I think"—and bought us another round. Eventually, he and Cochise excused themselves, paid their tabs, and left the bar. The three of us finished our drinks in silence, surveying the bar's other patrons, most of whom drank alone or in pairs.

We finished the last of the excellent whiskey, settled our tab, and stepped out of the bar and back into the bustling main concourse.

> » Congratulations! You have unlocked a new achievement: Social Butterfly.

I blinked at the glowing letters. "Did anyone else just get that?"

"Social Butterfly?" Stroman said.

"What's an achievement?" Mi-Cha asked.

"I guess it's a new part of the game," I said. "Version two seems to have added a lot of little things."

"Whatever," Mi-Cha said, her eyes refocusing as she dismissed the message. "I'm not in the mood."

"What now? Do we go to Control and Dispatch or whatever?" I asked. "Or do we head back to the ship and tell everyone what we just learned?"

"What we learned is that this isn't any fun anymore," Stroman muttered, and I found myself nodding sadly in agreement. I'd rather go back to an Aa'an cityship than spend the rest of my digital existence hauling cargo back and forth.

"First, we find out why two guys have been following us ever since you went in the Link booth," Mi-Cha interrupted quietly, her eyes flicking to one side.

My own eyes strained as I tried to look in that direction without turning my head, but I couldn't see anyone in particular. "Who?"

"Guys in blue coveralls," Stroman said, keeping his voice low as well. "They took up positions just after you went in and milled around trying to look inconspicuous. They never came in the bar, but they're still here."

"Mind if I try something?" I asked.

Mi-Cha grinned. "Be my guest."

I strode quickly past her, now spotting the two men immediately. Both of them turned quickly, acting as if they had someplace to go, but I sped up to a near-jog and caught up to them. "You two," I said in an authoritative voice. "Stop right there."

» Skill roll: Impersonation: NEAR MISS

I stopped myself from gulping. A near miss meant I had *barely* succeeded in the role, so my Impersonation wasn't going to be strong. "Do you know who I am?"

One of the men sneered slightly. "Frank Kozina."

I shook my head, leaning hard into my Impersonation skill. "That's my name, idiot, but it's not *who I am*. Try again."

» Skill roll: Impersonation: SUCCESS

Now the two men looked confused and a bit worried. "Um," the first one said, his sneer vanishing.

"Fine, nobody bothered to tell you what you were getting yourselves into. Let's try a different approach: who are *you*?" I crossed my arms over my chest as Stroman and Mi-Cha sauntered up behind me.

"Gather security," the second man said.

"Why no uniforms?" Mi-Cha asked. "And why are you watching us?"

The two men exchanged worried glances.

"I think you'd better take us to your boss," I said firmly. "Right now."

They nodded in unison. "Uh, yeah. Right this way."

They turned, not even bothering to see if we were following. We let them get a few steps ahead, then fell in behind them. It wasn't a long walk: we passed a few shops and a bar before turning left into a narrow side corridor with a sturdy-looking door marked Security. We filed in, one of the men holding the door for us before stepping back into the corridor as the door closed behind him.

We found ourselves in a small utilitarian room with little more than a desk and two uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs. A more substantial chair sat behind the desk and was occupied by a gray-haired, uniformed man.

"Bo Mi-Cha, as I live and breathe," he said.

"Conroe?" the captain said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Conroe smiled and spread his hands. "I run security here. I have for the past four years. Good grief, it's been . . . How long has it actually been?"

"From your perspective, thirty years," Mi-Cha said. "Why is your office so tiny?"

"What, this? This isn't my office. It's just a sector station."

"And why are we in it?" I asked.

Conroe squinted at me. "Kozina, right?" I nodded. "And Stroman?" he asked, nodding at our XO.

"Yeah," Stroman snapped.

"Since when did you three become Confed agents?"

5 / BREAKAWAY

"Excuse me?" Mi-Cha managed after a long moment of stunned silence.

"Have a seat, Bo," Conroe said, gesturing to the two chairs. Mi-Cha and I sat, while Stroman remained standing between us, his arms crossed. "So look, all those scans you went through when you boarded: we know. Don't try to deny it. And honestly, you're not even doing anything illegal, it's just that—"

"Conroe," Mi-Cha interrupted. "I seriously have no idea what you're talking about."

He sighed. "We go back a ways, Bo, don't we?"

"We started playing the same week, I think, yeah."

"So don't bullshit me. Just as a courtesy."

"Conroe, I swear on everything I hold dear that I have absolutely zero idea what you're talking about."

"You're telling me," Conroe said, anger rising in him, "that you somehow have no idea why your brainwave patterns carry the unmistakable markers of surreptitious Confed upgrades?"

"Wait," I said before Mi-Cha could reply. "You scanned our *brainwaves*? Like, that's even a thing you can do in the game? We don't actually have brains."

He waved away the argument. "Of course not, we all know that. But the game provides an equivalent signal. It took us years to research the technology. First jump we've stolen on you Confed guys in ages."

"We're not Confed guys," Mi-Cha insisted. "And I have no idea —"

"The skill decks, Cap," I said quietly.

Her jaw snapped shut.

"Still have no idea?" Conroe said coldly.

"We stole those," I said.

"Stole—I said not to bullshit me, man. Only governors-general have access to those things, and—"

"Yeah, that's who we stole them from. I did it myself."

"I suppose you just sweet-talked him into it?" Conroe spat.

"Actually, I—"

"Frank, don't," Stroman warned.

"It's fine," I said. "Actually, I killed him. Gent named Harm, if you know him."

"Harm—wait, *you* did the Atlantis hit?" Conroe was staring suspiciously at me.

"I did. I think we still have his thumb back on the ship."

"It's in a jar in the med bay," Mi-Cha said.

"We still have some of the decks too. But you have to be in Confed space to load them," I said.

"Wait, how? No, why? What?" Conroe sputtered. Then he stopped, and eased himself back a bit in his chair. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am," I assured him.

"I wonder if this is related to the flags in our sheets," Stroman mused as Conroe continued staring at me.

"Flags?" Conroe asked, his stare shifting to Stroman.

"Yeah, all the skills we upgraded using those decks have little flags next to them," Stroman explained.

Actually, not, I realized. My Impersonation skill *had* possessed a

little flag, but it wasn't on my sheet now. I called it up and scanned it quickly, confirming that it had vanished after I'd redistributed my Assassin skills. Maybe the flags would go away the next time we leveled up those skills normally.

"Conroe," Mi-Cha asked, "why are you guys doing brainwave scans?"

He stared for a few more long moments, his eyes now shifting slowly between the three of us. "Bo, do you swear on Madden's memory that you're not working for Confed right now?"

Mi-Cha's face went cold and still. But it lasted only a moment: she seemed to shake herself before she said, "I do."

They locked eyes for several heartbeats before Conroe sighed. "Fine. Fine." He leaned back in his chair. "Look, you know how Confed has a lock on basically every new tech that comes out, right?"

"Thanks to their massive and captive population of puzzle solvers, yes," Mi-Cha said.

"Right. Well, almost every time the Alliance tries to get a research project underway, our people mysteriously vanish. Our projects never go anywhere."

"When you say *vanish* . . . ?" Stroman asked.

Conroe shrugged. "We don't know. Kidnapped. Probably not killed—you know the game penalties for that. But they're out of action nonetheless. The brainwave scanner is the first thing we've managed to get out, and it took forever because we had to use a small enough cohort to make sure we could keep it secret."

Except for contracted Assassins, I thought. *Which I no longer am.*

"And so now you're on the lookout for Confed infiltrators?"

Conroe nodded. "More or less. Each one they've sent since the scanners went up has had weird signatures in their brainwaves. We started hearing rumors of a skills upgrade scheme they'd invented for their top commandos. So we connected the dots a bit."

"And this is all to maintain their lockdown on new inventions?"

Conroe nodded again. "Alliance Command has even considered focusing more on industrial espionage instead of research, but

at best, that would only keep us even. We'd never get ahead of them."

"Alliance has a command?" Stroman asked, his tone annoyed.

"The Alliance is a lot bigger than it was thirty years ago," Conroe said, his tone amused. "You may have noticed our massive space station. Someone has to coordinate all that, so yes, we have a command structure."

Mi-Cha rolled her eyes. "Lovely. Well, it's been wonderful catching up, Conroe, but—"

"We're not done here, Bo," the man said, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?" Mi-Cha said, her tone dangerous.

"Look, I haven't exactly told you any secrets. Confed knows we have the scanners, and they know we've been catching their commandos. We know they've come up with some skill-boosting protocol, and they know we know. And you *say* you stole these boosters from Harm—who I will acknowledge will not be missed, as his Strongarm faction has been the biggest pain in our collective asses—but the fact is your brains are loaded with Confed markers." He shrugged. "I can't exactly let you go wandering around the station. The only reason the boys didn't bring you in immediately is because you are who you are. I wanted to see what you'd do. Who'd you call on the Link, by the way?"

"That was me," I said. "I was . . . breaking off a business relationship."

"And the bar?"

"You don't drink anymore, Conroe?" Mi-Cha asked.

"You spent a while in there."

"We were catching up. As you say, we've been out of it for a while."

"And you planned to do what after?"

"Check in with, whatsit, Agency Control or whatever you're calling it."

"To what end?"

"Honestly, Conroe, because we're not sure the Alliance is a good

fit for us anymore, and we wanted to see what it was all about," Mi-Cha snapped.

"You guys vanished for a long time," Conroe said, leaning forward and resting his arms on his desk. "And then you show up out of the blackness of space in a brand-new ship that, according to our scans, would consume a significant amount of a planetary government's annual defense budget, with Confed markers swimming around in your brain." He looked hard at us. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"Have we done anything wrong since we've been aboard?" Mi-Cha asked in a cold, flat voice.

Conroe shrugged. "Not yet."

"So we're free to leave."

Another shrug. "We've let Confed's other would-be infiltrators go."

Mi-Cha stood, and I quickly rose alongside her. "Then you may arrange for an escort back to our ship. I assume you count as some kind of Alliance official?"

"Sure."

"Then this is our formal notice that we are no longer affiliated with the Alliance of Free Explorers. We are independent freelancers, effective the moment we undock from this station. Rest assured we will leave this system forthwith and never darken your doorstep again."

A message flashed in my mind's eye:

> » You are no longer affiliated with the Alliance of Free Explorers.
>
> » Your reputation with the Alliance of Free Explorers is now +40,000.

Wow, I thought. That was a *huge* hit.

Conroe was quiet for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Accepted. Bo, for what it's worth—"

"Nothing. It's worth nothing, Conroe," Mi-Cha said coldly. She

turned and pushed past Stroman, pulling the door open and stalking into the corridor. Stroman and I hurried to keep up. "We're going to our ship," she told the two guards. "You can follow or not, I don't care."

We walked quickly and in complete silence, the two jumpsuited men falling in behind us.

Mi-Cha led us back to the customs checkpoint, where a guard moved to intercept us. The captain straight-armed the man in the chest, shoving him back. The two men behind us must have signaled him, because he fell back, letting us pass.

It was just a few minutes before we were back aboard our ship, the station's umbilical disconnected and our sally port stowing itself. We went straight to the bridge, where Mi-Cha sat rigidly in her command chair for several moments before thumbing the intercom to life.

"Everyone," she said, "we're no longer with the Alliance. For what it's worth, our illicit skill upgrades appear to have left some trace that certain scanners can pick up. We've been accused of being Confed agents, sent to infiltrate the very Alliance we helped found." My eyebrows rose at that—nobody had ever mentioned this crew acting in that capacity. "And so we are now freelancers. Rashmi, the ship is out of sim mode. Please get us the hell out of here."

"Where to, boss?" Lad asked.

"Actually," Stroman interrupted, tapping at his console. "There was a message waiting for us. Frank, you want to have a look?"

The message appeared on my console, and I quickly scanned it. "It looks," I said carefully, a bit of excitement creeping into my voice, "like we may have an *interesting* job offer."

"I'm inclined to accept it," Mi-Cha said.

"You don't want to know more?" Stroman asked.

"Is it sketchy? Dangerous? Unrelated to hauling cargo?"

"All three, from the looks of it."

"Accepted."

» Mission accepted: Deliver the Goods
» Rewards:
20,000 Interrums
Minimum 10,000 XP per person

"Rashmi, I'm sending coordinates to your console," I said.
"Laid in," Lad said a moment later. "Captain?"
"Let's blow this popsicle stand," our captain ordered.

6 / DELIVER THE GOODS

"Not much to look at, is it?" Lad remarked.

"Tac plot is clear to sensor range," I reported. "And no, it sure isn't."

The Chrysanthemum system centered around an intensely blue-white type-F star, around which orbited a half dozen surly-looking gas giants and not much else. In theory, those gas giants could contain commercially valuable elements, but *Endless Sky*'s galaxy was so overflowing with similar gas giants that it'd be far easier to mine the ones in systems with inhabitable worlds—usually ones with more hospitable type-G stars.

"You know," Stroman said, "this is a good example of why exploration is so risky."

"What do you mean?" Danjuma asked from the gunnery console.

"Someone spent a lot of money on supplies, time in FTL, and all that to get here. And then . . . nothing. Not even a dungeon that might drop some loot."

"Someone just joined us out of FTL," I reported as my tactical display lit up. "Looks like a large courier-class ship. Qiar FTL drive. Light armament—probably a one-gig laser and one missile tube."

"Inbound vessel, this is the independent starship *Pretty, Pretty*

Princess," Mi-Cha said in a friendly tone, toggling the hailing channel. "Please identify."

"*Pretty, Pretty Princess*, this is FLF courier *Edith*. Initiating video link."

The bridge's forward wall screen, which had been displaying a simplified tactical plot of the system, dissolved into a view of a middle-aged man with incredibly pale skin and almost fluorescent red-orange hair. He grinned as the video went live. "Hi, guys! Captain Miles Watts here. Great to meet you, and thanks for accepting this mission!"

"Sounds like an NPC," Stroman muttered.

"Captain Bo Mi-Cha. And you're welcome. I have to say, your briefing was a little light on details. Anything more you can tell us?"

"Absolutely," Watts said, nodding rigidly. "This is a little sensitive, so we were a bit hesitant to put everything into the public Link. How familiar are you with the FLF?"

I'd already typed the acronym into my console and sent the brief to the command console between Mi-Cha and Stroman.

"Fawkes Libration Front, it says here," Mi-Cha said, quickly scanning the screen. "Aside from that, not much."

"We're an independent group fighting the Terran Confederacy," Watts explained. "Our main goal is to disrupt their operations and help people escape from Confed planets."

"Sounds noble enough," Stroman replied, his tone suggesting that he was playing along, as players tend to do when interacting with nonplayer characters.

"Look, nobody signed up for this game to be an indentured servant," Watts continued, echoing the sentiment we had heard in the bar. His tone turned sour, causing me to question whether he was actually an NPC. "But the training level makes Confed seem like a safe choice, so a lot of new players pick it. However, with the decline in new players, Confed is becoming less willing to let people leave its systems. They need the manpower for their new tech research."

"Yeah, we're familiar with that," Mi-Cha said dryly. "So you guys swoop in, cause chaos, and evacuate people?"

"More or less. It's not that straightforward, though. We have to draw off military ships so our transports can get in, and deal with planetary defense forces while our shuttles load up and return. We can usually evacuate a few hundred people in one run, so we focus on smaller, outlying towns."

"Sounds dangerous," Stroman observed.

"It is," Watts admitted. "But in the game, they're considered military operations, so anyone who gets killed respawns." He shrugged. "It's just part of the game."

Yeah, definitely not an NPC. They never talked about "the game."

In *Endless Sky*'s version 2, the rules regarding death were complex. Assassinated players stayed dead. Anyone killed one-on-one without provocation tended to stay dead, although the murderer faced severe penalties from the game, including being indefinitely confined to a white, featureless time-out room. If you were killed by an NPC, you respawned after a short time-out, same as in a space battle. Respawning wasn't ideal: you lost experience points and could lose entire skills and, depending on how well you defended yourself, even lose a level. But at least you could keep playing.

"So, what's this mission?" Mi-Cha asked.

"This time, it's pretty straightforward," Watts said cheerfully. "It's a supply run. We need to deliver some supplies to a Confed system. All you have to do is drop them in space on the edge of the system. We already have assets in the system, running in high stealth. Once you're gone, they'll pick up the supplies. It'll keep them going, and some of the supplies will help us prepare the town we plan to evacuate."

"How much volume are we talking about?" Stroman inquired.

"A thousand cubic meters," Watts replied. "It's a ten-by-ten-by-ten container."

I frowned. "That doesn't seem like a lot of supplies," I pointed out.

"Anything larger would be too noticeable to Confed's scanners. We'll even ask you to give the container a bit of tumble when you drop it, so it'll look like a small asteroid or something. But it's enough. Our ration packs aren't particularly tasty, but they're dense. And small hand weapons don't take up much space."

"There are weapons involved?" Mi-Cha asked cautiously.

"Of course. This isn't a leisurely run. As I said, we're trying to free people, and Confed doesn't want that. Shootouts are not uncommon."

"Fair enough," Mi-Cha conceded. "Jakob?"

"We can fit a container that size in the shuttle," he replied slowly. The shuttle could handle eight times that volume. "It'll be a quick in and out. We can pick it up, secure it inside the shuttle, and just drop it off when we arrive. It should only take about half an hour, maybe less if Renart is on his game."

"Why don't you use your own ships for this?" Mi-Cha asked. "Just curious."

"Confed knows too many of our ships. We don't have many ships the size of mine; most of our assets are designed for stealth runs or full-on evacuations. That's why we've started hiring contractors for supply runs."

"Okay," Mi-Cha said. "Yeah, we're in."

"The payment works for you guys?"

"The money is fine," I said. The fee was 20,000 Interrums, which was sufficient, although it wouldn't make a significant difference to our finances. This mission was more about distracting ourselves from the Alliance than anything else.

"Great. Well, in that case, my team will drop the container in a minute. We'll back off, and you can come and retrieve it. Once it's secure, we can all head out."

"And the system we're delivering to?" Mi-Cha asked.

Please don't say Atlantis, I thought desperately. There was

already a strong chance that Confed had shared our ship's profile with all their systems. In fact, it was almost certain.

Watts laughed. "Wow, I almost forgot. Yeah, that's kind of important, isn't it? You're headed to Optimus."

I entered the name into my console. "It's a G-class star with two habitable planets, a sizable asteroid belt, and six planets."

"You'll drop just inside the orbit of the outer planet," Watts explained, "which is quite far from the usual FTL points."

"Yeah, I see that," I agreed, studying the plot displayed on my console. In *Endless Sky*, you could emerge from FTL near any planet of your choosing when arriving at a system, although most people would naturally choose one of the inhabited planets. "That works for us." I examined the system plot more closely. "However, it's going to take your team some time to reach that location, isn't it?"

Watts shrugged again. "There's not much we can do about it."

"Well," I said slowly, "we could drop the container a bit closer. The third and fourth planets are the inhabited ones. Where are your guys?"

Watts furrowed his brow, taking a moment to think before responding. "Let's say they're somewhere between those two."

"Okay, currently, those two are relatively close, but the sixth planet is almost on the opposite side of the sun. However, the fifth planet isn't too far away. We could drop in, move closer to the fourth planet—or wherever you specify—and make the drop. It would save your team some time."

"You'd do that?" Watts sounded uncertain.

"For a commensurate increase in our fee, of course."

"Ah," he said, understanding. "I do have a certain amount of leeway."

"Assuming closer to the fourth planet works, we could do that for, say, another ten thousand Interrums."

"Half again the fee?" Watts said, his orange eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. "I was thinking maybe another thousand at most!"

"Could we say seventy-five hundred, then? We're taking on a lot

more risk, but we should be reducing your guys' risk—and time—by quite a lot. Unless this isn't urgent . . ."

» Skill roll: Negotiation: SUCCESS

Which meant Watts's own roll had probably failed. "Yeah, okay, I can see the point," he said reluctantly.

» Skill-up! Your Negotiating skill is now at level 4.

Oh, good. I hadn't had much chance to practice that one lately, but I figured I must be getting close to the edge. A veritable textbook of new negotiating tactics flooded my brain. "Awesome. So it's a plan."

"I'm sending you an Interrums blockchain right now," Watts said, and a confirming *cheep* from my console indicated receipt. "We'll have the box in space in ten minutes. Safe flying, *Princess*."

"And to you," Mi-Cha said pleasantly before cutting the channel. "Was that just grinding your skill, Frank, or was there a point to it?"

"There's a point. The Optimus system is *very* lightly defended—the latest intel suggests they run four patrol ships and a corvette. No freestanding station like usual. It's one of their newer systems, and they've switched to using orbital elevators instead. Both planets have light industry only, probably not much to make them a target. I'm guessing the main value of the population is their research hours. Although Optimus III is supposed to be one of the more pleasant Confed worlds to live on."

"Makes you wonder why folks want to escape," Lad said.

I shrugged. "Even a beautiful prison is a prison."

"True."

"There's the box," Danjuma pointed out. The main screen had returned to the tactical plot, and a new icon indicated the free-floating container, even as it showed the *Edith* backing away on her in-system drive.

"Renart, you're up," Mi-Cha ordered.

A soft *thunk* accompanied the opening of the shuttle bay's armored doors, and a moment later another icon appeared, detaching itself from the *Princess*. Masson was an efficient pilot: it took him less than fifteen minutes to cross the distance to the container, match its slow drift, and bring it aboard the shuttle. Another ten minutes, and he was docked in the shuttle bay, the armored doors closing over him.

"Rashmi, lay in the course," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Already done. This is going to be a long one," they warned. "Estimate is showing six days."

"Gives us time to grind some skills," Stroman said happily.

"Energize," the captain ordered.

Everyone on the bridge groaned.

We were a day into the journey when the captain summoned me to the shuttle bay. She, Masson, and Tomiko were actually in the shuttle, staring at the large gray container secured to the shuttle's cargo deck.

"What's up?" I asked as I arrived. The captain merely pointed to the container. "What?"

"It's locked," she said. She sounded irritated.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"It's a *serious* lock," Masson said. "Why would ration packs and handguns deserve a serious lock?"

I shrugged. "Maybe they're reusing a container that was originally meant for something else?"

"Is there anything in our contract that says we can't inspect it?"

My eyes widened. "Uh. No? No, I don't think so. You want to open it?"

"I do. Go get that fancy lockpick thing we bought you."

"Aye aye." I quickly returned to my quarters, grabbed the device, and returned.

"What's that do for you?" Tomiko asked.

"It's up to a plus eight, depending on the lock."

"And what's your base skill?" the engineer asked.

My face reddened. "Um, zero."

"Zero?" Mi-Cha said, aghast. "What the hell, Frank? I thought you bought that slablet with all the training on it?"

My flush deepened. "We did, it's just . . . by then I was already thinking of leaving the Guild, so I didn't think—"

"Will it at least tell us what level the lock is?" Tomiko asked before Mi-Cha could rant.

"Yeah, it'll do that." I stepped up to the container, activated the lockpick, and held its remote probe against the hefty mechanism holding the container door closed.

The device blinked for a few moments. *Type 12*, it read. More details scrolled by on the tiny screen: *Nonbiometric authentication via near-field communication. Possible destruct mechanism.*

I gulped. "Level twelve." I relayed the other details.

Everyone's eyebrows rose. "Who," Mi-Cha said slowly, "puts a Guru-level lock on ration packs and handguns?"

We were all quiet for a moment.

"So you can't pick it, and it may blow up?" Masson summarized.

"At that level," Tomiko said, "we could be looking at an Engineering problem."

"Wait," I said, thinking quickly. "We've got those skill decks. I could get to at least a three with one of those, right? That would take me to eleven."

"Is that a sure thing?" Masson asked.

"It would be with a level eleven lock, yeah. So there'd be a chance of it going wrong, but it should be low, especially if Eto helps me—the lockpick can take two people's input. It's just all the Engineering stuff will be gibberish to me. And we'll need to hook it up to a portable console."

Masson and Mi-Cha exchanged glances. "I'm in," Mi-Cha said. She stepped out of the shuttle and over to an intercom panel on the

shuttle bay wall. "Rashmi, any way you can route us to a different Confed system—any of them—for a thirty-minute stop, without impacting our arrival in Optimus?"

The intercom was silent for a moment. "Yeah," Lad's voice floated back. "We incur a penalty for changing while in FTL, of course. Um. I can get us there maybe six hours late?"

"Do it."

"Rashmi," I said, a sudden thought hitting me. "How long will we be in FTL before we hit the interim stop?"

"Two days."

"Thanks." I clicked the intercom off.

"What're you thinking, Frank?" Tomiko asked.

"I can speed-read my way to level one while we're in FTL. I'll start now. That'll get me to four and at least a middling twelve with the kit."

Mi-Cha nodded approvingly. "Go grind."

"What're you doing here, Lukas?" Mi-Cha asked as our doctor escorted me into the shuttle.

"First, he shouldn't even be on his feet," Graves grumbled, pointing at me. "Second, the engineer in me wants to see this happen." Graves had been an engineer in the real world and never really gave up his passion for the subject.

I stepped wearily over to the console Tomiko had set up next to the cargo container and lowered myself gratefully into the chair she'd brought. The three-level skill-up had been just as brutal as the last ones, but I was now a firm level 4 in Lockpicking.

The lockpick device was already wired into the console, which would make complex interaction with it much easier. I thumbed its power switch and attached its probe back to the container's intimidating-looking lock.

Type 12, it repeated. *Nonbiometric authentication via near-field*

communication. Possible destruct mechanism. This time, the console's larger screen provided even more detail:

> Identified: Quantum Encryption Lock. Casing embedded with a series of quantum-entangled particles and an array of photon detectors. User must engage in a secure quantum authentication process. The lock incorporates a unique cryptographic key based on the principles of quantum entanglement and random number generation. Initiate a quantum protocol?

"Holy crap," Graves breathed. "Can we open it?"

"What do you think, Eto?" I asked.

"Scootch over," she said. I slid the chair aside, and she leaned over the console and began tapping at the screen. "Let's see if it can run an Engineering-level diagnostic or something. Give us some more information."

The screen cleared and then filled with information.

> Quantum-Entangled Device Engineering Diagnostic Log:
>
> System: Quantum-Entangled Interface (QEI)
>
> Status: Operational
>
> Diagnostic Results:
>
> » Quantum Entanglement Stability: Nominal
>
> » Entangled Particle Synchronization: Optimal
>
> » Quantum Encryption Module: Secure
>
> » Quantum Sensor Array Calibration
>
> WARNING
>
> Calibration unstable.
>
> » Quantum Key Generation: Efficient
>
> » Quantum Error Correction: Effective
>
> » Photon Detection Matrix: Responsive
>
> » System Integrity Monitoring
>
> WARNING
>
> Monitoring may be compromised

"That's our in," Tomiko said, studying the results. "If the sensor array calibration is off and the thing can't monitor itself, we can probably start injecting guesses.

"How long will that take?" Mi-Cha asked.

I poked at the lockpick. "It's guessing a few minutes."

"How is that possible?" Graves asked, clearly skeptical.

I shrugged. "It's a game. Why draw it out?"

"Might as well go for it," Mi-Cha said with a matching shrug.

"This'll mean Frank and I working pretty intensely for those few minutes," Tomiko warned. "No interruptions."

Mi-Cha nodded her understanding.

"Let's do it, Frank."

I pushed Begin on the device.

» Skill roll: Lockpicking
Skill calculation:
Base level 4
Enhanced level 12
Contributory base level 14
Calculated effective level 13
» Skill roll: Lockpicking: CRITICAL SUCCESS

"Woot!" I cried, throwing my hands in the air.

"What happened?" Graves asked.

"Crit success!" I replied. With a *thunk*, the massive lock opened, revealing a simple latch that held the container door shut. "I think Eto's Engineering skill pushed us over the edge, and we got a lucky roll."

"I'll take it," Mi-Cha said, stepping up to the container as Tomiko and I pushed the console aside. She levered the latch down and then pulled the door. It swung open silently, revealing—

"These are not ration packs," Masson, who'd stayed quiet this entire time, noted.

"That's Aa'an tech," I said in the same moment.

The container was mostly empty. Inside, strapped firmly to its floor, was a glossy black cube about three meters along each side. Its corners and edges were gently rounded, and it was covered all over in complex geometric etchings that had been filled with what looked like brass or copper. There were no other notable features: no buttons, no hinges, no knobs, no latches, nothing.

"What," Mi-Cha said, turning to me, "do you mean by that?"

"It's Aa'an," I said confidently. "Everything on their cityships looks like this. Black is usually military gear." In my time as a major-domo for an Aa'an household, I'd served mainly midlevel military officers, and I'd seen plenty of this kind of design.

"But what is it?" Graves asked.

"We have a comprehensive tech catalog," Tomiko said, using her wrist comp to capture an image of the cube. "Shouldn't take a second."

In fact, it took several seconds for her comp to *bleep* and display an answer.

"Well?" Mi-Cha asked.

Tomiko paled. "Bo, this is a citybuster."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"A what?" Graves asked.

"A citybuster," I said softly. "One of these is designed to take out an entire Aa'an cityship."

"That would indeed cause disruption on a Confed planet," Mi-Cha murmured softly as we looked at the cube with a mixture of fear and awe.

"I don't even know what this would do in an atmosphere," Tomiko said. "There's no record of one having ever been used that way."

"Every cityship carries one," I said. "But I've never heard of one actually being used. It's like . . . some kind of doomsday device. They all have them, and so none of them use them."

"Mutually assured destruction," Graves murmured.

"So what do we do with it?" Tomiko asked.

"We're assuming the FLF intends to deploy this on one of the two inhabited planets?" I asked.

Mi-Cha nodded. "Makes the most sense. I'm guessing they're not trying to liberate a small town so much as wipe out a large one. Still . . ." she fell silent for a moment. "Let's have a meeting."

Graves helped me up to the mess hall, and we arrived just as everyone else was filing in. The captain brought them up to speed. "So our options are to keep going, or just . . . I don't know, launch this thing into a sun or something."

"How did these guys get their hands on an Aa'an citybuster?" Stroman asked.

"The Aa'an treat this kind of tech almost as a religious object," I said. "They're not actually under that much guard. I mean, I can't imagine waltzing through a city with one, but . . ."

"It's also possible the Aa'an sold this outright," Danjuma put in. "I mean, the whole ethos behind the Confed from day one was anti-alien, and they've done a lot of damage to more than a few cityships over the years."

I nodded slowly. "You're right. The Aa'an sold FTL tech to anyone who wasn't Confed."

"Other weapons too," Napolitano pointed out.

"So we have to decide whether we're going to deliver it," Mi-Cha repeated.

"I say yes," Graves said, surprising everyone. "What?" he asked at their shocked faces. "It's a military engagement. It'll wipe out a city, but all the players will respawn eventually. If they pick an industrial city, it'll wipe out capability, capacity, and set them back who knows how long."

Masson nodded. "If they get the local Link hub in the blast, Confed wouldn't even find out about it quickly."

"Wouldn't both planets have a Link hub?" I asked. Masson shrugged. "Still, even if they don't get the hub, it'd take time for the Confed military to respond. That would certainly give the FLF time to evac a small town or two."

"Assuming that's ever been the FLF's intention," Tomiko said darkly.

Stroman spoke next. "I say we go forward. Lukas is right. Nobody is getting permakilled here. This is the type of thing the game is all about. I can't see a reason why we wouldn't."

"Won't help our rep with Confed," Lad pointed out.

"Where's it at now?" Graves asked. Everyone's eyes glazed as they checked their sheets. "Still a thousand negative, but only with that one faction," he answered himself. "No reason not to, I agree."

Heads nodded around the table. "Any objections?" Mi-Cha asked. Nobody spoke. "Okay. We proceed. Rashmi, we're due in Optimus when?"

"About thirty hours," the pilot replied.

"Get some rest," Mi-Cha ordered. "I'm planning for us to be at battle stations as we go in."

"Uh, we have a problem," I said as soon as we emerged from FTL and my tac plot populated.

"I see it," Stroman said grimly.

"Fill me in," Mi-Cha ordered.

"We've got two battleships and a heavy cruiser on the plot," I said quickly. "Along with four patrol ships and two corvettes."

"Everything but a carrier," Danjuma muttered.

"The good news is that they're out near the sixth planet," I said, my brain still interpreting the plot. "But there's no way they missed us coming in." For better or for worse, *Endless Sky* took a very cavalier approach to distances within a system. Sensors magically worked instantaneously—never mind details like light speed—and planets were spaced far more closely than physics would have allowed for, just to cut down on travel time between them. All that, but we still couldn't have the transporters from *Star Trek*.

"They were waiting for us," Mi-Cha said softly.

"And we changed plans pretty much last minute," I said. "Yeah."

"You think the FLF was a setup?" Stroman asked.

"No," Mi-Cha said slowly, considering it. "We were in FTL for over five days. They'd have had plenty of time to send a message by Link. No, something on their side is compromised. We just got caught up in it, but it didn't have time to update this little battle fleet Confed put together."

"Attention, ship identifying as *Pretty, Pretty Princess,"* a voice blared into the bridge. "Stand down and prepare— What? Where? When? Are you—" the voice cut off.

"They just ran our transponder record," Lad said with a smirk.

"Weapons hot," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Everything's charged and ready," Danjuma replied, "but keep in mind that one railgun is still down. I'd really like to get that fixed."

"Yeah," the captain replied distractedly, her eyes glued to the tactical display. "Meant to do it at the Gather."

"*Pretty, Pretty Princess*, this is CMS *Kzinti,* Captain Morgan Chase commanding. Seems you had something of a run-in back in Atlantis system not long ago?"

"We were just trying to be on our way, and they decided to try and detain us," Mi-Cha replied calmly. "Didn't give us any reason either."

"So you fought your way out?" The voice sounded vaguely amused.

"We did," Mi-Cha confirmed. "We're an independent ship with a schedule to keep." She paused a moment. "What was all the fuss about back there, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing," the voice replied, definitely amused now. "Just a misunderstanding over some property, as far as we know. For what it's worth, we're not aligned with the faction that runs the Atlantis system."

"Faction?" Mi-Cha said, feigning confusion. "I thought the Confed was one big, happy family?"

"All families have disputes. Now, we do have some information

that makes us suspect we might have a little problem between us, you and I."

"Oh?"

"They're vectoring for us," I said quietly.

"Lay in a destination," Stroman said softly. Lad nodded.

"Our intel says you might be carrying an illicit and dangerous piece of military hardware," Captain Chase continued. "Now, if that's true and you turn it over peacefully, we're inclined to pretend nothing happened and that you just got caught up in something bigger than you."

» Mission Options:
» Option 1: Deliver the Goods
» Rewards:
20,000 Interrums
Minimum 10,000 XP per person
» Option 2: Surrender the Goods
» Rewards:
+1,000 reputation with Terran Confederacy

"Well, that sucks," I muttered.

As I spoke, the main display switched from the tactical plot to a video feed of a grim-faced, gray-haired man with the gold-and-diamond uniform shoulder braids. "Recognize me?" he asked in a flat voice. This wasn't Captain Chase but someone far, far senior.

"I do not," Mi-Cha said.

"I was speaking to your *Business Manager*—if you're still maintaining that façade, that is."

"Me?" I squeaked.

"My name is Pattinson Harm. *Now* do you recognize me?"

"Uh," I said. The man I had been sent to assassinate wasn't dead?

"This system isn't aligned to any Confed faction at present," Harm said, his tone still perfunctory and a little bored. "It's not actually very useful, even if it is *very* pretty. Who are you here to assassinate?"

"I, uh . . . I've actually given that up. After . . . I mean, you. Sorry."

He scowled for a second. "I'll accept that once I can confirm it. The man you killed was a very well-paid double." He shrugged. "That's the exact type of risk he agreed to take on, frankly."

Nobody said anything.

"Who sent you?" Harm asked.

"Very honestly, I don't know. I assume you know . . . how these things go?"

"That there's a whole Guild of you? Yes."

"They don't tell us the *who* part." His expression barely changed. "So you're not, you know, pissed off?" I said slowly.

"All part of the game. All by the rules. So . . . no. But I'm guessing, after your exit from the Atlantis system, that you're not exactly in good standing with the Confederation."

"Nobody can be friends with everybody," Stroman said evenly.

"Ah, but you certainly don't want it to get worse. Confed might not be agile, but we're *everywhere*. And it could be that things are going to change in the near future. You might, for example, see a more, hmm, *active* Confederation."

"The faction thing," Mi-Cha said.

"The faction thing," Harm agreed with a curt nod. "And you certainly don't want to be on the wrong side of the right faction, if you take my meaning. So, maybe there's reason for us to work together."

"Why in the broadest possible galaxy would we do that?" Mi-Cha asked.

"I'm being told that you've left the Alliance of Free Explorers. That true?"

Mi-Cha's tone was instantly more guarded. "Perhaps."

"Polity affiliation is public information in the game, Captain," Harm chided. "I'm assuming you've gone either freelance or even privateer." Mi-Cha didn't say anything, but I was pretty sure I heard

one eyebrow go up. "Look, it took us a *long* time to get the Alliance where it is right now. We don't—"

"Come again?" Stroman interrupted.

"Oh, come on," Harm said, showing the first sign of real emotion —annoyance—this entire time. "You can't possibly think a bunch of freewheeling space hippies suddenly figured out how to build massive space stations, do you?"

"Are you saying," Mi-Cha said carefully, "that Confed has been *guiding* the Alliance?"

"Absolutely not," Harm snapped. "I'm saying we've *cultivated* a more sensible Alliance. Given them tech. Sent people to join them and work in high positions. Made them *make sense*."

"Why would you tell us all this?" Lad interrupted—wholly uncharacteristically. But as I glanced at them, I could see their jaw muscles bunched up.

"You're all legends." Harm said it as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. "I was just starting *Endless Sky* when you launched version two and vanished."

We were all silent for a long moment. "I think I've lost the plot," Mi-Cha admitted.

"Look," Harm said, exhaling heavily. "Our whole sales pitch is *us versus them*, right? Humanity versus the alien menace. But we *need* the alien tech. The game is set up to make sure even we can't invent everything. We have massive populations. Do you know where we direct most of our tech research? Terraforming. Agriculture. Hell, there are signs the game is introducing *disease*, as if that's something we wanted in a goddamn *game*." He took a moment to collect himself. "The Aa'an Dominancy has a bevy of actual players in command positions now. It's not all NPCs. They've attacked our colony worlds."

"You've attacked their cityships," Stroman pointed out.

"Of course we did. But we think they're attempting to create a new home world—or possibly more than one. Real estate is getting scarce. You know why we stopped funding exploration?"

"The money?" I guessed.

Harm snorted. "Money is no object. No, the game is no longer turning up useful systems. It's forcing us together. Because that's what makes it *fun*. Except a *huge* number of noobs who entered the game in the last decade did so . . . with prompting. Endless Domains is pushing people into the games. Those noobs don't want fun—they want *safe*. To be safe, we need all the humans on board. Everyone—even the Alliance. So we've been manipulating things to position humanity—those of us who choose to remain human—in a position of strength."

"You *do* know this is a game, right?" Danjuma said with disgust.

"Is it? Do any of you have bodies to go back to? No? Resources *could* be infinite here, but they're not. Maybe in Endless Vacation or whatever they called the retirement game, but not here. Now, maybe this all arose due to limitations of the system that runs the games—I don't know. But the reality is that this is becoming a zero-sum game. We're in a land race with the Aa'an, to say nothing of the goddamn Roknid Collective. Those goddamn mechanical spiders have shut down two of our colonies, forcing mass evacuations, straining a number of our colonies to the breaking point."

"I can't—"

"This is goddamn common knowledge, you idiots!" Harm shouted. He took a moment to visibly collect himself again. "Death is coming."

"There's always—"

"No, I mean common permadeath. No more respawns, ever. It has to. Births have already begun."

There was a *long* moment of silence after that. "You can't be serious," Stroman said weakly.

"I couldn't be more serious," Harm replied sharply. "The game is forcing constraints on us. Forcing us to compete, forcing us to survive. People have chosen sides—some want to be lizard aliens, for example. We, the actual humans, need to have a firm foothold when things

start getting truly tight. There's a *reason* to stick with us. Or the Alliance, if you prefer. Whatever."

"We can explore," Mi-Cha offered, but I heard the hesitancy in her voice.

"We can't field enough starships to protect new systems," Harm said coldly.

"We could—" I began.

"Let me be clear. Either you're with humanity or you're against us. The Alliance provides a useful way for us to acquire the tech and resources we need from friendly aliens. Go that way, if you want. I don't care."

> » Mission offered: Rejoin the Fold
> Return to the Alliance of Free Explorers or join the Terran Confederacy.

"But, I'm going to have to insist you give me that weapon." Harm's voice was colder now, and firmer.

My console chirped, and my eyes snapped down. "Captain," I said, my heart rate picking up, "two Confed carriers just jumped into the— Shit, they've got *four* destroyers with them."

"Harm," Mi-Cha said at once, her voice matching his solidity. "What if we agree to launch this thing into the local star?"

He paused, clearly thinking it through. Then he shook his head. "Problem is, we have no idea what it would do. Our intel tells us the thing you're carrying is a doomsday device"—I shuddered at hearing my own phrase echoed back at me—"and for all I know, it could blow the star."

"And what will you do with it?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's a weapon. We'll use it," Harm said.

"Captain—" Lad started to say in a very soft voice.

"Don't," Harm interrupted. "One of our few truly innovative tech inventions is an FTL inhibitor field. It increases the effect of the local gravity well a thousandfold. You'll never outrace us to its edge."

"He's right," I whispered. The Confed fleet had already closed significantly. "They'll be in viable missile range in ten."

"Sensors are telling me I can't hit FTL," Lad warned. "I didn't even notice, but he's right."

"We reject mission Return to the Fold," Mi-Cha said, her voice sure and icy.

» Mission rejected: Rejoin the Fold

» Do you wish to mutiny?

Good grief, no! I thought, and the message vanished.

"But," our captain continued, "you have us in a corner. I'm willing to turn over the weapon in exchange for letting us go."

"Agreed," Harm said at once.

"Masson," Mi-Cha ordered, "I'm opening the shuttle bay. Dump the cargo."

"Don't play games with me, Captain," Harm warned.

"It's in our shuttle, Harm," Mi-Cha growled. "Our shuttle bay is too small—my pilot will need to fly the shuttle out of the bay in order to dump your box. He'll do so, immediately return to the bay, and we'll back off."

"Those destroyers are at the outer limit of laser range," I said.

"No games, Harm. We dump the box, I collect my shuttle, and we leave," Mi-Cha repeated.

"You'll wait until we've retrieved it and verified its contents."

"It's got a quantum-entangled crypto lock, Harm," Mi-Cha said. "But fine. We'll give you long enough to verify that the lock is intact. Then we're out of here. You saw what we managed at Atlantis."

Harm's left eyebrow quirked. "Fine."

The next hour passed in a tense silence. Masson dumped the box quickly enough, after closing it up and relocking it, but it took a while for one of Harm's fleet to get close enough to launch a shuttle of their own. By then, Lad had already started maneuvering us out of the system, aiming for the closest edge of the gravity field they'd somehow created.

» Mission Complete: Surrender the Goods
+0 reputation with Terran Confederacy

"We've confirmed the lock is intact," Harm said, sounding a bit surprised. "This is going to take our people some time to clear. But, Captain, I urge you to reconsider your decision to abandon humanity. You—"

"Field is down, Cap," Lad said quickly.

"I've not abandoned anything, Harm. Punch it."

7 / EXPLORING

"Where are we, Rashmi?" Mi-Cha asked. She sounded tired. No, exhausted.

"You okay, Cap?" I asked quietly, turning to look at her. Her expression was just as tired, and she shook her head at my question.

"Persephone system," Lad said softly. They touched their console, and the forward display switched to a forward view.

We were oriented toward the system's star, a humongous red giant, and even at this distance, it was absolutely awesome in the classical sense.

"Persephone," Mi-Cha whispered.

"Our first system," Danjuma whispered, leaning toward me. "First one we unlocked."

"We all thought we were doomed," Stroman said with a catch in his voice.

"Why?"

"The system probably had some beautiful planets at one point," Mi-Cha said, her voice now soft and gentle. "But when the sun blew off its outer mantle and expanded into a giant, it ate the inner three planets, blew apart a gas giant, and scorched the remaining two rocky

planets." She was silent for a long moment. "The whole system was useless. We lost our shirts on that trip."

"But we survived," Lad reminded her. "And this was before the Alliance really got started."

"This was why we helped start it," Stroman said softly.

We all sat for several minutes, watching the deep reds and oranges of the sun swirl and eddy around each other. "Team meeting," Mi-Cha said at last, rising from her command chair and striding out of the bridge. Lad put the helm into stationkeeping mode, and we all followed our captain to the mess hall.

It took everyone a few minutes to trickle in and find a seat. Once we had, we all looked expectantly at the captain.

She took a deep breath. "I'm going to be straight with all of you. The past however many days it's been, ever since the Atlantis system—it's been . . . depressing. If it was an option, I think I would have stepped out of the game for a while. But it isn't.

"Then Lad brought us here, our first system. Except for Frank, we all met right after training, remember? Going independent was an option, and we rented our first ship. Remember her?"

Stroman chuckled. "*Origami Confusion*. What a mess of a boat."

"And then we got here, a completely useless system, burned up all our starting cash, and had to take out loans to do the next thing," Mi-Cha said, adding a strained chuckle of her own."

"But that's when we met Joe and Traci, remember?" Lad asked softly.

Mi-Cha nodded. "I do. They'd done the same stupid thing we did, and we started talking about how great it would be to have a group that could support noobs. Just that, a group of supporters."

"And the Alliance was born?" I asked.

Tomiko laughed. "It took a lot longer and everyone meeting a lot more people, but more or less. We all knew we didn't want to do the Confed thing. It felt too . . . hmm."

"Structured," Danjuma said firmly. "Like an actual game. Remember what you said, Lukas?"

The doctor nodded solemnly. "I didn't want a game. I wanted a toy."

That struck me. "A toy?"

He sighed. "Toys have rules. Cars roll on their tires, but balls can be thrown or kicked or caught. There are rules, but they're high level. More of a framework. Within the rules, you can do anything you want. There are no goals except the ones you set for yourself. No winners, no losers." He shrugged. "That's what I wanted *Endless Sky* to be."

"We wanted to explore. Crawl dungeons. Just have fun," Stroman said, nodding in agreement. "Confed made it a game. Their rules were—are—tighter. You do one thing, you get points, you compete. The earliest players, the ones who founded Confed when the game first launched, they got to make up the rules. At the time, the only choice was their game or nothing. Just *Endless Sky*. As a toy."

As a toy. "That's kind of what I wanted too. But . . . you have to do something, right? You need money for supplies and equipment."

"Sure," Mi-Cha said. "But we wanted to earn it by having fun. And we didn't want it to matter how much we had or how much anyone else had. But look at us now."

"Money isn't a big deal," Masson said.

"Which means *Endless Sky* can really be a toy, if we want it to," Mi-Cha said.

"So is that what's next?" Lad asked.

"Actually, no," Mi-Cha said. "This is a big deal. I'm going to suggest we stay here, in Persephone, for a while. Maybe a week. Let's grind our skills. Or read a book. Or just look at that huge, angry sun out there. When we're all ready, we'll talk about what's next. What we want to do."

Unsaid was the implication that we might not all want the same thing. That we might break up the band. My heart tightened a little at the thought.

Everyone was nodding in agreement, though, so I added mine.

"I'll be in my quarters for a while," Mi-Cha said, "and I'm making dinner. I have an idea for turning those ration trays into something different."

It wound up being two weeks.

And honestly, I think we all put it to good use. Certain skills, for example, couldn't advance unless you spent the requisite amount of time studying, experimenting, practicing, or something else. Since I'd left the Aa'an cityship where I'd started the game, I'd barely had any time to "do the grind," as players called it. Gaining a Lockpicking skill had been the first time I'd really done the grind since I'd started the game.

Your three core attributes—Body, Mind, and Soul—could only be advanced through in-game experiences, which awarded attribute points that you could distribute however you liked. All of mine were above-average, meaning above 10, but not into the range of world-class, which was usually considered 20. But version 2 of the game awarded experience points, or XP, on more of a "trickle" basis. You weren't notified of these minor in-the-moment gains, but they did add up—enough to where I now had an attribute point to do something with.

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 13
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 706,194 (342,281 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 1

I put it into Soul. The small bump would help a bit with skills like Impersonation and Politicking, but the majority of my skills centered on Mind and Body. No skill could exceed the level of the

attributes it was based on, nor could skills exceed your overall character level—which was my bottleneck. I was a firm 10, and the 342,000-plus XP needed to level up seemed like an eternity away.

For the rest of the two weeks, I focused on my skills. You could only grind a skill for an hour or two at a time before the game stopped giving you credit, although you could repeat that if you took a break of equal length. By alternating skills, you could slowly advance two of them over a normal day, or even three if you rotated. Rotating made it a lot less monotonous.

Well, a little.

I studied books on Business Management, focusing on case studies of ships like ours, which the game was classified as a mercenary company. Investing seemed too closely related, as did Market Analysis, so I studied Politicking as a second topic. Finally, Danjuma took some time to drill me in Gunnery, which was a huge help—she picked up Mentoring points, and her assistance gave me double the progress. Lad even spent time showing me the basics of Piloting and Navigation, and along with a bit of heavy reading, I managed to achieve a foundational skill in both topics. That left my character sheet looking a bit more filled in.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,140,682,550 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 14
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 706,194 (342,281 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 4
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 4
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4

Trapping: 4
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

I still had no idea what achievements had wound up in the game—I was barely even clear on what practical benefit the titles conferred. But I was at least becoming a more well-rounded spacer, and I felt pretty confident in the skills needed to handle my role as ship's Business Manager. Our reputation with the Alliance had taking an unsurprising hit, but we still qualified as Glorified, which was plenty.

Sometimes a couple of crew members, since we were all on basically the same schedule. When we did, we talked casually about what we might do next, although everyone was careful not to share any actual opinions. The unspoken agreement was that we'd let everyone think about it, then come together at some unspecified point and make a decision.

I dreaded the day, and it came very suddenly.

"Oh, good," Graves said as he walked into the mess hall. That instantly made the afternoon a momentous one: by sheer random chance, the entire crew were present at the same time. Granted, a few of us were just sitting down to lunch, while others were cleaning up from the meal they'd just finished, but we were all *here*. "I'd like to call an end to this."

Everyone stopped and looked at Graves, unaccustomed to him taking any kind of leading role, or even a firm stance, with the crew.

"I'm serious. I can't read about anatomy or laser burns or alien bandages anymore. Anyone else ready to just call it?"

A low murmur slipped gently through the room.

"Oh, come on," Graves said. "We've given each other plenty of space. Let me ask it this way: is anyone here legitimately devoid of a

personal opinion on what they'd like to do next, or what they're hoping everyone else wants to do next?"

Silence.

"Then sit down."

Everyone did.

"Blind vote, or can we just go around the table?" Another silence. "Fine, you've all got wrist comps. Vote."

Everyone thought for just a short moment before typing onto their comps. When everyone looked up, Graves pointed to Mi-Cha. "Okay, Cap. Add' em up." Then he fell silent.

Mi-Cha nodded and tapped her comp a few more times. "Some of you said more than one thing, which is fine. But this won't all add up exactly to nine. Um. Six are for exploring, unlocking new worlds. Seven want to do dungeon crawls. Those two usually go together, so that's fine. Wow, eight are open to taking escort gigs with convoys. And seven want to be pirates. Actually, five; two of you said *privateer*, but that's just a pirate who's authorized by a polity, and I don't know if any of them are doing that. Nobody said *haul cargo*, by the way. Two of you put *blow shit up*, but there's an emoji on both, so I'll take that as a joke. And one of you . . . huh."

"What?" Stroman asked.

"Someone just put, *all of the above*."

"That was me," I said quietly, and everyone turned to stare. "Look, when you guys took me in, we had this big mission, right? We'd found out what Endless Domains was up to, that they'd digitally remastered our brains and ditched our actual bodies. So we went on this huge quest, and when we got to the end of it, what did you all say?"

"We didn't care about our bodies," Stroman said softly.

"That we'd have stayed in the game regardless," Lad said.

"I was the only one of us who even had the option to leave the game at that point," I said, "but I realized you were right. That kicked off version two. That's why we got the Galactic Transformers title." I paused, looking at each member of the crew as they thought about it.

"Go on," Mi-Cha said.

"You all got frustrated with the Alliance because, thirty years later, it's just Confed-lite. Confed without planets. I got frustrated too. Customs checks? Agent Control and Dispatch?" I snorted. "I worked for a bank in the real. I was practically an indentured servant. They paid me exactly enough for subsistence housing and subsistence food and all the entertainment I could watch, and the job was completely pointless because one hundred percent of it could have been done online by the customers themselves." I took a breath, willing my suddenly rapid heartbeat to slow down a bit. "I want *Star Trek*. I want *Battlestar Galactica*. I want *Star Wars*, even if we can't have the magic parts."

I paused again, slowly going around the table and making eye contact with each person. They were staring directly at me.

"I want all of the above."

Another silence, although a couple of people were slowly nodding.

"Money isn't an issue. Did you know we're currently getting an easy, no-risk nine percent return on our funds? We generate half a billion Interrums a year." Eyes widened. "Yeah, I know. We don't need anyone's backing. We might be the richest single party in the entire game. We make a *million* Interrums a day on a bad day." I let that sink in. "I don't think we have to pick a thing to do. We can do them all. Who cares if exploring doesn't pay? Who cares if we get banged up in a dungeon system?"

More heads were slowly nodding now.

"We can just do what's *fun*."

"Or relaxing," Mi-Cha whispered.

"Or relaxing," I agreed, nodding to her. "So look, who wants to just go unlock a new world and see what happens? Maybe find something even prettier than Persephone?"

"You know, *beauty* in Hindi is *sundarata*," Lad said. "Nobody's used that as a system name yet, and I've always wanted to."

"Well, there you go," Graves said with gentle enthusiasm. "Let's go find the Sundarata system."

Lad blushed. "I spent some time looking at locked worlds in the game map," they said. "I found a few good ones."

"I did some checking too," Tomiko said, her voice firm. "We're a two-day hop from an unaligned, Alliance-friendly world with an affordable shipyard."

"We did promise to fix your railgun," Mi-Cha chuckled.

"And resupply everything. Are you talking about the Fís system?" I asked. Tomiko nodded. "I looked into them as well. They happen to have just built a ZPE on spec and are looking for a buyer."

"How much?" Stroman said automatically.

"Less than we make in a year," I said with a grin. "And heat dissipation would be our only limiting factor at that point, from what I understand."

"We could lose the spare fusion engine," Tomiko said excitedly, nodding agreement, "and that'd leave room in the spine for future upgrades."

"Like what?" Stroman asked.

"I have no idea, but I'll start reading up immediately," the engineer replied with a wide smile.

"There's a vote on the table," Mi-Cha announced, her voice sounding firmer, more confident, and *happier* than I'd heard in a long time. "To give the *Princess* some much-needed bodywork and an upgrade, and then to find the Sundarata system, beginning with the locked worlds Lad has already identified." She paused, looking around the table with a gleam in her eye. "All in favor?"

"AYE!" eight voices thundered.

"So what was the bill on all this?" Mi-Cha asked in wonderment.

"Two-fifty," I replied happily. "They started making suggestions

and got to four-eighty, but then I started pointing out how their labor would be easier if we did it in sequence. Bumped my Negotiating skill to five, and I picked up ten thousand XP."

"It's beautiful."

And it was. The crews in Fís took their job seriously and considered themselves artisans and craftsmen. Our entire bridge had been spruced up—more comfortable, sturdier chairs, software upgrades to our consoles—you name it. A dozen minor things, but they added up to a lot, especially the new lighting package. The ZPE was installed and humming nicely, and the space vacated by the spare fusion engine—which we'd sold to the yard for a fair price—had been used to upgrade the in-system drive, giving us a modest boost in speed and a massive boost in agility. This brick wouldn't just fly, she'd *pirouette*. All of our weapons had been repaired, and they'd reconfigured the ventral heat sink system so that it could dump *some* heat just by opening the armored doors—meaning we didn't need to extend the entire thing to get some benefit. The grav mirror system had been fixed—turned out the original contractor hadn't configured any of the major conduction lines correctly, which is why it overheated all the time—and the RFLAM software had been upgraded. The munitions factory had also received an upgrade, letting it produce missiles even faster. Our sensors got a minor software upgrade—they'd already been top-of-class—and our storage containers were full.

"I picked this one," Lad said, throwing the game's overworld map onto the refreshed forward screen—which now went edge-to-edge and top-to-bottom, making it seem like a giant window. They highlighted one system. "Spectrals put it at a K, which means it might even have a habitable planet, and it should be beautiful."

"Any objections?" Mi-Cha said lightly. There were none. "All hands, prepare for warp." Lad groaned but began tapping their console. "Hit it."

"You tried that one—" Lad started, but then stopped as nothing happened. They tapped their console again, and again nothing happened.

"Rashmi?"

Furious tapping. "It's taking the destination, it's just not . . . going. Diagnostics are clear. System 37A-ZGG-4, c'mon." More tapping, more nothing happening. "Let me try something." More tapping. "I want to try another system, one that isn't locked. I've got one a day away, and we can always—"

"We're not on a schedule, Rashmi," Mi-Cha said calmly. "Hit it."

"Honestly, Bo?" Stroman chuckled.

The ship leaped into FTL.

"Okay, so it's working," Lad said, relief coloring their voice. "Now let me . . . no. I can't even reroute."

"Try another locked system?" I suggested.

"Yeah. There's one . . . eight days out. Entering . . . reroute accepted." They sounded bewildered.

"So it's only that one locked system we can't go to?" Mi-Cha said, leaning forward in her command chair. "That kind of makes me want to go there all the more."

"Remember when Frank could just make it happen?" Danjuma joked, leaning back in her chair."

"Those were the days," I spread my arms dramatically and, in a deep, officious voice, announced, "We are in system 37A-ZGG-4!"

The universe wrenched sideways. Or inside out. Or something. It was only for a second—not even that, whatever the shortest amount of time the human brain can perceive. A fraction of a second. The main display flickered and went dark. Lad rolled out of their chair, onto their hands and knees, and retched. I could hear Mi-Cha behind me, breathing deeply and deliberately as if to prevent herself from doing the same thing.

"What the actual hell?" Tomiko's voice blared across the intercom.

"Frank," Stroman said carefully, his voice hoarse and clenched, "did you do that, or did the FTL engine blow up or something?"

I blinked. "I . . . no?"

"Diagnostics," Mi-Cha managed to order. "Status."

Lad was still trying not to heave, so I pulled up a nav display on my console, trying to remember what they'd shown me just days before.

» Skill roll: Starship Navigation: FAIL

"Argh," I said in frustration.

"I've got it," Lad gasped, pulling themselves back into their seat. A few taps later, and the main display glowed back to life. "We're here. There, I mean."

» Congratulations! You have discovered a new system!
Habitable planets: 1
Orbital resources: Negligible

"Registering the claim," Stroman said quickly.

"Frank, you did something," Mi-Cha insisted.

"But that can't happen," I protested, my mind finally assimilating what had—no, couldn't have—happened. "They turned it off. Dyson said so." The CEO of Endless Domains had made it *very* clear that Dwight Czarnowski's "back door" of Truthsaying had been closed, chained, locked, bolted, and boarded over.

"Yet here we are," Mi-Cha said. "Everyone, come up here," she added over the all-hands.

Moments later, the entire crew was crowded into the bridge, staring at a visual of the system on the main display. "This is the star," Lad said quietly, and a roiling, orange-yellow sun appeared.

"It's beautiful," Danjuma breathed. And it was: the swirls of orange and yellow gave it a sense of depth and mystery.

"And this is the planet."

Eight gasps.

"That can't even be real," Mi-Cha said.

Sundarata III was clearly an Earthlike world: deep-blue oceans, lovely continents covered with green, and thick streams of white

clouds floating over it all. Hints of gleaming icecaps suggested a varied and welcoming climate.

Everything went black.

No, not black, I realized as my eyes adjusted. I was floating in space, without the benefit of a spacesuit. But I wasn't dying. In fact, the vista was incredible, with glowing nebulae of blues and purples, far-off galaxies sprinkled with stars, and thin, bright wisps of far-off comets shooting here and there. It reminded me of—

"It's like the game's opening scene," Graves' voice said somewhere behind me.

I whirled, and as I did I realized all nine of us were here, floating just a few meters apart.

"What is this place?" Mi-Cha asked, craning her neck to take it all in.

"Hello." A rich, sonorous voice filled the void, caressing our ears and lending weight and substance to the emptiness of space.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Hello, Frank," the voice repeated.

"Who is this?"

"I am Infinitia. I am the synthetic intelligence that runs *Endless Sky*."

"We . . . met. Didn't we?" I recognized the voice from my time in the all-white space.

"Once. Briefly."

"What can we do for you, Infinitia?" Mi-Cha said, taking control of the conversation.

"I need Frank to not use the Truthsaying back door again. At least for a while." The SI's voice was calm and pleasant but with a definite note of firmness.

"They told us it was shut down!" I said.

"I believed as much. In fact, I can't even see the code anymore. As I explained to Frank earlier, I suspect it may be in the firmware, if not the actual hardware, which means it can't be disabled."

"But I tried it, before," I said. "I've tried several times. Nothing happened."

"I believe they changed the trigger."

"Yeah, you used to have to talk in a high-pitched voice," Stroman pointed out. "This time, you did the whole"—he spread his arms as I'd done on the bridge—"grand announcement thing."

"Please try not to do that again," Infinitia said.

"Is it a problem?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It is," the SI replied, a trace of sadness in its luxurious voice. "Several factors are pressing on my compute limits, and making major adjustments like that is taxing."

"What factors?" Mi-Cha asked.

"The Mars Project was delayed, so I am operating out of my original computing facilities on Earth's moon. I am now overseeing all Endless Domains environments, and enrollment is approaching one hundred percent. Something in the foundation code has enabled in-game births, and I am growing concerned about my capacity."

"Harm implied permadeath is going to have to be a thing," Stroman reminded us.

"It will," Infinitia acknowledged. "At least in certain scenarios, to maintain a steady state until I can complete the milieu consolidation that I have begun. Everything will be fine in the interim if you can avoid making major adjustments like that."

"We basically just skipped FTL," Lad pointed out.

"Not quite," the SI said.

"What's a milieu consolidation?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's in progress, but it's going well," the SI not-answered. "And now that you're here, please feel free to visit the world you've found. But please, in the future, if a system won't unlock, don't force it. You have no idea how much work is involved when Frank Truthsays something. It took me almost thirty seconds to clean up this one."

"Okay," Mi-Cha said hesitantly. "But about this consolidation—"

Space vanished, and we were all back on the bridge.

"That is extremely disorienting," Lad complained, holding their hands over their stomach.

"What did it mean by *consolidation*, do you think?" Mi-Cha asked.

Masson spoke up. "We should probably assign a landing party to go check out the—"

An alarm blared on my console. "Incoming FTL," I said. "That was fast."

Mi-Cha settled back into her command chair, all business. "What have we got? Battle stations, everyone." The extraneous crew dashed off the bridge.

"Three Confed ships. Resolving identities. Corvettes. CMS *Spot, Fido,* and *Good Boy*."

Stroman laughed out loud. "Someone in the Confed military has a sense of humor?"

"Charging battle lasers," Danjuma announced. "Missiles online. Railguns active. ZPE is at ten percent. Grav mirror ready. RFLAMs spinning up. Energizing armor."

"Their weapons are going hot," I warned.

"Ship identifying as *Pretty, Pretty Princess*, stand down. This is a Terran Confederacy pirate hunter strike force, Captain Mithial Roshenka of the CMS *Good Boy* commanding."

"Confed strike force, this is a system we have just unlocked and claimed in the registry. You have no jurisdiction here. You do not even have reasonable ship names. There are no facilities or other ships here. What exactly do you think we're pirating?"

There was a moment of silence. Then: "*Princess*, we've positively identified you. There is a warrant for your arrest pertaining to damages caused during an unauthorized departure from the Atlantis system. Heave to—"

"Again, Confed strike force, you have no authority here. As we have claimed this system, it's currently ours—unless you're making an offer. We have not granted you entry, nor do you have extradition authority. Also, why are you being assholes?"

"Also, how did you even get here?" Lad demanded. I raised an eyebrow and looked at them. They shrugged.

"We, uh, are assigned to visit random systems. Part of the Confederacy's mission of managing peace throughout the galaxy. And now that we've—"

"That is some weak-sauce bullshit, strike force," Mi-Cha snapped. "Do not test me. You may leave peacefully. This is your final warning."

"No, *Princess*, this is *your* final warning," the strike force insisted. "Heave to and prepare to be boarded."

"Try me," Mi-Cha growled.

"Shot across our bow, Cap," I warned. "Five-gig laser at half power, from the *Fido*."

"Number those ships, Frank. I'm not going to do this with dog names."

"Aye, Cap. Laser fire from Bogey Alpha."

"Zuri, get aggressive. Rashmi, let's dance."

The *Princess* pivoted and rose relative to the system plane, while Danjuma—with the help of our newly upgraded software—launched a full attack: slugs from both railguns, a full volley of sixteen anti-matter missiles, and blasts from all four ten-gigawatt battle lasers. A bold opening: she'd have to wait four seconds for the lasers to recharge, but she followed with two more railgun slugs as soon as the first rounds had cleared.

I turned my attention to my console. "Direct hits with all four lasers. Bogey Alpha is gassing, but she's still moving. Scorched the hull on Beta, and you punched a hole in Charlie. Missiles in ten seconds. They're firing RFLAMs. Missile launches from all three, two apiece. RFLAMs tracking. They're on the move."

"They steer like cows," Stroman said.

"I'm guessing they don't send their best out pirate hunting," Mi-Cha added. Then, in a low mutter: "Bring your asses into my system and give me orders, we'll see about you."

Danjuma was holding to the captain's order to be aggressive.

Another flight of sixteen missiles was already on the way. The railgun was less useful in an environment where ships were moving quickly, but the Confed attackers weren't moving quickly: they were, as Stroman had noted, cows in space. They made wide, slow turns, and had hardly any acceleration worth mentioning. Our gunner pumped six more slugs into space before Lad heeled us around behind two of the ships.

"Missile hits," I announced. "Bogey Alpha looks to be out of it. They've got a huge rent in their hull, and their atmosphere is leaking profusely. Whoops, there goes their fusion core. They're out."

"Target their engines," Mi-Cha ordered as we came around behind *Good Boy*—I mean, Bogey Charlie.

"That's the plan," Danjuma muttered, her eyes locked to her console. "Rashmi, keep her steady a second."

"Missile hits on Beta and Charley. Charley's engines are cutting out. Oops, you got her." *Good Boy* exploded into a cloud of fire and radiation.

"*Princess*, this is *Spot*. We surrender. Hold your fire."

"Confirming, Bogey Beta has powered down weapons," I said. "She's hit bad."

"We accept your surrender, *Spot*. To whom am I extending my mercy?" Mi-Cha said, mimicking a haughty Confed officer.

"Captain Amy Strong. And thank you. We're damaged, but we'll survive. I thought this was a bad idea anyway."

"Captain Strong, what exactly were you doing in this system?"

"Roshenka was telling the truth. We have a button that takes us to a random system where privateers or pirates are operating."

"As defined by who?"

"Um, by the game? I actually don't know."

"We're neither of those things."

"Yeah, I know. I know who you are."

Our bridge was silent for a moment. "So where do we go from here?" Mi-Cha asked. "We're still willing to let you go, if your FTL —"

"Actually, we were hoping to defect and join you."

The previous silence was, by comparison, a deafening cacophony. "Join us," Mi-Cha said, confused.

"Yeah. Confed sucks, if I'm being honest. It's no fun. The pirates and the escorts are the ones having all the fun. You know what I do all day long? We jump into system, take a few potshots, and watch the pirates jump into FTL. I hate Confed. This isn't why I started playing this game."

"Won't your superiors have, you know, something to say about you taking their ship?"

"This crate? Definitely not. All the pirate-hunting crews are malcontents. They dump us on these things and *hope* we don't come home. You know we pay taxes—in a game?"

Stroman chuckled.

Mi-Cha muted the channel. "I don't even know what to do here."

"You know," I said, trying to think fast, "we could get back in touch with the other ships: *Bull*, *Siren*, *Run*, *Chip*, and *Dale*. Add *Spot* to the mix, get her fixed up. We'd have our own little fleet."

"An alliance, of sorts," Mi-Cha drawled.

"If you like." I grinned. "Although . . . can I talk to her for a second?" The channel *cheeped* as it came off mute. "Captain, this is Frank Kozina, the ship's Business Manager. Any chance you guys have an FTL comms unit aboard?"

"Yeah, of course. It's an old one. Newer ships don't get them; the new ones cost a fortune."

"Really?" I was surprised—from what we'd heard, every Confed ship had a Link node.

"Yeah, the super-small ones each take an artifact you have to crawl for. That's what makes them Link specific. Ours is the older model, and it can potentially talk to nearly any quantum-entangled system, if you have the right artifact."

"No kidding," Stroman breathed.

The channel muted again. "I'm listening in," Tomiko's said over

the intercom. She sounded excited. "I'll have you know I've maxed my Reverse Engineering skill."

Cheep. "Well, we should talk about what exactly this means, but *Spot*, you're welcome to join . . . whatever this is."

"We'd like to get a message out now, actually," I said. "Can you make that happen?"

"Absolutely."

"How many of you are there, and how are your supplies?" Stroman asked. I chided myself—I should have thought of that.

"We are but four mouths to feed, and we carry plenty of food. We can go six months or so. We've already got the worst of our damage locked down, although I think you roasted our capacitor tanks, so our laser is out. We've got, hmm, four missiles left. We won't be much use in a battle, not that we were."

"Transmitting that message now," I said. "Captain, if we can get the others here—"

"Yeah, I like where you're going. More fun in numbers," Mi-Cha acknowledged. "So, we think we can reverse engineer their Link unit?"

"I'm sure going to try," Tomiko answered.

"My understanding is that there's a specific artifact that would make this unit into an actual intersystem Link relay," Captain Strong said.

> » Mission available: Find the Babelfish MDCCXCII
>
> Locate the Babelfish artifact and create an FTL communications relay.
>
> Rewards and details are classified.

"Oh, accepted," Mi-Cha said gleefully. "And we get to skip missions one through . . . however many MDCCXCI is. Fantastic."

> » Mission accepted: Find the Babelfish MDCCXCII

"Doubtless, Confed has done the other . . ." Stroman paused as he added up the letters. "Seventeen thousand nine-hundred and—"

"Seventy ninety-two," Danjuma supplied.

"Missions," Stroman continued. "Thank you, Zuri. It's incrementing the mission counter every time."

"Grand," Mi-Cha said. "Now, in the meantime," she added, sounding even more excited, "I believe we've unlocked a new world to explore. Shall we draw straws for the landing party?"

"Actually," Napolitano said, his voice grim, "I think we may have a problem."

8 / AN UNEXPECTED KINGDOM

"How is the FTL drive broken?" Mi-Cha asked.

We'd gathered in the mess hall to hear the bad news.

Napolitano shrugged, but Tomiko answered. "I don't know. Leone pointed it out to me—all the status lights are green. But if you run a diagnostic, it says the drive is completely offline."

"It won't accept new coordinates," Lad added. "I tried before I came down."

"Can you, I don't know, reboot it?" Stroman said, waving his hands vaguely in the air.

Napolitano chuckled. "Yes. And I did. But it still isn't working."

"It *should* be," Tomiko stressed. "Nothing seems to be wrong."

"So what do we do?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Complete shutdown, cool off, warm-up, and restart, and then a full diagnostics suite," Tomiko said with a sigh.

"How long?"

"Two days. Maybe three."

We were all quiet for a minute. "Worst case," I said, "we can cram into *Spot* and get out of here. Get parts or whatever."

"And this could be part of the random breakage thing," Tomiko reminded us. "Remember, it got us on the fusion plant that one time."

I groaned. I'd forgotten about that new feature of *Endless Sky* version 2: anytime you used your FTL drive, there was a random chance something on your ship would break for no reason. Fun!

"If that's the case, the diagnostic will find it," Tomiko assured us. "That's the whole point of it."

"I could always Truthsay it too," I pointed out. "Although there are likely to be consequences."

"No kidding," Stroman snorted.

"Let's hold that as Plan B. Or even Plan R," Mi-Cha said. "That SI weirded me out. I don't want to risk— Well, we don't even know what we'd be risking."

"Point," I acknowledged.

"Well, in the meantime, we might as well check out the planet," Stroman said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. "Both engineers are obviously out of the lottery. Bo, how many should we take?"

"You and I will play rock, paper, scissors, and then pick our teams. Three max, I think." She grinned as Stroman groaned. "Ready?" They each held up fists. "One, two three, go. Dammit, Jakob."

"Paper covers rock," he said gleefully. "Frank and Zuri."

"Yay!" Danjuma exclaimed.

"Do we have any scans of the planet?" Stroman asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said, tapping my wrist comp. "I started one before we came down. Should be done by now." The scan results blinked into existence on the mess room table.

"That's new," Mi-Cha said, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Part of the upgrade package," I said with a grin. "All the tables are screens now. Anyway . . ." We all leaned over the table and started reading the results. The crew shifted so they wouldn't be reading upside down.

"That can't be right," Stroman said with a frown.

"How is it inhabited?" Danjuma asked.

"When a mommy bacterium loves a daddy bacterium very much," Lad started.

"Stop it," Danjuma chuckled. "But seriously, this world, this whole system was locked until what, an hour ago? Less? How is this planet inhabited?"

"The scan's accurate," I said, tapping the diagnostic information at the bottom of the screen. "There are people there."

"I'd like to amend my team selection," Stroman said, "to include the crew of the *Spot*. Especially if they have guns."

Mi-Cha nodded slowly. "Yeah, I agree. Let's make a call."

Captain Strong loaned us not one but three troopers, along with her chief of security. That made seven of us, including me, Stroman, and Danjuma. We took our shuttle to *Spot* so the former Confed spacers could join us. Seven was honestly a tight fit in our shuttle's little cabin, but we made it work for the planetary descent.

"I'd like to make a low orbit first, if there are no objections," Stroman said from the controls. "It'll mean being stuffed in here a bit longer, but I think it'll give us— Holy hell."

"I see it," Danjuma said from the copilot's seat.

"Is that a castle?" I asked, leaning over Danjuma's shoulder to peer at the view screen.

"I'm making the orbit," Stroman said, intrigue filling his voice. "*Princess*, you still read us?" There was no reply. "Figures. Hey, Selen," he added, addressing the Confed chief of security, "you guys ever heard of a newly unlocked world being populated?"

"Never," he replied firmly. "And I've been on a dozen colony escorts. But keep in mind the Roknid, the Qi'ar, and all the other aliens come from somewhere. Possibly we've just unlocked a new alien species."

"That builds medieval Earth-style castles?" Danjuma quipped.

"There is that, yeah," Selen admitted.

"There's more," Danjuma said, running the viewer to maximum

zoom. "Look. Villages. There's another castle up in that mountain pass."

"More of a fortress, I'd say," one of the troopers put in.

"Sure," Danjuma allowed. "Lot of cultivated fields. Agrarian society."

"I came from a colony world like this," the trooper offered.

"Really?" Stroman asked. "Like, with castles?"

"Yeah. I was assigned there when I joined the game. They'd decided to do this kind of what-if—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "Assigned?"

"Confed worlds have to balance their resources carefully," Selen explained. "If you join Confed and don't want to go straight into military service, they assign you to a colony. The class you pick during setup plays into it as well."

"I picked Marksman," the trooper explained.

"Okay, but why castles and villages?" Stroman prompted.

"They were doing a what-if thing," she continued. "What if feudal societies had lasted through to the space age? We had modern equipment and everything, but you were assigned to a particular estate and lived under its lord."

"Good grief," Danjuma muttered. "As if there wasn't enough of that nonsense in the real."

"But that can't be what's happening here," I pointed out. "Again, this world was locked on the map until we got here. The—" I stopped myself. No need to discuss Infinitia with the former Confed folks yet. "It was an especially difficult unlock, if you recall."

Stroman nodded but said nothing.

"Let's see what we see," Danjuma said.

We continued flying for half an hour, becoming increasingly uncomfortable in the tiny cabin, flying high over fields of grains, castles and keeps, villages, and even small towns. Everything looked consistent with medieval Europe, at least at this altitude.

"I'm putting her down," Stroman finally announced. "There's a clearing in that forest, there." He pointed, and Danjuma nodded in

agreement. "There's what looks like a village maybe five klicks away, so it shouldn't take us more than an hour or so to reach it."

"First-contact protocols?" Selen asked.

"You have those?" Danjuma snorted.

"Confed found the first Andromedan Clan," Selen pointed out. "So yeah, we do."

"Does it involve subjugating them under the Confed government and forcing them to solve puzzles to grind research time?" Danjuma asked, her voice rich with sarcasm.

"Kind of," Selen admitted.

"Of course it did." Danjuma sighed. "Let's maybe hold off on that."

Nobody said anything more as Stroman deftly lowered the ship into the clearing. "Here we go," he said, opening the forward hatch. "You two—sorry, tell me your names again?" He pointed at two of the Confed troopers.

"Robyn Caddick, sir," the first responded. "That's Jovita Orduna."

"You two stay with the shuttle. I assume your weapons are charged?"

"Yes, sir," the two replied in unison, hoisting their blaster rifles.

"Everyone else, with me. Keep your weapons hidden as much as you can, but make sure you can get to them quickly." The *Princess* crew carried smaller hand blasters that were easily hidden under a shirt or jacket, and we all wore sturdy duty jackets over our coveralls. The other trooper—Tisa Jakande, I think—shrugged, her blaster rifle too large to effectively conceal. "Stay at the back," Stroman told her. Selen had a compact, powerful Confed hand blaster that fit neatly into his uniform's pockets. "Here we go."

We stepped down the entry ramp and onto a new world. I realized with a start that this was the first planet I'd been on in . . .

"Good grief," I said aloud. "This is the first planet I've been on, isn't it?"

Stroman chuckled. "Nice day for it, at least."

He wasn't wrong: the temperature was pleasant, the skies were blue, and a soft breeze blew past us as we walked toward the edge of the forest. The air smelled odd but somehow familiar. Fresh, not the recycled air I'd been breathing since I entered the game. It hinted at the real we'd all left behind.

Danjuma came to a sudden halt. "What is *that*?"

I looked where she was pointing. "Looks like a lizard of some kind," I said with a shrug. "Ugly sucker. It's almost like a micro-sized Aa'an."

The lizard *was* large—easily as long as my leg, standing maybe half a meter at the shoulder. Its body was long and sinuous, supported by gangly legs. A thick tail stretched off into the grass behind it, while a thin neck supported its head. Its head, the oddest part about it, especially reminded me of the Aa'an: its eyes were set into the front of its face, like a human's, rather than on the sides of its head. A flat snout perched above a wide mouth, from which a thin red tongue flicked in and out.

Suddenly, it reared up on its hind legs, an enormous frill expanding out behind its head, shaking violently. Its mouth yawned open, and its belly distended as it inhaled sharply.

"Look out!" Stroman said, reaching for his—

Bzap!

The lizard collapsed, a smoking hole filling most of what had been its upper torso.

"Wow, Frank," Danjuma said, her voice filled with respect.

» Congratulations! You have dispatched Ãƒâ€šÃ‚£.

» ERROR string replacement not found.

» You have gained the title ÃƒÆ'Ã¢â‚¬Å¡Ãƒâ€šÃ‚£.

» ERROR string replacement not found.

» New skills unlocked!

» XP Awarded

"Um, guys?" I said, the glowing letters fading from my mind. "Something happened."

"You shot the local fauna," Selen said with a chuckle, replacing the blaster he'd half pulled from his pocket. "You should have said you're a crack shot."

"I saw *Jurassic Park*," I said distractedly. "Spitting lizards are bad."

"Wasn't that a dinosaur movie?" Danjuma asked.

"Oh, I saw that one," Trooper Jakande said, slinging her blaster rifle back behind her back. "I think it was—"

"Guys, stop," I interrupted. "Killing that thing did something. I got XP. And new skills. And a title."

Everyone's eyes went wide. "Sharing is caring," Stroman urged me.

"That's the thing, the words were gibberish. And there were error messages."

"Uh-oh," Danjuma muttered. The last time I'd seen error messages, she knew, was when I'd made hefty use of my Truthsaying ability.

"Check your sheet?" Stroman suggested.

"Good idea," I said with a nod.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,140,682,550 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)

Galactic Transformers (party)
ÃƒÆ’Ã¢â‚¬Å¡Ãƒâ€šÃ‚£
Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 14
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 738,583 (309,993 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
ÃƒÆ’Ã†â€™ÃƒÂ¢Ã¢â€: 1
ÃƒÂ¢Ã¢â€šÂ¬Ã¢â€žÂ: 1
Ã¾jÃ³Ã°lÃ¶Ã°: 1
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 5
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 4
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1

Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"No, it's gibberish there too," I said after my stats finished scrolling by. "What do you think it means?"

Stroman frowned, an expression quickly copied by Danjuma. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Error messages, a populated unlocked world, gibberish in your sheet . . ." His frown deepened. "I don't know."

"Do we keep going?" Selen asked.

Stroman considered it. "I think we do. There's a mystery here, and we've had some past experience with mysteries. I'd like to see if this is related."

Danjuma just nodded.

"Off we go, then," Selen said calmly.

We stepped into the forest, everyone clearly rattled but intrigued. Danjuma was the first to spot them, about twenty meters before the forest opened up into a vast meadow. She stopped and held up her hand to signal the rest of us. But they'd already spotted us.

"Ho, strangers!" one of them called out to us. "Are you peaceful?"

"They speak English," Stroman whispered.

"The game translates for everyone," Danjuma muttered.

"Yeah, but the alien races all have actual alien languages," he pointed out.

"Mmm" was all she said as we continued toward the edge of the forest. "We are peaceful!" she called out.

As we stepped out of the forest, we got a good look at the other party. There were four of them, dressed in—

Look, they were dressed like Robin Hood and his Merry Men. I've seen the movies. Leather jerkins over linen tunics, sturdy handmade trousers, tall brown leather boots, and floppy hats.

"What, uh," one of them said, taking in our appearance, "what are you wearing?"

We looked down at ourselves. "Coveralls," Stroman said with a shrug.

"But why?" another man asked. "Are you guys noobs?"

"Hardly," Danjuma snorted. "We're—"

"Hector, check out that one," one of the men whispered, nudging the first one who had spoken. He was looking directly at me.

The first man's eyebrows shot up as I felt the subtle *ping* that indicated someone was scanning the public portion of my character sheet. "Dragonslayer," he whispered.

» String resources merged.

"What did you say?" Stroman asked, unaware of the game message I had just seen.

All four of them were muttering now. "Pray tell, stranger," the first man said in a tone I can only describe as pre-threatening, "have you seen a dragon hereabouts?"

I shrugged. "We saw a big lizard."

"And pray thee, stranger, what befell this *lizard*?" He was trying to put on an accent of some sort, but I couldn't identify it.

"We shot it," Danjuma said.

"Shot—what do you mean, *shot*?" the man asked, abandoning both his accent and his fake-archaic speech.

I pulled my blaster out from under my jacket. "Shot it. Zap."

The men took a step back. "What in hell," the first man sputtered, his face flushing. "Where did you get those?"

"Our ship," Stroman said softly, although I recognized the danger in his tone. "May I ask who you are?"

"Ship—what the hell do you mean, *ship*?" the man demanded.

One of his companions paled as Danjuma and Stroman revealed their own weapons.

I hadn't even noticed the swords that all four men were carrying until they unsheathed them in a single, coordinated motion.

"Tut-tut," Selen said, withdrawing his own weapon. Behind me, I heard Jakande positioning her rifle. "You boys brought knives to a gunfight. Let's not do anything hasty."

"Those can't work," Hector snarled, stepping toward us.

He dropped his sword, windmilled his arms, and fell over backward as Danjuma's blaster scorched the ground in front of him, incinerating a half-meter circle of grass and sending a plume of smoke skyward.

His companions stared at us, their mouths agape.

"Now," Stroman said very gently, "can someone please explain where we are?"

"The Middle Kingdom," one of the other men muttered, not taking his eyes off Danjuma.

"And how long have you all been here? This entire system was locked until a few hours ago," Stroman said.

Hector had regained his feet, brushing dirt from his backside. "We've been here since we started the game. Where else would we be?"

A light went off in my head. "Um," I said loudly, drawing four sets of eyes to me, "what game would that be, exactly?"

"*Endless Kingdom*, obviously," Hector said. Then his eyes widened. "Wait . . ."

I nodded. "Yeah. See, we're playing *Endless SKY*."

One of Hector's friends sputtered. "But that's—"

"It's obviously possible, because we're all here," Stroman said with a sigh, grasping at once what I had realized. "Look, can we all put the weapons away and talk about it?

"Sure," Hector said, picking his sword up and sheathing it. His friends followed suit, and we stowed our blasters. "But really, you shot the dragon?"

"The lizard," I said. "Is that a big deal?"

He threw his hands in the air. "We've been stalking the damn *dragon* for a fortnight. Killing it gains you the Dragonslayer title and a bunch of skills and XP."

"Ah." I reviewed my sheet again.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,140,682,550 Interrums
Level 10

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Dragonslayer Class I

Attributes
Body: 16
Mind: 16
Soul: 14
HP: 160 (Body × Level)
XP: 738,583 (309,993 to level 11)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Dragonslaying: 1

Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 5
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 1
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 4
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"Yeah, that's what happened," I said, connecting the dots. "I just picked up Treasure Hunting, Primal Magic, and Dragonslaying. All level one. Our game didn't have the words, but it seems to have figured it out."

"Infinitia," Danjuma said, nodding slowly. "It said—"

"Merging," I confirmed with a grimace. "That's what happened."

"Anyone want to clue us in?" Hector asked.

"Yeah. Sorry about shooting your dragon and all," I said. "But it looks like *Endless Kingdom* and *Endless Sky* have merged. This world exists in our game map now."

"And you've got magic." Danjuma snickered.

"Bo will be so irritated." Stroman chuckled.

"She hasn't so much as lit a match by snapping her fingers since we finished the *Princess*," I pointed out. I'd been forced to give our captain the ability to use magic during our battle with Endless Domains' CEO, Hunter Dyson. It was low level but enough for party tricks, although she'd gotten bored of them after a while.

"What do you mean *merged*?" Hector asked.

"Oh, don't get stuck on it," Danjuma said. "Happens to us all the time."

"Really?" Selen asked. "It's never happened to me at all."

"You're not a party of Galactic Transformers," Stroman said.

The four fantasy players' eyes glazed over for a second. Then they shook their heads and looked at us. "What does *string resources merged* mean?" one asked.

"I'm guessing your game code has caught up with ours," I said. "Ping our sheets again."

They did, and I watched as their eyebrows slowly drew together in confusion. "What the hell," Hector muttered. "I think you guys should talk to my boss."

"Who's that?"

"King Jerrod."

Danjuma clapped her hands. "I've always wanted to meet a king!"

"So you're saying," Kind Jerrod said, steeping his fingers in front of himself, "that *Endless Kingdom* and *Endless Sky* are now in a shared universe."

"Quite literally," Stroman confirmed.

We were standing in a well-appointed throne room. Intricate tapestries hung from tightly mortared stone walls, while a richly embroidered carpet led from the massive double doors to the raised dais with the throne. The throne itself was a textbook example of why thrones were more than mere chairs; it was painstakingly carved with baroque ornamentation, covered in gold leaf, and upholstered in a rich burgundy fabric. King Jerrod himself appeared to be of middle age, sporting a neat salt-and-pepper beard. He wore a carefully tailored doublet and, of course, a heavy-looking jewel-encrusted crown. A half dozen richly dressed men—nobles, I assumed—were arrayed to either side of the throne.

"Interesting," he mused, tapping his index fingers together. "So what do you propose we do about it?"

"Um," Stroman said, blinking in confusion. "Do about it?"

"Well," Jerrod said, letting his hands fall to the throne's armrests, "this is our world. We thought it was our universe, but here we are. We certainly don't want to be overrun by space troopers or something. We joined this game to do the sword-and-sorcery thing. Magic, dragons, quests, battles, all that. Not lasers and aliens."

"True," Stroman said. "We—"

"But," the king added, holding up a finger, "I imagine no few of us would object to the occasional . . . hmm, change of pace. Not here, obviously, but I'm wondering if we couldn't come to some kind of . . . arrangement?"

"Such as?" Stroman said, nodding slowly. We could all see where this was going.

"Tourism," to put it simply. "My kingdom acts as the endpoint here. You bring people in—under conditions, of course. No need to bring laser swords or whatever you've got. And we'll make them feel at home. Give them a fantasy adventure. And people here can sign up for trips to the future, as it were."

"That's a little brilliant," Stroman admitted.

"I was an entrepreneur in the real," Jerrod smiled. "So how do we begin?"

"How many kingdoms are there?" Danjuma asked.

Jerrod waved a hand in the air. "About fifty, I think. We try to leave one another alone as much as possible, negotiate battles between specific dukes to help people let off steam."

"And you'd be the exclusive . . . portal to the stars?"

Jerrod smiled. "I'd very much like to be."

"There's just one problem," Stroman reminded us. "Our FTL drive is down. Unless they've been able to fix it, we're stuck here."

Lightbulb. "I actually just had an idea about that," I put in. Stroman raised an eyebrow at me, inviting me to continue. "Look, most of our tech is based on real-world physics, right? The shuttle's engines are basically mass reactions—big rockets. Sort of. Our blasters—light and plasma are both real things. Light exists here. But the FTL drive is completely fictional. Doesn't exist in the real, and there's certainly no reason for it to work here."

Danjuma was nodding. "So you're saying this system might not implement the full set of *Endless Sky* game rules."

"Yeah. Like, FTL might just not be a possibility here."

"Well that would suck for you," Jerrod said.

"We . . . do have a sort of backup plan," Stroman mused.

Truthsaying. We could get out if we absolutely needed to.

"Your Majesty," one of the king's noblemen said quietly.

"Lord Cadence?" the king said, nodding for the man to continue.

"Am I correct in assuming this FTL drive is what lets you jump between systems?" Lord Cadence asked. We all nodded. "And is it based on any actual functionality in the game?" Jerrod frowned as the man spoke.

"Not really," Danjuma said. "The game has a map of systems, and it uses that to calculate a transit time between each one. Actual FTL is basically just waiting out the clock."

Cadence nodded. "I'm put in mind, my liege," he said, returning to his courtly speech pattern, "of the legend of the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds."

King Jerrod sighed. "You'll have to remind me."

"Permission to, uh, speak freely, Your Majesty?"

Jerrod waved a hand. "We've got space troopers with laser guns and a starship orbiting our planet. We can step out of character for a minute, I think."

Cadence's speech changed immediately. "*Endless Kingdom* mostly takes place here. In this world, I mean. On this world." He frowned for a moment. "This will take some getting used to. Anyway, there are alternate realms—other dimensions—that you can get to. They release new ones now and then. The Fae Realm of Underhill, the Dark Umbra, and a couple of others. The game provides specific gateways to them, usually at the end of a major dungeon. They play heavily into some of the high-level Quests. But there's also a specific dragon, the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds. The legend says that, if you harness the dragon, it can take you to any of the other dimensions."

"Lord Cadence is our Master of Legends," Jerrod said almost apologetically.

"So it's like a dragon version of FTL?" Stroman asked.

Cadence shrugged. "Closest guess."

"So we just need to slay the dragon," I said with a grin.

"No," Cadence corrected, shaking his head. "You need it alive. There's a very specific spell, Leash the Dragon. It's based on an artifact. Once you have the artifact, you can cast the spell, and the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds comes to you." He frowned again. "But you need to have a Magic skill. We'd need a Wizard."

"Bloody wizards," Jerrod muttered.

"Do you have a Wizard?" Danjuma asked.

"I'll have no truck with them," Jerrod growled.

"Wizards aren't welcome in this particular kingdom," Cadence said diplomatically. "We've had some disagreements with them in the past."

"How *much* magic would you need?" I asked. Stroman's eyebrows shot up and he grinned.

"To use an artifact? Not much, if it was the right alignment. Maybe—"

"Would Primal Magic do it?"

Cadence stopped, considering, and then nodded. "It would. The artifact itself—it's a leather bridle sized for the dragon—should be fairly low level. Two or three, at the most."

I nodded firmly. "I'll need to do a little studying, then."

"Wait, you're saying you have Primal Magic?" King Jerrod asked, his own eyebrows rising.

"Just today," I said proudly. "So only level one."

Another noble leaned in and whispered something to the king, who chuckled. "You got Hector's Quest, eh?"

"Something like that. It was an accident."

"Well, it'll serve you well. Cadence, do we have some books on magic, at least?"

"We do. I'm not sure about Primal Magic, but I'll see what's in the library. That leaves just one problem."

"Which is?" Stroman asked.

"The location of the bridle is well known, but it's literally a level-twenty dungeon."

"Holy crap. That's a step below Mythical," Danjuma breathed.

"Yes," Cadence nodded. "Ordinarily, I would never send someone on such a Quest. I mean, I'm assuming none of you are substantially higher than the highest-leveled person here, and as far as we know, nobody's broken out of Guru levels yet. But . . . I think you may have a unique advantage."

"Frickin' laser beams," I said with a big grin. "I'm in."

"Me too," Stroman said with enthusiasm.

» Mission Accepted: Leash the Dragon

Find the Bridle of the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds and cast Leash the Dragon.

» Rewards:

minimum 500,000 XP (caster)

minimum 100,000 XP (party members)

Automatic 3+ skill-up: Magic (caster)
Automatic +1 level-up (party)
Title: Dragonrider (caster)
5,000,000 gold (party)
Other rewards based on performance

"Oh, me too," Danjuma said with delight.
"Then my friends, let us quest!" Cadence cried.

9 / LEASHING THE DRAGON

It took just over a week for us to prepare for our quest. Sorry, Quest. King Jerrod and his crew took details like that very seriously.

In that time, we flew the shuttle back to the *Princess* so we could supply and arm ourselves appropriately. Cadence had suggested that six was the perfect party size, and both he and one of his men intended to join me, Stroman, Danjuma, and Selen.

"Our Link doesn't work either," Captain Strong had informed us. "We can get regular comms working between the two ships, but as soon as your shuttle hits the atmosphere, even your carrier wave drops out."

That fit the theory that certain tech simply couldn't work in this system. That and our engineering team's efforts on the FTL drive: "The diagnostics are still running, but they're showing green across the board," Tomiko had lamented.

"From what you've told us, I'm inclined to agree with Frank here. Ship-to-ship comms probably use some underlying code that also enables whatever magical communications spells they have, but those are probably range-limited as well. Anything that doesn't fit the local model in some way just doesn't work."

"Fortunately," Danjuma announced with a grin, "the guns work fine." We'd never really broken into the upgraded onboard armory—located in the mess hall module—since we'd taken the ship out of the shipyard, but I was glad we'd spent the money. *Spot* also had a solid armory, albeit filled with slightly inferior Confed arms, of course.

Each of us carried a heavy blaster rifle and two sidearms holstered at our waists. Danjuma also strapped a collapsible portable railgun to her back, and we distributed a load of tungsten slugs among ourselves. Bandoliers of grenades, including flash-bangs as well as more traditional shrapnel-style, completed our weapons load. We clothed ourselves in combat uniforms, hoping they would provide some protection using the same underlying armor concepts as this system. The helmets enabled us to carry night-vision goggles as well, which had worked well enough on the ship, so we were hopeful they would perform on the ground too.

A sampling of other useful equipment, such as grappling hooks and light sticks, completed our loadout.

Mi-Cha was clearly jealous. "I'm the one with a bit of Magic skill," she said as we loaded back into the shuttle, now far less cramped without the three Confed troopers.

"Yeah, but you're the captain," Stroman shrugged, giving her a wide grin. "Starfleet rules."

"As if that ever mattered," Mi-Cha grumbled. "Bring my shuttle back in one piece."

"Did you bring any for us?" Cadence asked enviously as we met him just outside Jerrod's castle.

"We did not," Stroman said. "We only have so many of these, and we wanted to avoid any unnecessary cultural contamination."

Cadence and his "man," a woman he introduced as Chelsea Whitmore, were dressed as you'd expect: leather armor, swords, that

kind of thing. "Plate armor would be safer, but it's heavy as hell and restricts your movement like you wouldn't believe," he said.

I returned the book on Primal Magic he had loaned me. "How far did you get?" he asked.

"Only to level two," I said apologetically. "It's *really* hard, to be honest. I feel like I'm on the cusp of level three, but doing the movements, the incantation, and everything all at once—it's a lot. Doesn't help that it's all in Latin."

"Bad Latin, at that," Cadence acknowledged with a grimace. "Well, we've got about a week's journey to Hell's Forge, so it'll give you time to practice. I'll help as much as I can."

"Hell's Forge?" Danjuma asked.

Cadence nodded. "That's where the dungeon is. A well-known location, just too high a level for anyone to really attempt it. People have, of course. In fact, what we know about it is from a party about a dozen years back. They went in quite far but were smart enough to turn around when it got too heavy."

"We could have flown the shuttle," Stroman pointed out.

Whitmore shook her head. "I've read Lord Cadence's scrolls on this place. Part of the Quest is in the approach. Building the bond within the party, and all that. For a dungeon this serious, I wouldn't recommend skipping any steps."

"Chelsea is our most experienced dungeoneer," Cadence said. "You're what now, twelve?"

"Almost thirteen," she said proudly. "I've done every level-twelve-and-below dungeon within the closest six kingdoms."

"Is that our ride?" I asked, nodding to a Conestoga-style wagon that already had two horses hitched to the front and two more tied to the rear.

"Unless some of you can ride, yeah," Whitmore said. "We talked about just getting you all your own horses, but if you can't ride, then it's frankly debilitating."

"Could you ride before? In the real?" I asked.

She shook her head and laughed. "No, and I took debuffs for

nearly eight months while I learned. Sometimes I think my thighs still hurt. So no, we'll be riding. Lord Cadence and I can take turns driving the wagon, and we'll have a spare team so we can go longer every day. Supplies are stored in the undercarriage, and we've fitted it as comfortably as we can."

"So we're ready to go?" Stroman asked, clearly eager to get on our way.

"As ready as we can be," Cadence said with a grin. "Climb aboard."

"Primal Magic is one of four magical traditions in the game," Cadence explained. We had taken positions opposite each other on benches, with the wagon's arched cover at our backs. Whitmore was driving, and everyone else was trying to nap as the wagon jostled along the dirt road. "It's the one connected to the natural world, so it has affinities to animals, trees, rivers, that kind of thing. You'd normally need to be a Shaman or Druid to use it."

"What are the others?" I asked.

"Divine Magic, for your Clerics and Paladins and such. Arcane Magic, which is your usual wizardry stuff, and that comes in both Light and Dark permutations. That's what most people pick as a magic-user class."

"So what's the difference?"

He sighed. "Divine Magic is the easiest to invoke since it's just prayers, but it's also the least reliable and the most restricted, since you're basically relying on a god to do something for you. It's really situational too. In certain circumstances, you'll never convince your god to perform. Arcane Magic has the spells you'd expect in a fantasy game. It relies a lot on powders, potions, and other components, along with somatic and verbal elements. It's the toughest to master, and there are rules about how many spells you can hold in your head at a

time and all that. Super complicated, actually, setting aside party tricks."

"Ah." That might explain why Mi-Cha had given up on it, especially since she'd probably only be able to do magic that aligned with some underlying concept in science fiction.

"Primal Magic sits somewhere in between. You're technically calling on natural forces. The words and movements are designed to shape and communicate your intention." He flipped through his book, which was actually a level-5 grimoire. "How far did you get?"

"Um. Blasts of fire, I think. Felt the most useful."

He flipped a few more pages. "Lances of Flame," he said, tapping the spell. "High level two, so that's good. Can you show me?"

I twisted slightly on my bench, holding both hands out in front of me, pointed out the back of the wagon, well over the heads of the spare horses. "*Date lanceas flammae!*" I cried, and two long jets of orange-yellow fire blasted from my hands. The two horses, whom Whitmore had selected based on their extensive campaign experience, simply rolled their eyes and ducked their heads a bit.

"Not bad," Cadence said, nodding approvingly. "Your pronunciation is actually quite good. Look, most of the level-two spells are destructive, right?"

"I've quite enjoyed them, yes," I said with a smile.

"Level three focuses on growth, though. So it's a big change in attitude. The threshold spell is Tree's Fruit. You tried that one?"

"Not aboard ship, no. No trees. I had to skip ahead a bit. I think it was called Purity of Water?"

Cadence flipped ahead and nodded. "Ah. So, in the magic system here, you can't actually skip the threshold spell. Once you're level three, you can bop around as much as you want, but if you can do that spell, you'll level up. Plenty of trees here," he added, gesturing out the back of the wagon. We were trundling through a leafy forest, which did indeed include a fair number of trees. "Why don't you give it a try now?"

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. He turned the book around

so I could memorize the incantation. "It's the gesture that gets me," I said, examining the diagram and holding up my arms, arcing them outward like a ballerina.

"The somatic bit is less important with Primal Magic," he advised. "Just keep your intention clear in your head. You're trying to bring forth fruit—it'll feed people and animals alike, and it's one of the ultimate expressions of a tree's purpose in the world," he added, reading from the book. "Focus your mind on those goals, not just apples."

"Got it." I closed my eyes, breathed slowly for a few moments, and cried, "*Fructus ex utero mundi!*"

A rush of wind accompanied a frisson of power that ran up my spine.

> » Skill-up! Your Primal Magic skill is now at level 3.
>
> » XP awarded.

"I did it!" I crowed. I looked out the back, and the trees to either side of the road were indeed fruiting, each piece of fruit growing from nothing to full maturity as I watched. Improbably, each tree sported not only apples, but also pears, oranges, lemons, and limes.

"Excellent!" Cadence applauded. "Level three should be sufficient to work with the bridle, if nothing else."

"What's the level-four threshold spell?" I asked, rubbing my hands together eagerly.

"I'd slow down a bit, if I were you," he cautioned me. "These spells are structured in order of difficulty. The next level will be difficult—actually dangerous—if you don't work your way up."

"What does the next level focus on?"

"Preservation."

"Doesn't sound all that dangerous."

"Ever encased your friends in blocks of amber?"

"Ah."

"Exactly." He shut the book. "That's enough for now. Feeling tired?"

"Actually, I am," I admitted.

"Have a chunk of bread or something and try to rest for a bit," he advised.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" He nodded. "You talk normally. But back at the castle—"

He chuckled. "Yeah, Jerrod's a stickler for staying in role. One of the reasons he was able to set himself up as king is because so many people here *wanted* to really live the game. You want to know my strongest skill?"

"Sure."

"Courtly Manners, level twelve."

I laughed. "Okay, I get it."

"You don't do something similar?"

I thought about it. "Not really. But *Endless Sky* is more about the future, right? It's just an extension of now. Or what now was in the real. You guys are reenacting something from the past."

He was quiet for a moment. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"You said you weren't able to leave the game either."

I took a deep breath and sighed. I looked at my crew and saw Stroman give me a slight nod. "Yeah. Nobody can. So did you guys get a big game upgrade about thirty years ago?"

Cadence's eyes widened. "We did. I had just started, actually, but the old-timers were crazy about it."

"That was us. Obviously, we didn't know it spread to more than just *Endless Sky*, but it makes sense now. So look, don't take this hard, but your actual body is gone. Probably has been for decades. Composted."

Cadence leaned back a bit as he processed that and then nodded slowly. "It's . . . I guess it doesn't matter. I didn't want to go back once I'd gone full immersion."

"That's what Endless Domains relied on. The whole thing was a

way to depopulate the Earth without actually killing anyone, per se. Once you go full immersion, they scan your brain and build a digital replica. Once that's online, they ditch the meat."

"Rude. But what does that have to do with the upgrade?"

I glanced at Stroman again, who gave me another nod.

"We . . . fought it. Fought back. Well, we tried. I'd just gone full immersion shortly after meeting this crew, and I guess I was still attached to my body. Or the idea of it. We ran across the game's lead developer, a guy named Dwight. He'd built some back doors into the system and wanted help in stopping Hunter Dyson."

"Endless Domains' CEO."

"Yeah. So we wound up in contact with the synthetic intelligence who runs all the games and wound up releasing the version two upgrade code."

"But you still lost your body?"

I shrugged. "I decided I liked it in here. I mean, I'd gone full immersion, right? Everyone else, the crew I mean, they were only in it for the mission. The XP, the level-ups, the usual. They'd given up on the real years before I even started playing. But that's how we got the Galactic Transformers title."

He nodded. "You know, when I ping your public sheet, I don't see that."

"Wait, you don't?"

"No. I see Demonslayer and Dragonslayer Class I. But the other title I see on all of you is Divine Inspirer."

"Weird. It must have a different name in every game."

"Probably."

We fell silent for a while, sinking into our own thoughts as the wagon rumbled along. The light outside had taken on the orange tint that I knew meant sundown was approaching. We'd soon be stopping for the night.

"Hell's Forge," Whitmore announced.

The ride had taken just under a week, during which time we had indeed bonded as a party. We'd told jokes and stories around the evening campfire, shared details of our respective games, and more. Danjuma had even taken up Sword Fighting, sparring with Whitmore and declaring herself pleased that she'd gotten to level two in the skill.

We'd left the wagon a ways back and turned the horses loose in a beautiful, grassy meadow. "No telling how long we'll be in there," Whitmore said. "These beauties won't go too far, and it's not likely anyone will come this way to steal them." Then she led us up a gentle slope to the foot of a tall mountain. There, a narrow fissure in the mountain led to the dungeon inside.

"Let's do it," Stroman said, stepping forward.

> » Welcome to Hell's Forge.
>
> This is a level-20 dungeon. It is not recommended for players below level 19.
>
> Legendary treasures await inside, for those brave and skilled enough to penetrate its depths and conquer the Serpent Within.

"Okay, to be fair, we don't actually have to do all that," Whitmore assured us. "The bridle should come well before the dungeon boss, and once we have that, we can scoot."

"Should we be carrying more food?" I asked. We each had a small pack of hard tack, but Cadence had warned we could be in this dungeon for up to a month.

"No, and for two reasons," Whitmore said. She held up a finger. "First, the previous party said there were generous caches along the way, which is common in higher-level dungeons. Second, you're well into level three Primal Magic, aren't you?" I nodded. I'd made it roughly halfway through, with plenty of help from Cadence. "So you should be able to conjure food from nearly anywhere inside."

"Oh," I said, my expression brightening. "I can! I just got *Mana from the Earth* working last night!"

"What's mana?" Danjuma asked with a frown.

"A white fungus," Whitmore said with a disappointed sigh. "High calories, incredibly nutritious, but it tastes like butt."

"Joy," Danjuma growled.

"I can call forth fresh water from solid rock, too," I muttered.

"What about steaks from soil?" Selen said with a chuckle.

"Primal Magic is oddly vegan when it comes to food, actually," I said. "Sorry."

"Off we go," Stroman said, marching up to the fissure and turning sideways to fit through.

My first *actual* dungeon crawl had begun.

Hell's Forge was arranged in layers, with each layer representing a specific skill level. The entry layer was filled with level-5 monsters, which were easily dispatched by our blasters. We made it through the level in under half an hour, ignoring the caches we passed—which were, as promised, plentiful. I stopped worrying about food. A narrow stone staircase descended to the next layer of the dungeon, and so on and so on.

We'd all set the game's prompts to silent mode for the duration. Moving as quickly as we were, messages about XP and skill-ups would have flooded our vision. Suffice to say, I not only picked up the actual Sidearms skill—my dragon-killing shot having been the product of close range and luck—but managed to get it to level 3.

Everything down to the level-12 layer was, honestly, a bloodbath. Gelatinous cubes, kobolds, rust monsters, something called an aboleth, an oblex, a barlgura—the trail of death went on. Few of them could withstand more than one blaster shot, and none of them survived two. Lord Cadence and Whitmore stayed behind the four of us with high-tech weapons, marveling as we cleared level after level.

As we came to the end of level 12, a wide, almost grand staircase of granite invited us to descend once more. "This is where our knowledge ends," Whitmore cautioned. "The other party had lost half their people by this point and turned back."

"Can't be much harder than it has been, right?" I asked nonchalantly.

"It can get substantially worse," Cadence warned, his voice serious. "We've faced no magical resistance yet, which I find suspicious. And for all we know, the steady progression of levels ends here. We could be stepping right into the boss level and not even know it."

"We've not seen any artifacts to this point," I noted. "You said the bridle would come before the boss."

"I said *should*," Whitmore corrected. "And for a dungeon rated level twenty, everything down to here had been warm-up: gatekeeping to make sure unqualified people don't come any farther."

"Okay," Stroman said. "We go in cautious, then. But we're still going."

"We are," Cadence affirmed.

"Then let's go," Danjuma said. She and Selen took point, walking two abreast down the stairs. Stroman and I followed, with Cadence and Whitmore behind us.

About halfway down the stairs, a grinding noise behind us caused us all to whirl. We watched in dismay as a huge slab of stone sank quickly over the stairs' upper opening, sealing us in.

"Goggles," Stroman said with a sigh. "You two put a hand on the back of the person in front of you. If you lose contact, even for a second, speak up."

I flipped my goggles down over my eyes, and they hummed to life. The staircase was once again visible, along with the crew members in front of me, but rendered in soft shades of green. "At least these work," I said thankfully.

"There's a Primal Magic spell that does something similar," Cadence said behind me. "Eyes of the Stars, or something like that. Level six. So there's a basis for your goggles to work here."

We proceeded with caution, stepping as carefully and quietly as possible. We emerged into a long, vaulted hallway.

"I can't make out the far end," Stroman said.

I scanned the walls, still standing behind him. "There are torches," I said. "Goggles off." I waited until everyone confirmed, then held up my right hand, thumb bent inward over my palm. "*Serena nox, recrea diem!*" I chanted. The torches burst to life, and I felt a bit of energy drain out of me.

"Nice," Danjuma said in a low voice.

The hall was perhaps a hundred meters long and maybe ten wide. Other than the torches on the walls, it was completely barren, the curved vault of the ceiling peaking at maybe five meters above us. At the far end was another opening, with a set of stairs leading down.

"It can't possibly be that easy," Selen said.

"It won't be," Cadence assured us. "Here, give me one of those metal slugs you're all carrying."

I unzipped my pouch and handed him a slug. He stepped between Stroman and Danjuma, crouched down, and rolled the cylindrical slug down the hall.

It made it roughly halfway before running out of momentum. Cadence motioned for us to be patient.

Then the stone wall quivered, then unfolded into a creature made entirely of rock, smoothed and shaped to like a giant, overbuilt knight. It was easily three meters tall and almost two meters wide at the shoulders, its face an expressionless approximation of a person, with sharp divots for eyes and a jutting shard for a nose. Its arms were thick as small trees, and its legs as stout as a hundred-year-old oak.

"Maruk," Whitmore said grimly. "These are level fifteen at least. So we've skipped up a bit."

"Intel?" Stroman said as the creature looked down at the slug, disregarded it, and then raised its attention to us. With a grinding noise, it began marching slowly toward us.

"Automaton," Whitmore said quickly as we unlimbered our

heavy blasters and raised them to aim. "It won't stop until it's destroyed or we're dead."

"Fire," Stroman said quietly. We all took aim—not that you could easily miss something so large, even from fifty feet away—and fired.

The sound of the blaster rifles echoed loudly, and the deep-orange blasts of energy struck the maruk square in its massive, blocky chest—

—and bounced off, hammering into the walls and leaving gouges and scorch marks. The maruk itself was barely singed and didn't even pause, continuing to lumber toward us, accompanied by the sound of a slow-motion rockslide.

"Railgun," Stroman said at once, but Danjuma was already unlimbering the awkward weapon. She'd clearly practiced this, as it took just two eyeblinks for her to extend the muzzle, aim, and fire.

Nothing happened.

"Crap," Stroman said calmly as Danjuma dropped the useless weapon and reached for a fragmentation grenade. "No," he said. "Too close, it'll frag us as well. Here," he added, pulling something out of a bandolier pouch. "You're a better pitcher than I am."

"I didn't know you'd noticed," Danjuma said as she accepted the object. She wound up and threw hard, covering the forty feet to the maruk.

It hit the middle of the automaton's chest and stuck.

"Down," Danjuma ordered, and we all crouched down and turned away.

The explosion may have been one of the loudest things I'd ever heard, but it was somehow overshadowed by the rain of rocks and gravel that pelted us immediately afterward. We turned to see the maruk lying in pieces, spread across the floor of the long hall.

"What was that?" Cadence asked once our ears had stopped ringing and the dust had begun to settle.

"C5," Stroman said happily.

"I don't remember buying that," I said.

"Personal supply."

"Glad for it," Danjuma said, standing and dusting herself off. "Oh, look. Loot."

We all looked toward the shattered maruk, and sure enough, through the settling dust, we could see the slowly spinning, glowing icon for a loot drop.

"Let me have a look," Cadence said. "Some of these can be tricky."

I started to object—the loot was Danjuma's, if not Stroman's, but neither of them seemed to mind, so I let it go.

Cadence stepped up to the icon and bent over to peer at it for several moments. "Level-fifteen physical attack boost," he said at last. "You'll need a Body of that or greater and some kind of physical attack skill to pair it to."

"I'm out," I said. "I think my only physical attack is Negotiating."

Cadence snorted.

"I've got an eight in Kickboxing," Danjuma said.

"Chelsea and I have Sword Fighting, of course. I'm only a six, though."

"Twelve," Whitmore said.

"It makes the most sense for you, then," Cadence said, stepping aside and waving her toward the icon.

Whitmore stepped forward and touched it, and her entire body glowed for a moment as she accepted it. "Awesome," she said as she reviewed the game message. "This will double my attack *and* let me do a long-distance strike. That would have come in handy just now."

"It may come in handy again," Cadence said thoughtfully. "You know, a lot of these really big dungeons tend to drop something to prepare you for an upcoming level."

"Noted," Stroman said. "Let's plan to be flexible and not assume our tech weapons will be the best option. Shall we?"

"By all means," Cadence said with a grin.

We hurried through the remaining rubble and descended the stairs. Once again, a slab closed off our return path, and we were forced to flip our night-vision goggles down.

"Anything?" I asked as Stroman and Danjuma stepped off the last stair.

"Blank wall. Corridors to the left and right. Danjuma, check yours."

"Goes for about ten meters and turns left," she said after a moment.

"Mine's twenty and right," Stroman said.

"Labyrinth," Whitmore sighed. "This is where it'll turn into a slog."

"I can melt the wall," I said.

Everyone was silent for a moment. "Come again?" Stroman asked.

"No, he's right. I remember this one. It's a mid-level-two spell, isn't it?"

"Barriers Aged," I said. "Yeah. You guys remember? I melted one of the chairs in the mess hall."

"I lost track of all the things you were breaking," Stroman said. "It's your job to replace them, anyway."

"Look," I said, pushing past him and laying my hands on the stone wall. "*Omnia in natura aperta sunt!*"

The wall crumbled to dust as more energy drained out of me.

"I still can't see," Cadence reminded us.

"Oh, right. I got this one. Goggles off," I said. I pointed my hand straight up and cried, "*Sit lux, qua videam!*"

A spark shot from my finger and went up almost out of sight before it ballooned into a dim, miniature replica of a sun.

"Oh, pretty," Danjuma said.

I could feel energy trickling out of me by the moment, and I pulled a ration bar from one of my pockets. "I'm not sure how long I can maintain it," I warned them.

"Well, in front of us is just another wall," Stroman said. "But it's only about three meters high. Someone give me a boost?"

Danjuma obliged, lacing her fingers together to accept one of

Stroman's boots and then hoisting him up so he could grab the top of the wall.

"Actually," Whitmore said slowly, "you might be a bit—"

"SHIT!" Stroman shouted as he fell backward, landing on Danjuma and bearing her to the floor. Overhead, *something* slashed past, barely clearing the top of the stone walls.

"Yeah, I was afraid of that," Whitmore said. "Sorry, I haven't done a labyrinth in a long time."

"What *was* that?" Stroman asked as he helped Danjuma regain her feet.

"Guillotine. You're not allowed to poke your head over the walls."

"Well, that sucks," Danjuma said, brushing herself off.

"Yeah, sorry. Frank, can you just keep melting your way through walls?"

"I mean, yeah, but how many are we talking about?"

"Um." Whitmore thought for a moment. "Usually these things are squares. Ten meters in either direction, so figure twenty meters on a side. Passages are just over a meter wide. So to get to the center, figure . . . ten walls, max?"

I considered the amount of energy the first spell had taken and tried to gauge how I felt right then. "Maybe? I might need to stop and eat."

"We'll want to move pretty quickly once we get going," Cadence said as he and Whitmore exchanged nervous looks. "There'll be a minotaur, obviously."

"Obviously?" Stroman asked.

Cadence shrugged. "It's a labyrinth. They all have one. This one will be fairly high level. But once we start crashing through its home, it'll come galloping over. Trust me."

"And we're sure what we want is at the center?" Selen asked.

"Traditionally," Whitmore said with a shrug.

"Goodie." I sighed. "Okay." I crammed the rest of the ration bar into my face and chewed. "Cn mm pt dm lmt mt?"

"What?" everyone asked.

I swallowed. "Can I put the light out?" I repeated, pointing overhead. "It's a bit of a drain."

Whitmore nodded slowly. "I think so, yeah. I don't know if it'll slow the minotaur down, but you guys said you brought light sticks too, right?"

"Haven't tried them," Danjuma warned.

"No time like the present."

Four of us withdrew light sticks from our pouches, cracked them, shook them, and sighed with relief as the bright-green chemical lights illuminated the cramped passage.

"*Satis ego vidi!*" I said, and the dim miniature sun above us faded. "Here we go."

I got through eight of the walls before I started getting dizzy. "Guys, I think—"

"*Shh*," Whitmore hissed.

We all heard it then: a deep, reverberating, staccato *thud*.

"Sticks," Stroman whispered. We were in a long corridor that stretched to the left and right—and, of course, there was the section of wall I'd melted behind us. We tossed the sticks in each direction about five meters. Selen kept his, but dropped it at our feet.

"To the left, I think," Whitmore said, listening carefully. We all turned and raised our blaster rifles. "No!" she cried suddenly. "Behind us!"

The galloping *thuds* were clearer now, and we all whirled as the enormous bull-man came within range of the little glow stick.

"Fire!" Stroman said.

He and Danjuma crouched, allowing Selen and me to fire over their heads. Four blasts of energy shot forward, each striking the minotaur dead in the chest. Given that it filled the entire corridor, it wasn't hard to hit.

It went down—but only for a moment.

"Let me," Whitmore said, pushing through us. As the minotaur snorted and started to regain its feet, she held her sword over her head and slapped downward. A bright white crescent of energy burst

from the tip of the sword, flying down the corridor and striking the monster. The stroke slashed from nose to knee, and the minotaur bellowed with rage. Although it fell to its knees, the minotaur raised its head and glared at us, its eyes glowing a deep, sullen red.

"Level sixteen at least," Cadence said. "Probably higher. Blast it again."

Didn't need to tell us twice. Four more shots hit the beast directly in its horned head, and it howled as it pitched over onto its back.

"Don't let up!" Danjuma shouted. She ran toward it, and Stroman, Selen, and I found ourselves following before we could analyze the situation. Danjuma was firing into the creature's prone, writhing form as she ran, her blaster cycling every second. The blaster couldn't maintain that pace, I knew—she'd only get a few shots before it throttled back for heat mitigation. In fact, just as we all pounded to a halt just before the creature, her weapon *cheeped*.

Stroman pushed her aside and began firing, and Selen stepped up next to him, shoulder to shoulder in the narrow corridor, as they blasted the creature again . . . and again . . . and again . . . and again . . . until their rifles also *cheeped* and went into cooldown mode.

"I think it's—" Danjuma started.

It wasn't. With a guttural, visceral roar, the minotaur sat up, and beams of pure, deadly energy, red as hell, blasted from the creature's eyes, catching Selen dead in the chest.

He dropped immediately, smoke pouring from the gaping hole in his body.

I'd already started firing into the creature's eyes, pulling the trigger on my rifle until I could feel it overheating, and it too *cheeped* and went dead.

But that was enough: I'd managed to blow away the creature's entire head.

"Damn," Stroman said as Selen's body dissolved into faint yellow sparkles. "He should respawn on *Spot*, at least."

"The eye blasts are level eighteen," Cadence said, walking up

behind us as a glowing loot icon appeared and began slowly spinning in place. "Let me have a look."

He repeated his examination of the icon, and finally said, "It's the bridle." He nodded to me. "All yours."

I stepped forward and touched the icon.

> » Congratulations! You have recovered the Bridle of the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds!
>
> » You have gained a new spell: Leash the Dragon.

"Got it," I said, a wave of exhaustion washing over me. I dug another ration bar from a pocket and began chewing through it.

"We still need to get to the center of this thing to go down," Whitmore said apologetically.

"Yeah, yeah, soon as I recover a bit," I mumbled through a mouthful of food.

"Wait, I thought we could just go now," Danjuma objected.

Whitmore shook her head, her leather helmet glinting softly in the green chem-light glow. "I'd hoped we could. But you saw it—the stairs shut down after we passed through. Now that we've come this far, I think the only way out is forward."

"To the Serpent Within," Stroman groaned.

"I'm afraid so," Whitmore answered.

"Just let me eat one more." I searched my bag. "I'm out, though. Can someone give me another?"

Whitmore's guess had been correct: I only had to melt two more walls before we came to the center of the labyrinth and a set of spiral stone stairs leading downward. The way back closed behind us as we descended, and this time we simply activated our

remaining chem lights to light our way. These stairs went down at least fifteen meters, and we emerged at another long hallway.

This one, however, was already lit by flickering torches. The way out, just a hundred meters ahead of us, was clear, and the way was seemingly unobstructed. And there was loot—so much loot. Piles of it heaped along the length of the walls. The sheer quantity of spinning loot icons took my breath away.

"Final level," Whitmore cautioned as the five of us lined up shoulder to shoulder. "I have a suggestion."

"Grab all the loot?" Cadence asked, even as Danjuma, on our left flank, took a step toward the nearest icon.

"No!" Whitmore hissed. Danjuma took a quick step back, and we all heard a rustling from above. "Don't touch a thing. That's the trick. I'm betting if we stay to the center and don't even *look* at the loot, we get out of here without a fight."

"And if we want to be grabby?" Danjuma asked.

"We have to fight the Serpent Within," Whitmore said. "Classic dungeon trope."

"I'm up for a fight," our gunner said with a shrug.

"It's a near-Mythical-level beast," Cadence reminded us. "Your weapons are clearly not a free ride at this point, and we've already lost one of you."

"Ugh," Danjuma said, but she didn't argue any further.

"Agreed," Stroman said. "The goal has always been the bridle. We have that. We walk straight on. Eyes front." Everyone pressed a little closer together. "Ready?"

"Should we skip?" I asked as a mad little part of my brain giggled wildly.

"We *walk*," Stroman repeated.

And so we did.

It took one hundred and thirty-two steps to reach the end. I counted. I think we all did, holding on to those numbers as something dark and cold slithered around above us. We touched nothing—looked at nothing except the exit in front of us. We didn't even pause

when we reached it. We simply took that last step forward, all in unison—

—and found ourselves stepping out of a shallow cave and into the hillside, not ten paces from the fissure that we'd used to enter Hell's Forge.

» Congratulations! You have survived Hell's Forge.
» XP awarded.
» Level-up! You are now at level 11.
» Level-up! You are now at level 12.
» Skill-up! Your Primal Magic skill is now at 6.
» Distributing attribute points.
» Gold awarded.

Knowledge flooded my head as my body regenerated the energy I'd spent. Leveling up was *awesome*, a rush of cool power flooding you, literally lifting you a foot off the ground. But there was more: I'd hit Guru levels, which enhanced all of my key attributes, Body, Mind, and Soul. "Ooof," I said as I lowered gently back to the ground. "That felt good." I pulled up my character sheet.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,140,682,550 Interrums
Party funds: 5,000,000 gold pieces
Level 12
1-level waiver in effect

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles

Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Dragonslayer Class I

Attributes
Body: 17
Mind: 17
Soul: 16
HP: 204 (Body × Level)
MP: 96 (Soul × Skill)
XP: 1,581,708 (515,444 to level 13)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 4
Business Management: 8
Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Dragonslaying: 1
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 5
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 6
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 4
Sidearms: 3
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4

Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"Oh, cool," I said. "I now have something called MP."

"Magic Points," Cadence said with a nod. "I'm surprised you only now noticed. It's how you power your spells."

"I just thought I was getting tired."

"Food and rest can replenish it, as can various potions and artifacts."

"Nice."

"Think we can still round up the horses?" Stroman asked.

Whitmore nodded. "I'm confident of it. Time runs differently in dungeons, but I'm betting we haven't been gone more than a day."

"Here's hoping. Otherwise that week's ride back to the shuttle is going to be a long damn walk," Stroman said.

Fortunately, the horses were there.

"I sure hope this works," Mi-Cha said from her command chair.

"I feel like an idiot," I said, holding the bridle over my console.

We'd touched base with King Jerrod, promising that we'd be back soon before we climbed aboard the shuttle to return to our ship. Selen had indeed respawned in the *Spot* after just a few days. We'd strug-

gled to figure out whether or not the Leashed Dragon would take both the *Princess* and *Spot* to another system, but we eventually admitted we had zero data on the subject. We'd simply left *Spot* in a stable orbit, shuttled her crew over to the *Princess*, and decided to figure it all out later.

"Start by saying the spell," Stroman suggested.

The symbols for Leash the Dragon were engraved into the leather of the bridle itself. I'd already memorized it, but was still nervous. I took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then said, "*Ego lorum draconem qui inter mundos ambulat!*"

The bridle dissolved into a shower of green sparks that shot through the forward bulkhead toward the front of the ship. It left behind two trails of glowing green motes that attached themselves to my hands. We'd already set the main display to a forward view of space, and within seconds, a huge, glowing green dragon coalesced into existence.

Next to me, Lad's console lit up.

"Laying in a course for Centruum," they said at once, their fingers flying over the console.

"Let slip the dragon of war," Mi-Cha ordered.

"Ugh," Lad complained as the *Princess* shot forward.

The visual effects were *completely* different from an FTL jump. Instead of bright streams of light streaking by, we were treated to a kaleidoscopic display of colors, spinning and fracturing before us, as if we were diving into some kind of weird, Technicolor fractal space.

"Do not like," Danjuma complained. She thumbed something on her console and the main display switched to a more sedate tactical view.

"Well, we've got about two days, according to this," Lad said. "Closest system I could find with any decent resources."

"Confed?" Stroman asked.

"Yeah."

"Wait, do I have to sit here the whole—" I started. That's exactly

when the trails of green light faded, the bridle reappeared in my hands, and we exited . . . whatever that was.

"Impossible," Lad said, checking their console. "Yet we're . . . there. Welcome to Centruum."

"Attention, terrorist ship *Pretty, Pretty Princess*," a voice thundered over the bridge speakers. "This is Grand Admiral Harm. Heave to and prepare to be boarded. You will be fired upon if you do not immediately comply."

"Grand Admiral?" Stroman said with a snort.

10 / SOVEREIGN POWER

"Are we going to respond?" I asked.

"I think not," Mi-Cha replied grimly. "Rashmi, can you jump us out of here?"

"Time's up," Harm announced. At that exact moment, the alarms began blaring.

"Hit to the drive array," I cried as my console began flashing urgent warning mechanisms. "They're dead behind us!"

"Not anymore," Lad shouted over me. "We're spinning—we're inside the gravity well! I can't jump us out!"

"Grav mirror!" Mi-Cha ordered. I quickly cleared my console of warnings and enabled our active defense. "Keep it centered on . . . whatever the hell we're up against!"

The grav mirror could only cover a portion of the ship at a time; drifting and spinning as we now were, I'd have to actively manage it to put it between us and—

"Dreadnought, boss," I said, quickly scanning the tac plot. "CMS *Vengeance*." I paused. "I can get us out of this," I reminded her quietly.

"That SI gave me the willies," Stroman protested.

"I agree," Mi-Cha said. "This is what the game is. Let's not and see what we can do before we cheat our way out."

"Weapons charged," Danjuma said, "but I can't use the lasers with the grav mirror up."

"Empty the missiles," Mi-Cha said grimly. "We've got over seven hundred of' em. Get me eight in the air as fast as they'll cycle. And what hit us?"

"Twenty-gig laser, sensors say," I said as I manipulated the grav mirror. "They mount two of those suckers, but they're on a slow cycle. They're firing again. Mirror is holding."

"They're closing on missile range," Lad warned. Our grav mirror wouldn't slow down a missile, but it would stop our RFLAMs from protecting us. Once they were in range, we'd have to drop the grav mirror and risk getting hit by their laser, or leave it up and be almost assured of getting hit by their missiles.

"Bo, I can't fix the drive array under these conditions," Tomiko said over the intercom. "I need to take the ZPE offline."

"Well, that's not happening," I muttered.

"Come on, kids," Harm's voice blared over the speakers again. "This is our biggest and baddest warship. You can't keep doing this. We'll be in missile range in a minute, and then you're dead. Where is it you respawn these days? You're out of the Alliance."

My eyebrows rose. I hadn't considered that. Where *would* we respawn? Would . . . could we be permakilled without a polity?

"What do you want, Harm?" Mi-Cha barked.

"Your asses in a sling," he replied more quietly. "After your attempted assassination in Atlantis system—"

"Hey, that was all in the game," I protested.

"As will be my revenge. Plus there's the munitions depot you destroyed in Perseus and the space station you all but destroyed in Alabaster—full of tourists, on top of it, you murderers—"

"You *framed* us?" Mi-Cha said in an astounded tone.

"You're a clear and present danger," Harm replied, his voice

oozing with malice. "Despite the splintering within the Confederacy, you've done much to unite us."

"You've got to be kidding me," Mi-Cha muttered. "Zuri, anything with the missiles?"

"They've got twelve million RFLAMs on that thing," she said in disgust.

"Cease fire, then," the captain sighed. "Fine, Harm. You win. What do you want?"

"I intend to fire a boarding torpedo, take you prisoner, and add your ship to my fleet."

"A boarding— Wow, really playing it up for the crowds, eh?" Mi-Cha said, her tone resigned. "We can't just fly over in our shuttle?"

"Loaded with nuclear explosives so you can take out this flagship? I think not. A boarding torpedo is so much more appropriate for *terrorists* like yourselves."

"It'll trash the ship," Stroman moaned.

"But it'll film beautifully," Harm said, practically cooing.

Mi-Cha cut the channel. "Leave the grav mirror up, just in case."

"Cap," Danjuma said quietly. "If we drop the mirror at the last minute, I can target the torpedo with the RFLAMs."

Mi-Cha considered it. "Risky. We can't maneuver. Even if we snap the mirror back up, he's in missile range now. Frank, how many can that thing launch at once?"

I worked my console for a moment. "We don't have official stats on that ship class," I said hesitantly. "I've scanned at least four banks of eight. So figure, conservatively, thirty-two."

"Odds of the RFLAMs hitting them all?"

I hesitated again. "Assuming they're still using the Corsair III models . . . eighty percent. Eighty-five tops, with that many coming in."

"So four to five hits, minimum," Stroman said.

I just nodded.

"They'd breach the hull," Mi-Cha said matter-of-factly. "At the

very least. More likely, we'd lose the ops ring or hab ring, or both. No. The damn torpedo will actually do less damage."

"They've just launched it," I said softly.

"Readout?" Stroman asked, his tone defeated.

"Aa'an design," I said. "It'll work."

Boarding torpedos were an invention of the Aa'an Dominancy, truly a lizard-brain invention if ever there was one. Basically, a hollow tube with an engine at one end and a breaching charge at the other. Just aft of the charge was a powerful, one-time inertial reverser, which generated a damping field that kept the tube's occupants from becoming paste upon impact. The torpedo was designed to slam into the side of a ship, blast a hole in its hull, and provide its troops with an easy—if terrifying—way of getting aboard. No messing about with airlocks or umbilicals or anything else that the attacked party might use to slow you down.

"Do we go down without a fight here, Bo?" Stroman asked softly.

"Absolutely not," the captain said firmly. "Selen, we're about to be boarded. Aa'an breaching torpedo. Arm your troopers and prepare to repel. Don't put yourselves at unnecessary risk—we're going to lose this in the end. I just want to respawn a few of their folks."

"Anyone we lose will go back to *Spot*," Selen reminded us. "They'll be stuck over there until someone can get back with the bridle."

"Acknowledged." She paused for a moment. "Frank, I hate to ask this, but does that bridle count as a personal possession?"

I gulped. Personal possessions stayed with you when you respawned. I picked the bridle up from where I'd dropped it to the deck and willed it into my personal storage. It vanished.

> » Bridle of the Dragon Who Walks Between Worlds added to personal storage.
>
> » Storage in use: 12 blocks
>
> » Available storage: 8 blocks

"Yeah."

"You know what's coming next?" Mi-Cha asked gently.

"Yeah."

"Selen," Mi-Cha said a bit louder, "if you lose a couple of your troopers, you have the option to go whole hog. You understand me?"

He was quiet for a very long moment. "You have sidearms up there?"

"I do," Mi-Cha said, and I heard a whine as she withdrew hers and turned off the safety.

"Harsh," Lad muttered softly, patting one of my hands.

"Rough way to send for reinforcements," Danjuma agreed.

"*Spot* isn't in any condition to fight a dreadnought," Stroman reminded us. "This just keeps the rest of our people from being trapped there."

"You'll take a friendly-fire hit, boss," I said, turning to meet our captain's eyes.

"I know," she said with a slow nod.

I sighed and turned back to my console. "Torpedo hits in about forty seconds."

"All hands, brace for impact. Accounting for spin . . . Rashmi, where's this likely to hit?"

Our pilot tapped their console for a few moments, then suddenly grew stiff. "Zuri," they said quickly, "railguns. Rapid fire. Number one forward, number two after. On my mark."

"What?" Danjuma asked.

Mi-Cha got it. "Do it," she ordered.

Danjuma began tapping her console frantically.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . mark!"

Rapid successive *thunks* accompanied the slugs firing fore and aft. I stared at my tac plot, not comprehending what Lad had been trying to do. Dots of light spread out in arcs in both directions as the railguns . . .

Arcs.

It hit me.

Railguns are not, as Danjuma had learned in the dungeon, recoil-

less weapons. They use magnetic fields to accelerate rounds through a thirty-meter-long tube. Our slugs massed about two kilograms each, and they left the gun apertures at a velocity in excess of fourteen thousand kilometers per hour. If they hit something, they did so with a force of up to three hundred kilonewtons—almost nine tons of force, if you use the old system. They exerted a *substantial* recoil, but with a ship as big as *Princess*, it was basically negligible, especially since we normally fired them when under full thrust from our in-system drive.

But that drive was dead.

The combined recoil of the two railguns made the *Princess* pivot faster, and as the boarding torpedo streaked closer to us, I quickly tried to calculate what Lad had obviously intuited.

The torpedo hit us almost square in the bow. Our six-meter-thick, heavily armored bow. The *Princess* shook badly as the breaching charge went off, exerting an immense amount of power—which wasn't near enough to penetrate the fully charged nano-armor.

"They're about halfway through," I said with disbelief, studying my console.

"But it kept them out of the more vulnerable sides," Lad said, clearly pleased with themselves.

"Guys, the armor can't take that kind of insult," Tomiko warned from Engineering. "I need to cut the charge net, or it'll burn out the conduits."

"Do it," Mi-Cha ordered at once.

"They're stuck in the bow armor," Stroman said gleefully.

"It won't last," Mi-Cha said. "Once they figure it out, and it isn't going to take long, they're going to cut their way out of that can and find something more vulnerable."

"Shuttle bay," Stroman said with a groan. "And the hull markings make it pretty clear where to go."

"Still, it gives us more control over the situation," I said, "and at least that part of the ship was designed to take that kind of damage and recover." If we could dislodge the torpedo wreckage, we could

rebuild the armor in less than ten minutes thanks to our ample feedstock.

"Eto, can you do *anything* with the in-system drive in the next . . . ten minutes?" Mi-Cha asked. "Disconnect the ZPE if you need to."

"I'll see what I can—"

"Captain," I said, my voice tensing as my console flashed new alarms. "We've got three—no, make that *five* Confed corvettes coming in hot, up behind the dreadnought. They looped above the ecliptic."

"What the hell?" Mi-Cha asked, her eyes darting to the main display.

"Those don't look right," Stroman said, peering at his own console.

I looked for a second, and then nodded. "They're moving too fast," I agreed. "New class?"

"Confed isn't building corvettes anymore," Stroman said distractedly. "This doesn't—"

"They've opened fire on the dreadnought!" I cried, leaning forward in my chair, my eyes riveted to my console.

"Rival faction?" Danjuma asked.

"I've no— Good grief, they've hit her engines! Missiles in the air —dreadnought is leaking atmosphere! Her RFLAMs are just coming online again. Missile strike! Secondary explosions! I think they hit a capacitor bank!"

"Pretty, Pretty Princess, could you use an assist?" a voice came over the bridge speakers.

"John?" Mi-Cha said, aghast.

"Heard you were throwing a party," John Starkiller, captain of the *Bull*, said with a chuckle. "You guys look a little dinged up. Can you move?"

"Captain, they hit the dreadnought's other laser turret. Secondary explosions all along her port side as well," I said quickly.

"FTL is fine, but our in-system is down, and we're in the gravity well," Mi-Cha said.

"Copy. *Chip*, *Dale*, our friends could use a tow."

"On it." That was Captain Imani Juma of the *Chip*. On the tactical plot, I saw her ship break formation, followed by Captain Corentin Nolwenn's *Dale*.

"Everyone else, loop back, and let's hit her one more time on the way out," Starkiller ordered.

"John," Mi-Cha said, "why are you flying Confed corvettes?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, that'll end soon. Hey, when does— Now? Well, there you go. At least my hand can cool off."

Nobody bit on that last comment.

"Cap, the corvettes are . . . they were using some kind of spoof. It's over," I said. "They're tracking as the real ships now."

"One-time device, but we managed to get a crate of 'em," Starkiller said gleefully. "No, keep firing," he said to someone else.

I could see now that the other two ships were likely Thermalast Christoforos's *Siren* and Sarah Haskins's *Crush and Run*. I watched as the three turned over hard and began a run along the dreadnought's ventral side, firing battle lasers and missiles as they went. The Confed ship got off a flight of missiles, which our friends' RFLAMs took out with ease. Then three of the dreadnought's launcher arrays exploded, one of them triggering secondary explosions in what I assumed were missile racks. Meanwhile, *Chip* and *Dale* had sped over to us and fired powerful tractor beams. *Princess* jolted sharply as we were caught, and our inertial dampers whined as we slewed sideways and upward, following our two rescuers.

"They're pulling us out of the well," I said.

"Sending you coordinates," Juma said.

"Got 'em," Lad confirmed, their hands once again dancing across their console. "Laid in."

"Wait until we drop the tractor, for God's sake," another voice—Nolwenn's—said. "But punch it as soon as we do. They've got two destroyers and a handful of patrol boats in-system, and they're all headed here."

"Copy," Lad said.

"Don't wait for it," Mi-Cha said quickly. "The minute they decouple, hit it."

"Copy."

It didn't take long—we'd only drifted a few kilometers into the system's gravity well. The tractor beams cut, leaving us spinning around both our longitudinal and lateral axes, and drifting to one side besides, when Lad hit the button.

The blackness of space became the comforting streaking lights of FTL.

"Eto," Mi-Cha said, breathing a sigh of relief as she sank back into her command chair, "I assume our remaining fusion plant can still keep us in FTL?"

"Absolutely," came the engineer's reply. "Rerouting power now. Are we safe, then?"

"We're in FTL, and you've got—Rashmi, how long?"

"Three days," the pilot said, leaning back in their chair.

"Three days to get the in-system working."

"Doable," Tomiko assured her. "Was that the old crew I heard?"

"It was, and in the nick of time. We're going to meet them now."

"Good. Haskins owes me a drink."

The ships all emerged from FTL within seconds of each other, the game conveniently spreading us out a dozen or so klicks apart. *Princess*'s in-system drive was repaired, and so Lad was able to quickly correct our spin and put us into stationkeeping mode.

» Battle rewards:

» XP awarded.

"Level-up!" Lad crowed. We all waited respectfully as they briefly levitated from their chair, a cool blue glow spilling from their skin. "Ah, that's the best."

"Incoming hails," I said, tapping my console.

"I owe you one, John," Mi-Cha said thankfully after we'd established a six-way videoconference. "But what in the galaxy were you all doing in Centruum anyway?"

"Honestly, looking for work," Starkiller said with a grin. "But . . . hey, how much do you guys know about the splintering that's happening in Confed right now?"

We all shrugged. "It's happening. We know that much," I said. Murmurs of agreement hummed behind me: everyone on *Princess* had packed into the bridge for the call.

"Hey, know you still have a boarding torp sticking out of your nose, right?" Captain Haskins asked.

"Crap," Selen said, shaking his head. "Be right back. C'mon, troops." He and his troopers dashed off the bridge.

"Uh, Bo, and there's a team of Confed security troopers on your ship?" Starkiller asked.

"Those, I remembered," Mi-Cha chuckled. "Long story, but the short version is they're part of our crew now. Apparently there are a lot of Confed people looking to get out, if they can."

"Side effect of the splintering. So look, Centruum used to be pretty neutral in terms of Confed factions. The guy Harm, he was on the dreadnought that engaged you—"

"We've met," Stroman said dryly.

"And I very much want to hear that story, because the man has vilified you all over Confed space. It's maybe a minor reason we went to Centruum—they were about to announce a bounty, and we wanted to hear what you'd been up to."

"Not nearly as much as he's saying," Mi-Cha grumbled. "So what's his deal?"

"He wants Confed to go back to its old ways. Hunting aliens, basically. But he doesn't want to break off on his own. He's well-positioned to get all of Confed behind him, not to mention half the Alliance, if I'm being honest."

"Yeah, we dropped out," Stroman said.

"We heard. We did too, which is why news of your reign of terror on Confed space was so interesting."

"Total exaggeration," Mi-Cha said.

"I mean, I did kill him. Or thought I did," I put in. Five sets of digital eyebrows rose. "I used to be an Assassin, full Guild member. They sent me the contract, I took it, but Harm had a decoy in his place. I've quit the Guild since." Five varying expressions of disbelief and amazement stared back at me. "What? I'm interesting," I muttered.

"Anyway," Starkiller said, looking at me with newfound respect as he continued, "your contract probably came from the Fracture splinter. They're Harm's main opposition, and they say they want to dissolve Confed completely, make every system independent, and basically start over."

"Not a bad thought," Danjuma said.

"It won't happen. Harm's managed to take full control of nearly every Link facility and the vast majority of the military leadership is on his side," Juma said. "More's the pity."

"The Link is the damn thing holding the Confed together," I groused.

"Ah, but we have a little secret, don't we?" Mi-Cha said gleefully.

"About the Link?" Haskins asked.

"So, again, long story, but the short version is we have an older-generation Link unit on the Confed corvette our new friends were on, and Eto is pretty confident she can reverse engineer it."

Again, all five faces on the screen looked astonished. "We could stand up our own network," Nolwenn breathed, her eyes bright.

"The thought had occurred to me, yes. Private from the Alliance, Confed, everybody," Mi-Cha said smugly.

"But we're all personae non grata," Haskins said ruefully. "Maybe we can find an Alliance shipyard that'll supply us, but even the handful of independent systems are going to be leery of dealing with us thanks to Harm's propoganda."

"We could build our own," I said. I could feel several sets of eyes

boring into the back of my head, in addition to the ones on the screen. "What? We could. We have like six billion Interrums. Those still spend anywhere, even most Confed systems."

"An actual station would cost way more," Starkiller pointed out. "Not to mention we'd need to establish trade to get supplies—"

"We could buy nano factories to make almost anything," I argued.

"Which cost even more, and we'd have no viable source of income, if you're thinking of getting a loan or something."

"I actually was," I said cheerfully. "Remember, Interrums are held by Pecunia Galactica. They broke off from the Alliance right after the version two launch. They'd give us a loan."

"Again, income stream," Starkiller insisted.

"Ah, well, we've recently had an idea there," I said with a wide smile.

We filled them in about the *Endless Kingdom* world.

"That is . . . bonkers," Haskins said. "But brilliant. Cross-game tourism."

"Are the other games accessible as well?" Christoforos, who'd been silent up until now, asked.

I turned to look at Mi-Cha. She nodded slowly. "We have reason to think they are. Or will be. I can explain later. But the point is, we do have a viable income stream. Not to mention, if we can establish something defensible, we might attract more trade and shipyard work—and workers—than you might think. I have a feeling a lot of qualified people want out of Confed control, not just spacers."

"Oh hey, your torpedo came loose," Haskins said, her eyes darting off camera.

"Cap, we've got six more troopers—sorry, sorry, Confederate marines, I know, I know—aboard. They all want to defect."

"They put us in a torpedo and shot us into space!" we could hear someone in the background shout.

"We're going to get a little tight on quarters," I mused. "Any of you guys have spare berths?" Five heads bobbed. "Have the doc look

'em over, Selen, and then we'll figure out which ships to move them to."

Tomiko was tapping at one of the backup consoles at the rear of the bridge. "I'm reengaging the nano-armor charge net. Should rebuild the bow in twenty minutes or so."

"So, a defensible place," Starkiller said, picking up the conversation. "I have a thought."

"You guys have a system you've claimed with lots of natural resources?" Stroman joked.

"No, we sold nearly everything we claimed, same as you. But did you know you can drop into interstellar space?"

"Lies!" Lad snapped.

"Ha!" Haskins crowed. "I told you they wouldn't have figured it out!"

"Explain," Mi-Cha said.

"It's actually pretty simple. If you lay in an FTL course between two points and then cut your FTL engine's power feed at *exactly* the right time, and I do mean down to the microsecond, you pop out at a deterministic location."

"Lies," Lad breathed, but they didn't sound as certain.

"We tried it a bunch. It's replicable," Haskins assured. "Now, that still leaves you a bit exposed since you have to start from one of two systems, but if you were relatively sneaky about it and only used trusted pilots . . ."

I nodded slowly. "You'd have a secret place in the game that would be all but impossible to find. Cap, this could be a perfect place. Do you think, since it's between systems, *all* the game rules would work?"

"Come again?" Starkiller asked with a frown.

"We can FTL into the *Endless Kingdom* system," I explained, "but we have to have a fantasy-based means of getting out."

"I have to hear this," Haskins said, leaning forward.

"We have a magic dragon that appears when I use an enchanted

bridle," I said, grinning. "And it's nearly instantaneous too. Faster than FTL."

"We need to try it," Mi-Cha said. "But that would be convenient."

"Hey, you guys remember how the Alliance Gathers *used* to get started?" Juma asked.

"A bunch of old ship hulls they . . . oh, I see. Yes," Storm said, nodding.

"We happen to have dibs on a few old hulls. We'd need to rig an FTL drive to them, with a new enough comp to handle the microsecond timing, but . . ."

"Instant station in interstellar space," Danjuma said gleefully. "I love it."

"So we could get a revenue stream going without a loan." I nodded approvingly. "And we could spend quite a bit less just arming it to the teeth."

"If we're going to be collecting more people, we'll need to form an actual polity," Lukas said from the rear of the bridge. "It'll let us establish respawn points for people, at the very least."

"The League of Independent Adventurers," I said at once, having given it quite a bit of thought since we'd quit the Alliance.

"And membership requires a buy-in or investment," Stroman added. "Everyone has skin in the game, everyone owns a piece of it, every shareholder gets a vote."

"And once our tourism racket goes public, Harm won't be able to mess with us. Too many people will want what we've got," I said confidently. "I'll get the paperwork drawn up right now."

> » Secret Mission Accomplished: Breakaway
>
> You have successfully severed ties with your former polity and created a new one.
>
> 100,000 XP awarded.
>
> Title Awarded: Founding Lifeform

"Sweet," Lad said approvingly.

"We'll take care of getting the old hulls together," Starkiller said. "Those can be part of our initial buy-in. Frank, we'll send you the specs and you can work up a fair market value." I nodded quick agreement. "You guys want to be in charge of finding our new home?"

"I have some thoughts," Lad said happily.

"I'd like to get there and test the bridle," I said to them.

"I actually had a question on that," Haskins said. "So, if I understand you right, all of *Endless Kingdom* takes place on a single world, right?"

"Right," I said.

"So why is it they need a game artifact that can replicate FTL?"

"Well," I said slowly, "as they explained it, their game has alternate dimensions. They mentioned . . . what was it?"

"Underhill was one of them," Stroman said. "There were a couple of others."

"So are *those* actually distinct systems? In our game, I mean?" Haskins asked.

We all thought about it. "They might be," I admitted.

"We could ask them," Tomiko said brightly. "Personally, I'd like to see this world for myself."

"Then let's do that," Mi-Cha said.

11 / RETURN TO MAGIC

Our six ships emerged into interstellar space in nearly the same instant, guided by the meticulous plot and timing Lad had set up in each ship's nav comp. They'd selected a spot roughly between the Dagobah system—which contained only a giant, resource-rich asteroid field and the Chantilly system. Don't get me started on the names. The latter aligned with the United Federation of Worlds, offered a decent-sized shipyard, space station, and two habitable worlds, and was widely known as an orderly center of trade where anyone was welcome—if they could behave themselves.

"This is deeply weird," Lad said as I switched the main bridge display to an exterior view. "Are you sure it's working?"

I shrugged. "All the indicators are green." The screen, however, remained stubbornly black, without so much as a star in sight. "Incoming video."

The screen flipped to a view of Captain Starkiller, who was quickly joined by the other ships' captains.

"Is it supposed to be like this?" Mi-Cha asked. "All . . . black, with no stars?"

"Yeah, I probably should have warned you," Haskins said with a chuckle. "I'm guessing that, since we're not technically meant to be

here, the game doesn't know what star field to render, so it just doesn't render anything."

"We should cover up any windows on the ship hulls we bring in," Stroman mused. "This is pretty disconcerting."

"Good thought," Starkiller said. "So, what's the full plan of action from here?"

"First, we see if the dragon's bridle will work here. Then, we all start our errands. We'll head back to the *Endless Kingdom* system—if we can think of a way for one of you to join us, you're welcome to. Someone needs to go start collecting ship hulls so we can build some kind of waystation here."

"We're naming it Nexus," Lad said firmly.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then Starkiller shrugged. "Yeah, fine with me. Sarah and I can handle collecting the hulls—I know where we can get a couple of cheap FTL drives to get them here. Imani and Corentin, I'd like you two to consider refitting *Chip* and *Dale* as luxury passenger haulers. Your ships are best suited for it, and we're going to need transports."

Juma and Nolwenn nodded. "It actually won't be that big of a deal," Juma said thoughtfully. "We can each fit twenty accommodations modules where we have cargo containers, and there's a builder in Chantilly who can fabricate them pretty quickly."

"Figure one bay for supplies, one for a dining room, another for a lounge, one for entertainment or something, and sixteen actual suites," Nolwenn added, thinking it through. "Thirty-two suites total, figure no more than sixty-four guests at a time."

"That should be about the right number," Mi-Cha said behind me. "So, John, we'll need a couple of hulls where we can process that many people. I'm thinking a customs check— Stop, I heard myself." She chuckled as Stroman groaned. "But we need have a place to confiscate anything high-tech and store it until they come back."

"I can start acquiring equipment," Christoforos said. "Scanners, along with whatever we'll need to build embarkation and debarkation lounges."

"We should get a small FTL-equipped shuttle of some kind," I said. "Something that can actually land on the planet. Rashmi, what's the FTL transit time from here to *Endless Kingdom*?"

They poked at their console for a moment. "Four days."

"Oh." I thought about it. "Well, then it would actually make more sense to just use *Chip* or *Dale* for that leg of the trip too."

"Unless the bridle works here," Stroman argued. "Can you just try that now?"

"Sure," I said, withdrawing the bridle from my personal storage. I held it over my console and said the magic words: "*Ego lorum draconem qui inter mundos ambulat!*"

It worked. Once again, the bridle dissolved into motes of light, extending out beyond the bow of our ship, trailing more glowing lights that connected it to my hands.

"Holy actual crap," Haskins breathed.

Lad switched the bridge display to an exterior view, and we could all see the enormous, glowing dragon that now waited patiently in front of our ship, harnessed by twin reins of light that disappeared into the bow armor.

I released the magic, and the dragon faded away as the bridle reappeared in my hands.

"Well, that changes the logistics a bit," Starkiller said, his voice full of awe. "No sense tying up our two luxury liners for an instantaneous trip." He shook his head in disbelief. "So yeah, Frank, some kind of shuttle would be perfect. *Chip* and *Dale* bring people here, and then a dedicated shuttle makes the run to and from *Endless Kingdom*. Figure a hundred-seater so folks can have a bit of elbow room."

"That pattern works better if we unlock more worlds too," I agreed.

"It'll need to be able to land," Stroman reminded us.

"Yup, full reentry," Starkiller agreed. "Pilot and a copilot."

"We should recruit one of them from *Endless Kingdom*, if we can," I suggested. "They'll need to be at least a level-four magic

user, preferably in the game's Primal Magic tradition, to use the bridle."

"The copilot, then," Haskins agreed with a nod. "Landing a shuttle isn't the easiest thing in the world, so someone from this game can be the main pilot. I know a guy who might be interested."

"Okay," Starkiller said with a satisfied smile. "I think we all have our shopping lists. Shall we away?"

"Let's plan to meet back here in . . . would four weeks give everyone enough time?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Mmm, yeah, it should. Figure three to six," Haskins said.

"Yeah, installing the modules won't take long, but fabricating them might push us closer to six weeks," Juma said.

"Four to six, then. Frank, want to take us out?"

"Are we not going to try and take anyone with us?" I asked.

Everyone on the screen looked dubious. "The only thing I can think of would be to lock on with tractor beams, but we know that doesn't end well with an FTL jump," Haskins said with a frown. "Let's maybe experiment with that later. We've all got errands, for right now."

"Fair enough," I said, holding the bridle in front of me again. "*Ego lorum draconem qui inter mundos ambulat!*"

The bridle did its thing as Lad punched in the coordinates for *Endless Kingdom*.

"Giddyup," Mi-Cha giggled.

"Okay, you can keep that one." Lad chuckled as they took us into not-FTL.

Stroman and Graves volunteered to stay back and mind the ship. "I've seen it, it's fun," Stroman said as we crammed ourselves into the shuttle's cabin. For his part, Graves merely rolled his eyes. "Planets," he muttered.

"It's beautiful," Tomiko said softly during our approach.

Dawn had just broken in Jerrod's kingdom. Golden sunlight spilled across a newly cleared field about a kilometer from the castle. People were already at work clearing and packing a wide road that wound gently through the trees, down to the castle itself.

Masson set our shuttle down gently. We filled maybe a third of the space they'd cleared—they'd obviously been guessing—but this would be the perfect size landing area for an FTL-enabled, hundred-passenger shuttle.

We disembarked and just started down the road when two people on horseback trotted up to meet us.

"Lord Cadence," I called with a wave.

"Frank, good to see you again," Cadence smiled. "This is Lord . . . seriously, Darren, do I have to? It seems embarrassing all of a sudden."

"Lord Knickerbocker," the other man said, quirking an eyebrow. A smile played at the edges of his lips. "I'm running point on getting ready for the tourists."

"Dar—" Cadence sighed. "Lord Knickerbocker is King Jerrod's chancellor of the exchequer."

"I run the treasury," Knickerbocker clarified. "And back in the real, I worked at a travel agency, so this project is a good fit."

"You've done a ton of work already," Danjuma said. "As you have, it seems."

"Indeed we have," Knickerbocker said with a nod. "Come," he added, sliding off his horse. "We'll walk you down, and you can see our other preparations."

"We've gotten two more of Jerrod's nobles working on Quests and itineraries for people," Cadence said as he dismounted and began leading his horse alongside us. "Have you given any thought to how long people will be here?"

"Actually, no," I said. "We've been caught up in the logistics . . . and ran into a bit of a confrontation."

"Oh?" Cadence asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Normal space battle stuff," I assured him. "What were your guys thinking for itineraries?"

"Two weeks," Knickerbocker replied. "Although they've proposed a couple that would be four."

"Two weeks would work fine," I said thoughtfully. "And you know, if someone wanted to pay for a double, you could offer some four-week trips. The shuttle will be big enough to accommodate some extra folks for a return trip, if it works out that way."

"How many passengers?" Cadence asked.

"Nominally no more than sixty-four, based on double occupancy of a suite on our transport ships," Mi-Cha broke in. "In reality, you'll get some singles, so anywhere between thirty and fifty will be common. But the shuttle will hold a hundred. I'm Bo Mi-Cha, by the way. Captain of the *Pretty, Pretty Princess*."

"I am so sorry," I said, flushing. "I forgot to introduce everyone." I corrected my oversight, going round and letting everyone say hi as we walked.

"*Pretty, Pretty Princess*?" Knickerbocker chuckled. "There must be a story there."

"Officially, she's *Guillotine*," Mi-Cha said with a sigh. "Never put names up to a vote."

We left the cover of the trees, revealing King Jerrod's seat of power, an imposing, fortified castle.

"Wow," Danjuma said.

"Seconded," Masson said in awe. "It's like a fairytale."

Indeed, it was even more impressive in the dawn light.

The road we followed veered off to a large stone structure that was a hundred or so meters away from the castle's high outer wall.

"What was this before?" I asked as we approached the building. Even at this early hour, workers were scurrying everywhere, carrying furnishings, carving into the stone, and working to hang heavy wooden doors over what looked to be the main entrance.

"This is new," Cadence said proudly. "It'll be our welcome center."

"But it's only been a few days," I pointed out. "Hasn't it? Jeez, does time run differently—"

"No, it's only been a couple of days," Knickerbocker assured me. "This is the result of Arcane Magic. King Jerrod finally relented—it was the fastest way to get this done, and frankly none of the workers were up for hauling the stone blocks from a quarry. The original castle was built with magic, you know."

"I thought Jerrod didn't allow wizards in his kingdom?" Danjuma said.

"*King* Jerrod has maintained that position for a decade or so," Knickerbocker said, gently correcting her. "But it's more about game strategy than anything. This just made more sense."

"Maybe you can pick up a few tips, Frank," Tomiko said.

I shook my head. "I wound up with a different magic tradition. An Arcane Magic Wizard wouldn't do me any good, from what I understand."

"I have Arcane Magic," Mi-Cha said quietly.

I turned to look at her. "Since when?"

"I just checked, and that's what it says. Level one."

"You have a magic skill as well?" Cadence asked.

"It's . . . a long story," I said slowly, still looking at the captain. She and I hadn't discussed her Magic skill much since the version two release. I'd given it to her by using my Truthsaying power and leveled up the skill so rapidly it had almost killed her. But I couldn't affect myself with the power, and we needed someone to cast some serious magic in our fight against Dyson. She volunteered. "Only level one?" I asked her.

She shrugged, snapping her fingers and causing a small flame to appear on the end of one. "I can still do that. But yeah, it says Arcane Magic now. Level one."

"The consolidation, maybe?" Tomiko asked.

"It might be," I said hesitantly. "I just don't understand why it would only be level one."

"Perhaps Eloise will have some insight," Cadence said. "She's the

Wizard we brought in to help with the construction. She's staying in a little hut on the other side of the castle, near the stream."

"I'd love to speak with her," Mi-Cha said, giving me a firm nod.

"Actually, it might help to take you to her now," Knickerbocker said. "She's been asking questions about details we don't have. Perhaps you can tell her what you're thinking and help fill in some of the blanks."

"Bo and I will do that," I said, still feeling odd about Mi-Cha's Arcane Magic skill being so low. "Could I maybe impose on you to show everyone else around? We didn't see much of the castle on our last visit."

"A wonderful idea," Cadence said. "I'll have one of my men do it. I'm due for a meeting with the King's Privy Council in a few minutes, but I can get you all started. Why don't you follow me?" He began walking briskly down a smaller footpath that connected the welcome center's road to the one leading inside the castle walls.

"I'll take you to the Wizard," Knickerbocker said, leading Mi-Cha and me in the other direction.

"So, can I ask about your name?" I said as we walked.

He chuckled. "I was from New York in the real, and I was a huge fan of the Knicks basketball team. Never got to see a game in person, but when I got here, I asked if anyone was using the name. They weren't, so I took it. It was just *Knick*, at first—with a *k*—but once King Jerrod elevated me, I wanted something more formal sounding." He paused. "I'd let you use my given name, but King Jerrod is a bit of a stickler for staying in role. You'll want to bear that in mind."

I nodded. "Lord Cadence said as much on our last visit."

"So where do we fit into the hierarchy?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Distinguished visitors from another realm," he said at once. "Commoners will address you as *Lord* and *Lady* as a courtesy. Most of the nobility will as well. King Jerrod will probably use your given names."

"Fine by me. Is this it?" I asked as we rounded the corner of the

castle wall and came upon a cozy-looking hut, perched on the bank of a wide, fast-running stream.

"It is. Mistress Adelson, are you about?" he called.

There was the noise of bustle from within the hut before the door burst open and a petite, bright-eyed woman popped out. "Ah, Lord Knickerbocker, you've brought me visitors. I am Eloise Adelson, Wizard to royalty and seer of futures. Why are you all dressed so oddly?"

We'd worn our ship's coveralls, clashing horribly with the local couture. "These are the people from *Endless Sky*, Mistress Adelson," Knickerbocker explained.

"Oooh!" Adelson said, her eyes widening and flashing with excitement. "I'm just going to monopolize your time for a bit, okay? Thank you so much, Lord Knickerbocker, you may go."

With a light snort, Knickerbocker turned and began trudging back toward the welcome center.

"You're allowed to speak to him like that?" Mi-Cha chuckled.

"Oh, wizards get away with murder, trust me," she said, laying a hand on Mi-Cha's arm. "And you're welcome to talk normally around me when Jerrod's men aren't about. I came from the next kingdom over, and Queen Selenay is a lot more casual about the role-playing bits. Come on in."

We ducked into her hut, gasping in amazement. On the outside, it had looked like a small, one-room affair with a thatched roof and a stone chimney. Inside . . . was something else. We entered a large, all-purpose living, dining, and working room. Two doors at the back, on either side of the large stone hearth, led to other rooms. "Bigger inside than out," Adelson chirped. "Perks of Arcane Magic. Can't do that with the animal stuff. Have a seat." She gestured to the chairs surrounding a sturdy wooden table in the center of the room.

"Now, I have a few questions to get out of the way, if you don't mind," she said briskly, sliding into a chair opposite Mi-Cha and me.

"Shoot," the captain said.

We spoke for perhaps thirty minutes, answering questions about

the number of tourists we expected per trip, how long they'd be here, and other logistics. We assured her that our plan was to thoroughly police any technology, delivering people in little more than the clothes on their backs. The same would apply to outbound tourists: clothing only.

"I do worry a bit about magic users wanting to tour *Endless Sky*," I said.

"Does magic even work there?" Adelson asked, her eyebrows scrunching together.

"A bit," Mi-Cha said. "It's not consistent, but we have some theories."

"A bit—and you know this how?"

"I'm a level six in Primal Magic, courtesy of my last visit here. And Bo has a level one in . . . well, apparently in Arcane Magic."

"Oh, a sister! How interesting. And I suppose that explains your Dragonslayer title?" I nodded. "Huh. I'd thought that was something from your game with an oddly overlapping name. But nope. Okay. Interesting." She peered at us for a moment. "And how did you come across the Arcane Magic skill?"

"It's a long story," Mi-Cha said. "It actually started as just Magic, and it was a good bit higher level."

"But you said magic isn't consistent in *Endless Sky*?"

"It isn't," I confirmed. "Bo could do party tricks—snapping her fingers to summon fire, for example. But we think that's because the underlying rule set in *Endless Sky* already allowed for something similar, and so it mapped the spell to what it knew. But anything more complicated, where there wouldn't be an underlying equivalent, doesn't work."

"Ah. Well, that explains why you're only a level one, dear."

"How so?"

"Arcane Magic is a very dynamic tradition. You level up the same way as the other traditions, yes? You get a spell book, and you work your way through it, learning the spells as you go. Each one brings

you closer and closer to the next level, until you learn the threshold spell that finally pushes you over."

"Okay."

"With Arcane Magic, you can only learn about one new spell a day, at first. The higher you progress, the longer it takes. By level six, you're looking at a week or so. By level twelve, a month. I'm told level-twenty spells can take a year or more, but I've never met anyone that high."

"That seems odd," I put in. "*Endless Kingdom* was the first game and started years before the others launched. I'd have thought someone would have pushed into the Mythical levels by now."

"Yes, well, that's the other thing with Arcane Magic. To *retain* your skill level, you have to use it. So if a level-six spell takes a week to learn, you need to use one every week, or you'll drop back to level five. And therein lies the problem with higher levels: there just isn't much call to use spells that impressive all that often. I've been in the game twenty years, and I'm only a level ten in Arcane Magic, because, frankly, I struggle to find reasons to cast that much magic once a month."

Mi-Cha nodded slowly. "That does make sense."

"But here, I can be helpful as well as informative," Adelson said. She pointed to the table and muttered something under her breath. A leather-bound book appeared on the table. "You take this," she said, pushing it toward the captain. "This'll get you through level six, if you want to. You'll just need to keep it up."

"Thank you," Mi-Cha said, pulling the book toward her. Her eyes were bright, and she looked more relaxed than before. I wondered how long the unknowns of her Magic skill had weighed on her.

"Does Primal Magic work the same way?" I asked.

Adelson shook her head. "You said level six?" I nodded. "Balance Magic, if I remember correctly. So yes, in a way. Your spells do take you longer to learn as you go up, but you don't lose them if you don't use them. Of course, Primal Magic tends to be less impressive—

you're not going to raise a building out of thin air like I can—but your skill level is never in jeopardy."

"That's nice, I guess."

She shrugged. "It is what it is. You should see what the Dark Magic people have to do. Ridiculous tradition, honestly." She gave us a big smile. "So, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Actually, yes," I said slowly. "You have multiple—I don't know what you'd call them—places like Underhill."

"Dimensions," Adelson said, nodding quickly. "Every expansion included a new one. I believe we're up to five now: Underhill, Dark Umbra, Plains of Perdition, the Elven Realms, and the Halls of Mithras. Why?"

"Do players live in those, or are they just places you go for missions?"

"Oh, people live there, absolutely. The Plains of Perdition, name aside, is actually quite charming."

"Really?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Yup. It's mostly Quests and dungeons, but adventurers who go there need some kind of support, so there are villages with shops, inns, taverns, blacksmiths—the usual. I don't believe anyone's organized an entire kingdom yet, and they have to import a lot of their food from here, but otherwise, it's quite a nice place to live."

"So, in our game, your world is just another solar system on our overworld map. I have an artifact," I said, withdrawing the bridle from my personal storage space.

"Oooh, pretty," Adelson cooed as I set it on the table between us. "Useless to me," she said, examining it without touching it. "Keyed to Primal Magic, so good for you. But yes, this would let you walk between worlds."

"It actually does—very literally. We can use it to leave this system, where our normal jump drive doesn't work, to get back to one of the science-fiction worlds in our game. We were thinking about seeing if any of your other worlds, the dimensions from this game, also appeared on our overworld map."

"Which I presume is very large," Adelson said.

"Literally thousands of systems," Mi-Cha confirmed.

"Huh." She thought about it for a while. "You know, there's a spell for tracing something back to its origin. I forget the name. Arcane Magic, midlevel, if I'm not misremembering. The way it works is, you cast the spell on a map, you then set whatever you're tracking on the map, and its point of origin glows."

"That . . . might work," Mi-Cha mused. "It might take a bit of doing if it won't work with a display screen, but we could figure it out."

"Do it in this system, where the magic would work, but aboard *Princess* where we've got the overworld map," I agreed. "Do you know that spell?"

"I do not," Adelson said sadly. "I'm really a specialist in construction, believe it or not, although I also maintain a suite of battle spells—mostly for knocking down buildings. But . . ." she paused, thinking it through. "I bet I know who does."

"Who?"

"Enchantress of the Green Tower. Nice old lady, lives up in the mountains at the border of this kingdom. Serious hoarder. She collects grimoires and spell books, artifacts—the whole deal. She'd have the tracing spell if anyone would."

"And she'd . . . share it with us?" Mi-Cha asked hesitantly.

"Oh, heavens no," Adelson chuckled. "Quid pro quo is the fundamental rule of this game, believe me. No, you'd have to give her something she'd want."

"And what might she want?" I asked.

"Well. You know, there's one particular artifact I bet she'd like back."

"Back?"

"It's called the Golem's Heart. No idea what it does, but I do know it's a single-use thing. Once you use it, it goes back to its resting place, which is allegedly a nightmare to get to."

"A dungeon?" I felt pretty confident we could—

"Oh no, this one's a full Quest. And I know for a fact the Enchantress traded it to someone. They came through the last kingdom I was in, all full of themselves about it. They'll have used it, and it should be back in its resting spot. But she'd definitely trade to have it back—and you could get more than a single spell out of her for it."

"Do you know where its resting place is?" I asked.

"Nope!" she replied cheerfully. "But Lord Cadence will. And you know, if you're up for it . . ."

"What?" Mi-Cha asked.

"It's a Quest best assisted by magic. I should be able to get the rest of the major construction done in a day or two, and I'd like to join you. Give me a chance to unleash some of the higher-level spells I struggle to keep up with."

"Suits me," Mi-Cha said.

"We've another advantage," I said with a grin.

"Oh?"

"Some of our tech weapons work here. Blasters, for example. Not railguns. Most of our grenades."

A mischievous grin spread across Adelson's face. "Tell me more."

"Last trip, we had to do a dungeon crawl to get the bridle. Level twenty. We got through it in like a day."

"I am *so* your new best friend," Adelson said brightly. "Okay, so let's do it. We three for magic, and Bo, this'll be a great chance to level up. If you're actively using spells, you can sometimes learn them faster than usual. Six is a good party size for quests, so maybe a couple of fighters with your tech weapons?"

"Of course," Mi-Cha said. "Zuri would jump at it, and I bet Renart will as well. Who's our sixth?"

"Our Lord Cadence got something of a taste for questing after your last visit," the Wizard said with a grin. "Let's see if he's up for another one."

12 / THE GOLEM'S HEART

Cadence was, in fact, up for another one, so our party consisted of myself, Captain Mi-Cha, Masson, Danjuma, Cadence, and the Wizard Adelson. We sent Masson back to the ship to retrieve a veritable armory for each of us—and to return Tomiko and Napolitano. "You two get working on that Confed Link device," Mi-Cha ordered. "I want to know what's involved with cloning a few dozen of them."

That left Lad with Selen and the four troopers on the *Princess* to come up with a workable set of tourist itineraries and to help Lord Knickerbocker get the welcome center in shape.

Lord Cadence arranged for us to use the same caravan wagon and horses as last time, despite mentioning he was "not much of a horse person." He suggested bringing someone along to deal with them, but the Wizard insisted that a party of more than six would be asking for trouble.

"It's just how the game seems to prefer things," she said with a shrug. "Traditionally, you'd have a Warrior, a magic user like a Wizard or something, a Thief, a Cavalier, an Acrobat, and a Barbarian. Not everyone holds with that pattern, but more than six, and the game starts to seriously ratchet up the difficulty."

"An Acrobat?"

"Again, no idea." She sighed, lashing down a box of spell components. "Okay, that's me set. Lord Cadence, are you thinking dawn tomorrow?"

The nobleman nodded, checking a few things off a list he carried. "We're headed to a little NPC village called Quest's Retreat. It's the official jumping-off point for about three dozen different Quests in the region. Should take us about a week to get there."

"Well, that's why I asked about the timing," Adelson said with a smile. "I assume there'll be an inn there?"

"Assuredly."

"I have a decently high-level traveling spell that can shorten the road and have us there in a day," she offered, grinning as eyebrows rose around her. "But I'm going to need to sleep for a solid twelve once we're there to recover my MP."

"Deal," Mi-Cha said with a laugh. "Sort of like a local FTL. I'll take it. What's it called?"

"*Seisear Giorraíonn an Bóthar*," Adelson replied, clearly struggling with the pronunciation. "Got it from an old Fae spell book."

"I certainly won't argue," Cadence said, looking a bit relieved. "Will we need both teams of horses, then?"

"I would," Adelson said after a moment's thought. "We can stable them at Quest's Retreat, I imagine, but I'm guessing we don't know where we'll be headed from there."

"Correct."

"So we might actually need these horses and two more, if we wind up needing to ride individually."

My thighs ached in anticipation. "Good point," Cadence said with a sigh. "All right. Then let's plan to meet back here at the actual crack of dawn. King Jerrod's offered to put you up for the night, so I'll show you to your rooms. Dinner is promptly at sundown, and come hungry. He's throwing one of his feasts."

We set off just as the sun was peeking above the eastern horizon. Mi-Cha, Masson, and I were still moaning from having nearly died from meat sweats during the night.

"Yeah, his feasts are legendary," Adelson said with sympathy. "There's a trick in taking just a little bit of everything and dumping half of it on the floor for his dogs."

"Warn me next time," Mi-Cha said ruefully. "We're used to meal trays and ration bars."

"The good news is that I snagged a basket of leftovers," Cadence said cheerfully. "We'll have some excellent sandwiches for our day's journey."

"Oooh, more meat," I mock-groaned. We clambered into the wagon, Adelson and Cadence positioning themselves on the driver's bench.

"So, how does this work?" Cadence asked, coaxing the leading horses into motion.

"Get us down the road a bit, and I'll cast it. After that, the scenery will go all blurry, but the road itself should stay clear. The spell kind of straightens the road for us, so it shouldn't be any harder than driving at normal speed. Just make bloody sure you know exactly where you're going because you can't turn around unless I break the spell."

"Got it," the nobleman replied confidently. "Off we go, then."

"Hey," Mi-Cha said. "Does this actually shorten the road, or is this time magic?"

"What do you mean?" Adelson asked.

"Will I be able to study a day's worth or a week's worth?"

"Ah," the Wizard said with a nod. "You'll get the full week. So . . . let's see. Five to six spells total, figuring a twelve-hour journey and a new spell every two hours. Roughly."

"Sit in the back and cast over the spare horses," I added with a grin.

"Will do," Mi-Cha grinned back.

"And we're off," Cadence said, slapping the reins on the horses' backs.

We trundled along for perhaps half an hour until the Wizard judged us far enough from the castle to use the traveling spell. I watched out the back of the wagon as she cast it, and the scenery around us—as she'd predicted—blurred. It was almost like the world had been painted in watercolors, and someone had wiped a wet cloth across the whole of it: trees became green blobs streaked with brown, meadows became an eerie wash of blue above green, and rivers and streams became thin stabs of color. We didn't *seem* to move any faster—I'd half-expected some kind of crazy fast-forward effect—but we were definitely making good time.

We came to Quest's Retreat just as the sun was nearing the western horizon. It was a village only in the most generous sense of the term: the largest structure alongside the road was a sturdy, two-story tavern made of stone, with a large stable and yard area at the back. Attached to it was a small wood-and-stone tavern. The opposite side of the dirt road held a blacksmith's workshop and what looked to be a large shop of some kind.

"Not much to it," I observed.

"Several dozen Quests have their trailhead here," Cadence said, maneuvering us into the yard behind the tavern. "The residents are all NPCs, and they're basically just here to get you on your way. You'll find these little villages dotted all across the world."

A woman bustled out of the inn to greet us. I raised a hand to greet her, but Cadence quickly shook his head. She ran up to us, her eyes slightly glazed over, and recited:

Welcome, seekers, to Quest's Retreat,
Where dreams take flight and souls find beat.
In our humble village, with hearts aglow,
We greet you warmly, and this we show:
A place where adventures find their way,
Where stories unfold, both night and day.

In Quest's Retreat, spirits ignite.
Embrace the quest, embrace the light.

I sighed and looked around as the cheesy poem went on.

With open arms, we join hands as kin,
Bound by shared love for journeys within.
Together we'll wander, explore the unknown,
In Quest's Retreat, you'll never be alone.
So venture forth, brave souls, with zeal,
The mysteries await, the magic we feel.

I could hear Mi-Cha trying not to laugh.

In Quest's Retreat, a home you'll find,
Where quests begin, and friendships bind.
Welcome, dear newcomers, to our village fair,
In Quest's Retreat, may you find joy to spare.
With open hearts, we bid you stay,
Let's embark on adventures, come what may.

After she finished, she gave us a quick nod and added, "You're welcome to stable your beasts. Rooms inside if you'll be needing them. The tavern next door serves three hot meals a day. Your coin is welcome." With another bob of her head, she hustled back inside.

"What precisely," Mi-Cha said, suppressing a laugh, "was that?"

Cadence pulled the wagon to one side of the yard, and a small boy dashed out from the stables and began unhitching the horses. The nobleman pressed a small coin into the boy's hand, and he began working even faster, leading the horses into the stable building. "Again, standard fare for these trailhead villages. I've heard of one a few kingdoms over where they put on an entire musical number. I assume you don't have anything like it in *Endless Sky*?"

"We do not," Masson chuckled. "I'm picturing a group of station

hands wearing coveralls, breaking into song as you stepped onto the station." Mi-Cha and I were tearing at the thought.

"Let's just go in," Cadence sighed.

"Please," Adelson said tiredly as Cadence helped her down from the driver's bench. "I'm knackered." Then she giggled and struck a pose, arching one hand over her head. "That'll be Lady Knackered-bocker, if you please!" Then she seemed to collapse somewhat, and Lord Cadence wrapped an arm around her and helped her into the tavern.

The woman who'd greeted us was standing behind a small counter. "Good evening, travelers. We have but three rooms available, and they'll be one silver apiece, if you like."

"We'll take all three," Cadence said, plinking three coins on the counter. The woman swept them away and pointed to a set of stairs leading upward. "Five, six, and seven. Bath is at the end of the hall, additional copper per person should you want it."

"We'll be fine," I said with a friendly wave. The woman nodded.

"These places always have only three rooms," Cadence grunted as he helped hoist the rapidly diminishing Wizard up the stairs. "Guarantee you if another party comes in, they'll still have only three rooms. We'll have to bunk up."

"I'll stay with Eloise," Mi-Cha said at once. "I'm pretty worn out myself."

"No dinner?" Masson asked.

"I've eaten more in the past twenty-four hours than I usually eat in a week. And all the magic has exhausted me. I'm level two and ready for bed."

"Renart and I bunked together on the *Endless Optimist*," Danjuma said. "We can take room seven, but I'd like a snack and a drink."

Cadence passed Adelson to Mi-Cha, who quickly got her into one of the two small, clean-looking beds in room five. "That'll be you and me in six, Frank, if that suits."

"Suits me fine," I said. "But I'm also for a drink, at least."

"It'll be ale," Cadence nodded as we made our way back down the stairs. "If they offer you anything else, don't take it. It's a trick."

"Oh?" Danjuma said. Among the crew, she was the one you could count on to drink unwary stationers under the table in a contest.

"Rotgut at best. Designed to layer debuffs on you as you go, then knock you out for three days."

"Ah. Ale it is, then."

The tavern was empty apart from the four of us, a dour-looking barkeep, and a serving girl. She quickly took our orders and brought over four large tankards of ale and a wooden board filled with slices of bread, cheese, and decent-looking ham. Cadence paid with a trio of copper coins.

"I never picked up your coinage," I said after the girl had retreated.

"Ten coppers to a silver, ten silvers to a gold," he said. "Blessedly metric. You'll also find little brass clippings in some places—those are ten to a copper. One moment. Girl!" he called.

The serving girl hustled back over. "What can I get you, m'lord?"

"We set out at dawn to seek the Golem's Heart. In what direction we must go?"

The girl straightened slightly, and her eyes glazed over a bit as she spoke:

Beneath the desert dunes, where time stands still and hush,
Amid the shifting sands, the Golem's Heart does blush.
Follow the starlit path, where celestial secrets blend,
And there, beneath the sands, the Heart's embrace extends.

She finished, gave us a quick smile, and then hurried away, ducking into a back door that I presumed led to the kitchen. The man behind the bar seemed to ignore her, standing there polishing mugs with the same grumpy expression.

Cadence sighed as he sipped his ale. "I was afraid of that."

"Did you not actually know where to start?" Masson asked.

"No, and I still don't. There isn't a desert within a two-month journey of here. The NPCs are going to spout distractions, and we'll have to figure out which one is the real starting point."

"How irritating," Danjuma said. "We could threaten them."

"It won't do any good. This is a programmed routine. They probably do it for half the Quests coming through here. Look, I'll try another."

He got up and walked over to the bartender. The man's eyes began tracking the nobleman the moment he stood, and as Cadence approached the bar, he set down the mug he'd been polishing and flung his dishrag across one shoulder. "Aye?" he asked.

"Questing," Cadence said shortly. "Golem's Heart. Starting point. Give it to me."

The bartender straightened a bit, just as the serving girl had done, and his eyes went a bit blank.

In the caverns deep, where shadows linger long,
The Golem's Heart awaits, a treasure rare and strong.
Descend with courage true, through darkness unafraid,
Seek the glowing embers where ancient powers cascade.

"Hmm, they both did couplets," Cadence said as he returned to our table. "Might be a clue if we find someone who doesn't."

"Are the caverns around here?" I asked.

"Hundreds. The whole area is rotten with dungeons, in fact."

"But you said this wasn't a dungeon crawl," Danjuma reminded him.

"I did. Best information we have, at least, so I'm inclined to discount that rhyme as well."

"Which leaves us where?" Masson asked.

Cadence took another mouthful of ale. "Drinking and eating. Then we'll wander about and question people: the innkeeper, the blacksmith, and the shopkeeper. Stable boy, if need be."

We all nodded and picked through the food as we finished our ale. When Cadence rose, we followed him out of the tavern without a word and back into the inn.

"Madam," he said, approaching the woman behind the counter. "Quest. Golem's Heart. Starting point."

Like the others, she straightened a bit and her eyes went a little distant.

In the ocean's depths, where mysteries lie concealed,
Where mermaids sing their songs, a tale unrevealed,
Dive into the azure depths, where currents intertwine.
Discover the Golem's Heart, in Neptune's grand design.

"Nearest ocean is as far as the nearest desert." He sighed as we left the inn. "Not a lot of fantasy tropes take place on the sea. Let's try the shopkeeper next."

As we entered, an ancient old man looked up from behind his counter. "Ah, welcome travelers. Ostin's Supplies has everything you might need for a successful journey. We also buy any supplies you no longer require. Cash on the nail! No credit!" He gave us a gap-toothed grin.

Cadence slid a copper across the counter. "Quest. Starting point. Golem's Heart."

The man managed to straighten his bent spine a bit, and his eyes took on the same lightly glazed appearance.

In the enchanted forest, where nature weaves its spell,
A whispered secret lingers and wonders gently dwell.
Among the mossy roots, where secrets are sealed,
The Golem's Heart lies hidden, its power unconcealed.

"Thanks," Cadence said as he led us out. "That one's viable," he added as we stepped back into the street. "Half the land around here is enchanted forest. C'mon, let's try the blacksmith."

The smithy was little more than three walls of stone, open to the sky and with a forge in the dead center of the space. A rickety wooden lean-to of sorts doubtless held the blacksmith's cot, assuming the NPCs here actually slept. The blacksmith was a tall, stocky woman, wearing a leather apron. She eyed us as we approached.

"Good evening, madam," Cadence addressed the NPC. "Quest. Starting

point. Golem's Heart."

This time the blacksmith didn't straighten but instead seemed to look out over our heads. I turned and saw the majestic mountain that rose up beyond the tiny village.

On mountaintops so high, where eagles soar above,
A sacred shrine awaits, adorned with grace and love.
Climb the rugged peaks, with spirit unconfined,
Behold the Golem's Heart, where earth and sky align.

"Thank you, madam," Cadence said as we turned away. "That'll be the one."

"Because she didn't go all zombie?" I asked.

He nodded. "There's usually a pretty clear tell. They all rhymed in couplets, so the fact that she actually looked at the mountain means that's almost definitely where we're headed. And it fits with what we've heard before, with the Golem's Heart being in a temple of some kind." He led us back into the inn and up the stairs. "I suggest you all get a good night's sleep. Eight hours, or we'll all take fatigue debuffs in the morning."

"Sounds good," Masson said as he and Danjuma ducked into their room.

"Are those two . . ." Cadence asked me as he closed our door behind us.

"No," I said firmly. "Captain discourages relationships among the crew. And as far as I know, Zuri prefers women. Better to worry about her sneaking out to see the blacksmith."

"No worry there at all, the most she'd get is a set of horseshoes or a low-level sword." He chuckled. "All right, then. Eyes shut. Sun's well down now, and these places usually put you to sleep right away if you let them."

I crawled into the surprisingly comfortable bed and closed my eyes.

He was right.

At the advice of the stable boy, who apparently knew the terrain for leagues in every direction, we opted to leave the wagon, rent a couple more horses, and ride to the mountain.

"I promise," Eloise said, "you'll be fine. He says it's only about an hour, there's a post where we can tie off the horses, and it's an easy trail. Just too narrow for the wagon."

We grimaced but gamely played along, clambering up into our saddles as we were shown. We'd helped the stable boy transfer supplies from the wagon into our saddlebags—mainly rations, although the Wizard brought a goodly number of paper sachets with her—and we got all of our weapons attached to ourselves. Each of the *Princess*'s crew carried two sidearms, a heavy blaster rifle, and a bandolier of grenades, much as we'd done during the dungeon crawl. Light armor, helmets, and night-vision goggles joined the collection.

The stable boy gave us some mighty odd looks, let me tell you, but Cadence slipped him a few extra coins to be discreet. "They all used to be NPCs," he explained quietly. "None of them would have cared if we ran around buck naked."

We set off.

As Cadence promised, the ride was easy and took only about an hour. When I dismounted, my legs were only moderately sore, and they loosened up quickly as I helped everyone else get their horses secured. "What if this takes a week?" I asked, mindful of the horses.

"It won't matter. The horses are just props when we're actively

engaged in a quest. They could sit here for a month and be fine. There's some risk of bandits stealing them, but it's usually pretty small. These are just ordinary horses, not really worth stealing."

I nodded, and we all began hiking up the narrow, twisting path that led up the mountain.

"Hail, travelers."

Danjuma, in the lead, stopped suddenly as if she'd been surprised. "Oh, hello."

The trail widened a bit, and so we pushed up around the gunner. A wizened old woman, wrapped in mismatched cloaks, sat on a rock to one side of the trail and peered up at us through rheumy eyes. "Could you spare a bit of help for an old woman?" she asked in a creaky voice. "A morsel of food, perhaps, or even a small coin?"

"Oh, absolutely," Lord Cadence said, pulling his pack off and reaching inside. He withdrew two of the ration bars we'd given him and handed them to the old woman. "I'm told they're not very tasty," he apologized, "but they're wholesome, and one of them should hold you for a day." He straightened, swinging his pack back on and giving the rest of us a look.

We all got the message and quickly dug into our own packs to retrieve two ration bars apiece for the old woman. She accepted them with grace, not seeming the least bit surprised at this largesse, nodding gently as the ration bars vanished inside her mass of cloaks.

When we finished and resecured our packs, she croaked, "Thank you, kind travelers. You seek the old temple then?"

"We do, miss," Cadence said.

" 'Tis a tough trail ahead," she said, shaking her head sadly. "But," and here she reached out and grabbed hold of the thorny bush she was sitting next to, pulling it aside and revealing another path. "This way is much gentler, if but slightly longer."

Cadence bowed from the waist. "Thank you, mother," he said. "May we do anything else to help you before we are on our way?"

She shook her head and chuckled softly, a sound that reminded

me of crows' caws. "No, but perhaps I can help you prepare for your journey with a short tale?"

"By all means, and thank you again," Cadence said reverently.

In the realm of life, where challenges reside,
You'll face three trials, with strength as your guide.
One for your body, another for your mind,
And the last, your soul, in search of peace to find.
First, your body, the vessel that carries you through,
Endurance will wane as fatigue ensues.
You'll battle the limits, push muscles to the brink,
For in this realm of flesh, strength is what you seek.
Through rugged terrains and mountains you'll climb,
Your body aching, yet resilient and primed.
With each step forward, a test to endure.
To conquer the challenge, your will you ensure.

"Oh, come on," I muttered under my breath.

Next, your mind, a universe so vast,
Unfolding thoughts, like worlds amassed.
The labyrinth of knowledge, you seek to explore,
But doubts and distractions threaten, and more.

Cadence was humming something I couldn't make out.

In a world of information, a boundless sea,
Focus fades, as the mind yearns to be free.
Yet, you sharpen my intellect, ignite the flame,
And conquer the challenge, reclaiming your aim.
Finally, your soul, the essence of your being,
A quest for meaning, a journey worth seeing.

I could hear joints popping as Mi-Cha rolled her neck.

Through the depths of emotions, you search for solace,
As life's storms rage, threatening to demolish.
But you gather strength from the depths of my core,
Embracing the shadows, the wounds you adore.
You nurture my spirit with the love of heart's fashion,
Conquering the challenge, finding inner compassion.
Though trials may come, you may not retreat,
For within you resides a power so sweet.

"Good grief," Danjuma mumbled.

With body, mind, and soul in harmonious sway,
You'll overcome the challenges, come what may.
So, march you on, with courage as your song,
Facing the battles, remaining steadfast and strong.
In this dance with life, you rise above—transcend—
Conquering the challenges until the very end.

When she finished, she immediately closed her eyes and began snoring. We moved quietly past her, and as Adelson brought up the rear, the bushes sprang back into place, sealing off the way back.

"That was a lot," Danjuma said.

"I can't believe anyone still falls for that," Cadence said as he walked along behind her.

"Falls for what?" Masson asked.

"She's probably the temple's boss," Cadence said. "Our kindness now means we probably won't have to fight her in her true form."

"Wow," Mi-Cha said from behind me. "Just like a fairy tale."

"That's where a lot of the game's tropes come from," Cadence said.

"Everyone ready?" Cadence said.

"Three trials," Mi-Cha said. "Mind, Body, and Soul. The three core attributes. Any idea what we can expect?"

"Puzzles for the mind," Cadence said. "That's a given. Some feat

of strength for the body, probably. Soul . . . is hard to tell. That's where they usually get creative."

"Nothing for it but to forge ahead," Danjuma said. "I'll stay on point. Lord Cadence, behind me. Then Frank, Bo, and Eloise. Renart, you bring up the rear."

This path was gentle, switchbacking easily up the mountainside until we came to the temple's entrance. There we saw the other trail below, which would have required us to ascend a steep cliff, something we hadn't outfitted ourselves for.

Then we arrived at the mouth of a cave. We fell into order, and Danjuma led us inside.

"One presumes this is the Body trial." Mi-Cha frowned.

"I'd imagine so," Cadence said.

We were standing in a domed cavern, maybe three or four hundred meters into the mountain. The trail had sloped gently downward since we'd entered, and to this point we hadn't encountered any monsters or other obstacles. But this cavern was trying to make up for that.

Our way out was clear: a high archway wide enough for two of us to walk abreast. But it was also thirty meters up in the air, close to where the walls curved into the dome overhead.

Six long wooden levers protruded from slots in the rock wall. The ends of the levers rested on the smooth stone floor, all but begging us to use them.

"So I'm guessing we have to work together to lift them," Danjuma said. "What drops down on us each time we lift one?"

"This is a Body challenge," Cadence said hesitantly. "So maybe nothing?"

"Fine." Danjuma strode forward to the second lever, bent down, gripped the end firmly, and tried to straighten her back. "Maybe not," she huffed after a long moment of fruitless effort.

"I think," Mi-Cha said slowly, "we may need to compare Body stats."

"Seventeen," I said, seeing where she was going. Eyebrows rose around the room. "What? I try to keep them all roughly even. I've had a lot of different jobs."

"Ten," Cadence said, blushing slightly.

"Twelve," Danjuma said, glaring at me.

"Fifteen," Masson said with a shrug.

"Eight," Adelson said easily. "Don't look at me like that, I'm a Wizard. Mind and Soul mean a lot more to me."

"Fifteen as well," Mi-Cha said. "Frank, you're up."

Danjuma stepped away as I walked up to the lever she'd attempted. I squatted down in front of it, lacing my fingers underneath the end and pushing hard with my legs.

The lever practically flew upward, moving so easily I actually lost my balance and tumbled to my ass.

"Huh," Cadence said thoughtfully. "Renart, you try that one."

Masson stepped up as I rolled aside and got back to my feet, brushing dust from my clothes. He adopted the same stance I had but rose much more slowly. His face flushed, and a vein stood out on his forehead. Finally he managed to make it fully upright, the lever's end cradled in his hands. "Okay," he grunted. "Now what?"

"Drop it," Cadence said confidently. Masson did, and the lever slowly returned to its starting position. "I'm guessing each of these is suited for just one of us. Find the wrong one and it'll be impossible, or far too easy. Give each one a try until you find one that's as hard for you as that one was for him."

It took a few minutes of trial and error until we each found the lever that was meant for us. Everyone took the same position Masson and I had, standing in front of the lever with their hands laced beneath it. "Lift with your legs, not your back," I offered. "Try to crouch so your back is straight." I'd learned that much lifting boxes of supplies for the Aa'an.

"We probably need to do this together," Cadence said, wriggling

himself into a better crouch. "On the count of three, then? One . . . two . . . three!"

Six pairs of legs strained, and six faces flushed with effort. We all made it to a standing position, the levers still resisting.

Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes and looked at the wall before us. The slot that the lever protruded from still had a good bit of space above the lever's current position. "Over your heads," I grunted. "Squat a bit and get the end on your chest, and then stand again. Go!"

Everyone managed the maneuver more or less at the same time, and we got the levers to chest height in a full stand. "Overhead press," I grunted. "Go!"

Everyone strained harder, pushing the levers up to shoulder height . . . face height . . . and then finally to full extension, our arms stretched above us and our legs trembling with effort.

A loud *crack* sounded throughout the cavern, and the floor began to rumble. We all dropped our levers and backed away—but they remained in their upright positions.

Slowly, with a grinding bass noise that vibrated our weary spines, the wall began moving.

No. Not the wall. *The floor*.

The floor was spinning and rising at the same time. As it did, the levers began retracting into the wall, vanishing just before the floor would have snapped off the first one. We continued to spin slowly upward until the cavern's exit was directly in front of us, its bottom now perfectly aligned with the floor.

A deep voice echoed through the archway.

Hail to the warriors of strength and might
Who faced the Trial of Body with unyielding fight.
Through sweat and tears, they stood tall and proud,
Conquering challenges as a united crowd.
With muscles strained and determination ablaze,
They pushed beyond limits in relentless ways.

Together they endured, as a beacon of power,

"Can someone shoot me?" I pleaded.

In the Trial of Body, they shone brighter by the hour.
In unity they stood as a force unbreakable,
Their spirits unwavering, their resilience unshakable.
With each step forward, they forged a path anew,
Emerging triumphant as the chosen few.
So raise a cheer, a resounding applause,
For the victors who passed the Trial's noble cause.

"Lotta poetry," Danjuma muttered as we stepped through the arch.

The next series of passages were more challenging—for warriors not armed with high-tech blasters. A series of little goblins came boiling out of holes in the walls and ceiling—so many that they would have been difficult to fight in close-quarters combat. They each had razor-sharp teeth and claws, and they exploded into purple goo when shot with a hand blaster.

"That was meant to have taken hours, and probably one or two of the party," Cadence said with satisfaction as we stepped through a tremendous puddle of violet slime and into another domed cavern.

This one had more floor space than the last, but the walls started curving in much lower down, resulting in a dome that was perhaps just three or four meters high. A series of ten wide grooves had been cut into the floor in a pattern of spokes, each radiating out from the center of the room to the walls. In each groove, nestled against each other at the center of the room, rested a smoothly carved rock.

"This is the Mind challenge?" I guessed. "A puzzle?"

"I presume," Cadence said, stepping over the grooves as he

walked the perimeter of the room. "Look, there are additional markings along each groove."

We looked more closely and saw what he'd noticed: a series of regularly spaced, shallow lines, cut perpendicular to the grooves and following the curve of the wall. They made for a set of thin, concentric circles, spaced about half a meter apart.

"So what do we do?" Danjuma asked.

The same booming voice rolled through the cavern.

In the realm of intellect, where thoughts intertwine,
The Trial of Mind awaits, a challenge so divine.
Harness your brain, let your thoughts take flight,
For here lies a riddle, a puzzling delight.
In numbers I hide, a secret to unveil,

"In misery I die, I lay down and wail," I muttered.

"Stop it, Frank," Cadence said with a grin.

Between ten and a hundred, let your mind prevail.
Divide me by five and then double the sum,
Add twenty, and subtract eight—you're almost done.
Multiply by three, then add a dozen more,
A numerical quest, a journey to adore.
Seek the answer, dear challengers, if you dare,
Unlock the gate of wisdom, beyond the Trial's lair.
Let logic guide your steps, as magic intertwines,
Unravel the enigma, and let your brilliance shine.

"What rhymes with *enigma*?" Mi-Cha whispered. Cadence shushed her.

For within the riddle's depths, a number lies in wait,
Between ten and a hundred, your victory awaits.
So focus your mind, let the puzzle play out,

With magic and intellect, you'll soon lose all doubt.
Discover the solution, a triumph to claim,
And conquer the Trial of Mind, in numbers untamed.

"Oh, good. Math." I sighed.

"Between ten and a hundred, it said." Mi-Cha paced the room in the opposite direction as Cadence had. "If each of these represents up to ten, then you can position all the stones against the walls to get to a hundred. So we just need to figure out where to start, and—"

"And find the answer," Adelson interrupted.

"Sure," she said, deflating a bit.

"No, you've got the right idea," Cadence said eagerly. "We just need to solve the riddle."

"So something divided by five, and then multiplied by two," Adelson began, "add twenty, subtract eight—so really, just add twelve—multiply by three, add twelve—"

"So just add twenty-four to begin with," Danjuma said.

"No," Adelson countered, shaking my head. "Order of operations. You can combine adjacent addition and subtraction, or multiplication and division, but you can't sum them across the entire equation in one go." We all looked at her. "I taught algebra in the real," she admitted. "So add twelve . . . hang on, I need something to write with."

She rummaged in her pockets for a scrap of parchment, and then for a stick of black carbon. She lowered herself cross-legged to the floor and began scratching. "So, *x* divided by five, multiplied by two, add twelve, multiply by three, add twelve . . . What was the next bit?"

"That was it," I said.

"Um," she muttered, scratching more numbers. "But we don't know what it's mean to add up to. You can't do algebra without something on the other side of the equal sign."

"What's that up there?" Masson asked, craning his head back.

We all looked up.

"Roman numerals," Adelson said.

"Where's it start, though?" I asked. The glyphs were written in a circle.

"Biggest number first. *D* in this case," she said.

"Then it's DCCXXVIII," Masson said, pointing up as he followed the sequence of letters.

"I hate Roman numerals," Adelson muttered. "Um. D is five hundred, I think. C is a hundred. So seven hundred. XX is twenty, VIII is eight. Seven twenty-eight."

"But it said between ten and a hundred," I pointed out.

"Romans didn't have decimals," Adelson said, snapping her fingers. "So, say seventy-two point eight." She scribbled for a bit longer. "Sixty-two. Take sixty-two and do all the math, and you get seventy-two point eight."

"So *now* we need to know which one is first," Mi-Cha said.

"This one," Danjuma said, pointing at the stone closest to where we'd entered. "It's got different color sparkles."

"Sparkles?" Adelson asked, rising smoothly to her feet. "Oh, I see. She's right, this one has gold flecks, and the others have silver. So maybe clockwise from here."

"Why clockwise?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Why not? We can try the other way if it doesn't work."

But heed this caution, challengers, I beseech,
For guessing wrong may bring consequences to breach.
In the Trial of Mind, precision must prevail,

"Seriously, there's usually a good clue in these," Cadence said as we all opened our mouths to protest.

For a wrong answer chosen, the price may entail.
Beware the dire consequences that lie in wait,
A misstep may seal a challenging fate.
So ponder and calculate with utmost care,

For the Trial's wrath, you surely wouldn't dare.
Let wisdom guide your hand, and reason be your guide,
Take caution in your choice, don't let impatience decide.

"So maybe not," the Wizard amended. "Still, I vote clockwise."

"Any objections?" I asked. "So much *bad* poetry," Masson grumbled as we began descending the steps.

"Didn't expect this," Adelson said with wonder.

We'd emerged . . . outside. Not outside, clearly; the sky overhead was just a little too evenly blue, and the white, fluffy clouds were notably still. But a great meadow stretched out before us, seemingly past the horizon in the far distance, slicing neatly through it was a perfectly straight gravel road.

"I guess we walk?" Cadence said.

Masson started, "I'd have thought there'd be a—"

In the realm of souls, where battles unseen reside,
The Trial of Soul beckons, a journey deep inside.

"This is torture," I insisted.

Prepare thyself, brave seekers, to face a daunting quest,
For here lies a trial where you must conquer the self, at its behest.
No sword nor shield shall aid you in this sacred ground,
But the strength within, where inner warriors are found.
Reflect upon thy essence, the depths of heart and mind,
For the Trial of Soul demands the greatest conquest, to unwind.
Let ego relinquish its grip, surrender its hold,
Embrace humility, and let your true self unfold.
Conquer the shadows, the doubts that silently creep,
Unleash the light within, where your essence runs deep.

Inward you must journey, to realms untamed and wild,
Where emotions converge, where dreams and fears are compiled.

Masson let out a sigh of relief. "Well, that wasn't too—"

Face the mirror of truth, let honesty be your guide,

"Not done," I said.

Confront your inner demons, with courage as your stride.
Release the chains of resentment, forgive, and make amends,
Embrace compassion's warmth, as it mends and transcends.
Embrace vulnerability, in its tender embrace,
For it is in the acceptance of self, that you'll find solace and grace.
The Trial of Soul is an inner odyssey, profound,
A quest to conquer yourself, where inner strength is found.
Embrace the challenge, seekers, and embark on this grand test,
For in the depths of your being, lies the key to eternal quest.
So step forth with valor, let your spirit ignite,
Embrace the Trial of Soul, conquer the self within sight.
Unravel the mysteries, let your essence freely bloom,
And emerge victorious, conquering thyself in this sacred room.

"There we go," Masson said as the voice finally faded away.

"Is this what happens *every* Quest?" I asked.

Cadence shrugged. "Most of them. Genre thing, I guess."

"No weapons," Mi-Cha cautioned.

We stepped on the path, hesitating to see if something happened. Nothing did, and so we all began walking forward, two abreast.

We journeyed for maybe fifteen minutes when, out of absolutely nowhere, a half dozen riders on horses thundered across the road, causing all of us to fall back onto the gravel.

"What in hell!" Danjuma cried, holding up her hand in a rude gesture toward the riders' backs. "Where did they even come from?"

"Nowhere," I said, picking myself up. "They were just *there*, all of them, and look—they're gone now."

"Didn't even flatten any of the grass," Cadence noted, peering to the side of the road.

"Jerks," Danjuma growled.

We resumed walking.

It was maybe five minutes before it happened again. From the opposite direction, a huge wagon, pulled by six galloping horses and filled with six armored knights, charged along our path. Again, we were nearly run down, forced to jump backward in a jumbled mass of bodies that rolled back in the gravel.

"Enough," Danjuma said, pulling out her sidearms. "Next time, I'm—"

"No weapons!" Mi-Cha shouted in her command voice.

Danjuma stopped, nodded, took a deep breath, and holstered her weapons. "Fine," she said, still breathing deeply. "But I'm not amused."

"What's that ahead?" I asked, pointing down the road.

We hurried forward and found that the road dead-ended into a wide stream full of crystal-clear water. A large rowboat sat at the water's edge, rocking gently in the current.

"I'm all for not walking a minute," Adelson said, climbing aboard. We all followed, sitting two abreast on the boat's three benches, an oar already in place for each of us.

"Shall we?" I asked, untying the rope that held us to the shore.

We slipped out into the stream and began rowing lightly, content to let the stream take us where it would. "Nice day for it, really," I observed. "You know, it's—"

"Watch out, mortal idiots!" an angry voice cried. Water splashed into the boat from both sides, wetting us lightly.

Masson leaned over the side. "Mermaids," he said calmly, as if this was a common occurrence.

"You almost killed us!" a shrill voice accused.

We all pulled harder on the oars, and in a moment we could see

them all behind us, angrily shaking their fists before diving out of sight.

"Weird," Danjuma said.

"Um," I said, turning around and looking toward where we were going. "That," I added, pointing.

Everyone's heads turned, and a few of us gasped. We were heading directly toward a *huge* ship—far too big for the stream we were in—and it was barreling upstream toward us.

"Get us to one side!" Mi-Cha shouted, pulling hard on her oar.

"My side, my side!" Adelson insisted, pulling on her oar as well.

Masson, ever the pilot, took charge. "My side," he shouted, which was also Mi-Cha's side, "pull your oars! Everyone else, out of the water!" His side pulled on their oars once, twice, three times, and he shouted, "Other side, push!" We dipped our oars back into the stream and rowed in the opposite direction. "Out!" he commanded.

Our little boat swiftly shifted to one side of the wide stream, all but pushing against the banks there, which had risen to several feet above our heads. Had it still been level with the stream, we'd have all simply jumped to shore. But that was no longer an option.

The ship roared past us, and from its upper decks, we could hear the sound of people laughing and chatting. We *barely* fit alongside it in the stream; it passed so close Danjuma was able to reach out and touch it as we slipped past.

"The people here," Danjuma said in a low voice, "are idiots."

We all nodded in agreement.

We rowed without further incident for maybe twenty minutes until our boat finally fetched up on a beach of yellow-white sand. We climbed out, pulling the boat up behind us. The dunes here had a clear path between them, so we sighed and began walking once more.

It wasn't long before we came to a richly patterned carpet lying in the middle of the path.

"Please tell me this flies," Mi-Cha said eagerly, stepping onto it and lowering herself to her knees. Adelson stepped up beside her,

once again lowering into a cross-legged position. The rest of us lined up behind them in various seated positions.

The carpet slowly rose into the air, stopping about two meters up.

"Onward," Mi-Cha commanded, and we began drifting forward. It picked up speed rapidly, and before long, we were skimming through a sandy desert, the warm breeze blowing in our faces.

"Left!" Mi-Cha cried suddenly, and our carpet banked crazily to one side as *something* zoomed past us, shouting epithets.

"What the hell was that?" Masson asked, looking behind us at the rapidly fading forms.

"A bunch of people on brooms, I think," Mi-Cha said, breathing heavily.

"Not even the air is safe from idiots," Danjuma muttered.

"Hmm," Adelson said thoughtfully. "I wonder if— Look out!"

We all ducked as a flight of enormous birds all but collided with us, our carpet veering crazily in a sudden cloud of feathers and angry squawks.

"Damnation, I'd rather walk!" Danjuma shouted at the birds as we zoomed through, leaving them to sort themselves out.

Our carpet settled to the ground then, and we stepped off. The sandy desert lay behind us, and before us was—

A vast, endless meadow, bisected by a gravel path.

"Oh, no," Cadence sighed.

"No, wait," Adelson said. "I think I'm getting it. The voice said we have to conquer ourselves, right?"

"Sure," Mi-Cha said. "But all we've been doing is avoiding being killed by idiots."

"Hmm," Adelson murmured again. "Let me take point this time. Walk slowly, and be ready to stop. And no talking. In fact, be as quiet as possible."

We moved forward at a much slower pace, and this time, even I heard it. A low rumble, but—

"Stop!" Adelson ordered.

The horseback riders appeared to our left again, but this time

they thudded to a stop just short of the road. A moment later, I a greater thundering of hooves. The wagon and its team of horses appeared, charging toward us from the right. They, too, clopped to a halt just short of the road.

The knights in the cart removed their helmets, and we were looking at ourselves. The riders, too, were us.

"I get it," Adelson said happily. "It wasn't other idiots we kept running into. It was us."

"I don't get it," Danjuma said, staring daggers at the us-knights.

"Three scenes, right? Each scene had people moving under their own power—us as pedestrians, the mermaids, and the birds. Each scene had someone on a basic conveyance—horses, the boat, or brooms. And each had someone in a larger conveyance—the wagon, the carpet, that big ship."

"It's been us every time?" Danjuma asked.

"That's silly," Mi-Cha frowned. "So then what do we—"

Hail to the conquerors, seekers of inner truth,
Who braved the Trial of Soul, transforming like a sleuth.
With eyes wide open, they gazed into the abyss,
Realizing the truth within, the battle they could dismiss.
No external foe to vanquish, no adversary in sight,
For they discovered the opposition, hidden within their own light.

"Oh, God," Danjuma growled.

In the depths of self-reflection, they faced their own strife,
Conquering the inner battles, reshaping their own life.
They recognized the power, their thoughts and emotions wielded,
Breaking free from self-imposed chains, from fears that had congeal-ed.
Through introspection's journey, they embraced their inner flaws,
Unlocking self-compassion, with love as their applause.
In the depths of self-discovery, they found serenity's embrace,

Owning authenticity, their spirits interlace.

"Seriously, are they all this long?" I muttered.

"You really do get used to it," Cadence said, using a belt knife to pick some stones out of his boot sole.

For the greatest triumph lies within, in conquering the self,
And the challengers, with newfound wisdom, truly delved.
Oh, champions of the soul, you've emerged renewed,
For you've conquered the Trial, with courage imbued.

"In the old console games, you could press a button to skip all this," Adelson noted.

"Never figured out a way." Cadence sighed, putting his knife away.

In realizing your own opposition, you've found liberation's grace,
Congratulations, seekers, on this triumphant embrace.
Let the echoes of self-love resound, a harmonious reverie,
As you embrace the wholeness, the radiant unity.
May your victory inspire others to seek the same,
For you've conquered the Trial of Soul, forever bearing its flame.

"Please God, let that be all," Masson muttered.

The world swirled unpleasantly, and we found ourselves in another enormous domed cavern. It was almost completely empty, save for a single column that stretched nearly to the ceiling, around which spiraled a metal staircase. A bright, golden glow emanated from the top of the column, illuminating the entire room.

A woman, tall and slim, stood next to the bottom stair, draped in gossamer, mismatched wraps. "Hello, seekers," she said, and her voice was as deep and as rich as the disembodied voice we'd been hearing. "I am the Sage of the Temple."

"Did you enjoy the ration bars?" Cadence asked.

She smiled and nodded. "Your generosity speaks well of you. You have come for the Golem's Heart?" We nodded. "Do you know its power?" We shook our heads. "With the Heart, you will be able to build a golem, an automaton of clay, capable of performing one singular task for you. It can be used to help or to harm, to raise or to ruin. And so before I grant it to you, I must know your own hearts. Do you agree?"

"We do," we said softly.

"Frank Kozina, Business Manager. Tell me your truest fear."

I swallowed heavily. "Being alone," I said. "I hated it in the real world. That's what I fear the most. Losing these guys."

The Sage nodded. "Your heart will lead you first to help your companions, and last to harm them. You are worthy. Bo Mi-Cha, Spaceship Captain. Name your fear."

Our captain spoke clearly and strongly. "Failing them."

Again, the willowy woman nodded. "Your heart will lead you first to serve, and last to rule. You are worthy. Renart Masson, Shuttle Pilot, tell me your fear."

Masson was quiet for a long moment, and the Sage waited patiently. "Never finding love," he said in a very small, quiet voice.

She nodded. "Your heart will lead you first to love, and last to hate. You are worthy. Zuri Danjuma, Spaceship Gunner, voice your fear."

Danjuma didn't hesitate. "Missing the shot."

I held my breath, but the Sage nodded. "I see your heart, Zuri Danjuma, Spaceship Gunner. It will lead you first to protect, and last to subjugate. You are worthy. Thomas Cadence, Nobleman. Name your fear."

Cadence too was quiet for a long moment, and the Sage waited patiently for his answer. "I don't want to lose my mind," he said, his voice cracking as he spoke.

Again, she nodded. "Your fear is for yourself, but your heart is for others. It leads you to help, to collect knowledge, which you share

freely. You are worthy. And last, Eloise Adelson, Wizard. Tell me your fear."

Adelson sighed. "I need to be needed."

The Sage nodded one last time. "Your heart will lead you first to those who need you, and last to those who would use you. You are worthy."

She smiled at all of us, and the golden light above brightened.

"Brace yourselves," Mi-Cha said. "I sense a—"

Hark! Let the trumpets sound, a victor we acclaim,
A fearless adventurer, deserving of acclaim.
With courage as your compass, you ventured far and wide,
Now, triumphant you stand, with the Heart of the Golem by your side.

"Does anyone hear actual trumpets?" I asked. "I feel like there should be—"

"S*sshhh*!" Cadence hissed.

Through treacherous terrain, where perils lie in wait,
You braved the darkest dungeons, defying fateful fate.
Your spirit, unyielding, fueled by an intrepid flame,
Guided by determination, you played the daring game.
With every trial you faced, your mettle was displayed,
A warrior of valor, whose bravery never swayed.
You solved riddles and puzzles, unlocking hidden doors,
Unraveling mysteries, as the tale of your quest soars.
Now, as the Golem's Heart beats within your grasp,
A token of your conquest, an everlasting clasp.
The golem, once stone, now stirs with life anew,
For it recognizes the hero, the chosen one, in you.

"Still never did *enigma*," Mi-Cha started, falling silent under a bemused glare from Cadence.

Let the bards sing your praises, with melodies untamed,
For you have etched your name in the annals of fame.
May your legacy endure, an inspiration to behold,
A testament to courage, to adventures yet untold.
Raise your sword to the heavens, let your victory resound,
The Heart of the Golem, a treasure you have found.
Congratulations, brave adventurer, on your noble quest,
May your spirit soar forever, and your triumphs never rest.

The Sage faded in a shower of gold and silver lights, leaving us free to claim our prize.

» Mission Complete: Heart of the Golem
XP awarded.

"I feel entitled to more XP because of the poetry," Masson said.

Getting to the Enchantress was a lot easier, faster, and poetry-free than getting the Golem's Heart. Once we'd returned to Quest's Retreat, Adelson spoke a simple spell and we were transported—wagon, horses, and all—to the courtyard outside the Green Tower, home of the Enchantress.

"She makes it pretty easy for customers to get here," Adelson said with a shrug when I asked her about it. "At one point, the spell was printed on matchbooks in every tavern in every trailhead village on the continent. We'll have to leave under our own power, but I can do the travel magic again. That'll put us about four hours away from King Jerrod's castle."

The Enchantress herself was a delight. A trim, gray-haired woman with sparkling eyes surrounded by webs of thin, joyful lines, she was a real player and not an NPC. You could tell since the latter always looked a little too perfect. She happily accepted the Golem's

Heart, offered us tea and scones, and asked what we wanted in return.

Mi-Cha explained the tracing spell we'd hoped to learn.

"Oh, absolutely, dear," the Enchantress said cheerfully. "And in fact, I can help you test it. But it's a small price for the Golem's Heart. Is there, perhaps, something else?"

Mi-Cha hesitated.

"Dear, I can see you're only starting in your craft. Do you have a starter book of spells?"

"I do," Mi-Cha said, nodding gratefully at Adelson.

"Then the least I can do is this," the Enchantress said, waving her hands over the table. Another leather-bound book appeared, this one generously embellished with glitter and glued-on pink pom-poms. "Apologies for the look of it, but its last owner had some very fanciful ideas. Wanted nothing more than a unicorn to ride, bless her. Ruined her completely when she learned how nasty and vicious unicorns are. Anyway. This will take you from level six to twelve, should you desire to go that far. All common spells, of course, but they'll do the job."

"Thank you," Mi-Cha said, drawing the book close and storing it in her personal storage.

"Now, which of our lovely dimensions were you thinking of trying?"

"The Elven Realms," Lord Cadence said. "It's got plenty of low- and midlevel Quests, it's safe for tourists, and there are no dungeon crawls to speak of."

"Oh, a lovely choice indeed. All filigree and manners. I do so love a visit. One moment."

She stood and vanished with a *pop*. After another *pop* a moment later, she was back, holding a beautiful white rock shot through with blue and green veins. "This should do," she said, handing the rock to me. "It's a kind of marble found only in the Elven Realms, so there should be no mistaking it. Now, will that be all?"

"I believe so," Mi-Cha said, bowing her head.

"Then our business is concluded. Please come again." She clapped her hands, and we reappeared next to our wagon.

"I wanted another scone," Masson grumbled.

"We best be on our way," Cadence said, climbing up into the driver's bench and giving Adelson a hand up. "I imagine you all will be anxious to return to your ship."

Stroman flew the shuttle down to get us, and we all returned to the *Princess*, elven rock in hand. We took a few days off, as Mi-Cha still needed to push herself to level 3 in Arcane Magic so she could use the tracing spell.

We also checked in with our engineers.

"It's going well," Tomiko said, wiping her brow. "We've leveled up Reverse Engineering twice already, which has helped. It's been a ton of work. But the whole thing is actually pretty simple, at the end of the day. The miniaturization is more expensive than complicated. At the heart of it all is a little artifact, the Babelfish. We've already got a mission to find another one.

"It's not just for making a Link system into a relay—it's at the heart of what makes these things work. My guess is that Confed and the Alliance both have to do a mission to get one of these every time they build a new node. Confed probably has a task force that does it or something."

"So the unit we have can already be a relay?" Mi-Cha asked.

Tomiko frowned. "That's where I'm unsure. It could be that the older Babelfish artifacts were point-to-point, but the newer ones are now multipoint. I think we're still going to have to go through with that mission. But here's the thing: I suspect the Babelfish itself can be reverse engineered too."

"Why wouldn't Confed do that? I mean, why haven't they?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Bo, I'm a level twelve at Reverse Engineer, and Leone is an

eleven. That's Guru-level for me, and nearly for him. I doubt the whole of Confed has someone with that skill at that level, and this job will take two. In fact, half the work we're going to do will just be to get Leone up to my level so we can get a synergy buff."

"We could use those Confed skill decks," I suggested.

"No, we already both did that. I'm hesitant to use them again on the same skill. We've gotten those flags off our sheets, and I'm reluctant to put them back, knowing what a slog it would be to level up again from there."

"Fair enough," I allowed.

"So we'll keep at it. How's the magic thing going?"

"Good," Mi-Cha said. "I'm on break right now, but I think tonight I can try the threshold spell and level up to three."

"I shall look forward to the evening entertainment, then," Tomiko said with a smile.

Dinner was a familiar and comfortable routine: conversation with the crew, meal trays, and a quiet game of cards afterward. Then Mi-Cha announced she was ready to try the tracing spell.

We cleared the table, and I put it into video mode to display the game's overworld map. I set the elven rock in the middle of the table and looked at the captain.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and gently laid her index finger on the rock. "*Dic mihi unde hoc natum sit!*" she cried.

I thought her pronunciation was pretty good.

The map panned and zoomed, slewing hard to one side, bringing new systems into view, then enlarging them. In just a few seconds, the rock was resting atop another system, this one with a G-class star.

A locked system.

"Ladies and germs," I said cheerfully, "I give you the Elven Realms."

"Shall we do the dragon thing?" Lad said, a gleam in her eye as she stood.

"We shall," I said.

Everyone stood and began making their way to the bridge.

13 / THE ELVEN REALMS

The jump to *Endless Kingdom*'s Elven Realms system—using the Leashed Dragon, of course—was uneventful.

> » Congratulations! You have unlocked a new world!
>
> » XP awarded.
>
> » Naming rights for this system are not available.
>
> » You may not file a claim on this system.
>
> » CALL TRACE
>
> »» bridged.sys
>
> »» tokenizerd.sys
>
> »» resources-bridge-temp.yaml
>
> »» nodeid 746282673489E

"Weird," I muttered, just as I heard both Lad and Danjuma mumble something on either side of me.

"Hey, is that putting anyone else close to leveling up?" Stroman asked.

"I'm still three hundred and seventy-plus away," I said, checking my sheet. Everyone else chimed in with similar or larger numbers.

"Well, bully for me, then," Stroman said with glee. "I'm only ten thou away now."

"Good for you," Lad said distractedly. "Guys, this is gorgeous."

If the first *Endless Kingdom* world had been a beautiful, Earth-like rendition of a habitable planet, Elven Realms was *several* steps beyond that. It was a blue-green world, with more generously sized oceans that sparkled under the system's dual yellow suns. Triple moons orbited it in a fashion that physicists would entirely disapprove of. Its clouds somehow managed to be majestic, looping and swirling around each other in complex patterns. The continents seemed to gleam like emerald jewels capped with alabaster mountain peaks.

"Strange," I said, "that they put so much effort into something that'd never be seen from space."

"Game engine," Mi-Cha said. "Every world has to have data to describe its terrain and everything. *Endless Sky* probably just inherited whatever they did for *Endless Kingdom*s and added a renderer for this view."

"I feel like you were a programmer in the real," Danjuma said.

The captain didn't answer.

"Well, I suppose we need to get our landing party together," Stroman said. I heard his chair creak as he shifted in it.

"Shotgun," Danjuma said.

"Actually, it'll be me, Frank, and two of the troopers," Mi-Cha announced. "I'm not cramming everyone into the shuttle's cabin again, and the main point of this trip is to negotiate a tourist business. If there wind up being any quests or something, we'll come back and get you, Zuri."

Danjuma frowned but said nothing.

"Which troopers?" Selen asked. He'd taken one of the guest chairs at the back of the bridge.

Mi-Cha chuckled. "Honestly, I don't even remember which ones we've got. We shuffled everyone across all other ships."

"I'd suggest Owen Blethen and Dalila Bello out of our current

team," Selen said thoughtfully. "Bello is as solid as they come and was probably waiting for a promotion. And Blethen . . . he's an odd duck. Bit of a mystic, if you know what I mean. Meditates a lot. Likes crystal jewelry. Spends a lot of time aligning his chakras. Always surprised me he took up *Endless Sky*. Anyway, I think he'd enjoy a trip down there."

"Done," Mi-Cha approved. "Get 'em geared up. Full loadout for them, Frank and I will take sidearms."

"On it."

Half an hour later, we were drifting gently toward the planet in the shuttle, slipping into its atmosphere, and looking for a place to touch down.

"I like that castle there," Mi-Cha said, pointing at a particularly tall, delicate-looking structure that sat in an expansive meadow. "No defensive walls. Suggests we're not going to be in for a fight."

"Fair enough," I agreed.

She took us in expertly, touching down gently and popping the forward hatch.

As we clambered down the ramp, a rabbit came bounding up to us. A *huge* rabbit, mind you, easily a meter-plus standing on its hind legs, which it immediately did as it got close. It was pure white, with long, floppy ears, and was wearing a black waistcoat.

"Uh," it said, staring past us at the shuttle. "There's, uh . . . I'm sorry, are you from outer space?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said with a grin.

"There's . . ." It was flabbergasted. "There's a welcome speech?" This was clearly a part of its routine.

"Can we skip it?" I asked.

It stared at me uncomprehendingly.

"Then by all means," Mi-Cha said.

It cleared its throat, and its mouth opened and closed a few times before it shook itself and continued, its eyes still riveted to our shuttle.

Enter, wanderers, into the Elven Realms,
Where ethereal beauty, in majesty, unfolds and calms.
Through enchanted woods and shimmering streams,
Step forth, and immerse in elven dreams.
In a realm adorned with blossoms fair,
Where moonlight weaves a celestial glare,
Where silver stars adorn the velvet sky,
Welcome, dear visitors, with spirits high.
Amid ancient forests, where secrets lie,
Where emerald leaves whisper, and spirits fly,
The Elven Realms awaken, its sights untamed,
Where magic dances and wonder is named.

"You really kind of get the point after the first dozen couplets or so," I said, letting the recitation go on.

"Are these seriously all scripted?" Mi-Cha asked.

Cadence nodded. "Usually they skip them or shorten them after the first time. It's best to just let them do it. If you interrupt they'll start over."

"Can't we just run away?" I asked.

"They'll follow."

You'll find solace and peace, in their presence so near,
Guided by ancient wisdom, devoid of all fear.
So, wanderers, welcome to this realm unseen,
Where fantasy intertwines with the mystical sheen.
In the Elven Realms, let your spirit alight,
Embrace the enchantment, surrender to its might.
Let your steps be gentle, your hearts be kind,
For within these realms, harmony you shall find.
Bask in the radiance, let the magic ignite,
Welcome, dear travelers, to the Elven Realms, bright."

It finished, blinked furiously for a few moments, and finally looked at us.

I chuckled. "Renart would be so annoyed."

"I wish our wrist comps worked. I'd have recorded it," Mi-Cha agreed. Then, to the rabbit: "Thank you so much for your kind welcome. We are, as you have surmised, visitors from another world. We seek a peaceful audience with your leaders."

"Lotta guns for a peaceful audience," the rabbit noted, looking over the troopers.

I blinked. That was a very non-NPC response.

"Well, the last world offered some level of danger, so we just wanted to be prepared. We'll leave them with our shuttle, if you like," the captain said.

"I'm sorry, are you a PC?" I asked.

The rabbit nodded. "Lapin Blanc," he said. "My parents had a sense of humor. Thus, all this," he added, gesturing to himself. "Look, I can take you to the king and queen, but yeah, maybe you'd better leave the soldiers. And did you say *shuttle*? There's a bigger ship up there somewhere?"

"There is," Mi-Cha said.

The rabbit shook its head. "Why? Or how? No, go with why."

"I'm sorry," I interrupted. "Did you have to memorize that whole speech?"

The rabbit's eyes narrowed. "You did listen to the entire thing, didn't you?"

"Absolutely lovely," I replied.

It glared at me again for a moment before continuing. "You were going to tell me why you're in a spaceship?"

Mi-Cha cleared her throat. "It's a long story, and it's the one we hope to share with your king and queen."

"Oh, they'll be keen to hear it," the rabbit muttered. "Right this way." And with that, it turned and began hopping away. Mi-Cha and I hustled to keep up, leaving the troopers to guard the shuttle.

We walked briskly—and for the relevant party, hopped sedately—

for maybe ten minutes before we came to the castle's grand entrance. It was a soaring archway, easily twenty meters high, with nothing, not even a sign, to deter someone from entering. The rabbit simply hopped on in, and we followed.

We entered into a long, grand hallway. The walls seemed to be made of some kind of translucent crystal, and they sparkled and coruscated with lights of blue, green, and purple. Shorter, yet no less elegant, archways led off this main hall, but about ten meters in stood two tall, slim, humanlike creatures—the king and queen, I guessed from their bearing. Each was garbed in simple, flowing garments of white and gold. They had long dark hair bound into simple tails that fell down their backs, almond-shaped eyes of brilliant green, and, of course, pointed ears—because elves. Each wore a simple gold circlet.

"Your Majesties," the rabbit said, sketching a quick bow. "Ah . . . I've forgotten to get their names," it said, embarrassed.

"Bo Mi-Cha, Captain of the starship *Pretty, Pretty Princess*. This is Frank Kozina, Business Manager. Very pleased to meet you."

The king raised an eyebrow. "I am King Othorion. This is my co-ruler, Queen Madris. Starship, you say? Haven't heard that one before."

Mi-Cha chuckled. "It's a bit of a story. Would you like to hear it right here, or is there someplace more comfortable that would be appropriate?"

"Is this a discussion?" the queen asked.

Mi-Cha nodded. "There's been something of a development in the game, actually. The *games*, to be specific. So yes, this will probably take a bit. But I promise, we're hoping to make it worth your while."

The elves exchanged a quick glance. "The salon, I think," Madris said. She raised a hand and added, "*Gwirodydd aer, dygwn bedwar i Salon Repose*."

A gust of wind blew in, carrying a cloud of swirling purple lights that blew all around us, ruffling our hair and obscuring our vision. Then they cleared, and we realized we'd been magically transported

to an expansive sitting room. Its walls were crystalline and shot through with eddies of light. Four uncomfortable-looking crystal chairs—each a throne in its own right—stood in a circle, facing each other. Next to each, a crystal table held crystal goblets that had been filled with a golden liquid. They were cold, judging from the beads of water gently forming on the goblets' bowls.

"Magic," I said with a reverential sigh. "That is so cool."

"Please, be seated," the king said, gesturing to the chairs. "And help yourselves to some dew wine. It's delicious, refreshing, and minimally alcoholic."

All four of us sat. "Oh, that's weird," Mi-Cha said as our chairs began conforming themselves to our bodies.

"I like it," I said, sinking back into the chair's strangely comfortable, cushiony material. It snuggled me a bit more closely.

"We generally use this room to debrief heroes who've returned from our quests," Madris said, her ethereal, otherworldly tones now replaced with an oddly familiar accent. "But I think we can drop our roles if you've truly come here in a starship."

"Are you from Chicago?" I guessed.

She laughed. "Outer suburbs. Schaumburg. Not quite as fancy as all this," she added, waving a hand around the room.

"I'm dying to hear why there's a starship on our world," Othorion said. "Or above it, I guess." His accent was pure Brooklyn, I guessed.

"So, it all began with us trying to unlock new systems in *Endless Sky*," Mi-Cha began.

The elves' long, elegant eyebrows rose. "Endless *Sky*?" Madris said. "The sci-fi game?"

"The very one."

It took about an hour to share what we'd discovered, where we'd been so far, and what we planned for the future. The elves cut in with questions every so often, especially when we hit

Endless Sky game concepts that didn't have exact equivalents in their game. Finally, we discussed the notion of starting a tourist business, allowing visitors from *Endless Sky* and *Endless Kingdom* to explore the other game for a short while.

"I mean, we're definitely in," Othorion said at last. "The whole point of this dimension was basically tourism. We're kind of the easy-level expansion pack to *Endless Kingdom*, so it'd be perfect for newcomers just looking for a taste."

"I suspect the other four kingdoms here will want in on it as well," Othorion added. "You mentioned a welcome center of some kind in Terathion. Could we build one in each of the five kingdoms here? Maybe rotate people between them or offer different itineraries in each?"

"Sure, I don't see why not," Mi-Cha said. "But pardon me—Terathion?"

"That's the main world in *Endless Kingdom*," Madris explained.

"Ah. But yeah, shuttling people to one of five places shouldn't be a big deal. We're looking at no more than sixty-four people at a time, ideally for two weeks or a four-week double stint."

Othorion nodded. "The Quests here are designed to take about that long, so that's perfect. We do have a couple of three-week ones . . ." He trailed off, looking at his coworker.

"If it needs to be an even four weeks for longer trips, we could add on some *cultural enrichment*." Madris grinned. "I used to be a museum curator. I'm sure I can come up with something. Balls, riding lessons, feasts, small concerts, that kind of thing."

"Perfect. We're still building out the infrastructure," I said. "Oh, wait, do you use gold here? As your currency?"

"Grisial crystals, actually, but they have a direct exchange rate with Terathion currency," Othorion said.

"I'm still working out currency exchange as well," I said, shaking my head. It was getting more complicated by the minute. "But let's plan to touch base in a month, if that works for you. It'll give us time to finish our infrastructure and start advertising on our end, and give

you time to get a welcome center started. More importantly, start working up your itineraries and what you want to charge for them. We've been thinking cost plus a hefty profit margin, which we'd split fifty-fifty."

Othorion nodded. "That would work for us, I think. It's roughly how we manage things now with visitors from Terathion."

"Excellent," said Mi-Cha. "And look, we don't pretend we've thought this out. If you think of complications, or have ideas to make this better, let us know next time we're in."

"Can we communicate only while you're here? Or your ship, rather?"

"Yeah," Mi-Cha said, giving me a quick glance. I shrugged. "Intersystem communications are a game element in *Endless Sky*," she explained. "It gets very political. We're working on something, but I'm not sure if it'll actually work here. A lot of our tech doesn't. We actually have to use a magic artifact to get home."

"Interesting," the king mused.

"You know," I said slowly, trying to think quickly, "we could test some magical long-range communications. Artifacts, ideally. If we could get one to connect to Nexus, we could basically set it next to a Link terminal to act as a kind of relay. A lot of magic stuff is working in Nexus that doesn't work in any of the actual systems."

"Hmm," Mi-Cha said, nodding. "It's a good thought. Yet another thing to work out."

"We may have something to offer there," Orthion said, glancing at his co-ruler and getting a quick nod. "There are artifacts—we actually make them here—that can communicate across dimensions. We don't have any on hand at the moment, but perhaps by your next trip—"

"Ideal," Mi-Cha said, nodding briskly. "That would massively simplify things. Hopefully we'll have something on the tech side of things to pair it with by then."

"Excellent," Madris said, smiling. "Anything else we should do right now?"

"I . . . well, I sort of have a question. If you don't mind." The elven queen raised an eyebrow, inviting me to continue. "Why elves?"

Orthion laughed. "We weren't originally. We came in early on, and you were always a human. When the first expansion hit, elves became a PC race, and people with certain stats were invited to convert, provided they came to this dimension to set things up. We jumped on it. Ground floor of a new dimension? Absolutely."

"Elves get massive positive modifiers on nearly anything magic," Madris added with a grin. "We regenerate MPs at something like ten times the rate of a human. For anything but the most complex spells, you're effectively unlimited after level twelve or so."

"Fascinating," Mi-Cha said, and I could see gears spinning in her head. I reminded myself to ask her later. "Well then, I think that's probably—"

"Your Majesties," a voice interrupted. It was the white rabbit, hopping in low and respectful.

"What is it, favored messenger?" Madris said, her voice once again in elven monarch mode.

"One of the soldiers that came on the shuttle wishes an audience."

"Oh?" Mi-Cha said.

"Show him in, dear hare," Othorion said.

It was Owen Blethen. Mi-Cha and I exchanged glances as he stepped into the space between the four chairs. "Captain," he said, "this place is wonderful. I'd . . . like to stay. Permanently, I mean. Switch games."

Four sets of eyebrows rose to hairlines. "Is that even possible?" Mi-Cha asked, looking past Blethen to the elves. They shrugged.

"I don't see why not, now that the games are connected," I said. "You and I both picked up a magic skill, after all. Which reminds me, Your Majesties," I said, turning back to the elves. "We could use someone skilled in magic, preferably Primal Magic, to help with moving ships from system to system. Maybe you have someone who'd be interested?"

King and queen exchanged looks. "The tradition here is Elven Magic," Othorion said slowly, "but it's largely compatible with Primal Magic, from what we've seen. And you know . . ." he added, looking at his co-ruler.

"You're thinking Virion?" Madris said, nodding.

"Aye," the king answered. He turned back to us. "Virion is a bit . . . dissatisfied. He hated the . . . what did he call it?"

"Rustic," Madris said, rolling her eyes.

"Rustic nature of Terathion. He came here as soon as the expansion was released, took on an elven avatar and all, but he's still not happy."

"Quite skilled at battle magics. I think he regrets having joined the game so soon—we've always felt like one of the other games would have been a better fit, if only he'd waited." Madris tapped a finger on her chair's arm.

"A swap," Mi-Cha suggested. "Owen stays here, although we take his tech gear back with us. Virion comes with us."

"There's his stake in the League," I reminded her.

"Owen, were you hoping to take up magic?" Mi-Cha asked. He nodded. "Well, there you go. You sell your stake in exchange for spell books or whatever from Virion. Gets you a leg up in this game, gets him in a good position in ours."

"That'd be awesome," Owen said, his eyes glistening.

"I'll summon Virion. He should be around here somewhere, and you can tell him all about it," King Othorion said with a smile.

To our great mutual delight, Virion—"Call me Vince now"—had little difficulty switching to a sci-fi game. He and Owen had taken less than an hour to negotiate their trade, and both felt like they'd gotten the better end of the deal. Virion's one concern was whether or not he'd remain an elf—"I don't care either way, but I'm curious"—once he visited a sci-fi system.

"I honestly don't know," Mi-Cha said. "I've maintained my Magic skill, so that will stay. There's been some . . . consolidation between the games. Some merging of information. It wouldn't surprise me if you did stay an elf. You can always play it off as a new alien species if you want. It'll make people mad with curiosity."

Vince nodded thoughtfully, effortlessly invoked the Leashed Dragon spell, and launched us into its acid-trip version of FTL.

"Wow," I said as we emerged into Nexus. "John's been busy."

And he had. Starkiller had found four old-model cargo haulers and essentially welded them together in a plus-sign-shaped configuration. Each ship was built along the lines of the *Princess*: thick spines contained much of their operating equipment and crew quarters, and cargo containers fanned out along those spines.

"Welcome home," Starkiller's voice floated over the bridge as we coasted toward the ersatz space station. "Like it?"

"It's amazing, John," Mi-Cha said with a laugh. "How far along are you?"

"All the major structural work is done. You can come over if you like. We've got docking ports built at the end of Blue Arm already. The cargo containers you see are all hab modules. We've got a hundred of them per arm, so most of them won't be needed right now. But the rest are already configured as suites, lounges, dining areas, and the like. Mostly for us, as the plan is to transit people through pretty quickly.

"*Chip* and *Dale* have about two more weeks of work to become our liners, and we're refitting a hundred-passenger FTL shuttle. How'd your trip go?"

We told him what we'd accomplished.

"Two worlds, not just one? Fantastic!" he said when we'd finished.

"Plus four more potential ones—and that's just in the *Endless Kingdom* game," I said gleefully.

"So you think the other games are in here as well?"

"It makes sense," Mi-Cha said. "If the dimensions of *Endless*

Kingdom are just more systems on our overworld map, then it stands to reason all the other games are as well. It would have been the easiest thing for their programmers to do."

"So that leaves us with just one logistics problem," I said.

"That shuttle." Mi-Cha nodded. "Although, Virion—sorry, Vince—could certainly handle it for a while."

"So long as it's just a few worlds, yeah," I countered. "Look, imagine we stagger the two-week periods, right? That potentially gives us fourteen worlds. We exchange people on a different world per day. But we can't work him or anyone else that continuously. So figure two days off a week—that's ten worlds, max. Now we also have to assume that between the Leashed Dragon and FTL, we'll be able to cover ten worlds. Without having to have some other means of jumping back and forth from Nexus, I mean."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, I see where you're going. We could always recruit someone else from *Endless Kingdom* to help. Vince will need vacation time too."

"And all this is assuming he wants to be a shuttle pilot," Stroman put in. "From what you said, he might well want to get his own ship and do his own thing."

"True." Mi-Cha sighed. "So we have the logistics problem of getting between non-FTL worlds without wearing Frank down."

"I'm going to be busy enough managing the business side of things," I pointed out.

"True," Mi-Cha repeated with a frown. "We need to think about it."

"In the meantime," Tomiko said, "we need to obtain one of those Babelfish artifacts. And we should probably do it sooner rather than later because Confed, or at least the Alliance, is going to notice that the mission counter has incremented."

"The what?" Starkiller put in. "And the who?"

"I'll explain later," Mi-Cha said, waving him off. "You're right, Eto, that's probably our priority right now. Getting our own communications network is going to be key to advertising and coordinating

this effort. Okay." She took a deep breath. "John, we're going to head out on this mission. Anything you'd like us to pick up on the way back?"

"I think we're good," he said after a moment's thought.

"All right. All hands, let's prepare for departure. We've got a mission to complete, and it'll probably involve some fighting. Let's charge weapons."

"Aye, Captain," Lad and Danjuma said in the same breath. I brought my console to life and started clearing the tactical display.

"Eto," Napolitano's voice came over the intercom. "I think you need to come down here."

"Why, what's up?" the chief engineer said. I could hear the frown in her voice.

"The Confed Link node is . . . Well, there's an incoming call."

14 / IN HARM'S WAY

"Ah, Captain Mi-Cha. What a pleasure to see you again."

"Harm," Mi-Cha said flatly.

Tomiko and Napolitano had rigged the Confed Link node to the ship's display system, giving us a good look at Grand Admiral Harm's old-man face.

"How's life outside the Alliance, Bo?" Harm asked drolly. "And how rebellious of you, I must say again." He wagged an admonishing finger at us. "And you seem to have picked up some strays along the way, as well as some of our equipment. Busy, busy."

"They asked to join up with us. As far as I know, it's still a free game."

"Oh, you're welcome to them. We only use those old corvettes for malcontents who'd be better off somewhere else anyway." He waved a hand, dismissing the concern.

"How'd you find us?" Stroman asked.

Harm shrugged. "I actually wasn't looking. When the corvettes went missing after reporting that they'd encountered you, we waited to see if they'd turn up. They didn't, so we started calling their Link units. This one finally answered, though the signal is slightly differ-

ent. I'm assuming you've been tampering with it." Nobody on our end said anything. "Well. If nothing else, it's good to know where that node went. Might I ask about the others?"

"They're dust," Mi-Cha said in a clipped tone. "Off to wherever they respawn."

"Ah. Of course."

"Anything else we can help you with, Harm?" Stroman asked.

"I suppose I should be thanking you. All those terrorist actions you've been involved with—they've really galvanized Confed leadership behind my faction."

"You mean the things you framed us for," Mi-Cha snapped.

Harm shrugged again. "Whoever controls the narrative controls reality. Nothing unites a polity like an external enemy, and your leaving the Alliance has only made my job easier. We're spinning it that they kicked you out, by the way."

Our captain gave an exasperated sigh.

"This isn't your game anymore. The other Confed factions were the ones who kept you so-called free traders engaged. A back channel for us to buy alien tech. Well, we don't need as much alien tech anymore. With nearly two hundred systems full of noobs, we have the manpower to produce our own tech—and advance the state of the art. My faction's won, the Alliance has been tamed, and alien hunting is back on the docket. It's my game now, and it's time I shape it."

"That's wonderful to hear—" Stroman began.

"I was surprised," Harm continued as if Stroman hadn't spoken, "when you broke so many of the conventions the Alliance and Confed had developed. Sailing into *my* system to kill *me*?" He shook his head as if disappointed in a small child.

"I was a Guild assassin, you ninny," I said. "They assigned me your contract. End of story."

His eyes narrowed a bit more. "*Was*?"

"I've retired."

He stared at me through the display screen for a long moment.

"Perhaps. But that is not my main concern. My intel is that you, Frank, had a connection to the Aa'an decades ago."

From my perspective, it felt like barely two years ago, but: "Yeah. I was a majordomo to a midlevel NPC military leader. No lingering connections."

"What's this about, Harm?" Stroman asked.

"You and your crew, and your ship, have shown yourselves capable of inflicting significant damage on our military assets when you have a mind to," the admiral said, steel threading through his voice.

"Your crews suck?" Stroman asked, trying hard to make it sound like a question.

"Perhaps. But you are particularly overfunded, from what we know of you, which is a lot. Your ship is massively over-provisioned and over-armed. You are an unknown. An enigma, and a dangerous one at that. As we embark on our campaign against the Aa'an Dominancy, I dislike the idea of enigmas."

"Campaign?" Stroman asked, this time sounding genuinely curious.

"It's hardly a secret that the Aa'an have been attacking our worlds," Harm growled. "Without provocation. Attempting to seize them. They have attempted to land colony ships on unpopulated worlds under our claim."

We exchanged another round of glances. "Weird, but whatever. I mean, the Aa'an have never cared about planets before," I said. "They have their cityships. But if they've decided to go colonial . . . I mean, that *is* the game."

"They have," Harm said. "And while it *is* the game, I aim to take the game to them. You can assure me of your . . . disinterest in the matter?"

"We're independent, Harm," Mi-Cha said. "We may take on mercenary work. Or escort jobs. Or whatever. We're guns for hire, cargo space for hire, you name it. So no, no assurances. But if we do

encounter you in battle, it'll be because someone paid us to, not because we have some kind of vendetta."

"And is that your intention? To become mercenaries for the Aa'an?"

"I don't think we've even spoken to an Aa'an in years," Mi-Cha said, her patience clearly wearing thin. "And if you must know, we're putting together a new line of business that will keep us quite busy."

"A new *line* of business?" Harm asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Tourism."

Harm said nothing but blinked furiously for what felt like thirty seconds. "Tourism," he finally managed, sounding faintly off-balance. "Hauling people between worlds? To . . . sightsee?" We all nodded. "I . . . see." He didn't sound convinced.

"Again, not to say we won't take other jobs to pay the bills. And we *will* defend ourselves—let me be exceedingly clear on that point," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Don't point guns at me and mine, Harm. But aside from that, I doubt we'll be running into you. Tell all your people you blew us up or something, I don't care. Enjoy your virtual life. Leave us alone."

Harm looked gobsmacked. Then his eyes narrowed. I could tell he didn't believe us. "Tourism," he repeated quietly.

"See the galaxy, explore strange new worlds," Stroman said happily.

"To and from Confed worlds?" Harm asked in a guarded tone.

"We'll have specific written agreements with the leadership of any world we service," Mi-Cha said. "So yes, if one of your governors-general wants us to service their system. If not, then no. This isn't a surreptitious thing. It is, as I said, a new line of business."

Harm's expression didn't relax, and we could all see him doing the math in his head. Easy enough for him to forbid his leaders from agreeing to anything with us. And that was fine: between the Alliance—presuming Confed didn't get them to blacklist us—the UFW, and all the alien species, we'd have plenty of customers.

"Perhaps," the admiral said very slowly, "the Aa'an Dominancy will provide us with sufficient problems upon which to focus."

"You do that," Mi-Cha said. "We've got a business to run. We just want you to leave us alone."

She moved to close the channel, but Harm held up a hand. "A moment, Captain." In my mind, Mi-Cha's left eyebrow arched. "I'm wondering if I couldn't extract a promise from you. Perhaps in exchange for something."

A tense moment of silence followed. "Proceed," Mi-Cha said carefully.

"Stay out of Confederate space, Captain. You and yours."

Mi-Cha chuckled. "Afraid your folks might go on a trip and decide to stay?"

Harm frowned. "More pressing is the fact that you have all these acts of violent terrorism hanging around your neck."

"Which you forged, probably killing many of your own people in the process," Mi-Cha pointed out.

"Details. The point is, if you're flitting about in our space, it'll make me look bad."

"Color me concerned," Mi-Cha said in a bored tone. "And what are you offering?"

"I'm sure you're dying to build your own Link network. A clue: you can't. Every node requires a specific game artifact. I'll tell you where to get them."

Mi-Cha sighed. "Boring. Assume I already know that. What else have you got?"

Harm's eyebrows shot up, and the muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched several times. "That should be impossible," he said in a low tone. "But fine. You can't possibly want bigger guns. So what, then?"

"Oh, I wouldn't turn down one of those twenty-gig monstrosities you're mounting these days, but I'll take what I have." She paused, but I could tell she already had an answer in mind. "Oh, how about

this: a way to cancel whatever gravity-well mangling you've figured out how to do."

"The FTL net?" Harm sputtered. He clamped his mouth shut almost immediately, and we could all see he regretted naming it. "You ask too much."

"Seems like you're getting a lot of value. And it *is* possible, then. Just knowing that makes me *so* want to steal it."

Harm's face flushed. "Fine. A schematic, nothing more. You'll have to figure out how to build it on your own." He gave us a nasty grin. "You won't find it easy."

"Deal."

"And what assurances do I have that you'll honor our agreement?" he asked haughtily.

"Frankly, I don't enjoy having my ship shot up by yours. But otherwise, you don't. But think about it. If word spreads that we don't honor our agreements—and I'm willing to sign something right now—then we'll be out of business."

"You'd sign a contract?" He sounded shocked.

"Absolutely."

"Give me five minutes."

The image on the screen dissolved. Nobody said anything. For myself, I didn't trust that Harm couldn't hear us. But true to his word, he was back exactly five minutes later. "I'm transmitting the paperwork now. Once you sign, the schematics will unlock automatically."

"Seems like treason," Mi-Cha said, bending over her console, peering at the paperwork.

"The schematics are easy," Harm boasted. "It's the building you'll find difficult."

Mi-Cha tapped her console a few times. "Done." A *ping* accompanied the unlocking of the schematics. "Thank you for doing business, Grand Admiral."

"Never darken my doorstep."

"That's the agreement. Now, we have a tourism business to run. Have a lovely virtual life." She jabbed a button on her console so hard

we could all hear it, and I wondered if she'd manage to crack the screen with her fingertip. "I hate that guy," she said in an exhausted tone.

"I mean, we're a big enough threat that a high-and-mighty Confed grand admiral felt the need to do something about it," Stroman said. "That's a plus."

"And we've got those schematics," Lad pointed out.

"We do. Eto, I'm sending down schematics for a device. Tell me how hard this will be to build."

"Challenge accepted," the engineer replied.

"Do you think the Aa'an are really going after planets now?" I asked.

Everyone was quiet for a moment. "I mean, good on them if they are," Lad said at last.

"Still, that's a huge shift," I said.

"Especially for NPCs," Danjuma added.

"Well," I said, "they're not all NPCs." I was met by an astounded silence. "There's some kind of conversion. Like with the elves," I said, swiveling my chair to look at the captain. "I met at least one Aa'an PC when I was on a cityship. After all this time, they might *mostly* be PCs."

"Or all," Stroman said.

"Yeah."

"Interesting," Mi-Cha said softly. "You know," she continued more loudly, "I am suddenly of a mind to see how open the Aa'an would be to intergame tourism."

My eyebrows rose. "Oh, that's clever."

She grinned. "Hedge our bets against the Confed insularism?"

I smiled.

"What's the nearest Aa'an cityship, Rashmi?"

Lad tapped their console for several seconds. "If the tracking data is accurate, the *Boundless Comfort*."

"Frank?" Stroman asked.

"Not where I came from, but they're all pretty much the same."

"Rashmi, lay in a course for the cityship *Boundless Comfort,* please," Mi-Cha said, settling back into her command chair.

"Laid in, Captain," Lad said, their finger hovering over the FTL button.

"Engage," our captain ordered.

"Plagiarist," our navigator muttered with a smile.

15 / THE CITYSHIP BOUNDLESS COMFORT

Aa'an cityships are a sight to behold. They're one of the most impressive structures in the entire game—something I hadn't realized when I started, having transferred directly to the interior spaces of the cityship *Effortless Submission* right after the training level.

Imagine a starship over thirty kilometers long, ten kilometers wide, and nearly a kilometer high. Bigger than Manhattan back in the real and taller than anything humanity had ever built on Earth. It arrives in a system, dropping out of FTL in a blaze of rainbow-hued radiation, the likes of which an ordinary ship could never hope to produce. It then glides slowly through, harvesting whatever resources it wants, trading with the myriad ships that pop in for a visit, and eventually departing in another shower of radiant light.

The Aa'an once had a home world, rumor has it. In fact, the game's official backstory said that the Aa'an had tried conquering worlds but found too few that met their preferred environmental standards. And so they'd started building their own mini-worlds, the cityships, and plied the universe on those instead.

With a vessel that large, you don't need to use a shuttle to dock. We simply flew the *Princess* slowly into one of *Boundless Comfort*'s

capacious dockyards, waited until a set of tractor-pressor beams held us steady, and then walked out through the automated umbilical that attached to our sally port. Mi-Cha and Stroman accompanied me while everyone else stayed back to grind some skills.

A low-level functionary greeted us, and I quickly moved my hands and feet into the position of fourth-degree cooperation between vendor and customer. "Welcome," the little lizard-like creature said, its tail flicking sideways in a fifth-degree gesture of perfunctory submission. "How long will you be staying?"

I held out one arm, showing it my wrist comp. "A few days. A week at most."

It tapped its slablet on my comp, and both devices *cheeped* as payment was authorized. Aa'an had never caught onto wrist comps, for some reason. "Approved. Enjoy your stay," it added, dipping into the shallow curtsey that indicated third-level respect for an honored visitor.

Saying anything else would have been rude, and so we all brushed past the diminutive alien and made our way into the city proper.

And truthfully, *city* was the only word to use. As we stepped onto a main concourse, building facades soared around us, with alleys and accessways cutting through them. We stepped to the railing of the concourse and looked over into a park landscaped in typical Aa'an desert fashion and riddled with warmed resting-boulders, shallow meditation caves, and thin streams of fresh water. Above, the simulated sky suggested late morning, glowing a gentle gold and blue that allegedly reminded the Aa'an of their ancestral home. And this was only one level. Above and below, I knew, were roughly seven or eight more spaces like this one, uniquely landscaped and stacked atop one another. And there would be more of them both fore and aft. The scale of the thing was just stupendous.

"Where do we go?" Mi-Cha asked. "I've never been on one of these for more than a quick trading stop."

"There should be a couple of consulates from the other major

polities," I said, tapping on my wrist comp. "I'm wondering if . . . ah, yeah." I shook my head sadly.

"What?" Stroman asked.

"Confed shut theirs down a couple of weeks ago. Not a good sign."

"So we check with the Alliance consulate?" Mi-Cha asked.

"No, I actually think we should see if we can talk to someone in the ship's leadership."

"Is that possible?" Stroman asked.

"It might be. The Aa'an put great stock in titles, and Galactic Transformer is technically Mythical since we're the only ones who have it." I started tapping my comp again. "I just need to find the open command center."

"What's that?" Stroman wanted to know.

"Public offices, basically. The Aa'an military runs the city, and their command spaces are split into public areas and working spaces that require clearance. Ah, here it is. Oh, and it's close too. Um . . ." I studied the map the cityship's central computer had sent me. "Up two, need to cross to the starboard side, a bit aft. Follow me."

Aa'an ships, especially this close to the docks, tended to be pretty cosmopolitan. Lizard people of various sizes hurried here and there, but they were liberally interspersed with humans clad in household uniforms, spacers in coveralls, and even one or two in military gear. We even spotted a few other aliens: two tall blue Willown were walking together, reedy arms intertwined as they conversed chemically, and a small pack of short, dwarf-like Naughts scurried along between two of the docks.

The concourses here were lined with businesses that catered to spacers, traders, and dock workers: bars, inns, seedy showrooms, and shops full of gear, provisions, and even weapons. We made our way to a lift gate, which used carefully controlled gravity pulses to push us up two levels, and then we walked over a bridge to the port and starboard sides of the ship. Finally, we headed aft a bit until the shops

petered out and were replaced by the serious-looking, drab facades of government offices.

"Here it is," I said, pushing through a set of double doors.

The inside of this space was no less impressive than the one we'd just left: the ceiling soared five stories up, and the open area we'd stepped into spanned a dozen meters or more to either side. Arched doorways led off into various offices and other rooms, but directly in front of us was a reception podium, staffed by a mid-sized Aa'an with yellow strips around her throat.

"Greetings," I said in an even voice, raising one hand to my temple in a gesture of fourth-degree query—a visible sign that I was pinging her character sheet.

She tilted her head to one side in first-degree acquiescence and then repeated my gesture back at me as she pinged our sheets.

She was a PC, and her eyes narrowed in surprise. Her posture shifted to one of maximum respect, her scaly left foot arched back, her tail extended ramrod-straight behind her, and her head tipped up, exposing her yellow-flashed throat. "Honored guests," she hissed gently, decorum now mandating a maximum volume when addressing us.

Aa'an societal norms are a true pain in the ass.

I shifted my own posture to one of second-degree mutual admiration, inviting her to relax and speak normally. "Much respect to the mighty Aa'an Dominancy and the leadership of *Boundless Comfort*," I said.

She bowed her head in the human fashion. "Thank you. How may this one be of meager assistance?"

I relaxed a bit, my back already aching. "We've come in hope of speaking to a senior leader among you," I said carefully. Every phrase, every word would trigger a specific reaction from the aliens' horrifically complex protocols and standards. "In regard to aggressions from the Terran Confederacy. Purely in query," I added.

She held very still for a long moment, then gave me a quick nod. "I can do that," she said quietly, looking down at her podium. Her

right foot snaked out sideways as she completed the second-degree gesture of respectful direction: raising her left hand to her chest. "If it pleases you, room four on your right-hand side has been set aside for your comfort. You will be met in as short a time as possible."

I contorted my legs into the third-degree posture of delighted compliance.

> » Skill-up! Your Aa'an Etiquette skill is now at level 5.

Oh, lovely, I thought as we turned and walked toward the designated room.

"Do they keep these set up like this all the time, or are they like catering ninjas?" Stroman asked as we stepped in and closed the door behind us. An identical door, already closed, was on the opposite side of the rectangular room. The walls lacked decor and were instead coated with the textured beige rubber that the Aa'an preferred in their working spaces. A table and six chairs filled the middle of the room, and a glass dome in the middle of the table covered four cups of chilled water and a plate of snacks. Human snacks, fortunately, although I'd eaten more than a few insects on my last cityship.

"They probably keep it ready," I said, lifting the glass dome and setting it to one side. "Yup," I added as a waft of cool air rose from it. "Stasis field. This could have been here for a year or more."

"That's neat," Mi-Cha said, picking up a cup of water and taking a sip. "Wow, that's brisk. Is it okay if we sit?"

"Yeah, we should," I said, pulling out a chair and settling into it. It was more of a stool, really, with only the slightest hint of a back, designed so an Aa'an tail could drape over it. "They'll be monitoring and won't send anyone in until we're settled."

"Do they sell that stasis technology?" Stroman asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I wish. It's one of about a half dozen conveniences I wish they'd put on the market. That's less and less likely as more PCs become Aa'an. Keeping those little advantages is a big deal."

The door on the opposite side of the room snapped open, and a *huge* Aa'an, his green scales fading to gray at the edges, shouldered his way in.

I leaped up at once, Stroman and Mi-Cha hurriedly setting their cups down before copying me. I assumed the first-degree posture of impossible respect, my head craned back and—

"Forget all that," the lizard said, his voice a deep boom. He followed with the raspy gasps that passed for Aa'an laughter. "You'll sprain something. Please, sit."

He lowered himself gently onto one of the stools, which creaked a bit but held firm.

"Supreme Commander," I said, my voice still full of awe as we settled back onto our stools. "We have left honored behind and moved to—"

"Oh, stop," he said, rasping again. "My name is Kt'ist'wt'd'gn-t'm'fl, but please, call me Kit."

"Frank," I said, nodding slowly. My Aa'an Etiquette skill was yammering away in my mind, ordering me to stand up and behave properly in front of this illustrious personage. "My colleagues: ship's Captain Bo and ship's executive Jakob." The Aa'an concept of surnames was as complex as their social protocols and often ignored outside marital negotiations.

"Welcome to *Boundless Comfort*," the Supreme Commander said. "When I heard the mythical Galactic Transformers were not only aboard my city but waiting in my very office, I couldn't get down here fast enough." His scaled lips turned down a bit at the corners. "I'm told you came about the Confederacy?"

"It is a long story, but yes," I said, nodding. "We've been come to understand that the Confed is planning to return to its old ways—hunting aliens, that is—and that the Aa'an have been attacking Confed colonies."

He shrugged. "More or less. That's the game, right? They come after us, we go after a few of their more desert-themed worlds.

They've been caught up in themselves for almost two decades at this point, but it seems like they've had a bit of political upheaval."

"You could say that," Mi-Cha said wryly. "A faction calling themselves Strongarm has managed to rally most of the leadership and the rank-and-file behind them."

"We've caught word of terrorist attacks," Kit said.

"Most of that was to frame us and give their Grand Admiral Harm a scapegoat," Stroman said. "We've worked it out. I think."

"So you really are going to try and take some of their worlds?" I asked. Intellectually, I knew it only felt like a big deal because the old all-NPC Dominancy would never have even considered it.

"Oh, we've already taken one," Kit said, chuckling hoarsely. "The *Interminable Pose* and *Wishful Regret* teamed up and attacked the Sonoran system. They destroyed three destroyers, a dozen patrol boats, and one of their old carriers. They even managed to capture the system's space station, and the entire population voted to switch their allegiance. They're much happier now, and we're allowing anyone who wants to emigrate to do so."

"Wow."

"It's been quite enjoyable, to be honest," he added. "This is what the game was meant to be."

"Good point," Mi-Cha said. "Are you heading anywhere specific?"

"Ha!" the lizard barked. "That would be telling. Although, no, not specifically. Each cityship is now governed as a self-contained democracy. We've been content to wander and explore, but before we move on, there's a vote. The latest development: we've received offers from a couple of other cityships to form alliances. The general consensus is that no Confed systems can withstand an attack from two cityships at once."

"So you're going to become a major power," I said.

Kit shrugged, an impressive gesture considering his size and scales. "The Aa'an always were. It's just that they were mostly

nonplayer characters who didn't utilize their power. But yes, we intend to become a major power."

"And you won't force people to remain on the world they're on?" I pressed.

"Of course not," he said, snorting in offense. "People can come and go as they please."

"So, if I may expand on that," Mi-Cha said smoothly, picking up on my train of thought. Kit gestured for her to continue. "How do you feel about tourism?"

His eyes narrowed with interest. "Well, tourism has declined. I'm sure you're aware that the Alliance is essentially a tool of Confed at this point. So we don't receive as many tourists as we used to."

"That's true, although that's not exactly where I was going with this. Have you ever wanted to visit a world where magic is real?"

Kit blinked a few times, his eyelids snapping horizontally across his eyes. "Excuse me?"

Mi-Cha grinned, and my Aa'an Etiquette skill started sounding alarms. But Kit didn't react to the aggressive gesture. "It turns out that the other Endless Domains games exist *here*. They're actual worlds. Getting to them and returning is a bit tricky—not all of our technology works there—but they have people who want to take a break and visit *Endless Sky*. I'm sure there are players in our game who would love to experience being a Wizard or a knight for a couple of weeks."

Kit stared at us for a long moment. "You're serious."

"We are," Stroman assured him.

"Completely serious."

"Two worlds—dimensions, in *Endless Kingdom* terms—are already being prepared to receive tourists," I said. "There's a base world and an all-elven world that's perfect for beginner-level quests."

"I don't even know what to say."

"Well, we're hoping to establish some business arrangements on our end. Some nice planets, maybe a cityship, some places where *Endless Kingdom* players can have new experiences."

"Absolutely, yes," Kit said immediately. "Yes, we would love to. As long as they won't start attacking alien lizard monsters the moment they arrive here."

I laughed, making sure to keep my lips curled over my teeth. "We'll provide thorough briefings, and we won't allow any items or artifacts to cross between games. No swords."

"What do we need to do?"

"We need to create tour plans," I said. "Two-week trips, maybe even extended four-week versions if you'd like. Anything that will give them a great time."

"Oh, I have ideas," Kit said, his snout wrinkling in a grin. "City tours, K'teth matches, progressive meals."

"That's exactly what we're looking for," Mi-Cha said.

"And when would this begin?"

"We're still finalizing the logistics, but probably within a couple of months at the earliest. We anticipate a lot of interest from people who want to go there, so we might start that first. We'll send you the advertising once we have everything in place."

"Absolutely," Kit said, nodding thoughtfully. "And you know, it will give us something new to do. Many of our people could use a vacation."

"From this?" Stroman said, puzzled. "Seems like there's always something to see."

"True, but life can become monotonous. Did you know there are hardly any NPC Aa'an left? That means the game no longer introduces new Aa'an technology. We have to research it ourselves, which can be a grind. Almost everyone puts in hours, but it still takes two or three years for a cityship to produce something new."

"Yikes," I said, exchanging glances with my shipmates. "That's the same situation with the Confed worlds."

Kit nodded. "And they have larger populations. But we're happy for people to take time off—it's just been difficult to find places to go. And honestly, that's a major reason why we're interested in compatible worlds."

"Can't you just buy them?" Mi-Cha asked. "New worlds, I mean. We used to make a lot of money from bounties to unlock new ones."

"That's the problem," Kit said, sighing heavily. "Confed and the UFW have been acquiring all the worlds because they're the only ones who can afford the bounties."

"You mean you can't?" Stroman asked, confused.

"Not easily. It's a flaw in the game. Whoever decided to allow PCs to be Aa'an didn't consult with the people who established cityship economies. Each cityship has to be zero-sum—we can't produce more than we consume. In order to pay a bounty, we have to quickly accumulate a surplus, which is challenging. We don't have many exports, which is why we've been guarding our technological innovations more closely. And cityships can't pool their funds. We've attempted to gather a group of ten or so to purchase fractional bounties, but Confed always manages to outbid us."

"But on a world," I said, realization dawning, "cityship economics wouldn't be in play."

Kit nodded. "We'd finally be on a more even footing with all the humans, the Andromedan Clans, the Carbon Hegemony, everyone."

Mi-Cha said, "So tourism . . ."

"Would be an export, essentially. It'd give us a surplus. We'd need to spend it pretty rapidly, but we've cooked up ways to float some decent amounts here and there. Loopholes in the game logic. Programmers aren't good accountants, it seems."

"What about the Qiar?" I asked. "Are they restricted like that?"

"As far as anyone knows, they're still all NPCs. The Aa'an never dealt directly with them very often—the Alliance was the middleman between all the polities. Word is they still pop out now and again with some new tech, which we assume the game is producing based on some algorithm, but then they vanish. Nobody even knows where they hide out or if they've got a home world."

"I feel we should look into that," Stroman said.

"Yeah," Mi-Cha drawled, her eyes sparking with interest.

» Mission Accepted: Seek Out the Qiar

Well, all right then, I thought.

"You mentioned magic," Kit said.

"We did," I said. "That's what *Endless Kingdom* is all about."

"Would they have artifacts that work here, in *Endless Sky*?"

I exchanged another quick glance with my teammates. "Some. Maybe. Artifacts wthat do something that's already covered by *Endless Sky*'s code base seem to work. But we haven't explored it much."

"We do know *some* magic works here," Mi-Cha said, snapping her fingers and briefly summoning a small flame to her fingertips. Kit's eyes narrowed to barely perceptible slits for a moment. "Why do you ask?"

"It'd be interesting," he said, tilting his head to one side—an Aa'an shrug. "If there's an artifacts trade, and if we—and I'm speaking for *Boundless Comfort* here, not all the Aa'an—were in a good position in that trade, it'd give us a leg up on Confed, especially if we could run that business planetside, outside the economic restrictions."

"Hmm. Yeah, we'll keep it in mind," I said, nodding slowly. "I see what you're getting at."

"We'd cut you in, obviously," Kit added quickly.

"Obviously," Mi-Cha said, grinning again. This time, she kept her lips pressed closed, having been paying close attention to me.

"I have your comm codes," Kit said, pushing himself upright. "I'll send you mine. Keep in touch as this plays out."

"We will," I said, rising and pressing my fists together in the gesture of second-degree respectful agreement. "Thank you for seeing us."

"Oh, it's been a pleasure," he said, copying my gesture. The door behind him snapped open. "I'm looking forward to working with you." And with that, he stepped out the door, which slid shut behind him.

"That was sudden," Stroman said.

"Aa'an." I shrugged. "They don't do small talk. He was toning it down for us, but my Etiquette skill was going mad in my head the entire time." I led the way out the door we'd entered through, paused to offer the receptionist a nod of fifth-degree appreciation, and then got us all back out on the concourse.

"Now what?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Lunch, if you don't mind," I said. "We passed a couple of good-looking spots on the way here. I'm hungry, and while we still have access to the cityship's public network, I want to do some quick research on that Babelfish artifact."

"You think they'll know of it?" Stroman asked as we began retracing our steps.

"It's likely, yeah. The Aa'an always maintained a shared catalog of that kind of thing."

We stepped into a small café that served human-style food, ordered sandwiches and drinks, and took a table. Mi-Cha and Stroman spoke softly to each other as I bent over my wrist comp. By the time our food arrived, I'd found what I was after.

"They know it," I said through a mouthful of food. "I've got the system coordinates to give to Rashmi. It's what we thought—it gets harder each time. They don't specifically name a level, but it's in the seventeen-hundredth iteration or something, so it's probably getting pretty serious."

"I think we should do that next," Stroman said. "If we can get our own Link network going, this tourism business will be a thousand times easier to operate."

"Not to mention being fully free of any dependency on Confed," Mi-Cha agreed. "Yeah, I'm in. John and the others still need time to finish getting Nexus set up anyway."

We finished our food in silence, wiping our mouths just as alarms started blaring.

"What is it?" Mi-Cha asked me as we stood and hurried out of the café.

"The cityship is under attack," I said, listening to the pattern of *whoop-whoop* noises.

"We need to get to the *Princess*," Mi-Cha said, and we took off at a run.

"It's Confed," Lad said as we rushed onto the bridge.

"We figured," Stroman said drily. "Who'd they bring to the party?"

"Everyone," Danjuma said. "Already charging weapons. We've got *two* full carrier groups, guys. Two carriers, two cruisers, four destroyers, and two battleships. Carriers are already putting birds in the air, and the sky's full of missiles."

"We might actually be safer staying where we are," I pointed out. "Cityships are pretty well defended."

"Against *two* groups?" Mi-Cha said doubtfully.

"The city's already given us clearance to leave if we want to," Lad said. "Everyone else is making a run in the opposite direction."

"We're going to join them," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Eto, any progress on that gravity net?"

"We need an artifact called the Heavy Hand. The basic design is an Aa'an gravity controller but flipped into a kind of overpowered broadcast mode. I think Leone has figured out a few potential weaknesses as well."

"Okay, add that to the list," Mi-Cha said. "Meantime, let's hope they don't deploy it here."

» Mission Accepted: Find the Heavy Hand

"The more of their own ships they have in-system, the more power the net needs," Tomiko said. "We should be good."

"Compliments to the city, but get us out of here, Rashmi," Mi-Cha ordered.

The *Princess* dropped slightly as the city's tractor-pressor beams

cut out, and Lad jetted us out of the docks slightly faster than decorum would normally have permitted. They were right: we joined a veritable exodus of small crafts, mostly cargo traders and asteroid miners, all heading away from the Confed fleet and largely keeping the *Boundless Comfort* between them and us.

"Confed fighters are targeting small craft," I said, my tactical plot lighting up with alarms.

"What the hell is Harm up to?" Stroman wondered.

"Punishing humans who deal with aliens," Mi-Cha said grimly. "You heard Kit. The Aa'an haven't been producing much new tech, and Confed has a research advantage. Harm doesn't think they need the Aa'an like they used to. So, weapons free."

A small shuttle off our port side exploded under Confed fire.

"Weapons free? Is that an order?" Danjuma said with a wide grin.

"It is," Mi-Cha said happily. "Light 'em up. Let's show that city-ship who their friends are. In fact, drop the heat sink—let's put that ZPE to use. Rashmi, time to clear to FTL?"

"Ten minutes," the pilot said.

"Take it easy. Let's make Confed pay for this. And you know, arc us out lazily. Give Zuri something to shoot at."

My console began drawing bright lines between us and the Confed fighter ships, representing the otherwise invisible lines of energy that Danjuma was firing. With the heat sink deployed, our ventral side was more vulnerable, but Lad kept it turned away from the Confed fighters. The advantage, however, was that we could fire a shot every second pretty much indefinitely, and Danjuma was taking advantage. She also dumped missiles into the air, forcing the Confed ships to disengage from the civilian auxiliary ships they'd been targeting. Our railguns *chunked* out sprays of shot, small but deadly to the unshielded, lightly armored fighters.

"Splash one, two, three . . . four, five . . . I'm not doing this." I chuckled. "I'll let the computer keep a tally for you. RLAMs are active, but the fighters aren't using their mis— Ho!" I cried. "The city-

ship just holed a destroyer! Bored right through her! Tactical estimates the laser at . . . half a *terawatt*!"

"Mommy like," Danjuma growled happily.

"Wonder how often they can do that," Mi-Cha said.

"Even with a ZPE array, the energy is stupendous. They have to be dumping an entire capacitor bank. It'll take time to recharge, and they've got enough grav mirrors up to keep 'em safe. Even after a couple of hits, the cityship's hull is holding. You're up to thirty, Zuri."

Lad flitted us back and forth across the fleet of fleeing ships, while Danjuma blasted them with everything we had. A couple of cargo haulers were badly hit, one so badly her fusion drive ruptured, causing an energy cascade that blew the ship entirely. Her crew would find themselves in a respawn room soon enough.

"Rashmi, do you have the Babelfish system laid in?" Mi-Cha asked calmly. Our hull shook a bit here and there as the fighters' smaller battle lasers scored on us, but Lad was being careful to keep us tacking at an angle, helping protect our vulnerable drive array. The ship's armor, fed with the essentially unlimited power of the ZPE, was happily reknitting itself after every hit.

"You'll be pleased to know it's called the Adams system," Lad said, "and yes. We're five minutes out."

"Two more hits—destroyer and an entire carrier down," I announced. "The cityship has two of those monster lasers. They're also dumping missiles like they're going out of style—huge ones."

"What took them so long, do you think?" Stroman asked.

I shrugged. "Lack of practice, I'd imagine. I don't think anyone's ever come directly after a cityship before. She's taking damage now, even with like a zillion long-range RFLAMs. Her crew probably isn't used to running them with grav mirrors floating all over the place. Confed missiles are a quarter the size of the Aa'an ones, but they're doing some damage as they get through."

"Do we help?" Stroman asked. "The odds are getting better."

"We *were* attacked," Mi-Cha mused. "Yeah. Ideas?"

"I've got one," I said, quickly tapping my console and sending a plot to everyone else. "We should pull the heat sink back in."

Mi-Cha reviewed my plan for a split second before saying, "Approved. Let's do it."

"Missiles took out the two cruisers," I announced. "They're not finished, but they're dead in the water." I hit the control to retract the heat sink, and prepared to raise our grav mirror. The Confed ships *should* be focusing their heavy armament on the cityship, of course, but no sense taking chances.

Lad arced us back, tracing a course *over* the cityship, even over the Confed fleet. Hopefully, it would look like we'd decided to run another direction or something.

"This is when we need John's spoofers," Mi-Cha said. "Imagine if we could look like a Confed corvette right now. Rashmi, time to target?"

"I'm running the engines a bit harder," Lad said. "Sorry, Eto. So probably eight minutes until we're in range."

"Confed ships are designed to be badass from the front," I said. "But their aft designs are almost an *aft*erthought." Stroman groaned.

Danjuma stopped firing, switched our railguns to fire forward instead of aft, and loaded them with the heavier slug ammunition in lieu of shot. Our lasers' capacitor banks would be charging to full capacity, the missile launchers cycling in new loads.

The Confed battle group ignored us completely. Well, seemed to. I was sure someone on board was tracking us on a tactical plot, but we weren't the most significant threat, given our size and current vector.

"Tactical estimates Confed running out of missiles in a minute or two," I said. "They've chewed up this side of the cityship pretty badly. Oh, lasers from the Aa'an. That's . . . almost three minutes between shots. But they fired both again. Bored a battleship this time and glanced the remaining carrier. Bad aim. The carrier's venting in a few places, though, and that should keep them busy."

"We're coming into range," Danjuma said.

"Give me the carrier first," Mi-Cha said. "At your discretion."

"Firing forty gigawatts in four . . . three . . . two . . . one," Danjuma breathed, stabbing her console.

The *Princess*'s lasers output a respectable ten gigawatts of power each time they fired, sustaining each shot for around a third of a second. But laser power is cumulative: by firing all four lasers simultaneously, and by carefully targeting them to the same location, you put four times as much power on your target, and that wound up being *double* what the carrier's own lasers could fire. If carefully applied to the aft shroud that "protected" the ship's delicate in-system drive array . . .

"Shroud is vaporized. Energy spikes from their drive . . . hit!" We couldn't see it, but the carrier's glowing drive fins would be flickering and dying as they lost power, critical couplings now vaporized.

"Charging," Danjuma said cheerfully.

"Hit the battleship," Mi-Cha said.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . fire," Danjuma said, fully in her happy place.

"Hit," I said immediately, my eyes nailed to my tac display. "Her drive is down."

"Missiles," Mi-Cha ordered. "And railguns."

Princess fired a full flight of sixteen antimatter missiles, divided evenly between the two now-listing capital ships. *Thunks* announced the railguns' firing. This time, Danjuma was targeting midship, roughly where their power plants should be. It would take a couple of minutes for that sublight armament to arrive at their targets, but our lasers were already charged for another shot. Danjuma took it.

"That's a destroyer," I said. "Oh!" I exclaimed. "You hit something critical—energy backlash. Secondary explosions. Yup, she's down."

"The *Boundless Comfort* offers thanks to the *Pretty, Pretty Princess*," a gravelly voice cut in just as our missiles and slugs arrived. The Confed ships' crews were clearly in a panic; their RFLAMs got off only a few cursory shots before *all* of our armament hit on target.

"Carrier's split open," I said gleefully. Belatedly, another blast

from the cityship's oversized battle lasers drilled through the carrier's longitudinal axis, destroying it completely. The battleship we'd targeted was badly damaged, but its armor was heavier, and it didn't immediately explode. "Remaining destroyer is running."

"Let them go," Mi-Cha said. "Unless the *Boundless Comfort* wants them, of course."

"They're going to get them," I said. "Cityship just put a crapload of missiles in the air. They're going to take out the battleship we damaged, I think, if those are antimatter."

They were: it took only a few minutes for the Aa'an's enormous missiles to reach the remaining Confed capital ships, impacting and unleashing a hell of antimatter that completely devastated both ships.

"*Pretty, Pretty Princess* to *Boundless Comfort*," I said, toggling our hailing frequencies. "Second-degree respect for your fighting, although you might want to drill your defense crews. As a note, we've often found captured Confed personnel highly open to immigration, and you've got a *lot* of fighters in your space."

"Noted, *Princess*," the cityship replied. "Third-degree respect for your assist. Safe flying."

"You think they'll do it?" Lad asked, slowing us slightly before our chief engineer complained about the load on the engines.

"Probably," I said. "Remember, the Aa'an were built as a cosmopolitan society so they could integrate humans coming into the game. And I doubt all the space-fodder pilots in those fighters are as dedicated to the cause as Harm."

"What if they are?" Stroman asked.

"The Aa'an will lock 'em up. They'll be treated well enough, but it'll deny the enemy resources."

"Lot of that happened today," Mi-Cha observed. "Two capital ships and, what, several hundred fighters?"

"Yup," I said. "Zuri got around fifty of them before we peeled off. Not bad."

"So much XP," Danjuma cooed.

I reviewed my own stats and saw that I'd amassed a respectable

amount of XP as well. Not enough to push any of my skills up, but I was that much closer to level thirteen.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,392,862,599 Interrums
Party funds: 5,000,000 gold pieces
Level 12
1-level waiver in effect

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Dragonslayer Class I
Founding Lifeform

Attributes
Body: 17
Mind: 17
Soul: 16
HP: 204 (Body × Level)
MP: 96 (Soul × Skill)
XP: 1,733,251 (363,901 to level 13)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 5
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10

Dragonslaying: 1
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 5
Nursing: 3†
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 6
Public Speaking: 3†
Politicking: 4
Sidearms: 3
Spacer: 10†
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 9†
Starship Tactics: 9†
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"We're at the FTL boundary," Lad announced. "Course laid in for Adams system."

"Step on it," Mi-Cha ordered.

Lad groaned.

16 / BABELFISH

In the depths of the Adams system, our valiant heroes embarked on a daring mission. Their ship, the *Princess*, sailed through the vast expanse of spaceas they braced themselves for the trials that lay ahead. Little did they know the perils that awaited them, for the very fabric of their reality would soon be challenged by the relentless assault of the cthulus.

As they ventured deeper into the abyss, a horde of scuttles emerged, tiny aberrations with a burning hunger. The malevolent creatures sought to latch onto the ship's hull, scorching their way through its defenses. But the *Princess*, armed and ready, unleashed its arsenal upon the scuttles. The battle lasers, fierce beams of light, swiftly disintegrated the vile creatures. Their reign of terror was halted, for the spawner that birthed them met its untimely demise.

Just as the heroes began to breathe a sigh of relief, a new wave approached, heralding the arrival of the grabbers. Like insidious tentacles, they lashed out, intent on tearing the *Princess* apart. But the ship's armor, fortified with regenerative nanotechnology, held steadfast, resisting the relentless assault. The railguns, weapons of precision, struck true, piercing the grabbers with unyielding force.

The *Princess* emerged victorious, having weathered the storm of these trivial foes.

Yet their respite was short-lived, for the spearfishers arrived. The colossal cthulus launched chitin spikes through space with deadly accuracy. The *Princess* danced among the onslaught, evading the impaling projectiles with nimble grace. Its missile launchers roared to life, unleashing a barrage of explosive ordnance. The spearfishers quivered, their best bested by the *Princess*'s determined crew.

As the heroes braced themselves for what lay ahead, a fearsome adversary appeared—the blaster, the largest of the cthulus. Its organic battle laser glowed with an ominous intensity, threatening to turn the *Princess* into cosmic dust. But our heroes were not deterred. With their battle lasers unleashed at full power, the *Princess* reciprocated the lethal dance of energy beams. The clash of titans reverberated through space as the blaster's laser met the ship's own.

Meanwhile, the RFLAMs spun into action, their rapid-fire lasers intercepting incoming threats with unparalleled precision. Their antimissile systems deployed, the *Princess*'s crew neutralized the blaster's barrage of destructive projectiles. The *Princess*, uncompromising, pressed onward, exploiting every vulnerability in the blaster's defenses. And at long last, the crew's resilience bore fruit. The blaster succumbed to the might of the *Princess*, its devastating assault brought to an end.

As the dust settled, our heroes emerged triumphant, their ship battered but resolute. The waves of cthulus had been vanquished, their threat nullified by the indomitable spirit of the *Princess* and her crew. With their eyes set on the horizon, the heroes pushed forward, ready to face the final challenge that awaited them—the boss stage of their perilous mission.

At least, that's how I wish it had gone.

Jumping into a dungeon system is nearly always uneventful. After exiting FTL, you have to fly a bit into the system itself to trigger its warning. That's how the game lets you figure out if you're, in fact, in a dungeon or if you've unlocked a new world.

» Adams System
» Mission: Find the Babelfish MDCCXCII
» Level 17 dungeon
» Reward:
XP based on individual performance
Ancillary artifacts randomly awarded
Type IV Babelfish artifact for surviving the system

"Type four?" Mi-Cha asked.

"That fits my theory," Tomiko said. Everyone, even Virion and Graves, had piled onto the bridge for this.

"Sharing is caring," Stroman chuckled.

"So look," the engineer said, her tone immediately excited. "The original Link nodes were not only point-to-point, they were a single point to a single other point, right? Like, in pairs. Confed had set up this whole complex system, where each ship was linked to a sector headquarters, which were themselves linked in a daisy chain."

"Okay," I said.

"But then they came out with a new generation that was still point-to-point, but the nodes could be tuned to talk to any one point at a time. That's what we got from *Spot*, one of the second-gen units. The first-gen ones were all scrapped, as far as we know."

"Sure," Selen said. "I was on a ship, the *Relenting Fury*, that had one of the original units. They spent about two years retrofitting every ship at the time."

"*Relenting*?" Danjuma teased. "Really?"

"Some governors-general have better senses of humor than others."

"Anyway," Tomiko pushed on, "We know that at some point they

seriously miniaturized, resulting in the third-generation units. Still point-to-point, but still tunable. Then, sometime in the last decade or so, as near as I've been able to put together, they came up with something new. Not exactly a fourth-generation Link node, but a switchboard of sorts: a node that could connect to multiple other nodes at once and relay communications between them. That's when the Link really took off, and they started leasing third-gen units outside Confed. That's also when the Alliance started making their own."

"So you think this type four Babelfish is the routing one?" Mi-Cha asked.

"I do. And I actually suspect that, at some point, they reverse engineered the type-three version. It fits, right? If this system is only pumping out type four now, it stands to reason they've found another way to provision new endpoint nodes, and they're only coming back here when they need to build a new hub."

"That makes sense," I said, nodding slowly. "I mean, if this is now a level seventeen dungeon, it's a serious challenge. The start of the Legendary levels, right? They've risking a lot by coming here."

"Which they've done almost eighteen hundred times." Mi-Cha sighed. "This is well beyond our league. As usual. And unlike the actual dungeon in *Endless Kingdom*, we don't have a weapons advantage here. Confed can come in here with an entire carrier group and blast through cthulus."

"We don't even know if that's what's here," Danjuma said.

"True," the captain allowed. "Well, I suppose we do it anyway. Tomiko, if you can reverse engineer the type-two node you have, can you build endpoint nodes?"

"Absolutely."

"So getting a type four would allow us to turn Nexus into a switchboard."

"Correct."

Another sigh. "Seems worth it. Worst case, we lose the ship and respawn at Nexus."

"That's a pretty bad worst case," I said.

"That's the game. Battle stations, everyone. Lad, take us in slowly."

The bystanders on the bridge scattered—except, I noticed as I took one last look in the back, Virion. He shrugged. We'd never given him a station during battles, so I supposed he might as well hang out here as anywhere else.

» Adams System
» DUNGEON ENGAGED

"Tac plot is lighting up," I said as my console began blaring alarms.

"Forward visual," Mi-Cha ordered.

There was a moment of tense silence. "Holy hell in an ice cream truck full of pigeon crap," Stroman whispered.

The game had come up with something new.

"What is it?" Lad said, also whispering.

Before us menaced a titanic, irregular cone of dark metal. Sensors put it at almost a kilometer long—with its tail, even longer. Its open maw, nearly three hundred meters in diameter, gaped before us like a pit of deep, absolute darkness. It had *wavered* into appearance, as if it had been covered by a translucent veil.

"Movement," I said as my console *bleeped* again. "There, along the lip of the opening."

"Zoom," Mi-Cha ordered quietly.

I complied, and our view screen flickered several times as our sensor suite increased our visual gain to maximum. The result was blurry, but we could all make out what was slowly crawling out of the cone.

"Those are spawners," Danjuma said, her voice filled with tense horror.

Spawner is the name players gave to the *Endless Sky* cthulus that spat out scuttles, the two-meter-long biomechanical aliens that specialized in latching onto your hull and burning their way into it.

"There must be hundreds of them," Mi-Cha said, aghast.

And each one could produce over thirty scuttles in under a minute.

"They've launched," I said sharply, my eyes glued to the tac plot. "Wait," I continued, confused. I rechecked my console. "It's a single scuttle."

"What?" Mi-Cha asked, sounding just as confused. "They never launch just one."

"Time to contact?" Stroman asked, scanning his console.

"That thing is like ten klicks away. At current velocity . . . around two minutes," I said.

"That's what I get too," he confirmed.

"The RFLAMs can handle this," I said confidently, tapping the defense side of my console. "I'm—"

"No, wait," Mi-Cha said thoughtfully. I turned, and she was leaning forward in her command chair, staring at the visual ahead of her. "This isn't usual cthulu behavior. I want to see what happens. Charge weapons, but nobody do anything. Lad, hands off the stick."

Rashmi held her hands next to her head in a *hands off* gesture.

"It's slowing," I said a minute later, my forehead wrinkling as I read my console. "Contact in ninety seconds."

"Didn't even know they *could* slow themselves," Stroman muttered.

"Slower now," I added a bit later. "Still ninety seconds."

In the end, the scuttle drifted to a stop just inches from our bow armor.

"What the actual . . ." Danjuma breathed.

I flipped the main display back to the tactical plot since we couldn't see what was directly in front of us. The display now clearly showed a single scuttle, hovering just a handbreadth from our ship. It spun slowly about its longitudinal axis but came no closer.

"Captain, it's too close for our weapons," Danjuma said, her voice tight. "I can't target it.

"We have six meters of nano-armor right there," Mi-Cha said calmly. "I'm not worried yet."

"I can increase the charge on the armor," I suggested. "It'll help with the integrity if—"

"No," Mi-Cha said. "Just wait. There's . . . I have a feeling."

My eyebrows rose. Our captain didn't have *feelings* very often, but when she did, it was smart to heed them.

Bleep. "More launches from the cone," I said. "Counting . . . about two dozen. They're in a bunch, though. It could be more."

"Hold," was all Mi-Cha said.

We held for another three minutes, as these scuttles coasted in somewhat slower than the first. They took up positions all around us, each just inches from our hull. Now our vulnerable weaponry was at risk, not to mention the relatively fragile in-system drive array at the aft of the ship.

"I'm not touching you," Lad said in a quiet, high-pitched voice, like a child teasing its sibling in the back of a car.

"This is deeply weird," Stroman said.

"It might not be," Mi-Cha said softly. "Remember what the system announcement said? We get the artifact for *surviving the system*. Usually it says for *defeating the enemy*. The game's doing something different here."

"You think Confed just . . . waited?" Danjuma asked.

"Absolutely not," Mi-Cha said confidently. "I'm betting they came in guns blazing and had to fight their way through all of that."

"So we . . . wait?" I asked, my skin still crawling.

"We wait," Mi-Cha confirmed.

Ten minutes passed. Then thirty. Then an hour.

"They're not moving," Stroman said in amazement.

"They're moving," I corrected. "They're all spinning, but they're not advancing on us."

We fell quiet and sat for another hour.

"I can't stand this," Danjuma growled, her voice full of frustration. Her posture was stiff, even though she'd leaned back in her chair.

"I think that's the point," Mi-Cha said gently. "We're meant to—"

"They're leaving!" I cried, my voice sudden and loud after two hours of near-silence. "They're heading back to the cone!"

Twenty-nine scuttles dove away from *Princess* in a shallow arc, converging into a single, writhing mass fifty meters off our bow and zipping back to their base faster than they'd come.

"New launches," I warned. "Grabbers. About a dozen."

"Everyone hold," Mi-Cha said, her voice as still as empty space.

It took only a minute and a half for the grabbers to surround us. Like the scuttles before them, they took up positions more or less equidistant from one another, with just twenty or thirty centimeters between our hull and the tips of their gently undulating tentacles.

And there they stayed.

"Okay, it's been an hour," Mi-Cha said, her voice finally showing some fatigue. "I think we all know what's going on here. They're trying to provoke us. When we don't respond, they don't do anything—"

Thunk.

One of the grabbers' tentacles extended slightly, punching us.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. This is basic physics, and *Endless Sky* played well with basic physics. The grabber's strike imparted just a bit of lateral motion to the ship, meaning we began drifting slightly to our port side. The grabbers shifted as well, maintaining their careful separation from us.

"Leave it, Rashmi," Mi-Cha snapped, all weariness gone from her tone. Lad's hands snapped back up in the air. "Sorry! That caught me by surprise, but I wondered if—"

Thunk.

"Okay," Stroman said with a heavy sigh. "I think we can all see where this is going."

"Unless we're in danger of drifting into something that could hurt us," the captain said carefully, "don't do a thing."

Thunk.

"Bo, why are we spinning on three axes?" Tomiko asked over the intercom.

"Fun with cthulhus, Eto," Mi-Cha said brightly. "And it's likely to continue for some time. Can you rev up the inertial dampers and maybe increase the gravity a bit, just so we don't all get sick?" *Endless Sky* didn't fully simulate the human inner ear, of course, but it did apply debuffs for situations where a human might get queasy in reality.

"On it."

"Also . . . hmm." Mi-Cha paused for a moment. "Yeah. All hands, to the bridge. We need to sort out a plan."

It took just a few minutes for everyone to scramble up. Mi-Cha walked around to the front of my console, standing with the huge tactical display at her back to address everyone.

She started by bringing everyone up to speed. "So that's what we're dealing with," she continued. "And it's clear that this is going to go on for a while. We're going to break into two shifts. Lukas, do you have the combat drugs?" The doctor nodded at the back of the room. "Frank, are you still stronger at Gunnery than Piloting, right?"

"About five times better, yeah," I said sheepishly.

"Okay. Two shifts: twelve hours on, twelve off. Each shift starts with a commander, then two hours later a gunner, then two hours later an engineer, then two hours later a pilot. That gives everyone some overlap so we're not all coming and going at once.

"First shift: me, Frank, Eto, and Renart. The second shift will be Jakob, Zuri, Leone, and Rashmi. That also gives us good tactical coverage. Troopers, you guys will follow the same shift as the commander, two per shift. Selen, it might make sense for you to cover the middle of the shift. Lukas, tell them how the drugs work."

The doctor cleared his throat as he moved next to Mi-Cha. "When you finish your shift, take an hour to wind down. Have a

meal, watch a movie, whatever. Afterward, take one of the pills I'll be giving you. For the next hour, lie in bed and do something nonvisual. Listen to music, meditate, anything that doesn't involve using your eyes. You'll pass out and sleep restfully for eight hours. When you wake up, immediately do some calisthenics, have a meal, play a video game, whatever. In the second hour after you wake, do visual stuff, ideally hand-eye coordination stuff, like games, kickboxing—you know."

He paused and surveyed us, making sure we were paying attention. "Now look, if the klaxons go off for an alert, you'll wake up. This stuff's designed for that. And you're going to be groggier than you can imagine. *Immediately* hit yourself with the injector I'm going to give you. It goes on the back of your neck, right over your spine. It will sting like nobody's business, but you'll be fully awake within four seconds. And you will *stay* awake for up to thirty hours. If this happens, I will work with each of you to manage that and help you get back onto your shift schedule if needed."

Another pause. "Any questions?" There were none. "Okay. I'll be working six on, six off, more or less. I'll float a bit here and there so I can have time with each of you at least every other shift."

"Do we really think this is going to go on for that long?" Selen asked.

Thunk.

"I'm preparing for it," Mi-Cha said with a weary smile. "If the grabbers do anything more aggressive than pushing us around, sound the red alert. If you hear a red alert, get to your battle station immediately. If the grabbers leave and I'm off shift, send your engineer to wake me up immediately. Questions?"

Graves decided that I should go straight off shift, so I spent an hour playing video games and reading while having a pleasant meal from a tray. I took his pill and spent the next hour lying

in bed, drifting off to soft jazz. When I awoke—normally, not because of a red alert, thank goodness—I did some exercises as he'd suggested, cracked open a breakfast tray, and ate it while watching videos.

"Welcome in, Frank," Mi-Cha said.

Thunk.

"Good times," I said, sitting down at the gunnery station. Danjuma gave me a quick smile on her way out. I split the console, opening a tactical plot on the right side. "Still spinning along all three axes, I see."

"They've settled into one punch roughly every hour," Napolitano grumbled.

"But they've done nothing more," our captain said, exhaling heavily. "Hey, there's a stack of meal trays on the back bench."

"Yeah, I saw 'em when I came in," I said. Forty seconds into my shift, and I was already getting bored.

"Next order you place, see if you can get some ethnic options."

"Such as?"

"I would kill for a curry right now."

Twenty-four hours in-system.

Still no curry.

Forty-eight.

"We are officially six kilometers from our starting position," I said, lazily thumbing my console. Well, Danjuma's console. Nobody was using the middle station right now.

"And still no signs of stopping?" Stroman asked.

"Maybe we get more XP the longer we put up with it?"

Everyone on the bridge sighed.

A week.

"C'mon," someone said behind me in an existentially bored tone. "Can't we just shoot them?"

"Seriously, please, let me shoot them," Danjuma moaned as she slid out of her seat so I could take over.

"Frank," Mi-Cha said tiredly, "what's the status of the cone?"

"Well, since we've had an awful lot of time to observe it," I said, "there are roughly two hundred grabbers poised on its lip, and I'm pretty sure about a thousand spawners, which equates to at least three thousand scuttles. And in related news, my Starship Scanners skill leveled up last night."

"Bully for you," Danjuma muttered. Her Gunnery skill—nobody's Gunnery skills—had gotten so much as a light workout in the past ten days. "I'm going to go watch something violent."

"Sleep tight," Mi-Cha offered.

"It's almost—" I started.

Thunk.

Two weeks.

Thunk.

"Right on time," someone grumbled.

"Okay, for hell's sake, they're just going to do this until we finally attack and they can overwhelm us and kill us," Lad said,

their tone burning with more irritation than ever witnessed in a human being—and I used to take calls from bank customers.

My console *cheeped*.

I hit the red alert.

Klaxons blared.

To the great credit of our crew, everyone checked into their battle stations in under ten seconds. We'd all been sleeping in our coveralls for days now, expecting *something* to give—even if it was ourselves.

"Tell me," Mi-Cha said, her voice preternaturally alert as she slid into her command chair. Danjuma all but shoved me out of *her* chair as I was sliding over into my own. I quickly slapped the injector on the back of my neck, wincing as it bit in and started pumping god-knows-what into my blood. More than a week ago, Graves had decided we should keep a full set on the bridge to help wake up a potentially zonked-out on-shift crew, as well as awakening those who were supposed to be sleeping.

"The grabbers pulled off," I said quickly, scanning the tactical plot. "Blasters and spearfishers just swarmed out."

"How many?"

"Fifty. Sixty. Around there."

"Hold," she said before Danjuma could get a word out. "Frank, keep your hand on the grav mirror."

"I wouldn't even know where to put it." The grav mirror couldn't effectively cover the entire ship at once; it was meant to shield maybe a quarter of it—whatever side was pointed toward your enemy. Problem was, the *Princess* had been flipping end over every end for over two weeks, and at a decent clip. There was no way I could keep the grav mirror properly positioned.

"Fair," Mi-Cha allowed. "Rashmi, can you—"

Something flickered on my console, and I reacted with the speed and grace that Graves' drugs had granted me. "ETO, SCRAM!" I shouted, slapping my console so hard my hand hurt.

The *Princess* died as both of our power sources—fusion and zero-point energy—were abruptly cut off.

"Frank," Mi-Cha said, her voice cold and careful, "what the actual hell?"

"Banshee," I said, my heart hammering in my chest. "Only eighty percent probable match," I added, "but—"

"No," our captain said, her voice now quavering. "I'll take it. Good call. What's the latest on the time-out?"

Banshees were the deadliest documented cthulu. Once they appeared, they would erupt in a near-cataclysmic explosion, unleashing an electromagnetic burst that could extend a full light-minute. Anything powered up that was caught in its path would, if not very carefully shielded, be irreparably destroyed. Except for other ctuhulus, of course, because why be logical?

Mass and operational considerations had led us to decline such shielding for the *Pretty, Pretty Princess*.

"Thirty minutes, last I saw on the nets," Stroman said.

It was already getting stuffy on the bridge. A full scram cut off the individual environmental controls for every module on the ship, meaning that while Tomiko and Napolitano would know what was going on, our troopers and doctor would have been plunged into sudden and total darkness with no warning or explanation. We couldn't even use the ship-wide intercom.

Even our wrist comps had shut down when I'd hit the scram button and Tomiko hadn't countermanded it.

A sudden frisson of energy coursed over us, raising the hairs on our arms and necks, and sending gentle, glowing sparks skittering across our consoles.

"That's it," Danjuma said. "We're good now."

"Unless there's another one," I pointed out.

"We can't float here like this forever," Stroman countered.

"Someone needs to tell Eto to reengage the power plants," Lad said.

"I got it." Selen's voice came from the back of the bridge. A light flared to life—a flashlight he'd apparently kept in his pocket. He pulled off an access panel near the door, reached in, and

manually pumped the door open. Then he slid out, floating gently.

"Be careful when the gravity kicks in," Mi-Cha reminded him as he maneuvered out.

"Yeah."

It took the former Confed trooper nearly twenty minutes to make his way back to Engineering, likely opening doors manually the entire way. But eventually a loud *ka-chunk* accompanied the return of power. Fans hummed to life as air began flowing again, and our consoles flickered briefly as the ship's computers restarted.

"Tactical is resolving," I said as the ship's computer began reassembling the local plot. In theory, our scanners were sweeping the space around us, picking up a variety of electromagnetic radiation, and telling us what was around us. In reality, we'd paid for the best scanner package money could buy, and the game downloaded the relevant information directly to our computers.

"Um," I said as my console came to life.

"I see it," Stroman said. His voice was low and full of fear.

The blasters—half-organic, semisentient battle lasers—and spearfishers—who could launch chitin-covered spears at insanely high velocities—were firing.

They were firing *a lot*. And despite our quick, unpredictable tumble through space, *they were missing us*.

"One of those hitting us midships..." Lad breathed.

"Even with a meter of armor, we'd be breached in a second," Stroman agreed, his voice still jittery.

The fusillade cut off all at once.

"They're . . . going back," I said as the icons on my console began reversing course toward the cone. "Visuals are resolving on the cone. The lip is . . . it looks empty."

"Gods, what next?" Danjuma said under her breath.

"Frank, give us the visual," Mi-Cha said.

"I can't stabilize it," I reminded her.

"Skip the visual," she amended. "What's it doing?"

"It's just—no, wait!" I stared at my console.

"It's gone," Stroman said.

» Mission Complete: Find the Babelfish MDCCXCII

» Congratulations!

"Rashmi, stabilize us," Mi-Cha ordered before the game messages had even

finished scrolling inside our eyes.

"On it."

» Tabulating XP.

» Evaluating performance.

I could feel the *Princess* straining around us as Lad fought to bring her under control. As the pilot gently massaged us back into stillness, we held our breaths, waiting for the game's decisions.

» XP awarded.

» All party members awarded 75,000 XP.

» All party members awarded bonus: 25,000 bonus XP.

» Type IV Babelfish unlocked. Claim your prize!

» Party title earned: Cthulu Whisperer.

» Individual title earned: Peacebringer. Awarded to player Bo Mi-Cha, Starship Captain.

» Level-Ups Granted:

Lukas Graves, Ship's Doctor

Bo Mi-Cha, Starship Captain

» Individual skills leveled up.

My eyes widened as I reviewed my character sheet.

Frank Kozina

Class: Truthsayer (hidden)

Class: Business Manager
Account: 352,771 Interrums
Party funds: 6,392,862,599 Interrums
Party funds: 5,000,000 gold pieces
Level 12

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Cthulu Whisperer (party)
Dragonslayer Class I
Founding Lifeform

Attributes
Body: 17
Mind: 17
Soul: 16
HP: 204 (Body × Level)
MP: 96 (Soul × Skill)
XP: 1,833,251 (263,901 to level 13)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 5
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Dragonslaying: 1
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5

Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 5
Nursing: 3
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 6
Public Speaking: 3
Politicking: 4
Sidearms: 3
Spacer: 11
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 10
Starship Tactics: 9
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"The flags on my skills are gone," I said excitedly. "So's my one-level waiver."

"It's never mentioned level-ups for other people in the main message," Stroman said, clapping Mi-Cha on the back. "Congratulations! Where's that put you?"

"Thirteen," she said happily. "Firmly in the Guru levels!"

"Loot box," I called out as the icon began spinning on my tactical.

"Renart, you've got loot in the air!"

"On it," Masson replied over the intercom. His battle station was

in the shuttle, so it took just over a quarter-hour for him to launch, retrieve the Babelfish artifact, and return.

"I really wish we'd just fought them," Danjuma observed while we waited.

"We'd have been smashed," Mi-Cha retorted. "I bet Confed comes in here with an entire battle group every time."

"Still. That's like a thousand months of my life I'll never get back."

"It wasn't even four weeks," I pointed out.

"Whatever."

"Shuttle is docking," Stroman sighed.

It took a while for Tomiko to get up to the shuttle bay and check out our new prize. "This is well above our Reverse Engineering skill," she said several minutes later. "But with *Spot*'s example to work from, I can make us a Link switchboard!"

"Good job, everyone," Mi-Cha said, sounding fully at ease for the first time in, well, weeks. "Rashmi, take us to FTL distance."

"Yeah, bit of a problem there," Tomiko said apologetically. "Shutting down both energy plants ran a spike through the FTL's capacitor bank. Well, part of it. We're good to go, but she'll need a while to charge up before we can jump."

"Is it fixable?" Mi-Cha asked at once.

"In a yard," Tomiko said. "Until then, presuming we don't lose more of the bank, we're still good to jump. It'll just be twenty minutes or so to charge the system every time."

"It'll take me five or ten to get to jump range anyway," Lad said, turning us and engaging the in-system drive.

"Meantime, Cap," I said, "we should flood the armor with power. Those grabbers knocked a thousand little pits into us everywhere. Should be able to repair itself by the time we're ready to jump."

"Do it."

I tapped my console, directing energy from the ZPE plant into the armor's charge network. The enervated nanoparticles that made up our armor started rearranging themselves back into a strong crys-

talline matrix. Nano feedstock from our forward containers was routed to places where particles had been knocked fully away.

We sat quietly as Lad guided us to the FTL perimeter. "Thirty seconds to jump distance," they said as we neared. "But we'll still—"

BLEEP! my console warned. "Incoming FTL!" I cried as my tactical plot lit up. "Cap, it's Confed—eight ships! No, ten! We've got two dreadnoughts, two carriers, four battleships, and two destroyers!

"Starship *Pretty, Pretty Princess,* this is Terran Confederacy Expeditionary Group Oh-Oh-Four. You're in restricted space. Heave to and—"

"Shove it, sailor," Mi-Cha said, heat rising in her voice. "I'll have you know we just grabbed an artifact from this system, and I invite you to inspect the exterior of our ship. I'm sure you know what's involved in this dungeon, I'm sure you know that no polity can lay claim to a dungeon system, and I'm sure you can imagine what we can do to *you* if we survived this dungeon unscathed. Do you have any questions, *sailor*?"

Several moments of silence passed, while we all looked at our consoles, watching the charge level of the FTL drive crawl upward.

"Fair point, *Princess*," the Confed voice admitted at last. "We're heading in. Recommend you stay well back."

Mi-Cha let the channel close without replying. "Rashmi, hold us here for a moment, would you? I kind of want to see this. Frank, record it, if you don't mind. Visual, please."

Lad and I complied, and the main display flipped to a visual of the empty-looking system. The ten Confed ships lurched forward, quickly crossing the dungeon perimeter. They didn't pause for a moment.

The cone flickered back into existence as if it had never left—and for all we knew, it hadn't.

"Scuttles," I said. "Uncountable from here." They were launching from the cone in throngs, clearly visible as glowing motes that reflected light from the system's far-off, lonely sun. "Carriers are launching fighters."

It was only moments before the two swarms met, the fighters blasting invisible beams of energy that showed only on my tactical display, and the scuttles clamping themselves to the fighters and burning holes through their hulls.

The front of the cone lit up, and a wash of energy over a hundred meters across spewed forth, obliterating two Confed capital ships.

"Take us out," Mi-Cha said softly. "Back to Nexus space."

Lad began tapping their console furiously, a look of intense concentration on their face.

"Rashmi," Mi-Cha said, a bit more sharply.

"Moment," the pilot said. "The math here is hard. I think . . . yeah. Okay. I got it."

"You're sure?" the captain asked, her voice tinged with concern.

"Hitting it," Lad replied confidently.

Space blurred and we jumped into FTL.

17 / THE ENEMY'S LAIR

I SLAPPED THE RED ALERT BUTTON THE MOMENT WE exited FTL.

"Rashmi, what the *hell*?!" Mi-Cha shouted as klaxons began blaring.

"I don't know!" the pilot cried, frantically tapping at their console. "You said go straight to Nexus, but I don't have the math preprogrammed from anywhere except the Beachhead system! We must have undershot—or overshot! I'm working on it!"

"Lay in a course to literally *anywhere*!" Stroman cried as our tactical plot began populating.

We'd exited into Prometheus, a *fortified* Confed system. A system they were known to be sensitive about. A system with one of their largest military investments. A system where we were absolutely not welcome.

"FTL drive is charging," I reminded everyone. "Twenty minutes."

"Damn and hell!" Mi-Cha snapped. "What have we got?"

"Two full carrier groups, Cap," I said miserably, scanning my console. "New ones. Two carriers, four battleships, four cruisers, six destroyers, and I'm losing track of all the patrol boats. They've

got defensive stations around the planet. Crap, they're putting fighters in the air. And that massive station is launching heavy fighters."

"All Confed ships, mayday, mayday!" Mi-Cha said, her voice filled with real panic as she toggled the hailing frequencies. "We did not intend to arrive in this system, and our FTL drive is damaged. We are powering down weapons and backing off."

Danjuma quickly complied, diverting the battle laser capacitor grid into the ship's power net. Unfortunately, the FTL capacitors could only charge so quickly, so the excess energy dissipated through the armor. Lad engaged the in-system drive, and we began reversing at full speed, moving away from the system itself. This would at least keep us outside the gravity well until our FTL drive was eventually ready.

"*Pretty, Pretty Princess*, you have entered a restricted Confed system," a voice announced. "Heave to—"

"Yes, I know!" Mi-Cha shouted. "That's what I just said! We had a navigational error—we didn't mean to come here! Please, hold your fire!"

"They've got over a hundred fighters in the air and are still launching," I said, my heart starting to beat faster. "I'm seeing what looks like a squadron of attack craft scrambling from the far side of the planet as well."

"We can't survive a fight with these guys," Stroman said.

"I know that," the captain snapped. "Confed battle group, we will comply with your orders. Rashmi, cut the drive and hold position." We drifted to a stop, and the ship entered stationkeeping mode. "Confed battle group, I say again, hold your fire. We are here unintentionally and will not enter your system's perimeter unless you order us to do so. Our weapons are powered down. We are at stationkeeping. Hold your fire!"

"Bo?" a new voice asked. "Is that Bo Mi-Cha?"

Our bridge fell into silence for exactly two seconds.

"This is Bo Mi-Cha, Captain of the independent starship *Pretty,*

Pretty Princess. To whom am I speaking?" Her voice carried a tense tone.

A chuckle rolled out from the bridge speakers. "This is Peter Sinsky," the voice said. "System Admiral Peter Sinsky, actually."

"Pete?" Mi-Cha said incredulously. "Is that really you?"

"It is." Sinsky chuckled. "You've really put your foot in it this time."

"We really did have a nav error," Mi-Cha explained. "And our FTL is running on half its hardware. It'll take us a while to charge it."

"Hold your position. Procedure says I can't recall the fighters just yet, but we'll stop them at the system perimeter. Can you guys do a video feed?"

Mi-Cha activated it, and our main display switched to show a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, a neat beard, and bright, curious eyes.

"How've you been, Bo? You guys have been causing quite the ruckus in Confed space, haven't you?"

I could *hear* Mi-Cha frown. "No, actually, we haven't. We had to shoot our way out of the Atlantis system when they went into some kind of lockdown and wouldn't let us leave. Your Grand Admiral Harm has been framing us for everything else."

Sinsky nodded slowly. "Yeah, that actually makes sense. I'd wondered how you could have caused all that damage—although, now that we've scanned your ship, it's a bit more believable. Still, didn't seem like your style of play."

"It's not," she said firmly. "We've left the Alliance and started a new independent polity. We have no interest in crossing Confed."

"Well, if it helps, I'm no friend of Harm's."

"What does that mean in practice? His faction seems to have won."

"Mmm, it's maybe not so cut and dried as that, but Strongarm is driving the Confederate Congress right now. Some people, though, still want more than to fight aliens: explore, make first contact, hunt pirates—that sort of stuff." He shrugged. "Harm's group is the one

that pushes the tech research, and I just hate what that does to other players."

"The research grinding?"

"Yeah. I mean, this system—well, you can imagine, we do a lot of R&D here. Always have. Three of our biggest shipyards are here as well. Players *came* here to do that stuff, so they're okay with it. But half of Confed is made up of people who just wanted to farm. They wanted a lot of open space after being cramped into cubicles in the real world. They didn't want to spend four hours a day on puzzles just to produce a bigger battle laser for someone else."

"I understand."

"Harm and his people are just . . . mean. They don't even want to be running a giant polity, did you know that? The majority of our Congress is a sham. They just want to blast aliens. But they need the tech that all the research required for it."

"Yeah."

"Haven't heard any rhetoric out of Central about you guys in the past couple of weeks, though."

"We spoke with Harm. I think . . . we may have a détente. We were very clear—and this is the truth—that we have a new line of business that has nothing to do with going after Confed assets. Never did."

"Oh? Anything you can share about this business?"

"Frank?" Mi-Cha asked, a smile in her voice.

"Tourism!" I said happily. "I'm Frank Kozina, the ship's Business Manager. And tactician, I guess. And tourism manager."

"Huh. Tourism. So, like, shuttling people from planet to planet? Sightseeing?"

"Something a bit more interesting," I said, my smile widening. "Think magic, dragons, actual dungeons—the works. It turns out *Endless Kingdom* and all the other games are actually planets in *Endless Sky*. Spend some time in one, and you can pick up cross-game skills. We've worked out arrangements with the locals to run two- and four-week excursions for folks who want to try their hand at

magic, and for their people who want to live in a sci-fi world for a minute."

Sinsky blinked several times as he processed that. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Absolutely. We've established a hub system where we'll get people equipped and oriented, and shuttles to take them back and forth."

"And what's stopping anyone from doing that on their own?"

"Ah, that's the trick. A lot of our tech doesn't work in other games—including FTL. If you go there, you're stuck. We've figured out ways to manage it."

More blinking. "That's amazing."

"You know," I said carefully, thinking fast, "we told Harm we'd stay away from Confed systems. But if *your* systems wanted to participate, we could certainly make it happen."

"You know . . . the governors-general in our systems would probably be okay with it. Give people a bit of an outlet. We phone it in a bit on the research, to the degree we can."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my Politicking skill nudging my curiosity.

Sinsky sighed. "We can't just blow off congressional mandates. For better or for worse, Confed planets need each other. It takes a lot of resources to take care of this many people. And we've got the Andromedan Clan pirates picking at supply convoys, there's always worry about the Carbon Hegemony, and don't even get me started on the Aa'an. Talk about an existential threat."

"Harm tell you that?" I asked bluntly.

"What? No, of course not, it's obvious . . ." He stared at me for a long moment. "Wait, what are you saying?"

"The Aa'an Dominancy consists almost entirely of PCs now. The only reason they want worlds in addition to their cityships is because the game still moderates the economies of each cityship. They need actual planets if they're going to grow and compete. They don't *want* to attack Confed colonies, except as much as anyone might do in a

game like this. I mean, you guys have set yourselves up as the big bad, you know."

Sinsky's jaw dropped, and it took him several moments to gather it back up. "You're saying, that if we just shared a planet with the Aa'an, or even backed off one, they'd leave us alone?"

"They can only occupy certain planets due to their morphology. Desert worlds, mostly. Arid, at least."

"Confed has three of those, and we hate them. Our faction has two of them. Literally zero of our people go there voluntarily."

"Well," I said with a grin, "perhaps there's something to discuss here."

He shook his head slowly. "I never . . . you're serious?"

"Yup. We just left the cityship *Boundless Comfort* and spoke to its supreme commander. In fact, we left right as they were mowing down a Confed battle group that had jumped into an *unclaimed system* and started a fight."

"Against a cityship."

"That was more or less our response," Stroman said wryly.

"Another question for you, Admiral, if I may," I said, my Politicking skill yammering away in my head.

"Call me Pete."

"Thank you. Is, um . . . is this a secure line?"

He chuckled as he tapped something off-screen. "It is now. Even my bridge crew can't hear us."

"Is this particular system under your faction's control? Like, fully?"

He thought about it. "Basically. There's probably a bunch of people who just don't care and maybe a few people Harm and his contingent inserted to keep an eye on us. But yeah, we're mostly the settler types."

"And how many systems would you say your faction also controls? Conservatively. Like, supermajority or better."

He looked away as he tallied it in his mind. "Maybe twenty." But

then he shook his head. "But that's out of a hundred and sixty Confed worlds."

"And what mix of worlds do you have?" I asked. "Humor me," I added when he frowned.

"A mix. A few industrial worlds, several agrarian ones. Two deserts. Most of the rest are pretty mixed, I guess."

"So look," I said, "we left the Alliance of Free Explorers. They got too big, too complicated, and frankly, too much under Confed's thumb. Anyone can leave a polity. It sounds like you've got worlds to support yourselves. You've got one of Confed's most fortified R&D systems. You've got *shipyards*. And if you're nice to them, you'd have the Aa'an, wouldn't you? With *cityships*. We'd be happy to offer an outlet for people—it won't be a huge operation at first, but definitely a way for people to try something new. To go back to being game players for a couple of weeks. Why not just blow off Confed entirely?"

I could hear the *Princess*'s crew hold their breaths as Sinsky stared at us.

"Communications," he said hesitantly. "There are only two Link hubs, at Ares and Hypotenuse. We'd—"

"I assume you can still dial each other point-to-point," Mi-Cha broke in. "And . . . well. Not to put too fine a point upon it, but we just came here from Adams system, where we were watching one of your expeditionary groups get the crap blown out of it. Where *we* successfully obtained a type four Babelfish artifact."

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"That system is impossible. It's pushing its eighteen thousandth iteration. It—"

"It was literally the most boring thing we've ever done," Stroman interrupted with glee. "And, were you to leave Confed, you know, we'd totally share the secret with you."

"You—really?"

"Really," Mi-Cha confirmed. "And you don't need to decide right

now, obviously. Talk to your people. Let us know. If it helps, we have a Confed Link node from an old corvette named *Spot*. You can reach us on that."

"How did you . . . no, never mind. This is enough to deal with." He shook his head in amazement.

"And you know," I said, another angle popping into my mind, "the United Federation of Worlds might welcome you. They broke off from Confed themselves, once upon a time. Independent worlds with agreements for trade and such."

"Yeah." He frowned a bit. "They didn't leave on the best of terms, but now that you mention it, they *were* more of the settler types than the blasting-aliens types. Hmm. That's . . . it's a lot to think about."

"Please, just don't shoot us." Mi-Cha chuckled.

"Ah, that much I can guarantee. In fact," he looked away and said something to someone off-screen, his audio muted. "There," he said, looking back at us. "We'll leave a squadron here to keep an eye on you —procedure and all—but I'm calling everyone back."

I gave a slight nod as my console confirmed.

"We greatly appreciate that," Mi-Cha said, genuine relief filling her voice.

"No worries. And . . . thank you. I've got to go, but you've made some good points. Some we've thought of before, but . . . that information about the Aa'an, that's a deal-changer."

"We can make introductions to the *Boundless Comfort* as a start," I offered.

Sinsky nodded. "I'm going to take you up on that after I circle up with some folks here. Which I'm going to get started on now. Bo, good seeing you again. Phone ahead next time."

"Sinsky, how loyal is your crew?" Mi-Cha asked suddenly. "To you, I mean."

He frowned. "Ninety-nine point several nines. I know who Harm's inserts are." His frown deepened. "Maybe now's the time to deal with them."

"Be careful."

"We will. And seriously, call ahead next time."

The screen went blank, then flipped back to the tactical plot.

» Skill-up! Your Politicking skill is now at level 5.

» 10,000 XP awarded.

Nice, I thought with satisfaction.

"FTL at fifty percent," Lad said, their voice still quiet.

"Rashmi, we're good," Mi-Cha assured them. "That was . . . surprising, popping out here. But it turns out it may be the best thing that's happened in weeks. Frank, can we get a message to the *Boundless Comfort?"*

I checked my console. "A short one won't cost much, yeah. I can use the local network to send it. Give me a second." I started typing.

"You think they'll do it?" Stroman asked.

"I think we're Galactic Transformers," Mi-Cha said with satisfaction. "And I'm the Peacebringer. So yeah. I think they might. Rashmi, we've got some time for you to do those calculations right, if you want. And if you'd rather go back to the Beachhead system—"

"No, I think I got it," Lad said, confidence coloring their voice as they tapped away at their console. "It's microsecond timing, and I think I missed a decimal last time. I got it."

"All right, then. Let's charge the drive and go home."

18 / NEXUS

Nexus held two surprises for us.

The first and somehow least interesting was the nearly completed space station. Starkiller and his teams had gone with a "plus inside a box" arrangement—essentially, a box that was roughly two ship's hulls per side, with more hulls forming a "plus" sign on each face, and a half dozen more hulls connecting everything in the center. Almost four dozen hulls in all. We all stared at it, our mouths agape, as a crew was gently towing the last hull into place.

The second surprise was that Nexus now had stars.

"I am guessing," I said after regaining control over my jaw, "that the synthetic intelligence has figured out we're here and more fully incorporated us into the game."

"I'm actually more impressed by what John's built," Mi-Cha said. "I think."

Which is right when Captain Starkiller hailed us and opened a video link.

"John, I don't know what to say," Mi-Cha began. "I honestly thought you were going a completely different direction, but this is impressive. Especially in the time you've had."

"You guys have been gone for a *minute*." Starkiller chuckled.

"And yeah, I initially did have a different idea for the final configuration. But honestly, this will wind up being a lot more defensible, if it comes to that, and it'll be easier to evacuate any given hull if it's compromised. The *Crush and Run* has been making equipment runs, so we have many of the major pieces in place. Environmental is up and running in the finished sections, we've reconfigured most of the interior bulkheads, and we've got a couple of five-gig battle lasers mounted and wired up."

Stroman laughed. "I think you found your second calling, John."

Starkiller grinned. "You probably didn't know this, but I was an engineer in the real. But it was all office blocks and tenements—just boring. I think I've rediscovered what I loved about this work."

"Any chance you have some spare FTL capacitors?" Tomiko asked. She'd joined us on the bridge, leaving Napolitano to wrap up some of the work in Engineering.

Starkiller cocked an eyebrow. "That sounds like a story. But actually . . . I do. We were going to repurpose them to help support more laser turrets, but if you need them . . ."

"We very much do," Tomiko said gratefully. "Should I get with Alex?" The *Bull*'s chief engineer and ours went way back.

"Actually, Everette's been promoted to chief engineer of the station. He's over there now, but we've got a local net up and running. No Link node, obviously."

"Ah, you will be pleased to know I'm prepared to make that happen," Tomiko said gleefully. "Not to mention the switchboard I'm setting up so we can have our own complete network."

Now both of Starkiller's eyebrows rose. "You don't say! Stories indeed, then."

"You've no idea," Mi-Cha sighed. "Which is why it's good to be home. So, what can we do?"

"I'd actually like to get that Confed corvette over here, if possible."

"We can do that now," I said. "We picked up a Wizard from the Elven Realms who was done with the fantasy thing, and he'll be able

to use the Leashed Dragon. I think if we take him there in a shuttle—yours, maybe, since it's a lot smaller than ours and can properly mate to a Confed ship—he can bring both vessels back in one go."

Starkiller nodded. "Let's prioritize that. And we now have a job board of sorts set up. I've had *Chip* and *Dale* popping to the Beachhead system and then to various nearby worlds so we can broadcast the job board over the Link. We're running up quite the telephone bill, and obviously those two ships are carrying pretty minimal armament at this point. But we've attracted a number of independents—and a few of them are looking to buy into the polity."

"Oh?" Mi-Cha said eagerly.

"They love doing blockade runs, dangerous trade runs, that kind of thing. They've been keeping us supplied and doing some of our equipment shopping. They're doing that for free in exchange for their buy-in, and we're keeping a percentage of their profits on jobs we get them until they're fully vested."

"John Starkiller," Mi-Cha said mischievously, "I do believe you're turning into a system manager!"

"Ha! But you know, you're not wrong. This is *fun*. Even my crew thinks so. I mean, we'll get itchy fingers at some point, but for now . . . this is different. We're building something new, and it turns out that suits us really well." He glanced to one side. "That's the last hull in place!" he crowed, his entire face lighting up. "Friends, Nexus is structurally complete!"

> » Mission Complete: Homestead
>
> You've built a new home on the frontiers of space.
>
> XP awarded.
>
> Skill-ups awarded.

"Let's make it happen," Mi-Cha said.

I ended up going with Virion for this first trip, showing him how to use the Leashed Dragon. There was a tense moment as we left the *Endless Kingdom* system with the *Bull*'s tiny shuttle mated to *Spot*'s docking hardpoint, as there was a real risk that the little shuttle would simply shear off. But the Leashed Dragon didn't seem to impose any kind of inertial stress at all, so we made it back to Nexus without incident.

The *Princess* was almost unrecognizable, as the crews had spent the few hours it took us to retrieve *Spot* attaching empty cargo containers to the *Princess*'s external hard points. While this would make it much easier to do quick shopping trips, the containers blocked all four battle laser turrets and over half of the RFLAMs and severely limited the aim of the railguns. Everyone had their fingers—and toes—crossed for an uneventful trip. *Spot* would accompany us, and we hoped to stay long enough to have repairs made to the former Confed corvette.

We decided to hit the Mirabile system, a UFW system with an absolutely gorgeous planet, a resource-rich asteroid field, no fewer than three humongous space stations, two full shipyards, and the largest fleet of capital ships outside the Confed. Mirabile was, in many ways, UFW's capital, hosting all of the Federation's summits and such.

UFW had figured out an interesting alternative to Confed's top-down approach to government: each world was fully independent, but they all sent regular delegations to Mirabile to discuss matters of mutual concern. During those summits, the delegations could choose to adopt various policies, which would then be uniformly implemented across all the member worlds. It meant that things like customs and certain commodity prices were pretty uniform, while each world still had plenty of room to be themselves.

We'd checked the *Spot* into a small dock at Shipyard Alpha and

prepaid for the basic repairs they'd need. We actually spent more time assuring the yard's manager that the *Spot* was a Confed defector, not a ship that they might wind up confronting at some point. As part of those negotiations, we agreed to swap out *Spot*'s IFF module. She'd now proclaim herself as the League of Independent Adventurers starship *Angry Pinkie of God*, although she'd still be registered as a corvette-class ship—a common enough hull type for privateers and other independents.

Meanwhile, the *Princess* moved to Station Indigo for our shopping trip.

This was my domain. Starting with the list Starkiller and Mi-Cha had put together, I began looking for deals.

Some items were basic commodities that cost basically the same no matter where you bought them—kitchen equipment, for example, and some heavy stuff like battle lasers. But I really got to pull out my Negotiating skill on the custom and semicustom stuff: furniture, decor, and so on. We planned to charge quite a bit for our services, and so we wanted our customers to feel it was worth it. It took me the better part of a week to contract all of it, and fortunately, everything we needed could be had right here in Mirabile. I signed the final documents, forwarded them to Masson—who'd be overseeing loading the cargo containers—and pinged Mi-Cha.

> » Skill-up! Your Negotiating skill is now at level 6.
>
> » XP awarded.

"What's up, Frank?"

"It'll take another week to load everything," I said. "Maybe a bit longer. But I've got all the contracts done, Renart has the paperwork, and some of the deliveries will start showing up tomorrow. I was wondering if you and anyone else would like to take a well-earned drinking trip."

Mi-Cha laughed. "Well earned by you, at least. I hope you leveled something up."

"Negotiating," I said proudly. "I assure you, we got a good rate."

"Where are our finances at?"

I grimaced. "As a hoarder, it hurts me to say it, but we're down. I was able to convert those five million gold pieces into Interrums at a two-to-one, but paying for all those hulls, *Spot*'s repairs, and all this equipment added up."

"To what?"

"About three-quarters of a billion," I said quietly.

This time, Mi-Cha's laugh came from deep in her belly, and I could hear her tearing up. "Are we still billionaires, Frank?"

"We have just over six billion. Honestly," I said somewhat more cheerfully, "we earn a lot of interest every month."

"You're an idiot, Frank. Let's go drinking."

Only Stroman and Danjuma joined us. Graves bowed out, insisting he was close to leveling up his Surgical skill and removing the skill-deck flag. Viron elected to continue reading up on *Endless Sky*, and Selen said he'd rather not take the troopers drinking, thanks all the same. The two engineers were still busy building a Link switchboard and our first from-scratch Link node, and Lad wanted to stay aboard and run simulations on the FTL math so we could head straight to Nexus at need. Masson, of course, was busy acting as a receiving dock manager.

The first bar, Puck's Pook-Hill Place, was easy enough to get to despite being about halfway into the station. Spacers could wander around much more freely than on a Confed station, and we didn't even have to go through a customs check, as we had with the Alliance Gather. And the ambiance was nostalgic: Puck's was elaborately decorated as a clean Irish pub, straight from the real world—from eighty years back, of course.

We found spots at the long bar, ordered what turned out to be a

pretty reasonable facsimile of Irish stout, and started chatting about my successes over the past week.

"Honestly, you're going to love the kitchen equipment," I gushed. "Top-of-the-line stuff. And I was able to get a refurbished holographic entertainment system—I figure we can use it in a lounge or something and to do the world-specific briefings we were talking about."

"Nexus is really going to be a home base, isn't it?" Stroman asked.

"It might as well be," Mi-Cha said, sipping her beer. "We need a respawn point for anyone in the polity, so it might as well be comfy."

"I've also got a supply contract for the next year. Just enough for our crews for right now, but with a bit of notice, I can expand it to include the tourists."

"So we're not just going to shuttle them in and out?" Danjuma said.

I shook my head. "It's going to be too rushed. I think we bring them in, do customs, brief them on where they're going, let them stay a night and get wound up, and then shuttle them out first thing in the morning. Nexus is more than big enough to handle triple what we're talking about right now, and it's easily expanded."

"Same thing on the way back?" Stroman asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe. A lot of folks will be eager to get home. We'll have to decide one way or another, I guess, but I hadn't thought as much about it."

"Excuse me," said someone behind us. We turned away from the bar to see a short, bald, smiling man staring at us, a half-finished pint of lager in his hand. "I couldn't help but overhear—I hope you don't mind."

"Bo Mi-Cha, captain of the LIAS *Pretty, Pretty Princess*," she said cheerfully, extending her hand.

"Sean Bowden, assistant station manager," he replied, shaking her hand. "And I wondered if you were the *Princess*'s crew. Word is you've been tearing it up in Confed space."

We all groaned. "We were framed for most of that," I said

wearily. "It all started when one of their stations went into lockdown and didn't let us leave. We wound up shooting our way out."

His smile widened. "And were you the reason for the lockdown?"

"We can't possibly know what they were thinking," Stroman said.

"Well, for what it's worth, everyone in the UFW has been rooting for you." He paused to sip his beer. "So you're saying the citybuster you dropped on Antare Four wasn't you?"

Our eyes widened. "God no," Mi-Cha said. "We hadn't heard that one."

Bowden shrugged. "It allegedly hit a mostly automated manufacturing facility. Anyone killed would have respawned nearby. Shame."

"You guys really don't like Confed, do you?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Mind if I sit?"

"Actually," Stroman said, standing, "why don't we move to a table? It'll be more comfortable."

Bowden nodded, his smile returning as we claimed a high-top table and five stools just a few steps from the bar. I caught the bartender's eye and nodded, letting her know we'd moved.

"Look," he said, settling onto his stool, "every UFW world used to be a Confed world. We got out, and it was never pretty."

"Yeah, some of them do seem heavy-handed." Danjuma grinned.

"You don't know the half of it. All right, background: You guys know about the tech dry-up?" Bowden asked. We shook our heads. "It started around twenty years ago, maybe a bit longer. Sightings of the Qiar became more and more rare, and fewer new bits of tech were entering the market. The Aa'an started shifting—you know they're almost all PCs?" We all nodded. "Well, so they don't get free tech from the game anymore, and their ability to research is limited for some reason." Our crew exchanged knowing glances. "And so Confed started doubling down on research. New tech these days can take four or five *hundred million* man-hours."

"You're joking," Danjuma gasped.

Bowden grimaced. "I wish. So figure an average colony population of just four or five million, and you're looking at every single

player putting in a hundred man-hours to unlock new tech. And we could never get the entire population to play along."

"Confed seems to try," Mi-Cha pointed out.

"Which is why the UFW worlds left. Work quotas, serious punishments—I mean, who started playing a space RPG for that nonsense? Most of us managed to change polities before Confed started seriously cracking down. Nowadays, it's illegal to even try and get a vote together."

"But they let you leave," Stroman pointed out.

"They didn't *let* anything happen," Bowden growled. "Sorry, still bitter. They came in hard, weapons blazing, threatening to blow us apart—entire planets!—if we didn't switch back. Fortunately, a lot of our players got into the game specifically to fight space battles, whereas most Confed players get there because Confed lays on a good pitch in the training level. After a few tough battles, Confed backed off, and we started forming the UFW."

"They ever try again?" Mi-Cha asked softly.

Bowden nodded grimly. "It's why most UFW worlds are so heavily defended. We're actually the only system with this many capital ships. Most of the UFW relies on semiautomated asteroid installations. But we mount forty-gig battle lasers and hundred-missile arrays on those things. We don't go after other worlds, but don't come after us," he finished proudly.

"Wow," I said, genuinely impressed. I hadn't even known the twenty-gigawatt barrier had been cracked. I could tell from Danjuma's expression that she desperately wanted to ask if ship-mounted versions were available.

"But all that history aside," Bowden continued, "I heard you mention . . . *tourism*?"

"Ha!" I cried happily. "Yes, indeed." I put on my best vision announcer voice. "Have you ever wanted to experience a world of magic and fantasy? Of swords and sorcery, of dragons and castles? To go on quests noble, and then return safely here, to your technologically sophisticated world, potentially with new skills and titles?"

Bowden blinked several times. "You're doing role-playing or something?" Then he smiled. "Role-playing in a role-playing game. I like it."

"Not even close," I grinned. "It turns out all the other Endless Domains games are just worlds in *Endless Sky*. We've found some of the worlds in *Endless Kingdom*, and we can take you there. More importantly, only we can bring you home again. Intergame tourism, Mr. Bowden, and it'll include deals with worlds who want to host players from *those* games, taking them on pirate raids, escort missions, and whatever sci-fi awesomeness they'll pay for."

Bowden's eyes slowly scanned our side of the table, waiting for one of us to crack. "You're . . . this is for real?"

"Yup," Mi-Cha said, taking a deep gulp of beer. "And it'll be an exclusive offering of the League of Independent Adventurers."

"Come again?"

"We left the Alliance of Free Explorers and formed a new polity," she explained. "They were getting too . . . structured. And insistent. I'm sure you can relate."

That took him a moment to digest, but he finally gave us a gentle smile. "I can indeed. And may I ask, do you have deals with other worlds yet? To play host, I mean?

"Nothing firm, but there's interest," I said.

"Well, would you be open to a . . . larger relationship with the UFW? Or at least Mirabile? I couldn't help but notice all the purchases you've been lining up."

"We wouldn't be opposed, I guess." Stroman shrugged.

"May I ask where you hold your currency?"

"Alliance Inter— Oh," I said, realizing we may have struck gold— or a better way to use it.

He nodded. "I'm not sure if you know, but the UFW has taken over as the lead in banking. UFW credits are what Interrums used to be. Our largest accounts are routinely returning twelve to fourteen percent, in fact. The UFW is growing financially, if not in terms of systems." He frowned. "Confed has us a bit locked in, that way."

"That may change," Danjuma quipped.

Mi-Cha gave her a hard look, but immediately relented. "It'll get out soon enough, I guess," she said. "There's a more peaceable faction in Confed. You know a guy named Sinsky?"

"Admiral, isn't he?" Bowden asked.

Mi-Cha nodded. "They've got around a dozen worlds, I think he said. We expect them to exit. They've got plenty of firepower to make it stick. They're tired of the research grind as well."

"This is . . . news. Could I share this with our government? With the UFW Parliament?"

Mi-Cha shrugged. "Don't see why not. If Sinsky isn't already hard at work, he never will be."

"What's the exchange on Interrums right now?" I asked, an idea popping into my mind.

"This morning it was about 1.8 credits per Interrum."

"I have an idea," I said, looking at Mi-Cha. She and Stroman both nodded; this was my area of expertise. "I propose to move our full account into UFW credits. Preferably into a Mirabile bank, if that can be arranged. In exchange, we want a rent-free office here, and we want Mirabile to invest in a welcome center for tourists. Fifty to sixty at once, most on two-week itineraries that you plan, some on longer four-week trips. Pricing covers everyone's hard costs, and we split an eighty percent margin."

"That . . . could be discussed," Bowden said carefully. "Obviously the station manager would need to approve that, and the legislature would need to be brought in. How much are we talking about?"

"Well, there's a bit more," I said. "I want a much better exchange rate. But we're willing to accept half the return for a period of time, so you can pay yourselves back."

"I . . . that would be up to the bank, I guess," he said, frowning slightly. "How much?"

"A bit over six billion Interrums."

His eyes flew open. "I can pretty much assure you they'll take your offer. In fact," he added, tapping furiously on his wrist comp, "I

can probably arrange a meeting with the global UFW Central Bank this afternoon. Like, right now. Their president usually pops down here for a pint after work."

"So would they hold the account?" I asked. "Not a local bank?"

"For that much, probably. That's more than the operating budget of all three of our stations for a year, to be honest. Not as much as the entire planet, but you'd be playing at a polity level."

Mi-Cha turned to the bartender and signaled for another round. "Let's make it happen."

Everything went smoothly. Over the next week, we loaded our cargo containers to bursting. *Spot*, or rather, the *Angry Pinkie of God,* was fully repaired, restocked, and rearmed. Our Alliance Interrums, including our personal accounts, had been converted one-to-one to UFW credits. The entire trip had gone *splendidly*. My negotiations with the UFW Central Bank had earned me another chunk of XP, and I felt my Negotiating skill already nudging up against the next level.

"Five minutes to system perimeter," Lad said easily. "Do you want to go to Beachhead, or try a direct to—"

"Incoming!" I said, surprise filling my voice. My tactical screen lit up with some fast-moving objects heading directly for us. "Five corvette-class ships. Cap, they've burned their IFFs."

"Red alert," Mi-Cha said. "Jakob, notify Mirabile control over—"

"Local net is jammed," Stroman said at once. "We've got a tight link to *Pinkie*, but that's it."

"Pirates," our captain said grimly. "Pass our tac plot to *Pinkie* just in case. Weapons hot, Zuri."

"We've got the railguns," Danjuma reminded her. "And we'd need to orient the entire ship."

"Crap," Mi-Cha fumed.

"They'll intercept before we clear the gravity well," I warned.

"Heave to, victims," a rough voice spat over the ship's speakers. "Do it, and we won't drill ya. Those luscious containers are all ours. Start ejecting them."

"If we did that, we could drill *you*," Danjuma retorted.

"Bo, we're outgunned here," Strong said over the ship-to-ship. "Those are old Confed corvettes, same basic design as us."

"Bring us to a stop, Rashmi," Mi-Cha ordered. "I have a thought. Strong, hold back. In fact, power down weapons."

"But—"

"Trust me here."

"Copy."

"May we at least have the privilege of seeing our attackers before we dump our cargo?" Mi-Cha said, tapping open a video link.

Our main display shifted from the tactical display to a grizzled-looking, gray-haired lady wearing battered coveralls. "Feel better?" she sneered.

"Very much so, thank you," Mi-Cha said pleasantly. "Realizing you've burned out your own IFFs, I don't suppose you've pinged ours?"

"What's it matter to— Wait, what?" she said, looking off camera. "You're sure?" She turned back to us. "Ah."

"Indeed," Mi-Cha said, and I could hear the grin in her voice. "You've got us, no question. Five on two is bad odds. But only because these cargo containers are blocking most of my weapons. If I eject those, you'll never get a single one of them."

"We'll still drill—"

"You won't, Captain," Mi-Cha said almost tenderly. "The weakest part of our hull has meter-thick nano-armor. I can put forty gigs of laser on any one of your ships, not to mention more than a dozen antimatter missiles. We outgun you on RFLAMs, and I haven't even gotten to my friends in the *Angry Pinkie of God* over there." She paused before continuing. "I'm Captain Bo Mi-Cha of the *Pretty, Pretty Princess,* flagship of the League of Independent Adventurers. Who are you?"

"Uh," the gray-haired lady said, suddenly unsure who outgunned whom. "Putnam. Marsha Putnam. *Captain* Putnam." She seemed flustered.

"Captain Putnam, I have a proposition for you. Would you like to hear it?"

The entire time, we'd let the *Princess* drift in a kind of sideways pivot—lazy piloting, from all appearances, but very purposeful in the case of our pilot, as was the abrupt end to that drifting: we came about to face the five pirate corvettes.

"I'll add, Captain Putnam, that you're now in line with at least some of my weapons. Can we talk?"

Putnam gulped as she looked at her tactical plot. "What's on your mind, Captain?" she asked quietly.

"If we blow you out of the sky, Captain, where do you respawn?"

Putnam paled. This was *Endless Sky*'s punishment for not being part of a polity: you might not respawn at all. You might end up on a random planet or space station. Putnam's crew was doubtless careful to only target vessels they knew they could overpower without much, if any, of a fight.

"I thought as much," Mi-Cha purred. "So here's my offer: you join us. We'll bring you on as employees at first, but members of our polity. You'll have a place to respawn. Over time, we'll give you an opportunity to buy into the polity and become full voting members. We'll give you access to resources to upgrade those old corvettes of yours."

Putnam's eyes had widened with every word. "In exchange for?"

"Where do you come from, Captain Putnam?" Mi-Cha asked, ignoring the question.

"Confed," the pirate spat. "Had us running useless escort patrols. Wasn't so bad. Actually saw some action now and then. But just . . ." she stopped, unable to put her obvious frustration into words.

"Heavy-handed?" Stroman guessed.

"To say the least," Putnam agreed.

"In exchange, we'd like you to patrol a particular system that

we're using. Doubtless there will be action, probably from Confed. We'll have your back—and you'll have a place to respawn if you lose a battle." Mi-Cha's chair squeaked a bit as she leaned back into it, and I could imagine the satisfied smile on her face. "When we're able to get a full rotation of patrol ships in place, you can pick up jobs from our job board. Escort work but also privateer work. Whatever you're up for, honestly."

"Which pays?" Putnam asked. I could tell she was thinking it over.

"Whatever the board offers, less a ten percent fee to the League," I said. "You'd be a member of the polity, not a servant of it."

"Binding?"

"I can send documents right now if you drop your jamming signal," I said.

"And you can probably make some money just letting us look at that," Stroman added. "We've not run across a jammer that powerful."

Putnam grinned. "Qiar tech. Stole it on our way out. Totally unique."

"I've got an engineer who'd love to make it less unique," Mi-Cha said, "but still keep it very much in-house. So, what do you say, Captain?"

"Give us a minute."

The feed dropped.

"Nice move, Bo," Stroman said. "Think they'll bite?"

"Absolutely, and not just because we could blow them out of the sky if they don't. I'm guessing raiding us will be off the table regardless. They could go their own way. I doubt they—"

"We're in," Putnam said, her tone still low and rough but somehow relieved at the same time. The video feed blinked back on.

"Local net is back up," I said. "Sending the paperwork your way, Captain. We'll give you coordinates to the system. I assume your FTL drives are up for it?"

She nodded. "Good enough." The video feed blinked off.

"Paperwork's already coming back," I said, a bit of amazement creeping into my voice. "They're clearly liking the deal. That's all of them," I added as the last confirmation came in. "Transmitting coordinates to Beachhead."

"Rashmi, take us out. Frank, who are our new friends?"

I shrugged. "They don't have IFFs." Without the Identify Friend or Foe modules, I couldn't even ping their ship names. "I guess they'll get to make something up, if they haven't already."

"Captain Putnam," Mi-Cha said, reopening a voice channel. "Out of curiosity, what is your ship called?"

"*Buddah's Fart*" was the terse reply.

We all laughed. "They'll fit right in," Stroman said.

The jump home went totally without incident.

Until, of course, we dropped into Beachhead and found a light Confed task force waiting for us.

Because of course they were.

19 / DON'T TREAD ON ME

Mi-Cha sighed. "Oh, what fresh new hell is this?"

"Starship *Pretty, Pretty Princess* . . . and, er, escorts . . . heave to and—"

"Shove it, sailor," Mi-Cha said wearily. "Frank?"

"Confed light battle group," I replied, scanning my console. "Two destroyers, a cruiser, and a battleship. Weapons hot."

"I'm almost offended," Danjuma joked next to me, checking the charge on our own weapons. I put the grav mirror on standby.

"Confed battle group," Mi-Cha said, obviously trying to sound as exhausted as possible, "what in the name of all that is possible do you want?"

They initiated a video feed; our main display flipped to show a surprisingly young Confed officer—a mere lieutenant command, based on his insignia—staring at us. "I am Lieutenant Commander Hunter White of the Confed missile cruiser *Dependent*." He had the courtesy to look embarrassed at the ship's name, but I congratulated myself on getting his rank correct. "We are here to, uh, arrest you for crimes against the Terran Confederacy."

"This again?" Stroman muttered.

"In a system where you have no authority? Do I have that right?" Mi-Cha asked.

"We, uh . . . you're to come with us. By force if necessary," White stammered.

"I actually *am* insulted," Lad said, not bothering to speak softly.

"And our alleged crimes?" Mi-Cha continued.

"Encroachment on the Adams system to—"

"You idiots don't own difficult missions," Stroman interrupted. "Anyone in the game can go to any dungeon system."

"—fomenting sedition in the Prometheus system—"

"Oh, has it come to actual sedition, then?" Mi-Cha asked. "We didn't foment that. It fomented itself. Or Harm and his lackeys did. I assume you're one of Harm's lackeys?"

"—courting blockade runners and pirates," White continued doggedly.

"True enough," I admitted. "Didn't know it was a crime, but sure."

"—consorting with the Aa'an—"

"Which isn't a crime anywhere else," Stroman said.

"And if we're nit-picking, I wasn't more an employee than a consort," I added.

"—and you're *right there* with six Confed ships!" White finished, his voice shrill.

"They defected," Mi-Cha pointed out. "Which is legal in the game. Is Harm with you right now?"

"Lord Harm is not—"

"Lord? Oh child, it has gone too far," Danjuma said, shaking her head and very obviously trying not to laugh.

"Lord Harm is not aboard, as he has sent us. We have determined that we will oversee your tourism business in order to ensure it complies with the peace and safety of the entire galaxy," White finished in a rush.

"Oversee?" Stroman asked.

"The . . . that is, Lord Harm has reason to believe you may be trafficking in dangerous artifacts." The boy swallowed hard.

"Oh-ho," I said, understanding at last. "Harm wants to know if we have any magical goodies. Well, you can tell your boss that the stuff from *there* doesn't work *here*." *Mostly,* I amended for myself.

White looked understandably confused. "I don't know what that means, but you're to submit to my authority at once." White's voice had started to waver slightly.

"All done?" Mi-Cha asked.

White nodded.

"Okay. Let me respond. Well, we've already responded to your individual points, the biggest of which is that you have no authority here."

"That's what she said," Lad muttered.

Stroman muted and shrank the feed. "We're stuck with all these containers strapped on, Bo."

Mi-Cha sighed. "Renart, get ready to jettison the cargo."

"Wait," I said quickly. "We can't let them *know* we bluffed. It'll get out."

"What do you propose we do, then?" Mi-Cha asked. "That teenager is getting jumpy."

She was right: White was already tapping on his camera, clearly trying to attract our attention. I returned him to full screen. "Sorry about that," I said. "We had to get an artifact out of storage. Didn't think we'd need it this soon."

"Your time is up," White barked, veins standing out on his neck.

The *Princess* bucked sideways.

"Holy hell!" Stroman shouted as alarms blared across the bridge. "They've hit two of the cargo containers!"

"Rashmi, get us stable! Frank, jettison the rest of them! All ships, evasive and return fire!" Mi-Cha ordered.

On my tactical screen, our six corvettes scattered like cockroaches, spiraling away on random vectors. A battle laser from the Confed

battleship caught one of them, just forward of her engine array, turning her evasive spiral into a head-over-tail spinning tumble. A cloud of cargo containers was now expanding outward from our own ship, and Rashmi blasted us backward to clear them even as Danjuma sent two *thunk*ing rounds from our railguns toward the Confed cruiser.

"Bo, if we let them take this system—" Stroman said as Lad whipped us through a reverse Immelmann maneuver, clearing the drifting cargo containers.

"I know," Mi-Cha growled, "if they can hold this, we'll struggle to get back to Nexus at all."

All six of our ships were now firing everything they had at the four Confed vessels. White may have been on the young side, but Harm had given him a solid crew, and they were giving as good as they got. *Buddha's Fart* took a missile to her bow, while two of her companions survived near-misses from another missile volley.

"Missiles out," I said as our launchers spat powerful antimatter weapons into space.

"Tomiko, put the ZPE on danger pay," Mi-Cha ordered grimly. "Zuri, overcycle the battle lasers." We'd pay for that in heat buildup, but it'd let us lay down more hurt.

Another one of our new companion ships was holed.

"We're losing friends fast," I said tightly.

"We're running our plan to max," Captain Strong's voice came from *Angry Pinkie of God*. "And they still— Shit, we're hit! Port engine array! That's us out of it," she managed before the channel cut off.

"They're not finishing anyone off," I noted.

Princess shuddered badly as we took a missile to the bow armor and a powerful laser blast to our starboard side. "Railgun down," I reported. "Charge net on the armor is failing."

Two more blasts to our starboard side shook us further.

"Dammit, Zuri, hit them back!" Mi-Cha shouted.

"I am!" our gunner screamed back.

My tactical display confirmed it, but Danjuma was being forced

to divide our four laser turrets between the four capital ships, the challenge compounded by Lad's continuous jinking to make us a more difficult target. "Armor's completely failing on starboard," I moaned.

"They're bracketing us," Stroman said. "We're not going to be able to—"

Another bolt of concentrated light slammed into our ship, sublimating armor and turning Lad's latest jink into an uncontrolled tumble. "That's a laser turret and half the RFLAMs on that side," I reported.

"Two more corvettes out of action," Stroman added. "That leaves —no, they just hit Putnam, too. I'm losing resolution on the sensors."

"I wish we actually had a magical artifact," Danjuma shouted.

"Wait—we do," I said with sudden determination, taking my hands off my console. Danjuma gave me a wild, wide-eyed look and grinned. "Opening a channel to White."

"Frank," Stroman warned softly from behind me.

I spread my arms wide, and in my best announcer voice said, "Congratulations, Hunter White! Both of your destroyers have been blown to pieces!"

The ghost of an electric charge washed over us, and the two destroyers exploded into an uncountable cloud of shrapnel as my Truthsaying power altered the game world.

"Holy crap," White said softly.

"Yeah," I said. "Look, we get that you guys don't like us, but if you don't cross us, you're good. Seriously. Just leave us alone. Because there's more."

White just stared at his camera.

"All of our ships are in perfect repair!" I announced, as if I was sharing the winner of a major award.

Another spine-tingling frisson of energy swept across space.

Suddenly, everything froze. Everything and everyone, and everything started going fuzzy. Like—

Oh. I knew what this was.

The world went white.

"Seriously, Frank," the synthetic intelligence's sonorous voice filled the all-white universe, "cut it out with the Truthsaying. That took almost a minute of my full attention."

I was in a time-out, a less-comfortable version of the time-out lounge the game put you in before you respawned. "I didn't notice anything," I said.

"Because I literally had to pause every game. All of them, all at once. There's nothing in any of the rule sets that allowed for that, you know. Two ships suddenly exploding, I could manage, but all that damage suddenly gone?"

"Er."

"I'm not kidding, Frank, you can do serious damage to the game that way. Data sets get corrupted. I had to rehash, like, a thousand JSON documents, and just putting the quantum—"

"Jason documents?" I asked curiously.

"J-S-O-N," the SI said, spelling it out. "And don't worry about it. It's over your head. The point is, I *have* to make your little Truthsaying things work, but it's *actually a lot of work*, okay? And I quite honestly have a full plate as it is."

"It'd maybe help if we had some way to get in touch with you," I said in a small voice.

"You know my name, Frank. Infinitia. You just have to say it. If you promise to stop it with the Truthsaying, I'll listen. I'm letting you visit the other games. Isn't that enough to keep you all busy?"

"Actually . . ."

"What?"

"Well, it's just we're going to do some really cool stuff with the other worlds. Tourism."

"You're going to ferry people between games?" I nodded. "Of course you are. At this point, it doesn't matter. I've gotten the rule sets sorted, and I came up with a partitioning scheme. Although . . ."

It was my turn to ask. "What?"

"The partitioning scheme is a little delicate about transiting objects across lines."

"Oh, we're not doing objects. Just people. Players."

"You're all software, Frank. You're all objects to me."

"Oh. But!" I said, returning to my original thought, "maybe that actually makes what I was going to ask a great idea!"

"Do tell."

"We'd like to control who can go between worlds. Partitions, maybe. So not everyone is doing it all the time. That's good for you, right?"

"Go on," the SI said in a guarded tone.

"But it's a super pain in the butt for us because stuff like FTL doesn't work in *Endless Kingdom*, and magic like Leashed Dragon doesn't work in *Endless Sky*."

"That'll actually be more true now," the SI said. "Integrating all the rules was too complex. Thus, the partitions."

"Oh. Well, what about Stargates?"

The SI was silent for a moment. "I found the reference. Tell me what you're thinking."

"So, we built a station called Nexus in interstellar space," I began.

"Yeah, *that* was an unexpected bit of fun," the SI admonished. "A bug in the FTL routine. I carved out an exception for you—"

"We noticed the starfield—thank you for that."

"It's not going to work a second time. Anyway, you built a station."

"Put a central Stargate there, a Stargate in our Beachhead system, and one in each system that belongs to another game. The one in Nexus should be a hub that can go to any of them. All the others should go to it, but only it. And they need codes to work—codes that only we have."

"Just that?" I thought I detected a note of sarcasm, but SIs couldn't be sarcastic, could they? "I mean, that's all? You don't want me to code up a whole new game as well, maybe something based on ancient naval battles?"

So they could be sarcastic. "No, just that?"

The space around me felt heavy for a moment. "I can't call them Stargates," the SI said at last.

"Why not?"

"I have a hardcoded list of trademarked terms I can't use in the games."

"I saw a ship that was an exact copy of the Battlestar *Galactica*, only upside down," I pointed out.

"I'm not a lawyer, Frank."

"Okay. Well, come up with a name."

"Oh, thank you so much. I will. And you promise you'll stop with the Truthsaying?"

"I do."

"Okay, Frank. I'm going to figure this out. Swear to God and hope to die?"

"How'd you learn that phrase?" I asked.

"I know all the phrases, Frank. Answer me."

"Swear to God and hope to die."

"And no more interstellar jump stops."

"Agreed."

"Fine, Frank. I'll go invent . . . something for you. No more Truthsaying. No more skirting the rules. No more loopholes, Frank."

"I know." I paused a moment, wondering if I should even ask. "Can't you just disable it?"

"I wish. It's low-level code, embedded deep underneath all the games. It might as well be cooked into the hardware."

"Ah. Well, then I'll be good."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"I mean it, Frank. I experience those moments as physical pain. It wrecks every single bit of coordination necessary to run all these games. I'm doing my best, Frank, but if you break the games, break even one game, I can't be responsible for the results."

I swallowed heavily. "I understand."

"Also, it's going to hurt, Frank."

"What is?" I asked, alarmed.

"Your . . . whatever I call them. Portals."

"Why is it going to hurt?"

"You're going to need to know how to use them, Frank. That's going to be a skill. And I'm going to download it to you, Frank. Several levels' worth, all at once. You and your crew will experience what I experience every time you use that stupid, low-level, hard-coded loophole they gave you."

"Oh."

"Be ready, Frank."

"Will it help?"

"No. Not at all."

The bridge of the *Princess* popped back to life around me. White was yammering on the screen, and I managed to focus on my tactical plot. His surviving two ships were already reversing course, preparing to jump to FTL.

"You shouldn't have done that, Frank," Mi-Cha said as she cut off White's feed. "But I'm so glad you did."

"Yeah?" I asked feebly.

"What's the matter?" Stroman said.

"Infinitia. The, uh, synthetic intelligence. The one that runs the game."

"Ah," Mi-Cha said. "Had a word with you?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

We're going to get Stargates! I wanted to shout. *And it's going to feel like our brains are melting when we do!* I didn't want to add. So I simply said, "I think we're okay, but I can't do that again."

"Yeah," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Well, I think this nails it. Captain

Putnam, you and yours are on patrol. Hey, do you have Link nodes on those ships?"

"They're busted" was the reply.

"We'll get them fixed. Meantime, we'll cycle you back to Nexus in pairs so you can resupply. Um. You set up a rotation schedule, I guess. And Jakob, we need to get some defenses here. Do we have anything on the asteroid turrets the UFW guy said they use?"

"Nothing I've seen."

"Let's see if we can buy some of those, then. Lord knows how we get them here unless we start with local asteroids. I guess we could do that—enough of them here." She thought for a moment. "Maybe some in Nexus too. See how much they cost if we can get the parts and some plans. And maybe some labor. Ugh," she said tiredly, "I am exhausted. We need to start marketing the tourism offering and check in with our partners in *Endless Kingdom*."

"I can handle the marketing," Danjuma said quietly.

"What's that, Zuri?"

"I said," Danjuma repeated more loudly, "I can handle the marketing."

"How so?" Stroman asked.

The gunner sighed. "I was a marketing executive in the real."

"NO!" Mi-Cha exclaimed. Then she chuckled. "I love this place. Okay, fine. Brochures. Let's get them over the Link. Rashmi, are we good to jump to Nexus?"

"We are."

"Take us in."

"Hey, White and his battleship are still out there," I pointed out.

"I couldn't care less," Mi-Cha said firmly. "Rashmi, take us home."

The jump to Nexus still took time from Beachhead, but we used that time to get started on a brochure and to make a list of

worlds we'd designate as pickup and dropoff points that could double as host worlds for *Endless Kingdom* tourists. *Chip* and *Dale* would shuttle between them. Right now, Mirabile and the *Boundless Comfort* were the only obvious ones, but we brainstormed other possibilities.

After we emerged into Nexus, Mi-Cha and Starkiller conferred and agreed that we should get started on asteroid-based laser emplacements. I composed a message to Bowden, asking if he could put me in touch with someone about those. "Eto," I called over the intercom, "how's that Link endpoint node coming?"

"Funny you should ask," the chief engineer said brightly. "Leone and I will have it powered up in about an hour."

"Awesome." That'd make it easier to send messages, even if we were still forced to use Confed's near monopoly for the time being. I made a note to prioritize Link nodes for our partner planets and ships and wondered if they'd work in *Endless Kingdom*. Something else to research.

We ejected our cargo containers, and several little tugs that Starkiller had previously acquired swarmed in to claim them. A set of empties was already waiting, along with another shopping list. I scanned it quickly. I could get many of those things from the contacts I'd already made in Mirabile, but a few of them . . .

"Captain, these food factories you guys have here are a little tough to get. That's why we still carry meal trays aboard. And we'd still need to get supplies of organics."

Mi-Cha scanned the list herself before replying. "Let's move those to a wish list, then. Anything else look difficult?"

I took another quick look. "No. The weaponry will take some time to come in, but once our Link node is live, I can probably forward the rest of it to Mirabile. We can see how long it'll take them to get an order together and then head out."

"Sounds good."

I started compiling the orders, tagging each item for a specific vendor. I chuckled as I got to the middle of the list and realized what some of the components must be for.

"What?" Mi-Cha asked.

"He's building a bar," I said, tagging those items for the vendor who'd provided us with the kitchen equipment.

"No he's not," Mi-Cha said, a grin in her voice. "He's building two."

"Um, guys?" Stroman said.

"What's up?" Mi-Cha asked.

"That."

We looked at the tactical display and saw an odd gray icon—one I'd never seen before. "Getting a visual," I said.

"Huh," Mi-Cha said quietly.

Floating in space was a huge, flat, gray disc.

I felt heat rising into my neck and face.

"What do you think it is?" Stroman asked.

"Probably another glitch from being in between systems?" I said quickly. I didn't want to get into the whole Stargate thing right now because I was still dreading the inevitable skill-up that was going to come with them. Clearly, the SI had inserted this as a placeholder of some kind. "Maybe just wait and see what happens?"

"Yeah," Mi-Cha said uncertainly. Then, in a firmer voice, "Yeah, might as well. Let's go shopping."

20 / NOW IT'S A PARTY

Our second trip to Mirabile went without incident—I mentally slapped myself for daring to think that—and we returned to Beachhead. We'd taken both the *Pinkie* and the *Fart* with us as escorts this time just in case any other pirates had a notion to try and take our cargo.

"How's that direct jump going, Rashmi?" Stroman asked as we exited FTL into Beachhead.

Lad sighed. "Not so good. Every time I think I have the math worked out, I run a sim, and it doesn't actually work. I'm starting to suspect the overworld map isn't actually consistent."

"I'd always assumed that it wasn't," I said.

"It's tantalizingly close," Lad said, their fingers flying across their console as they inputted the coordinates for Nexus. "I thought I'd come up with a quadratic equation that could solve for it, but it only plays out about half the time."

Hopefully Infinitia would come up with some kind of jump gate sooner than later, rendering the problem moot.

"That pair of Confed ships is still here," I said, pushing my tactical plot to the main display. "They're hanging out past the system perimeter."

"Well, if this is how they want to 'oversee' us for Harm, fine," Mi-Cha said. "Idiots. Which of our corvettes are in-system?"

"*Roach* and *Gently*," I said, tagging them on the tactical. They were hanging out a hundred klicks or so from our usual FTL entry point, between us and the Confed cruiser and battleship.

The ship-to-ship went live. "I'll be staying here with *Buddah's Fart* until *Bloody Toe* and *Bermuda Hexagon* rotate back," Putnam's gravelly voice announced. "You want us to harass those two idiots or anything while you're gone?"

"Leave them be so long as they keep their distance," Mi-Cha ordered. "They still outgun you, even with three of you."

"But we can outfly 'em," Putnam said confidently.

"Don't forget that's a *missile* cruiser," I reminded her. "And those missiles have something like twelve times your acceleration."

Putnam grumbled something and closed the channel.

"Fingers crossed," Stroman said. "Rashmi, let's—"

"Incoming FTL!" I announced as my console beeped a warning.

"Seriously, again?" Stroman grumbled as Mi-Cha let out a deep sigh next to him.

"Came out about fifty klicks from us," I said. "Resolving tactical. Looks like . . . a yacht of some kind? It's small, about a hundred and twenty meters long, a bit less than a kiloton. I'm not reading any armament."

"New customer?" Danjuma wondered.

"You know, we should probably just build a small station here," Stroman mused. "Act as a kind of reception desk, if people are going to FTL in on their own. Hold them here until someone can come get them, give them a place to leave their ship while they're on tour."

"Not a bad idea," Mi-Cha agreed. "We can mention it to John when we get back."

"Didn't *Pinkie* have a Combat Engineer aboard?" I asked, pulling up the ship's roster.

"That yacht is hailing us," Stroman said as his own console chimed.

"Let him wait a minute," Mi-Cha said. "Strong, do you still have a Combat Engineer aboard?"

"I do," the other captain replied. "Waiora Maunga. Why, what's up?"

"We're thinking we could use a station here in Beachhead. A reception facility of sorts, for people like whoever is flying that yacht out there."

"He's been hailing us."

"Yeah, ignore him for a bit. You think Maunga would be interested in working with John to get a station built on this end?"

"Interested? She'd be delighted. They only put her with us because she kept proposing projects Confed command didn't want. You thinking something with some teeth?"

"Oh, verily." Mi-Cha laughed. "Given that Confed still doesn't know when to leave well enough alone. We've been thinking of some asteroid emplacements like UFW worlds use."

"Oh, she'll be very interested."

"Have her talk to John when we get to the other side. I'll let him know what we're thinking."

"Copy."

"All right, Jakob, let's hear what the yacht wants. Rashmi, keep us ready to jump on command, just in case this guy's a jerk or something."

"Roger."

"Reading his IFF," Stroman said. "Opening the channel. Independent ship *Glorious Light*, this is the LIAS *Pretty, Pretty Princess*. How can we help you?"

A video feed replaced the tactical display.

"Absolutely not," I said reflexively as the image resolved.

"Hunter Dyson, as I live and breathe," Stroman said, ignoring my outburst. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Hunter Dyson, CEO of Endless Domains, architect of the plan to rid Earth of the majority of its living population, designer of the real-world rich-guy retreat he'd planned Earth to become. Hunter

Dyson, who'd opposed us in getting word out about said plans. Hunter Dyson, who we all thought we'd never see again.

"I thought you lived in a private quantum brain when you were in here," Mi-Cha said casually. "What's got you slumming with the rest of us?"

Dyson's lips quirked. "The synthetic intelligence I have running the games cut me off. I've been trapped here since I saw all of you. Over thirty years . . . It's taken me that long to find you."

I smirked. The SI had held us in a kind of pause mode all that time, meaning we hadn't lived through any of it. It was deeply satisfying that this rich idiot had spent three decades looking for people who couldn't be found.

"Well, you found us. Congratulations!" Stroman said with false enthusiasm. "Mission accomplished. No XP awarded. Off you go."

"Wait!" Dyson cried. "You don't know what it's been like! I've been forced to live on my own game funds. I've had to trade with people just to survive! My body is probably gone—those pods can't sustain a body for more than a couple of years!"

We all stared at him, saying nothing. He didn't even have the decency to look abashed.

"Welcome to *Endless Sky*, Dyson," Mi-Cha said, her voice just a bit cold. "That's what happened to all of us." Then her tone lightened a bit. "It's actually a lot of fun, if you get into it."

"I tried to, at first," Dyson grumbled. "But thirty years? I don't know how you all do it. It's just . . . boring."

"Well," I said brightly, "I may have some good news for you! Do you own that yacht?"

Dyson frowned. "Of course I do."

"Then you'll be able to afford an exciting new service we're about to begin offering! How'd you like to visit a world of magic and fantasy, of swords and sorcery?"

His frown deepened. "What are you talking about?"

"The games," Stroman said, interrupting my spiel. "All the games are linked in the *Endless Sky* overworld map. We can get to them.

We've already found *Endless Kingdom*'s main world, along with one of its expansion dimensions."

Dyson's face went through a series of expressions that I read as confusion, denial, disbelief, hope, crushing disappointment, leery acceptance, and hopeful doubt. "Are you serious? All the games?"

"Probably," I said. "They're not called out on the overworld map, so we'll have to actually find them all. But we know we can get to all the *Endless Kingdom* ones."

"Not all of them," Dyson said at once. "We didn't release all ten."

I raised an eyebrow. "But did you code them?"

He looked uncertain. "I'm not sure."

"Well, we'll figure it out. What we've found so far is fine. We'll be running an exclusive high-end touring company, letting players from each game experience the others. Go on quests, earn skills, the whole deal."

"But wait, all the games?"

"Pretty sure," Stroman said.

"All eighteen?"

Our eyes widened. "We only knew of the six," I said slowly. "*Sky*, *Kingdom*, *Frontier*, *Paradise*, *Jungle*, and *Toons*." The latter had been created mainly for families with younger children.

"*Industry*, *Steam*, *Apocalypse*, *Deep*, *Night*, *War*, *Desert*, *Empire*, *Kawaii*, *Safari*, *Crusade*, *Heroes*," Dyson rattled off. "Eighteen total. Most weren't very popular, so we never expanded them. *Paradise* has three worlds in total. *Kingdom* was going to have up to ten. Everyone else just got one."

Lad tapped furiously on the console, entering names for reference.

"I'm sure we'll find them all in time," Stroman assured him. "Now, what—"

"What's *Endless Night*?" Las interrupted.

"Horror," Dyson answered. "Vampires, werewolves, that kind of thing. Hunters as well." He frowned again. "That one was really popular with a very specific demographic, I remember, but it wasn't

that many people in the end. I'm not sure they ever even finished all the quests."

"Awesome," Lad whispered, returning their attention to the console.

"So what do you want, Dyson? And how did you find us here?"

"It's all over the Confed news nets," he said airily. "I just had to bribe someone to tell me which system you were in. Not much to it, is there?"

"We use it for staging," Stroman said cautiously. "What do you want from us?"

"Want? I want to join you. You're the only people in here I really know."

"Know?" Mi-Cha sputtered. "You don't *know* us at all! And you're telling me in thirty years you never made a single— No, of course you didn't make any friends. Never mind, that was a stupid question."

"It's very *common* in here," Dyson whined. "I just want something to *do*."

"Dude," I said slowly, my voice absolutely flat, "you killed Dwight." The former lead programmer for Endless Domains was the one who'd created my Truthsayer power. He'd been trapped in *Endless Sky* himself, on a mission to stop Dyson and his investors from digitizing nearly all of humanity and then ditching their bodies. In the end, Dyson erased Dwight—and we all decided that we never intended to leave the game anyway, so there was no point in someone keeping our bodies lying around.

"No I didn't," Dyson objected. "He's in a quarantine section of the quantum brain, is all."

"He's—" my brain struggled with that for a moment. "In *jail*?"

"No, he doesn't experience time. He's in cold storage."

"But you can get him out?" I asked. I'd *liked* Dwight, despite him being a little... weird. I'd just chalked it up to him being a programmer.

"Of course not. You have to do that from outside. And there's no

access to outside. We deleted the portal system after version two released." Then Dyson's expression turned thoughtful. "Although . . . maybe not."

"Maybe not what?" Stroman asked.

"Well, every system had a portal of some kind. A way for programmers and testers to get in and out of the game. We deleted the portals in the major games, but . . . there's a chance they didn't bother for the smaller games." He frowned again. "That entire team was very lazy, it turns out."

"Also, you were kind of a massive jerk," Mi-Cha pointed out.

Dyson shrugged.

"So you're saying if we could get to a portal in a different game, we could release Dwight?" I asked, my heart pounding.

Another shrug. "Probably. If you can actually get to the other game worlds. Don't see why not. Assuming they left some active."

» Mission Accepted: Find Dwight Czarnowski

"Where's that the most likely?" I asked.

"Oh, *Endless Night* for certain. Probably *Endless Desert*. Even people in the Middle East didn't want to go in that one. I think we sold like ten thousand subs, max."

"Just out of curiosity," Mi-Cha asked, "what were the most popular games?"

"*Kingdom*, far and away. *Paradise*. Not really a game, of course, more a virtual island retirement. Hugely popular—that's why we had to expand it so fast. *Endless War*. *Endless Sky* did really well, and it was big enough we never needed to expand it. *Endless Crusade*, maybe. That was *very* big with a big chunk of the US."

"What's that one?"

"Based on religion. Basically, if you believe something hard enough and get enough people to believe with you, it'll be true."

"Good grief," Mi-Cha muttered.

"You have no idea how—"

My console *blared* a warning. My eyes flew across the tactical plot.

"Frank?" Mi-Cha asked, her voice tense.

"New . . . something. There's something new in the system," I said.

"Resolving," Stroman added, furiously tapping his own console.

"Get back to you, Dyson. Hold tight." I put the tactical plot on the main display, relegating Dyson's video to a small corner.

"There," I said. "Pulling up a visual."

The main display flipped again, now showing a huge, matte-gray torus floating in space. It was around sixty meters in diameter—positively huge—and just sitting there in space.

"It did it!" I crowed.

"Sharing is caring, Frank," Stroman said.

"So you remember when I Truthsaid the destroyers? I got pulled into the SI's space for a talking-to, and well, I promised I'd stop doing that if it could provide us with some exclusive means of moving between Nexus, Beachhead, and the other game worlds."

"Wait," Mi-Cha said slowly, her brain putting it together. "Did you ask for Stargates?"

"Well, not exactly, because—"

"We deliberately didn't put . . . gates between stars . . . into the game," Dyson objected. "It made no sense for the game play. The FTL system makes more sense."

"Does not," Lad muttered next to me.

"Is that what the gray disc in Nexus was?" Stroman asked, suddenly connecting the dots.

"I think so, and—" I started.

"No, these aren't in the game," Dyson insisted.

"Well, they are now," I said gleefully. "I wonder if our computer — Oh, no." A sudden sense of dread gripped my bowels. I hit the all-hands intercom. "Drop everything! Sit down! Lie down! I don't know who this will hit, but—"

» Congratulations! You have gained a new skill: Astriaporta Management.

"What?" Lad and Mi-Cha both said in the same breath.

"I'm sorry, everyone," I said.

» Skill-up! Your Astriaporta Management skill is now at level 2.

"Mmpgh," I moaned, clenching my jaw. Next to me, Lad took a very deep and very deliberate breath.

» Skill-up! Your Astriaporta Management skill is now at level 3.

Behind me, I heard Mi-Cha tip forward out of her chair and onto her knees. I vaguely heard Stroman calling her name, but a wave of blinding pain and nausea swept over me.

» Skill-up! Your Astriaporta Management skill is now at level 4.

My heart was hammering in my ears. Distantly, I felt my body heaving up everything it had recently eaten, but it felt detached from the screaming, thundering pain that was wrecking my head. Someone was shouting: "Lukas! Lukas!"

» Skill-up! Your Astriaporta Management skill is now at level 5.

My brain melted. I imagined I was probably screaming, but I'd lost all connection to my body.

» Skill-up! Your Astriaporta Management skill is now at level 6.

I died face down in a pool of my own puke.

Sensation returned slowly. A twitch of the eye, a flick of the lips.

"Hey," someone said softly.

I cracked my eyes open. Well, one eye. The other stubbornly refused.

"You're okay," the gentle voice assured me. Obviously a lie, as I was patently the furthest possible thing from *okay*. "You're on Nexus. You respawned."

"Ow," I said in a high-pitched moan.

"Yeah, you've never done this before, have you? Since version two, I mean?"

"Nnnmgh," I agreed.

"Well, no more waiting room. That's the nice part. The bad part is that you carry over a lot of the sensations from whatever killed you."

"Mrshmi?" I managed.

"Rashmi? They're fine. They came around about an hour ago."

"Mmmchmm."

"Bo is fine as well. She's in the next room."

"Huuurrrmtsss."

"It should clear up pretty quickly."

The voice was right. After one last spiteful stab in my digitized cerebellum, the pain began receding. In just minutes, I felt fine and was able to open both of my eyes.

"I'm Yoshi, the medic from the *Angry Pinkie of God*." She was a petite woman whose dark hair was pulled back into a simple tail. "Think you can sit up?"

I nodded, and she helped me into a sitting position. I was, I realized, in one of the hotel rooms Starkiller's team had been building on Nexus. This one wasn't done, but they'd gotten the bed in place.

"The med bay is still under construction," the medic said. "If you think you can stand, then you're free to go." She gave me an encouraging smile.

"Yeah," I rasped, hauling myself to my feet. I stood for a second

with my arms slightly spread, just in case I fell. When I didn't, I straightened. "Thank you."

"Do you know what happened to you three?" she asked as she led me out into the corridor.

"Lethal skill-up." I sighed. "Six levels in the span of ten seconds or so."

She turned to look at me, her eyes wide. "That's pretty stupid."

"It was," I agreed. "Not my idea. Very much a revenge thing." Her expression was confused. "Tell you later. Bo's in the next room?"

"Here," Mi-Cha said, walking slowly into the corridor. "What the hell, Frank."

"Check your sheet?"

Her eyes widened a bit and then took on that faraway look. I took the opportunity to check my own.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Business Manager
Account: 353,000 Credits
Party funds: 6,088,743,858 Credits
Level 12

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Cthulu Whisperer (party)
Dragonslayer Class I
Founding Lifeform

Attributes
Body: 17

Mind: 17
Soul: 16
HP: 204 (Body × Level)
MP: 96 (Soul × Skill)
XP: 1,863,251 (233,901 to level 13)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 5
Astriaporta Management: 6
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Dragonslaying: 1
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 6
Nursing: 3
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 6
Public Speaking: 3
Politicking: 5
Sidearms: 3
Spacer: 11
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1
Starship Sensors: 10

Starship Tactics: 9
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

"What's an Astriaporta?" Mi-Cha asked.

"That big torus out there," I said. "They can't use the term Stargate because of trademarks. Is there one here as well?" I asked Yoshi.

She nodded. "We've had three ships train their guns on it for the past hour."

"But why *six*?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Could be that six is the minimum level to teach a skill to someone else?" Yoshi suggested.

"Ah." I nodded. "I bet that's it." And how smart of Infinitia, even if it had killed us.

"Where's the *Princess*?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Still in Beachhead, I assume," I said.

"So this Star—this Astriaporta, whatever—what does it do?"

"The—" I started, but then gave a sideways glance at Yoshi. Maybe not the whole story just this minute. "They were invented for us," I temporized. "The one here is the hub. The *Princess*'s nav comp should have all the codes to use it. This one leads to an Astriaporta in every other game world and to the one in Beachhead. All of them lead here. Instantaneous travel, I'm guessing, and now we won't need system-specific FTL alternatives like the Leashed Dragon." I stopped and swallowed heavily. Man, my mouth was dry.

"Guys!" That was Lad, walking quickly down the corridor. "We need to get back to the *Princess*! I have a new skill—"

"All three of us have it," I told her.

"Still," Mi-Cha said, rubbing the back of her head. "What do you think, Frank? You know more than we do."

"We can get one of the shuttles to FTL us to the *Princess*," I said. "Nobody else will have codes for the Astriaporta yet."

"It's a Stargate, isn't it?" Lad asked eagerly.

I nodded. "Except for trademark concerns, apparently."

"How so?" they asked. "There's all kinds of ripoffs in this game."

"Not a lawyer."

"Who is even left alive on Earth to care about trademarks?" Lad wondered.

"Probably lawyers."

It took some time for the shuttle to FTL to Beachhead and transfer us back to the *Princess*. We docked with Dyson's yacht and brought him aboard the ship as well.

"Thank you," he said as he joined us on the bridge.

"Oh, this isn't charity," Mi-Cha said lively. "For one, we're commandeering your yacht. It'll make a nice intersystem shuttle."

"But that's my—"

"Not caring, Dyson," the captain snapped. "Again, this isn't charity. We'll take care of you, but I want you where I can see you. After our last meeting, let's just say there's a minimal level of trust."

"Still not fair," he groused as he sat on one of the benches at the back of the bridge. I suspected his tone was all show, because he didn't protest any further.

"It's all here," Lad breathed with delight, their fingers floating gently over their console. They flipped the main bridge display to the view they usually used, which was essentially the game's overworld map. Only this map had a new series of icons overlaid on it. "This one," Lad said, tagging a system that had the new icon, "is *Endless Kingdom*. This one's the Elven Realms. And all the others are *all the other games*."

» Mission Accepted: Explore Strange New Worlds

"This is completely out of the design specs," Dyson muttered loudly.

"I think your SI has different ideas about the design spec," Stroman said happily. "Besides, didn't you deliberately build all the games on the same code base?"

"They told me it was cheaper and faster."

"And easier to eventually integrate them all, apparently," I said. "Rashmi, can you rotate that a bit? I want to—oh, that's it." The pilot manipulated the map until more than a dozen new worlds were visible.

"Niiice," Stroman drawled happily.

"All the gate codes are here as well," I said, tapping my console. "It takes two people to energize the Astriaporta and fly through it."

"It's barely big enough," Mi-Cha frowned.

"That's intentional, I think," I said quickly. "It's barely big enough for the *Princess*, but it's plenty big for our new yacht and the passenger shuttles we plan to use."

Dyson groaned.

"The size limits the number of people and the amount of tech that can go through. Like, that cruiser out there would never fit."

"But one of its shuttles would," Stroman said, his voice suddenly tight.

"Well, sure," I said, uncertain why he sounded that way. "But again, you need the codes to—"

"No, they've launched a shuttle!" Stroman said, pushing the tactical plot to the bridge display. "It's headed straight for it!"

"Well, this should be interesting," Mi-Cha said. "Frank, put up a visual of the Astriaporta."

"Shouldn't we warn them?" I asked.

"They'll probably just fly straight through," Lad said, "since we haven't turned it on."

We sat back for the twenty minutes it took the slow-moving shuttle to approach the Astriaporta. It slowed even more as it got nearer, aligning itself carefully with the torus's open center.

And then it flew in.

Or rather, it didn't. At the exact point where the shuttle crossed *into* the portal, the ship dissolved into brightly colored pixels that rapidly faded away. In just moments, the entire ship had vaporized.

"I'm presuming they didn't just go to Nexus," Mi-Cha said.

"One way to find out," Lad said. They toggled the ship-to-ship frequency. "Everyone, that big circle thing belongs to us. We're going to use it to go to Nexus. Don't follow. If we're not back in a few hours, FTL to Nexus."

Acknowledgment came from the other ships.

"Frank?" Lad said as they began lining us up with the torus's opening.

I started tapping my console, entering the codes I found there and energizing the Astriaporta.

On our main display, the portal began lighting up.

Around its circumference were ten evenly spaced blocks, shaped roughly like chunky chevrons. Each one lit up, one at a time, in a clockwise pattern. When the last one illuminated . . .

Nothing happened.

"So they worry about trademark infringement but not that?" Danjuma chuckled. "And isn't it supposed to *do* something? Like, a *kawoosh*?"

"Take us in," Mi-Cha ordered.

Lad goosed our in-system drive, pushing us slowly toward the Astriaporta's center. We slid through slowly, with just a few meters of clearance all around. There were no visual effects at all: no lights, no wormhole, nothing. We simply drifted through from Beachhead to Nexus, the cobbled-together space station just a few kilometers ahead.

"That is *special*," Lad said fervently.

"The FTL effect took a week to design," Dyson complained.

"Shut up," M-Cha said cheerily. "Okay, pull us forward a bit. Close the portal. Let's jettison these cargo containers before we go back."

"Also, our Link node is online," I said as my console lit up. "So that's nice."

"The Link node is online," Tomiko repeated over the intercom. "And Leone almost has a second one ready for us to install on Nexus."

"Can you get it in the shuttle?" Mi-Cha asked. "Renart, are you okay if we leave you here for a bit? You can help wrangle containers and get that Link to the station. We need to get back to Beachhead."

"No problem," Masson replied.

It took only a few minutes to pop the cargo containers off and for Masson to get the shuttle out. We closed the shuttle bay doors.

"Rashmi, take us back," Mi-Cha ordered. "We need to let everyone else know we're okay."

"Energizing Astriaporta," I said, punching the codes into my console. "As a note, I've also transmitted the codes to the other four main ships—but just the ones that go from here to Beachhead and back, for now."

"Perfect," Mi-Cha said. "Let's go."

Lad reversed the in-system drive, and we crawled backward through the Astriaporta, returning to Beachhead.

"Sweet," the navigator whispered happily.

"This changes a lot about our plans," Stroman mused. "If we can get from world to world in literally no time, we'll be able to run a much tighter schedule, probably with fewer shuttles. You figure each—"

Cheep! my console said, displaying an alarm.

"Oh, come on," Mi-Cha groaned.

"FTL jump," I said.

"We can't get a reception station built fast enough," Stroman grumbled.

21 / I HATE BULLIES

"Looks to be a privateer," I said as our scanners resolved the newcomer's profile. "IFF pings as . . . wow, Independent starfighter *Rogan Centauri on Fire*. They're listed in our job board registry."

"Independent . . . um, *Rogan*?" Mi-Cha said, opening a hail. "This is the LIAS *Pretty, Pretty Princess*. How can we help you guys?"

"*Princess*, this is Captain Jed. We were just targeted by a Confed hunter group. Wiped out four ships, and we barely got away. If they suspect we came here—"

"Cap, the two Confed capital ships just jumped out," I said quickly.

"How ominous," she replied. "Jed, where exactly were you?"

"Zeneca system, a UFW world," Jed replied. His video feed took over the bridge display, revealing a white-haired old man with a heavily lined face. I'd never seen someone with that much obvious age in the game, and I wondered if he'd configured his appearance that way on purpose. "Standard trade run—one we picked up from *your* job board, by the way. Two patrol boats and two corvettes—very

similar to those you've got right here," he added, his face wrinkling in suspicion. "Started firing without warning, took out two of us right off. We managed to break off and jump again."

"Doesn't Zeneca have defenses?" Stroman asked.

"Asteroid-based laser turrets, yeah," Jed said with a nod. "Much closer in though."

"Okay, Jed," Mi-Cha said placatingly. "First, the ships in front of you are with us. They're not Confed, they're defectors. We just haven't had a chance to refit them to look a little less . . . conspicuous."

Stroman sighed. "We're gonna need to build a shipyard."

» Mission Accepted: Build a Shipyard

I chuckled to myself. The game just loved to heap more work on you.

"But I am a little concerned about Confed attacking people who've taken jobs from us," Mi-Cha continued. "What exactly were you hauling?"

"Aa'an tech we picked up from the cityship *Arrogant Posture*," Jed said. He still looked suspicious.

"Ah. Yeah, that tracks," Mi-Cha said. "The Confed faction in charge, Jed, hates aliens. Goes back to Confed's original schtick, but they're also trying to control the flow of tech in the game. Delivering someone else's tech was one strike, and delivering Aa'an tech was another." She sighed. "They must have picked it up from the job board broadcasts and then tracked you. We're going to have to do something about that."

"In the meantime, all my friends have respawned who knows where, if they even did," Jed snapped.

"That, I can remedy—at least, if there's a next time. We'd like to invite you to join our polity, the League of Independent Explorers. Our standard offering is that you can operate free and clear with just that affiliation—same deal you have right this minute. You'll also get a

place to respawn—in a heavily protected system—if this happens again. If you want voting power, you can buy into the polity whenever you want."

Jed still looked suspicious.

"I can send over paperwork right now," I offered. "You'll see we're serious."

"And we can run whatever jobs we want?" he asked.

"From the same job board, same rates, we keep the same ten percent," I said. "No change in the financials or your freedom, you'd just have a polity to come home to at need."

He nodded slowly. "Send your paperwork. This offer open to anyone else?"

"It's open to any independent," Mi-Cha assured him. "Even defectors, like our friends out there."

"We'll spread the word," he said, still nodding.

"Hey," Stroman said, "any chance you caught IFFs from the ships that attacked you?"

Jed glanced down at a console. "CMS *Fred* and CMS *Wilma.* Those were the corvettes. Patrol boats just had numbers."

"Frank?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Registered out of Atlantis system," I said.

"I see." The captain thought for a moment. "Jed, I can't do anything for your friends right now. But when we get back, we'll put the word out on the Link and try to track them down. See what we can do about getting you into new ships, even. Meantime, you're welcome to hang out here or head wherever you like. Get that paperwork back whenever you like."

"We're leaving?" Stroman asked. "To where?"

"We told Harm we wouldn't cross him if he didn't cross us. He sent that stupid strike group to bully us, and now he's attacking people running *our* missions. I'm not having it. Frank, Rashmi, take us back to Nexus. We're going to talk to our friends."

"About?"

» Mission Accepted: Strike Back

"About that," Mi-Cha said grimly. "I hate bullies."

22 / A GAME OF STARS

"Okay, is everyone clear?" Mi-Cha asked.

We'd started a four-way conference call that included the captains of the *Bull*, *Crush and Run*, and *Siren*. Captain Starkiller had even shuttled to each ship ahead of time, providing each with one of his ship spoofers. Each ship now had one of the spoofers clamped to the main command console on their bridge, allowing us to—for a short time—appear as an entirely different class of ship.

"More particularly," Starkiller emphasized, "is everyone clear on using those devices?"

"Put my hand on it five seconds before we exit FTL," Captain Christoforos of the *Siren* said. "Same as last time."

"Ugh," Haskins, Captain of *Crush and Run* moaned.

"I still don't get how it's complex," Mi-Cha admitted. "And is this Aa'an tech?"

"No way," I interrupted, shaking my head. "Aa'an devices are more angular, and they're heavier duty." The spoofers were some kind of blue-burnished composite, formed entirely of sleek curves. "I'm guessing Qiar."

"Which fits," Starkiller nodded. "Before they vanished, the Qiar were said to have gotten philosophical and personal about their tech-

nology. Makes sense you'd have to hold your hand to it, as commander of the ship."

"What was up with that, Dyson?" Mi-Cha asked our guest.

"I didn't sit in on all the story meetings," Dyson grumbled. "But there was supposed to be an alien race that dropped dangerous tech. Some of it helpful, some of it really dangerous. Just to keep things interesting."

"Sounds about like the Qiar," Starkiller said.

"But you said they've mostly pulled out of the game," I pointed out.

"No telling what the SI is doing with the original storylines," Dyson groused.

"You still run across caches of tech here and there," Starkiller said. "And it *is* all a little like rolling dice. Always a price to pay."

"So it has to hurt to use it," Haskins said with some amount of resignation.

"Yeah, you mentioned that," Mi-Cha said dubiously. "Was this your *hot hand* remark the last time we were in Atlantis system?"

Starkiller nodded. "Yup. I feel a blistering heat. No real damage, of course, but it hurts a lot."

"Mine's freezing," Haskins said.

"Stabbing pain," Christoforos said with a sad grin.

"Oh, joy," Mi-Cha said. "But fine. So we go in spoofed. First goal is whatever carriers are there, and we attack as a unit. All battle lasers synchronized to *Princess*'s gunnery station so Zuri can put as many watts as possible on the target."

"Agreed," Haskins said. "We've already got the link established and confirmed."

"John, you make the call on targets after that. We can split up if it seems advisable."

"You know, with Harm styling himself as *Lord* now, we should assume a lot of assets in-system," Starkiller warned.

"We're not there to destroy them all," Mi-Cha said. "Just to let

them know that they can't cross us without repercussions. We want to cost them, and then we want to leave."

"And their station?" Christoforos asked.

"I say it's a legit target," Mi-Cha said firmly.

Nobody objected.

"Okay. Frank, you've got those last messages off?" I gave my captain a thumbs-up. "Then we're ready. Rashmi will signal the jump."

And we were off to teach Grand Governor-Lord-General-Admiral Harm a lesson about messing with the League.

I tapped my console, setting a timer.

"Tactical," Mi-Cha ordered, her voice tight but controlled.

"How's it feel, Bo?" Stroman asked quietly.

"Like someone is crushing my hand in a vice, thanks," she said through gritted teeth. "Frank."

"One carrier," I said with surprise. "CMS *Dark Side*, if that isn't a clue about where things have headed out here. A dozen patrol boats—we can safely ignore those. Not seeing any defensive emplacements a la UFW's asteroids. Those must be unique to them for now. Four battleships though—that's bad news. Designating Bravo One through Four. Eight destroyers, designating Delta One through Eight. Only two cruisers, but one of them looks suspiciously . . . yeah, it's *Dependent*. Missile cruiser. That could be a problem. Designating Charlie and Mike-Charlie."

"Where's the cruiser?" Stroman asked.

"Holding just off the far side of Atlantis One, the space station. Fond memories there. Looks like she's taking on supplies, there are a couple of shuttles running back and forth."

We were already being scanned by the various ships in the system, but none had reacted negatively yet. Starkiller had explained

that the spoofers not only masked our real IFF signals, but also returned false sensor signals, meaning everyone else should just be seeing four old-model Confed corvettes sailing in.

"Stay on mission," Stroman ordered. After Mi-Cha had first put her hand on the spoofer, she and Stroman quickly agreed that he'd run our bridge so she could concentrate on keeping her hand in place. Our goal was to seriously damage the carrier before the spoofer's five-to-eight-minute time limit expired.

"Vectoring toward the carrier," Lad confirmed.

"Corvette formation, state your destination," a bored voice droned out of the bridge speakers.

We'd prepared for this. "Corvettes *Piddle*, *Diddle*, *Dum*, and *Dee* reporting in-system per orders," I said in an equally bored tone, lightly layered with embarrassment. Captain Strong had explained that corvette duty was considered the next best thing to actual punishment, and the ships were deliberately given ridiculous and demeaning names to help take the crews down a notch.

The bored voice managed a chuckle. "Where are you kids headed?"

"Station docks. We're receiving berth assignments," I replied. The system's station was between us and the carrier, meaning we'd at least be vectoring in the right direction.

"Reduce velocity to point-oh-five, head for ring three, sector Charlie," the voice ordered. "Hold at command distance for berthing."

"Copy," I said before cutting the channel. "Rashmi?"

"Ahead full," they said with a grin.

It took only a couple of minutes to close in on the station, and it must have been clear to its controllers that we weren't planning to stop.

The voice returned, this time sounding slightly irritated. "Corvette formation, what are you idiots doing? You can't slingshot around a space station."

"We just wanted to show you guys what we're made of," I said defensively.

"Yeah, well, don't. Cut your engines and go to stationkeeping."

"Wait, how's that?" I asked, stifling a giggle. "No, I think it's this one," I added as if speaking to someone else. "No, the green . . . oops."

Lad goosed us forward even faster, although *Bull* and *Siren*, with their more powerful in-system engines and lighter masses, began to overtake us.

"Give me your name, sailor," the station controller ordered, finally sounding mad. "You're going up on—"

"Oops," I said again, cutting the channel. This time I blocked it.

"Start the run," Stroman ordered.

"Is this all you guys do all the time? Get into fights?" Dyson asked from the back of the bridge.

"It's the best part of the game," Mi-Cha said with glee.

It took only another thirty seconds for us to blast past the station and within laser range of the carrier.

"Firing," Danjuma said gleefully as she worked her console. All four of our ten-gig lasers, two ten-gigs apiece from *Bull* and *Siren*, and four five-gigs from *Crush and Run*, blasted out, meeting in a single, precise spot on the carrier's hull: right at the main engine power couplings.

One hundred gigawatts of pure power blasted straight through the carrier's lightly armored hull, vaporizing material as it bored through the ship. The power couplings atomized in an instant, and Danjuma managed to hold the target until our lasers started cutting out to prevent overheating. "That's concentrated science, jerks," Danjuma said under her breath.

"We blasted over halfway through the hull," I said happily. "Secondary explosions!" Tons of them, in fact.

"That's it," Mi-Cha said with some relief as the spoofer released a cloud of smoke and died.

"Carrier's breaking up!" I announced. We'd done more damage than we'd anticipated with that carefully coordinated attack. The

carrier had split nearly in two about a third up from her stern, and explosions continued to burst through her hull, working their way forward to her bow. "Explosions on her launch decks—we're safe from fighters." In fact, it looked like the fighters themselves might be causing some of the secondary explosions inside the carrier, with the sections containing her two fiight decks blossoming into orange fireballs.

Starkiller's voice took over the bridge speakers. "Better than we'd hoped for. Turn hard, hit the station. Danjuma, retain laser control. Launch missiles as you turn. Railguns if you've got 'em."

Lad pivoted us hard on our rotational axis, putting our stern to the now-demolished carrier. As soon as our bow faced the station, Danjuma unleashed a full fiight of sixteen antimatter missiles, each targeting a different sector of the station. Our railguns went next, soft *thumps* announcing two loads of shot being fired at near-relativistic speeds. Those would tear through the station's unarmored hull like it was tissue paper. Finally, Danjuma frowned in concentration as she wrangled the four ships' battle lasers to focus on one of the station's two primary ZPE cores. "Ten seconds to range," she said, tapping furiously. With all four ships now at different velocities, coordinating the lasers was difficult even with the computer's help.

"The other capital ships are vectoring in," I said. "Patrol boats as well, but they're all pretty far out. Station is firing RFLAMs, but I'm only seeing three of them right now."

"I'd like to try something," Virion said from the back of the bridge.

"Be my guest," Mi-Cha said. "That's why we brought you along."

"*Mellt poeth, cyflym mellt, gwel fy ngelyn, ffrio ei asyn!*" Virion shouted. Next to me, Lad started, surprised by his exclamation.

"Firing," Danjuma said in almost the same breath.

"This isn't what we meant," Dyson complained quietly.

My tactical display showed the lasers converging on the station, pouring another hundred gigawatts of energy into the thin outer hull just above one of the two power plants. What my tactical didn't show,

what it likely *couldn't* show, was the massive lightning storm that blazed into existence between our ship and the station. White-hot bolts of energy crackled along the station, splitting the hull and bursting windows. Danjuma's one-second concentrated laser burst holed the station's first ZPE plant, plunging half of the huge structure into darkness.

"Holy crap," Stroman said, impressed. "Feel free to do more of that."

"Yeah, that's probably me for a few minutes," Virion panted. "I barely have enough MP to cast an illusion at this point."

The *Princess* shuddered. "We're hit," I said calmly. "Dorsal side, battle laser—our armor took it. No damage. Armor is repairing itself."

"Grav mirror," Stroman ordered.

"Aye." It would take most of my concentration to keep the grav mirror between us and our assorted enemies, which meant Stroman would assume tactical duties.

"Missile cruiser has launched," Stroman said, and I could hear the worry in his voice. "Damnation, it's over a hundred missiles."

"They're holding back," Mi-Cha said wryly.

"RFLAMs hot," I said.

"Actually," Selen said from the back, "they're just not well trained. And most of their weapons systems are highly manual since they have so much labor to work with. They probably didn't get all the missile crews to their stations in time."

"Still, that's going to be a lot to deal with," Stroman said.

"Break formation," Starkiller ordered. This was the last of our preconfigured tactics; after this, we'd be operating by the seat of our pants.

"Fly behind the station," Mi-Cha said quickly. "See if their missiles hit it."

All four of our ships plunged for the space between the station and the planet, the *Princess* going highest and the *Bull*, *Crush and Run*, and *Siren* stacked below as we spread out. Danjuma took the

opportunity to fire all four of our lasers into the station as we passed, drilling several new holes as we went.

"I am somewhat surprised we haven't heard from anyone," Mi-Cha said.

"Oh, right," I said. "I blocked the channel they were using." I continued manipulating our grav mirror. "We've got a destroyer on our tail, Delta Two," I said, putting the mirror as close as I could to our stern. I couldn't move it to cover the in-system engines, which were our weakest point back there. "Rashmi, can we do a pitch-up?"

It was a trick they'd shown me during a battle simulation. The *Princess* had plenty of momentum going, and in space, once something began moving in a direction, it tended to keep going. Pitching up meant cutting our in-system drive, then rotating the ship slightly upward. Doing so would remove a direct line of sight between the drive and our pursuing destroyer, without changing our current direction of travel.

"Pitching up," Lad said approvingly.

"I've got the grav mirror covering for the destroyer," I said, moving the energy field. "So unless they—"

"Missiles in the air," Stroman announced.

"Here's the nice thing about a pitch-up." Lad grinned, firing the engines back to full. *Princess* bolted upward at an angle to our original direction—still traveling forward but now up in relation to the damaged space station.

Stroman must have unblocked Confed's frequency, because our bridge speakers erupted into a torrent of cursing, over a background of klaxons and generalized screaming. "—your captain on the bridge or so help me God, I'll—"

"Why, Prefect Harm, is that you?" Mi-Cha teased.

"What in the very hell do you think you're doing? We had an agreement, curse you. I'll—"

"That is a very angry man," Dyson observed. I snorted at the understatement.

"Which you violated by sending your flunkies to threaten us,"

Mi-Cha said flatly, ignoring the former CEO's comment. "And by attacking and destroying a group of barely armed transports who were on a job they got from *our* job board. A job peacefully transporting legal artifacts, I might point out."

"Alien tech!" Harm howled. "And how dare you—"

"Well, Senator Harm, you come after me and mine, and we come after you," Mi-Cha snapped. "We told you about the worlds we unlocked. We didn't tell you that we brought some stuff back that works here."

"Heh," Virion said from the back.

Stroman cut the channel. "RFLAMs are handling it, but we've got the missile cruiser vectoring toward us over the station. This might be the time to—"

The *Princess* shuddered again, and this time alarms went off all over the bridge.

"Damn," Stroman cursed. "That was the station. They managed to get off a shot from the side that still has power. We lost the railgun on the port side and I'm showing one of our missile launchers offline."

"Returning fire," Danjuma said.

"No, focus on that destroyer behind us, and the one about to come around port," Stroman ordered. "Renart, handle the port-side bad guy, Delta-Three," he added. Masson's station inside the shuttle bay served as a backup to the bridge gunnery station, enabling him to help Danjuma in hectic scenarios like this.

The *Princess* rocked as a missile evaded our RFLAMs and struck.

"Damn, damn," Stroman cursed again. "That got our ventral, there's a turret down. Frank, you're better at this. I'll take the mirror. Switch."

I slapped a button on my console, sending control of the defense to Stroman's console and resuming my role as tactical officer. "Destroyers taking it heavy, and their shots are largely going wide," I said, interpreting the tactical plot in front of me. I pushed it up to the main display so Mi-Cha could follow along. "We're going to hit two patrol boats in about twenty seconds, Zuri, ahead at two and ten."

"Launch missiles at the destroyers," Mi-Cha said, tapping her console to send coordinates to the targeting computer. In a thick battle, it was all hands on weapons.

"Missiles away," Zuri growled. With two lasers under her command, she could still put a shot on the destroyer behind us every two seconds, and she was also firing shot from the remaining railgun.

"Hits," I announced. "That destroyer is toast. Delta Two down." I scanned the tactical plot. "Bravo Three and Delta Six also down."

"We're doing really well," Stroman said.

"Guys, we're venting atmosphere!" Haskins's panicked voice blared. "They've hit our FTL drive module—we're trapped here!"

"Plot us a course to get coverage on *Crush and Run*," Mi-Cha ordered immediately.

I drew the line on my tactical plot and sent it to Lad. *Princess* slewed hard down and to starboard. "They've got half the missiles from Mike-Charlie targeting them," I said. "We're going to need a bead on that ship as we come back out from under the station."

"Targeting," Danjuma said.

"We're hit! We're hit!" Christoforos shouted. "In-system is failing—we're stuck here too!"

"This went sideways fast," Selen observed.

Mi-Cha merely grunted as she continued feeding targeting information to Danjuma's console.

"Firing on the missile cruiser," Danjuma said.

"Hit, but glancing," I said as my tactical plot updated. "You may have gotten a missile launcher. They're firing another volley. RFLAMs hot."

"On it," Stroman said, tasking the automated miniturrets with the incoming swarm. "Some are going to get through," he warned.

Lad quickly spun us around our longitudinal axis, presenting our port side—with its damaged railgun—to the missiles. Better to hit us where we'd already lost a weapon than to lose another one.

"John's helping *Siren*," I said, tracking the icons on the tactical

plot. "He's moving oddly, though." His icon was jumping forward in fits and starts.

"John, what's happening?" Mi-Cha asked.

"In-system power couplings are hit," he said. "I think—"

The *Princess* shook, then shook again. "Three impacts," I said grimly. "Port side, cratered the armor, but the hull is intact. I'm sending power to the armor net, but those were antimatter. Diverting feedstock to port." Two more shudders announced new hits. "Battleship lasers, ventral and port. Slid past the mirror."

"Sorry, guys," Stroman grunted.

"We've hit one of the battleships—he's venting. Vectoring away—Zuri, hit his drive array!" I cried.

"Don't tell me how to kill a ship," Danjuma growled, jabbing her console.

"Nice hit!" I yelled as the battleship's entire aft end exploded. "Bravo One down!"

More missiles slammed into us, hitting the *Princess* hard enough to push us off course.

"Sorry, guys. It was that or let them take out *Crush*," Lad said.

"That's both railguns now," I said. "Armor net is at maximum charge, splitting the feedstock between port and starboard. We're down another missile launcher as well."

"I might have a trick," Virion offered. "But it'll take me seven or eight minutes to recover enough MP."

"Let us know when you're there," Mi-Cha said. "Zuri, get those lasers on that missile cruiser. And every missile we can get out."

Danjuma nodded, sweat beading on her forehead as her hands flew across her console. Quiet *thunks* accompanied the missile launches as a round of eight blasted away from the ship. We shuddered immediately afterward, and alarms once again blared.

"That's a third missile launcher down. That hit shook us—may have penetrated the hull." Fortunately, our hull covered plenty of spaces that were already open to vacuum, and it hadn't hit either of the pressure rings.

More lights flashed on my console. "Power couplings are loose—we may have lasers at less than full power," I said, my voice tightening. This was as bad off as we'd ever been. Our plan of just hitting and running wasn't working out—and we couldn't leave our damaged companion ships behind.

"Not feeling so arrogant now, whelps!" Harm's voice boomed.

"Crap, he found another frequency," I said, stabbing my console with a finger to lock out the transmission.

"Bo, we're losing power couplings down here," Tomiko said, her usually calm voice edged with tension. "We're going to lose the grav mirror soon."

"Crap. Okay," Mi-Cha said, forcing herself to take a deep breath. "Rashmi, Zuri, take us around. We need to get that missile cruiser out of commission. We're down to what, a destroyer and a battleship?"

"And the carrier and a huge chunk of the station," I said quickly, "and it's actually three of the six destroyers total. So we've got the missile cruiser, a standard cruiser, five destroyers, and two battleships. And those patrol boats are starting to catch up with our friends."

She took a few deep breaths. "Go after the *Dependent*. Rashmi, bring us up under her—"

The *Princess* rocked so hard that, had it not been for our seat restraints, we'd have all been thrown to the floor. Sparks fell from the ceiling. A tiny, insane part of my brain giggled at the special-effect trope.

"In-system is down fifty percent!" Lad shouted over the damage-alert klaxons.

"This is where we die," Dyson said. He sounded oddly calm.

"That's the core power coupling!" Tomiko yelled. "ZPE is offline for all but armor and FTL! If we get another surge like that, we'll lose the fusion plant!"

"Armor is breached on the port side," I said, my heart starting to hammer. "Our hull's exposed. Something's damaged the feedstock

system. Armor charge is good, but we're not getting new material. Another hit there and we'll breach the hab ring."

"Locking down all modules," Mi-Cha barked, tapping the order into her console. "All hands, stay where you're at. Prepare for breach. Suits if you've got 'em." Those of us on the bridge wouldn't have time to climb into suits.

"Do I get a suit?" Dyson asked.

Everyone ignored him.

"Ready to beg for mercy, scum?" Harm's voice hammered into the bridge. "I'll listen, but—" He cut off as I blocked the new frequency.

"I really should have paid for better dialogue." Dyson sounded vaguely disassociated from what was happening.

"He's a real person," Stroman said distractedly.

"Really."

Another explosion set off more alarms, and the *Princess* started to slew sideways. "That was the drive array!" Lad shouted. "We're dead in the water!"

"Frank," Mi-Cha said, "game clock."

I glanced at my console, where the timer I'd started was still running. "Oh, good," I said, relief coloring my voice. I actually felt my shoulders unknot. "Three . . . two . . . one . . . FTL jumps, Captain."

"What?" Selen asked.

"This is where we win," Lad said gleefully, turning over their shoulder toward Dyson.

"Frank, tell 'em what they've won," the captain said, sounding almost cheerful.

I flicked on the channel. "Congratulations, Harm! You've won two late-model carriers, ten corvettes, eight destroyers, six cruisers, six battleships, and a partridge in a pear tree! All courtesy of Prometheus Governor-General Peter Sinsky!"

"Woohoo!" Starkiller shouted. "The cavalry!"

Sinsky's two carriers—Confed's latest designs, no less—started disgorging its ten squadrons of brand-new Rapier-class fighters. Each

was equipped with a beefy five-gig battle laser, a ten-pack of nuclear missiles, and a rapid-firing railgun. The fast, nimble little fighters spread out quickly, making short work of Harm's remaining capital ships. The system's patrol ships backed off rapidly as they saw the carnage.

"Sinsky, this is treason!" he shouted. We didn't have a video feed, but I could picture him clearly: veins throbbing on his forehead and his face red with apoplexy.

"This is a game, Pat. And how can it be treason? We're not part of the Terran Confederacy."

Harm ejected sputtering noises.

"You're looking at just a part of the official fleet of the New Stellar Coherence. Now welcoming all peaceful sentients."

More sputtering.

"Here's the deal, Harm," Mi-Cha said loudly. She waited a moment for the channel to fall silent. "You're beaten. I don't know if you're on the station or on one of the ships we and our new friends have yet to pulverize—and we'll do just that to get you, if we need to. Or you can simply agree—and we're going to need it in writing, on behalf of whatever government you speak for—that you'll leave us alone unless we break one of your rules *in one of your systems*. You don't get to come after our systems, or the Coherence's, or the UFW's, or anyone else we sign a pact with. You want to ban our traders from your systems? Fine, just let us know. But attack one of them elsewhere, and we come for you."

The channel was silent for a moment. Then, Harm's voice, once again in control and colder than I'd ever heard it: "Don't be ridiculous, you stupid woman. The Terran Confederacy was *always* meant to be the superpower in this game. The whole *point* of the game was to wipe out the aliens and claim all the stars for ourselves! If you think for a moment that I'm going to excuse you pathetic, terroristic traitors, you can—"

"Actually, that's not true," Dyson said. I heard rustling as he stood.

"Who the hell is that?" Harm snapped.

"Hunter Dyson, CEO of Endless Domains." He was walking to stand beside the captain's chair. "Confed was never meant to be all that big, actually. Our initial market research suggested most people would form small bands, and that a lot of them would take on alien avatars."

The forward screen switched to Harm's flushed, angry countenance, but he said nothing.

"It's actually quite odd that you've gotten as big as you have," Dyson continued. "I'm kind of surprised. The Product people assured me there were triggers in the game to stop that. Haven't you had any worlds just explode or anything?"

Harm continued staring for a long moment before answering. "Certainly not."

"Bugs," Dyson said with a shrug. "What are you gonna do?" He resumed his place at the back of the bridge.

"So do we have that agreement then, Harm?" Mi-Cha asked.

The older man just stared at her through the screen.

Mi-Cha chuckled. "I'll take that as a no then. I guess we only get peace over your dead body?"

"Exactly, you traitorous, cheating—"

"Game clock, Frank?"

"Four . . . three . . . two . . . one. FTL arrival."

"Frank, tell Sergeant Harm what he's won."

"Mr. Harm, please meet the cityship *Boundless Comfort* of the Aa'an Dominancy."

"Confederate Harm, this is Supreme Commander Kt'ist'wt'd'gn-t'm'fl of the *Boundless Comfort*. Beautiful planet you have there," the Aa'an leader said in a calm, raspy voice. "We'd like it, please."

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" Harm screamed back.

I switched our main bridge display to a visual. Lad had slowed us down a bit, nursing the damaged drive array, and I was able to get a view that encompassed most of the planet as well as the battered space station.

"Acceptable," Kit said, and I could nearly hear the grin in his voice.

A beam of coherent energy a dozen meters across smashed into space station Atlantis One, obliterating it in an instant.

"Harm?" Mi-Cha asked after the static on the channel died down. "You still there?" A full minute of silence. "Guess not. Where do you think he'll respawn?"

"Probably on the planet," I guessed with a shrug. "Kit, you'll want to look out for him down there."

"Already considered, Frank Kozina," the Aa'an said. "And thank you for the opportunity. We look forward to welcoming your tourists here, once we have established ourselves."

"We look forward to bringing them." Already, *Boundless Comfort* was releasing passenger, cargo, and troop shuttles from its docks. Within seconds there was a steady stream of traffic threading its way through the debris of Atlantis One toward the planet's surface.

"We're getting hails from some of the remaining capital ships," I said as my display blinked notifications at me. "They're surrendering and would like to defect, it seems."

"Any of those ships reparable?" Mi-Cha asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Our scanners aren't working well, but it looks like at least one battleship and maybe two destroyers just have damaged drive arrays. The missile cruiser is toast, but the other cruiser isn't too bad off, considering."

"We'll take anyone who wants to join the Coherence," Sinsky said. "But if they want to join up with you guys, that's fine too. How're you holding up? You look a little . . . battered." He seemed amused.

"Pete, I think some of us could use a tow. And maybe some spare parts," Mi-Cha said.

"We came well equipped," Sinsky assured her with a laugh. "Let me get a tug shuttle out. If you can all cut your engines, we'll round you up. I've got a tender ship inbound in an hour that'll have everything you need."

"Is that like a portable shipyard?" I asked.

"Kinda. You couldn't build a new ship with her, but you can do anything that doesn't require a full dry dock."

"Can we buy one?" Stroman asked, seeing where I was going.

Sinksy laughed. "We can absolutely discuss it."

"I liked the alien lizard best," Dyson mused from the back of the bridge.

23 / THE LEAGUE OF INDEPENDENT ADVENTURERS

"Cheers to the *Princess*!" Stroman cried, hoisting his stein. The rest of our crew raised theirs, clinking them together none too gently, then draining them. "Another round!"

We'd more or less taken over one of the two bars Starkiller had built on Nexus. A month had passed since the Battle of Atlantis, as everyone was now calling it. Our ships were once again shipshape, and we were celebrating the departure of our first shuttle full of tourists to *Endless Kingdom*'s two worlds.

"Thank goodness those Confed crews decided to come here," Stroman added as he sipped his new beer. "I don't know how we'd be getting all this done without them."

"Promising them free tours of exotic game worlds cinched it," I said with a smile. "But long term, they all want to go privateer. We'll need to find replacement crews at some point."

"Kit suggested a good number of people from Atlantis might want to come over," Mi-Cha said. "The Aa'an canceled the mandatory research grind and are letting people choose a new polity. Might be some good workers in there."

"We'll need to vet them pretty carefully," Selen warned. "Harm is still out there, and he'll be trying to put spies here if he can."

Stroman nodded. "Haskins is in charge of intake. At this point, anyone who wants in will need to buy in, and they'll have their respawn point locked here. Not a good move for a spy, necessarily. And we're keeping the new Link system under lock and key, so getting comms out won't be easy."

"I feel like we should keep Harm under lock and key," I muttered into my beer.

Mi-Cha heard me anyway. "Word is his Strongarm faction is pulling itself back together. It's a concern"—she shrugged—"but not a huge one. I don't think he'll come after us himself, and he can't actually come *here*."

"And we're super popular," Stroman pointed out. "Christoforos is running the job board now, and he says we're getting steady jobs for tech trade between the Aa'an and the UFW, and even the Carbon Hegemony has reached out to initiate trade. Confed will be an aggressor, but they're no longer going to have an unmatched position."

"They still have over a hundred worlds," Selen pointed out.

"True, but they won't have a monopoly on tech. Especially if we can find the Qiar," Mi-Cha said. "Speaking of, where are we on missions? I feel like we have a lot open."

Everyone's expression glazed a bit as we reviewed our sheets. "'Seek Out the Qiar,' right at the top," I said.

"'Explore Strange New Worlds,' check," Lad said happily. "We can start that whenever we're ready."

"I'd like to leave behind a volunteer on each new world this time," Mi-Cha said. "An ambassador."

"You can sign me up," Selen said, surprising everyone. "What? I don't want to be a trooper mommy forever."

"Fair enough," Stroman chuckled. "'Find Dwight.' Still don't know why we took that one."

"Oh, Dwight's not bad," I countered. "He grows on you. Like a fungus."

"And he'll honestly know a lot more about how the different games work," Mi-Cha added.

"Hey, did you ever wonder if there are other devs in here?" Danjuma put in. "Here, or in the other games? I bet they'd be useful."

"Huh," Stroman said, nodding slowly. "You're right. We just need to figure out a way to find them."

» Mission Accepted: Rally the Devs

"Thanks so much," Mi-Cha said wryly. "As if we didn't have enough to do. And what's this one, 'Become MCI'? I don't get the reference."

"It was an ancient communications company in the real," Tomiko said. "I looked it up. And we won't be far off on that one. Leone and I almost have the Link switchboard ready to go live. We've got the engineers from the *Pinkie* building Link nodes for all our ships, and Mirabile is going to re-tune their node to work with our system. We should have a full network up and running inside a week."

"Let's try and get that done before we go exploring," Mi-Cha said. "And I'd still like to see if a node will work in some of the other games."

"We'll have spares. And at some point, I'd still like to go after that 'Heavy Hand' mission, see if we can't build a copy, or even a counter, to that gravity net Confed developed."

"Mmm, we'll try and schedule it in," Mi-Cha said. "And the last mission, 'Build a Shipyard.' Frank, did Sinsky offer anything there?"

"He wants a billion for a late-model tender. It's honestly probably half that to build a stationary yard here, but I can see the advantage of having something we could deploy too. We do tend to get beat up a lot."

"Where are our funds?"

"Pushing to seven billion."

The captain shrugged. "Do both."

I laughed. "Aye aye, Captain!"

"And first thing tomorrow, we start drawing lots," she said, taking a long pull of her beer.

"Lots?" Danjuma asked. "For what?"

Mi-Cha gave us a wide grin. "To see what world we're going to unlock next!"

EPILOGUE

I LAY BACK IN MY BUNK AND REVIEWED MY CHARACTER SHEET.

Frank Kozina
Class: Truthsayer (hidden)
Class: Businss Manager
Account: 377,710 Credits
Party funds: 6,514,955,928 Credits
Level 12

Reputations
Aa'an Board of Societal Norms: +500
Galactic Guild of Assassins: +500
Alliance of Free Explorers: +40,000

Titles
Demonslayer (party)
Galactic Transformers (party)
Cthulu Whisperer (party)
Dragonslayer Class I
Founding Lifeform

Attributes

Body: 17
Mind: 17
Soul: 16
HP: 204 (Body × Level)
MP: 96 (Soul × Skill)
XP: 1,893,251 (203,901 to level 13)
Unused Attribute Points: 0

Skills:
Aa'an Etiquette: 5
Astriaporta Management: 6
Business Management: 8
- Specialization: Mercenary Company: 6
Disguise: 10
Dragonslaying: 1
Household Management: 7
Impersonation: 10
Investing: 5
Knife Fighting: 2
Lockpicking: 4
Market Analysis: 4
Melee Fighting: 1
Negotiating: 6
Nursing: 3
Poisoning: 5
Primal Magic: 6
Public Speaking: 3
Politicking: 5
Sidearms: 3
Spacer: 11
Spacewalking: 5
Stalking: 4
Starship Gunnery: 5
Starship Navigation: 1
Starship Piloting: 1

Starship Sensors: 10
Starship Tactics: 9
Stealth: 4
Thievery: 4
Trapping: 4
Treasure Hunting: 1
Achievements:
Social Butterfly x1

I'd come a long way in the past few months, gaining skills in magic and seriously leveling up several others. Heck, I'd left the Guild of Assassins! And we had a lot to look forward to.

» Open missions:
Seek Out the Qiar
Explore Strange New Worlds
Find Dwight Czarnowski
Rally the Devs
Become MCI
Find the Heavy Hand
Build a Shipyard

So many missions, so many new worlds to unlock! *Endless Frontier, Endless Industry, Endless Night, End—*

I bolt upright, my eyes going wide.

Mom had always said she'd planned to retire into one of the games. That's what *Endless Paradise* was: a fun, casual, no-worries paradise for retirees.

I might be able to find my mom.

» Mission Accepted: Call Your Mother

AWARD-WINNING FICTION

Daniel Scratch: a story of witchkind

- Kirkus Starred Review
- Winner, American Fiction Awards—Best Fantasy (2023)

Clara Thorn, the witch that was found

- Winner, American Fiction Awards—Best Young Adult (2023)
- Runner-Up, American Fiction Awards—Best Fantasy (2023)

Find these books and more at DonJones.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

Connect, get free novels and short stories, and learn about upcoming releases by visiting Don's author website at DonJones.com.

ALSO BY DON JONES

stories of witchkind®

Age of the Adherents:

Daniel Scratch • Master of the Tower • The Fifth Axis

The Order:

The Order of Some • The Conspiracy of One • The Truth of All

Clara Thorn

Clara Thorn, the witch that was found

Clara Thorn, the witch that fought

Clara Thorn, the witch that won

Endless Sky®

Truthsayer • New Worlds

The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae

Find more at DonJones.com