

As the ravaged postwar Imperial Fleet stands helpless, nearby worlds fall to the League of Dark Stars. Commanding a squadron of Starfuries, Wilf Brim sets course to save the star kingdom of Fluvanna. If he fails, the Empire is doomed.

The Mercenaries

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THE MERCENARIES
Director's Cut Edition

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THE MERCENARIES

Director's Cut Edition

By Bill Baldwin

CHAPTER 1

Bromwich 52009

Except for a stubborn inverter in a backup KA'PPA communications system, Wilf Brim's astroplane, Starfury Σ 1-AA, was ready to fly. Outside, extending from his left along an age-stained seawall, fifteen more Starfuries bobbed alongside small jetties projecting into cold, tossing Glammarian Bight. He pursed his lips. For the moment, these sixteen astroplanes comprising Squadron Σ -1 represented the entire output to date of Sherrington HyperSpace Works. That would soon change as the factory became more familiar with mass-producing the complex little spaceframes, but at present, Sherrington Starflight was still learning how to build their latest creations with any kind of efficiency.

He checked the panel clock. "Just about time, Number One," he announced to Lieutenant Nadia Tissuard at the Co-Helmsman's station beside him. "Let's pipe it on the blower."

"Aye, Skipper," Tissuard replied; a deft pass of her index finger triggered the starship's intercom. "Hands to lift-off stations," she announced, her voice resounding into every cubic inch of the little starship. "Hands to lift-off stations."

Abruptly, the bridge filled with noises of imminent departure: running footfalls, airtight doors slamming, the cadenced babble of checklists. Brim settled into his recliner with a full measure of excitement. Beneath his boots, the Starfury's deck trembled to the steady beat of twin Admiralty A876 gravity generators running at fast idle in pontoons at either side of the main hull. Through it all, he sensed (more than heard) the treble rush of steering engines as Systems Tech-1 Strana' Zaftrak carried out her last-moment checklist at the Systems Console behind him.

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"Internal G's warning, if you please," he dictated.

"Aye sir; internal G's warning," Tissuard replied, switching on the intercom again. "Hands stand by for internal gravity; hands stand by for internal gravity." A woman in her early forties from the Lampsen Provinces, freshly-promoted Lieutenant Tissuard, I.F., had laughing eyes, jet-black hair, and a compact figure; her matter-of-fact competency had been an asset since the day she signed on as First Officer—only metacycles following Brim's own arrival as Squadron Commandant. With the million-odd tasks to be accomplished before the new squadron was commissioned, her kind of cheerful willingness had been doubly appreciated.

Once more Brim verified the flow of information over his console—the ship was completely sealed—then swallowed hard and nodded to Zaftrak's furry visage in a display. "Switch it, Strana'," he ordered quietly.

The Sodeskayan nodded and passed a delicate, six-fingered hand over the gravity console beside her, changing eight flashing red indicators to steady blue—and savaging Brim's stomach in an avalanche of nausea as gravity cycled from planetary to the ship's artificial gradient. During twenty years in space, he had never become inured to the change, especially when it happened abruptly.

Forcing back his gorge, he shunted one of his displays to Chief McCord, Generator/Drive Tech., in the forward mooring cupola. "Single up the moorings, Chief," he ordered, "and pass that on to the other ships."

"Singling up moorings and passing it on," replied a bearded face from the display. McCord had narrow lips, a sharp nose, and the humorless, close-set eyes of a sharpshooter. So far, he also promised to be the winningest Cre'el player in the squadron.

Through the Hyperscreens—normally transparent crystalline windows simulating conventional vision at HyperSpeeds—Brim watched a network of greenish mooring beams wink out one by one along the row of Starfuries until, at least as far along the seawall as he could see, each ship was tethered by a single set of two port spring beams, flaring and abating as their hulls moved to wind and wave.

Outside, the weather was moderating—at last. Bromwich city

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(indeed all of Rhodor's boreal hemisphere) had been stormy that winter. But today, the air was clean and crisp over white capped Glammarian Bight. Brim thoughtfully gazed out past the ship's sharp-nosed prow and momentarily wondered what the coming months would bring. A fragile peace doggedly persisting among the various Galactic dominions reminded him of the thin, winter dayshine outside; it still managed a pallid light, but all the heat had long ago escaped. Even as he sat in his Helmsman's seat, the old enemy was constructing new, deep-space fortifications in a score of locations. War was about to break out all over the galaxy, and with a sadly depleted Imperial Fleet, only squadrons of tiny Starfuries from the Sherrington Works held any genuine promise of defense from a bleak-looking future. He commanded the very first of these; at present, its crews as well as its astroplanes were far from ready for anything like combat.

The bridge had grown quiet now, every console manned and active. "Ship's buttoned up, Skipper," Tissuard reported with a grin. "All hands are at stations and pre-taxi checklists are done," she said. "Ready to proceed...."

"Good work, Nadia," Brim replied. He touched the COMM panel at his right hand. "Bromwich Ground," he sent, "Squadron Sigma-one requests immediate G-pool departure."

"Squadron Sigma-one: affirmative. Cleared immediate departure into the Bight."

"Squadron Sigma-one," Brim acknowledged. Then, into the display: "Stand by springs, McCord!" He checked fore and aft through the Hyperscreens—all clear. The Starfuries had a quartering wind on their starboard bows. No particular problem, but it never hurt to be careful. Besides, the other fifteen Starfury Helmsmen had even less time than he did at the controls. "Order the others to cast off, Nadia." Narrowing his eyes, he waited for the proper balance of wind and mooring beams before, "Clear to port!"

"All clear port, Skipper," the bearded McCord declared from his cupola.

A crosswind from starboard meant Brim and the others would have to go ahead on the back spring, swinging the stern out to port,

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then use the crosswind to straighten the ship as they moved ahead into the bight. He touched his power console. Immediately two narrow amethyst damper rays warmed the palm of his hand, each controlled the ship's gravity generator on its respective side. Nudging the starboard glow forward without altering its color, he called up only enough power to move the ship. "Let go the forrard spring!" he barked.

"All clear forrard, Skipper," McCord acknowledged.

The Starfury's deck throbbed steadily to the increased beat of her Admiralty A876s; a mug of cvceese' rattled on console somewhere aft. "Stow that mug," Brim snapped quietly.

"Aye, Skipper," came an embarrassed reply. The rattling ceased immediately.

Brim regarded the spring tightening below. Too much strain and the jetty projectors would override—letting the Starfury skid downwind into the next pier, or the sea wall. Unthinkable! Momentarily, he glanced left at the other ships and mumbled a silent prayer to Voot, then trained a second display aft to watch his gravity generators turn the view to shimmering haze. Presently, he remembered to breathe as afternoon light replaced the ship's shadow along the pier. The stern was beginning to swing out, angling away while the solitary spring took the starship's slow thrust like a great leash.

With the Starfury soon skewed between the sea wall and the pier at about ten degrees, Brim drew the starboard damper back to idle. "Let go the aft spring!" he ordered.

"All clear aft, Skipper!" replied McCord.

At the precise moment the last spring beam disappeared, Brim moved both damper rays forward together. With only a moment's hesitation he eased the little starship out over into the Bight, hovering a regulation five irals above the unique, three-element footprint she pushed into the surface of the dirty water thumping and foaming beneath her hulls. All along the breakwater, his other Starfuries were pushing off, too. When all were clear, he sent: "Bromwich Ground: Squadron Sigma-one requests taxi instructions."

"Squadron Sigma-one: cross one seven left without delay and

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hold at Locus Six Five."

"Squadron Sigma-one," Brim acknowledged. He glanced off to starboard. At the landward termination of takeoff vector Seventeen Right, I.F.S. *Commerce*, a large military cargo ship was running up its gravity generators in preparation for liftoff. Clouds of mist and spume mounted into the pale blue sky behind it. Salutes would be necessary, of course—and since Brim's squadron was only recently commissioned, he would salute first.

"Pipe the honors to *Commerce*, please," he prompted KA'PPA/COMM Operator Owen Morris, Spaceman 1st Class at the COMM console.

"Aye, Commander," Morris said tensely.

As the squadron crossed the intended path of the big cargo ship, archaic symbols flashed across Brim's KA'PPA display, MAY STARS LIGHT ALL THY PATHS, the traditional salutation between starships as old as starflight itself. He glanced up to watch glowing KA'PPA rings shimmer out from the Starfury's dorsal beacon; through an odd quirk in Travis Physics, the message would arrive instantaneously at KA'PPA receivers throughout the Universe, though all but the addressee's set aboard the cargo ship would ignore it.

Moments after Brim's last Starfury cleared the takeoff vector, *Commerce* thundered past, trailing a lofty cascade of spray that doused the Starfury's Hyperscreens like a waterfall before the cargo ship soared gracefully into the sky to disappear into the clouds. As Brim drew the squadron to a halt at Locus Buoy Six Five, he frowned. "Did they acknowledge that, Morris?" he demanded; the answering salutation from *Commerce* should have been, "...and thy paths, Star Traveler."

"If they did, Commander, this KA'PPA set didn't pick it up. You want me to call 'em?"

Brim shook his head with a chuckle. "Won't be necessary, Morris," he said. "I think we just learned what standard starship drivers think of astroplanes."

"Aye, Commander; it would seem so."

Like any radical innovation, astroplanes were still largely unrecognized for their potential. Brim smiled to himself. That

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wouldn't last, of course, but until little ships like these Starfuries proved their worth, they'd often be on the small end of courtesies. He relaxed in his recliner and listened to Tissuard and Zaftrak completing their lift-off checklist.

"Transponders and 'home' indicator?" Tissuard asked.

"On," Zaftrak responded.

"Fullstop cell?"

"Powered."

"Warning lights?"

"On."

"Engineer's check?"

"Complete."

"Antiskid?"

"Skid is on."

"Speed brake?"

"Forward."

"Stabilizer trim—delete the gravity gradient, if you please."

"Gradient null."

"Course indicators?"

"Set and checked."

"Lift-off check is complete, Skipper," Tissuard reported.

"Very well, Nadia," Brim returned, then used the next moments to make his own audits of the starship's systems, finishing only moments before Ground Control came back on line. "Squadron Sigma-one: you may taxi into position, hold one seven right," the controller sent. "Contact Bromwich Tower. Good day."

"Into position, hold, and call tower. Squadron Sigma-one.

Thanks, and good day," Brim replied, then touched his SQUADRON COM button. "Sigma-one Leader to Skippers: Check in by quads."

"Quad two, check...."

"Quad three, check...."

"Quad four, check...."

"You heard all that," Brim responded. "Taxi into position by flights in column staggered left. Follow me and space your takeoff runs at two-cycle intervals; rendezvous point is ah....," he glanced at a chart, "...Whitehall Beacon-889. And let's keep your quads closed

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up on the way out—never know who's gazing up at the sky. Got that, you quad leaders?"

"Cartner here; gotcha...."

"Deegan; closed up...."

"Merryman, check...."

"See you out there, then," Brim closed, easing forward again to follow a series of bobbing markers until a ruby light gleamed out of the distance. At that point, he put the helm over, turned into the wind, and centered the glimmer in a small circle projected on the Hyperscreen from his console. "Bromwich Tower: Squadron Sigma-one is in position and holding...."

"Squadron Sigma-one is cleared for lift-off," the Tower sent. "Wind three one five at two seven, gusts four seven."

"Cleared for lift-off, Squadron Sigma-one," Brim acknowledged, watching the other three Starfuries in his quad pull into line abreast to his right. He flicked the blower. "All hands stand by for lift-off," he warned the crew, then glanced over his shoulder; Zaftrak was holding her left hand up, thumb in the air—the ship was rigged for space.

In all his years at a helm, Brim had never outgrown the wild, almost-physical thrill of lift-off. "I'll have full military power, Strana'," he called out

"One hundred percent military," Zaftrak replied from her display.

"Steering engine's amidships," Tissuard added—the final item on the preflight checklist.

Taking a deep breath, Brim stood on the gravity brakes and cautiously moved both damper rays forward until they passed from amethyst to blue, then to green... yellow... orange... finally to flashing red. The deep rumbling of the gravity generators changed voice to a thunderous bellow that shook the whole spaceframe and resonated deafeningly through the Hyperscreens as if the little ship were centered in the midst of some gigantic explosion. Astern, a long strip of the Bight had suddenly flattened into a madly flowing millrace that ended in a towering cloud of spray and ice particles soaring into the pale winter sky.

"All lights are on, Skipper," Zaftrak called above the noise,

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"you've got one-fifteen thrust!"

Brim cleared his flight path visually, made another pass over his readouts, checked the other ships. "Here we go!" he shouted, then released the gravity brakes...

Instantly, the little astroplane began to move forward—completely unlike generations of standard starships that took what seemed to be eternities at full power before they would even respond to their steering engines.

Brim found himself grinning with pleasure. In only moments, all four Starfuries were trailing lofty cascades of spray and plunging across the water at tremendous velocity. The enormous quantities of power available did little to interfere with the ship's naturally delicate, quick, and positive response to control manipulations. After a moment, her bow lifted slightly, then fell again while speed increased through 165 c'lenyts per metacycle. At about 170, Brim eased back on the controls, overcoming a slight tendency to nose down farther, then as she accelerated through 180, he lifted the bow again and let the ship's weight transfer to the gravs, applying a few degrees of right rudder to check a normal swing to port during lift-off. A moment later, she separated from her shadow and began climbing smoothly over the Sherrington Works on the way to the ultimate freedom of her native element: deep interstellar space. Glancing around, he could see Ted Bently his wingman in $\Sigma 1$ -AB tucked in close to his starboard quarter; to his right, Norm McAlda in $\Sigma 1$ -AC and Adam Dowd in $\Sigma 1$ -AD completed the quad, keeping perfect formation.

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader is at one thousand and climbing," Brim reported, spying a small crowd of people on the ground who had stopped whatever they'd been doing to wave wildly.

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader: turn port fifteen to join two thirty radial outbound blue; contact Blue District Departure Control," Sherrington Tower advised while Brim's Starfury bounced through light turbulence.

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader: turning port fifteen to two thirty radial outbound blue. Good day," Brim replied.

"Best o' luck at the school, Commander Brim."

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"Thanks, Control, we can always use it."

As he trimmed the ship's head toward the assigned departure radial, Brim glanced back at the huge sheds where Sherrington was struggling to boost Starfury production.. He shook his head while the course indicator settled onto its new heading. Those sheds down there were working on little more than faith alone; faith the Starfuries' original design was sound—and a sincere hope the mistakes they did embody could be easily and economically modified. Major modifications to a whole fleet could actually spell financial disaster to the credit-strapped Imperial Fleet. They would almost certainly mean Crown Prince Onrad would be deprived of his succession.

Only son of Emperor Greyffin IV and heir to the Imperial throne at Asterious-Avalon, Onrad had personally ordered the prototype Starfury's creation at the historic Dytasburg conference in Sodeskaya the previous year, then immediately funded one hundred additional "prototypes" (subsequently designated Starfury 1as) using discretionary development funds: six squadrons of sixteen Starfuries, with four spares to make up for inevitable accidents associated with new machines. He took these seemingly rash actions because he *truly* believed war might soon engulf the "civilized" dominions of the galaxy, during a time when the once great Imperial Fleet had been reduced to a mere shadow of its former might.

Outside, the other three quads had caught up, and everyone was keeping station nicely; so far, these Helmsmen from standard starships had transitioned to the little astroplanes with amazing ease. Reflexively, Brim touched his Comm button. "Squadron Sigma-one Leader, climbing through fifteen thousand on two thirty radial," he reported.

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader," Control replied. "You are cleared through three hundred c'lenyts on two thirty radial outbound blue. Advise slower traffic approximately twenty-five c'lenyts off your bow. Contact Blue Planetary Control."

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader acknowledges all that," Brim said, glancing to his left at an elderly looking merchantman moving out from the planet like some oversized beast of burden. The proximity

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alarm chimed beside him, "We see the slower traffic approximately twenty-five c'lenyts off our bow," he added. "Good day."

"Best of luck to the squadron, Commander."

"Thanks, District," Brim acknowledged. "We'll need all the luck we can get." He grinned to himself. A lot of people believed in these new Starfuries and the royal orders that had put them into production. But that belief was by no means universal among the diverse peoples of the Empire. Since the year 52000 when the delusory Treaty of Garak ended open warfare between Nergol Triannic's League of Dark Stars and Greyffin IV's far-flung Galactic Empire, a sinister and powerful antimilitary organization had infiltrated the Imperial Government as well as the Admiralty itself. Known as the Congress for Intra-Galactic Accord, or CIGA—and almost openly funded by the League itself—it was chaired by a one-time shipmate of Brim's, Commodore Puvis Amherst. The CIGA's avowed goal was dismantling, from within, the mighty Imperial Fleet that had nearly annihilated League Admiral Kabul Anak's spaceborne armadas. All, of course, in the name of "Peace."

Unfortunately for the Empire, during almost nine-odd years of false truce, the craven Amherst and his CIGAs had been all too successful at their task—at the same time their League masters were secretly rebuilding their own war-decimated battle squadrons at a feverish pace. And now they were working on their xaxtdamned space forts...

Brim had seen Onrad's courageous move raise a predictable hue and cry from CIGAs all over the Empire, but the Prince remained undeterred, indefatigable in his belief the new ships constituted an absolute minimum counterforce necessary to insure survival of civilization. Clearly, he trusted that eventually he would be vindicated—and meanwhile, each new Starfury added to the possibility the Empire might persevere into the second phase of a war that was coming as surely as helium follows hydrogen on the chart.

Brim's LightSpeed meter read .86 when he spotted I.F.S. *Commerce* lumbering along ahead. Altering course slightly, he led his sixteen Starfuries past with no more than a thousand irals separating them from its bridge—at nearly double its speed. He

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smiled briefly, wondering if the disdainful officers would even notice them as they flashed past.

They did. As the big ship disappeared aft, Brim's KA'PPA display flashed momentarily with ...AND THY PATHS, STAR TRAVELER. Now and then, it didn't hurt to be a little pushy...

Again, he touched the Comm button. "Squadron Sigma-one Leader to Planetary Control. We're at two eighty c'lenyts on two thirty outbound and climbing," he reported.

"Squadron Sigma-one Leader: cleared direct to deep space and light speed. Knock 'em dead, Starfuries!"

"Count on it," Brim answered. Then, moments later, the LightSpeed meter passed 1.0 and standard radio communications ceased.

* * *

**IFSSWC : The Imperial Fleet Strike and
Space Warfare Center**

The Imperial Fleet Strike and Space Warfare Center (IFSSWC) was established at the Imperial Fleet Base, Gimmas-Haefdon as the center of excellence for Imperial Fleet astroplane training and tactics development. IFSSWC will provide service to space crews, squadrons and space wings through spaceflight training, academic instructional classes, and direct operational and intelligence support. At present, the command consists of 28 officers, 41 enlisted, and 80 contractors. IFSSWC maintains a Simulation Center and operates 18 ED-4 starships in various configurations.

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IFSSWC will be the primary authority on training and tactics development for astroplanes. IFSSWC will provide training, assessment, spaceflight requirements recommendations, research and development priorities for integrated strike warfare, deep and near-space combat superiority, astroplane employment, spaceborne battle management, Space Combat Search and Rescue, Surface Support, and associated planning support systems. The command also will be responsible for development, implementation, and administration of several courses of instruction while functioning as the Fleet point of contact (FPOC) for all issues relating to the Space Combat Training Continuum. Additionally, IFSSWC is the FPOC for all issues related to the Gimmas-Haefdon Astroplane Training Complex.

The Training and Standardization Department (N7) instructs graduate-level strike-fighter employment through the Attack Ship Tactics Instructor (ASTI) course. It also conducts the Strike Leader Attack Training Syllabus (SLATS).

The SFTI (Space Fighting Technical Institute) course trains individuals in the art of space-to-space and space-to-ground superiority. It provides highly advanced tactical training in astroplane tactics, hardware, and threat training. Concurrent with each SFTI course, IFSSWC conducts an

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Adversary Training Course where pilots receive individual instruction in threat simulation, effective threat presentation and adversary tactics. Each class trains five to six Air Intercept Controllers in effective strike/fighter command and control.

Imperial Fleet Information Bulletin (IFIB)
52009-AHJ-91-12M

Squadron Σ -1 would train some thirty Standard Days with IFSSWC, the entire curriculum conducted almost in secrecy at the gigantic, all-but-abandoned Fleet base on Gimmas-Haefdon. Ironically, the base had been Brim's first duty station out of the Helmsman's Academy, nearly sixteen years previously, when he was assigned to Regula Collingswood's old T-class destroyer I.F.S. *Truculent*. Closed for nearly two Standard Years now by CIGA-contrived "economic" concerns, the great base had been without maintenance and would already be yielding to the corrosive effects of Haefdon's brutally frigid climate.

Brim had been in contact with Haefdon Control for nearly half a cycle when the Squadron thundered down out of perpetually dense storm clouds over the tossing Sea of Gamatz; however, nothing could have prepared him for the barren, frozen wasteland that lay below. The base's great, ocean-spanning causeways appeared to be intact, but were covered with snow and ice and seemed to be little more navigable than the gray, ice-strewn sea they surmounted. Nothing moved as far as he could see. The planet's wearisome flatness was broken only by vast complexes of forlorn structures that looked as if they were constructed of nothing more permanent than the ice and snow that covered them.

Closer to the surface, Tissuard pointed out vast compounds of battleship-sized gravity pools covered with drifted snow and locked in ice that must now extend all the way to the bottom of their feeder canals. In sprawling scrap yards; hundreds of discarded starships lay

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in slipshod rows beneath the drifted snow. Some of the hulls, by their very shapes, were obsolete. But far too many were clearly serviceable, modern starships, relegated prematurely to abandonment by industrious CIGAs—citizens of the Empire who were causing more damage to their own Fleet than all the powerful squadrons of warships Nergol Triannic had been able to effect in a fully declared war.

Within half a metacycle, the squadron was sweeping low past the colossal structures that were once the Base's Central Complex: lofty glass and metal towers so tall their exaggerated perspective gave Brim a brief feeling of vertigo as he sped past. Nearby was the enormous parade ground where he received his first medals from Crown Prince Onrad so many years ago—just before he'd been transferred to I.F.S. *Defiant*. From thirty thousand irals' altitude, the great tract appeared to be no larger than his thumbnail.

Broad, empty, avenues extended out from the deserted complex like c'lenyts-long spokes of some gigantic wheel whose interstices were filled by jumbles of odd-shaped structures, soaring conduits, rows of ship-sized tanks, huge mushroom-shaped reactor sites, and a maze of empty tram lines. All were covered by unblemished layers of drifted snow—except, strangely, the reactor sites. Every one of these appeared to be ice-free and clearly operational. Surrounded by soaring energy-transmission towers and topped by blazing beacons, their enormous collapsium domes gleamed as if they had only just been installed. Odd, Brim considered, that so much power was necessary for a purely maintenance effort, even if one counted the enormous energy needed to protect some of the base's larger, more valuable structures. But the Admiralty never had been noted for its logic—especially in peacetime.

Near the shore, and verging a vast expanse of half-buried maintenance structures, two small groups of buildings fronted some fifty active gravity pools in a tiny aggregation of cleared streets and melted snow. A number of the pools were already occupied. As Tissuard piped landing cautions throughout the hull, Brim counted ten ancient ED-4s below; the infinitely serviceable starships would doubtless carry referees and recording gear—and act as rescue

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vessels, if necessary—during actual space operations. Brim shook his head dejectedly. The great Imperial Fleet was reduced to using ancient, cast-off civilian starships, probably purchased at auction somewhere—a far cry from the proud fleets of only a few years ago. Nearby, a large supply vessel in the colors of AkroKahn, the Sodeskayan space line, clearly housed shops and facilities for tuning components of the Krasni-Peych Drives that gave Starfuries such impressive velocities in deep space. On the next two gravity pools, a mammoth repair and salvage vessel and a smaller commissary transport completed the little squadron. Pretty impressive, considering the badly reduced state of the Imperial Fleet

"Ironic, what they've done to the old base, isn't it?" Tissuard's voice broke into his thoughts.

"I was thinking 'wasteful', myself," Brim muttered as the Starfury bumped through turbulence over the shoreline. "But I'm sure it's ironic, too," he allowed grimly. Ahead, a five-c'lenyt long section of ice was melting into a landing strip as he watched. Clearly, the reactors here were operating flawlessly, too.

"You bet it's ironic, Skipper," Tissuard said firmly. "Not that long ago, this was one of the most significant military bases in the known Universe. The Admiralty should never have closed Gimmas. Someday, we'll all be sorry we let Amherst and his CIGAs get away with it."

"A lot of us were sorry when it happened," Brim replied. "I wasn't even in the service then. I got bumped in the first Reduction In Force."

"The first RIF after the Treaty of Garak?" Tissuard asked.

"That's the one," Brim said, banking into a course paralleling the long strip of ice mush now churning wildly from tremendous convection currents. "I'd been in enough action to know the Leaguers for the zukeeds they really are, but nobody was much interested in the opinion of an ex-StarSailor. All people wanted to talk about was *peace*—and CIGAS were mouthing the right words."

Tissuard laughed wryly. "That must have been just about the time I graduated from the Helmsman's Academy," she said. "I suppose we cadets were more acceptable to them. We hadn't seen much of the

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real war."

Brim chuckled. "Well, you've certainly sullied your acceptability now, shipping out in a Starfury," he observed. "The CIGA factions in the Admiralty are really upset about these ships—they'll be keeping a sharp eye on anyone associated with them."

"That's what I wanted," Tissuard replied. "You know, you've only a few Standard Years on me, Skipper—I've been around awhile myself. It was about time I declared a choice."

"A declaration, unfortunately, for *right*, not *might*," Brim observed, glancing into the rearview monitor to check the other ships. "Those CIGAs all but run the Admiralty these days."

Nearly ten c'lenyts distant now, the patch of slush was currently turned to water and the convection currents had already subsided. Brim pulled off power and rolled into a bank, hauling the starship around in a tight curve until she lined up with the strip of gray water, already speckled with whitecaps from Haefdon's constant wind. Behind him, the other fifteen Starfuries were pulling into line-astern formation, ready to follow him to the surface. "I'll have the landing checklist now, Number One," he said, then pushed the nose over and started a gentle descent.

* * *

With the last Starfury secure on her gravity pool, Brim switched his controls to Zaftrak and winked at Tissuard. "I think we're getting the hang of this already, Number One," he quipped.

Tissuard grinned. "Best Starfury Squadron in the Fleet," she chuckled, sliding out of her seat, "even if it *is* also the only one."

"Won't be that way forever," Brim called over his shoulder as he peered out at the little group waiting at the entrance to the brow. Even in heated battle suits, the few humans who had ventured into the frigid wind looked miserably cold huddled in the lee of the access gateway.

The Bears who waited with them, however, were waving heartily. Dressed in colorful Sodeskayan winter garb, they looked right at home in the driving snow. Sodeskaya, "Mother Planet" of the G.F.S.S. (Great Federation of Sodeskayan States), orbited a cool dwarf star named Ostra that meted out little more energy than

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Gimmas itself.

Brim quickly donned his heated Fleet Cloak and followed Tissuard off the ship, clapping Zaftrak on the shoulder as he passed. "Best damned team in the known Universe, Skipper," she called after him.

"*Unknown* Universe, too," Brim added from the companionway. "Don't sell us short!"

* * *

Nikolai Yanuarievich Ursis, Brim's long-time friend and Dean of the famous Dytasburg Academy on the G.F.S.S. planet of Ostra-Zhiv'ot, met Brim at the end of the brow with an authentic Bear hug. Standing a quarter again as tall as most humans, he had small gray eyes of enormous intensity, dark reddish-brown fur, a long, urbane muzzle that terminated in a huge wet nose, and a grin so wide that fang jewels on either side of his mouth blazed out in the light of the doorway. Even though a *Polkovnik* in the Sodeskayan Home Guard (and an equivalent full Captain in the Imperial Fleet), he was dressed in his civilian persona. He wore a colossal egg-shaped hat of curly wool that covered his ears and added at least an ival to his already formidable height. His black, knee-length greatcoat, embellished by two rows of huge gold buttons and jasmine waist sash, was cut in the old military style with a stiff collar, embroidered cuffs, and a wide skirt. Crimson trousers bagged stylishly over his thick, calf-length boots, the latter of black leather so soft they bunched at the ankles. His hands were protected by delicately embroidered, six-fingered gloves of ophet leather. "Wilf Anzor, my old comrade!" he roared. "Grand Duke Anastas Alexi sends regards."

"Nik!" Brim exclaimed through a happy grin, "what in the Universe are you doing here? I thought you'd be tied up in Zhiv'ot this time of year."

Ursis looked serious for a moment. "Matter of relativity, Wilf Anzor," he said soberly. "Old Dytasburg Academy may survive well enough without *me* for little while—but not without these Starfuries." He gazed past Brim at the astroplanes. "I doubt Nergol Triannic would permit such academic liberty as students there presently enjoy. 'Freedom', they say, 'is sure possession *only* of those who can defend

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it'."

"I'm glad you're here," Brim said with feeling.

The Bear grinned. "You will be much more glad to learn I am accompanied by large contingent from Krasni-Peych you see trooping toward your ships. They, not I, will remedy problems you may experience with new Reflecting Drive gives them so much pride." He motioned toward a low building just visible through the driving snow. "Operations Headquarters," he explained. "Come. I show you where you officially sign in astroplanes and get room assignments. Then, you buy us both goblet of Admiralty's rather modest meem in what passes here for wardroom. Omnibus skimmers will take rest of crews to dormitories where is possible to sleep without freezing."

The Bear led off along snow-drifted walkways toward the headquarters. "I have done best possible to stock wardroom," he said, "but never even half so well as Utrillo Barbousse—remember him?"

"Who could forget Barbousse?" Brim mused with a grin.

"Truly, I have lost track of splendid individual Barbousse," Ursis said mournfully. "Greatest of all ratings. In midst of most austere wartime shortages, man could supply literally anything—as if magic." He kissed the tips of his fingers. "Logish Meem such as would make Universe itself jealous."

"*Shortage* was only a relative term to people like Barbousse," Brim interjected, "...like *impossible*. You knew he sent a message of congratulations when I took over the Squadron, didn't you?"

"He did?" Ursis said with an interested frown. "And how did missive arrive?"

Brim shrugged. "One of the ancient Cerendellian COMM channels, as I remember. I'd never seen it used before."

Ursis smiled. "Impossible to trace, of course."

"Absolutely," Brim agreed. "I tried. Last time I heard from him, he was in the Helmsman's Academy. Then after I was RIFed, I lost track of him. Something happened at the school there, but I don't know what it was. He certainly wasn't allowed to finish."

"I doubt if the CIGAs or his one-time associate Amherst had much use for people of that caliber," Ursis offered.

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"Too much of a free thinker, anyhow," Brim added as they reached the building. "Whatever it was that happened to him, he disappeared. Completely."

"Somehow," Ursis mused, opening the door for Brim and stamping snow from his boots, "I have feeling we have not seen last of Mister Barbousse. He will turn up when he can do some good; mark my words."

Brim never got a chance to answer. Before he could open his mouth, his words were quelled by the familiar twang of Mark Valerian, chief designer for the Sherrington Starship Works and virtual creator of the Starfury.

"Brim, this is absolutely horrible!" the little man growled with a twinkle of laughter in his eye. "If I'd had any idea they'd pick an orbiting iceberg like this for the school, I'd never have designed the xaxtdamned ships in the first place." Valerian was almost painfully slim with a sizable nose; damp, humorous eyes; and a drooping black mustache of truly prodigious size. As usual, his coat and trousers were made of soft-looking wool. These were coupled with an old-fashioned white shirt, necktie, and high, pointed boots cut in the Rhodorian style.

The Carescian grinned happily as they shook hands. He'd seen very little of Valerian since driving the designer's M-6B racing starship to victory in the final contest for the Mitchell Trophy nearly a year previously. The hiatus was no reflection on their friendship; it was purely the times. Both men had all they could do simply keeping up with their responsibilities. "Don't blame me for the weather," he quipped, casting a sidelong glance at Ursis. "I certainly didn't opt for this wretchedly cold stuff. *We do*, however, have associates who are *known* for their affinity to nippy climates."

"But who can deny benefits of bracing wintry weather," Ursis sighed theatrically, fang jewels glinting opulently. "Look how well preserved keeps us Bears."

Valerian grimaced. "Nik's got a point, Brim," he declared—just as they were joined by a bantam Commodore with gray-blond hair, high cheekbones, piercing gray eyes, and a most sober bearing. Beneath a casually open Fleet Cloak, his perfectly-fashioned formal

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uniform looked as if it had been tailored only moments previously.

"Wilf, may I present Commodore Zorfrew Tor from the Fleet Design Bureau?" Ursis interjected quickly. "In command of this operation."

Brim extended a hand. "A pleasure, Commodore," he said.

Tor nodded and smiled a little. "Yes, I'm certain it is," he said without so much as raising an eyebrow.

"Er, yes," Brim allowed.

Suddenly Tor chuckled, the quick change in his aspect like sunrise after a particularly dark night. "Ah," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "You were *listening*."

"Well, ah..." Brim stumbled, "yes, I was."

"Nearly a lost art," Tor commented with raised eyebrows.

"What?" Brim asked.

"*Listening*," Tor replied with a little grin as he glanced through the windows in the front door. "Watch..."

A moment later two civilians entered the foyer in a blast of cold air and snow. One immediately glanced over at the Commodore and smiled while he stomped snow from his boots. "How goes it today, Doctor?" he asked.

Tor nodded his head affably. "Horrible," he said with a pleasant smile.

"Good—glad to hear it, Doctor," the civilian replied absently, opening his parka with cold-reddened hands. Then, with a friendly nod to Brim and the others, he opened the door for his partner, and the two of them hurried off along an inner corridor, deep in conversation.

The moment the door swung closed, Ursis and Valerian broke into gales of laughter. "Happens damn near every time," the designer gasped, wiping tears from his eyes. "He got me twice before Nik here finally let me in on the big joke."

Ursis's soulful eyes rolled toward the ceiling. "Night and green moonlight scarcely bother miners of small emeralds', as they say," he recited with a wry smile. "It was only after I fell victim myself—three times yesterday—that I discovered the joke. Three times!"

"Unfortunately," Tor said with a culpable look, "people *do* catch

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on." He extended his hand a second time. "Wilf Brim," he said, "I've heard much about you—I followed your every move in the Mitchell races."

"Thank you, Commodore," Brim said, "but it was Mark's ships that actually won. I just sat back and drove."

"I see," Tor said with a chuckle. "Easy as that, eh?" He smiled. "Well, I shall endeavor to make you a great deal busier, Commander, during the coming SFTI course." With that, he checked his timepiece and nodded to no one in particular. "And since everyone has at last arrived, I suppose it is fitting we launch our efforts with a get-together—on board my headquarters ship, I.F.S. *Refit Enterprise*." He nodded to himself. "Tonight, after you're all checked into your rooms. Twilight plus two. How does that seem, everyone?"

"It seems horrible," Brim quipped with a straight face. "Twilight plus two."

"Splendid; glad to hear it," Tor chuckled with a wink. "At Twilight plus two, then." He closed his Fleet Cloak. "Oh, bye the bye, Brim," he added, opening the door to a blast of arctic air, "plan to have a similar affair somewhere on base the night we complete the school, if you please."

"I shall look forward to that, Commodore," Brim called, winking at Ursis. He knew from experience that before the second party took place, everyone attending IFSSWC would be *quite* ready for *any* kind of deliverance.

* * *

At Twilight:2, Brim found the business of simply getting away from his workstation was no easy task in itself. It seemed as soon as he battled one lengthy task to a finish, a dozen others took its place. As a result, the party aboard *Refit Enterprise* was well under way before he straightened up the area around his workstation, donned his cold-weather gear, and set off for the *Enterprise*. "Looks perfectly awful out there, Gromnik," he commented to the Duty Officer, a tall Sodeskayan Lieutenant.

Gromnik grinned as he came to attention and saluted. "Aye, Commander," he answered. "It surely must be for those without natural fur coat."

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"Count on it," Brim said, pulling the Fleet Cloak tight around his neck while he turned up the heat. Through a nearby viewport, he could see only a gentle snow was falling—a far cry from earlier in the evening when FULL BLIZZARD seemed to be the sole weather mode. He was about to open the outer door when Tissuard appeared around the corner.

"Skipper," she exclaimed with raised eyebrows. "I thought you'd be long gone to the party."

"I might say the same about you, too, Number One," Brim grinned, strangely happy to see her. She had the sort of face that was charming even when mostly covered by the great collars of a Fleet Cape and a beaked officer's cap. "You're going to the party, I hope."

"With the kind of day I've put in," Tissuard chuckled, "I wouldn't miss Tor's get-together for a whole Universe, especially the free drinks. Local scuttlebutt has it the Commodore stocks his ship with pretty good Meem—Logish even."

"I never refute scuttlebutt," Brim said, holding the hatch while she stepped onto the brow, "too often it's nearly truth." Outside, Brim could feel the crisp air bite his nostrils as he breathed. Almost without thinking, he offered his arm as they negotiated the slippery steel grating.

She took it with a little squeeze. "You don't suppose anyone at home would mind, do you?" she asked.

Brim raised an eyebrow. "At home?"

"You know," she replied cocking her head slightly and looking him in the eye, "as *in a relationship*."

"Oh," Brim replied, feeling his cheeks burn. "No—there's no one at home who would mind." For a moment, he thought back over the many women who had drifted in and out of his life since he'd joined the Fleet: some suddenly, some over a long period of time. Even his first and dearest love, the Princess Margot Effer'wyck, not only had married someone else, she had become... He closed his eyes for a moment. He didn't even want to continue *that* thought.

"Caught you daydreaming, Skipper," Tissuard broke into his reverie.

Brim nodded and pursed his lips. "I guess you did, Number One,"

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he said, experiencing a definite visceral thrill sensing her small, soft form close beside him. Shipmate or not, he laughed to himself, Tissuard was a mighty attractive package—in any middle-aged man's book.

"It was awfully nice taking your arm, Skipper," she murmured as they stepped onto a heated walkway. "I'll remember to keep my eyes peeled for slippery spots every time we walk someplace together."

Brim felt himself blush again. "Me, too," he said awkwardly, then quickly peered out at the line of snow-cloaked Starfuries standing out in silhouette against the darkened sky. Docking beacons swung long beams of blue light through the falling snow while dim battle lanterns bobbed and hovered at their entrance hatches. Here and there, multicolored points of light glowed and blinked through bridge Hyperscreens, and KA'PPA rings radiated lazily out to the far corners of the Universe as someone in the COMM center kept touch with the reality of everyday business.

"Beautiful, aren't they—even covered by snow," Tissuard said quietly, her words breaking into his thoughts.

"Beautiful, at least," he mused. Somehow, it took another Helmsman to understand the way people could relate to starships. But then, Tissuard seemed to understand lots of things about him. That's what made them such an effective team.

"Deadly, too...", she added. "Strange how such graceful shapes could have been created for the sole purpose of destruction."

"'Protection' might be a better word," Brim offered.

"A nicer word, perhaps, Skipper," Tissuard allowed softly, "but the primary purpose of each Starfury is still destruction, pure and simple. No matter how harmless we'd like to make them seem."

Brim nodded agreement as they walked. "Yeah," he said at length, "and our purpose as well. Just like those space forts the League seems to be putting up all over the galaxy." He took a deep breath of cold air. "One begets the other, I suppose..." Behind them, the graceful ships were already dwindling to a pattern of blurred lights. The two officers continued in silence through the cottony solitude until *Enterprise* began to appear through the falling snow.

* * *

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Brim never did have an opportunity to attend Commodore Tor's party. At the entry port, he was notified a message awaited at the Comm Center. A KA'PPA dispatch required his personal receipt. Immediately directing Tissuard to make his apologies, he trudged back to the Administration Building, only to discover his urgent KA'PPA to be mere notification of a state visit by one of the few influential politicians who remained untouched by the CIGAs. Nevertheless, it did require a direct personal answer, and he made it. After that, instead of returning to the party, he retired to his assigned room for one of the few full nights of sleep he might get during the school.

* * *

Throughout the next Standard Days, much of the squadron's time was spent in ultra-realistic simulators, ceaselessly testing each crew to the limits of its combined proficiencies. Other days passed in actual space trials with individual quads pitted against others, fighting for mock objectives with no holds barred.

There could hardly have been more desolate circumstances in which to locate a school. The colossal maintenance yard to which they were assigned was occupied by gaunt, weatherworn figures of mammoth derricks and cranes silhouetted against storm-gray skies in the grip of perpetual winter; every square iral was covered by uniform layers of snow unsullied by tracks of living creatures for nearly a decade. The dying star Gimmas was long since dimmed beyond supporting any of the sentient life forms known in the Home Galaxy. Even so, there was a gaunt dignity to the surroundings, almost as if they were some gigantic vestige of a primordial civilization that pulled up cosmic stakes and departed long before the dawn of recorded history.

The crews had little enough time for pondering their surroundings and, for most, scant inclination to poke about the stormy landscape. Eyes and thoughts were constantly turned toward the ships and their tasks within them. Valerian's creations were already coming alive, as one 128 individual temperaments shook down together, melding into the single, unique personality that would become a mature fighting squadron. Like the cells of some bantling

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organism, they were beginning to work in concert, dedicating their energies and intellects to one exacting goal: operation of sixteen powerful astroplanes whose deadly function was important to them, and the ancient nation they called home. Their battles were in the future, in an as-yet-undeclared war. But each of the specially-chosen crewmen understood that sometime in the offing there would be dangerous work to do, and it would be worth doing.

* * *

During a rare hiatus from the IFSSWC agenda, Brim checked out an elderly launch from what remained of Base Operations and flew to the deserted Eorean Starwharves, his home for nearly three Standard Years at the beginning of his career. Touching down near an abandoned skeleton of what was once an elevated tram station, he labored through knee-deep snow beneath rows of dark Karlsson lamps, past the staring, broken windows of a half-tumbled guard station, then along nearly a c'lenyt of stone jetties and crumbling gravity pools to a small sign had nearly disintegrated with rust. "GRAVITY POOL R-2134," it read. Once—nearly an eon ago as time often seemed to Brim—his life in the Fleet had begun here.

For a moment his mind's eye carried back across the years to a snowy dawn when he had first laid eyes on the wedge-shaped form of starship T.83, I.F.S. *Truculent*, testing her moorings in the amber glow of repulsion generators thundering steadily within the gaping walls of this now-empty pool. Only Gimmas' perpetual wind broke the lonely stillness as it wailed 'round emaciated forms of towering cranes, rattled corrugated sheets in dilapidated sheds, moaned through the yawning mouths of broken windows, and hurried powdery snow ghosts among the run-down jetties. Out of sight somewhere, an unsecured door slammed against its frame to a totally irrational rhythm. CIGAs had destroyed Gimmas Haefdon with politics mightier than the League's most powerful disruptors.

Brim shivered in his heated Fleet Cloak. Despite the loneliness, this place—the whole colossal ruin, for that matter—was far from empty. Every square iral was peopled by ghosts of one sort or another. And in the silence of the deserted complex, he could still hear the shrill whines of big gravity generators spooling up before

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thundering into ground-shaking reality. As if it were yesterday, he recalled ice-blue tongues of free ions shooting back from open waste gates, great ships marching ponderously out onto the half-frozen bay, then soaring into the overcast, heroic comrades of all races striving together to turn the tide of a war that initially cast them in the role of underdogs. He sighed. So many of those brave men and women had paid the supreme toll, and for what? When fortunes began to reverse, Emperor Triannic quickly duped the Empire and her allies with his deceitful Treaty of Garak, then set up cowardly Puvis Amherst as chief of the CIGAs to destroy his nemesis Fleet from within.

Now, the great ships had departed, replaced by lonesome wind and a banging shutter. All that presently stood between Triannic and his dreams of conquest were the tag ends of a once-mighty war fleet, the relative handful of half-finished Starfuries a'building at Sherrington's, and the dogged resolution of a few remaining warriors who still believed freedom was worth fighting for—to the death.

As wan afternoon shadows lengthened in the stillness, Brim grimly retraced his steps to the launch and took off into the scudding gray clouds. But instead of setting a direct return course for the Central Complex, whimsy guided him only a short distance through the darkening sky before he set down again, this time in a wide courtyard fronting a snow-covered jumble of peaked roofs and tall stone chimneys. Over the great boarded-up doorway, a weathered sign swung to the wind on rusted chains that were clearly in their last days of existence. "MERMAID TAVERN," the faded letters blazoned in the gray twilight. "ESTABLISHED 51690." Opposite, through the rusting metal gate, he could sense what was once a country road, now buried irals deep in everlasting snow. On either side, tangled forms of long-dead treetops wound away in snowy perspective, mute reminders of summers now gone forever as the dimming star Gimmas continued its long march toward ultimate demise.

He hadn't been here in years, but the ghost of his earliest love affair was inextricably linked to this abandoned country inn. Its once-cozy, candle-lit interior was the place of his first liaison with Her Serene Majesty, Princess Margot of the Effer'wyck Dominions and Baroness (Grand Duchess) of The Torond. A lot of snow had fallen

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on the old building during those intervening fifteen years; clearly, it had served its last patron some time previously, probably with the closing of the base. Inside, he could imagine the huge fireplaces dark and cold, with only swirling soot marks from the last fire to serve as evidence the rooms had ever known life-giving warmth.

He stood before the derelict inn only a few cycles before something drove him away. The cold? The snow? Perhaps the lonesomeness? Whatever it was, he soon climbed back into the launch and departed shortly thereafter for the warmth and fellowship of the Squadron's wardroom. Certain memories were simply too painful to countenance.

* * *

As the days passed, Brim began to settle more comfortably into his role as Squadron Commandant. It was a proprietary sort of feeling, and it became more firmly established as the sixteen crews proved their mettle. The ships themselves were all he'd expected, and then some. Quite apart from a prodigious turn of speed, they were enormously easy to fly and maneuverable at nearly any velocity. Their only major snags, if major snags really existed, were with the new reflecting Drive units: three crystal shells grown around a central core in layers. During normal operation, all layers fired aft as a unit, with each shell contributing a third of the unit's total thrust. However, when short bursts of speed were necessary, the outer shells could be reversed, firing forward into a ring-shaped focusing reflector that fed back this specially modulated energy directly to the core and increased the power output by nearly fifty percent.

The process, of course, used tremendous energy and released enormous heat as a byproduct. The latter had to be radiated quickly lest its blistering presence damage portions of the hull; collapsiums like hullmetal had physical limits like everything else. But therein lay a problem. Even the prodigious radiating surfaces built into each Starfury were insufficient to continuously dissipate the heat generated by a Wizard C operating flat out in reflecting mode. And because of this defect, runs at absolute flank speed had to be suspended when the Drive crystals passed maximum operating temperatures, usually after no more than fifteen cycles. The situation

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also required a great deal more diligence at the helm, especially at high speeds. Brim had no problem managing the situation. Except when running under unusual or dangerous conditions, he flew with a sixth sense anyway. But not all his Helmsmen were so fortunate to be born with his intuition, eyesight, and coordination. The Sodeskayan engineers from Krasni-Peych would have to do something about *that* minor flaw before combat conditions changed it to "major."

And fix it they did, in a most amazing manner. No more than a fortnight after Strana' Zaftrak's first complaints, sixteen new space radiator systems had been fabricated and were waiting for installation when the squadron made landfall after their second series of disruptor trials. The astroplanes were laid up only two days while the systems were installed by a much larger party of technicians than Brim had guessed were housed aboard the Sodeskayan supply vessel. But then the new systems had been fabricated in a seemingly miraculous fashion also. Besides, they *worked*, and that was the only important point, anyway. Years ago he had learned that unnecessary questions could be a matter of embarrassment for everyone concerned.

* * *

The morning before their last day on Gimmas, Brim found a large notice on IFSSWC bulletin board:

NEW ABSOLUTE VELOCITY RECORD SET
The Imperial HyperDrome
Alcott-on-Mersin, Asterious-Avalon, 369/52009

Today, nearly a year after the Mitchell Trophy was permanently retired here at the Imperial HyperDrome near Avalon, Lt. Commander Tobias Moulding, I.F., set a new absolute speed record over the Standard three-light-year course at 407 light years per Standard metacycle. Moulding, a member of the Imperial Fleet's High-speed Star Flight Team, set the new record in the same Sherrington M-6 Beta he would have flown as backup, had Lt. Commander Wilf Brim,

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then Principal Helmsman to the Imperial Starflight Society, failed to capture the trophy himself. Moulding's M-6B was powered this year by a specially prepared Krasni-Peych Wizard-S (for "sprint") Drive.

* * *

The Carescrian smiled as he read the brief bulletin. Toby Moulding was one of Brim's few close friends, and he was genuinely glad the man had a chance at the record. But even more, it made him aware of the tremendous potential of his production Starfuries. During their final trials, they often reached 362 LightSpeed—approaching 90 percent of Moulding's new absolute speed record! If Sodeskayan intelligence estimates were correct, this easily made them the speediest astroplanes in space.

* * *

Eventually, Brim presided over a small graduation ceremony on a small parade ground next to the complex. For all intents and purposes, Squadron Σ -1 was now ready for its official entry into the Fleet List, which occurred promptly the following morning. At precisely Dawn:2:00, all sixteen crews plus most of the lonely base's personnel assembled in the bitter cold outside the Administration Building. In a simple ceremony, Commodore Tor formally muttered a few official platitudes concerning Emperor, Duty, Home, and Hearth. Then Brim stepped to the platform and symbolically accepted a large diploma for everyone attached to the organization, after which, Squadron Σ -1 entered the Imperial lists as a fully "commissioned" Fleet Unit. Next, Brim read orders that the squadron was to proceed within one Standard Day to Bromwich, while the new ships received a first scheduled maintenance. The good news: All crews and non-essential personnel were granted two Standard Weeks' leave, beginning eight metacycles after the ships were safely moored at the Sherrington plant.

Immediately after the ceremony, preparations got under way for the celebration Commodore Tor requested for the conclusion of the school. Tired as everyone was, the idea of a party, where everyone

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could let down his or her hair and relax for the first time in weeks, seemed to create its own energy. At least there was sufficient vigor to clean and decorate the Administration Building, as well as cool down a great quantity of Logish Meem in the everlasting ice.

But once again, Brim never got to celebrate. As he fought his way to the Administrative complex through one of Gimmas-Haefdon's signature blizzards, a small but expensive-looking civilian skimmer skidded to a stop beside him and hooted its tiny horn while the passenger-side door opened in a cloud of warm air and the odor of costly ophet leather. "Hoot mon!" came from the darkness inside, "climb in 'afore snow gets all over th' seat!"

"Who in the name of Voot?..." Brim growled, stooping to peer inside the low-slung vehicle at a gray beard, gray mustache, and gray eyes sparkling with the keen wisdom and humor of a lifelong StarSailor. "Baxter Calhoun?" he exclaimed.

"The same. Now get in an' shut the door!"

Brim took one more look. Calhoun was the only person he knew with enough money to buy one of these little skimmers, except perhaps Prince Onrad. "What in xaxt are *you* doing here on Haefdon?" he demanded.

"Freezin' my toosh while I'm wait'n for you t' get in m' skimmer, ye daft fool!"

Awkwardly, Brim wedged his way into the warm little cab and carefully pulled the door closed. "Aside from *that*, what brings you here to Haefdon, of all places?" he asked, opening his Fleet Cloak and fumbling for the thermostat.

"'Tis you that brings me here, young Brim," the man replied, extending both his hand and a steely grin. "But afore I answer any mare of your questions, Laddie, I'll hie us both along to the Comm Center so ye can collect the dispatch bonnie Prince Onrad ha' sent to you. It'll save a lot of explainin' once we begin talkin'." With that, he set the little skimmer moving across the drifting snow at a frightening rate of speed.

Brim ground his teeth and braced himself in the seat; he'd often driven with Calhoun when the two were shipmates aboard I.F.S. *Defiant*. So far, they were both still alive, although he wasn't quite

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sure why.

At the far end of middle age, Calhoun looked every inch a proper StarSailor. His chiseled countenance was handsome in a weather-beaten way, and his eyes carried the imperious look of one long accustomed to command—as well as the limitless depths of intragalactic space. He was dressed in expensive-looking, casual finery that appeared as if it had been tailored for him that very morning. Gossip had it he was wealthy beyond all belief, and the enormous StarBlaze ring flashing from his left hand lent powerful credence to the hearsay.

At the Comm Center, Brim identified himself and signed for the mysterious dispatch, which was delivered to his hand in the characteristic blue and gold plastic envelope of the Imperial Courier Corps.

“How did *this* get here?” Brim demanded. I haven’t seen any Royal Dispatch Ships since I arrived.”

“It was delivered about a week ago, Commander,” the clerk explained. “You and the Squadron were out on maneuvers when the ship dropped it off.”

“But a *week* ago?”

“Wasn’t supposed to be delivered until you came to pick it up personally—accompanied by Mister Calhoun. See...,” the clerk said, showing Brim a plastic instruction card.

Nodding thanks, Brim frowned at Calhoun. “I assume you know all about this, don't you?”

"Weel," Calhoun replied with a little smile, "I've ne'er *exactly* seen inside yon envelope, but I probably know a wee of wha's written there." He looked at the clerk. "Is yon a secure room?" he asked, pointing to a door beside the counter.

"Aye, Mister Calhoun," the clerk assured him, "category three at minimum."

"Hie you in there and read the message, young Brim," Calhoun said. "It wull na take you lang. I'll wait here, and afterward we'll be able to talk."

Placing the envelope under his arm, Brim entered the secure room, turned on the lights, and sealed the door, seating himself on a

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hard, straight-backed chair at a bare table. Thoughtfully he touched his right index finger to the plastic envelope's seal, which—after considerable cybernetic musings—approved of his fingerprint and opened in a puff of odorless smoke. With growing excitement, he withdrew a single sheet of light blue plastic, engraved in gold with the Royal Seal of Crown Prince Onrad, heir to the Imperial Throne at Avalon.

The Imperial Palace, Asterious-Avalon, 388/52009

My dear Lt. Commander Brim,

This letter comes to you under Our personal signature as introduction to Baxter Calhoun, not that you should need such after serving with him on I.F.S. *Defiant* during the past hostilities.

First, be aware that Calhoun is no longer a civilian, although he will be most certainly dressed as one when you first encounter him in Bromwich. He is on special assignment, serving in Our Imperial Fleet under Our direct orders with rank of Commodore, I.F. His mission: to thwart the plan of high-handed annexation Nergol Triannic has concocted against the Dominion of Fluvanna, which now involves one of the League's new deep-space fortifications.

Commodore Calhoun has devised an extraordinary plan that requires not only your skills as a Helmsman but also the excellent ships you command. He will personally describe this plan and the role you will play in its early stages. It is Our desire you provide all support within your purview as both Squadron Commandant and citizen of the Empire.

Until you receive further orders from Us personally, Lt. Commander Brim, you will covertly serve under Commodore Calhoun's direct command, although your "official" documents may state otherwise.

Accept, Lt. Commander Brim, the assurances of

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Our highest consideration, etc., etc.

Onrad, Vice Admiral, I.F.,
and Crown Prince to the Throne at Asterious-Avalon

Clipped to the message was a note scrawled in a hand that closely matched Onrad's signature. "Brim," it read,

"I can't imagine what got into me when I agreed to team you two lunatic Carescrians together. See if you can at least stay out of major trouble."

The note was signed, simply, "0."

Slouching in the hard wooden chair, Brim read the dispatch twice more and frowned. Fluvanna—a large domain separated from The Great Federation of Sodeskayan States (GFSS) by the Straits of Remic—supplied Greyffin IV's Empire with nearly eighty percent of its celecoid quartz kernels: the rare crystalline "seeds" from which Drive crystals were manufactured under tremendous temperature and pressure. Well, it wasn't as if he hadn't predicted trouble since long before Nergol Triannic usurped political power in Rogan LaKarn's Torond—at one time the Empire's primary source of the rare, all-important crystals. Eventually, he folded the page in half, touched his thumb to the top right-hand corner, and the message evaporated into thin air.

When Brim exited the room, Calhoun was absorbed in conversation with a gorgeous strawberry blonde stationed behind the message counter. From their eye contact, Brim could see his newly appointed leader was about to chalk up another conquest. The gorgeous woman was Calhoun's sort of luck. She had clearly replaced the chubby, middle-aged clerk who earlier delivered Brim's own message—no doubt as his last act on the shift.

"Brim, mon," Calhoun called over his shoulder, "while you pack your duffel, Miss Phillipotts and I plan to share a spot of lunch, noo. Meet me at the main lobby in, say, two metacycles and I'll drive you to my ship."

"My duffel?" Brim asked. "Your *ship*?..."

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"Aye, laddie," Calhoun said. "Pack enOUGH for a couple o' weeks. We'll be gone at least that lang."

"But a *ship*? *What* ship. *Where*?"

"Oh, one o' mine. I've parked her at an old complex a couple o' c'lenyts yonder. She's ready t' lift soon as we gat there."

"Cal!" Brim protested, "I can't leave just like that. I've got a squadron to command."

Calhoun frowned, whispered a few words to Phillipotts—who smiled delightedly—then strode across the room. "What's troublin' you, young Brim?" he asked.

"My squadron, Cal," Brim answered hotly. "I can't just walk off and leave everybody like that."

"Sez who?" Calhoun demanded with an easy grin. "You mean they're not good enough t' fly off to Bromwich without your services?"

"Well, of course, but..."

"So, ye'll send your First Officer in your place. Are ye under special orders I don't know about, or should I conclude yon comely Tissuard is incompetent in her job as Number One?"

"Neither," Brim said. "It's just that..."

"That wha?" Calhoun insisted. "If it's not secret orders that're holdin' you back, then we'll go right away and replace Ms. Tissuard with someone who can handle her job. After all, most of your people will be on leave much of the time you're absent."

"Oh, dammit, Cal," Brim replied hotly, "Tissuard is a fine officer. It's just that...I don't feel I ought to leave the squadron yet."

"If that's true, young Brim," Calhoun charged, poking a finger into the younger Carescrian's chest, "then *you* are a damned poor commanding officer. What would happen to that squadron of yours if—Universe forbid—you got yourself killed durin' action?"

Brim swallowed hard. Calhoun's point was definitely well taken. He had been running everything since the very beginning. He'd given no one a chance to get along without him.

Calhoun smiled. "Tissuard can take over for a while," he said. "She looks reasonably competent."

"She is," Brim grumped. "*Very* competent."

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"Then it's settled," Calhoun said with a shrug. "Tissuard will take your squadron to Bromwich and we'll meet right here in this lobby"—he consulted his old-fashioned gold timepiece and glanced at the smiling Phillpotts—"Brightness-one and a half. Two metacycles from now. That ought to allow us *both* enough time to conduct our business."

"Oh, good," Brim grouched. "And what am I to tell Tissuard about my return?"

"Tell her you'll be in touch."

"But for how *long*?"

"E'en I don't have an answer to tha'," Calhoun replied. "An' either do you."

"I guess I'll 'be in touch', then," Brim said phlegmatically, and started off toward the door.

"If I'm a wee late," Calhoun called after him, "you'll understand?"

"I'll understand," Brim chuckled with a snort. It was reassuring to know Calhoun at least had *some* priorities straight.

* * *

Nearly three metacycles later, Calhoun strode into the lobby with a lopsided grin. "Sadly," he said, "'tis time for us to be gone from this extraordinary place. I would spend considerable time learning about young Miss Phillpotts."

"The exigencies of the Service" Brim quoted phlegmatically.

"Ah yes, the exigencies," Calhoun said. "Wull, another exigency awaits outside."

"Lead on, Commodore," Brim chuckled, eyeing the magnificent little snow-covered skimmer—a Leaguer Majestat-Baron, model 1600—while his duffel bobbed at his heels. "Where you and I started our lives, waterproof boots were considered first-class surface transportation. Remember?" Carescra was perhaps the most beggarly province of Greyffin IV's Empire.

"True," Calhoun agreed with a wry nod. "A good place to be *from*, Carescra...."

Brim had to agree.

The surface route to Calhoun's starship lay along what once must have been a highly industrialized corridor of the frozen planet. Brim

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hung on to an armrest as the skimmer's tight suspension reacted to Calhoun's urging over a roadway visible only as an indistinct track in the snow. On the Leaguer planet where Majestat-Barons were manufactured, the agile little skimmers normally followed cables built into the roadways. Only export models were rigged for independent steering, and it was clear that even with this modification, they retained much of the control logic that allowed them to navigate more or less on their own. On either side of the snow-covered roadway, they passed half-buried red brick buildings with small windows that reminded Brim of Carescria. "Pick-and-shovel" workers seemed to gravitate toward such housing everywhere in the galaxy.

"First and foremost," Calhoun explained as they bounced across what might have been a narrow intersection, "you must understand one underlyin' fact. Nergol Triannic means to take the dominion o' Fluvanna an' her supply of celecoid quartz Drive crystal seeds as soon as he can. He's e'en buildin' ane o' his new space forts no mare than a few hundred light-years from their capital."

Brim nodded. "Onrad mentioned that in his letter," he replied. "He also said you have a strategy to thwart Triannic's plans."

"O' course I do," Calhoun replied, "as promised." He was following what appeared to be a twisting lane, blithely ignoring a flashing MAXIMUM SAFE SPEED EXCEEDED on the richly finished wood instrument panel. "And I've based the whole plan on legal means, in spite o' the wild stories that circulate about my many enterprises in space."

"I'm all ears," Brim responded with a grin. Calhoun had been prime suspect in a long list of deep-space acts of piracy for years, but the courts never successfully proved the link between him and the crimes. Probably this was due to the peculiar fact that Imperial ships had never fallen victim to the attacks.

"It all has to do with the Mutual Defense Treaty Onrad put in place with Fluvanna a few years ago," Calhoun began as they passed what looked like a huge metal salvage yard, glittering here and there in a rare moment of sunlight. "That scrap of plastic he signed may turn out to be a *most* important document."

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"How so?" Brim asked.

"Wull," Calhoun replied, steering toward a steep up ramp, "the way I see things, that zukeed Triannic's wanted to grab Fluvanna for a considerable time now, long before the Treaty of Garak in the year 52000. He'd have gone right after it once the war was officially suspended. But when Onrad inked his Mutual Defense Treaty, the Leaguers had to take us on first. And after losing the battle of Atalanta, their squadrons war in no condition to do anything like that, even though Fluvanna never had much of a fleet."

Brim nodded grimly while the skimmer arched giddily across a skeletal bridge; hundreds of irals below, a forever-

frozen canal wound toward what might have been a sprawling factory. "I haven't kept up with Fluvanna lately," he said, "but the CIGAs have certainly changed the odds with our Fleet."

"You've got that right, laddie," Calhoun growled, "though we've na lost *all* our teeth just yet. The Tyrant's still proceedin' with a little caution." He winked. "His latest ploy is to set up an 'incident' tha' wull give him a legal excuse to take military action. His CIGAs wull instantly tie up our General Parliament in endless debate aboot retaliation while he invades Fluvanna's capital on Insing-Ordu, and afore we know wha's hit us, we'll hae lost our supply of Drive crystals. Tha' wull put paid to most o' our new warship construction—including your precious Starfuries—an' one day he'll be able to walk into Avalon essentially unopposed."

"Unless we develop some sort of new Drive technology that doesn't depend on celecoid quartz kernels," Brim interjected. They were now astride a grotesque-looking complex of thick glowing transmission conduits suspended from huge spirals that towered at least two hundred irals overhead—clearly still in use. He remembered wondering about the structures from the air. He smiled to himself. A lot more went on under Haefdon's protective snow than met the untrained eye—his and the CIGA's untrained eyes, at least.

"We both know that's a few years away at best," Calhoun retorted. "Too far in the future to have much effect on the short-term events that are starting e'en as we speak. That's why we've got to make certain the Fluvannians can take care o' themselves—as well

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as' yon Leaguer space fort. An we've got to do it *wi'out* our Imperial Fleet.”

Brim frowned, staring apathetically at a long row of weathered storehouses fronting the snow-filled canal. Each was connected to one of the mysterious transmission conduits. “Not an easy task,” he said thoughtfully, “if what I've heard about their fleet is correct.”

“And wha's that?” Calhoun queried.

“It's said they fly some of the oldest starships in the galaxy,” Brim replied. “Real antiques.”

Calhoun pursed his lips. “True eneugh,” he said. “I've seen them—e'en flown in a few. But there's a lot mair to a fleet than tha'. Fluvannian crewmen rate as some o' the most professional StarSailors in the galaxy. An' those auld ships are in excellent repair.”

“Could they stand up to a pack of the League's new Gantheisser light cruisers?” Brim asked, staring at the blur of a high-speed train thundering past in the same direction, gone in clicks as it hurtled above the roadway through the glowing coils of a helical bridge. *Dead planet my foot*, he thought.

“Depends on wha' you mean by 'stand up’,” Calhoun replied after a little thought. “Disruptors are disruptors, after all. The Fluvannians clearly couldn't survive a toe-to-toe sluggin' match wi' a squadron of those new Gantheisser cruisers—or tha' new space fort—especially if the Leaguers came at 'em with a couple squadrons o' astroplanes. But if those Fluvannians decided on suicide, they could inflict a lot of damage afore they were ground into space dust.”

“Ground space dust doesn't stop an invasion fleet,” Brim commented, wondering what Calhoun was leading up to.

“That's true eneugh,” the other allowed. “But Starfuries could.”

“Starfuries?” Brim demanded, turning to Calhoun in surprise. “I don't think I understand.”

“You will directly,” Calhoun assured him with a smile, “because Starfuries are a major part of m' plan.”

“Cal,” Brim said with a frown, “I'm all ears—I think.”

“Simplest thing you could think of,” Calhoun explained, “an' it even makes a bit of business sense. We'll simply transfer the ships in

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your squadron to the Fluvannian Nabob along with the remainder of the Starfury 1a production run. That'll give them forty-eight first-line astroplanes and a couple o' spares, three full squadrons. In return, Fluvanna wull send their entire production of celecoid quartz kernels to the Empire. Tha' way, they can defend themselves wi' the same ships we wad, and the xaxtdamned CIGAs won't hae onything to say about it."

"My Starfuries?" Brim whooped. "Did you say, 'Give away' *my...*"

"Calmly, calmly, young Brim," Calhoun interrupted. "We're only talkin' theory right now."

"Somehow," Brim said with great suspicion, "your 'theory' doesn't sound all that theoretical right now."

"Trust me," Calhoun said.

"That's what's got me worried," Brim replied. "I *do* trust you."

"I war afraid of tha'," Calhoun mumbled, mostly to himself. "Well, for the nonce, at least do me the favor of checking out my plans, whether or not ye approve of em."

"Okay," Brim said with a shrug—Calhoun was, after all, his commanding officer. "Shoot."

"Aside from any personal problems ye maun have wi' things, what troubles do ye think we'll have transferrin' the Starfuries in the first place?"

"Well, right out of the box," Brim began, "Starfuries are the most restricted ships in the Empire. Even if Prince Onrad could get the sale approved somehow, the Bears at Krasni-Peych would never consent. The reflecting Drive is their latest technology."

"I didn't say onythin' about a sale, young Brim," Calhoun chuckled. "What I mean to do is *lease* the ships to Fluvanna."

"All right," Brim allowed. "Maybe you could get some sort of leasing arrangement past the Bears, but who would man those ships? Damned near half the systems aboard are classified, with a NO FOREIGN NATIONALS caveat. Even our closest allies are barred from the Drive chambers and the control systems."

Calhoun smiled as he urged the little skimmer around a fast-moving lorry that seemed to appear from nowhere. "Well, there you

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are," he said, cutting back in front of the lumbering vehicle and careening onto what might pass as an exit ramp. "You already know who would man them, then. Who else but Imperial crews?"

"Cal," Brim objected, "you know better than that. The Imperial Fleet Oath strictly forbids us from anything like—"

"True enow," Calhoun interrupted. "But if those crews weren't *in* the Fleet anymore, they simply wadn't ha' tha' problem, noo, wad they?"

Brim considered that for a moment, then gasped. "Are you suggesting everyone simply resigns?"

"Not permanently," Calhoun answered. "Only lang enough to do a wee bit of fightin'—*defendin'*, that is."

The skimmer was now speeding along the perimeter of a small maintenance facility Brim had often spotted from the air. Its single gravity pool had always been empty...before. "Voot's beard," he growled, "whoever heard of a temporary resignation? The CIGAs would love it. They'd never let us in again."

"How about if Greyffin IV himself guaranteed your return?"

"Greyffin IV? He knows about this?"

"To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure," Calhoun admitted, "but Onrad does, as ye well know."

Brim considered *that* while they pulled to a hover beside a large gravity pool. He'd only regained his long-revoked commission in the Imperial Fleet a year previously, and many of his civilian-life recollections weren't all that comfortable. "I'm not sure anything less than an Imperial guarantee would be acceptable anywhere," he concluded at length. "I know I'd certainly have a hard time with it."

"I think I understand," Calhoun said. "I hae pretty strong feelin's myself." He put his hand gently on Brim's shoulder. "When the time comes, if our plan's right, we'll hae little trouble gettin' Greyffin to back us. Wha's important noo is to start the groundwork in Avalon. We're a lang way from settin' course for Fluvanna."

Brim climbed out of the skimmer; for once, it wasn't snowing, but the clear air was bitter cold. He glanced up at a large starship floating on the pool, its ebony hullmetal coated stunning white. A curious red circle glimmered just aft of its bridge Hyperscreens,

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enclosing what could only be an old-fashioned blue hat folded into a "tricorn" shape, similar to the ones Brim had seen in A'zurn. "You said something about heading for Asterious-Avalon?" he asked, dialing more heat into his Fleet Cloak.

"Avalon it is, young Brim," Calhoun replied over the roar of the pool's repulsion generators. "An' welcome to my yacht, S.S. *Patriot*."

Halfway along a short stairway to the pool's rim, Brim shaded his eyes and took in the angular lines of Calhoun's "yacht." A curious craft; with her trilon-shaped hull, she looked more like someone's idea of a very fast attack vessel than someone's expensive toy. And she mounted no disruptors, of course. *Visible ones, at any rate*, Brim considered with a smile.

"What do you think o' her?" Calhoun shouted proudly. The repulsion generators were even louder here.

"Impressive," Brim called out for lack of a better word. He guessed she was in the neighborhood of 500 irals long with a beam of perhaps 250, and by the size of the four Drive outlets in her squared-off stern, she was probably powered by Admiralty HyperDrives of some sort. "Where'd you find her?" he asked as a cloud of vapor hissed noisily from a vent a few c'lenyts aft. "She's got Imperial lines right out of the last war, but I've never seen anything like her."

Calhoun smiled proudly. "That's because I own the only three e'er built," he explained, passing Brim onto the brow with a wave of his hand.

The moment Brim's foot touched the runners, a trio of white-cloaked StarSailors at the top snapped to attention. Each was armed with a large blaster holstered on his hip.

"And you're right about the era," Calhoun continued as they moved out across the brow, breath passing in clouds of white. "They're prototypes o' fast attack ships that were to be built at Arret, on the other side of Eastleigh-Rhodor. Your Medical Officer, Penelope Hesternal, hails from there. They make damme fine deep-space cruisers, they do. But after the Treaty of Garak, there wasn't all that much demand for new warships, at least on our side. And then the CIGAs declared 'em surplus. Tha's when I got 'em. Bought all

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three hulls as scrap metal." He stopped at the entry port and gazed up at the wide line of Hyperscreens fronting the bridge. The angle at which they were set gave a brooding look to the ship, like some great spaceborne creature of prey. "They'd removed all the weapons and propulsion systems, but they were scrappin' so many ships at the time I had no trouble replacin' onything."

As they approached the entry port, two of the sentries snapped to an Imperial Fleet salute and held it while the third blew two shrill notes from a tiny silver whistle. At that moment, a fourth white-uniformed crewmember appeared inside the large airlock. Even a long way off, she was stunning.

"At ease," Calhoun said, standing aside while Brim stepped over the coaming. As he passed, the woman saluted, in a most military fashion.

Instinctively, Brim returned her salute, upon which she met his surprised gaze with a most charming smile. She was tall and slim with high cheekbones; a sharp, attractive nose; soft eyes; and legs that seemed to go on forever. Her black, shoulder-length hair was cut in severely coiffured bangs, and she wore two full gold stripes on the cuffs of her white cloak: a Lieutenant Commander of some sort, Brim guessed. And try as he might to maintain a professional attitude toward her, she was simply *beautiful*.

"Make you feel at home?" Calhoun chuckled proudly.

"Especially the white Fleet Cloaks," Brim equivocated, struggling to dismiss the seductive woman who still held his glance. "Almost as if I'd never left my Starfury."

"Lieutenant Commander Brim, meet Lieutenant Commander Cartier," Calhoun stated perfunctorily, indicating the woman with his hand. "She's *Patriot's* Executive officer."

"Eve Cartier," the woman said, extending her hand. "An' it's quite a pleasure to meet you." Her face colored for a moment. "I've heard much about you from the Governor."

"Any of it good?" Brim asked.

"A wee," she said in a soft voice.

"Number One," Calhoun interrupted, "I'm on my way to the bridge. Show the Commander to a stateroom so he can stow his gear,

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then bring him along as soon as possible. I'll hae the skipper begin his start-up checklists the moment I get there."

"Aye, Governor," Cartier said. "But you'll find the checklists done; *Patriot's* ready for liftoff on a moment's notice. All we need are your orders."

"How about that for a seasoned crew?" Calhoun asked, starting toward the far end of the airlock.

Brim nodded. Clearly, Calhoun had established a little Carescrian Admiralty, with himself as First Lord.

As the older Carescrian passed *Patriot's* builder's plaque he stopped to polish it with his sleeve. "A wee trick I learned from a mutual friend," he called over his shoulder to Brim. Then he disappeared into a companionway.

* * *

Only cycles after Brim stowed his duffel in the most luxurious stateroom he'd ever encountered, he followed Cartier onto *Patriot's* roomy bridge. It was laid out in the standard warship manner with twelve rows of consoles split along the ship's centerline by a wide aisle, the two most forward consoles for the Helmsman and Co-helmsman respectively. Through a tremendous expanse of Hyperscreens that wrapped completely around the bridge, Brim could see nearly the whole upper deck. "Nice view," he whispered to no one in particular.

"Nice view indeed," Cartier replied. "And you, Commander, are one o' the *very* few individuals who hae e'er been up here to see it, except for the flight crews an' a few close friends, o' course." She smiled. "Greyffin IV was here for a wee flight, and Prince Onrad's been wi' us on numerous occasions. Regula Collingswood's been here, too—she an' Admiral Plutron."

Brim nodded, peering out the forward Hyperscreens at two circular plates expertly fitted into the centerline of the forward deck. Each was perhaps thirty-five irals in diameter. Two more occupied the aft corners of the triangular hull. "How long does it take to remount the turrets?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Something less than three Standard Days—at the Governor's private facilities in Rhodor," Cartier answered as if it were common

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knowledge. "That includes the twa' twin-mounts by noo you've guessed we can carry ventrally." She laughed quietly. "'Tis why few outsiders ever get a glimpse o' the ship from her bridge."

No need for comment on that, Brim thought. A powerful warship like this in private hands would be enough to unnerve nearly any politician. Three could cause absolute panic! He grinned as he caught sight of Calhoun seated at one of two raised stations behind the Helmsmans' positions. He was staring intensely at his console and uttering short phrases from time to time. By the multitude of glimmering rings diffusing outward from *Patriot's* high KA'PPA mast, Brim guessed "The Governor" was making up for time he'd lost playing chauffeur during the morning.

At that moment, a tall, aristocratic man strode onto the bridge, took one look at Brim, and thrust out his hand. He had three stripes on the cuffs of his white Fleet Cloak. "Aha, 'tis you, young Brim—finally. We've been a long time in meetin', but I used to watch you flyin' ore barges years ago in Carescra. I knew your family afore they were killed in the war."

"Universe," Brim said, shaking the man's hand. "That's a few Standard Years ago."

"Don't I know," the man agreed, rolling his eyes.

"Probably I ought to introduce the twa' o' you afore you've become auld friends," Cartier laughed. "Captain Melbourne Byron; Lieutenant Commander Wilf Brim."

"*Byron*," Brim said, testing the name with his mind. "That does sound familiar, but..."

"I wadn't expect you'd remember," Byron said with a chuckle. "'Tis been a number of years noo, and you war' in a mighty big hurry to get on wi' your life."

"You've been with Calhoun long?" Brim asked.

"A wee," Byron replied, his eyes momentarily peering far into the past. "Since his first ship." He smiled. "Which reminds me I'd best gat to my console. The Governor is anxious to be under way. We'll talk further ower a cup o' cvceese' once we're spaceborne."

"I'll look forward to it," Brim said. He turned to Cartier. "Guess I'd better find myself a place to sit," he said. "I take it the jump seats

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are over there along the starboard 'screens."

"They are," Cartier answered with a look of surprise, "but nae ane's sittin' there this trip, at least to my knowledge."

"What do you mean 'no one'?" Brim asked with a grin. "I'm someone, aren't I?"

"Well, o' course you are," Cartier said with a raised eyebrow.

"But..." Then she frowned. "Wait a cycle. I'll bet the Governor ne'er told you, did he?"

"Told me what?"

She laughed. "That you're to replace him at the Co-helmsman's console. Beside Captain Byron."

At that moment, Calhoun swung himself out of his console and strode toward them along the main aisle. "Come on forrard, Brim," he said with a grin. "This trip, I've nae time for gawkin' thro' the Hyperscreens. An office is a better place to prepare for sellin' m' plan. Besides," he added, clapping Brim on the shoulder, "I've been told you'd ne'er believe we war off the ground if you didn't watch the takeoff. So I thought I'd make things easy on you." Before Brim could answer, he was through the hatch and clattering down the companionway.

"I was wrong," Cartier chuckled. "He did tell you, after all."

"When you *said* it, you were correct," Brim mumbled, shaking his head.

"All hands to stations for lift-off!" piped over the blower.

"All hands to stations for lift-off!"

Within fifteen cycles, they were headed for deep space.

* * *

Scant metacycles later, Brim watched Byron lay *Patriot* through heavy traffic for a perfect landing on an autumnal Lake Mersin just off Avalon's sprawling Grand Terminal: civilian gateway to a thousand-odd civilizations scattered throughout the galaxy—and beyond. It was less than a week from the turn of the year, and the town was aglow in holiday decorations. Swinging off toward shore, they followed three gleaming liners and an old tramp into the prodigious mooring basin of bustling canals, fanciful bridges, gravity pools, reactors, and towering goods houses surrounding the terminal,

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all connected by fleets of high-speed pool trams that made the mammoth complex feasible.

Under a high overcast, the sky was never without starships of one sort or another coming and going in all directions at altitudes. War might be looming throughout the galaxy, Brim considered, but the interlocking gears of commerce still managed to turn and mesh as if little were amiss, especially at this time of year. Trade was the very lifeblood of civilization; when it stopped, whole dominions died, as had nameless thousands during the long march of history.

General Harry Drummond of the Imperial Army met them at the terminal. Brim had first encountered the man during the Mitchell Trophy races on Tarrott, capital city of The League on the planet Uadn'aps-Dahlem. An enigmatic character who appeared to rove at necessary among all Imperial Services—including the prestigious Foreign Diplomatic Corps—Drummond often exercised extraordinary prerogative and clearly served someone with tremendous political power as a military wild card. Small and perfectly tailored in the tan and red uniform of Greyffin IV's Imperial Expeditionary Forces, he had a long narrow face, a prominent nose, and laughing eyes with an irrepressible natural humor. "Cal, you old reprobate, Commander Brim," he exclaimed, shaking their hands, "it's good you have come. The time is ripe."

"I kind o' thought so, Harry," Calhoun replied. Then he looked the General over critically. "An' you haen't luiked so good in years. You must be takin' care o' yourself."

"No more than usual," Drummond replied with a smile. "Maybe it's that plan of yours that gives me a bit more hope these days, Cal. You know, those xaxtdamned CIGAs have made it pretty rough on those of us who stayed loyal to the Fleet."

Calhoun grinned. "Tell that to my friend Brim here," he said. "He knows."

Drummond nodded at Brim. "I've heard."

"I *also* understand you hae a most attractive chauffeur, General," Calhoun continued.

"My chauffeur?" Drummond demanded, his cheeks reddening slightly. "Why," he blustered, "I suppose I hadn't noticed."

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Calhoun grinned. "Weel, I consider myself to be an *extraordinary* noticer. An' my sources say she's really somethin'," he pronounced, snapping his fingers to summon his traveling case. "Maybe Brim and I ought to hae a luik at her. That way, we can make a mair honest judgment. What do you think, Wilf?"

"Sounds like a great idea to me, Commodore," Brim agreed.

"Absolutely," Calhoun mused. "An' while we do that, we'll let her drop us off at our hotel, killin' twa' birdies with ane stone. How about it, General?"

"Unfortunately, you'll have to wait till morning for her," Drummond chuckled. "I decided I'd drive you to your hotel myself this afternoon." Then he winked. "But yes," he grumped, his cheeks coloring, "she *is* a knockout. You'll see in the morning." With that, he led the two Carescrians through the huge terminal to a skimmer parking lot.

* * *

Next morning, Brim regretfully climbed from his luxurious hotel bed and stretched agreeably. Tiny bunks in astroplanes were never more than just bunks—built more for durability and weight saving than comfort. After a quick shower, he dressed in the living room while scanning the media channels for news. Nergol Triannic and Grand Baron Rogan LaKarn of The Torond had just issued a joint warning to Fluvanna concerning use of her warships in the Grompton Corridor, a narrow strait separating Fluvanna from two small Leaguer protectorates of Lamintir and Gannat. The fact that the strait had been patrolled at the expense of the thrifty Fluvannian government for nearly five hundred years clearly meant little to Gorton Ro'arn, Triannic's Minister of State Security. It was no surprise to Brim, who had personally encountered the man years before during a Mitchell Trophy race. Even then, Ro'arn appeared to be a most pragmatic politician.

Elsewhere, CIGAs were manning twelve disparate, anti-Fleet demonstrations throughout the Empire. Two of the larger gatherings were being kicked off simultaneously in Avalon at that very metacycle; one would take place before the gates of the Imperial palace; the other at the Admiralty in Locarno Square. Both would be

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vociferant protests against Onrad's order for Starfury production. Brim grinned in spite of himself as he made his way to the lobby. If nothing else, the demonstrations proved the Leaguers felt they had little to counter Sherrington's new astroplanes...

"Mornin', young man," Calhoun said, proffering a disposable mug of steaming cvceese' as Brim exited the elevator. "Thought this might come in handy."

"And how," Brim said appreciatively, sipping the hot, sticky-sweet liquid. Somehow, cvceese' seemed to go hand-in-hand with creature comforts.

Outside, a chill rain began to spit just before Drummond's big limousine pulled up to the curb. Brim knew better than to hope the weather would dampen the CIGAs' enthusiasm for their demonstrations. Zealots thrived on bad weather, it seemed. Happily, so did Felicity, Drummond's chauffeur: Long blond hair, a profile that would gladden the heart of a pin-up artist, keen blue eyes, full lips, and a captivating smile. When she held the door, her wink told Brim all he needed to know. Good for Drummond!

The rain continued without letup all the way across town, along with a brisk wind that littered the streets with a rainbow of fallen leaves. As the limousine glided across a second ruby arch spanning the Grand Achtite Canal, two humpbacked tugs below were dragging a long string of barges toward Lake Mersin, presumably for transshipment to some remote part in the galaxy. Farther on, past the great domed tower of Marva, only a few damp-looking tourists had gathered in the Palazzo Edrington to look up at the Desterro Monument with its colossal spiral of sculpted flame. It was the kind of morning when sensible people avoided the out-of-doors at all costs; tourists simply didn't fit that category.

Nor CIGAs! Outside the Imperial palace, Courtland Plaza was a seething mass of malcontents marching around the Savoin gravity fountain and its onyx reflecting pool. Most carried the costly holographic placards that characterized all CIGA gatherings.

OLD MEN DECLARE WARS;
YOUTHS FIGHT THEM.

Bill Baldwin

STOP THE ADMIRALS!

PONDER GALACTIC PEACE!

A WAR WORTH WAGING:
CLOSE THE ADMIRALTY,
ONCE AND FOR ALL!

The marchers were sheltered by bobbing shoals of hovering, multicolored umbrellas struggling to keep station against the wind. Brim nodded to himself as the limousine slowed to a crawl in the narrow lane that remained open to traffic. Puvis Amherst needed extravagant resources to imprint pretentious posters like that, especially since they were supplied to CIGAs all over the Empire. He also needed considerable credits to pay for the large brass band that had set up in front of the guard station in a position unquestionably calculated to produce the most difficulty for Avalon's Peace Officers.

PEACE IS MADE BY THE HEARTS OF MEN,
NOT WARSHIPS!
STOP THE STARFURIES!

"Leaguer money," Drummond growled as rain streaked the windows. "Triannic knows just where to put his credits. Voot's beard, the Feet itself couldn't make that much trouble in Tarrott."

EVEN FREEDOM MAY BE PURCHASED AT TOO HIGH A
PRICE!
NO STARFURIES!

"Or what's left of the Fleet," Calhoun laughed wryly. "Just look at those zukeeds. I'd like to see a bunch of Leaguers try something like this outside Triannic's palace."

PEACE WON BY COMPROMISE OF PRINCIPLES IS SHORT-
LIVED.

The Mercenaries

STOP ONRAD! STOP THE STARFURIES!

"Oh, they could *try*," Drummond put in. "They'd simply be jailed for their pains."

"Or shot," Calhoun snorted.

Brim peered into the crowd, concentrating on individuals here and there. They all looked familiar by now; ordinary CIGAs exhibited a certain conformity. Most were elegantly costumed, except those who favored the currently fashionable simulated tatters known among the modish as "poverty chic." All but a few appeared to be well fed, too; in fact, a significant number were overly so. They marched in little bunches, seldom more than three or four to a group, and only a few had the look of *bona fide* zealots. Soft-looking innocents; most were babbling and laughing impulsively—well nigh nervously—as if out for some shady childhood lark. Doubtless, few had fought to protect the privileges they enjoyed. Certainly their leader had done no fighting during the last war. Puvis Amherst was one of the most craven individuals Brim had ever encountered. Until his father—Admiral Amherst—was able to extract him from blockade duty aboard I.F.S. *Truculent*, the man had spent most of his time cowering in any available hiding place.

From time to time, the marching CIGAs made furtive glances at a thin line of determined-looking men and women who marched in an opposite direction, surrounding the whole demonstration area. Hardened individuals these were, dressed in ordinary clothing—some wearing portions of old Fleet uniforms from the last war. They carried hand-lettered, amateurish placards of a much different type.

WHY IS IT NOBODY LISTENS
WHEN HISTORY REPEATS
ITSELF?
REMEMBER ATALANTA!

KEEP OUR FREEDOMS SAFE.
BACK PRINCE ONRAD!
BUILD STARFURIES!

Bill Baldwin

DON'T SELL OUR CHILDREN
INTO TRIANNIC'S SLAVERY!
DOWN WITH CIGA TRAITORS!

"Glad to see those," Brim remarked, nodding through the window.

Drummond nodded. "Aren't we all?" he growled. "They've only just started to show up at these affairs." He shrugged. "It's taken a long time for the CIGAs to coerce people like this into acting, but some of our citizens are finally waking up to what's going on. There'll be others. In the end, nobody really wants to lose his freedom."

Continuing on, they passed Avalon's imposing Admiralty building where a second CIGA demonstration had traffic in Locarno Square tied in knots. Here again, fifteen, perhaps twenty, counter-demonstrators were carrying pro-Fleet placards.

WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE MISSION.
BACK THE FLEET!

BUILD STARFURIES!
IN DEFENSE OF OUR EMPIRE,
THERE CAN BE NO SECOND BEST!

COURAGE AND STARFURIES:
THE FLEET TEAM!

Brim smiled dourly. There weren't many of them, certainly not in comparison to the thousand-odd CIGAs who had shown up for the main demonstration. But everything had to start somewhere. The very fact even a small segment of this peaceful population was now sufficiently aroused to take definitive and visible action in the face of overwhelming odds said a lot about the state of the Empire.

* * *

Once in the historic Beardmore Section—as always abounding in reconstruction scaffolding and derricks—Felicity slowed at two

The Mercenaries

heroic marble statues of Cerenian asteroid wizards sculpted in the classical Barrett technique; turned onto ancient, tree-lined Gregory Street; and pulled to the curb before a half square of fusty old office buildings done in the flamboyant style of a bygone age. The rainy gloom made them look gray and tired, their gallant colonnades and statues out of place in these shameful days of CIGA-induced privation within the Fleet. Brim recognized the structures instantly: the old Admiralty Annex buildings. If they could only speak!

The three climbed the massive front staircase while their hovering umbrellas dodged this way and that in plucky (but ineffective) struggles to outguess the chancy air currents set up by the huge stone edifice before them. With cold rain dripping from his nose, Brim returned a salute by four imperious-looking guards at the portico, then followed his two companions across a sculpted colonnade, through an automatic door, and into a lofty room encircled by five levels of balconies. Far overhead, a vaulted ceiling holographically depicted cavalcades of historic starships that soared off toward destinations so far removed in time some now existed only in memory.

Brim recognized many of the famous vessels at a glance: Graceful I.F.S. *Valorous*, the renowned battlecruiser that cleared the Lorandal Cluster of space pirates for the first time in recorded history; S.S. *Pericole Enterprise*, a plucky little freighter that ran the deadly Qu'oodal blockade thirty times; even little I.F.S. *Idrovolante*, a classic example of Mario Castoldi's fine hand that to this very day held the speed record for starships powered by old-fashioned Agello Drive systems.

"Hey, Wilf," Drummond called out with a guffaw. "That's a great way to trip over your feet or run into a wall!"

"Oh, right," Brim said, feeling his cheeks burn as he lowered his gaze. "I always was an easy mark for antique starships."

"Makes sense," Drummond chuckled. "Who else would the Admiralty put in charge of their newest Fleet iron?"

At the elevator lobby, a frosted-glass partition slid back and two pairs of eyes scrutinized each of the three before they passed into the lifts. On the seventh floor, they were stopped again, this time by

Bill Baldwin

three marines checking fingerprints and retinal images. At last, they passed into a high-ceilinged hall whose length was clearly designed to foil intruders. The guard at the far end would have ample time to activate whatever safety devices he deemed necessary before potential threats could move from one end to another. A truly ancient device, Brim considered with a smile. But effective for all that.

Once past that guard station, he found himself in a large, rectangular room like all the others he had seen in the complex over the years: row upon row of workstations, quietly humming electrical equipment, the occasional clatter of switches and keystrokes, a muffled cough or the creaking of a chair. The air was filled with odors from hot electrical equipment, over-warmed cvceese', whiffets of perfume, Hogge'Poa smoke (indicating Bears somewhere in the area), and an all-pervading odor of mustiness from the ancient building itself. Brim's sense of history even imagined the brittle redolence of paper, though that primordial substance had been available only in museums for more than five hundred years.

"In here," Drummond said, keying open the door to a side office with his Holobadge.

Brim found himself mildly shocked as he entered. Unlike the other offices he'd seen, this room was bright and airy. Tall windows with ornately rounded tops and high ceilings completely dwarfed both desks and a huge conference table that dominated the room. The latter had been carefully lined with decanters, ready for whatever libations accrued to various Admiralty dignitaries who would be briefed in the office.

"Executive office," Drummond explained to Brim's raised eyebrows. "It's also one of the best briefing rooms in the complex. I'll demonstrate soon as you've had a chance to look around. You'll want to know what the Leaguers are coming up with to counter your Starfuries."

Calhoun nodded. "Aye," he said. "We'll need to know that, all right." He looked around the room appreciatively, then frowned and peered over the top of his eyeglasses. "I assume you won't hae time to personally escort us in and out for the next couple of weeks," he added.

The Mercenaries

"Your IDs ought to be here within the metacycle," Drummond countered. "I've got to get *some* Army work done, after all." He nodded toward the door. "Just so you don't get too homesick for deep space, you'll find the office cvceese' brewer behind the panel outside with the usual tin for credits. There are reasonably clean mugs on the shelf. Standard rules: When you're done here, leave things the way you found 'em."

"The place is secure?" Calhoun asked.

"Electronically as perfect as we can make it. Actually, it's secure as the Bears can make it. Xaxtdamn CIGAs have the same equipment we do, but the Sodeskayans...well...they have a few extra tricks up their sleeves, so they sweep the room. It's clean."

"How about the people outside?" Brim asked.

Drummond thought about that for a moment. "Most of them have higher clearances than either of you," he said. Then he frowned and pointed a finger at Brim. "What's the most reliable way you know of to tell a CIGA from an ordinary StarSailor?" he demanded without warning.

Startled, Brim frowned. "I don't know, General," he said, rubbing his chin. "Unless I have some personal knowledge, or a tip from somebody I trust, there's no reliable way I can tell—at least until someone does something overt."

"That's the point, Wilf," Drummond answered with a serious look. "We can't, either. That's why we've got a good door, a good lock, and Bears who do a daily sweep. Most of the *real* security will be up to you Fleet types." Then he glanced through the door. "You're lucky, though. Cal sent us one of your old shipmates about a month ago. He's had most of the duty setting up an office here and working with the Bears."

Brim noticed Calhoun break into a wide smile. "He'll also be your new Master Chief Petty Officer when you get back to your squadron," he added with a wink. "Come in, Chief, while I help brother Drummond set up his League briefing."

"Aye, aye, Commodore," an oddly familiar voice replied from the hall.

Bill Baldwin

Suddenly Brim caught his breath as a tall, powerfully built figure strode into the room. "Barbousse!" he shouted, a wide grin breaking across his face. "Utrillo Barbousse!"

As the ravaged postwar Imperial Fleet stands helpless, nearby worlds fall to the League of Dark Stars. Commanding a squadron of Starfuries, Wilf Brim sets course to save the star kingdom of Fluvanna. If he fails, the Empire is doomed.

The Mercenaries

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