

RIGHTEOUS REIGN



T.J. MACDONALD

Righteous Reign

by

T. J. MacDonald

©Copyright 2016 Tom MacDonald
all rights reserved.

Righteous Reign is purely a work of Fiction. Any resemblance or similarity to persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Dedication: To Tanis who put up with so much while I completed this work.

Table of Contents

[Forward](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter 1 Turning Point](#)

[Chapter 2 Old Tom](#)

[Chapter 3 The OESA](#)

[Chapter 4 Rigil](#)

[Chapter 5 The Promotion!](#)

[Chapter 6 Bryant](#)

[Chapter 7 Bryant and Boots](#)

[Chapter 8 Drums of War](#)

[Chapter 9 Expansion!!](#)

[Chapter 10 Justice](#)

[Chapter 11 Mobile Fifth Command](#)

[Chapter 12 The Spiel?](#)

[Chapter 13 The Fifth RAC Forever](#)

[Chapter 14 On My Way to The Top](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter 15 The Loki Step](#)

[Chapter 16 Clean Up this Mess](#)

[Chapter 17 The Conspiracy](#)

[Chapter 18 Opened for Business](#)

[Chapter 19 Manipulations](#)

[Chapter 20 A New Beginning](#)

[End](#)

Forward

There are four hundred ninety-two billion, four hundred twenty-one million, three hundred eighty-six thousand, seven hundred twenty-eight citizens within the sovereign territories of the democratic government I work for. And, of all those people, I am the one in the best position to access any information; no matter how secret or sensitive. That makes me the best person to tell this story.

It is the story of George Bryant; probably, the greatest man to live, in my lifetime. It tells of his adventures, successes and love. It also tells the story of his absolute loyalty to his love, his subordinates, his government and his Emperor. It describes his "Royal" wedding; and two others celebrated similarly in a ten-year span.

George's story is one of leadership. Though a man of deep feelings, strong convictions and impeccable ethics, he is also a tactical genius capable of leading wars waged on a massive scale. He'll do anything to defend the people and institutions he cares about.

Within his story are several others, including my own - we are interwoven. In one way or another, we all owe George for the success we have achieved on his coattails. And, through it all, are the stories of a conflicted Emperor and the determined, "Old Tom", who helped established this great sovereignty; and became one of its legendary heroes.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General

Part One
Chapter 1 Turning Point
Tuesday July 10, 2255

"Politics is the skilled use of blunt objects". Lester B. Pearson Canadian Prime Minister

Life aboard any military vessel is never easy. However, it can be challenging, rewarding and downright pleasurable, at times. Officers and crew face navigational hurdles, confined spaces, Mother Nature's anger and sudden perilous encounters. On the other hand, we get to assist others; to be ambassadors; to be explorers and pioneers; and, to enjoy the camaraderie aboard ship.

I am just about to engage in my third meeting of the day. It's a training meeting that follows a two-hour mission debriefing and a staff meeting, I chaired earlier in the day. The first involved all the department heads under my command. The second included my Exec and the other three shift commanders. Meetings like those first two are magnificent opportunities for junior officers to extend their experience at command. Someone has to run the ship, while we're all occupied. Overall, it's been a very long day. After rising, dressing and eating, I spent a couple of hours managing administrative chores. Then, I finished my six hours as the bridge watch commander; a boring job considering, we are just orbiting Rho Corona Three.

Orbiting any planetary body is a sobering experience; changing with your perspective. When you arrive at a system many planets, close to its star, are not even visible, to you; or are little points of light, in the distance. As you approach, the planet grows on your screens and in the viewing windows. When you finally park in orbit, it appears as a colossal object that diminishes your vessel to the absolute minimum. The Shenzhen is just a mosquito on the back of an elephant. And, when it occurs to you that; the planet is a tiny speck in the totality of the universe; you can feel meaningless, for a moment... Until, you realize that; you are one of very few species that use this space-scape for a playground.

The earlier debriefing concerned a mission that started out, six days ago, resembling a captain's ghastliest nightmare. We'd been intercepted by a communications drone from Rho Corona Borealis, a system a little over eleven light years from 14 Hercules; which we've been patrolling. The communiqué stressed that the Encalle tribe had turned a political disagreement into an out and out civil war; employing terrorist tactics to achieve advantage. The Encalle

political view is grounded in ancient religious beliefs. Rho Corona Three had a deep tribal heritage; but, had long since become a technological, space-faring planet. The planetary government expressed their unqualified fear that; they were about to lose control; and illustrated some of the barbarism that was being inflicted on the population.

Nine generations ago, the Empire I serve ratified a Constitution guaranteeing its citizens generous rights. The one notable absence is the right to religious freedom. That Constitution included the means for new colonies to gain admittance to the Empire. Once in the group, it forbade separation from it. Enshrined in the document is also a clause dealing with treason and the use of terrorism as a means of waging war against the Empire. The punishment for treason is as specified in supporting legislation. However, civil disobedience, civil war and other treasonous acts shown to be terrorist in nature are dealt with by sterilizing the affected planet of its infection. OESA regulations specify how a ship's captain is to fulfill his obligations under the Constitution.

As captain of the ESS Shenzhen, I would first have to corroborate there was a legitimate threat. Then, I would have to document that the threat was terrorist in nature. This step, in itself, requires deployment of a considerable intelligence operation, to the planet, to gather accurate, real time, objective information. Once this phase meets the specifications outlined in OESA regulations, I am required to obtain Flag Level approval; and completely eradicate the threat. I have to admit that this is the one responsibility I have that truly terrifies me. The only buffer for me is that, such a decision must be supported by a Flag or General Officer of Level eight, or greater. But, for all intents and purposes, we are a blunt object wielded to defend and protect the constitution of the Empire.

In this case, I was very fortunate, in that, preliminary intelligence reports indicated this was a very extensive uprising. Thousands of Encalle had snatched vast swaths of territory and were deploying terrorist networks throughout the planet. Though the ship is capable of bombarding the offenders into submission, it requires land forces to ensure successful completion of this type of mission. Such an expansive operation could require more than five thousand ground troops. And, that's not to mention the intelligence body I would need to land, first; to acquire the level of detailed information I need to meet the requirements to gain approval. This means the deployment of a full fleet to the scene, since the Shenzhen only carries fifty Marines and a fleet possesses a division of over eight thousand supporting troops and all their command structures.

The Shenzhen is part of Ninth Theatre Command which is attached to Fifth Mobile RAC Command. Fifth Mobile directs over twenty percent of all OESA forces. The Ninth and Tenth Theatre Commands each with eight fleets are within Fifth Mobile's jurisdiction. In addition, those theatre operations each have twelve frigates unattached to any fleet. The Shenzhen is one of those autonomous frigates. So, when I have to seek help, I send a communication to my boss, Admiral Stephen Nichols, commander of Theatre Nine. Communications' drones were used to take digital messages to their recipient, until 2249; but now, a communications assembly uses a Casimir Emitter to open a wormhole and transmit and receive messages through it on laser beams. I copy Admiral George Bryant at Fifth Mobile. Nearly three hours later, I receive notice from Nichols that the Virgo Fleet has been dispatched, from its current patrol at 69 Virgo by Theatre Five Command; which is the permanent regional headquarters. I turned over all my intelligence reports and handed over command of the operation to Vice Admiral Shagotha, when she arrived in command of the Virgo Fleet, three and a half days later.

.....

I don't have all the particulars; because, I was not in overall command of the operation; but I can tell you that, three different regions totaling more than four hundred and fifty square kilometers were rendered temporarily unusable and uninhabitable by bombardment from orbit by the Virgo Fleet and the Shenzhen. I watched the "Gods Rods" we dropped; tracing smoky trails; as, they streaked through the atmosphere; with, very little reduction in their acceleration rate; because of, their extremely sleek shape; and never burning up; due to the heat resistant tungsten that, jacketed the entire six-ton exhausted uranium body. Exhausted uranium is pure processed uranium ore, where the concentration of fissile material has been depleted by processing, to less than two-one-thousands of a percentage point, by mass – far less than background radiation on most planets. Only in the last half century have, we been able to reach that level of refinement. Each projectile struck with a force of between fifteen and twenty kilotons of TNT; generating a shockwave and mushroom cloud like a small nuclear weapon. And, each had incredible penetrating capacity; bestowed on them by their kinetic force and needle-like characteristics. In less than a year, life would begin to return to these substantial craters; some big enough to form small lakes. The rods left little or no residual radiation.

Nearly twenty-five thousand enemy combatants were exterminated, in those showers of death. All offensive medium and heavy enemy hardware in the three major locations and seven

remote regions were destroyed. As these battles progressed, ground intelligence, attached to planetary forces, and embedded OESA security detachments around the planet pinpointed terrorist network cells; as, they began to move to inflict retribution throughout the civilian population. Some “Spears of Fear” were fired on those targets. The spears are discharged at high velocity from the muzzles of railguns; and, are like scaled-down versions of the Rods but, with fins. That is because, they are a “Smart Weapon” with a control system that can direct them through a gaseous environment, to a target, with nearly pin-point accuracy.

Virgo's Marine Division Command dispatched nearly its entire force to the surface. Regiments from each Brigade were assigned zones to clear. Regimental Commands distributed their Battalions to still more remote locations casting a net that was drawn in, to entrap the networks. Some faced maniacal opponents brandishing guns, machetes, hatchets, axes, shovels, clubs and any other weapon they could acquire. These were bloody vicious battles; resulting in, the loss of many enemy combatants; but, few from the combined official forces. OESA marines wear full body armor hard to penetrate with anything but armor piercing ammunition. Among these enemy packs were two nearly decimated light-armored and heavy-armored battalions; along with two artillery ones.

As control was regained, tens of thousands of arrests of those even remotely suspicious were made, in an effort to sift out the actual terrorists. Intelligence operations were dangerous and painstaking; and, fighting was fierce and deadly. Nearly twelve hundred were actually imprisoned and close to four hundred terrorist killed in these satellite operations.

Four hundred marines were detached from the fleet on temporary six-month assignment to fortify the intelligence and security planetary force; when, the overall operation was declared complete. Their job would be to aid in rooting out any remnants of the terrorist organization. These fanatics were like a cancer. Just a few remaining terrorists could metastasize into a mass that would have to be excised again. No one wanted to come back and repeat the whole operation again.

On our side of the equation, the combined fleet lost twenty people, initially; with injuries of various severity to another thirty-five over the three days of ground operations. On the Shenzhen, we suffered one dead marine and two injured ones.

My debriefing meeting, earlier had been to acquire all the details necessary to complete my wind-up report to the Admiral. We remained behind as Vice Admiral Shagotha returned her fleet

to its original patrol area headquartered at 69 Virgo, thirty-six-and-a-quarter light-years from here.

I took a shuttle and its crew to the surface; the day after Shagotha's departure. We skipped from site to site examining and inspecting the devastation. It was incredible to see the regions that endured air assaults. There was not the usual visual carnage and destruction. In fact, there was nothing; where, concentrations of buildings and people had been. Each was just a giant earthen pit. Some of the more abysmal ones, in lowlands, were already filling with water; from the ground table and streams they intersected. Where close fighting had occurred, there was the usual destruction. Dead bodies punctuated rubble fallen from partially destroyed buildings. Damaged structures showed signs of both heavy artillery and fighter craft missile hits. Crumpled twisted masses of steel and exotic alloys were the remnants of once powerful tanks, personnel carriers and artillery guns. Smoke lingered from smoldering embers; and, the smell of burning flesh and decomposing corpses filled the air with a sickeningly sweet odor.

.....

"Captain on the deck!" The voice yelps as I enter the room.

"As you were." I call back to those present in the room as I walk to the dais.

Twelve recently commissioned ensigns are seated in the small room. Training of all types is an ongoing process for everyone in the service. The course I teach aboard the Shenzhen is about the legal responsibilities, to the Empire, of those in the OESA. It is based in history that explains how and why things developed, as they have.

"Many of you serve in adjuncts of departments which are imbedded deep in the Shenzhen. You work long hard hours. This ship employs a five shift rotation; with four taking duty shifts at their scheduled time; and the fifth on its off-time. So, you all work six actual duty hours a day and another four to five preparing departmental plans and doing personnel reviews. And, that doesn't take into account all the time you spend in training to improve yourselves and increase your rank. So, you have little time on your hands to get to know other parts of the ship and the people in other departments. I want to encourage you to use a little of your meager off-time to seek out others and get to know them. In that light, I will start this lecture series by giving you a little of my personal history.' I pause for effect. Then, I continue. 'For those who don't know, I am Commander Kurt Brubacher; and, I am Captain of this vessel.

I was born in the restored city of Columbus Ohio on Friday December 6th, 2222. I graduated from Ohio State, with a doctorate in Aerospace Engineering, in 2246 and entered the OESA Academy on Earth, that year. I graduated, first in my class, from the command program in 2248. I was posted as a Midshipman to the Boots Fleet, before I even graduated. I got off to a very bad start there. I did not impress Admiral Bryant, who was then a Vice Admiral in command of that Fleet. But, I survived the incident; and, he did not seem to hold it against me. In fact, when he saw how serious I was and how committed I am, he became one of my strongest supporters. I was commissioned an Ensign in May of 2248. I served in various capacities at various posts throughout Boots. I completed fighter pilot training and received my wings in June of 2250. I rose through the ranks; serving mostly in Boots until my promotion to Commander and assignment as Captain of this vessel on December 15, last year. I have seen battle on several occasions, in several positions. Now, I would like to start in the rear corner to my right; and, have each person introduce themselves and relate a very brief personal history to the rest of us."

It took nearly an hour for all twelve people to complete the introductions. I called in refreshments and snacks; as, we took a short break; milling about in discussion with each other. It is a great way to get to know your workmates. After ordering everyone to their seats, I continue the session.

"I will start some sessions with questions that should be answered in the lecture; and in subsequent handouts. You will be asked to answer those, in the next session, a week from now. I want to begin today's program with the following queries. The first is - 'Why an Empire? Why not a democracy? Why would a dictatorial based state want a constitution? Why does our constitution enshrine our rights? Why does the constitution forbid organized religion? Why does this document guarantee representation? And finally, why does it forbid a member state from separating? I want you to think of those questions; as, we travel back in time, to search out answers. These will be the questions asked on your testing.

To answer those questions, we must travel back in time to before the Empire - back to a devastated world wracked by natural disasters, war, terrorism and very bad governmental management. In 2020, the planet earth did not enjoy universal government. In that year, there were about two hundred different countries - give or take a few; depending on, what part of the calendar year you look at. Though Earth was well past the two-world-wars, there were constantly skirmishes; and even a few pretty substantial wars. A vast area in the middle east, in continuous

upheaval, suffered terribly due to the actions of terrorists trying to impose their religious beliefs on their region; and even, on the entire planet.

Economic displacement was equally disruptive during the same period. The world saw a doubling of wealth over the period of three decades ending in 2019; but, ninety-six percent of the new wealth was distributed amongst just four percent of the world's population. Many people starved on a very rich planet.

The planet had seen a steady rise in ocean levels as glaciers and polar ice caps melted, due to a rise in temperature caused by emissions of greenhouse gasses into the air. The world did not seem to have the inclination to deal with this problem seriously; because of, perceived negative economic reactions, they believed would result from any proposed actions. In mid-2017, they crossed a temperature barrier that allowed vast offshore deposits of frozen methane gas to melt; amplifying the greenhouse effect as it rose into the atmosphere. This exaggerated rising temperatures, even more. In 2018, polar ocean temperatures rose high enough to slow; then stop the circulation from the equator to the poles. Late that year, polar ice caps began to grow at an astonishing rate. By the next year, it was apparent Earth was heading into a mini ice age triggered by manmade global warming.

At the same time, Colony Collapse Disorder reached a catastrophic level. CCD is a syndrome affecting honey bee hives. No one ever understood the cause of it; but, whole colonies of bees would go out to work on a given morning and would not return in the evening. Beekeepers would find thousands of carcasses in the orchards and fields they had been pollinating. 2016 saw the beginnings of crop failures attributed to this problem. By 2018, our world was in the midst of a full-fledged famine. There were not enough bees to pollinate crops around the world.

Each apocalyptic contributor added to the loss of life worldwide. But, the famine did the most damage. By 2020, only 1.8 billion of the world's more than seven billion were still alive. Most of those lived between thirty degrees north and thirty-seven degrees south of the equator. A northern glacier came south to cover most of the landmass to forty-five degrees north. A southern glacier grew from the pole to a line fifty degrees south of the equator. The one benefit was the recovery of previously submerged coastlines; and more.

In the north, small handfuls of people waited for the glacier to arrive, before heading south. For most, that spelled disaster. They died making valiant attempts to come south. But, one man

did make it. We celebrate him, today. Seeing the confusion and potential for anarchy when he arrived in the south, he worked to found the Empire we know today. He helped establish the constitution and many of the efficient systems still in use today. Most of you do not know his full name. We have affectionately nicknamed this legendary man; and, most of us refer to him by that handle, today.

Next week, we'll come back to the story of the constitution; but, we have to break, for today. You will each find a handout on your data pads. Study it. It pertains to a man we all think we know. But, few really possess much real detail about him - they think they know because they hear him referred to so often. The handout is titled - Old Tom - 2020. Read it a couple of times. It will help you understand why things are as they are."

Chapter 2 Old Tom

Monday December 7, 2020

"Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." Confucius

Half naked, dripping wet and nearly freezing, in the bitter north wind, in the pitch black of night, the old man was in a fight for his life. He had fallen asleep in the Alpine tent with a fire blazing outside to keep away any intruding carnivores; always hunting ahead of the advancing glacial edge. But, the fire had dowsed itself; as, it melted its way into the ice sheet sending rivulets of water flowing through his bedding on the tent floor. Now, he was flailing away at the black bear with the butt of the unloaded shotgun; in an attempt to avoid being shredded by its ominous claws. Forced to retreat on each of four or five lunges during which it was clubbed on the snout; the bear finally stopped, as if to consider the situation; then turned and slowly walked off into the darkness; pausing and peering back, from time to time, to grunt its disapproval at the old man's defense.

When he was satisfied the threat had diminished and his shakes subsided, the aged camper checked out the woodpile, first. Some of it was wet; but, some was still dry enough to use. Rummaging through the sled, he found a large double layered baking sheet near the bottom; and decided to use it as a base for the next fire. Old Tom hoped it would keep the temperature of the ice down; as the fire burned above it; thus, avoiding a repeat of the same situation. Surrounding a loosely crumpled piece of paper with some kindling, he carved from the wood with his hatchet and hunting knife; Tom lit it and slowly fed it as much wood as the pan would hold around the burning tinder. Soon it was roaring; though, not as big as the previous fire. Setting up the drying line over the blaze, he hung his bedroll in the heat flow. In the truck, he found clean clothes, redressed and placed his wet ones on the line beside the bedroll. Taking down the tent, he turned it inside out to freeze dry; so, he would have it for the next night. Then, he sat close to the fire, in the silence of isolation, broken by, the distant howling of the advancing glacial bow, to think about what had happened, and why.

It soon occurred to him that, he was not properly prepared for this trek; though, he had taken half a year to do so. In the morning, he would backtrack to nearby Trenton; where he'd search for additional provisions. After brewing a pot of coffee, he sat drinking and thinking for the rest of the night; building a list of necessities, in his mind.

The old man packed up and broke camp at first light; heading north. He was travelling on the ice sheet that had been Lake Ontario; but, was now the southern end of the massive glacier. It was not yet too thick at its southern end. On the way to Trenton, he had been able to follow paths between treetops and the tops of old electric and telephone poles to stay on route. He had often seen high rise buildings and roofs of lower ones peeking through the ice and snow. Many looked disheveled by their near crushing, at the hands of the mighty ice sheet. It had taken nearly a week to travel from his shelter west of Toronto to Trenton; a trip that would have taken an hour and a half, a few years before.

He thought about the recent past as he headed back to the shore line. It could be funny if it hadn't been so devastating. This "Ice Age" had been caused by global warming. And, to make it worse, it had been preceded by several other world altering disasters. First, an influenza pandemic killed nearly one and a half billion. That was followed by a worldwide famine triggered by Colony Collapse Disorder, an insidious loss of bee colonies. Without the bees, there were none of the foods they are responsible for pollinating. All the while, temperatures continued to rise until they reached a point where frozen methane pockets in the shallows of large bodies of water melted; releasing enormous invisible clouds of the greenhouse gas into the air. At that point, a runaway temperature rise began; warming polar ocean waters; resulting in the complete cessation of the equatorial to polar water currents. This was the beginning of the mini ice age that created the massive glacial sheet.

It took half a day to find the town and locate a business district that should contain the needed supplies. The occasional sign still stood; peeking through the frozen layer.

Old Tom dug his way into a roof vent of a large home improvement center. Tilted on an obtuse angle and mostly covered by ice and snow, he had almost missed its placard. The condition of the building made negotiation of former aisles extremely hazardous. And, he knew, the weight of snow and ice atop the roof could collapse it, at any time. He acquired porcelain tile, wood and mineral insulation. At another store, he located a large inflatable mattress for his sleeping kit to lay on. This would prevent it from getting wet, again. At the same place, he found a large roll of dense foam rubber he could place on the ground before erecting his tent on it. This would raise the floor of the tent and prevent melting of the ice below; while, acting as an insulator from the cold ice, beneath it.

It took quite a while to locate the gun range he had visited in the past. Besides the practice range, they had also been a source of weapons. Inside the store, he found an ample supply of handguns, rifles, shotguns and ammunition; along with, substantial archery gear he had not noticed in his many sessions there. He had not drawn a bow, since childhood; so, he would choose carefully. He picked out a nine millimeter Glock automatic pistol, an AR16 assault rifle, ammunition for both and for the shotgun in the truck, and a crossbow with hunting arrows and quiver. As an afterthought, he grabbed a gun maintenance kit; containing the oil, brushes and cloth he would need to keep weapons in working order and spare bow strings. He would not be defenseless again. And, from now on, he would keep his weapons loaded. By the end of the day, he returned to the campsite; raising the tent atop the foam. Placing the sheet of plywood on the ice surface, he topped it with the insulation and placed the porcelain tiles in two layers on the insulation. That night's fire was built on the tiles. If he was right, the insulation and tile would prevent heat from burning the plywood; while, the whole assemblage should prevent melting.

Supplies were stored in the vintage Toyota Roadrunner and the home made sled he pulled behind it. He had designed the sleigh with wheels that could be lowered below the runners. It could run on snow and ice or land. Built of aluminum tubing atop a steel support structure, it was light and strong enough to hold over a ton of belongings in two shelving layers. On the top at the rear, were countless Gerry cans of gasoline, containers of naphtha and one pound canisters of propane gas. There was always a danger of spillage onto the contents below; but, placing the fuel on the top ensured adequate ventilation. Ahead of it were clothing, soaps, cleaning products and fresh linens and packed clothing. On the lower rack, prepared meals were stored in self-sealing glass containers below the fuel. Wrapped frozen meats and fish were stored ahead of that; along with pots, pans and commercially packaged frozen vegetables. Canned goods, computer, flashlights, spare batteries, a clothing change and current towel and facecloth were stored inside the vehicle; which the old man had modified with a larger alternator, a second battery and an in-car heater that kept its interior from dropping below freezing, each night. When collapsed, the tent was stored atop the front of the sled. Bedrolls, ground sheet and the new inflatable mattress went in the back of the car. An assortment of pulley systems, ropes, tools and dry medical supplies were kept in the roof top carrier atop the truck.

While caring for his wife of over forty years, Old Tom had spent the last six months planning, foraging, stocking and building for the trip south. It had taken nearly two months to

design the sled, acquire the materials and build it. Throughout the entire period, he made pilgrimages deep into the abandoned city. These excursions provided him with the four-wheel drive vehicle, food; and, a small wind generator and solar system he had assembled to keep the house warm and powered. Repacking the truck and sleigh several times over that period had led to the layout he now enjoyed. Goods were packed safely; while their locations were prioritized by need. He did not want to be unpacking and repacking throughout the trip.

He needed two days to recover; when, Margaret finally passed away. Though it had been a long illness, it was still devastating. Once she was laid to rest, he left the house without even locking it or shutting anything down; even though it was mid-winter. What was the point?

By his estimation, the old man felt it would take two to three additional months to reach what was once Northern Florida. He chose to travel now; because, the glacier would be more stable in winter. During late spring melts and early fall freezes, it is contracting and expanding; while moving along the ground layer below it. This causes great fissures to open without warning. They are still there and hard to spot in winter; but, safer than having one suddenly open below you, as you travel over it.

There were some other benefits to travelling in the winter during an ice age. The tent had a small protected opening in the back; and a flapped window in the side. He could use either to aim the five-inch auto tracking reflector telescope he carried in the truck. Most nights, there were limited clouds or falling precipitation; and, most pollutants and moisture had condensed from the atmosphere, long ago. In addition, there was no light pollution; making star gazing truly wrenching. So many smaller or more distant stars were visible that, he had trouble identifying constellations that had once been very familiar. Instead of the few hundred he knew, he could now see thousands of stars and galaxies.

.....

The old man was born Thomas McCracken to a teacher mother and a chemical engineer father, in the little town of Wyoming Ontario, outside of Sarnia in southwestern Ontario, Canada. It was such a small place that; the passenger train only stopped, when there was actually a patron at the station. As a young man, he was of average stature with dark hair and brown eyes. His father James, who had been his mentor, his teacher, his advisor and his best friend died the year he started college. When his mother moved South to Florida, eliminating all family financial support, he left school; joining the Canadian Air Force; where, he took up radar technology as a

trade. He stumbled about in the business world, for several years, after the military. He met and married Margaret. They had three boys. At some point in those years, he decided to go back to school; receiving a formal education in electrical engineering. He had over thirty years' experience in designing, building and programming industrial electrical control systems before retiring.

As the world he knew was in decline; but, the system was still intact, his early retirement days included surgical interventions replacing both eye lenses and a right hip. By the time Margaret's health failed, Tom was more than fit to handle her care. He began a rigorous exercise program during the period of preparation for the trip. When it was time to leave, he probably could've done the trip two times over.

.....

The morning after the trip into Trenton, Old Tom resumed his journey. The following days, he learned that, he had to use his compass to find landmarks in the distance to navigate towards. He discovered that; if, he just headed south-east by compass alone, he would be obstructed by impassable objects that would lead him well off the path. The distant landmarks kept him from the confusion the circuitous routes created.

It took nearly three weeks just to cross Lake Ontario. The mono – colored scenery often hid a white mountain of snow or a bottomless crevice. Add to that the blinding snow storms, the bitter winds and the strain of the constant glare and each ten-hour travel-day had been about as exhausting as a sixty-nine-year-old could possibly take – no matter how young at heart.

It took nearly two days for old Tom to get the truck and the sled ashore on the New York side of the lake near Youngstown New York. The problem was that the glacier edge stopped at the shoreline; and, was elevated fifty feet above the beach. Though not sheer, the drop was in nearly equal ten-foot steps.

It was nearly a ten kilometer drive along the glacier face to find a spot where it had either formed in a slope; or collapsed, turning the edge into a steep but manageable gradient. Negotiation was nearly impossible with the sled; so, he spent time felling a midsized maple for a crane tower; then, mounted the pulleys to it. It took seven exhausting hours to lower the sleigh to the beach. Then, another hour to navigate the incline with the truck. The next morning, after disassembling the crane and repacking it on the sled, he headed south down Robert Moses Parkway.

Planning his route carefully each night in his tent, old Tom used seventy-nine, eighty and Highway eighty-one to work his way south east to pick up I-95 at Baltimore; keeping on track with compass and GPS receiver. Several times, he had to find ways to forage rivers or to cross dry river beds where bridges were wiped out. It took nearly ten days to reach Baltimore from Youngstown.

As he worked his way farther south on I-95, the trip became progressively easier. Many more bridges were still intact. There were less obstacles to negotiate and many of those did not fully obstruct the multilane highway. In Maryland, he had his first experience with hunting for his dinner. He had stopped for the evening in the Capital Beltway section on I-95, somewhere near Glen Arden. He was setting up camp, when he saw the first wild turkey. Making sure to work his way around so he was downwind of it, he began to track it, crossbow in hand. When he finally caught sight of it again, it was strutting and preening in a clearing with several more. Taking care to move quietly into position, he took aim at the largest and fired.

That night, he feasted on turkey roasted in a steel pan, over an open fire, with gravy, mashed potatoes, rice stuffing, canned asparagus and even Margaret's famous home canned cranberries. He packed the leftovers into large containers; using the carcass and browned drippings to start a stock for soup. When the broth was ready, he added, canned vegetables and dried noodles and simmered for another ten minutes. Packing that too, he stowed the soup and turkey with trimmings aboard the sleigh for future meals.

Spotting the turkey had been an epiphany; awakening him to the fact; it was time to start living off the land as much as possible. Why use up all the supplies he might need in his first winter in northern Florida when, he could save a great deal of them for use when they were really needed.

Old Tom reached the turn-off to Highway Ten West in northern Florida just over a month and a half after making land at Youngstown New York. Spring wasn't too far off; and though there was some ice and snow here, he did not believe the frost line would be too deep in the ground. It took a full day to travel west on Highway ten until the turn off at highway 187-North. After camping for the night, old Tom travelled north; branching off to the right at highway two eighty-five. Ten minutes later, he found Britton Hill, his new home. Old Tom knew that, even relatively mild Northern Florida would be too cold for most, in these new winters; so, very few would choose to settle there. On Tuesday February 16, 2021 he had arrived home.

The old man perused the area with several objectives. First, he had to ensure he was alone and secure. Next, he had to find the best location for a new home. It must be hidden from view from all directions; looking up at it, from the bottom of the hill. Finally, he was seeking abandoned businesses where he could purloin the materials and machinery he would employ to construct his new fortress.

.....

Edward Delnikov arrived at the 285 junction, for his first meeting with Old Tom, with his family on a sunny, warm Saturday August 28, 2021. The two men greeted each other warmly; though, Edward could not hide his surprise at Tom's age. From the voice received, on his shortwave, he had obviously envisioned a much younger man. What he saw now was a balding, grizzled, grey, wrinkled form that couldn't weigh more than a hundred and fifty pounds and stood no more than five foot seven in height. But, Tom's stature would rise, in Edward's eyes as he became familiar with his energy, determination, conviction and abilities. Within a month, he would no longer see him as a septuagenarian.

The old man escorted the family up the highway to Britton Hill; leading them onto the hidden roadway that served as the driveway to his complex. They parked the vehicles on the flat in front of the house.

Tom had heard Edward on his local political talk show that; he ran at the same time every day, on the same shortwave radio frequency. He had gone to some effort to acquire an auto scanning shortwave system to monitor frequencies. Edward had crackled to life; while, Tom was working on his new fortress, one day. He espoused a philosophy to return to some form of civilized government; believing that, a hybrid system of representative government with a single leader who had the power to overrule and force legislation was the best way to eliminate the foibles of past governments.

"How in the world did you ever find this home?" Edward's attractive wife Sylvia asked.

"I did not find it. When I was still in Canada, I researched northern Florida for a site that would be easy to secure. Britton Hill turned out to be ideal. Before I even left, I knew I would probably build in the southwest slope of the hill. I knew it was composed mostly of sedimentary rock and forested by Florida pine, maples and oaks. I knew there was a lake close by and that a breeze was almost constant. I planned it alone. I built it all...alone. I would like to show you around. It is a lot more than what you see from out here; because, it's dug into the side of the hill.

You're only seeing the front. It goes to prove that; anyone can do anything they want if they put their mind to it." Tom explained as he extended an arm toward the front door.

They entered into the foyer of an open-concept section of the house that included the living room, dining room and kitchen. The guests oohed and awed at the fully equipped kitchen with adequate storage, countertop, and a big island separating it from an eating area. Off to one side was a fully functional formal dining room visible from the kitchen table and a well-furnished living room with full entertainment center. To the rear of the house was a main bathroom, a large bedroom with in-suite bath and an office.

"I will go through the back wall, right here." Tom pointed to the wall; then, continued. "That will give me access to the guest bedroom, I will be building, later."

In the garage, they were astounded at the power center and pumping station that supplied electricity and water to the complex.

"Is that natural light?" Sylvia asked pointing to one of the ten fixtures, in the ceiling.

"Yes, it is. It is brought in by fiber-optic cable. That way, there are no exterior windows or skylights to give away the existence of a residence." Tom replied.

"Can you show us how that works?" Edward asked.

"When we two are outside, I will show you where the fiber-optics come up through the ground." The old man answered.

Pointing to his various assets, Tom explained how he had scavenged working tools like the tractors to construct the home. He pointed out that, most people left valuable possessions to make their way south; and, in other cases, owners of equipment had died in the great tragedies of the recent past and these things were left lying about.

"An old guy like me isn't going to be able to do all this alone; unless he has the right equipment. The small dump truck, two tractors, man-lift and hydraulic jacks were all abandoned. Gasoline, diesel, wood, concrete, all varieties of building materials, appliances and furniture are just lying about for the taking, if you can figure out how to recover them; not to mention life's finer things like wine and some great canned goods.

I cleared the areas for the driveway, house and garden. I dug the holes and trenches for the foundations and septic tanks system. I found a precast concrete place with those multi-layered insulated slabs for the walls; and raised the slabs and the roof girders and roof-slabs using the tractors and the man-lift; and, I planted the garden and backfilled and graded the yard. I used

those prefab wall panel systems for the interior walls; using only the insulated ones around the interior perimeter. Because, I acquired all the right tools, it only took six months. The big jobs were really the plumbing and electrical. They are labor intensive. Every circuit has to be pulled and wired, individually. Every drain, supply line and vent has to be installed one at a time. When, I want something else, like the scanning shortwave system I contact you on, or a new cement mixer; I just go shopping.' Tom explained with a laugh. 'I have determination and some pretty good skills; not to mention that, electrical is my bailiwick. That's why the big windmill generator, power system and water pumping system. I never lifted one thing over twenty-five pounds, manually. The tractors, man-lift and pulley systems did all the heavy lifting.' He added proudly.

'I listened for a civilized voice on the shortwave, every day. I would leave it on scan twenty-four hours a day. I finally heard you a month ago; and, I was impressed. So, I went looking for you and left that note you found. And, here we are.'" McCracken smiled as he finished.

Tom led the way out the front of the garage; stopping to point out the grading and gravel of the parking area and the driveway; and, how it had all been cut into the side of the hill while remaining camouflaged. He walked them up the slope, on the south side of the hill to the windmill generator.

"I raised the windmill; then, buried the cabling all the way to the house to supply electricity to the entire complex. I came back up here recently and upgraded the windmill from fifteen kilowatts to fifty kilowatts; so, I would have enough power for all future needs.' Tom pointed to the scars in the ground from the trenching. 'You have to work with what's available to fill your immediate needs; and, satisfy your wishes, later.'" He added.

He walked them halfway down that slope and stopped; pointing to the lake below.

"If you look down there, near the lake, you can see the area I turned into a rice paddy. It's over there to the left of the shore and kind of looks like a marshy area. You can see the dikes I built to regulate the water. I can drain or flood the field, at any time. I need a supply of rice for flour; because, I can't eat wheat flour. That machine you saw in the garage is a rice huller. It allows me to shuck large quantities of rice for milling." Tom explained as he turned to take them towards the garden.

"The garden is planted with an assortment of vegetables including a variety of beans, a selection of lettuce, cabbage, peas, broccoli, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots and the large area you can see over in that corner devoted to corn. It was a risk; planting the seeds, I brought with me; but, there seems to be enough bees around here to make it all fertile." Tom said pointing to the southeast corner of the garden. He continued walking them about; pointing out water valves and electrical outlets positioned conveniently. He ended up at a large picnic table located in the cleared area where he had first set up camp, when he arrived.

"Help yourself to some lemonade or iced tea.' The old man offered as he pointed to the closed carafes and upside down glassware; then continued. 'I have a pretty fair luncheon prepared for us all to enjoy. But, I thought we could just sit and talk, first.'" Tom said as everyone took a place around the table and helped themselves to a glass and their preferred beverage.

For the next couple of hours, they all sat around talking. First, they discussed family life for the Delnikovs. Next, Edward and his family had many questions about Tom's trip from Canada. They were truly astounded at the way he viewed such a harrowing experience as an adventure. They all had a great belly laugh when Tom embellished the story of his encounter with the black bear in the middle of the night. Then, Tom moved the conversation towards Edward's philosophy. After a great deal of back-and-forth regarding its tenets, Tom brought out his own writings and turned the conversation to how each goal could be attained; while maintaining security and providing the economic wherewithal to be able to make it all happen. The thesis he presented was a step-by-step plan for first achieving the goals over a small area like a town; and then, spreading out with the future intent of governing an entire country; and maybe even a world. It included the means to establish departments and funding. It offered a detailed timeline that took it all the way through the legitimization of a new government to a point where it could begin to expand. At the end of the document was a formal ten-page constitution enshrining an empire, its emperor, a representative government and its citizens' rights and freedoms. A look of shock appeared on Edward's face as he skimmed the proposed constitution.

"Why is my name embedded in this document as Emperor?" Edward exclaimed.

"Because, you're the best man for the job!" Tom replied.

"What are you talking about? I don't even want the job!" Delnikov responded.

"That's exactly the point. You're the man with the plan; but, you think someone stronger should execute it. That's a recipe for a despotism: when, you're really advocating a cooperative government. You would never miss-use all the power; because, you don't even want the power!" Tom explained.

"What do you think, Sylvia?" Edward asked, in disbelief, as he turned towards his wife.

"I'm a bit biased; but, I agree with Tom; and, for exactly the same reasons. You are the best man for the job." Sylvia responded.

"My head is spinning – I need time to think." Edward replied to the assemblage.

"Why don't you take a walk around the grounds – by yourself if you want?" Tom suggested.

"Yeah but, I think I'd rather have you with me. I still have a lot of questions." Delnikov's voice had a pleading quality.

The two men rose and began walking across the front of the house and garage. Tom wasn't sure if he should just take Edward around the hill; or, if he should be walking towards the lake. Anyway, they were moving and that's what Edward wanted.

"How would we gain support for all this?" Delnikov asked, after several minutes thinking quietly to himself.

"It's a step by step process. You would continue to do your radio broadcasts. Meantime, I would go out and begin to hold rallies to drum up a core of true believers. It takes that kind of loyal nucleus to establish this type of organization. Once we have enough support, I will begin leading them on excursions to recover supplies we'll need to establish such a venture." Tom explained.

"What kind of supplies do we need?" Edward asked.

"Food supplies, building materials, communications equipment, police vehicles, weapons, ammunition, and electrical equipment and a whole host of other stuff we can scavenge from abandoned businesses, police stations, military installations, homes; and, even stuff just abandoned on the sides of roads. We need materials that allow you to establish government-like operations without cash funding; since, there isn't any legal currency, at the moment. We need stockpiles we can use as currency; because initially, everything will be done by barter. You can see what I've done here, just by scavenging. One determined old man built a fully equipped complex that is completely secure, all by himself. If I can do that; then, a large group of

supporters can really help you achieve success. Once you have your stockpiles, you'll have something to pay employees with. That allows you to establish operational government agencies, police forces, fire departments and utilities. In time, we have our followers ratify the Constitution; allowing us to create a currency to replace the barter system. Once we reach that point, we're on the way!" Tom explained.

"I can see what you mean; but, I'm really not sure that I'm leadership material." Delnikov responded.

"You're the man with the plan. You're the man with the populist following. You're also the man who really doesn't want power. That makes you our leader." Tom countered in a low near whisper.

"But, why not someone else; someone more driven; someone like you?" Edward asked.

"Because, people who are driven, like me, are potential dictators. Though I firmly believe in, and share, many of your ideas, I know that because I am so driven, I can be so impatient that, I might actually become a hated tyrant. What our world needs now is semi-democratic government. It needs a representative government where one person has the authority to step in and get things done, when government stalls or goes sideways. It needs a clearly understood set of values and parameters for both the people and the government to work under. My first draft constitution is a good example of the direction my thoughts are going in this matter. Though under the Constitution, you could take absolute control; I don't believe you'd actually exercise the option. Because you're you, I believe, your children have been, and will be, raised with your values; and, they will rear their children the same way. No, it can't be me; or, someone like me. It has to be someone like you. As you can see by my planning and my draft constitution, I am a good planner; and, I will be able to help you execute. But, my ideas are a little strong. They need the final say of someone who will pull in the reigns. I understand the order in which things should be executed to achieve your desired goals. I know how to attain the assets and wealth needed to reach these goals. But, in military terms, I am like the general of the army; you are like the commander-in-chief." Tom explained.

And so it was that, Tom and Edward formed a very strong partnership. Edward continued to host his shortwave radio shows – complete with all his opinions. Tom organized rallies; building support for Edward around the ideas he espoused on the radio. A small group of six joined Edward and Tom as an inner circle; executing a plan laid out in Tom's draft and edited

and approved by Edward. More than a thousand additional people became the driving force behind the execution of the plan. They travelled to surrounding areas drumming up support for Edward's ideas. Groups went north, east and west on scavenging trips. Others journeyed through Florida to assess the state of infrastructure built before civilization fell. Six months later the organization could boast vast warehouses of stored foods, building materials, technology, medical supplies, automobiles and repair parts for machinery and vehicles. Abandoned housing was corralled and restored for availability of future public and civil servants. At first, a policeman would not be paid in cash; since there was no currency. But that officer would receive a home, a car, fuel, furniture, clothing allotment and weekly food allotment. Utilities would be provided by the new state to the employees. This would be the way for all legislative members, judges, firemen, policemen, city officials and all the other jobs and positions that would support restoration of services and a comfortable way of life for the people within their territory.

Meetings of the future Emperor and his inner seven advisors continued through 2022 and into early 2023, at Tom's complex. Throughout it all, Edward's teams, under the direction of the inner circle, amassed scavenged assets; while, restoring needed service, throughout the State. The name of the State was changed, in the proposed constitution, from the Eastern Empire to the North American Empire; and its defined boundaries were altered to include the entire former U.S. and Canada.

Data returned by the many exploratory and recovery missions indicated that somewhere around four and a half million people lived in the State of Florida; having survived all the phases of the Apocalypse. The draft constitution evolved through many editing sessions. The State was divided into fifty districts each housing about ninety thousand people. Each district would send two elected representatives to the Legislative Assembly. So, the assembly would start with a hundred representatives. As the Empire expanded, representation would increase based on a formula that established a new district for every ninety thousand citizens. Registered candidates would run to represent the district in elections held every four years. The two candidates receiving the greatest shares of the popular vote would represent the district. Divisive, partisan party politics would be banned.

By the end of the year, the Empire had the complete support of the more than one and a half million living within a forty-mile radius of Wildwood. Within that region, the defacto government had restored all services and created central trading markets for bartering. From that

group of people, it was not hard for the Empire to find and hire thirty thousand displaced military personnel with experience in all fields and at all ranks to build the Army of the North American Empire. Recovered uniforms, clothing, rank insignia, light weapons, heavy weapons, ammunition, mobile launchers and rockets, medium and heavy armor made the small force one to be reckoned with. Though not an ideal headquarters, two thousand troops secured the former Naval Air Warfare Centre, in Orlando; quickly determining that, a lot of abandoned hardware and aircraft were still fully functional. It provided a military base of operation for what was to come.

On Tuesday February 15, 2022, eighteen thousand soldiers composed of twenty-four battalions of seven hundred and fifty well-armed and supported troops posted proclamations in the largest population centers throughout the state; dispatching companies to enforce the document throughout the territory they patrolled. The Major General heading the operation was under the direct command of Tom McCracken who had been granted the military rank of Lieutenant General within the Empire, by the Emperor-in-waiting. The heavy armor and professional troops, with the promise of a return to civilization, seemed to pacify people; at least long enough to see what would result. Armed Forces were quickly followed by another army of teachers, administrators, doctors, technicians, construction teams and logistics specialists to restore services. By the end of the month, most areas had functioning hospitals and schools, protected bartering markets, police services, fire departments; not to mention the promise of housing, automobiles, food, clothing and utilities; if, they chose to apply for and occupy one of the many civil service and military positions being offered.

March 15 saw the posting of a proclamation announcing district boundaries and elections; to be held Tuesday May 10, 2022. Candidates were to register with the local administrator, by Tuesday March 22, 2022. The document included an imbedded constitution and an explanation describing the role of the Assembly and its representatives.

On Friday July 1, 2022, the first session of the Legislative Assembly was called to order. The hundred members swore an oath of allegiance to the Empire; then, an oath to protect and defend the constitution and faithfully represent the citizens of the North American Empire. After all were sworn in, they were required to sign the founding document with Edward Delnikov and his seven-member council. It was official. The North American Empire was born at 2:30 in the

afternoon on a warm sunny July 1, 2022. The inner council and Emperor would continue to meet at Tom's refuge, until the end of April 2023.

The Emperor officially announced his first council; appointing the seven-person inner circle to portfolio positions along with a former Vice Admiral as his Secretary of Defense. The first council had eight members. Old Tom was made First Minister - the most trusted and responsible member of the team; and with the agreement of the Secretary of Defense, maintained the military rank of General of the Army.

Tom's first act as First Minister was to ceremoniously close the book he had drafted; which contained the authorized plan for establishment of the government. Then, he ceremoniously opened another book.

"Fellow Council Members, Legislative Assembly members, Ladies and Gentlemen and military personnel present, I would like to officially end the first phase of the plan for the North American Empire by closing the book that contained the plan. Then, I would like to open the book that contains the plan for our country, for the near future. This document has been penned by the council members; and, edited and approved by the Emperor. This is Edward 1's plan for the future development and expansion of our country." Old Tom announced to the applause of the hundreds present.

The book contained a plan for the establishment of a digital currency and taxation system. Expansion of the military to a force of one hundred twenty thousand; included creating a naval and air wing with the personnel available and the leftover equipment, at hand. It had an outline for the development of industry and commerce that included the rebuilding of any needed infrastructure in need of repair. This would be a rich Empire. Its wealth came from its predecessor. The trick was to continuously make it bigger, stronger and richer.

This article was compiled from Tom McCracken's recorded audio files. Many observations were made on his trip south. An operating recording device was always on his person. All his interactions with Edward 1 are on these devices. Copies of these file can be accessed in the OESA historical library folder.

Chapter 3 The OESA

Tuesday July 16, 2255

"I was taught that the way of progress was neither swift nor easy." Marie Curie

It's Monday following the mission at Rho Corona Borealis; and, I am in my office working my way through mounds of paperwork. We still call it paperwork; though, there is seldom any paper involved. Most of our formal work is done on the mobile data pads we carry. Verbal dialogue and the receipt of written communications can be completed without any hand-held devices. The units involved are imbedded within us that send the signals directly to a neural interface. At any rate, I've just received a standard electronic mail informing me that, a secured communications drone would arrive with an encrypted message and orders from Admiral Nichols.

We are currently searching the travel corridor between Rho Corona and 44Bootes for a group of privateers who have been attacking private shipping. Stopping at Borealis' HD144579 as a midway point, this is a twenty-three light year trip. It is the normal route used by cargo ships to stay close to Empire systems; where protection is heaviest and anomalies are minimal.

"Communications – You will soon receive a level one secure message for me, from Admiral Nichols. Please, forward it without decrypting - immediately." I instructed.

"Aye Captain." The response was from the Communications officer of the watch.

I hope the data will arrive soon. My data pad indicates there is only three quarters of an hour until I take the bridge watch. I continue on with my work; exiting the office for the bridge, when my shift begins.

I think of how proud I am of the Shenzhen as I scan the bridge. It's nothing like the ones on the Carrier Class or Cruiser Class vessels. The navigation bridge takes up a space sixty by forty meters in the center of the bow on the upper deck of the ship – deck nine. Eighteen operational stations ring the interior perimeter with the Captain and Executive Officers' stations on a raised dais that make up the command center in the middle of the space. On the walls above each station eighteen large screens display a variety of the surrounding region's astronomical images and ship's status information. At three hundred eighty-four by two hundred meters, and nine decks in height, the massive vessel is dwarfed, when sitting near one of its larger Cruiser or

Carrier class cousins. Though crewed by nine hundred eighty, the Shenzhen carries eleven hundred sixty-five; including, civilian contractors and crewmember families.

"Watch Commander - report!" I order, as I step up to Lt. Commander Savign, my Executive Officer.

Savign is from the fourth planet orbiting the star 82 Eridani. We call it 82 Eridani - E. Its inhabitants know it as "Gi" (Pronounced Gee). Gians are very humanoid in appearance. In fact, most serving members of the OESA are the most humanoid of all the species in the Empire. That is to say, they are bipeds with two arms, a nose in the middle of the face separating two forward facing eyes. They all use some form of verbal speech for communication. All these humanoids come from environments similar enough to Earth's to allow them to serve on OESA vessels with only minimal acclimatization. Gians use only one name for personal identification. Savign is tall and lean with a somewhat longer face than humans have. Two large ear lobes are mounted to the sides of a bald head. Her large almond - shaped eyes and bright smile make her very attractive, despite the obvious differences.

First encounters with alien species are always risky. Infectious agents are found in every environment. Each world develops an immune system designed to deal with its specific set of challenges. Contact initially involves the risk of infection to one or both parties; so, initial meetings are handled carefully. Participants from the Empire are isolated by full bio-suits; until, assessment and resolution can be achieved. We are constantly being inoculated with preventative vaccines developed to protect each species from the others. At any rate, the eighteen most compatible humanoid species serve in the OESA. Many are multi-race worlds, like Earth was. Now, humans are pretty much mono faceted; most exhibiting café-au-lait colored skin, large slightly slanted eyes and dark hair; though, a low percentage exhibit other recessive traits like fair skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. Redheaded humans no longer exist.

Anyway, Savign reports on the current state of engines, shields, weapons and environmental control. Then she gives our current position, course and velocity summing up that there is no status change in the current mission; and, nothing unusual to report.

"Very Good, Commander. I relieve you." I direct to her; employing the standard protocol.

"I am relieved, Captain." She responds with a salute and steps back one pace.

"Savign, can you stay with me on the bridge for a while. It may be an hour. I am expecting encrypted orders and messages from Theatre Nine. I need you to witness the decryption and note it in your log. Would you mind?" I quietly ask my Exec.

"I'd be happy to, sir. I have nothing personal planned. I was heading out to update personnel evaluations - a very boring job." She whispers with a smile.

"Maintain course and speed." I call out from my Command Station seating as my shift completes the transfer of bridge operations.

Things were quiet for a while. I notice how beautiful star RCB looks on our screens. The images we view are composites of filtered optical and sensor inputs. We never look directly into a star through a glass window; which would destroy the retina in the eyes. It's a yellow star like Sol; but, somewhat older and a little inflated. Though we are some distance from the system edge, this sun's enlarged status makes it appear somewhat brighter than Sol would appear from the same vantage point outside its system.

I scan each station on the bridge, one at a time. I am proud of my crew. We came together on the Shenzhen's very first mission; which was to certify her for service. I had been assigned as its Captain; before the ship was finished construction. I had picked Savign as my Executive; then, we selected our senior officers together. Following that, we worked as a group to pick the rest of her crew.

Proofing the vessel is taking it through a series of tests and shakedown cruises that prove she will withstand more than we subject the craft to, in normal operations. I had been part of a team working under, then Commodore Nichols, that certified vessels during the last expansion of Fleets. Every new vessel must be certified, before putting it into permanent service. It is always a daunting task; that, took nearly eight weeks, in this case. It is an intense mission that, brings a crew together; while weeding out those that are not up to their assignments. We took the Shenzhen new from the shipyard. By the time it was certified, the ship's officers and crew were second to no one.

"Captain, I have that message, you advised communications of. I am downloading all the data to your station." The communications officer advises.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." I counter; as, I rise and leave the bridge for my office.

"Lieutenant Volpe, you have the bridge." I called out to my deputy watch commander as Savign and I headed for my office. The Lieutenant moves into the Command Station followed by

a flurry of activity as the tactical officer moves to replace him and a substitute replaces the tactical officer.

Off the port bow corner of the bridge, my office is a fairly expansive space six meters deep by ten meters long. My desk, credenza and office chair are at one end with two side chairs pulled up to the desk. At the other end, a couch, two arm chairs and a coffee table form a conversation pit. Once at my desk, I begin navigating the information system. Decryption is a two-step process. Step one decrypts and unpacks the entire group of folders employing a thirty-two character two hundred fifty-six-bit key. Phase two uses a different sixteen character one hundred twenty-eight-bit key and decodes the actual documents. Keys are generated by our systems based on the date of the communication. The communication station uses one set; and, the Captain of a vessel uses another. The only way another officer can gain access to the Captain's encryption set is if the command codes for the vessel are transferred to that person. Transfer of command codes, at any level, require that commander's thirty-two-character daily code to be entered into his data pad's command transfer application. The transmitted folder contains two full documents and a video file. One document is called "OR"; the other is titled "Promo". I opened "Promo" first.

"OESA Command Order number 215903-9411 - To all citizens within the limits of the Orion' - I stopped reading and scanned to the end of the paragraph where my name was entered in bold italics. A little farther down, I read - 'to elevate a member of the service to the level of Captain.'" I have been promoted.

"It looks like I've been promoted, Savign." I say with a smile, as I look up at her.

"Congratulations, sir." She responds. If you send me that order, I will post it, for you." She adds.

I send the order; then, I open "OR" which directs me to complete any portion of my current patrol that can be executed on my way back to Theatre Nine. I am to report to Admiral Nichols, by fourteen-hundred hours on July 25th.

"That'll be fine, Commander. Can you enter witness to my reception of the communiqué in your log, please? I think the video will probably be more personal; if, you don't mind." I am essentially kicking her out of my office, politely.

I open the video file. The OESA logo fades out after about ten seconds. Admiral Nichols appears, sitting behind his desk. I watch the entire two-minute video, without a break. Nichols is relaxed, friendly, animated and smiling, throughout. The gist of the video is that, I will be

awarded the Empire's Order of Merit, at a ceremony at Theatre Nine, on July 25. He informs me, kind of off-the-cuff, that I will also be offered command of a carrier, at that time. In the same tone, he suggests that I might want to consider staying where I am, for a while. He says he knows; I am enjoying this kind of autonomous command. Then, he adds that, a carrier will always be available for me, later – when I am really ready to make the change. He sums up by saying it is my choice. He adds congratulations for my promotion to the rank of Captain; then, signs off. The logo reappears.

I go over to my office safe; punching in the security code that unlocks it. Then I reach into the small metal case for the appropriate rank insignia. Ships' commanders are supplied with all levels to Commodore for other elevations and field promotions; even those, above their own rank; though, this is a permanent one - blessed by headquarters. I pull out a set of the silver spread winged eagles, each sitting atop a silver number six surrounded by an olive branch wreath. I replace the silver oak leaf wreath surrounding the number five on my collar points with the new insignia. All officer level insignia display a level number, from one to twelve. This is to avoid confusion between services and between ranks employing the same insignia. For example, the OESA employs two levels of four star admirals who are really at different ranks. Theatre Commanders display the number ten; while, Quadrant Commanders are level eleven Admirals.

The rest of the shift is uneventful. I return to the bridge and issue orders. I order the helm to plot a course to coordinates fifteen hours by forty-five degrees by seventy-one light years, the approximate location of the Theatre Command. All such positions are given relative to Earth. The actual heading would be approximately minus one hour, one minute by plus eleven and three quarters degrees, by forty-seven light years from our current location. At one time, the OESA considered using galactic coordinates; but, this proved confusing. This trip will take eight and a half days. There isn't time to continue our search for the pirates operating in the region; and there are no systems we can patrol on our way to Theatre Command, without heading out of our way. My day's not over when the watch ends. It has been a week since the last lecture session; so, I have another scheduled training session to lead. I head for the meeting room.

.....

"Captain on the deck." A voice snaps out to the rest of the attendees, in the room.

"As you were, people – let's continue where we left off last week. Who can answer the questions I posed, at the start of the last session?" I ask.

I look about; eyeing several hands that have been raised. I do not recognize many of the junior officers with their hands elevated; but, I decide to call on one of them. It would be a good means to make contact and get to know each a little better.

"Ensign Engava, do you think you can answer all the questions?" I ask.

"Yes sir, I do. But first, I wanted to mention that we all noticed your change in rank; and, on behalf of our class, I'd like to congratulate you on your promotion." She responded.

"Well, thank you Ensign; and, thank you all very much for the good wishes. If you'll continue, Ensign?" I prompt her for the answer to the questions.

She responds. "First, you asked – why an Empire? I believe that an imperial form of government was chosen to rest all real authority in one place. Having an Empire eliminates all intermediate levels of government such as state governments.

Then, you asked – why not a democracy? I believe we live under as Democratic a system as we can handle. We have proven we cannot deal with the diffusion of a true democracy. We operate like one; but, there is one person to shake out the wrinkles, when we have difficulties. The Constitution allows the Legislative Assembly to essentially run the government; but, gives the Emperor final say. Our Emperor pretty much rubber stamps everything the assembly does. That seems to be the same pattern followed by the five emperors who preceded him. In two hundred years, those six people have only stepped in a couple of times each. In those cases, they prevented issues from stagnating, when a consensus could not be reached; or, when a piece of legislation could have been harmful to the overall well-being of the Empire.

Then, you asked – why would a dictatorial state want a constitution? I believe, the previous answer proves this one. I feel the people who established this Empire always wanted its citizens to have a representative government. But, they looked back at the past and created the best system they could that would allow for representation, but have a failsafe means to eliminate the failings experienced by past government.

Then you asked, why the Constitution enshrines rights. I believe it is to ensure the population that no one is trying to put them under the yoke of oppression. I also think that, it was a means of establishing what is acceptable and what is not. I say this; because, the Constitution also spells out null rights; which are, in effect, rights we do not have.

You asked – why is religion forbidden. I believe it is because, in the past, people used religion as a means to circumvent other sections of the Constitution. It was also used as a basis

for political philosophies and was very divisive, in this way. Finally, religion was the source of many terrorist uprisings; and, the reason for many wars that had been fought throughout Earth's history. Personally, I've always believed that religion is men telling other men how they think God wants them to live their lives. I also believe it has been used as a means to control the masses. I think the next question about representation was answered in the replies for all the previous questions.

Your final question is – why is separation forbidden, in the Constitution? I honestly think that the question of separation from a state you joined willingly is a specious one. The cessation of a region from an existing sovereignty would destabilize the remaining territory and the region that separates. It would be absolute pandemonium. Separation affects the state of your economy, your military, the Legislative Assembly and the distribution of districts within the Empire. It may also serve to place a future enemy on, or within, your borders. So, it also creates a severe security problem." The young Ensign finished as he took his seat.

"Very good, Ensign - very good, indeed.' I acknowledge as I turn back to the rest of the class. The questions we're going to try to answer, after today are as follows. What motivated the formation of the OESA? What one man is responsible for our ability to travel interstellar space? What person is responsible for molding the OESA into the configuration employed today? Who is the current C & C of the OESA?

.....

Old Tom McCracken died in 2036, at the age of eighty-five. He worked for Edward 1, until he retired in 2032. By the time he passed, those people located in the former states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and southern California had joined the Empire, voluntarily. Most had been living in anarchy. Some were getting by; but, others could not see a way to reorganize and lived in extreme poverty. Only a few isolated settlements had limited services. Most had some form of informal leadership – usually a greedy local tyrant. They began to investigate, when they heard stories. Most of these tales had been started by a group of agents sent out by the Empire to subtly spread the word. The goal was to gain the hearts and minds of those people - to conquer them peacefully. Several communities sent missions to Florida; which, returned with stories of full services, a national government and a good standard of living. One after the other, each of the seven states received a large mission from Florida. Each time, a couple of officials accompanied engineers, security specialists,

teachers and doctors, on the state visit. Each visit was relaxed. No visiting member was restricted by the accompanying officials. They were allowed to travel, freely; and, speak their minds. The result of the campaign was that six of the seven regions requested membership in the Empire. New Mexico, the seventh, had to be coerced with a little peer pressure by the other joining states.

The original format for the creation of the Empire was followed. The populated regions of each state were divided into districts containing about ninety thousand people. They elected representatives to go to the Assembly in Wildwood. On December 1, 2025, the Empire officially had two hundred eighty-five districts representing over twenty-five and a half million survivors.

The original pattern for restoring services, government, education and business was followed in those regions. A year and a half after joining the Empire the seven former states boasted full services and a reasonable and rising standard of living. For its part, the Empire grew its military to one million twenty thousand; and, began restoring the old NASA facilities along that southern belt. It opened trade with regions that expressed any interest. It assisted the reestablishment of industry and business that had wilted or failed during the apocalypse. Some industries were much more heavily regulated. Food processing was severely restricted; in an attempt to attain inexpensive but healthy food choices. Trade always led to new inductees. By 2030, the name of the Empire had been changed, officially to the World Empire; as it controlled all the inhabited territory in the western hemisphere and sixty percent of the eastern hemisphere. This world government now had twelve hundred and thirty-four assemblymen representing six hundred seventeen districts around the globe. Its population base was now more than fifty-five million. Its military had grown to one and a half million. This was a figure that, the Secretary of Defense felt they could settle on, for quite a while. Though there were still over a billion people in the world not governed by the Empire, no others had recovered to the point where they could support a military of any consequence. The two largest regions outside its territorial boundaries were India and southern China; which housed most of the remaining survivors. Each of those would be a strain to absorb; unless the Empire enlisted all the rest of the remaining globe, first. Once the economy was big enough, it would be able to support each major induction, one at a time.

Old Tom was already gone when Edward 1 was succeeded by Victoria 1 in late 2045. She inherited a realm in solid economic shape. It supported great scientific research in many fields; including a space program run by the renamed NASA. It had been called WEASA, since 2028.

Edward had poured a lot of funds into restoring many of the old associated companies; so, their work could be continued; instead of, starting over. Amtel was the result of combining the two largest and most advanced microchip developers that existed before the Apocalypse. Old Tom had seen to their amalgamation and resurgence. It was his pet project of 2031. One of his greatest discoveries was a young scientist that he chose to head its research department. Tom liked to call Doctor William Black - Blackie. It grated on Bill; though, the old man used the nickname affectionately.

Blackie was twenty-four and held an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering and a master's level graduate degree in computer systems sciences when, the world wide collapse led to the closing of his school. When the Empire re-opened Florida State, he registered achieving his PHD in the discipline just a year later. His thesis on artificial super intelligence was ground breaking. Associates and professors all agreed this man was the next Einstein. He was a visionary with a goal and the energy to achieve his ends. He fostered a design for an intelligent computer system he tagged CCAI.

Blackie's prototype was comprised of four microprocessor groups. Each processor ran two hundred fifty-six cores. Four processors comprise each group. Each of those assemblies had terabytes of very high-speed memory under its control. One group controlled input – output. One employed pure logic to solve problems. The third also used pure logic tempered with firmware and software algorithms that moderated the calculations with moral and ethical considerations. The fourth brought it all together, like the corpus callosum of the human brain; determining what weight should be given to each solution; and, melding them into one final one. Nearly half a billion lines of programming code gave the combined assembly near-human abilities to extrapolate and question, based on solutions. It would always try to take every solution to the next step. He called this system Corpus Callosum Artificial Intelligence; or, CCAI, for short.

It took them nearly four years to debug and test the system; but, CCAI solved the first problem presented which was to describe gravity. Dr. Black was not looking for how its energy emanated or interacted; but, rather what makes it work the way it does. It was a revelation to a curious world. It was much simpler than imagined.

From the mathematical solutions, cosmologists and astrophysicists developed a theory that "empty" space is dark matter - a fluid like dense medium composed of quark-like fermions, gluon-like bosons and Higgs-like bosons; along with dark energy. Since, no other analogues

exist, like those in our normal phase, neither the weak or strong atomic forces exist. Dark matter exerts a negative gravity and negative mass. That field is responsible for the never ending expansion of space. Displaced dark matter leaves a deficiency in the field; creating what we perceive as gravity. The "big bang" was really a big conversion. An unknown disturbance caused an interaction between dark matter and dark energy igniting a chain reaction of particle transformation to the phase we detect today. In this phase, several new particles were possible; allowing for combinations generating the weak and strong nuclear forces. Wherever mass displaces dark matter; it creates gravity. The more mass – the greater the field; because more dark matter has been displaced. The shock wave of the conversion created the web-like pattern in dark matter we know, now; but, see like a negative photograph. The web is actually the regions of low concentration of dark matter and high gravitational force; and, the regions between the lattice work are dense regions of the particles.

So, the team asked the CCAI to develop a system to generate artificial gravity. Though large and cumbersome, the device CCAI created worked. It was based on a method of generating relativistic mass; employing a massive multi-stream particle accelerator. By this time, Amtel was maintaining sustained profits and sales; as were other tech operations; restarted with Imperial assistance.

Amtel added additional teams to prove other applications for CCAI. Physics, medical, aerospace, weapons, industrial, agricultural, computer design and economic specialty versions were developed that incorporated hardware and software tuned to their specific disciplines. Much of the work built on that already started before the near apocalypse. The original team continued to work on miniaturizing and refining the CCAI concept, with the aid of the prototype. By the time they were done, the CCAI core, without peripherals, was the size of a baseball and could be powered for years by a single power cell designed by the prototype machine. With input and output devices, it could see, hear, smell, feel and talk. It mastered conversation; and, its command of optical character recognition allowed it to read.

Lab based units were loaded with all the worlds knowledge; and, applications to use it in their specific fields. Operating systems were encoded with the logic to call and close each application's programming, as needed. Remote units employed compact versions of the same data base; but, all units could access central libraries remotely.

The most shocking development was by a small robotic team that used the baseball sized generalized CCAI to power a lifelike robot that used carbon nanotube fibers, to develop muscle like power for its own limbs. It walked like a person. It talked like a person. It seemed self-aware. Maybe it really was a person. It even had a sense of humor.

Now that I've laid the ground work – you'll each find another handout on your pads. It will take you quickly through the next hundred years of the Empire which include the creation of the OESA and the development of interplanetary and interstellar space flight. Dismissed." I call out as I tapped my pad to transmit the handout; then, left the room as every rose to attention.

Chapter 4 Rigil

Sunday Jan 30, 2101

***"Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere."* Albert Einstein**

The Empire's road to Rigil was filled with discovery. We were in the fifty-sixth year of Victoria One's reign; and she had been a great leader. She maintained Edward's technique of governing at arm's length; but, had a way of getting legislators and councillors to push through what she wanted; while feeling like it was their idea, in the first place. She was viewed as a benign and benevolent leader; and the citizens of the Empire loved her. She had grown from a beautiful, sweet young woman, when she was crowned, to a beautiful sweet grandmother in 2101.

Behind the scenes, she pushed territorial expansion, scientific advancement and economic development. In 2093, she welcomed more than sixty-six hundred representatives from India to the Legislative Assembly; bringing the total to forty thousand representing twenty thousand districts around the globe. The Earth was now under one government. Representatives cast votes electronically in a massive stadium-like complex with seating, services and computer voting interface at each station that; served the forty thousand members. Most made their arguments from their own station; but, representatives often had to wait, as long as, fifteen minutes for someone to come down on to the floor of the assembly to make an impassioned plea. A recess was often called to create the break needed to reposition legislators, during such emotional debates. But, it ran like clockwork. No one bunged up the works with regional concerns. The Emperor could just step in and overrule everyone. So, everyone cooperated.

A great deal of support was sent WEASA's way in the first decade of Victoria's reign. And additional support was provided to outside companies that provided WEASA with technology. Not the least of these was AMTEL. As the years passed, Dr. Black would ask for government funds for the many space related projects he worked on. His lab was so prolific that, he always got what he wanted. Sometimes, he produced results that were proven but impractical; so, many times the work had to be turned over to another funded specialty lab to refine the application. At any rate, he used CCAI to develop artificial gravity, nanoparticle energy recycling, mobile fusion electric power generation, multi-phase / multi-layered ionic / magnetic shielding and a host of other systems and improvements that could be employed in space.

Construction finished on the prototype gravity generator in 2040. Improvements continued; until 2042 when a control system using a CCIA could envelope and accelerate two thousand streams of five hundred thousand heavy baryons to near “C” around a one kilometer accelerator; generating a one and a half Earth gravity field within its confines.

In 2043, WEASA built the first disc-shaped craft with the first gravity generator; and, fitted it with the latest Ion Propulsion System (IPE). A six-week round trip to Pluto proved the gravity generator; but, showed WEASA wasn't ready for interstellar flight; since, that translates into ninety years to reach the closest star. Fitting the vessel with the new AAMP anti-matter propulsion system decreased the next Pluto trip to twenty-seven-and-a-half hours each way. It was fast; but, still meant a fifty year round trip to Alpha Centauri.

"All this technology; and, we still can't get to the nearest star." Was Victoria's favorite crack every time a new mission did not achieve the required speeds.

From 2040, the Empire began recording improvements in Earth's weather. Temperatures were moderating; as, the glaciers began to retreat. In 2045, a program was instituted to explore and reopen territories, where possible; since, more than fifty-five million were now crammed into a small band along the southern end of the former United States. Similar densities existed over the entire globe. The program required a region to be fully rehabilitated before another was taken on.

Black's lab presented a plan to WEASA in early 2045 for a system, based on Casimir research, that would open a directed wormhole for a craft to use as a conduit for travel. A ship travelling at twenty percent light-speed within it would reach a destination in one two-thousandths of the time a ship travelling, to the same destination outside the vortex at the same speed, would do it. Travel time to Alpha Centauri and back would be reduced to under two days, plus exploration time. In June, a vessel with the AAMP engines was fitted with the device. It opened a wormhole and directed it to Alpha Centauri; entering it at point two of C. The crew shut down the device to close the worm hole, when they were nearly torn apart a few seconds later. In that time, they had travelled so far that, it took nearly twelve days to return in normal space.

The Casimir Emitter was a major accomplishment itself; easily as complex as the gravity generator, or the Anti-Matter Pulse Engine. The final version employs two curved plates, like

dish antenna; a smaller one mounted ahead of a larger one. Both of these thin covers are attached to substantial bowls that; incorporate radio frequency heating to maintain terphenyl-based heat transfer fluid to above its optimum pumping point of eleven degrees Celsius. The rear saucer emitting surface is mounted on its inside face; while its inner bowl overlay is on the rear exterior. When the emitter is activated, the heating radio frequency is increased along with the fluid pump rate to promptly elevate the plates to six hundred seventy-five degrees Celsius; as servos bring the bowl faces to within one nanometer of each other; producing a substantial buildup of exotic particles. Since the inner dish has a smaller diameter than the outer one, spill-over occurs into a magnetic field; that keeps the, supposed, tachyons from dissipating or evaporating into space. An RF generator, sequences coils along the central pole to accelerate and direct the focused particles to the desired point in space.

After analysis the Black team came up with a sounder structural design; employing their tri-layer shielding to protect the vessel from the turbulence of the phenomena, among other forces. Along with the plan, they presented a timeline for assembly of two vessels; and, the construction of orbital assembly docks in the preliminary steps, prior to building them. The new designs incorporated a large enough footprint for a full field strength gravity generator and all the infrastructure for long period interstellar flights. Three years later, the two ships were a reality.

Both ships could be seen, in orbit, as bright stars, from on the ground at night. At three hundred nineteen meters by one hundred eighty-five meters and four decks high, they were truly massive. They contained all the technological advantages developed by Black's teams, using CCIA, over the last few decades. The lower deck contained gravity generator, both fission and fusion reactors and power generators, both IPE and AAMP engines, water recycling, waste recycling, power distribution, ventilation and air recycling, shield generator power and magnetics and a web of magnetic shielded conduits that conducted particles from the accelerator to other areas requiring them.

Deck two was all storage. The bow section held hundreds of upright twenty-meter-long cylinders of oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, argon and methane gas; and the distribution systems to pump them where needed. The mid-section held banks and banks of freezers filled with frozen foods and rows of racking containing boxed and canned foods of all descriptions. The aft section held supplies for crew and ship; like clothing and spare parts.

The deck above that one contained a mess hall and galley for two hundred. Aft of that, was a gymnasium and pool facility. The mid-section bore a sizable sickbay. The aft section had three sub-sections of living quarters.

Deck four was divided between more living quarters, offices and the main navigation bridge. The deck plating above that was enclosed in transparent aluminum and held rows and rows of upright racks with plant boxes full of soil growing fresh foods they would need. Large areas of its surface were planted with fruit trees and grass; and in the aft portion an apiary, supported by two bee keepers, provided the technical knowledge to keep the plant life fertile and productive.

The outer hull was constructed of carbon fiber coated one-hundred-millimeter-thick 7039 - T6 aluminum armor plate, which maintains ductile strength at cryogenic temperatures, laminated to fifty millimeters 3033 aluminum plate. Thermal heat exchangers from the power generation, water reactor units and recycling machinery in the lowest deck warmed the inside of this plating and the outer surface of the inner hull. Part of the tri-layer shielding, a powerful magnetic field aligned by a core through the mid-ship was focused between the two hulls as a guard against penetration by cosmic rays and solar particles. The exterior of the inner hull was a fifty-millimeter-thick layer of 3033 aluminum laminated to seventy-five-millimeter-thick plate of Grade 38 armor plate titanium. Small ion generators would produce charged particles held in place between the magnetic field in the hull and one generated outside the ship. The magnetic - ionic - magnetic layering acts as shielding against all sorts of solid and directed energy sources. Each ship was crewed by four hundred thirty officers and enlisted personnel.

Those two FTL vessels were christened at their dry docks, in space on February 25, 2051. Training and trials took another six months. There was a short shake-down cruise to ensure the ships could do everything they were supposed to. Most of the concepts used in the design of these vessels are still in use.

On September 1, 2051, the two ships designated PT-1 and PT-2 left dock for Alpha Centauri.

Once in FTL mode, they could no longer communicate with WEASA. Communications would only be destroyed, if sent through the vortex. So, WEASA would not know the status of the mission until the return of the vessels; sometime about September 22.

The exploratory portion ended with the safe return of PT-1 and PT-2 on September 21, 2051; but, the true heavy lifting literally began the day after.

.....

Over the next two years WEASA first selected and assigned two thousand to move to a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri A that, they renamed Rigil in to honor Rigil Kentaurus the ancient Arabic name for the system. About six hundred were actually dispatched to it; while the balance remained detached on Earth to conduct work needed to inhabit it. The group on Rigil elected a governing council; which, formally requested membership into the Empire. A new constitution was drafted, based on the original planetary one, creating a government that would rule associated worlds within a space born Empire within a fifty light-years radius of Earth. This new empire was named Orion; the name of the arm the two systems inhabit in the Milky Way. Both Earth and Rigil formally requested membership in the Empire; signing onto the new constitution.

The Orion Empire constitution guaranteed representation to all member planets on the basis of ten assembly members from each world; with final legislative assent resting in the Imperial Throne; as it did on Earth. The Earth assembly sent ten of its members and Rigil elected ten and sent them to the new Orion Empire Legislative Assembly to ratify the constitution and begin working on legislation. Earth's government transferred WEASA to the Orion Empire. In marathon sittings, the Orion Assembly enacted legislation establishing the means to raise revenues through taxation; granted charters to both Earth and Rigil as members of the new Empire; wrote and enacted a criminal code; enacted business law; changed WEASA's name to the OESA; and, enacted law chartering the OESA as a military body responsible for defending the constitution, safeguarding the citizens of the Empire, protecting territory within its borders and exploring and expanding its boundaries. Then, they embedded The Rules and Regulation of the OESA into statute; appointed its Command & Control and all senior officers; and, approved its five-year budget and fifteen-year plan.

In the meantime, Black's team designed a drone that could employ the Casimir Emitter to open a wormhole and carry messages; thus, establishing long distance communications, in space. A message could now be sent across the Empire's entire one hundred light-year expanse in less than fourteen days.

The OESA grew rapidly under C&C, Fleet Admiral Robert Simmons', direction; meeting many of its goals and objectives within projected timelines. In twelve years, twenty-four fleets

consisting of a Carrier Class Vessel supported by a flotilla of six warships patrolled its space. Each Carrier sported over a hundred Raptor Class one-man fighters and carried fifteen-hundred Marine troops and their command staff. Each Fleet was commanded by a Vice Admiral. Groups of six Fleets fell under the direction of a Quadrant Command managing all the territory within a ninety-degree wedge of the fifty light-year orb that was the Empire. They had only enough capacity to actually defend a radius of twenty-six light-years; a region that added six advanced intelligent humanoid species to the Empire, in that period; growing the Legislative Assembly to eighty members.

The Tau Ceti system, just under twelve light years from home, was the first system where humanoid life was discovered. Tau Ceti F is an earth sized world orbiting its star at a fifty-two-million-mile radius. This would have been a close orbit in the Sol system; but, the planet had low levels of carbon dioxide and hydrocarbons in its atmosphere and the star has less than sixty percent of the luminosity of Sol. So, though it was a little warmer than Earth, this planet was by no means arid. The population closely resembled humans, was technologically advanced, enjoyed a rich culture and valued a long heritage. Though wary, at first, they welcomed the Empire representatives with opened arms. Things rolled along for ten days. Then, several Ceti Fleet members showed signs of illness; as did a host of planetary residents. It turned out, they had exchanged bacteria and viruses neither side had immunity to. By 2081, all initial contacts were made in full environmental suits; until medical studies were completed and immunity could be established for conflicting contagions. At any rate, all five of these worlds joined the Empire; giving it more strength than had been imagined in the planning days.

With Orion Empire Space Agency expansion came the problem of actually managing the space and its members. The OESA was always stretched to its limits. In 2065, Simmons filed a proposal, with the Secretary of Defense, to grow and restructure the whole organization, over five years. The OESA statute was amended; so, each Fleet would contain two Tactical Groups; each with its own Carrier supported by a Cruiser, Three Frigates and two Supply Ships. In addition, two additional Fleets would be added within each Quadrant Command. Fleet command structure was modified to include a Commodore to run each Carrier Group and a Brigadier General to command the Marine Contingent.

Over the next one hundred and twenty-five years the Empire continued to follow pretty much the same pattern. By 2206, its reach had extended to fit the one hundred light-year

description in the now revised Constitution of the Orion Empire. In the middle of that year, the forty-fifth member planet was chartered by the Empire. It's Legislative Assembly now seated four hundred fifty members; all enjoying the great benefits of a symbiotic relationship. Andrew I had come and gone, after the death of Victoria I in 2085. Edward II reigned until 2135. He was followed by Steven I, who passed away in 2190. Stephen II reigned until 2216. By 2216 it was Edward III who was the Emperor. All the Delnikov rulers had lived up to everything Edward I and Old Tom had envisioned.

By that time, an additional twenty-five percent of the former United States had recovered and was inhabited, under the Empire. The Empire now actually occupied the territory to, north thirty-seven degrees, across nearly the entire planet. More territory had returned to a temperate climate; but, it took a lot of resources to clean up and rebuild areas devastated by the weather and changing shorelines. Though badly scarred, in some regions and wiped clean in others, Earth's policies were promoting its recovery to a parkland; with major populations away from waterways and valuable farmland.

OESA continued to grow during the two century period. By 2216, each Quadrant Command consisted of sixteen fleets; managed in groups of eight by two subordinate Theatre Commands. The service's one and three quarter million personnel manned its headquarters on Rigil, and the sub-commands directing over a thousand warships, supported by over two hundred thousand marines, fourteen thousand fighter craft, two hundred seventy supply vessels, eight Theatre Command stations, eight Mobile Hospital Commands, two commands and assembly and construction facilities orbiting three different planetary systems.

On the civilian side of things, Rigil boasted robust and burgeoning industrial, agricultural and economic sectors that; made it almost completely self-sufficient. In fact, the need to import basic necessities, building materials and supplies had dwindled to nothing by around 2145.

The OESA's new headquarters, still at the original location on Rigil, had nearly three square kilometers of floor space to support its thousands of staff members; and sat on fifty acres of parkland beside the city of Rigil New York, inhabited by more than a hundred thousand citizens; supporting the OESA and the massive ship building fabrication facility ten kilometers to its east. A new OESA Academy was under construction to the north end of the city.

.....

Six commanders succeeded Simons over the years. In 2216, thirty-six-year-old Admiral David Williamson was promoted to Fleet Admiral and confirmed to the position of Command and Control of the OESA.

As a Quadrant Commander, it had been readily apparent that, the service was stretched to meet its obligations. It sounded big; and seemed even bigger; when, you analyzed it on paper in terms of personnel, assets and budget. In fact, it seemed mammoth when, you were in the position of running it. But, there was over four million cubic light years of space and more than four hundred and fifty systems to patrol. And, the Empire now had enemies. There had been several small border skirmishes and two small wars since reaching the hundred light year border. FTL flight had exploded in the nearly two centuries since its inception; which led to a corresponding growth in first, shipping; then piracy. Williamson spent a lot of time travelling between Earth and Rigil to discuss it with his superiors. But, he wasn't sure how to achieve an increase in strength without breaking the bank. He had created a special task force of fifty people to study the problem.

What they finally came up with was a program with some trade-offs. Two cruiser class vessels and two frigates would be added to each fleet. This would give each Tactical Carrier Group two cruisers four frigates and two supply ships with the objective of creating the ability to break up each Group into two squadrons to increase their reach. The problem was that; these squadrons would be unbalanced. One would be attached to a Carrier and one would not; since, each Group would still only have one Carrier. It was the best compromise at the time. It required the construction and purchase of two hundred fifty-six warships and an increase of nearly three hundred thousand personnel. Capital expenditures would reach nearly fifteen billion sovereigns per year; while the operating budget would exceed ninety-one billion sovereigns per year during the period. The OESA budget did not include the money for the off-campus development except for the Academy itself. The Empire was spending nearly one hundred billion sovereigns on planetary development, at the same time as the OESA expansion would take place.

A proposal to do the expansion over a two-year period was prepared along with revised budgets for the next five years. All received legislative approval with a great sigh of relief. Any larger expansion, at this time, would have created a need for deficit spending; which was contrary to normal Empire policies.

It was on May 15, 2247 that, Williamson became aware of Commodore George T. Bryant. He was acquainted with the man; since, he had placed his name in nomination, when he was promoted to Commodore and Assigned as Commander of the Canada Group in the Borealis Fleet, under Vice Admiral Blackman. The latest report seemed to indicate the thirty-one-year-old was a real up-and-comer.

An incident drew Bryant and his Canada Group to Rho Corona Borealis. This is a beautiful system nearly fifty-eight light years from Rigil. It restructured its planetary government to conform with Empire requirements; when, it joined the Empire thirty-five years earlier. The old religious and political hatreds from before entry in the Empire had now resurfaced. A group was espousing replacing the planetary government and separating from the Empire.

Vice Admiral Blackman was on leave, on Earth; so, Bryant had no immediate superior to turn to. He evaluated the situation and determined that the situation was urgent. Thousands had died. Vast areas were devastated; and an enemy column was five miles to the south of the Capital City. He deemed he didn't have the twenty-days it would take communications drones to exchange messages regarding orders on the situation. Two hundred marines were dispatched to the planet to break into squads of ten and get on-the-ground, up-to-the-minute intelligence on the situation. A day later, reports piled in. There were essentially fifteen large enemy formations fighting on three fronts; including the one outside the capital. All were heavily armed; including the armor captured from government forces in a series of blitz attacks. Several formerly picturesque regions of the planet bore the terrible scars of vicious battles; some evident from orbit. At the same time, this rebellious group had dispatched small cells of terrorists to the most populous regions wreaking havoc and terror with lightning attacks on civilians and bombings of heavily frequented retail businesses, restaurants and underground transportation systems. Two complete divisions of the planetary army, totaling over sixteen thousand troops, had been completely annihilated. Commodore Bryant formulated a plan with the planetary defense ministry to move troops away from targeted sites without giving them new objectives, got last minute intelligence, advised his teams; then, issued orders to his Group. From orbit, each cruiser and a frigate bombarded remote sites with their high powered kinetic rods; while, two frigates took on the capital city formation. The Raptor class fighters in the Canada's hangars capable of atmospheric and space operations were dispatched - thirty to each of the three fronts to support the twelve hundred Marines the Regimental Colonel sent in after the bombardment to fight

alongside ten thousand government ground forces. Ten fighters were deployed to patrol the space around the Canada Group; in an abundance of caution; though the rebels were not space capable. Remnants of enemy ground forces resisted fiercely; but, their depleted numbers were no match for government troops. By May 4, 2245, the rebellion was, all but, dead; along with, thirty-seven thousand enemy combatants. Ten rebel leaders were quickly captured and summarily executed, by the planetary government, to reinforce the notion that this type of rebellion would not be tolerated. Canada Group lost seven marines. Ten suffered injuries of various degrees. Though they had prevailed in the major confrontations, the widespread guerilla units still attempted to inflict terror; so, Bryant ordered the Marines to assist law enforcement in rooting them out. He forwarded a detailed report to Blackman, at the Espanola Group and Admiral Gogorra, the Theatre Six Commander. Gogorra passed it on to Admiral Dickinson the Quadrant Three Commander. Blackman received it, first; since, he had returned to the Espanola on August 8. The Espanola Group was parked in Eta Corona Borealis, just under ten light years away. Bryant's own contribution to the report was nauseating to read; since, it concentrated on the aftermath. He had taken time to go ashore and tour ravaged areas of the capital. Rubble from collapsed storefronts was punctuated by bloody body parts. The death, destruction and devastation, it described graphically, was sickening.

A day after his return, Blackman received the probe with its communiqué. Bryant was still at Rho. His Group was still assisting the planetary government. Blackman could see that the chain of command had been advised. He sent his own message to Theatre Command recommending a promotion and citation; incorporating the report in the request; and ordered Espanola Group to Rho to assist Bryant.

Williamson called in all the Quadrant Commanders, after digesting the report.

"Did you see this, Brian?" he asked Dickinson as he turned his data pad to him.

"Yes, I saw it, David. This guy is good. He made Flag Rank at twenty-eight - the youngest ever. He has great tactical skills. He can sum up a situation quickly. He's very decisive. And, his people love him. They say he is the enlisted man's commander. No bullshit, though. He's all piss and vinegar, when it's business. But, he's loyal to his people and they are loyal to him. I think he should get the Order of Merit and move up a level; but, he isn't going to want to come in from the field. He's a nuts and bolts type.' Dickinson did not hold back; as, he referred to the norm of

no Rear Admirals in field assignments. 'Your biggest problem may be holding him back - he's so decisive. But, I don't really think that's a problem. It hasn't been, so far. He added.

"So, you want to recommend him for the award and a promotion. You think he's a mover and shaker, do you? Williamson chuckled.

"For sure, David. He's the future. And, there's a couple more. A young Captain by the name of Nichols; under Bryant's Command; and, a Commodore named Tonaka; who is Blackman's other Group Commander. That Fleet is like a little gold mine. It's a real testament to Blackman. We should move him along, too." Dickinson's enthusiasm was apparent.

"Okay, okay, let's move it along to the Secretary of Defense - but don't keep it down to just Bryant. Let's do a couple of lateral moves, at the same time. Move Tonaka and Nichols to Boots Fleet. Let's see how they do under another Commander." Williamson said with a laugh as he recovered the data pad.

(The Group of Admirals in the room did not realize that they were creating a turning point. This would launch George Bryant. He would be a force for the OESA like no other, since Admiral Simmons.)

Chapter 5 The Promotion!

Thursday July 25, 2255

The week has been a busy one. I kept the Shenzhen on site at Rho, for a couple of days after the Fleet left, to aid the government. This was the second incident there. Admiral Bryant quelled one when he Commanded the Canada Group ten years ago. He had been extremely thorough in his attempt to eradicate the infection. And, the Empire did view rebellion - especially religious - politically motivated, as an infection. The procedure for dealing with it is very clearly spelled out, in detail, in the Rules and Regulations; and, that procedure is strictly adhered to. But, a few bad seeds at Rho had obviously escaped the wrath of the Empire, that first time. Now that I'm sure we have squashed the rebellion, I am ordering the Shenzhen out of orbit and pointing it in the direction of the Theatre Command, now located in an uncharted brown dwarf system at fifteen hours, inclination plus forty-five degrees and seventy light years out from Earth. It is on the same trajectory from Earth as HR5581; but ten light years closer to home. The location is central to all eight Fleet patrols in our Theatre Command. We actually arrive there on July 23rd. The entire Fifth Mobile is in this region, on combined exercises with Quadrant 3 Command.

After the official promotion and award ceremony in the Theatre Command's giant amphitheater, there is a reception with a lot of great food and booze. I keep it light; though. I have been ordered to a meeting with Nichols and Bryant; to be convened, immediately after this shindig. We sit about the boardroom table; once all the formal courtesies are complete.

"Kurt - I think I speak for both of us when I say - good job.' There is admiration in Nichol's voice as his arm motion indicates he is including himself and Bryant. 'We also want to congratulate you on the award and the promotion. You're on the fast track list, now. We'd like to offer you a new command. Your rank would remain, as is; but, your responsibility would change. We'd give you a carrier. That means you'd have six thousand on board and nearly four thousand within your Command and a lot of expensive hardware. The negative trade-off is that; you'd fall under a Group Commander. You wouldn't be autonomous, anymore. But, carrier command is essential experience to a Flag level field command. On the other hand, there isn't any rush - we'd just like to see your name moving further up the list, sooner than later. How do you feel about it?' He finishes as I notice how intently Admiral Bryant is observing my reaction to the offer. I take pause to think it over and to frame my answer.

"Admirals, I am truly flattered by all of this. And, I don't want to pull my punches. I do want a major tactical command like a Theatre, some day. And, I know I owe you gentlemen for the second chance I was given by you in 2248. Some of the others in that notorious group have done well, too; but, half the group is gone; because, they did not recover from the incident, when given the opportunity.

But, I am only thirty-two; and, I haven't even had the Shenzhen a year. Detached frigate duty is a great place for a captain to hone tactical skills needed in flag rank postings. It sharpens your ability to cut through all the chaos and sum up a situation, quickly. So, I think that, I want to stay where I am for just a little longer, if you don't mind. I'd snap up a carrier command; if, you'll repeat the offer, in another six months." I finish as I feel my face flush. I hope I have not insulted these two very special men.

"I think we've just been snubbed, George; but, I'm not really sure." Nichols says to Bryant with feigned confusion and a smile.

"I am!" Bryant declares with a laugh. 'Consider the offer on auto-repeat in six months. We'll expect you to accept a carrier command, the end of next January. And, we'll be looking for your application to the War College within a couple of months of accepting a carrier. But, something you said struck a chord with me. We have always considered fighter pilot experience a prerequisite to a carrier command; and, the carrier command a prerequisite to a Flag position. But, you've made me scratch my head in thought. I think that, I will be suggesting to the C & C that, detached command experience should be a requirement of field flag commands, too. It will give the Flag Officer that much more experience to draw from; and, it will let us see, in advance, if an officer has what it takes for a tactical command.

Kurt, I just want to reinforce that, I think you've got the right attitude; regarding managing your own career. It takes a lot of self-discipline to know when to leap and when to hold back. Your point score just went up another ten points with me - and, I'm sure the same is true for Admiral Nichols." Bryant concludes with a smile.

"Ditto, for me" Nichols pipes in. 'You're going to make a fine Admiral, someday soon." He adds.

"Thank you, Admirals" I stood and offered my hand to Nichols first. We all shook hands. I step back, salute and exit the room.

Now, I'm sitting in my own office re-examining the orders regarding this joint exercise. For the Shenzhen, it is still business as usual. I am still to patrol random areas in the current Theatre 9 locale. Opening my data pad, I call up the current "Deployed Fleet Positional Chart" to see where everyone's at, now. We've been out of circulation for a couple of days. 45 Bootes is currently unpatrolled; so, I ordered the bridge to set a course for the system, which is about twenty light years from our current position. We'll be in the vortex for about four days. My pad says it is nearly time for the next training session; which, I'd reschedule to the 25th; because of all the activity, over the past week.

.....
"Captain on the deck." Someone yelps as I enter the training room.

"As you were, ladies and gentlemen!" I snap back, before they can all rise. 'I'm glad to see you all looking so perky and ready to learn a little more. Who's got the answers to last week's questions?" I ask.

Hands went up all over the room. I picked a very young looking ensign to do the honors.

"Let's see if I can do as well as Gabe did, last week.' She said with a smile; then, continued. 'First you asked, what motivated the formation of the OESA? My short answer is necessity; but, it was really more than that. The world was devastated and its population was decimated. The people that survived had strong memories of the system that was gone. They remembered the constant economic roller coaster, the gridlock caused by partisan politics, the constant wars and terrorist attacks and the environmental negligence that led to most of the apocalyptic events. So, formation of the Empire was predictable. The two major founders of the Empire were both believers in scientific research of all types; but, seemed to understand that humanity had come too close to the brink. I think they believed we needed to be out in space to hedge our bets. If we have humans on several worlds, it is unlikely that, we will end up as an extinct species. In Old Tom's case, I believe he had an unquenchable curiosity about space. I think he was enchanted, curious, enthralled and scared about it, all at the same time.

Then you asked, what one man is responsible for interstellar space travel? The easy answer is Dr. Black; but, I don't really give him the credit. He definitely worked out all the technical kinks; but, the real driving force was Tom McCracken. He was the one who steered Edward I towards research. He was the one who ensured the recovery of the old NASA system. He influenced a lot of things, during the early days; but, I think he was a visionary who really loved

the thought of interstellar travel. I believe if he was alive today, he'd be out here with us." I cut her off with an interjection.

"That is a great answer. Most would have said Dr. Black; but, you found a way to get two people in, when I asked for the one man who was responsible for our ability to travel interstellar space. But, I have to say you're right. Old Tom was responsible for a lot; but, he really seemed to have an affinity for space travel. He wanted our people to spread their wings. Good answer! Continue on." I finished.

"Your next question was; what one man is responsible for molding the OESA into the configuration employed today? Admiral Williamson is the first C&C to really modify the service to the form it is right now; but, I think Simmons had already put us on this track before he retired. By then, we had the four levels of field commands we use today. We've beefed them up and added technology to strengthen everything; but, we still operate in the same way; as, we did in Simmons day.

Your last question was, who is the C&C of the OESA? This answer requires two names; since, today, the service is headed by two Fleet Admirals. It is too big for one person to run; and, it's getting bigger. The C&C is Admiral Brian Dickinson and Admiral David Williamson." Ensign Glish sat down as she finished.

"Very good Ensign. Now we're going to move on into the recent past; where one man really made things start to pop for the OESA.

.....

A communications drone with an encrypted folder for Commodore Bryant appeared off the Canada's bow on Saturday May 26, 2247. He enlisted the Canada's Captain to witness that, he decrypted the message without it going through other hands. It was from Admiral Dickinson who commanded Quadrant Three which was parent to Theatre Five and the Borealis Fleet. There was a text file and a video file. He opened them both to find, he was ordered to report to Dickinson by nine hundred hours on June 1, 2247, at Theatre Five Command. He was to be awarded the OESA Award for Tactical Merit on June 2; and would be elevated one level in the same ceremony. He noted on the memo that accompanied the order that, Blackman was copied on it. It just so happened that both the Borealis Fleet Groups were together at Rho Corona Borealis. After his return from Earth, Blackman had ordered Espanola Group to Rho to help out with the post operation cleanup and planetary recovery. So, George texted him that; he was going to Shuttle

over to the Espanola, immediately. Moving between ships always bothered Bryant in those days. It was written in the regulations and common practice for a full color party to meet a visiting Flag officer and pipe him aboard. It was fine for a first time entry of a visiting Flag Officer; but, it was a formality he had never liked for flag officers travelling between ships in their own fleet. There are ways to show respect without so much pomp and ceremony; and, it is not very efficient to tie up all those people because one person was coming aboard.

He saluted and greeted Vice Admiral Blackman in the shuttle bay, once the bosun was finished piping him aboard; then, turned to the Espanola's Captain, returned his salute and asked permission to board the vessel. Permission was granted.

George and Blackie quietly made small talk as they took elevators and negotiated corridors to get to his office just behind the Flag Bridge. In the office, they discussed the order. Blackman said the C&C, all four Quadrant Commanders and the Theatre Commander were incredibly impressed with his quick decisive handling of the Rho problem. He would receive the tactical award and would be promoted to Rear Admiral. He would also be reassigned as Assistant Borealis Commander to justify the rank; though, he would still directly control Canada Group. The Vice Admiral also explained that the entire Fleet had been invited to the ceremony and relieved of normal responsibilities, until after the promotion. Three of the five shifts would be allowed to attend, at each individual's discretion.

Theatre Five was now sitting off 59 Virgo, thirty-six-and-a-quarter light year away. That is normally a six-and-a-half-day trip; but, Blackman authorized an increase to twenty-five percent of light speed, through the vortex, to decrease the travel time to five-days, six hours - they would just get there on time. He sent orders to the entire Fleet; commanding the ships to jump to 59 Virgo, immediately. Meanwhile, Bryant sent orders of his own to his quarter master. He was setting up a surprise of his own for Theatre Command.

By the time they exited the jump, Bryant's yeoman had a complete dress uniform, a mess uniform and two sets of daily work uniforms cleaned and pressed. In the normal working environment, officers wore creased gray slacks and a grey shirt with no tie. The shirts bore epaulettes with shoulder marks indicating rank and displayed the rank on both collar points. Flag officer's shirts also bore a single fine gold braid around the top of the cuffs. The uniform was completed by black leather boots. The dress uniform consisted of the same color gray creased slacks with a fine black braid down each outer seam, from waistband to the cuff bottom. The

shirt was the same color as the slacks with epaulettes and the rank insignia on the collar points. A black silk tie and black jacket completed the ensemble. The tie was always accompanied by a fine silver jeweled tack bearing the Fleet's Pennant and the jacket's cloth epaulettes bore ceremonial shoulder boards bearing a crown and the rank insignia. He would need at least one set of dailies for meetings and work and one set of dress for the ceremony. Having two sets of each ready meant that, he would never have a problem if there was an accident. The Quartermaster had his special materials ready; and, invitations had been sent to two twenty-five person teams of Officers and Enlisted men throughout the Entire Fleet; along with a special request to Admiral Gogorra, the theatre commander.

The entire Fleet parked in space amongst at least ten other visiting craft and the six vessels attached to the India, the Super Carrier classed vessel that served as Theatre Five Command. The mayhem at its docking bays would be incredible, when everyone started transferring over. It took a ten-person team with lift trucks to move Bryant's special materials to Hangar Two aboard the super carrier, where they would be used. Hangar Two stores and launches half of the vessel's two hundred twenty fighter craft. There is enough space on its deck for service pits capable of repairing up to twenty fighters at a time. In addition, several spaces are designated as refueling stations on the deck. In all, it occupies a portion of the deck that is two hundred fifty by one hundred twenty-five meters and thirty-five meters in height. For the visit, most fighters had been moved to Hangar One with the exception of twenty readied ones parked in the two launch chutes of both Hangars. A knee-wall set up to section-off a large central area of the empty hangar was surrounded by elevated bleachers to seat up to seven hundred personnel – over a thousand would fit; including those standing. Another five hundred would fit on the bleachers assembled on the mezzanine surrounding the entire area. The floor inside the walls had been completely covered in an aggregate that resembled silica sand. All was ready for Bryant's team to take over.

George and his personal entourage went to the carrier immediately. George was piped aboard and his crew was accompanied to quarters, while he went straight to Admiral Gogorra's office. They exchanged the normal military courtesies; then, Dickinson greeted and welcomed him warmly and personally.

'George, you really impressed a lot of people. You have a fine record; but, that last action really separated you from the pack. Your being awarded the OESA Award for Tactical Excellence in the Field. It is a rare one. As far as I know, it's been handed out only twice before.

But, that was truly a great decision and a fine tactical operation; so, you deserve it. We want to promote you to Rear Admiral and assign you as Deputy Fleet Commander of Borealis. It's not really much of a change. You will still run Canada Group and Bill will still run the Fleet. But, it will make a difference, when Bill is away or if he's incapacitated. You will automatically step in as Fleet Commander; because, of rank and position. Otherwise, it's a fair raise in pay. But, most important, it makes you the next man in line for a fleet, when a job opens up. We all agree that, you should be on a fast track to the top. Are you in for it?' Dickinson finished it all with his usual bluster.

"Yes sir, I do want my own Fleet. If that means, I have to take on a position you made up for me; then, so be it. I will still be in tactical command of a Group; so, I'm sure I will be happy until the next step. Thank-you, sir. I also wanted to thank Admiral Gogorra for the preparations in Hangar Two. My people tell me that, things could not be better." George responded to a somewhat bewildered Dickinson.

"Good. I'm glad that's settled. Tomorrow's ceremony will be at ten hundred hours. The whole thing will take about an hour and a half. There'll be a light lunch, at noon. At fifteen hundred hours we'll be holding a reception for you. There are a few people coming who really want to meet you, personally. The press will be there. Everyone back home is all fired up. The major electronic and smaller paper outfits are all calling you a hero. Everyone wants to meet you. I thought I should give you a heads up; so, you don't get a surprise."

"Thanks Admiral. I will be on my best behavior. But, I really don't feel like a hero. And, even though I know I did the right thing, under the circumstances; and that, I would do it again; I can't help wishing I didn't have to kill so many people to stop so many more from being murdered. But, I would do it again; if faced with the same conditions." George repeated as he rose from his seat.

"That's why we like you. You think quick. Your tactical instincts are great. And, you can make the hard decisions. That's what it takes, at the top." The bluster was there, again as Dickinson finished.

"If you'll excuse me, sir." Bryant said as he stiffened to attention.

"Your dismissed, Commodore." Dickinson responded.

Bryant found his way to his quarters. The super carriers are massive ships that house a huge group of command staffs; so, there is considerably more living quarters than on a standard

one. Correspondingly, there is more room on every other deck, too. Minimum ship displacement is determined by the gravity generator; which requires the accelerator streams to be fired along a minimum one kilometer length to achieve ninety percent of the speed of light to form a gravity field eighty percent the strength of earth. A CCIA had long ago determined that, the most efficient space to put it in is a rectangular shape with wide radius corners. Three hundred eighty-four meters long by two hundred meters wide, with forty-five-meter radius corners is the optimum minimum outside footprint required to attain eighty percent of earth's gravity. So, this size was chosen for the frigate. Cruisers are based on a platform one hundred forty percent of the frigate. Carriers and supply vessels have an elongated platform that is one hundred and fifty percent of the frigate length; but only one hundred and ten percent of its width.

Frigates are nine decks in height. Cruisers have eleven decks. Carriers are fifteen decks including three small decks stacked as an island to the port mid-ship portion of the vessel. The lowest of these three decks is the Flag Bridge. The middle island deck contains the navigation bridge. The top most deck contains the flight control tower. Each of those decks contain stations and offices for the officers involved. The Navigation Deck contains the Captain's quarters and quarters for all the senior bridge officers; while the Flag Deck has quarters and offices for up to six personnel. The upper deck has only its bridge.

As far as weaponry is concerned, everything is based on multiples of the weapons on the Frigates. They are equipped with ten, twelve-port missile launchers capable of launching the small fission and antimatter ones; in addition to, the larger fusion and antimatter missiles. These launchers are scattered around the upper deck and keel; with several attached on port and starboard hull plating. Port and starboard bow and stern torpedo ports are capable of dispatching two antimatter torpedoes from each position. Each of the cannon mount assemblies peppered over the fore and aft decks is fitted with two one-hundred-megawatts two-and-a-half-meter neutral particle cannons and several dual kinetic rail guns firing three-ton, two-meter long depleted uranium spears that achieve velocities of sixteen kilometers a second within one kilometer of the gun muzzle; generating concussive force of fifteen kilotons with deep piercing capabilities. Particle cannons are used on targets from very close proximity to fifteen kilometers range. Rail Guns are used between ten kilometers and fifty thousand kilometers range on both enemy ships and planetary targets. An enemy vessel within the overlap will be treated to an assault by both types of cannons. These cannon units are always mounted around the bow and

stern upper deck plate; and, several assemblies are mounted along the center of that deck plating and the keel; with many more gracing the sides of the vessel. Arial bombardment capability is achieved by dropping six-meter long, six-ton, depleted uranium filled tungsten rods from high orbit. These “gods’ rods” will generate a fifteen kiloton force; reaching speeds of over eighteen kilometers per second, in a One-G environment, on impact; and, have very deep penetration capabilities by virtue of their hardness and shape. Cruisers sport one and a half times the same weaponry. Carriers are equipped with double that of the Frigates along with their one-man fighter craft. A Frigate’s power systems and gravity generating main particle accelerator can supply the cannons indefinitely. With stores full, the rail guns would be capable of firing two thousand shots per assembly. A Frigate stocks nearly five hundred fission missiles, one hundred fusion ones and five hundred chemical ones, in addition to one hundred of the six ton rods. Ships’ weapons stores are proportionate by vessel size to those of the Frigate, except for the Carriers; which store an additional two hundred fusion type and one thousand chemical missiles for their Raptors.

A supply vessel is essentially the same size as a carrier without the upper island. Only six decks take up the space of twelve on a carrier. Each deck has the height needed for massive stacked storage.

The super carrier class vessels are a hundred and fifty percent scale of the standard carrier class. They are truly behemoths. At eight hundred sixty-five meters in length by three hundred thirty abeam; with seventeen decks, towering one hundred eighty-six meters above the keel, not including peripherals like antennae and weapons; they are rated at six hundred forty-two thousand metric tonnes displacement. There are thirty-six hundred officers and crew involved in ships operations. Three thousand marines and somewhere around forty-four hundred Command Staff personnel are also housed in these ships. With civilian contractors and family members, over twelve thousand three hundred are aboard each super carrier. These vessels house two hundred twenty fighter-class Raptors; though, full strength is considered to be two hundred. In addition, they are the supply depots for the Fleets they serve; so, it takes three hundred thirty logistics personnel, just to handle movement of supplies. By comparison, the standard carrier class vessels house thirty-five hundred operational staff, four hundred Fleet and Group command personnel and sixteen hundred marines. One hundred ten Raptors are attached to standard carriers. These standard carriers carry only the supplies and materials they would need for two

weeks' operations; which is why each Task Force is accompanied by two supply vessels travelling between the Fleet and the Theatre Command to maintain an inventory to draw from.

George called his Chief of Staff and the Chief's senior team to his quarters. They sat about for an hour discussing what this promotion actually meant for him; and how, he could really make anything out of the position; or, would he still just really be a Group Commander. Bryant made it clear that, he liked and respected Blackman and did not want it to become a source of friction. In the end, they realized that the only real advancement was when Blackman went on leave. Technically, he would enjoy a little more authority. The Delegation of Authority portion of the Rules and Regulations automatically doubled his autonomous financial approval level, with the change in rank. But, that really meant very little; because, anything he did would be based on a Fleet Plan approved by Blackman. One additional benefit under the same section was the right to make tactical decisions, on his own. The decision at RCB had not been without risk. The kind of action he took was mandated; but, the regulation stipulated that, a Fleet Commander had that authority. He had been relatively certain Blackman would back him when, he wrote his orders; but, there had been a risk. In the DOA section, it gave responsibilities to the Empire by Rank; regardless of position. The authority to declare war on behalf of the Empire for the specific purposes of quelling a rebellion; stopping terrorist actions; and, repelling an enemy attack was clearly granted to an officer, in a tactical field command, at the level of Rear Admiral, or above. Since no Rear Admirals held tactical commands, until now, it had always been understood that only a Vice Admiral and above could assume the responsibility. But, armed with that section, George would no longer have had to worry about doing something that was clearly his duty. By the time they broke up, Bryant knew that, things would not be a lot different; but, he was sure of the benefits, responsibilities and authority that would emanate from the promotion and change in position. He questioned his Chief about preparations for the special event to be held in Hangar Two, late the next day.

On his own, he continued to search the Regulations. He needed to know his operational limits. How large a Command Staff was he permitted? What rank could he elevate his chief to? There was no precedent. There were lots of Rear Admirals commanding support departments in Headquarters, Quadrant Commands and Theatre Commands. But, there were none posted to tactical positions in field Commands. He was not sure what kind of access to the Fleet Commander's staff, he could expect. He had not needed it before; because there was not a

defined Chain of Command without the Commander. Now, he would definitely be in command, when Blackman was absent. There would be no conflict between him and the other Group Commander or; between him and the Brigadier Commanding the attached marines. He would now outrank both.

.....

That's enough for this session. I have things I must attend to. Dismissed!" Brubacher finished the recitation to the Junior Officers; who immediately began to rise and gather up belongings.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot; I've sent you all two more handouts. The first puts things in historical context. The second one is much more detailed." He called out; as, he turned and made a quick exit.

Chapter 6 Bryant

Wednesday June 2, 2247

"Ability will never catch up with the demand for it." Confucius

George Bryant has always been a man who keeps his cool; so, the frantic pace things moved at on June 2 didn't really seem to faze him. He was advised late on June 1 that, he was required in a meeting at Dickinson's office, at eight hundred hours on June 2nd. He rose at five hundred thirty, went for a jog through the corridors, did his workout in the gym and returned and ordered breakfast. When it arrived, he was sitting at the provided desk working; having shaved, showered and dressed in a daily uniform.

When he arrived at the required meeting, he was surprised to see Vice Admiral Blackman, Admiral Dickinson, Fleet Admiral Williamson and the back of a fourth person already seated opposite Beldura Gogorra, the Theatre Six Commander. As he came deeper into the room to pay the required respects, the changing perspective finally allowed him to see the attire of the unknown attendee. Though he was shocked to see Edward III, he did not show it outwardly; the benefit of a decade and a half of intense poker games.

Edward III had assumed the throne in 2215. Though, now in his late sixties, Edward cut an impressive figure. Tall, erect and regal in stature, he still sported a full head of black hair; though it was heavily streaked and sprinkled with steel gray. He wore no glasses; and, George guessed the teeth in the smile were all his own. He wore the traditional uniform of the throne. A black double breasted jacket sported a triple braid gold aiguillette hanging from the right shoulder epaulet, looping under the right arm and branching off to secure it on a gold button on the right breast jacket pocket; so as, to drape gently in on the right breast; and, a variety of regal medals dangled at the left breast. Embroidered gold crowns, on black shoulder boards trimmed in gold braid, accented both epaulets sewn into each shoulder of the jacket. Finely fitted and well pressed black slacks were adorned with gold piping; running down the outside seam of each leg. His military boots were polished to a high sheen.

George stopped at attention, saluted and said; "Commodore Bryant reporting, as ordered."

"Rest easy, George; and, take a seat." It was obvious, Williamson was in command, here.

"George, I'd like to introduce you to Edward III, our Emperor.' He said to Bryant; then, turned to the Emperor. 'Sir, this is Commodore George T. Bryant."

"I wanted to present your award; and, to meet you personally, George." The Emperor said; after the two had exchanged greetings. George noted the ease and warmth of the Monarch's smile.

"It is my pleasure, sir. I am honored." George responded without the usual awe of a first time acquaintance.

"Will you walk with me?" Edward said as he motioned to the door. 'If, you'll excuse us gentlemen; we'll be back in a few minutes." All others rose, in respect, as the two men left the room.

"George, I thought you might be a man I want to know. I can see by your record and your reaction to me that, you too are one of them! There are a few others. These people have my confidence. I trust them with my life. And, I feel you are a man of principal that, I could trust with my life." Edward paused; apparently seeking a response.

"Sir, I am not blindly loyal to your position, or the Empire. I am loyal because you earn that respect. You basically let your subjects run the Empire and only step in to resolve problems. You make sure we are well provided for. You are not a tyrant. But, if you were, I could not honestly say you'd have my loyalty." George said quietly; as, the two men negotiated the corridor.

"That's exactly what I mean. You are highly principled; and, you're frank. You are not afraid to speak your mind. Since Edward I, the Delnikovs have always had a few people they could really count on. People who wanted the best for the citizens of the Empire; without currying favor or profit - like Tom McCracken. And though we have tried to be beneficent, my family has had to be brutal at times. Look what you had to do on Rho Corona Borealis, in my name. But, the past taught that, some things do not work if people are to have true freedom. Some things are just not good for us. Anyway, my family has always sought to turn all authority over to the people. Each Emperor has watched for the right time; and, looked for the right way. I hope, I am the one to achieve success. But, I will not be able to do it alone. Though my inner group always remains loyal, they are ready to help me execute the change, at a moment's notice. But, some find the status quo very comfortable and will resist change. So, it will take some effort; if, it is to happen. When the time is right, I will call on you. In the meantime, I would like us to remain in contact; and maybe even become friends." Delnikov finished.

"Sir, I would be honored to help; and, to be a friend." George responded.

"Good, I'm glad that's settled. You will still have to make it the rest of the way up the chain of command, on your own. I don't show favoritism. But, I have no doubt that, you will be at the top soon enough, on your own. In the meantime, I want to thank you for your great service and for your quick action at Rho. If you had waited for approval from your superiors, RCB may be gone; and, we'd be in a war with a planet within our own boundaries. I also want to congratulate you on your impending promotion, now. By the way, I know of your planned event in Hangar Two. I have figured out what you're up to. I am a great fan, too. I will be there." The Emperor offered with a smile, as they now sauntered toward Williamson's office.

"Okay Blackie, the meeting's yours." Dickinson said.

"George, I know this promotion is a means of getting you a little closer to your own fleet. But, I want it to really count for something. Though, I will always have the last say, we will divide up Fleet responsibilities. You are permitted to increase your staff accordingly; and, you'll have full access to mine. In addition, though, I don't know what Theatre, Quadrant or HQ will do, you will have level nine security access, within the Fleet. That's the same as my own. If, no promotion comes along in the next nine months, we'll switch responsibilities. By the time you get a fleet of your own, you'll have done it all, on a regular basis." Blackman said with a smile.

"Thank you for the confidence, sir." George responded with a smile.

"George, you have my full confidence, too. I have approved Admiral Blackman's plan, for you. And you'll have level nine access at Theatre Command, too. You'll need it, if you have that access in the Fleet." Admiral Gogorra interjected.

"Okay Gents, we better break this up. It's nine hundred hours. We have to be in the hall in our monkey suits, soon." Williamson said with a smile as they all rose.

At the dais on stage an hour later, Williamson made a short speech about the auspicious occasion to the crowd that included a great deal of representation from the Borealis Fleet. Then, he called Bryant to the stage, for the award; as, he nodded to the Emperor who came to his side.

"OESA Command Order number 215903-9201 - To all citizens within the limits of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light years from the Orion Empire central government, at planet Earth; by order of the C&C and Quadrant 3 Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; George T. Bryant has been awarded the OESA Award of Tactical Excellence for swift action eliminating a possible civil war and preventing a threat to the government, property and citizens of the

Orion Empire. This action was in response to a rebellion and was completed on May 21, 2247 at Rho Corona Borealis. Signed - Fleet Admiral David Williamson May 31, 2247." He read the order as George stood in front of him at attention; then, Edward III pinned the medal on his left breast pocket. Both presenters stepped back and saluted Bryant. Williamson handed him the warrant and ribbon and congratulated him. The audience of eight thousand stood in applause.

He repeated the same procedure for the promotion; accompanied by Admirals Gogorra and Blackman. Williamson and Gogorra each replaced one collar and one shoulder pin with the new ones displaying two silver stars atop a silver number eight. They stepped back into line with Blackman. All three saluted Bryant.

"Ladies and gentlemen - officers and enlisted personnel - members of the press - Emperor Edward III - may I present to you Rear Admiral George T. Bryant" Blackman announced; as the audience rose to its feet and applauded.

The procedure was repeated a third time for the order assigning George to the position of Assistant Borealis Fleet Commander; this time by Gogorra. Applause was heavy.

The Emperor rose to his feet and took the podium.

"Hello everyone. I thought I should be here today. George Bryant did a great service for the Empire that probably resulted in saving millions of lives. I thought the least I could do was show my gratitude. He is an exemplary officer with extraordinary ability, who should continue to rise rapidly. I will watch his career with interest. Thank you Admiral Bryant; and, good luck." He finished as he shook George's hand. George was surrounded by members of the press corps; as he stepped off the stage. They called to the Emperor for pictures of the two men together.

All attended the luncheon and the reception. It was a fine day. Then, they disbanded with those in residence returning to quarters.

At eighteen hundred hours the doors to Hangar Two opened. People filing into the bleachers were truly amazed at what lay before them on the deck below. The floor was overlaid with green turf lined in a diamond pattern with white lime lines. Three square canvas bags and a funny shaped plate were spaced atop the naked sand bed at the corners of a ninety-foot square turned on its points, like a diamond. In the center of this, twenty meters from the plate, the sand rose twenty-five centimeters above field level into a six-meter diameter mound with a narrow white two-foot-long plate at its center. Though some had never seen this before, many more were familiar with the baseball diamond they were looking down on; which was complete with two

teams of twenty-five players, managers, coaches, umpires and scorekeepers. A dais stood on the mound.

Admiral Bryant in white and blue with a baseball mitt under his arm approached the mound. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to what I hope will be the first annual Theatre Five baseball game.

For those who don't know the game, I will tell you that, it was played professionally on Earth, until the near apocalypse. More than thirty teams in major cities vied for supremacy in America. There were also professional leagues in many other countries around the globe. Players were paid large salaries for their skills. It was even a sport of the Summer Olympic Games. We in Borealis play the game fairly regularly.

A player, known as a pitcher, stands on this mound and throws a ball to an opposing player standing at that plate with a bat in his hand. The batter attempts to hit the ball pitched to him by the pitcher. As you will see, this is easier said than done. The pitcher uses all kinds of trick throws to attempt to fool the batter. The pitcher is attempting to throw the ball anywhere over that seventeen-inch-wide plate at a height between the batter's knees and armpits. If he succeeds and the batter does not swing this is a strike against the batter. It is also a strike; if, the batter swings and misses; or, if he hits the ball; but, it travels outside those white lines. If the pitcher throws outside the strike zone and the batter does not swing; it is a ball. If the count reaches four balls, the batter gets a free pass to first base. This is called a walk. If the count reaches three strikes the batter is out. Each team gets three outs in each inning. A team gets their turn hitting; until their three outs. Then, they take the field; and, the other team gets their turn to bat. There are nine innings. The object is to hit the ball or get a walk and make it to the farthest base you can. Any batter going around the bases and crossing back over home plate scores a run. The team with the most runs at the end of the game wins. The pitcher's team, in the field has a player at each base, one between second and third base and three in the outfield. Their object is to get the batter out. If the batter hits a ball in the air, their job is to catch it before it hits the ground. In that case he is out. If a ball is hit on the ground, or in the air and is not caught in flight, the object of the defenders is to get it to the base before the runner gets there. If they succeed the runner is out. If not, he is safe and can stay at the base. He advances to each successive base on the following batters hits or walks. We have prepared a handout for you; and, many of the other spectators know the game; so, don't be afraid to ask them. You can use the paper handout; or use your

internal interface to access the file in the Theatre Entertainment folder. The file is titled baseball. My description has been brief. There is really a lot more to the game and its rules than I have described to you. At times, it will seem boring. At other times it is exciting. But, it is always a game of great skill and strategy. My team is called the Eagles and Admiral Blackman's team is called the Cougars. Pick a team and cheer us on. We hope you enjoy the game. We want to win, of course; but, our job tonight is to entertain you. It is our gift to our fellow personnel." Admiral Bryant finished to a loud round of cheers and applause.

Two attendants removed the dais as the umpires and Admiral Blackman approached the mound. A coin was flipped. It came up Bryant's choice of tails. He chose to bat last; so, his team took the field and Blackman's team came up to bat. An announcer broadcasted the results of the toss; then, asked everyone to stand for the Empire's anthem.

George pitched for his team and Blackman for the Cougars. Both proved to be great pitchers. The score was one to one at the end of five innings. By then, people had seen great pitching and some remarkable fielding. They had seen teams get hits and get put out with men still on base. Several times, George spotted Edward having a great time. Most were beginning to catch on to, at least, the basics, of the game.

In the bottom of the sixth inning, George's team broke the game open. Two singles, a stolen base and a home run created a lot of excitement and gave the Eagles a four to one lead over the Cougars. It stayed that way to the top half of the ninth inning; when, the Cougars scored two runs; but, could not tie the game before being put out. The Eagles had won; and, were given a standing ovation that lasted several minutes. Some senior officers came right down onto the field. They wanted to know if they could form teams for intra-theatre league games. George asked them to send him a request. He would use the requests as ammunition to convince the Theatre Command. The Emperor came onto the field congratulating him on a great game that, he had really enjoyed. He recommended popcorn, hotdogs, beer and soda pop be available for future games, to add to the authenticity.

The following morning, George shuttled back to his Fleet; which returned to duty. He worked hard at making the Assistant Fleet Commander position really mean something. He excelled at the new duties he absorbed. But, as promised, it didn't last long.

To everyone's surprise, in late November, Admiral Brian Dickinson was elevated in rank to Fleet Admiral - Level twelve and made C&C of the OESA. It was to be a joint command, from

now on. Williamson had requested the move; sighting the sheer overwhelming size of the organization as the reason for the change. But, everyone knew, his advancing age played a part in the move. Vice Admiral Bill Stephenson the Boots Fleet Commander was raised in rank to full Admiral - Level 11 and promoted to replace Williamson as the Quadrant Three Commander; bypassing Beldura Gogorra and all the other Theatre Commander.

The entire Borealis Fleet was at 14 Hercules for tactical exercises; when, they started receiving communications drones with updates on the moves and promotions. On December 23, 2248, one arrived with encrypted communications for both George and Admiral Blackman. George was to report to Admiral Stephenson on Rigil on Wednesday January 5, 2248. Stephenson included a video message. In it, he spoke earnestly to George; explaining that, he had a Fleet Command he wanted to offer George. He added that, the need was immediate; but, that for all concerned, they were targeting Friday January 21, 2248 as the official elevation date. That would give everyone involved time to meet all obligations.

George shuttled over to Blackman. They discussed it, in detail. Blackman was a little miffed at Headquarters. He felt they should have given him Boots; which is the tougher assignment; and assigned George the Borealis Fleet. Since there was no request for him to report on Jan 5, Blackman was sure they were going to ask Bryant to take Boots Fleet. Bryant wasn't so sure; because, it was the toughest assignment in the Empire. Why would they give it to a new Fleet Commander?

"Remember George, you've handled Borealis Fleet, on your own several times; and, you've been getting experience for the last six months as my Deputy Fleet Commander. It's not like they're giving it to a greenhorn. Besides, you're the rising star; since resolving the Rho incident.' Blackman offered; then added. 'The Frigate Tokyo will be at your disposal for the trip. It'll take you to Rigil and wait for your orders. You can come back in it if, you decide not to take the position. You'll have your own transportation if you do take it.'" He finished with a wink.

He had a little time; so, he took a few days; deciding to leave on the 27th. Though no religious holidays existed, the Empire celebrated a season including three holidays on December 30, 31 and January 1st. This meant that George would be in flight during the holiday season. He hoped that, the Tokyo did something nice for those special days.

Of course, some people can't keep anything simple. George just wanted to get going. But, Amrit Singh the captain of the Tokyo decided to follow protocol, to the letter, and pipe the Rear

Admiral aboard with all the ceremonial crap that goes along with having a flag officer aboard. The trip itself was uneventful; if not boring. There were three days of special dinners and get-togethers, aboard the vessel. George kept the ship's information system busy researching the personnel of Boots Fleet. All ships' systems within a Theatre held the Theatre data; if, the user had the clearance level and access codes. He wanted to know his Group Commanders and Captains, as much as possible, before actually agreeing to the assignment; if, it, was really being offered.

Usually, travel is limited to jumps of twenty-seven light years or less. The stress of being in a vortex more than five days is incredible. There is the fact that you can't see space or the surrounding stars when you're in a jump; not to mention the effect of the phenomena on the internal ship's gravity. A jump directly to Rigil would take nearly eight days. Eight days travelling forty-three light years is kind of pushing it; but, Singh felt his people should have the experience; which might be a necessity in a wartime situation. The other detail George found confusing about the whole episode was the fact that, he was being called to HQ, instead of Theatre Command. The call to headquarters must be important; usually, changes would be made at Theatre Command a trip of only one third the time, based on its current position.

They assumed orbit around Rigil Kentaurus Prime at twenty-three hundred hours Tuesday Jan 4, 2248; and of course, Singh had to go through the full flag officer disembark protocol before allowing the shuttle craft to descend to the planet, the next day. George was left thinking that, he should take the promotion; just so, he wouldn't have to return with Singh.

Chapter 7 Bryant & Boots

Wednesday January 5, 2248

"You can't blame gravity for falling in love." Albert Einstein

His impatience and frustration evaporated suddenly, when the hatchway opened onto HQ landing pad seven to reveal a stunning mid-shipman awaiting his arrival. The fair skinned, dark haired, blue eyed beauty was petite; though not short. A vigorous sparkle of life flashed in her incredibly large clear blue almond shaped eyes; elegantly slanted just a little upwards towards the high cheekbones; and perfectly trimmed by naturally arched brows: all separated by a thin bridged nose with slightly flaring nostrils. Exquisite features formed a perfect face; complete with perfectly formed lips slightly raised at the outer ends; with pouting bottom lip; framed by an elegantly sloping jaw line slightly squared at the bottom; atop the shoulders of a body that could not be masked by the uniform she wore. Confident manner, regal bearing and genuinely warm and welcoming smile completed the portrait of the perfect woman that George had always painted in his mind. George was not known for ogling; so, the fact that all this detail was immediately burned into his brain condensed his thoughts to the realization that, he had been incredibly impressed by the angel in front of him. Warning bells went off; nudging him back to reality. He knew it was dangerous to take this view of someone so quickly. It often led to rash decisions and bad behavior.

He took in the scene behind her. They were on a landing pad at the far edge of a park-like estate behind a massive multi-storied glass and concrete building. They were near one rear corner of the structure; which was so expansive, he could not see the other rear corner. Elegant gardens and stands of trees and tall grasses punctuated the perfectly manicured grounds. Wide walkways stretched from the landing pads to the sidewalks that appeared to surround the building perimeter. The OESA badge style emblem was hung just below the Orion Empire one above the rear entranceway, at this corner of the building. George assumed each doorway was adorned similarly. The badge was a circular silver ring with the word "Orion" at its top and "Empire" at its bottom, in silver. Gold olive leaf branches garnished the ring between the two groups of lettering. The letters O – E – S – A were emblazoned in gold on a thin gold bar that spanned the center of the medallion, inside the ring. It was the same one that adorned every ship in the OESA armada. The jewelry-like crest is tasteful and elegant.

"Welcome to headquarters, Admiral Bryant.' She barked out confidently as she snapped to attention and saluted; then, offered a dry firm handshake, after George returned the salute and took her soft hand.' I am Midshipman Marie Ste. Laurent; and, I will be at your service and your side during your visit. I work for Admiral Stephenson; and, it is my job to anticipate your needs - kind of like your personal yeoman.' She paused; then continued. 'With your permission I will have your shuttle crew move your belongings to your quarters; while, we make our way to Admiral Stephenson's office, Vice Admiral."

She gave him a half smile and flashed a glinting devilish sideways glance, as she finished.

"That's Rear Admiral, Midshipman Ste. Laurent; and, yes you can have my baggage moved. You may lead the way." He added with open hand extended towards the Headquarters building; after, she had instructed the shuttle crew about his luggage.

"I have no inside information; but, I think that, if you've been brought to see the Quadrant Commander, you're about to be promoted. It's simple logic." She showed that teasing nature again.

He liked this sassy girl.

"Lead the way, Captain; and, let's not speculate anymore. I could be here to walk the plank or to be hung from a yardarm." He stifled a chuckle as he made the jab with a smile.

By the time they reached the fifth floor office, they had traversed about a kilometer of sidewalks and corridors; and, cleared a wide variety of security stations, along the way.

"If you'll just take a seat, Admiral; I'll let Admiral Stephenson know your here. He'll fetch you, shortly." She said, pointing to the overstuffed leather chairs arranged around a coffee table; as, she tapped on the screen of a data pad.

Bryant sat quietly absorbing the details around him. Although it was leather, he found the chair somewhat uncomfortable. Its softness allowed his nearly two-meter frame to sink a little too low. The room was finished in tones of oak wood trimmed with darker pecan: and, boasted a highly detailed hammered tin ceiling. Sconces and pot lamps dimly illuminated the space exaggerating the mottling of the moderately worn leather furniture. The walnut table and furniture trim unified the entire ante-room; while the slight scent of tanned leather and old wood hinted at authority and affluence.

"George, come right in.' Stephenson's warm smile and soft voice interrupted an approaching daydream. 'Grab a seat and make yourself comfortable.'" He led the way into the office; not allowing the time to follow protocol.

George noted that, Bill Stephenson was somewhat shorter than the average OESA officer; a little paunchy; and, sported a balding spot atop his graying head that was probably growing with time. The jowly face sported several character lines. He knew this must mean the man was incredibly capable; since the C&C seemed to promote only the top notch people with youthful movie star looks to higher positions.

The office was so much brighter than the waiting room that; it took a moment for his eyes to truly adjust to the point where he could take in the massive desk, office chair, two visitors chairs and credenza at the opposite end of the room to a conversation pit comprised of two leather sofas, two leather arm chairs and a large coffee table. Corner tables embellished with lamps and crystal decorations sat at either end of one of the couches. A massive fully stocked cherry and mahogany wet bar occupied one side wall. The walls were finished in light oak with darker oak wainscot and crown mounding. The white coved ceiling was trimmed in more of the dark oak.

"Would you like something, Admiral Bryant? I have a fully stocked bar with just about any kind of poison you can name." Bill offered with a wide ranging wave that spanned the length of the bar.

"Just a bottle of water; if you don't mind. I don't think I want anything alcoholic, until I know what I'm here for." Bryant responded with a smile.

"I like that, George. You force me to get right down to business while appearing to be selecting a beverage. That's great diplomacy and control of a situation.' Stephenson said with a chuckle as he plopped a bottle of water on the massive oak desk in front of Bryant. 'Let me get you a coaster. The desk was made for Ulysses Grant when he moved his home to Georgetown in early 1864; so, it's nearly four centuries old."

"It's not that I want to control the meeting, sir. I would like to be sober when I find out if I am getting a pat on the back or walking the plank - that's all it really is, sir." Bryant responded with a sidelong smile.

"Okay, let's get to it. As you know, I was brought here a month ago. Dickinson felt he was getting on a bit and needed help running the service; which has grown into a behemoth. He

convinced the Secretary of Defense, the Council and Emperor Edward III that, a shared C&C would be the best solution for an institution already the size of the OESA; and, still growing larger. In the end, they chose Williamson as his partner. He was elevated to Fleet Admiral and assigned as C&C OESA. For some reason, they didn't choose one of the eight Theatre Commanders to fill the Quadrant 3 Command position vacated by Williamson. Instead, they reached way down and pulled me in from Command of Boots Fleet. I can tell you that, I am a little uncomfortable with being my former Theatre Commander's boss. But, I digress from the point of the meeting.

Quadrant 3 is the entire volume of space over a six-hour range, running from twelve to eighteen hours, and one hundred eighty-degree span, from ninety degrees north to ninety degrees south, and extending to our border, one hundred light years from Sol. Extending a line from Sol towards object M5, just about takes you through the center of the Quadrant. Theatre Five Command is north of the ecliptic and Theatre Six Command is south of it. Theatre Commands manage all the Fleets in all eight zones throughout their six hour by ninety-degree corridor of space that extends out to our borders. A fleet's territory is three hours by declination forty-five degrees for a specific distance from Sol. The inside ring of fleets covers this territory to a distance of seventy-nine light-years from Sol and the outside ring covers from there to the one hundred light year border. So in effect, a Theatre Command controls the northern or southern half of a ninety-degree orange section; and, a Fleet manages a zone within that section. Though the space is relatively equal, the responsibility is not. For example, the Fleet Commander in Zone four of Theatre Five is mostly a border patrol; since, there are so few inhabited systems out there. On the other hand, Boots Fleet, in zone two, encompasses a multitude of inhabited systems. It is a very demanding assignment; which may be the reason, I was moved to Quadrant Command.

I'm sure you're aware that any assignment requiring a Level Nine rank of Vice Admiral, Lieutenant General; or, above, requires nomination to the Council independently of any other moves. That is to say that, these elevations are recommended on a case by case basis. They are not handled in groups as are those of ranks below this level. Each one is reviewed by the First Minister, the Emperor and the Defense Secretary. These moves must also be ratified by the representatives. This is the case for all senior level elevations and appointment. So, I chose you as my replacement; when I was asked for a nominee. You're what the service is looking for. My biggest reason in choosing you is that; you have what is needed to run Boots. It's tough enough

running any Fleet that patrols a sixty-five and a half thousand cubic light year region of space; but, Boots has its special needs. Most of the red dwarf systems in that sector are inhabited by unfriendly insectoids. The region runs rampant with privateers. And even the Sol-like systems are a problem. Their humanoid inhabitants are either true-blue loyal, totally defiant or ambivalent to the Empire. Some multi-star systems have both types of intelligent life orbiting one of more stars. There are over fifty-six hundred charted systems in Empire space. Most aren't habitable by any types of life forms; but fourteen hundred are; so, they must all be patrolled. Of those, just under six hundred are inhabited. The average fleet patrols nine inhabited systems and twelve more empty ones. Boots has thirty-one within its boundaries; sixteen of which have intelligent life of one type or another. So, I need a good strategist; not just a tactician. That sector requires an ambassador; not just another policeman. It necessitates someone who is decisive; and, can be tough; but, fair. Boots is always under a lot of pressure; so, I also want a fleet leader who can be human. You have all those qualities, in abundance; so, you are my first and only pick, at the moment. And, you're a favorite of the Minister and the Emperor. Those specifics virtually guarantee your appointment.

What I'm offering you is command of your own fleet, twenty ships, over twenty-seven thousand personnel, entry into the Admiralty registry, your own Admirals craft, private and executive staff; and, a challenge of unbelievable proportions. It also means a twenty-five percent raise in income, to a base rate of fifty-five thousand sovereigns, a higher standard of field accommodations and facilities; and, a step on the path to four stars.

I don't require an immediate answer; but, you must decide by tomorrow. I will be compelled to select someone else immediately, if you say no; because, it takes time to make things happen in an Empire this size." Stephenson finished his pitch; and, slumped back in the chair with hands clasped in his lap. Then, there was silence.

"I don't need until tomorrow.' Bryant started decisively, after a full minute's consideration. 'I will say yes; with two conditions. First, I make my own choices for senior staff; and that includes, a new Command level I wish to establish, within the Fleet. I want to inaugurate a formal level between Fleet Command and Group Command headed by a Rear Admiral. And, I aim to make my own pick to that position - call it Deputy Fleet Commander. It'll alleviate any problems, when I'm away or incapacitated; and, it's working well in Borealis Fleet. Plus, we'll have full command capabilities in both halves, if we split the Fleet. Then, I'd like to create and

staff a new division within the medical department. For lack of a better term, I will call it Counseling Services Division. It will serve the Fleet to aid those in pain from the stresses of duty. Any sufferers currently come here or return to Earth for treatment. Issues could often be dealt with locally much more efficiently and timely - before turning into full blown PTSD cases. And from your summary of the region, Boots is one Fleet that could really use the service. In addition, it would mean that those seeking help would not immediately have an entry placed into their personnel records. Other than that, I'm your man." He finished.

"Who any Senior Commander promotes to executive positions; or, how he sets up the Fleet command structure is up to him; as long as, it fits within Regulations. Since a Level Eight appointment requires Headquarters' approval, I understand why you broach the matter; but, usually we would rubber stamp your choice anyway. Your fleet is yours. You would be responsible for assets worth over seven hundred million sovereigns, a nearly two billion sovereign annual operating budget, a one-hundred-fifty million sovereign capital budget and all the Fleet objectives and responsibilities. If creating a new departmental division will help achieve results; we aren't going to quibble. So, I can honestly say yes to your conditions, without compromise. You'll find everything you need on this data pad. Once you imprint it, you will have all security clearances; and, will unofficially already have command of Boots Fleet, Vice Admiral.' Stephenson said, with a grin; as he tapped final changes into the pad; then, handed it over to Bryant.

'You will be here until after your elevation ceremony on the twenty-first. The C&C need to hustle the nomination through. While that's going on, you must formally select your personnel and make any official appropriation to me as soon as possible. Then, there is the ceremony; and, a dinner in your honor. We need to meet tomorrow to get all the final details ironed out; including your new Rear Admiral; so, I can send you to Boots with the promotion in hand. I don't have details yet but, I also know the C&C have a couple of provisos for whoever takes Boots Fleet. Let's meet at ten hundred hours, tomorrow. I'll have everything ironed out by then. Do you have any questions or observations, George?" Stephenson added in a less officious more friendly manner.

"Not really, sir; except to pledge that, I'll try not to disappoint you. And, ten hundred hours will be fine." George responded, as he rose to his feet.

Stephenson lit up in a broad smile as he stood; right hand extended.

"Congratulations George, you'll do just fine. I'm glad you're taking the assignment. You've done a great job for the service, over your career; and, you deserve the chance to move into senior flag ranks. It's an exclusive club. There are only one hundred-three active Senior Level Executives in a two million personnel organization. Seventy-six of those have Tactical Commands. The rest are Staff positions and pencil pushers. You will find that, though you had little contact before; every officer above you will now seek and respect your opinion. The chain of command is always maintained; but, don't be surprised to be contacted directly, by the C&C or me, for evaluations and opinions. Just as you will come to depend on your Group Commanders for their on-site evaluations; we look to the other members of our little group for their observations and opinions." Bill had held the hand shake as he concluded the monologue.

George snapped to attention and shook the offered hand. "With your permission, sir; I will get going. I have preparations to make and homework to do."

"Dismissed." Stephenson snapped back.

.....
George ambled along with Marie; as she walked him through the corridors. He did not know what cued her; but, she awaited him when, he departed Stephenson's office. He had accepted when, she suggested a tour of what was important to him, at the headquarters complex. The massive structure held the more than thirty-three thousand personnel that ran the organization, under the direction of the C&C and Quadrant Commanders. She took him past the dining halls, the communications Centre, medical; and then, out the doors to the rear of the complex into familiar territory. She had brought him into the facility this way.

They sauntered past the pad where his shuttle and crew stood waiting. Stopping at hangar five, she pointed inside. "Your Admiral's craft and crew are inside. You may want to familiarize yourself and meet your crew. On our way back, you may want to stop at Pad Seven and release the shuttle, you arrived in. You won't need it any longer." Marie said with a smile.

"Did Stephenson instruct you to do this?" He asked.

"No sir, but, he did advise me, you have accepted a promotion and assignment as Boots Commander. This is Boots Fleet Admiral's Craft. It only follows that; it's yours now. It was Admiral Stephenson's; but, he utilizes the Quadrant one, now." She reverted to silence as, they stepped into the hangar.

"Lieutenant Commander Olivia Hurst." A tall, stately, very attractive blonde smartly snapped to attention and saluted as he approached. "May I assist you Rear Admiral?" She queried.

"Yes Commander, I have just accepted an assignment as Commander Boots Fleet. This will be my craft; and, I presume, you and your crew will be within my Command. That is, if you wish to stay on?" George smiled as he returned the salute; then offered a handshake as he made his explanation.

"Commander, this is Vice Admiral George Bryant; Commander Boots Fleet." Marie interjected.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Admiral; and yes, I will stay on. I love Boots and I love commanding a crew." She said in quiet earnestness.

"I will be here another two to three weeks. I would like to leave, no later than, the morning of the twenty-fourth. Of course you and the crew are invited to the headquarters promotion ceremony; if you'd like to come. It would be nice to have someone present representing Boots personnel." He responded with a smile.

"Yes sir, we'd be honored. Would you like the fifty cent tour, now?" She asked waving her hand in the general direction of the Admirals Craft.

He couldn't help but appraise her, in comparison to Marie; as, she conducted the tour. She was tall; probably a little over one hundred and eighty-five centimeters. Slim and erect her ample breasts were more perky than undergarments could make them. He assumed, she was in remarkable physical condition; probably conducting a rigid exercise regimen, daily. Her body was flat through the bottom of her ribcage, stomach and lower belly; but, hips curved out pleasingly creating elegant arcs that flowed in to her legs. The uniform's slacks did not permit an assessment of her legs; but they were long. A beautifully featured, high cheek boned, slim nosed face held sharp green eyes with clear whites framed by wide almond shaped eyelids. Her almost honey blonde hair was cut to a stylishly short blunt edge just below the ear lobe; and, worn slightly swept back along the sides; but, brushed to the left along the front bangs. Though a very statuesque and elegant package; she, did not compare to the striking beauty of the midshipman he toured the base with. Like Marie, she smiled warmly and easily; but, seemed less daring and impish, in nature.

The vessel is impressive for a personal craft. These are the largest craft that can be landed. The forty-eight-person crew manages the five station bridge; a large galley serving into an expansive lounge; a sizable engineering department and quarters for eighty-two passengers and crew. Eight substantial two level Officer's suites occupy the two upper decks. Fifty-four large rooms with in-suite baths serve as crew and guest quarters on the two decks below. Her three propulsion system, tri-layer opposing field shielding, gravity generators and defensive weaponry make the vessel a safe and comfortable method of travel. Forty-eight thrusters imbedded in the keel enable vertical takeoff and landing. Though expansive from this point of view, her gravity generator could only achieve twenty-five percent of Earth Gravity, due to her size.

It takes special training to pilot one of these beasts. They are generally flown in, what is considered to be, strange attitudes. Keeping the craft's floor pointed toward the system gravity median you exit; then toward the one you were travelling to until orbit, boosting the internal gravity to between thirty and thirty-five percent. Bridge crew tend to use display screens one hundred percent of the time; instead of, relying on view ports, occasionally.

.....

George and Marie stopped by pad seven to give the shuttle pilot and crew orders. He asked them not to leave for a couple of hours and to advise Singh only when, they were actually getting off the ground. It was when she noticed the shuttle pilot craning to maintain eye contact with the much taller Bryant that, she really took stock of him. He is tall and very erect; not in a stiff way; but, with a stately bearing instead. She estimated his age at not older than thirty-four by the lack of character lines in his face or bags under his eyes. *Café au lait* skin, brown eyes and a thin nose completed a ruggedly handsome face topped by a thick head of short cropped dark hair. Slim and very fit, he could easily be mistaken for a professional athlete.

They continued the tour for about another hour; taking in all the grounds; then returning inside to visit the C&C staff offices, Quadrant Three staff offices, the Security Department and the Intelligence Department. Marie introduced him to the chiefs and department heads who each took a few minutes from their busy day to speak with him.

"Can we head back to quarters, now? I need you to show me my way into the computer system. I have a lot of homework to do, before tomorrow. Bryant directed at Marie, as they walked towards the back of the main building.

"Won't you be needing uniforms, before the ceremony?" Marie asked.

"No, not uniforms; the ones I have are already appropriate. But, they will require alteration. They need the correct patches and aiguillette. However, I know Banerjee, already. I was here three years ago; and, had him do tailored Flag Uniforms for me. We can go in early tomorrow. He is very fast.' George explained; as, they stepped up to his door. 'He maintains stock of pants, skirts, jackets, shirts and ties in all sizes and cloths set up for mix and match. All he has to do is minor alterations to give an officer a tailored uniform in a day or two. Cost is determined by the material. If you want the best ultra-fine Italian merino wool, you pay the highest price. But, your seven hundred sovereign uniform hangs like a suit three times the price. Your jacket cuff buttons indicate the suit class. Five button jackets are made from the best materials - like the ultra-fine; but, four button are generally super-fine merino. Three button can be any other fabric; but, still indicates a custom made suit. In the back, his people just produce what it takes to replenish the stock. You get an allowance from your Fleet. You pay the difference if you want something more; unless, you can get your commander to authorize a larger subsidy. When you are commissioned, you should have no trouble getting the best merino, if you are still at headquarters. The old man thinks the sun rises and sets on you. I believe he thinks of you as a daughter. I paid the difference for my uniforms; but, as a Fleet Commander, any new ones would be fully paid for, at the top level. You're generally allowed two service, one mess and nine daily sets, plus three sets of accessories, in every calendar year. There is a Banerjee outlet on every Theatre Command Carrier" Bryant finished.

"What are the service and mess uniforms like. I don't recognize the terms." Marie inquired.

"The service uniform is a kind of dress uniform; but, can be worn for a function like my upcoming promotion. It's worn with the standard gray shirt and long tie for daily functions, like an official planning meeting. It can be worn with a white shirt and bow tie to official after eighteen-hundred-hours events. Its jacket is a standard length single breasted suit one. The mess uniform is for very formal official events; like those that might be attended by the Emperor. It is Cavalry styled and only worn with a waistcoat and cummerbund and bowtie. The women's mess uniform has a crossed tie and is worn with a pleated skirt. Of course, the dailies are everyday uniforms. All gray with no jacket. They're kind of like a combat uniform." He explained.

Marie held up his data pad in indication that, she wanted him to watch. She pressed the screen; as she waved it across a receiver on his door jamb; which clicked as it unlocked the door. She passed his luggage, inside; as, she stepped to the console on the desk; tapping a button on the

data pad. Three dimensional holographic images appeared in the air, over the desk. She manipulated them; navigating through the system; pointing out important milestones. By the time she finished, George knew he could find his way to Boots Fleet and Quadrant Three personnel files he needed to examine.

"I'm going to order something. Would you like to stay for dinner?" He asked.

"No, I have work to do to prepare for your big day. I have to be able to advise you on the protocols; and, I've never been involved in the promotion of a Senior General Staff member.' she responded with a smile; as she edged towards the door. "With your permission, Admiral?" She requested his leave.

"Your dismissed, Yeoman; and, have a good evening." He responded with a smile.

"Thank you; and, you too, sir." She replied with a smile as she exited the room.

George was somewhat disappointed that Marie hadn't accepted his invitation; but, spent the next two hours examining Boots and headquarters personnel files for different positions within the Fleet, after ordering his dinner. The salad and chicken breast arrived; interrupting as he was investigating personnel for his new Counseling position. When finally, able to return his concentration to the task, one file stood out, immediately. He spent half an hour examining it in detail; finally deciding that, this was his choice.

He went over the Theatre Command's personnel records looking for good selections for the Deputy Fleet Commander position. No one struck his fancy; so, he turned to Boots Fleet records. Both Group Commanders stood out as ideal candidates. Commodore Grace Tonaka, Commander of Grenada Group, was a thirty-three-year-old powerhouse who had distinguished herself on several occasions. They had been assigned together a short while back; and, George had met her in a multi-fleet exercise sponsored by Theatre Five Command, five months ago. She had been a most impressive Group Commander. All previous Commanders had been impressed by her performance throughout her career, including Stephenson. Commodore Tom Stevens Commander Columbia Group was fifty-one and being avoided strictly because of age. His prime had come during a lull in activity in the OESA. When things finally picked up, he was viewed as too old for Senior Level commands, by those above; who tried to engage young aggressive people in the important positions. Tom had a distinguished career; having received several commendations over the years; and, rising rapidly before the OESA period of low activity.

George had been Commander of the carrier Kenya, when Tom was Commander of the Kenya Group, in the Hercules Fleet. His Commanders' evaluations of his performance were outstanding.

George completed the documentation for the personnel moves, on the data pad. Stevens would be the new Deputy Fleet Commander. Now, Fleet orders would filter through another level of command; leaving someone in charge, if he were unavailable or indisposed.

Another hour was spent on files for the positions of Adjutant and Chief of Staff. Both Stephenson's people had been excellent; but, he had brought them to Headquarters with him. Bryant would leave his current chief with Canada's new Group Commander. Adjutant of a Fleet Command could hold no less rank than Captain; and a Chief of Staff would be raised to or at the level of Commodore. By the time he was finished, George decided he would combine the positions and had a pick from within Boots. He looked over Boots additional personnel records; trying to familiarize himself with the possible choices for replacements to those he was promoting. The choices would actually fall to others; but, he would be required to approve them. A little advanced knowledge would be helpful.

He added all the information to the documentation for Stephenson, on his data pad; forwarding it immediately. Then sat back enjoying the dry Riesling that came with dinner. A short while later, a reply arrived approving his choices; though, Bill conveyed his disappointment at his personal loss; created by one choice. In addition, Stephenson forwarded information on a C&C order for Boots Commander. A five-member press corps detachment would be assigned to Boots Fleet; as would twenty of this year's senior class at the Academy. George was to go there and pick from the group, on his way to the Fleet. He was thankful the Admiral's Craft had so much space.

George navigated to communications; working his way through the list until he found the one he wanted; tapping the air, at the address.

Head wrapped in a white towel and wearing a housecoat; but, still exceptionally beautiful, Marie's image appeared over the console on the desk.

"Hello, Marie Ste. Laurent... oh, Admiral; I'm sorry for my appearance." She sounded confused by the late call; and her right hand rose defensively to the beehive shaped towel.

"Nonsense Marie, it's me who should apologize for disturbing you so late. You have a right to your own time." He was truly embarrassed for the interruption.

"Thank you, sir. What can I do for you? She responded, still somewhat hesitantly.

"I believe you know that, I've been offered Boots Fleet. I agreed to take it; but, had two requirements that, I would have for any Fleet. The first was the creation of A Deputy Fleet Command, a command layer between the Fleet Command and the Group Command. The second is the creation of a new division within medical to deal with the stress and mental health of Fleet personnel. I have been frustrated over and over, in the past, by the need to send people to Headquarters or Earth for stress related issues that could be dealt with locally by qualified people; if we had them.

Anyway, both requests were approved; so, I spent the evening going over Boots Fleet and headquarters personnel files. I was shocked to find that, you are the person I am looking for to head up my new division. I want to offer you a promotion to First Lieutenant. It is necessary to have a division head at Level Three or above; so, you will bypass two rank levels. As a Lieutenant, I would assign you as Commander Counseling Division - Medical Department; if you'll take it." He paused to give her a chance to think and respond. Instead, she seemed to get frustrated and upset, as she considered it; stammering several times as she attempted to answer.

"What's wrong, Marie? I thought you'd be happy. I didn't mean to offend you, or anything." George was shaken by the young lady's reaction.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's not that; I'm not happy with the offer. It is more than I could have dreamed of. It's just that; I would have to take on the assignment without seeing my parents. I had hoped to take leave on Earth before taking any assignment. I haven't seen them since last year, at the winter holiday." There were tears in her eyes; and she seemed genuinely confused.

"I'll give you something to think about; then, I'll disconnect. Promotions will take place on the twenty-first. On the twenty-second, I leave for Earth in the Admirals craft. I will be there two days or more assessing cadets for assignment to the Fleet; and retrieving a small press contingent assigned to the Fleet. While I'm busy, at the Academy, you may take the vessel's shuttle to visit your parents in Canada. You won't have it all to yourself. There will be crew members going home for visits, too. But it takes its crew and six passengers. Think about it; and, let me know in the morning. If you want the promotion and assignment, it's yours." He finished.

"Oh, Admiral, I wouldn't want to inconvenience you..." He cut her off before she could finish.

"It's no imposition, Marie. I am going to Earth; and that shuttle will just sit for two and a half days. It is no trouble to assign it to you for that time. Let me know your answer in the

morning. Have a good night, Marie." He pushed to end the conversation to give her some breathing space.

"Thank you, Admiral. You have a good night, too." She was still sobbing a little; but, seemed less disconcerted as they disconnected.

George could not believe what he was feeling. He was apprehensive about her answer. He knew he was attracted to her; who wouldn't be, after all. But, it was more than that. Marie had received an undergraduate degree in psychology from U of T; then, a masters from Michigan. On graduation, she had entered the Academy; completing her doctorate level in a year and spending the next two in the Command Program. She had completed her intern hours while completing the Command Program. Not only was she a highly trained psychologist, she was a qualified bridge officer with serious motivation. There was a dread that, she would say no, in the end. He really wanted her near.

.....

George was astonished at the stunning picture Marie became when she donned her new tailored OESA officer's mess uniform. The ultra-light Merino wool blend, black, single breasted, notched lapel, "Morning Coat" jacket was pleated in a manner most flattering to her figure. A black crossed-over style tie accented the white under-blouse. The black, four panel, rear zippered A-line skirt boasted a belt looped waistband and enough pleating and shirring to hug her frame in a subtly suggestive manner. Delicate gold cuff trimming, braid, lanyard and shoulder boards added just a touch of elegance to her entire appearance.

In his OESA mess blacks; George cast an impressive figure, too; though the Banting winged stand-up collar, bowtie and fold-back point lapel, double breasted "Morning Coat" style jacket always made him feel bound up and over heated. The entire costume was set off by his many service and citation medals, flag level shoulder boards and cuff braiding and the stars and number eight silver rank insignia that emblazoned the shirt collar and shoulder boards. He would be much more comfortable in the dinner dress uniform; he would don after the elevation ceremonies were complete.

.....

The morning after he made his offer, Marie had called back accepting it. While connected, they made plans for the following day; which was spent in town; mostly at Banerjee's Tailor Shop. Marie was fitted for new uniforms. George left his behind for changes to braiding,

shoulder boards and patches; after satisfying Banerjee by trying one of everything on to ensure he still had the best possible fit.

Rigil New York was an interesting city, of just over one hundred thousand. It had been laid out in a radial grid pattern, in the very early days of the OESA. A central administration building stood in the middle of its multi-acre central park. A downtown, of single building storefronts, absorbed the first two rings of tree-lined streets and the spoke sides streets intersecting them. Land had been reserved, on the city's northern outskirts, by the OESA for a new academy campus. OESA headquarters was on the northeast border; now so close to the city that, it would be surrounded if housing or development moved in that direction. A large freshwater lake bordered it on the outer ring of streets to the southwest; causing them to be horseshoe shaped. A large industrial complex, devoted to ship building, lies about ten kilometers to the north of the city center. City center is known as the Downtown Mall. Except for small segways and electric scooters, no motorized conveyance is permitted in the two block disk; other than, those delivering to business concerns; and, small carts used by the handicapped. Only electric vehicles traverse the other boulevards and avenues of Rigil New York.

George continued on to the meeting with Stephenson, alone; then, retrieved Marie from the shop at thirteen hundred hours; taking her down the street, to a small English style pub for lunch. They returned to the base and spent an hour and a half with Commander Hurst; updating her on the impending stop-over at Earth and the return trip to the Fleet.

The next morning, they returned to Banerjee's; picking up Admiral Bryant's uniforms and one dress and one dinner uniform for Marie. The remaining package of two additional dress uniforms and eight sets of daily duty fatigues would be forwarded to her quarters late the following day. Then they met with Admiral Stephenson; who updated Bryant's data pad with current orders, directives and security clearances. He also presented Marie with what would now be her permanent service pad for the balance of her career.

George had returned to his quarters sending the following encrypted message to Commodore Stevens at Boots Fleet; which had been ordered to Xi Bootes by Stephenson as a courtesy to George.

MEMO

To: Commodore Thomas Stevens Commander Boots Fleet - Espanola Group

From: George T. Bryant Commander Boots Fleet

Date: January 8, 2248

Commodore Stevens,

This communiqué is for your eyes only; and, is not to be discussed with anyone. I have accepted an offer to Command Boots Fleet; with conditions which were agreed to by Headquarters. One was establishment of a Deputy Fleet Command. I would like to offer the position to you. You would be promoted to Rear Admiral and assigned as Deputy Commander Boots Fleet - Commander Espanola Group. This would give Boots a complete chain of command and Command representation in my absence or incapacity; and, a unique ability to split the fleet with command level in both halves. It's time to get your career back on track. I need you! Will you accept. Please respond in kind, immediately.

George.

Com drones travelled faster than manned flights; so, George could expect an answer within a week.

The next thirteen days were very busy. George, escorted by Marie and his senior staff officers, was in constant meetings regarding Boots Fleet. By the time promotion day actually arrived, he had been briefed on the intricacies of all the inhabited systems, the common travel and trade routes, piracy in the region, Fleet personnel disposition, pending equipment upgrades, equipment and asset deficits, fleet budget and security. In addition, he attended a special session with Stephenson on the Flag and Senior Officers attached to Boots. During that period, he received the warrant for Commodore Stevens Promotion and reassignment. He was relieved to open an encrypted response from Tom Stephens accepting the promotion.

Now, George and Marie waited beside the stage housing the dais at the center of today's events. The C&C each made brief statements. Dickerson introduced Emperor Edward III's Secretary of Defense; who made a few comments; then, turned the whole thing over to Stephenson. Bill made an eloquent speech; acknowledging the C&C for his recent elevation; and, ensuring those present that, things would be run much as they had been in his Quadrant. Then, he went on to observe how important it is to recognize achievers; and, how pleasant it is to discharge this particular responsibility of his job.

"The promotion we will witness, is in the best tradition of the Empire and the OESA. This particular advancement acknowledges the achievements of a man who functions and operates at the highest level of character. He is a person much like Old Tom, himself. As all of you know,

Old Tom overcame great obstacles, to reach our original Emperor; and, was devoted to him; and, the founding and development of the Empire, we know today. Now, we honor a man who displays bravery and cunning; while maintaining high ethical standards and empathy for fellow personnel. He has been awarded many citations, by the Emperor; and has been decorated many times by the OESA. Would Rear Admiral George T. Bryant please come forward?' It was an order; not a request.

It had taken one full hour to get to this point. He waited for George to arrive at the podium; then continued. "It is always a pleasure to be instrumental in promotions of deserving people; but, this particular one is unique for me. It is the first time I have nominated someone for elevation to Senior Flag level. It is also different, in that, it is to fill the position I vacated several weeks ago; and finally, promoting the most honored hero in this generation's Empire makes the task particularly special and enjoyable. Admiral Bryant is the enlisted mans' officer. He is intelligent; a good strategist; an excellent tactician; but, most of all he is a good leader, who really cares about every person in his Command. So, I execute this order with the greatest satisfaction.' He stopped to focus on the data pad he raised to eye level; then, continued; reading from the screen.

'OESA Command Order number 215903-9411 - To all citizens within the limits of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light years from the Sol system in all directions; and, encompassing all-star systems, anomalies, energy, matter, life forms and representative governments and citizens within that region; and to all conducting business of any fashion with the Empire; let it be known that, on Wednesday January 19, 2248, the Emperor, Council and the Defense Minister of the Empire, in white paper OESA 215903-72114 paragraph three; did approve the nomination of the C&C of the OESA and its Quadrant Three Commander to elevate a member of the service to a senior Flag Staff rank; requiring entry of the candidate's name into the Registry of the Admiralty. By order of the C&C and Quadrant 3 Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; George T. Bryant is upgraded to the level of Vice Admiral with all the rights and privileges prescribed in the aforementioned regulations and protocol; and that, any and all serving, engaged or employed within Vice Admiral George T. Bryant's commands; present or future; and, any and all conducting business with; or, having present or future interest in the Orion Empire, shall pay respect, obedience and loyalty to the rank he possesses as prescribed

by the law of the Empire. Let it be known that George T. Bryant was elevated to the grade of Vice Admiral, his name enrolled in the Registry of the Admiralty; and that, this order was signed and sealed; all in the presence of witnesses and the Emperor's delegate, on Friday January 21, 2248; at OESA Headquarters, in Rigil New York, on Rigil Prime in the Kentaurus Star System. Signed, Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C, Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson C&C, Admiral William O. Stephenson, Quadrant Three Commander.' Stephenson paused while the two C&C stood and approached. They returned Bryant's salute; then, flanked him; removing the rank insignia pins from his dress uniform's raised collar and shoulder boards; pinning on the replacements; and, handing Bryant the expended ones. In the meantime, Stephenson removed the two element gold aiguillette from George's right shoulder; replacing it with a wider silver three-strand braided one. All three stepped back, snapped to attention and saluted him in honor of his new rank. He smartly returned the salute; before all three stepped away from the lectern to small table. A large book titled The Registry of the OESA Admiralty stood open to a page containing blank lines below some entries. Bryant noted the partially filled entry line with his name was number nine hundred and ninety-seven; which meant he was the nine hundred and ninety-seventh person elevated to the Senior Admiralty over its entire history. George followed his three superiors in signing the register; making it official and elevating him to life-long membership in the most exclusive club in the Empire. With George at the center of the group, they turned to the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, officers and enlisted personnel and citizens of the Orion Empire, I present to you Vice Admiral George T. Bryant."

With that, the entire crowd rose; the military participants snapping to attention and saluting as if synchronized by a hidden timepiece; as the entire hall flickered from a multitude of photography flashes. Then the group called out in unison. "Rah" The single word cheer used by the OESA in recognition of achievement. Thunderous applause followed, for a good three or four minutes; as more flashes ignited in illumination of photographs being taken by the press and the OESA official photographers. Finally, Stephenson raised his hands to subdue the group.

"We have a considerable agenda to complete; so, I would ask that you keep all future applause to a reasonable length.' The C&C took their seats as Stephenson spoke. Stephenson and Bryant approached the podium, again with data pad at eye level.

'OESA Command Order number 215903-9412 - To all citizens within the boundaries of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light years from the Sol system in all directions; and, encompassing all-star systems, anomalies, energy, matter, life forms and representative governments and citizens within the region; and to all conducting business of any fashion with the Empire; let it be known that, on Wednesday January 19, 2248, the Emperor, Council and the Defense Minister of the Empire, in white paper OESA 215903-72114 paragraph four; did approve the nomination of the C&C of the OESA and its Quadrant Three Commander to assign Vice Admiral George T. Bryant to the position of Commander Boots Fleet. Let it also be known that, by order of the C&C and Quadrant 3 Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; that, on this day, George T. Bryant is assigned as Commander of Boots Fleet a position outlined and described in the aforementioned regulations and protocol; and that, any and all serving within Vice Admiral George T. Bryant's Command; present or future; and, any and all conducting business with; or, having present or future interest in the Orion Empire, shall pay respect, obedience and loyalty to the rank and position he possesses as prescribed by the law of the Empire. Let it be known that, Vice Admiral George T. Bryant is hereafter responsible for all personnel, hardware and assets belonging to; and / or assigned to Boots Fleet; and, is, responsible for the peace keeping and security of the space within a sixty-five thousand cubic light year volume sector of Orion Empire Space centered in the Bootes constellation, as defined and described in article twenty-four section three - b of the OESA Rules and Regulations ; and that, this order was signed and sealed; all in the presence of witnesses and the Emperor Edward III's representatives on Friday January 21, 2248; at OESA Headquarters, in Rigil New York, on Rigil Prime in the Kentaurus Star System. Signed, Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C, Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson C&C, Admiral William O. Stephenson Quadrant Three Commander.' With that, Stephenson handed Bryant Boots Fleet Patches and the Commander's Pennant; then stepped back with his hand outstretched.

'Congratulations, Vice Admiral Bryant.'

Bryant took the Admirals hand and warmly returned the handshake. Then, he stepped back and saluted smartly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen may I present to you, the new Commander of Boots Fleet; Vice Admiral George T. Bryant." Stephenson called out as they turned to the crowd who repeated the

same ritual as before. This time, the press corps made mad dashes to the aisles to get the best angles and perspectives for images of the event. The next day's digital news headlined "Hero of the Empire now new head of Boots Fleet" and "Empire's Golden Boy New Head of Boots Fleet".

Again raising his hands to silence the crowd; Admiral Stephenson began to speak. 'Until this moment, I was still the official Boots Fleet Commander; so, there is another minor ceremony we will conduct.' George handed Stephenson his data pad; keeping it low and out of sight. Bill continued. 'Sir, I am the Commander of Boots Fleet. Please, state your business with me.' He said officiously.

"Sir, by order number 215903-9412, I am the new Commander of Boots Fleet and have been assigned as your relief by order of the C&C and the Quadrant Commander.' Bryant sounded equally official. After a pause he continued. "Sir, as directed by the order presented, I relieve you." He finished.

"Sir, I confirm the order. I stand relieved, with thanks.' Stephenson said as he examined the data pad screen. Then, they stood apart and saluted. He went on. 'You will find all security codes transferred to your command." He finished, as he handed the data pad to Bryant. George feigned a serious inspection of the screen.

"Sir, I see all is in order. I accept the command from you, in good standing; with my thanks." Bryant responded. Then he saluted, turned smartly; and, returned to his seat.

The next half hour was spent reading orders that, granted elevations and assignments to Boots officers; as requested by Bryant. Then, another fifteen minutes was spent ceremoniously elevating Marie to First Lieutenant; but this time, George was on the presenting end; pinning insignia to her right collar point and shoulder board. She looked all the spiffier with her new silver number three, double bars and gold lanyard adding to the accessories on her uniform. They all sat through another hour and a half as other Quadrant Commanders conducted other advancements.

"I guess you're dying to get out of that monkey suit?" Marie queried as they came together when the event ended.

"You are so right' George responded. 'But, I'm booked with C&C and Stephenson, now. I think it'll be another hour before I can change; and then, it's the dinner uniform. Thank goodness it's a bit more comfortable." He exaggerated his distress; hooking his right hand pointer finger inside the raised collar; and pulling it away from his throat; all with tongue hanging out.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" She asked through the snickers.

"Certainly. I'd enjoy the company." He responded; as, they turned into the corridor and started for his next appointment. They arrived at Admiral Dickinson's office after a slow walk; enjoying the casual conversation that friends often share.

"Vice Admiral Bryant reporting as ordered, sir." Bryant snapped to attention and saluted; as he announced himself to his three superiors inside the office doorway.

"Relax, George.' Dickinson responded; as he casually returned the salute. This is a very informal meeting. We just wanted to get to know our rising star a little." He added.

The next hour was spent sunk into an over-stuffed leather chair in the ambiance of power; as they shared conversation and Cuddy Sark. All were impressed by George's apparent humility. He did not enjoy talking of his conquests or heroism in anything but tactical terms. They also enjoyed his candor. George never held back with superiors; and hang the consequences.

Marie was waiting when he withdrew; but, she had already changed for the dinner party. A short black Cavalry-style jacket sported two non-functioning bronze buttons on each side, just above the waistline. Its notched wide lapels flowed into a collar; the points of which displayed her silver Lieutenants bars. A single row of silver oak leaves encircled the top of the cuff and its bottom, at her wrist. The jacket's final adornment was the Fleet medallion worn in the middle of the right side panel above the waistline. The delicately ruffled white blouse was accentuated by a four-inch red cummerbund surrounding her delicate waste and her skirt and shoes were the same as the dress uniform. In addition, Marie had changed her hair. Her shoulder length tresses now sported one roll on either side of her face and a conservative portion of makeup accentuated her features.

"You look absolutely stunning.' Bryant said, with a wink and a smile. 'But, you'd probably look great in a gunny sack." It popped out before it could be stopped. For a moment, he wished he could pull it back through the air.

"Why thank you, Admiral. You clean up pretty good yourself. I bet you'll be the bell of the ball in your dinner uniform." She returned the smile, with an exaggerated wink, as they started down the corridor.

She waited in the salon of his quarters; as he changed. His tailless black single breasted short Cavalry jacket sported a row of bronze buttons from top to bottom on each side only buttoning at the top one. Its straight collar rose about an inch and a half up the neck. Golden

piping trimmed the black shoulder boards displaying his three silver stars surrounding a silver number nine. Jacket cuffs were encircled with a row of fine golden oak leaves trimming top and bottom with one wide and two narrow gold bars ringing the cuff between the trim. A gold Boots Fleet Commanders' medallion was displayed on his right jacket breast panel. Mini medals graced his left breast just above the pocket. The opened-front jacket revealed a black waistcoat fastened with four bronze buttons and trimmed in gold piping. The slacks sported the barely perceptible gold stripe of a flag officer.

George always suspected these occasions were just a matter of socializing with all the upper elite; in the guise of celebrating some supposedly important personal achievement. Otherwise, he found them a complete bore; and only accepted the minimum obligatory dance requests to avoid being classed as anti-social. Marie rescued him from potentially long, monotonous, embarrassing conversations with invited Press Corps members who only wanted to discuss harrowing events surrounding his past awards. They usually pressed the questions of how it felt to be a heroic swashbuckler; or, what risking your life in the void of space was like. Marie had already come to understand that George did not like talking about himself. If he was forced into small talk, sports were the most comfortable topic matter for him. She already knew from lunch in Rigil New York that; he liked ice hockey; though, he'd never played it; and, he loved baseball. Otherwise, he preferred a discourse on business with those who worked in any capacity with the OESA. At any rate, he enjoyed the evening immensely; if only because of, Marie's company and the three dances they shared over the course of the evening.

Citing the following day's early departure time, Bryant made apologies for them. They left shortly after midnight.

.....

Seated in the general passenger compartment aboard the Admiral's Craft, on route to the Fleet, Marie was in a quandary regarding her new charges. After breaking orbit, the Admirals' Craft would not see land again; until the next similar change in Command. It would travel through space attached to the Flag ship; unless in route to somewhere. Crew or passengers that had to attend something planetary would now use its shuttle craft. This is because, the fuel expended in launching it from a large body is considered an inefficient waste. The eighteen-hour trip to Earth had been uneventful; but, had shaken Marie, a little. The reduced gravity on the "Yacht" was much harder to deal with than that on the big warships. She had been in zero gravity

on a shuttle before; but, this half-gravity was harder to handle. She had not developed "space legs", yet; and, had a queasy feeling; as, they entered the jump. Otherwise, the time home was most enjoyable. She managed nearly two full days with her family; while the Admiral conducted business. In the end, Admiral Bryant had chosen to leave Earth via a small pad in Marie's hometown; Waterloo Ontario Canada. It worked to her advantage; providing an extra half day, at home; and, had allowed the opportunity to introduce her parents to the Boots Fleet Commander.

Dressed in his daily gray utility uniform; flashes, ribbons and rank insignia bearing witness to his importance; Bryant cut a figure who greatly impressed her folks. But, to their surprise and her chagrin; he was comfortable, at ease and at home with them; taking time to enjoy a light lunch. Ratatouille, white rice, crusty chunks of fresh bread and pieces of Swiss lace cheese made for an impressive snack. For his part, George made quite a show of relishing the fine meal; washing it down with two glasses of her father's homemade ice tea; and, complimenting them again and again on the fine cuisine. But, the highlight of the afternoon was the ten full minutes George and her father spent locked in a conversation, about the galaxy - in French. She was stunned and exceptionally pleased. Though English is the language of the region, French is her father's native tongue; and, the galaxy is George's bailiwick; but it turned out; both spoke the other's language fluently. It was a true bonding moment for the two men. Always the matchmaker, Marie's mother made it understood just how good this man would be for her with animated hand signals and exaggerated whispers. Marie involuntarily nodded her assent; while chastising her mother for drawing such conclusions.

On arrival, they had launched the shuttle from its bay; while in orbit; then, landed both craft side by side, at the Academy. She, and others, took the shuttle to their destinations. An Academy shuttle had brought George to Waterloo, when his Academy business was finished. When they returned to the main vessel, at fourteen hundred hours, the entire squad of cadets were absent; investigating the sights and shopping in town. All had been ordered to return to the landing pad by thirteen hundred hours; but, though the press corps personnel were aboard, none of the cadets had appeared. The large vessel stood waiting; its commander on station, at the entry port. Olivia decided to have the shuttle reloaded, while awaiting the cadets. They straggled in one at a time failing to pay their proper respects to Marie, Commander Hurst; or even the Admiral. Later, as the yacht did its de-orbit burn to depart earth orbit, they had boisterously taken over the lounge; all the while, failing to observe the mandatory protocols at each and every

required encounter. It would take ninety minutes for the ship to reach the point where it could jump towards Boots; so, Marie rose from her seat and headed for the lounge. No one made notice of her entry to the space.

"Cadets; attention!" She snapped in a deep guttural voice at a volume that filled every corner of the ship. Everyone in the lounge froze. Silence broke out in the general seating area as its inhabitants looked questioningly at each other. Bryant rose to investigate the disturbance.

'Form two lines!" She roared.

There was the rustle of all twenty cadets rushing to form the lines. They stood erect; at attention with eyes front.

"Right dress!" She snapped at the top of her lungs; to which each cadet. but the furthest right extended their right arm to the next person's shoulder; shuffling left until the line was aligned and equally spaced. The second line did the same except for the person at the extreme right who raised his right arm forward to the right shoulder of the first person in the first line; thus aligning the two rows.

"Eyes front! The first cadet that moves a muscle will be on report!" She snapped when the alignment was completed.

There was complete silence within the room. The steward tending bar tried to make himself invisible; as did the head chef who could be seen through the galley pass-through. Bryant stood silently; outside the door jamb; out of sight to Marie and the cadets. Marie paced back and forth along the line; looking them up and down; scowling at each and every one.

"Look at yourselves. You are a mess. You are disgusting.' She said in a low guttural growl as she walked along the line flicking at blousing shirts, crooked collars and unfastened buttons. 'You are disheveled, wrinkled and unpolished. Most of you look like you've been in a wrestling match, in your uniforms. After four; and, in some cases five years; none of you know anything about OESA regulations and protocol. I should recommend that; you are all thrown out of the service. There is almost no point in wasting any effort on you; if, you don't get it, by now. Do you understand me, cadets?!" She hollered the question at the top of her lungs.

"Yes, ma'am." Chorused a weak response.

"Ma'am ... ma'am!!" She repeated; glaring eyes wide with indignation. 'There is no such reference in the service. Are you all sexist pigs; or, do you all just think I'm some weak little female? In this service, you answer a superior with yes sir, or Mr. X, or by rank, or by rank and

name. There is no male or female protocol in any military service. And, you answer smartly; and, in a fashion that shows those nearby you are listening and committed. Do you understand?" She paused.

"Yes sir." Came a weak chorus.

"Do you understand?" She bellowed again, even louder.

"Yes sir." The unified chorus was loud and clear.

"Yes sir; what sir?" She yelled again.

"Yes sir; we understand, sir." Came the thundering chorus.

"Do you cadets know what was your most disgusting offense?" She held a lengthy pause for affect; then, continued. 'You returned to this vessel and showed no deference to any officer as you reported in and boarded. Each of you should have reported to me, acknowledged the Admiral and asked the ship's Captain for permission to come aboard. And at each of those occasions, you are required to pay a senior officer the respect of acknowledging their presence and rank. None of you reported to me, none of you saluted the Admiral or the Captain. In the future, you will follow regulations. You will salute officers and call them by rank and name or sir; and, you will follow protocols; like, asking permission to board a craft. Do you understand?" She barely took a breath through the entire soliloquy; while sustaining an eardrum shattering volume.

"Yes sir; we understand, sir!" Came the crisp loud chorus.

"I will not forget this day. For this entire assignment, you will be rotating between tasks; but, always at my command. You have each had your first and last chance. Today's conduct will be recorded in each of your records; along with a reprimand.' Her voice was almost a low whisper; reinforcing her statement. "This will be your first and only chance. I will recommend the discharge of any one of you that fouls up again. You will follow all regulations and protocol while in my command; or, you will be gone. Do you understand?" She snapped the last question.

"Yes sir, we understand, sir." The group responded.

"Stand easy." She commanded; and sidled from cadet to cadet matching nametags to information on the data pad she carried; asking questions of each person she confronted.

"Admiral on deck!" One yelled and all snapped to attention; simultaneously as Marie turned, jerked to attention and saluted.

"As you were.' Admiral Bryant responded as he returned the salute and then continued. 'I came up here when I heard the raucous begin, to see what was going on. I intended to speak to each of you regarding your behavior; but, I see it is not necessary. I do want to convey to you that, each and every person attached to Boots Fleet is under my Command; whether directly or indirectly. That is to say that, when you are insolent to an officer in my command; you are impertinent to me. I will not tolerate it. Lieutenant Ste. Laurent has my complete confidence, as do all my Officers. If she is forced to recommend the discharge of anyone in her command; I will honor the request. She will assign you duties for specific periods under the command of a department or division head. While attached to that operation you will follow protocol; but, you are under her umbrella; always in her command. I do not want a repeat of this type of behavior from any of you again. I personally selected each of you. I considered you the best of the graduating class. Your actions have humiliated me. They have made me look incapable of assessing personnel. I do not like being embarrassed. Do you understand, cadets?'" He hissed the words.

"Yes sir, we understand, Admiral." The line chorused.

"What's your name cadet?" Bryant asked one body in the line.

"Kurt Brubacher, sir." The cadet responded.

"I thought so, Kurt. If I remember your file, you topped your class in all areas. I definitely expected more from you." The Admiral snorted.

"Group!" Marie snapped bringing everyone to attention, as the Admiral turned and headed for the door, without warning.

Marie turned back to the cadets; methodically going about the work of finishing the documentation, she started before Bryant's entry. When finished, she took a step back.

"Attention!" She ordered. "This lounge is for everyone aboard. You will not dominate it. You will spend time in your quarters boning up on Boots. You will devote time to learning about the Admiral. You will study protocol. There will be tests, when we reach the Fleet. You may use the lounge for dinners and the occasional quiet limited social gathering from time to time; but, use common sense and discretion. Other people need to move about and some even have work to do. You will not drink alcohol, while aboard this vessel. You will only drink during off-duty hours aboard an assigned ship; and you will maintain decorum at all times. You will keep assigned quarters neat and clean; and, you will wear clean and pressed uniforms, at all times.

You will show respect to all you come in contact with. I will tolerate no more of this. You are dismissed!" She snapped as she turned and walked out of the room with a sideways glance to insure all the cadets remained at attention as she left.

"Remind me never to cross you, sergeant major." Bryant quietly wisecracked as she returned to her seat.

"Is that a crack...sir?!" She responded with flashing eyes.

"No, it isn't. As a matter of fact, if you listened carefully; you would have noted a hint of fear and admiration in my voice. I am just glad you're not one of those drill sergeants who carry a riding crop. I went to lend a hand; but, you didn't need it. The intrusion I made was to reinforce to them that there are consequences in treating any officer the way they did.' His smile faded as he reverted to a serious matter. 'Are you really entering a formal reprimand in their files?' He asked.

"I don't know your view on it, Admiral; but, I thought I'd keep it informal, for the time being. By that I mean that, I have recorded the incident and tied different infractions to the appropriate names. I've got it all in this little baby.' She tapped her data pad. 'But, I thought I'd only enter the reprimand to the official files of those who screw up again; or don't perform; and backdate it at the time. I was planning to abandon the record for those who do well over the next months. Of course, I would defer to your judgment." Her intonation was questioning.

"As a matter of fact, that is what I'd have recommended. For some of them, it's the first time in the field in four years. It is very tempting to let loose, once you're outside the Academy walls. I think you made your point; and, I bet none of them will really louse up again." He responded with a smile.

Marie had never actually seen any of the combat rated deep space vessels; until, the instant they exited the jump point outside the Eta Bootes system on Wednesday February 2, 2248; though she had been on several bridge simulators, when she took the academy command program; and, had studied technical drawings of all the different classes of ships. She was truly stunned at the size of the vessels in the fleet; all parked outside the Murphid system heliosphere. She counted twenty leviathans; presuming the most grandiose and imposing to be the carriers. They sat in groups of ten; presumably, each nest a Tactical Carrier Group. From her port side perspective, she counted fifteen decks of portals, as they approached the Columbia; which according to the literature exceeded three hundred and fifty meters long and one hundred and

fifty meters abeam. Two huge retractable ramps were extended from the sides like wings. These were obviously used for launching and receiving the one hundred ten fighter craft held in the cavernous hangar bays; and were likely matched by mates extending from the starboard side. Her graphite and gun metal gray motif, dotted by numerous gun placements, torpedo launch doors, missile launchers, hundreds of passive sensors, antennae, emitters, escape pods, hundreds of thruster packs, the IP engine and the AMPE propulsion system, all combined in achieving a truly threatening appearance. Marie remembered reading that, two five terawatt fusion reactors supported by two one hundred megawatt fission reactors supplied power and particles for all the Carrier's systems; including the artificial gravity generators, all three engines, weapons and all support systems, lighting and heating for the craft. Depending on the carrier, six thousand to sixty-five hundred personnel resided on the ship; including nearly half of a full brigade of OESA marines complete with aviation, heavy artillery and armored ground support. All vessels displayed a similar design theme; with a gap in the nose of decks two through four for weaponry installations; and a massive door in the bow of deck three or four for shuttle bays; depending on the class of ship.

Marie been told that, a full platoon of Marines and two percent of the Fleet's personnel were the latest models of Dr. Black's sentient artificially intelligent androids; though they would be imperceptible to anyone but a physician with the appropriate examination and diagnostic equipment.

To the right through the view window, Marie could see a vessel she was certain was a "sub", sitting just aft of the big carrier. These were special little ships; usually operating in fully cloaked mode. They were never discussed or mentioned in fleet descriptions. In fact, she was surprised this particular asset was visible. Looking about, she noted that, both vessels of this class were uncloaked. Marie wondered if this was proper tactical protocol. The whole concept of this type of craft is its stealthy nature. It would take a considerable effort to achieve fully covert status. Each "sub" would need to take long circuitous routes to throw any watchers off their tails, when it went dark.

In full daily field dress attire, Bryant stood in the bridge hatchway; watching his personal craft's bridge team as they docked with the Columbia. Commander Hurst was piloting the craft herself and did an impressive job. Contact with the behemoth was nearly undetectable. George filed away a mental memo about Hurst. She looked like a good candidate for promotion. He

moved to the hatchway. As senior officer, he was supposed to represent those aboard the vessel to the captain of the Columbia.

"Vice Admiral George Bryant and a party of sixty-eight requesting permission to come aboard, Captain." He snapped to the man he recognized as Captain Steven Nichols.

Nichols snapped to attention and saluted. "Permission Granted, Admiral; and, welcome aboard.' Then looking over his right shoulder he snapped. 'Boatswain.'

The three note call to order was played as the Admiral approached the docking bay receiving line. Two flag level officers and more than forty senior officers presented themselves in full dress uniform; saluting the arriving senior officer. Bryant returned the salute; then, took the time to meet each one and introduced Marie to all.

"Captain Nichols, can you have my pennant moved from my personal craft to the Columbia? She will be the flag ship of the Fleet." He ordered after half an hour of introductions.

"Aye Admiral." Nichols responded smartly.

"These are orders and itinerary for the rest of today. We need to get this moving, right away; since, the day is already so far along." He said as he tapped his data pad transmitting a prepared message to each Commodore's personal data pad.

"I will want time with Commodore Stevens, Commodore Tonaka, Captain Tahu Moahu and Commander Olivia Hurst, before the upcoming events. I will need to see the Commodores immediately; while Moahu and Hurst stand by. Shall we say, fifteen minutes from now in my office? And Commodores, please have your subs begin covert maneuvering and go dark. We don't want them visible ever, if possible."

"Aye, Admiral." the two Commodores responded in chorus.

"Post these orders fleet wide, forthwith, please. I assume command of Boots Fleet under these directives, immediately.' He said as he tapped his pad to forward the command order placing him in charge of Boots to Nichols, Stevens and Tonaka. 'Please note the orders and date in your logs. All security codes are rescinded, temporarily. We must move fast to reduce the time we are defenseless."

"Aye, sir." Nichols acknowledged with a nod.

George made his way to the Flag Bridge; introducing himself to those he contacted in the passageways. On the Flag Bridge, he made a point of quick introductions with the entire bridge crew; and, took extra time with Captain Nichols and Marine Brigadier Malcolm. Finally arriving

at his expansive, glass-walled office, he placed his data pad to the desk console and tapped on the screen; entering his password, when prompted. In the blink of an eye, his orders and command codes were a matter of Boots Fleet records; as all others were rescinded. He was now in operational command of the fleet. He tapped off a quick note to all commands advising that all command rested in him only - temporarily.

"Commodore Thomas Stevens reporting as ordered, Admiral." Like Frick and Frack, Stevens was at attention just inside the doorway with Grace Tonaka at his side. He was very tall and Grace was on the short side.

"Great, I want to speak with you both. Grab a seat. When I agreed to the Boots assignment I had a couple of provisos. The first was to establish a new level of command within the Fleet. We will now operate with a Deputy Fleet Commander who I will issue level nine command codes to, for ninety-five percent of Fleet operations. Initially, the Deputy Fleet Commander will also command a Carrier Group. However, I will make a proposition to the C&C through quadrant command within six months. If accepted, it will create the need for two Task Force Commanders instead of the Deputy Fleet Commander. I looked over the personnel records from Theatre Five and Boots Fleet records and realized the two of you were, pretty much, equally qualified for the initial position; but, I can choose only one. So, I have elected to go with Tom. This is not a slight to you Grace. When the Task Force concept is a reality, you will get a promotion, too. Though I would like to keep you here, you are welcome to seek an elevated position elsewhere. I wouldn't blame you. You are qualified. But, I'd like you to stay; and, you will be rewarded for it, soon. In the meantime, you would normally report directly to me; but, Tom would be your superior; if, I am unavailable. The Deputy Fleet Commander assignment will be filled by a Rear Admiral; so, Tom will be promoted. When, the Fleet changes to Task Force Commands, Tom will be reassigned to one Task Force; and, Grace will be promoted to Rear Admiral and assigned to the other Task Force. How do you feel about it, Grace?" Bryant held her gaze through the entire recital with only momentary glimpses at Stevens.

"Well sir, I was excited, when I heard you were coming. I wanted to serve with you. And, as far as I knew, there wasn't any promotion involved. Nothing's really changed. I'd like to stay on as a Group Commander. I am most interested to hear about the Task Force idea. What will the Task Force look like?" She asked.

"You're jumping ahead a little. I have a couple of additional meetings. I want you both in for them. When those issues have been resolved, we will discuss the Fleet's future.' Bryant was chuckling. 'Thanks for agreeing to stay Grace. I wanted to work with you, too. I have big plans, for the future; and, several Boots personnel should be a part of them.' He turned to Commodore Stevens. 'Tom, are you still okay with the promotion and assignment? It's a big job, for the time being. You'll still have your Group; and, you'll take on some of the Fleet Commanders portfolio.'"

"I'm fine, sir. I've got big shoulders. Besides, it's not forever, by the sounds of it." He said with a smile.

"That's great. So, you will move your flag to Grenada, Tom; and, Grace will transfer her pennant to Columbia. That way, if we split into Groups, there is Fleet Command on both teams. And, no; it's not forever - six to eight months. The need is there, now; but, we need time to show the higher ups how to do it. I'll explain when we do the Task Force meeting. I have re-issued your command codes for your appropriate assignments.' George said as he tapped his pad. 'Right now, I need a Chief of Staff. Bill took his Chief and Adjutant with him. My Canada Group Chief is staying put. Grace, I believe you have a Captain Tahu Moahu serving in the Grenada Group?'" Bryant asked.

"Yes sir. He's Captain of the Cruiser Tanagra. He's a great officer. He hasn't got the tactical aptitude to Command a Group; but, he's a wonderful ship's captain - knows people - follows orders - smart as a whip - has an immense capacity for work - earns loyalty. He's from 51 Pegasus D." She responded.

"Yes, I read good things in your evaluations, of him. Tom, I would like to take him from you; since, he would be your man, now. I will promote him to Commodore and make him my Chief of Staff. I have a suggestion for a replacement. In the nearly one month I was at Headquarters, I spent a great deal of time building a plan and going over personnel records. Nearly two weeks ago, I came across the Moahu file; and realized that, he had the skills needed for a good Chief of Staff. So, I went on looking at possible replacements, for the Tanagra. In the end, it will be your decision, Tom. But, we have someone in the Fleet who has the credentials; but, has been passed over for promotion at Admiral Stephenson's insistence. His Admiral's Craft is commanded by an officer who has held all the senior positions on all our warship classes, except a Carrier. Bill did not want to move her; because he liked having her in charge of his craft. I discussed it with him. He regrets it; knowing that, he unintentionally slowed her career.

He asked me to look after it. Anyway, I am recommending Olivia Hurst to replace Moahu. Take a look at her file. She has worked for Grace, here; and was under Captain Nichol's command, before. So, talk to them, too. In the end, I will accept your decision; but, please take a good look. She deserves it." He finished.

"Tom, she is a very good Commander. Before, Nichols took the Columbia, she was his exec on the Frigate Toronto. He spoke very highly of her. Of course, she ran Bill's vessel for the past three years; so, we all kind of lost track of her. But she really is good." Grace finished as Tom looked at his data pad; which he raised to eye level during Bryant's monologue.

"Don't be so polite, people. I won't let you push me around. But, consider it a done deal. Let's promote her to Captain, today. I'll write the request for promotion and reassignment, when we break up." Stevens responded with a genuinely warm smile.

"Great. Now, let's get Captain Moahu in here." Bryant said.

Grace fetched him from the place he had occupied on the bridge just outside the Fleet Commander's Office.

" Captain Tahu Moahu reporting as ordered, sir." The captain was erect at attention and very formal.

"Relax Captain. Please take a seat. When rank is not a concern, how do you like to be referred to?" Bryant asked.

"Most people call me Moe, in general conversation, sir." The Pegasian responded stiffly.

"Well, I think I will call you Moe; and, you may call me George, when we are in private. We will be working very closely together - I hope." George said with a casual smile.

"What do you mean, sir?" Moahu asked stiffly.

"Moe, I want to promote you; and, make you my Chief of Staff. The Chief's job is a tough one. In your case, you would also do the job of an adjutant. So, you would be busy. And, we will be making a very extensive proposal to the Quadrant Three Commander and the C&C. Your team will lay all the groundwork for it. Are you interested?" The Admiral asked.

"I think so, sir. I am not really sure; because, it's all a little vague." Tahu responded.

"Okay then, I will try to give you a little more data. But first, I must reiterate to you all that meetings in the privacy of this office will be informal, after the initial contact. I am George to all of you, inside these walls. An adjutant is like the communications officer for a command. That position, prepares all reports, posts all messages and conveys all commands from the

Commanding Officer. The Chief's position is a lot bigger. Anyway, the Fleet Commander has a large staff at his disposal. They run fleet accounting, payroll, legal, acquisition and purchasing, medical, security, intelligence, personnel, logistics, tactical and a few other departments at the policy level. Each has a manager and a staff. The Chief of Staff runs that Staff for the Fleet Commander, through those managers. In addition, you and the staff will be responsible for preparing all the Fleet orders and ensuring they are carried out. It is your job to ensure that all orders and communications comply with OESA Rules and Regulations. Everyone in the Fleet is at your disposal to aid in carrying out my commands. The Fleet Commander's Chief of Staff is his right hand. When he speaks, he is speaking for the Commander. Counting your position, there are six hundred and sixty-five personnel in my staff. It is a mirror of Theatre, Quadrant and Headquarters staffs. Except, they get larger at each more senior level. Headquarters staff is over eleven thousand. You will also have to liaise your staff with the new Deputy Fleet Command Staff and the Group Staffs. As far as the proposal goes that I spoke of, I cannot be too detailed, until you accept. But, I can say that, the OESA is taxed beyond its limits, right now. No one seems to be able to come up with a cost efficient means of increasing our capabilities. Each Fleet Commander has been tapped for ideas; but, none seem practical, so far. As soon as I was asked by Admiral Stephenson, I had an idea; but, I need to make a case for it. You will help build that case. It will be a big undertaking with a short timeframe. You would be elevated in rank to Commodore. That carries a pay rate thirty percent higher than yours is, now. And, you will have a lot more authority and prestige. You will move to "Flag" quarters, on the Columbia; and, you will have your own yeomen and stewards. If you prove to be as good as I believe you will be, I will bring you with me as I rise through the ranks. Each elevation for me, would be an elevation for you. At each level, the staff is considerably larger than the one below. However, after a couple of years or one more elevation, you would no longer be eligible for a field command. You would always be administration with a maximum achievable rank of Vice Admiral." Bryant finished.

Moahu flexed his large ears against the side of his head. It was like a human furrowing his brow in concerned concentration. There was silence as he considered the facts, in deep thought.

"Admiral, I am honored by your offer and your confidence; but, I am not sure I can handle the job. I would like it; but, it seems massive." The captain said softly.

"The first time anyone takes on a Chief assignment; they have never done the job before. But, consider this. You have run a ship which has most of the very same departments in it. It is a smaller version of a Group or Fleet Command. And, you have dealt with Group and Fleet staff for years; so, you really already know most of the systems and protocols. You are intelligent and a good leader. You have commanded a ship with over a thousand on board. All you need is a little time. I would not have made the offer; if, I didn't think you could acclimate to the position." Bryant offered.

Again there was silence with the large ears drawn back.

"Yes sir, I will take the position; and, thank you. I will try not to let you down." Moe responded.

"Start by calling me George. Don't worry, I'll help you through. After a while, you'll be showing me how things have to be done.' The Admiral said with a smile.

I have warrants on my pad. Promotions will take place, this afternoon on the hangar deck of the Columbia. I will do the honors for Tom and Moe, first. Tom will promote Olivia, after that. Tom, you either need to promote your current Chief or find a new one. The rank will be Captain. I will point out that, you need a good manager and leader. This person should have commanded a similar size group before; but, does not need to have great tactical skills. In fact, you would be wise to choose a chief who you believe would not go on to flag level tactical positions. I say this because, there are lots of great people who can fit the Chief position; but, only a limited number have the tactical skills to handle the flag level tactical field commands. As far as the proposal goes, let me fill you in.

The OESA has sixty-four fleets divided into eight Theatre Commands. That's eleven hundred fifty-two war ships, one hundred twenty-eight subs and two hundred fifty-six supply vessels to cover nearly four and a quarter million cubic light years of space. That's sixty-five and a half thousand cubic light years of space for each Fleet to cover. Right now each fleet is comprised of two Groups each containing a Carrier, two Cruisers, four Frigates and two Supply Ships. Each Group is also supposed to have a sub; though less than half have received them. We tend to extend our reach by breaking our Groups into squads. As we are configured now, these squads are unbalanced. One will have a Carrier the other won't. In most cases, one will have a sub; and, the other will not. This means that, each Fleet is really only two fighting forces and two reconnaissance arms. The weak squad can fight; but, are limited. They cannot be used as a squad

for offensive or counter offensive operations; except in very limited confrontation such as piracy. A squad with no Carrier is really a defensive force.

As a Fleet Commander, I deploy my patrol force in two Groups twenty light years apart. Once on site the Group Commanders deploy each squad another ten light years apart. Then, each Squad breaks into two ship detachments that are sent out like the spokes of a wheel to systems surrounding the Group center. The whole formation forms a, kind of, starburst pattern in the area. This way, we get maximum coverage over an area twenty light years in diameter. No ships are farther than ten light years from a carrier and no more than a few light years from another set of two vessels. However, if there is immediate action, the heavy squad can pull together with the support of a carrier and its one hundred fighters. The weak squad has to wait longer; and, may even be defeated or destroyed before help arrives. Because of the squad imbalance, we tend to do the patrols in Group formation; splitting off vessels to systems nearby the one Carrier.

So far, all the proposals involve increasing the number of Fleets. They vary in number; but, are all variations of the same idea. Each Fleet is twenty vessels and has a fair size Command Staff and Group staffs. Theatre Commands would have to increase staff sizes to support the increased number of fleets. A fifty percent increase in strength requires the construction of over five hundred warships and one hundred supply vessels.

I have two ideas for increasing our reach that would be much more cost effective. The first is to reduce the size of a Group slightly; but, increase the number of Groups in a Fleet to Four. This would require two additional Group staffs and a slight increase in the size of the Fleet staff. In return, you'd have four carrier Groups each with two squads still unequally balanced. Because of this, we would still tend to avoid Squadron actions; but, we would be able to handle four areas at the same time. In fact, it would probably be best to just turn each squad into a Carrier Group.

The second idea is to expand each Group by a Carrier and another sub. This allows us to have four equal squadrons to handle four regions at the same time with only the addition of two subs, two carriers and two additional supply vessels. Over the entire field force, this represents purchase and construction of two hundred fifty-six war ships and one hundred twenty-eight supply vessels.

Staffing one fleet takes around thirty thousand people. Staffing two new smaller groups in a Fleet would add about twenty-five thousand additional people. Staffing two Carriers, two subs and two supply vessels in a Fleet would take about fifteen thousand.

The first idea doubles your strength. The second appears to double it; but, really only gives you an increase of eighty percent effective protection. However, it appears to be much more cost efficient than any other plan. But, we need hard research on this. That's your special assignment Moe. I need an honest assessment of current capabilities and future capabilities using each of the two proposed methods. Then, I need an accurate projected cost for each method. Not a small task; and, it's got to be done while everything else is running.

This is where the Task Force Commands come in. In plan two, I believe each Carrier Squad will work most efficiently with a Commodore at the helm. There is a flag command level in each Carrier that way. So, it is more efficient to have each Task Force Commanded by a Rear Admiral over the two Commodores in the Groups.

The same holds true for plan one. Increasing to four Groups would require a Command level for each pair. So, whichever plan we end up promoting, I will need a Task Force Command level. The way the OESA usually operates is that, the Fleet with the winning suggestion becomes the prototype; so, everything would start here, nearly immediately." Admiral Bryant finished with outstretched hands as if begging for responses.

"This will affect the marine command structure, too. It means you'll have an additional thirty-two hundred marines in a Fleet counting staff. That would require a change in command structure throughout the Fleet." Moe offered.

"That's true. I hadn't thought of that, Moe. If you change the structure within a Fleet, you'll have to change the levels above. For example, a Brigadier has always commanded Marines at the Fleet Level. Now, you're close to where a Major General would be needed. That means that, at Theatre, you'd want a Lieutenant General as Corps Commander and a full General at Quadrant as Army Commander. You'd have to do analysis to determine what the needs will be, Moe. I think you should look at increasing in-group marine levels from sixteen hundred plus staff to two thousand plus staff. At over eight thousand per fleet a two star is definitely warranted. I've never liked the idea that the Commander of the marines at the Fleet level is a Brigadier; but, the numbers didn't warrant a higher level. This way each Group under plan two would be Brigade level and the Fleet would be division level. Under plan one, each Carrier would be a Regiment, two Groups under one Task Force would be a Brigade and the Fleet would still be a Division. Anyway, you'll need to try and tie down all possible contingents to these expansion plans. That way your projections will be accurate, Moe.

The reason I have asked for Nichols to be here is because he is a definite choice for a Group Command, when we go to the Task Force system; and, we would need an officer to manage new acquisitions while we come up to strength. I want to clue him in on the whole thing. When the time comes, we'll promote him, quickly; and, ship him right off to the construction yards. Are you okay with that?" George asked.

"Yes I am, George. I'll get him, right now." Tom answered as he waved the man into the room. Nichols had been waiting outside the office the entire time.

"Captain Steven Nichols reporting as ordered, Admiral." Stephen stood at attention and snapped off the announcement.

"Relax Steven. And, call me George, in here.' Bryant said; then added, to the others in the room. 'Steven and I know each other from the Borealis Fleet."

Then, he went on to outline the plan leaving out some of the fine detail. He described the change in Tom's level and assignment and the new position Grace held. He included their plans for Nichols and then advised Stephen that, he wanted him on standby to go to the Earth and Rigil shipyards, at any time.

"I need you to have a team picked out. You can't discuss it with them, yet. But, the instant you are promoted, you have to issue them orders to accompany you to Earth. You need to look at all the systems involved and ensure you have experts for each one at hand. Some people will be able to handle more than one system, of course. Take that into account. You may not choose any ship's departmental commanders. Everyone else is fair game. And, you need to have a plan. How are you going to prove out quality in each system of every ship for Boots?" George said.

"I'll get right on it, sir. And, thanks for the confidence." Nichols responded.

"I will post announcements of the promotion orders. Grace and Tom, you need to have the digital communications ready to establish command codes. Your Group assignments are official the moment the orders are posted; so, you should get them out immediately after. We do not want to remain defenseless much longer. Moe, you will have to organize things. We need the hangar deck on the Columbia for the promotions. We'll want to have a dinner / dance celebration on both carriers this evening in honor of the promoted personnel. If we handle the event in two sessions, on both Carriers, most of the Fleet personnel will be able to enjoy the dinner. If we start at seventeen hundred, serve at eighteen hundred and start again at twenty-three, fifty-nine, we'll make it most accessible for all. We will stay here until the day after tomorrow. It's very short

notice; so, do the best you can. Tom, you'll have to discuss this with Olivia Hurst. And, you and Grace will have to move your Commands and your staffs. Moe, there's one more thing I want. Post this notice looking for people who would like to represent their Group on a baseball team. We will start some intra-fleet action. We might soon be able to compete with Borealis at a Theatre Five function. It's a lot; so, let's all get going. " George finished.

Then he prepared a communiqué for Blackman.

"I am firmly ensconced in my new position. Starting up two baseball teams. Keep yours sharp. We will challenge, soon. - Bryant"

Chapter 8 Drums of War

Thursday August 5, 2255

"Life isn't worth living, unless it is lived for someone else." Albert Einstein

As soon as we exit our jump at HD 156668 in the constellation Hercules, I order deployment of a full long range sensor pack to half a light-year. It's standard procedure. Unlike the two and three century old science fiction shows we all like to watch, we cannot scan several light years of space instantly. We still have not found any way to circumvent Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Since the sensors are limited to receiving signals at the speeds they come in, an object half a light year away would take half a year to update, on our screens. So, we concentrate our short range sensors in a radius of three million kilometers, an effective weapons range. This gives us a timeframe of ten seconds delay for the farthest objects our local sensors can detect. This is the closest we can get to real time monitoring of the space immediately surrounding us. Long range sensor packs are comprised of two hundred and sixty-eight drones that are evenly scattered over a globe with a radius out to one light year. Each drone employs a Casimir and Laser Communication Module to send sensor data back to the Shenzhen. They are programmed to "jump" to their destination and return data continuously, until recalled. So, in effect, it takes about half an hour for us to really begin to put a clear picture together of the surrounding space within the half light-year radius of the vessel.

Admiral Bryant had ordered Theatre Nine to support the Theatre Five patrols. So, I jumped the Shenzhen to HD 156668; which would not be patrolled by either the Theatre Three Hercules Fleet or the closest Theatre Nine Fleet, Phoenix. The jump from Rho Corona Borealis to our current location is just over twenty-nine light years, as the crow flies; so, we were in a vortex for five days, seven hours. After exiting the event horizon, we are all a little buggy; and, won't accurately interpret our sensor data; until, a shift rested after the jump comes on duty. In the meantime, everything is double or triple checked for accuracy.

In my case, I rose from a long sleep only one hour before we exited the jump; so, I can at least make sure there is no immediate threat to the Shenzhen, or its crew, for the time being; though, I too am experiencing some perception difficulties. It's not as bad for me, though. I have made several jumps that were over the recommended five-day limit.

"Lieutenant, make sure that, I get all long and short range raw sensor data as it comes in." I order my watch first officer.

"Aye sir." She responds.

Besides regular minute by minute operations, all we can do is wait - for now. Short range information will let us know we are safe; but, we just have to be patient as far as the star system goes. In the meantime, most of us spend the time between sporadic operational requirements to look into the surrounding space. But, it's like looking into space anywhere else. Other than a close planet or the system's star, space is like a black velvet backdrop with glittering rhinestones pasted all over it. You don't really expect to see anything else; unless, you position the ship for a specific sighting; which, all ships in the service do regularly, including Shenzhen.

The next hour is spent with my attention divided between short range sensors, long range sensor reports, ship's system readouts and the window off the port side of the bridge. Suddenly, I see something.

"Did anyone else see a bright flash? It only lasted a second or two." I call out to the bridge staff.

There are a bunch of verbal and head wag negative responses.

"Keep your eyes on sensors and windows ten degrees off the bow on the port side." I call out as I manipulate my system to the long range reports of that area. No matter how hard I look, there's nothing there.

Since the drones are staggered throughout their half light-year orb data comes in at various lags; and, has to be synchronized by computer; so, we get an accurate picture; but, we can examine the raw, untimed, data. They have data originating from a little farther out than the last set. I pour over the data once, twice; then, a third time. There is an anomalous reading about two hundred seventy million kilometers out and eleven and a half degrees to port. I switch to video mode; scanning and scanning the view until my eyeballs feel dry from not blinking. Finally, I see it. There are four ships out there. They are faint in this view; but, will be better in the view from the probe that's actually closer to that location; so, I switch to that data set. Three fairly large vessels seem to have cornered a smaller one. The next set of probe reports will tell me a lot more. I watch the time index on the video. These images are from a period nearly half an hour ago and end fifteen minutes, later.

"Keep your eyes on the windows and screens. I have confirmation of something happening almost three hundred million kilometers at eleven and a half degrees to port and plus ten degrees "Z" axis. That's about fifteen light minutes out; so, anything you see will have happened a quarter hour before..." I am interrupted before I can go on.

"Sir, look out the window." A bridge officer calls out.

As I turn, I see an intensely bright ball like a growing sun in the spot I was monitoring. It grows for about another ten seconds to a radius of about five hundred kilometers; then, quickly reduces in size and fades out completely.

"That was a fusion explosion." I think out loud.

"You mean a weapon, sir?" The watch first officer asks.

"No, lieutenant a weapon would not show from here. That was a fair size ship flaring up like a sun going nova. Its fusion reactors went super critical and exploded. Fusion reactors are intrinsically safe; unless acted on by an outside force. Someone hit at least once with a very powerful weapon. Let's get over there. I want to be there in less than an hour." I order.

"Helm set heading eleven point five port - plus ten degrees Z-axis. Propulsion set acceleration and deceleration ramp to forty minutes - set max-ramp-speed to point three light speed; execute, immediately." The watch first officer calculated the required speed curve necessary to meet my orders, in her head. The ramp is calculated; so, acceleration will not kill the crew because of inertial force. Then she set a timer to one hour.

Usually, we do not exceed point two of light speed; because of time dilation. The faster we travel and the longer the distance, the greater the time differential becomes. However, we will exceed that level in an emergency, for short distances. Chronometers always need to be adjusted after a trip at any speed. To put this in perspective, our one-hour trip would be viewed by a standing observer to have actually taken about seventy-one minutes forty-eight seconds. We can set our internal clock to one hour; because, it experiences this dilation with us. However, when we stop, we will have to advance ship's chronometers by eleven minutes and forty-two seconds.

At our normal cruising speed of point two of C , this difference would only be a little over seven seconds. On a trip from Earth to Rigil, we experience a time differential of a little over two hours thirteen minutes. "Jump" technology brings this down to a bearable level. By reducing the distance, we have to travel, the time dilation is reduced considerably. However, it would increase as we increase our speed; so, point two of superluminal velocity is a happy trade off.

An hour later, we are on site. It still takes short range sensors to home in on the actual event location. There appears to be three large vessels attempting some kind of recovery.

"Communications, engage translator and hail those ships." I order.

"Sir, there is a visual response coming in." The lieutenant responds.

"Put it up on the screen, please." I ask.

"Whoever you are - back off.' The humanoid alien orders. 'This is none of your business. Stay out of our way; or, you're next.'" It threatens.

The face on the screen boasted massive ears and skin that sagged in extensive rolls along the forehead and cheeks. I could barely tell its eyes were like ours with blue irises. There is a nose; but, it's barely visible amongst the folds.

"This is my business. I am Captain Kurt Brubacher of the ESS Shenzhen. I represent the Orion Empire. You are in our space. My sensors indicate that, you are no match for us. We have superior weapons and shielding. If you do not cease what you're doing and send a representative aboard to discuss this, I will be forced to open fire." I order.

There's a long pause. I realize this opponent is testing me. Whoever speaks first loses. What seems like an eternity; passes.

"In case you haven't noticed, there's three of us and only one of you." Mr. Wrinkles responds, finally.

"In case you haven't noticed, three of you do not have the fire power to penetrate my shields; and I have weaponry that can destroy each of you with one shot. This is not to mention the fact that, my one ship is five times the size of your three ships put together. And, you cannot run. There are thirteen hundred vessels in this fleet. Even if I lose you, we will get you in the end. Stand down; and, send someone to my vessel. You have ten minutes.' I motioned for the communications officer to cut off the outgoing signal. 'Are they speaking English; or, is this coming in, in another language? I don't see a difference in the phasing of the lips and voice.'" I direct at the communications station.

"They are speaking English, sir. At least, this one is." The response came.

There is a flash as a vibration travels through the entire ship. It takes a while to fire on someone so much more formidable than you are.

"Weapons, set particle cannons to twenty percent. Take out that weapon. Then, take out that ship's engines. Be careful. I don't want them destroyed." I order.

"Aye sir." Weapons responds simultaneously with the first flash.

The vessel rocks violently on each shot. The damage to each section hit is very visible. The other two vessels turn; heading off in opposite directions. They jump away once they have achieved the necessary velocity.

"Lieutenant, get the Marine commander up here; and, put us in a position to board that ship. Weapons, keep a lock on it. If sensors say they are restoring any engine power, hit them again." I order.

Both officers nod their assent as they issue orders enabling my commands.

"Captain Shellots reporting, as ordered, sir." The marine officer stands erect as he reports in, ten minutes later. He has two bars with a number three on his color points.

"Captain, I want you to be ready with your men. We are moving in, to secure that vessel.' I explain; as, I point to the ship out the window. 'We will need two squads to board it and one or two squads to investigate the sealed compartment remains of the ship it attacked. Take anyone you find into custody; until, we sort out who is who. The first officer will advise you when to launch your shuttles." I finish.

"Aye, sir." The marine says as he turns and exits the bridge.

I could see three shuttles head out into the field, from the shuttle bays in the nose of our craft. The two smaller ones went for the ship that fired on us. The larger one headed for the remains of the other vessel. Both had to navigate a considerable debris field filled with indiscernible materials, jagged pieces of metal and plastics. The mission would put thirty on board the offending craft and twenty on board the other one. They would all be packing heavily. Defensively they'd be wearing full armor made from carbon nanotube fiber and Kevlar KM5. Pockets distributed over vital body areas hold ceramic metallic reinforcing plates. Helmets and boots are made in much the same manner. All members wear full face shields made of transparent aluminum. Offensively, they carry eight-inch razor sharp knives, three flash-bang grenades, two concussion grenades, an M25 combination laser / conventional rifle and a ten millimeter fifteen kilowatt peak firing rated hand laser weapon. In addition, some specialists will bear GN 50 grenade launching rifles. Each squad is equipped with mobile sensor drones they can send into blind areas ahead of any action. Each platoon will be made up of two or three ten person squads; each headed by a sergeant. A two squad platoon will be run by a second grade Lieutenant and the larger one by a full Lieutenant.

Normal operational procedure would be to achieve a soft seal over any external hatch or bay door; then, blow the opening, if necessary. Flash / bangs debilitate anyone in the local region, before sending in drones to reconnoiter. Once a determination is made, the smallest number of personnel possible would be sent in, first; holding the remainder in reserve for a follow up sweep if resistance is heavy.

Ten minutes later, the team that entered the offending ship are on the way back; but the platoon at the damaged vessel are calling for medical help, for injured occupants. I know this means that, things must be fairly bad. Each team would have two members well trained as field medics. They can generally stabilize almost any injury, for transport. Another shuttle headed for the craft.

Nearly an hour after the shuttle arrived at the vessel, it departed for the Shenzhen, with the one that carried the marine platoon. I am now receiving preliminary reports.

The military incursion met some early stiff resistance. Crew members of the ship that fired on us held up in compartment hatchways along a corridor just inside the opening our team entered. Once the flash / bangs had been expended and the drone had made a quick pass, the pirates intruded on the entry space with conventional handguns and machetes. A couple of our people had slashing injuries around the neck area - the weakest area of the body armor system. In response the team had killed two and severely injured the other three personnel. We would not get much information, for a while. None of the survivors of either craft would be able to withstand questioning for some time.

I looked up to see Shellots standing in my doorway. "Come in; and take a seat."

"Sir, my initial report..." He said as he handed over his data pad.

I looked it over. "Quite a little battle out there, eh?"

"Yes, Captain; and, it looks like it might be piracy. We can't be sure; until, we can question some survivors." Shellots responded.

"How are your people?" I asked.

"A couple of fairly serious machete hacks. They knew enough to go for the neck. Considering the weaponry available in this day and age, these guys want to instill terror. My people were up to it, though. I left a couple behind in each craft. They have investigative services forensic training. They say the ship that was nearly destroyed was a freighter; but, there wasn't much left of it. However, there was still a coupling attached to the remains of the pilot house.

From the type, the investigators say it was definitely a multi-section barge being towed by a freighter. The other vessel seems to be full of all kinds of unrelated contraband. There's also a lot of hand weapons aboard." He had summed up the report.

"We won't be able to complete the investigation. We're not equipped for it; and, we haven't got the time. I'll report it to Theatre Command. They'll decide how they want to handle it. We'll have about ten days to continue on it; until, someone else arrives to handle it. You'll have to be able to turn it over to them and walk away. Are you okay with that, Captain Shellots." I asked.

"Mine is not to reason why, sir. But maybe, I'll get lucky and we'll finish before they arrive." He said with a smile.

"Anyway, you did a great job, today. This will go into my report. You'll probably be a Major, soon. That means, I'd probably lose you to a carrier class vessel where you can command a regiment; or assist a Brigade Commander." I tell him as I rise; indicating the end of the meeting.

"Thank you, sir." He says as he stands to attention.

"You're dismissed." I reply as he turns and walks out.

It takes me the next half hour to prepare my report to Admiral Nichols. I include Shellots' report; and, my recommendation for his promotion. Piracy with loss of life is one of the very few crimes that carry the death penalty, in the Empire. That's way above my current pay grade.

It's time to head to my next class. It's overdue; but, trying to teach after such a long jump is not a great idea. Between myself and the class, at least a few of us are likely to be out of sorts.

.....

"Captain on the deck!" A voice yelps as I enter the room.

"As you were. Rest easy. I'll try to keep the lecture a little shorter today. Most of us are still hung over from the long jump. Are there any questions about last week's session or the handouts?" I ask - hands go up all over the room.

"Yes ensign, what's your question?" I ask; though, I really know what they all want to ask.

"Sir, is the Brubacher cadet, you?" She asked a little hesitantly.

"I could have left that out of the story; so, you'd think your Captain is perfect. But, I included it for a reason. I wanted you to see that you can make a mistake and recover. We all make mistakes. My group, were all given another chance. Many of us used it wisely; but, a few didn't. They are gone, today. It's not just about using your second chances the right way. It's also

about giving them. Admiral Bryant and Lieutenant Ste. Laurent gave us a second chance, when they didn't have to. In fact, the entry never appeared in the files of those of us who used the opportunity to our advantage. During your careers, people will disappoint you. You must let them know they did. But, you should be forgiving; if, the opportunity arises.' I sum up; then move on.

'Anyway, lets continue from where the last handout left off.

.....

By the end of March 2248, George was satisfied with Boots performance. The time had been spent handling normal patrols while doing constant drills and war games at the squad, group and fleet levels. Bryant had put a lot of strain on the personnel in his command. They had languished between commanders; so, he wanted to be sure they were truly razor sharp.

On Thursday March 30, 2248, the Fleet exited a jump at Xi Bootes. It is a truly beautiful binary system. Star A is a little smaller and dimmer than Sol with a slightly dimmer orange main sequence dwarf orbiting it. The yellow star has seven planets including a massive one nine times the mass of Jupiter orbiting fourteen AU from its parent. It also sports one at sixty-one million miles that is very earth like; with a lot of vegetation and animal life; but, no intelligent species inhabit it. It is a warm; but, not arid planet. OESA personnel have named it Eden for its paradise-like environment. It is a great place for shore leave. There is camping, mountain climbing, hiking and swimming without any intrusions by strangers. Star B mothers four planets that host primitive life forms.

As he searched the space outside the observation window, Bryant thought back to his arrival to Boots Fleet at Xi Bootes, when the fleet was here earlier.

The arrival day had gone well. The last of the documents required from Group Commands by Bryant arrived in the proper condition by about thirteen hundred thirty that afternoon; allowing George to download all the command codes for user authentication and complete promotion warrants by fourteen hundred hours. Fleets are essentially down after a new commander assumes the reigns; until, the Commander has the information required to issue subordinates their new command codes. They in turn will have to re-issue to their people, after activating these codes. The entire Fleet was back on line by fourteen-thirty, that afternoon; which gave everyone time to get into dress uniforms for the ceremony an hour and a half later.

Aboard the Columbia, the dividing wall between the two hangars had been retracted; allowing nearly five thousand to attend the ceremony. With a new Rear Admiral, a new Commodore and two new captains, it took nearly two hours to do all the promotions and assignments. The announcement of the changes took another half hour; and, George spent ten minutes attempting to engage the entire fleet. Unscheduled, but not unplanned by his subordinates, Stevens spent ten minutes welcoming Bryant and recounting some of his history to the assemblage of personnel. Then, came the announcement of the dinner party which would start at nineteen hundred hours.

Stewards and service crew started populating the massive room with tables and chairs; even before all the attendees had exited the space. Anyone standing by, would have noticed the room taking shape around a raised head table and dais. Tables radiated toward the back of the room in giant semi-circles. Between the head table and the first line of tables a temporary floor was laid to create a dance floor; and to the left of those at the head table, a musical boutique with amplifier, drums and well placed microphones took shape.

Those who began to file into the space, just before nineteen hundred noted the band already playing soft music, the decorations hanging from the ceiling and on the walls and the fine linens and tableware that graced every place setting on the tables. It was hard not to notice the long hot and cold water serving counters that would hold the entire menu were in their preparatory temperature cycles; so, they would be ready to display the many appetizers, soups, salads, entrees and desserts that would be served that evening. To top it all off, was the longest wet-bar most people would ever see; fully stocked with hard liquors, liqueurs, wines, beers, soft-drinks from worlds all over the Empire; and, ice, stir sticks, glasses, cups, coffee, tea and even water. Someone had pulled out all the stops.

Earlier, when Bryant had gone to check on preparations, he had been astounded and pleased to find things taking the current course. It is what he had envisioned; but, had not quite articulated to those he gave the orders to. A few inquiries made it apparent that his new Chief of Staff had taken the bull by the horns; demanding everything from both Groups that would pull the event together into a gala second to none. He used the power of George's office and position to imprint himself on the situation; telling all, he'd been enlisted for the task, by the Admiral. And, he did it all within his first few hours on the job. There would be a party, for all to attend, on both ships.

When the evening got underway, Bryant inaugurated all to the festivities on the Columbia; inviting everyone to have a good time; as Tom Stevens did the same aboard the Grenada. As George spoke, the serving crew were quietly wheeling large roast turkeys, prime ribs, rack of lamb, fish dishes and carts of assorted rice dishes, pasta entrees, vegetables, salads, soups, finger foods and deserts into the room and preparing them to be served. In addition, a chilled pile of small beef tenderloin medallions and plump chicken breasts were set up on the chef's side of a gas char-broiler that was positioned under one of the hangar's many exhaust vents. And, as all this transpired, silent stewards strategically placed bottled white and red wines along the tables. One crew of servers, chefs, stewards and the service team would be replaced by another at midnight; allowing the first crew to enjoy the party, after their shift.

Once the welcomes were complete, Bryant asked all to join in a series of toasts. He individually toasted each and every officer promoted and reassigned in the earlier ceremony. Which led to his final salute. "Ladies and gentlemen, officers, NCOs and enlisted; I would like you all to join me in a toast to the finest group of people to grace our galaxy. It is a group of the bravest and most generous people alive; each and every one of whom are incredibly skilled. I would like you to raise a glass with me and toast...you the people of Boots. For, it is you who get the jobs done. It is you who make the engines run; allow us to see the many complexities of space; make it possible to live in space; and, keep us safe from its many hazards. It is you who risk your lives each and every day to make life for the people of the Empire safe. It is not its Commander that makes Boots great. It is you. Please turn and toast the person on your right, then on your left, then, ahead of you; and finally the one behind you. Each member of the crew is your hero and you are theirs. But, most of all, you are all my heroes. To Boots!!!!" George finished as he raised his glass; then took a long slow drink from it.

"Now, that I have you all a little tipsy with all these toasts, I'd like to turn the floor over to the new Deputy Fleet Commander. Admiral Stevens will say a few words." A broad smile crossed his face as he made the statement waving his glass toward the newly arrived Stevens. He had come over from the Grenada, after opening their party. During the second shift the procedure would be reversed. They would both concentrate on the Grenada and come over to Columbia for a brief visit.

"Even though, I am in foreign territory, I'd like to welcome you all here.' Tom announced; referring to his move to Grenada. 'And, I'd like to make an observation; and maybe, fill you in on a few things you may not know; but, wish you did.

Admiral Bryant is the true enlisted man's officer. When he made the last toast, it was not just to make you like him. I can tell you that, he really believes in the context of that statement. I worked with him a few years ago when he was actually my subordinate. Each and every person under his command was as important as each and every other. So, on behalf of the more than twenty-seven thousand people in the fleet, I would like to welcome him to Boots and thank him for the toast. And, I would like to raise a glass myself to Vice Admiral George T. Bryant the best Commander in the OESA.' There was a minute's pause while all raised glasses with the traditional cheer and drank to the Admiral. Then, Stevens continued on a lighter note. 'You noticed I said the best Commander. I didn't say the best Fleet Commander. I said the best Commander. There isn't another that can come...." He feigned being cut off as Tonaka dragged him from the dais; mumbling words about drunken sailors all the way back to her chair. Then, she moved to the podium.

"Sorry about that folks.' She said with a smile to a response of raucous laughter. "Poor Admiral Stevens can't hold his liquor. He was out of it when Admiral Bryant made his second toast.' She paused to wait for the laughter to die down; then continued. 'Of course, that was the one to him; and, he took an extra big gulp, for that one.' She said with a smile as she looked over to Tom. It was just then that, he was laughing so hard, he almost fell out of his chair. 'See what I mean?" She said to the audience as she nodded sidelong towards Admiral Stevens. ' But on a more serious note, I would like to say that he may be a little under the weather; but, Admiral Stevens is right. We are lucky to have Admiral Bryant as our Commander. So, I would like to raise a glass and ask you to toast him, again. To Vice Admiral George T. Bryant; the best Fleet Commander in the OESA.' She raised her glass and then took a sip for the toast. Then she paused in absolute silence for a good minute. ' You notice I said the best Fleet Commander. I did not get into overkill with the best Commander thing; because, we all know who the best overall commander is.' She was beaming and polishing the nails of her right hand on the right breast pocket of her jacket. ' Even if you're not sure; I certainly know who the best overall commander is..." Her sentence was cut short as Bryant hauled her off the dais with the hook of what appeared to be a shepherd's staff; as, the crowd roared in laughter.

"Okay folks, the foods getting cold; so, I'll get this moving along. We just have one other item on the schedule; before we serve. Some of you have deeply held beliefs; and others don't; and, the Empire does not condone group participation in religion. But, I will ask you all to take a moment of silence in respect of those who wish to give thanks." Bryant said as he gave up the podium.

After the silence, all lined up along the various food venues, picking and choosing the delectable dishes and delicacies they liked; or wanted to try. There were some unusual and quite exotic foods along the way. You could find marinated Kalamata Olives, escargot aux vin, and even spiced calamari vinaigrette for those who like a good chew. There were ethnic Chinese, Thai, Italian, French and Mexican offerings, from Earth. There were many more exotic entrees from member planets; including a few live food dishes. There were salads of all types including a salad chef to make your Caesar fresh, if that's what you wanted. Steaks, chops and fillets were cooked to order on the grill. The desert tables included an assortment of cheesecakes, finger pastries, pies and even crepes made to your personal request. Each item sported a name tag that included the originating Carrier. You could vote for your favorites in the back of the hangar. The Chief had organized a competition that included some pretty fine prizes for the winning kitchen in every category. It was a smart way to motivate the Carrier' galleys to come up with their best offerings in such a short period.

Seated at the head table were all the guests of honor and their escort or date. Bryant and Marie sat center table. On either side of them sat the two Group Commanders and their partners; and at opposite ends of the table were the Chief and the Brigadier and their dance partners.

As dinner was winding down, the band began to raise their volume a little every few minutes; taking the whole room from a quiet dinner ambience to a more festive mood. Couples began to trickle onto the small dance floor. Olivia Hurst came by the head table; paid respects to everyone; and, invited Captain Nichols to the dance floor. This seemed to cue Marie, who had arrived to the dinner party on George's arm. Taking his upper arm, she directed him to the hardwood square; where they danced to a slow piece.

After a few turns, George relaxed with her; pulling her in tighter against his body; which, she did not resist; and in fact seemed to welcome. They remained there for the next number, slow dancing, cheek to cheek; bodies in tight proximity. At the end of the piece, he leaned his head back to capture her eyes.

"I have duties I must look after. I have to shuttle over to the Grenada and spend some time glad handing. I need to show all the troops, I really care; not just, the ones from my flag Group. Would you like to accompany me?" He asked.

"I'm your date; aren't I?" She responded with that impish twinkle in her eye.

"I think your becoming more than that; but, we'll leave it there for now. Let me beg leave from here, with those that might notice; then, we'll go." Bryant said.

He made his way along the dance floor, over to the head table, and into a small group that had formed in front of it. At each point, he made contact with those who had been with him throughout the evening; explaining that, he and Marie were heading to the Grenada to check out the festivities there.

The two vessels were parked about five kilometers apart, in space. Too close to launch his relatively large personal craft; so, they made their way to the shuttle bay; asking the bay's duty officer to grab a pilot to take them to the Gemini. The young ensign started flitting about nervously; obviously never having dealt with a Senior Flag Officer, before.

"Ensign, take it easy. Take a moment to take a breath, and think. I am just another person, like you; and, I am off duty. Whenever, you meet someone of higher rank, you respect their rank; but, the person behind it is just like you. Always remember that. Are, you going to attend the party, when the shift is over? George asked, changing the subject.

"Yes sir, I'm planning to go as soon as I can shower and clean up." The young lady answered.

"That's good; because it's quite a do; and the plan is to repeat the entire meal, an hour after the shift change. The whole party resets and starts over for all who were working, before. Do, we have shuttles going between the Columbia and the Grenada, tonight: because the party is in both places? Some people may want to make the rounds."

"Yes sir, the orders from your office said to keep two shuttles from each ship running back and forth through the entire party." The diminutive young Alphan woman from the 61 Virgo system responded. She seemed much more relaxed, now.

"How long until the next regular shuttle?" The Admiral inquired.

"Sir, we have one leaving in less than five minutes." The young officer was actually calm and smiling, as she responded.

"Then, don't make any special arrangements, for us. We'll hop on that one." He responded.

"Did you want to wait with the others who are taking it to the Grenada, sir?" She asked pointing through the glass wall to a group of about ten people in a waiting room.

"I don't think so. You know how you reacted, when I came into your command area. I don't want to ruffle too many people, this evening. They're supposed to be having fun. We will just stand around here for the next five; if, that's okay with you? We wouldn't want to be in the way." George sort of chuckled through the statement.

"No sir, it's no problem; but, I think you're making a mistake; if, I may be so bold. " The young Ensign obviously wasn't really shy, after all. She had just been intimidated by the rank.

"Absolutely, feel free. I'm all ears." George responded with a smile.

"Well sir, you were a junior officer, once. You know what it's like to have your Fleet or Group Commander, suddenly show up. But, in this past few minutes, I've come to realize that, you're the boss; but, you're basically a normal all-right person. If you get what I mean?" She sort-of stumbled through the last part of the explanation a little nervously.

"Yes, yes, I get what you mean. Please go on." Bryant invited.

"Well sir, it might be better, if you disturbed them a little, now. They're going to get to know you a little. Besides, you're going to disrupt their night, at first, when you get on the shuttle, sir."

There was wisdom in this young greenhorn's observation.

"Yes Ensign, you have a point. We will wait with the others." George responded, as they moved to the hatchway.

Aboard the Grenada, they began their journey through the corridors; electing to take the keyed elevator and follow a different route than the others.

"Wow, I can't believe it. It's just like being aboard the Columbia. Are all the carriers so similar?" Marie asked with amazed wonder displayed in her very expressive blue eyes.

"They are all identical; except for, the little possessive things people do to personalize a workspace; or, the trial of the occasional new idea or concept. Every ship in each class is identical to the next; unless there has been a design change that is working its way through the Fleets." George responded to her, as they stopped in the empty hallway, while he explained.

As she looked up into his eyes, George felt himself drowning in her gaze. When she leaned into him, it was only natural to put an arm around her, pull her in tight and kiss her firmly and warmly, on the lips. She responded without hesitation.

"You know, Marie; it is probably way too soon for this; but, I think I've fallen in love with you. You can push me away; and, I will stay clear of personal encounters, after this; but, I had to tell you." He said as he stared down into the two liquid pools.

"Ditto." She said in a low hoarse whisper, as she placed her lips against his again.

He responded warmly; and, the embrace and kiss became all the more passionate.

"Unfortunately, we have obligations. I would like to explore this much further." A very raspy whisper he almost didn't recognize as his own voice came from his lips.

"Later.' she responded. 'The feeling will still be there later. We'd better get going before, we're missed.'" She whispered.

Each straightened already pristine uniforms, out of a false sense of propriety and modesty. Then, they broke into raucous laughter, over the reaction, when they glanced at each other.

The Grenada hangar staff stopped and came to attention, when they stepped inside.

"Not tonight, people. This is a party." Bryant yelled in an attempt to be heard in the massive space.

The party continued, until just after midnight; when, the change of shift became evident. There was a change-over of about a third of the guests. During the time before midnight, George and Marie enjoyed several more trips to the dance floor, before heading to the head table. By that time, most of the head table from the Columbia had arrived; and, those that composed the original head table on the Grenada were now on the Columbia.

When the party resumed with the second round of food, George went through the same toasts and greetings, as in the previous setting; but, paid special attention to Grace Tonaka and Moahu; both of whom had been promoted or moved to senior positions within the Fleet. It was especially important for Bryant to pay special attention to Grace. This had been her Flag Ship; and, she had received little attention, to this point. This time it was Tonaka and Moahu who did a similar comedy routine to the one on the Columbia. And once again, the dinner was exquisite, if not a replica of the first. Despite the fact it was a second stint, the entire menu was as fresh and hot, as the first had been.

Again, Marie and George enjoyed several dances; but, returned a little more often to the head table to become better acquainted with their new friends and co-workers. George told humorous stories about things that he had witnessed over his career; until, he finally got to one about Marie he wanted to tell.

He described the event aboard his personal craft with the cadets; comparing Marie to a drill sergeant major on several occasions; but adding embellishments like her cracking her swagger stick across a table; and, expressing his own fears of her. All the while his face held emphatic expressions as he rolled his eyes in apparent disbelief at what he was recounting. All roared in laughter. He ended the story by turning to Marie and making a toast.

"When I first met you, at headquarters, I learned very quickly just how smart and humorous you were. But, I made the mistake of thinking you might be meek. Your constant little barbs, while on the base, convinced me this was not the case. But, when I saw you in action, I knew that, this Lieutenant would make a great Commanding Officer in any assignment. She has grace, elegance, bearing and compassion; but, can be the toughest officer in the pack, when it's required. Marie Ste. Laurent, may the wind be always at your back; and, may you have the best career that anyone could ever want. We all wish you the very best." He finished with a warm smile as he raised his glass to her.

The other members of the group elevated their glasses as they called out a "Rah" in unison. Bryant noticed how she leaned to Grace and whispered into her ear. Grace responded in kind. On the dance floor a short while later, George asked Marie about it. She answered that, she had never heard the expression: "May the wind be always at your back." and had asked Tonaka what it meant. She had explained it was a well-wish for sailors of times past. If the wind was at their backs the sails were full, they were moving, and, not becalmed. She told George, she thought the expression was a beautiful one, for those in the service.

At two hundred thirty hours, George and Marie made their excuses and left; heading for the shuttle bay; stopping from time to time in little naturally occurring alcoves in the corridors for brief intimate moments. The same was true aboard the Columbia; as, they made their way to his quarters. Up on the Flag level, she stopped.

"What's the matter, Marie?" He asked.

"Nothing.' She responded and paused; then, continued. 'I've never been up here; and I can tell by the doors that, the quarters are a heck of lot bigger than even the Captain's quarters must be."

She looked along the corridor at the six doors that graced each side of the shortened hallway. The Flag quarters were in a hallway that sprang directly from the Flag bridge. That level was situated on the lowest deck of the Island; which contains flight control on level three,

the Navigation Bridge on level two, the Flag Bridge, on level one; and, the communications antennae control beside the Flag Bridge. The entire island sits atop the top main deck. It is forty-five meters across and nearly one hundred meters long. Offices, bridges or control room take up considerable space at the front of each level; but, each deck's living quarters corridors are about fifty meters long; with, the living quarters residing on both sides of the full length of the hallway. On the navigation deck, the corridor contains relatively sumptuous quarters for sixty-six; which represents all the shifts for all the departmental commands on the bridge. The same length of corridor, holds just twelve homes for Flag personnel. On some carriers, only two suites are used. On others as many as six may be used for the Fleet, Group and Marine commanders and their chiefs of staff. The rest are maintained; but, vacant. They are held empty for use by visiting dignitaries and Theatre or Headquarters Flag personnel.

George and Marie clawed the clothing from each other less than a minute after entering; and leaving bits of their wardrobes strewn throughout his suite; spending the entire night making love; first in desperation; then, softly; over and over again in every corner of his living quarters; including twice in the shower. By the time he finally fell asleep, George knew every inch of Marie's gorgeous frame, intimately.

He awoke at eight-thirty hours, after only a couple of hours' snooze. Marie was fast asleep and fully uncovered. Propped on an elbow, facing her, he spent the next fifteen minutes admiring the view; until, she finally opened her eyes.

"What time is it?" She asked.

"Eight forty-five." He responded as she jerked herself out of the bed and jumped to her feet.

"My God, I've got a meeting at nine hundred thirty hours. I've got to move my ass." She yelped.

"And what a lovely ass." He said; then, went on. "Use my shower; while I order breakfast. Have a quick bite, then head to your quarters for a quick change. That way, you'll be fresh and awake, when you get to the meeting."

"Great idea!" She responded over her bare shoulder with a smile; as, she headed into the bathroom.

She dressed, after a quick breakfast.

"I wish we had more time." George said as he watched her.

"See you later, George. I've got to run!" She said as she pecked him on the lips, turned and bolted out the door.

George went back to sleep for another three hours. By that time, they were in the vortex on the way to 44 Bootes. It was nice to be the boss, sometimes.

.....

There were a variety of maneuvers that Admiral Bryant wished conducted at 44 Bootes. Preparation and practice were always keys to success. "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." was a quote from Abraham Lincoln that always played in his head. First, he wanted the standard movements; where, Tactical Groups jump in and out of an area to attain synchronicity in those operations. If you want true surprise in a force situation, you need to be able to appear out of nowhere, all at once and all together. The second set of maneuvers were new to this Fleet. The Group Commanders were to order jumps in and out by both of their squads, together; and, by each squad to different destinations. The idea was to get the force used to working under the direction of its Commander; and to working both alone and together. The third stage of the war-games were to repeat the first two steps; with orders coming from the Fleet Command. This would perfect the communications and command chain between all the units involved. The final three days were spent with Task Groups handling defensive or offensive roles in simulations that including point-scoring mimicked weapons hits.

After a couple of false starts, the entire operation went smoothly with the Fleet Command, the Group Commands and all the ships performing excellently. But, the two heavy squads stood out. Of course they were more formidable; but, they were a little more coordinated in all of the first two sequences; and head and shoulders above the rest in the last two sets of operations. They were by far, the best at handling both defensive and offensive tactical situations. This was a testament to Stevens and Tonaka. Not only that; but, it served to validate Bryant's promotion decisions.

After ten days of operations, Bryant ordered five days of rotating leaves to 44 Bootes A Prime; known as Tetrad, to its inhabitants. During the break, he would write a strategy for the Fleet; based, in part, on Stephenson's old one. That would become a Command Document that would be passed to the Group Commands; for, implementation, when separated from Fleet Command. It would also be the basis for future Fleet Action Orders; including the ones he would prepare for the first deployment, after leaving 44 Bootes. Before departure, he would take the

time to complete a detailed report to send to Theatre Command and up the chain. It would include all the changes in rank and assignment and the results of the maneuvers; conducted over the past ten days.

Sending reports in space was an interesting operation. There were no direct communications, at these distances. Electromagnetic waves would take years to reach the destination. Instead, verbal and data reports were stored in communications drones; which made the jump to the intended recipient; who would retrieve the device. That way, a message that would take years to travel to a specific destination would reach it in days. In this case, the Theatre Commander would receive the report, in nine days. The only way to speed up the process at all was to have the probe transmit its data as soon as it exited the jump; which would save about half a day.

George was in the process of writing orders sending the Groups off on regular patrols when, he was sure he saw a bright flash of light through the port side windows of his office on the Flag Bridge. He stood at the window taking in the inky scene. Twenty seconds later, there was another flash. He was sure it was weapons detonating somewhere near them.

"Bridge, did anyone else catch those weapons' flashes." George said as he activated his communicator.

"Aye, Admiral. We're tracking them, now.' A voice he recognized as Nichols responded over the communication system. 'You're welcome down here, if you'd like to watch over it, sir."

"No Captain, you don't need a hovering Fleet Commander, now. Let me know when you have its source and are sure of what it is." Bryant replied.

"Aye, sir." The line closed off.

Over the next ten minutes, George saw another fifty of the flashes; which grew larger as they came from positions progressively closer.

"Sir, those bursts are weapons' explosions!' Nichols was back on the horn. 'They originate from bearing three forty-five, elevation seven point five. The last ones were launched from a quarter light year out and detonated nearly six hundred billion miles from us. However, I believe that, whoever is firing is approaching us in a series of successive short jumps. Based on detonation points to now, they will be in weapons' range, in another ten minutes."

"Stephen have communications get me a secured line to the Grenada, please?" Bryant ordered; and clicked off. 'Commodore Tonaka, can you report to my office, immediately, please?" He had activated communication to her.

"Aye, Admiral." Came the response.

Tonaka hustled in just as Stevens called in about a minute later.

"Tom, I have Grace here. We've picked up weapons fire closing on us at bearing three, four, five by elevation seven and a half. They seem to have detected us; but, are trying to establish engagement distance. They seem to be using weapons' rounds for ranging; firing each time they exit a short jump. They are leap-frogging towards us; and it appears they will be in range in about eight minutes. I will have Grace divide Columbia Group into Squads; but, hold this position, until you're ready. I would like you to split Grenada Group. Direct one squad to the left flank the other to the right of where they will land next. Whoever they are, they are headed right at Columbia. They're only about a quarter light year out. You'll have to get an exact trajectory and jump each squad; so, you catch them, at their rear, by surprise. I need to know your exact execution time. We will jump the two squads of the Columbia to a point half way between us and the intruder, shortly after you go to FTL. Based on their pattern of short jumps, they will make one more stop-and-shoot exit; before making, the final leap to us. So, our jump should put us right at their exit aperture as they emerge. With you coming at them from slightly behind and to the sides, we should be able to overwhelm them; even if, they are a much larger force." Bryant ordered.

"Aye, sir." The response came over his communicator at the same moment launch times and trajectory courses came in for the Grenada squads' jumps. George punched in the numbers; did a few calculations of his own; and, pointed out the Columbia launch times and trajectories to Grace.

"I got your info, Tom. That's approved. We've programmed our jumps. I'm sending our schedule and courses to you, now." He said as Grace waved herself out of his office quietly tapping on her data pad to issue orders to her group.

Bryant watched out the view window as Grenada split into two; each squad heading towards different jump points. He felt the customary shudder in the deck below his feet; as, the Columbia began to move. There was the familiar lurch as they crossed their FTL threshold. Then, just as suddenly, they exited the vortex directly in the path of a small fleet of vessels.

George had never seen these designs before. Most were relatively saucer shaped. A couple had the form of large cigars. Still others were orbs. He wasn't sure whether or not they had fewer decks or the inhabitants were very small; but, the crafts were very slim and sleek. Each saucer was about one hundred seventy-five meters in diameter; but, from keel to top deck plating, they were no more than thirty meters in height. If the intruders were similar to humans in size, these vessels could only be two or three decks in height; suggesting, a relatively small crew.

The Columbia rocked a little as vibrations from a kind of thunder rolled through her interior. She had taken weapons fire the moment she exited the jump. Bryant observed the launch of about eighty fighters from her sides in a period of about five minutes. It was obvious, Grace was holding a reasonable reserve force still; and, he was proud that they could launch two fighter craft every seven and a half seconds. Bolts of particle charges whizzed through space; as, the two forces exchanged fire. The Columbia and her heavy Cruiser fired deadly salvos of spears from their railguns. As he scanned the space around them, Bryant could see the Columbia Group's light squad off to their port side; and, observed a large portion of the interlopers' formation breaking from their main flotilla, to head for it. Fifty Columbia Raptor class fighters intervened; while thirty remained on stations with the original body. As the Columbia Group took continuous blows from the intruders, he noted that, Grace was still hitting the two assemblages with streams of continuous weapons fire from the carrier's vast arsenal. Her many cannon placements were aimed at numerous targets on multiple enemy ships; as were those of her accompanying Cruiser and Frigates.

Suddenly, the two Grenada squads emerged on each side of the enemy rear; presenting a hail of rounds from a different vantage point. Grenada launched another eighty raptors. These split into two; bearing towards positions that supported both of Columbia's fighting squads. Within a couple of minutes, the encircling Boots Fleet was shooting at the superior force; which was now on the defensive. But, the enemy returned volleys at a similar rate. The flickers, streaks and detonations from exchanged salvos of weapons fire resembled a nighttime fireworks display; lighting up the battlefield, like a bright summer day. There was a sudden fusion flare as the Minneapolis from the Columbia Group went up like an exploding star. Then, the Cleveland from the Grenada Group exploded. Boots had lost two frigates in a matter of minutes.

Bryant sent an urgent communiqué to his two Group Commanders. "Use of anti-matter weapons is authorized. - Bryant."

He eyed all four squads beginning to slowly yield to the opposing force; though, they continued the barrages on their nemesis. Of course, their adversary would think they were winning this skirmish; but, in reality, the force was giving ground; to avoid damage from their own armaments. When a buffer zone of a hundred kilometers had opened between Boots and its encircled opposition, each Columbia and Grenada Group ships launched two missiles. Detonating like super novae, each one of these weapons destroyed an enemy vessel in a series of twenty-eight fusions flares much like those of the Minneapolis and Cleveland; filling the space with debris and wreckage of all types; each fragment following its own deadly trajectory. The remaining five vessels attempted to regroup; but, Boots Fleet kept piling on the conventional fire; disabling one ship after another. As the brilliant flashes diminished, George could see the remnants of partial hulls coasting through the void careening off each other, in unpredictable ways; accompanied by, an immense accumulation of flotsam and garbage, so integral to peoples' lives; and, bodies, that cluttered the entire battlefield.

He tapped in new orders. "Recover one or two complete enemy bodies; and, return them immediately to the Columbia. - Bryant.' Then, added, in reflection. 'It would not be bad to have one intact ship, too."

He needed to begin an investigation of the invaders immediately. This had been a fairly major force.

The battle took a different turn, now. It was much more measured, from a Boots Fleet point of view. They were trying to disable the enemy vessels without destroying them; but, without accepting too much more mutilation of their own ships or people. One of the frigates and three newly launched Raptors took up positions to protect a recovery shuttle that moved into the outskirts of the battlefield. Meanwhile, another enemy ship flared into oblivion; while a second went completely dark; after a spear, fired by Grenada, penetrated deep amidships. If it wasn't playing dead, this ship could be a great capture.

"Grace, send a strong force of Marines to board that vessel. Make sure they're well covered; in case, we need to destroy it." He ordered.

Half an hour later, two enemy bodies were being moved to sickbay; as a Cruiser began to take the secured enemy ship in tow. The entire remaining Boots Fleet was left fighting three damaged enemy vessels. Supply vessels went in and out of the battle area resupplying various vessels; while the enemy was now having great difficulty maintaining the battle.

"Grace and Tom, let's finish it. We have two bodies and a captured ship. Let's not risk any more of our people or ships." Bryant said as he directed his communication to both of them.

Boots' weapons fire increased dramatically as they moved further out. Then, a single anti-matter torpedo was directed at each vessel. Thirty seconds later, they had been vaporized. The battle was over.

A communiqué from Nichols indicated that, George and all three Flag officers were requested in the Medical Bay. Bryant logged off, heading out along the corridors. He met up with Grace and Stephen on the way.

"I ordered my Exec to meet Admiral Stevens in the shuttle Bay." Nichols said.

The three waited in the hallway outside Sick Bay, for Stevens. Tom arrived about fifteen minutes later. It had taken time for the Grenada to jump back to the Fleet and shuttle him over.

"Welcome, Tom. I can only assume that, this is about our two dead enemy combatants." Grace offered.

"Can we go in and see?" He asked.

They were met inside by a flitting, nervous Lieutenant Commander Hajt, the Chief Medical Officer; who seemed over-excited in anticipation of something.

"None of you are going to believe this.' Hajt said excitedly forgetting all protocol. 'This answers questions we've had for maybe - three centuries."

"Get on with it, Commander.' Tonaka ordered. 'And next time, you follow protocol, when you meet a senior officer.

Hajt walked them over to a gurney; hesitated for effect; then, slowly pulled the sheet back from over the face of the body. There was a collective gasp of surprise.

Its finely wrinkled skin was so gray - it was nearly silver in color. Massive almond shaped closed eyelids slanted upwards towards the sides of the head. Two nostrils exited a slight rise in the front of the face between and below the inner corners of the large eyes. Thin gray-blue lips formed a narrow mouth.

Hajt continued to withdraw the sheet; revealing a delicate frame about four and a half feet in height and proportionately small relative to the head. The entire body could not have weighed more than thirty-five kilograms. Spindly arms came from articulating shoulders and were hinged by an elbow and terminated by a rotary wrist ending in a narrow palmed hand sporting four

elongated fingers. Thins legs looked barely able to support the small frame and ended in relatively long feet with three toes.

"As near as we can tell, they are bipedal; but, not very physically active. They have very large brain casing and four-lobed brains. Vocal cords are present; but, seem underused. They can talk; but, probably don't do it much. We think they employ telepathic communications most of the time. They seem to be the very creatures that were described for so long by those we all thought were short a few cards in their decks." Hajt chuckled; as he finished the summary.

"Yes, it would appear you're right' Bryant responded. 'But, the question is, why would an advanced civilization, who have been space faring much longer than us, suddenly attack after spending a few centuries studying us peacefully. Their perception must have been that, something has changed. Somehow, we scared the hell out of them. We'll need to see what we get from that vessel; we took in tow.'" Bryant finished as he turned and led them out of Sick Bay.

"Let's meet in the Flag Boardroom in twenty minutes. I would like all our Chiefs there, along with the head of the team studying the captured vessel." Bryant ordered as he turned down the corridor.

"Lieutenant Commander Ireland give us your report on the enemy ship." Bryant ordered.

"Aye sir. As you know we have engineering heading a large team to analyze it. We haven't had a lot of time; so, this is somewhat preliminary. First of all, we took three live prisoners from the disabled vessel. Overall, these ships would be more powerful than ours if, they had as much power to draw on. They have a much more robust shielding system and better weaponry; both limited by power supply; which appears to be undersized. However, the spear that penetrated their hull went right through that part of engineering; so, it will take more work to be sure of their generating capacity. Particle weapons are limited in range because of this energy deficiency. Shields are more powerful, but easily overloaded. We should adapt them for our ships. The biggest thing in our favor, at this point, is our anti-matter weapons. They have no defense to it; and, they seem to have no analog to it in their immediate arsenal.' Ireland finished his summary; then, added. 'Of course, we'll have more for you as we dig deeper. This is only the start."

"Does anyone have any views on this incursion?" Bryant asked.

"Yes sir. I think it was a probe. A test to see how strong our defenses really are." Nichols piped in.

"Captain, I think you're right. For some reason, the Grays are thinking of invading. I know that, if I was sending a probe, it wouldn't be larger than, five percent of my total capacity; so I believe that, we are speaking of a force that's at least twenty times what we saw. Moe, do you have the proposal on Fleet expansions, yet?" Bryant asked his chief.

"Yes sir, I have a proposal that lays out both ideas; but, recommends the enlarged groups and balanced squads. I will forward it to you." He responded.

"Not yet. I'd like you to incorporate this battle into it, as an example. We lost two frigates and over two thousand lives, today. In both cases, they were frigates in the weak squadrons. A case can be made that; this loss could have been avoided with the proper balance. Those ships would have been protected better. What was the conclusion in your report?" Bryant asked.

"Sir, I took the liberty of using the point of view of completing deployment of the subs; and adding two carriers and two cruisers to each Fleet. I also allowed for the Task Force Commands and the Squad Command level. It includes the inflation of the Fleet Level Marines to the Division level; under, a Major General and all the appropriate new Commands and additions to Commands and Senior levels that would be required. With the subs, this expansion does double our capabilities; but, represents an increase of only thirty percent in personnel and assets. It is definitely the most cost efficient way to increase strength." The Chief finished.

"Good. Add the information on this battle. Send it to me. I'll edit it. You revise and resubmit; and, we'll get this off to the Quadrant tomorrow afternoon with the reports on this battle. It's a lot of work; but, I know you can do it." Bryant said with a smile.

Bryant put pressure on science teams to glean as much from the recovered craft, bodies and prisoners, as possible. One of the live captives spoke English. This was not really a surprise; since, the team believed they had been visiting Earth for centuries. Over the next few hours, a computer team discovered home system charts that seemed to indicate Lambda Bootes was home planet to the grays. However, it was not the main star inside Empire space. From Earth and Rigil, the OESA had been unaware this was a binary system; because of the brightness of the main star which is blue white twenty-five times the brightness of Sol. It turned out to have a yellow orange K classified star in an eccentric orbit around it that kept the secondary outside Empire space, most of the time. Though it would be one to two light years inside our territory for a short portion of its orbital period, it spent the majority of its time from there to four light years outside our borders. From the center of our territory it either cannot be seen because of its parent star or

is outside our territory and appears of no consequence. The Empire had always been very definite on border determination; and so, spent very little time and resources on systems even slightly beyond its borders. So, we had just missed the fact that, there was an intelligent space faring species inhabiting two planets in a system right on our border that was part of a wider system inside our territory.

George requested that; Tom Stevens, Grace Tonaka and Marie Ste. Laurent meet him in the brig of the Columbia.

"What's up boss?" Stevens asked, after the three had paid their respects.

"I am a little worried that this little test of our defensive capabilities was not without cause. I've received information that these grays are from a system right on our border. I am afraid that, they may have innocently misconstrued our intentions. They may have felt a major attack was a necessity and this was the test to precede it. I want to send Marie in with one of them. They speak English; so, coax a little out of it, Marie. We need them aware of the fact that, we know this was only a test; and that, a more powerful attack will follow. But, we need them to believe that, we see ourselves as a peaceful species; and so, we are baffled and do not understand the reason for the attack. I think Marie will be convincing, I believe she is the one to prod them into talking. We shall just observe. Are you okay with that, Lieutenant?" Bryant directed the question directly at Marie.

"Yes sir; but, why do you feel we brought this on?" She asked curiously.

"...just a hunch, Marie. You'd better get a move on. A fleet could be on the way, right now." Bryant gently steered her toward the cell door with pressure on her shoulder as he finished.

Marie's interrogation took over an hour. For half an hour the alien did not respond, at all. It seemed to be her genuine concern for its well-being that softened it. Once there was a dialogue, it took half an hour to get to any meaningful details. She spent fifteen additional minutes getting specifics and confirming everything; then, exited the cell.

"Sir, the Empire's rapid expansion to their system is what has them worried. They believe we are an aggressive hostile species. I reminded him of their visits over many centuries; and of the fact that we have empathy and compassion as good attributes to mediate our bad ones. I explained that, the expansion was relatively peaceful. That, we negotiated the memberships into the Empire. Argat, our alien, says that the real fear was created by the fact that we moved so fast

and are governed by a dictatorship. I explained that, the people chose our form of government to prevent the paralysis of previous ones. I also pointed out that it is not a dictatorship but a cooperative government with democratic representation. Argat explained that the two incidents at Rho convinced them it is a military backed dictatorship. I explained to him that a vast majority of Rho citizens want membership in the Empire and a very small percentage of the population started a civil war, each time. I explained that, the rebels based their division on a philosophical point of view; something that caused widespread destruction, suffering and death in Earth's past. And that, because of that, it is the Empire's policy to eradicate that type of rebellion. I offered Argat our constitution, bill of rights and criminal code to study, if he wanted. Argat is male, by the way; and, he was in command of the vessel we took him from and second in command of the mission." Marie finished.

"Marie, would you go back in and ask if he would speak to me for a few minutes? You may tell him who I am and my position, here." Bryant suggested.

"Aye, sir." She responded as she turned to the cell.

A few minutes later, she straightened in her chair and made eye contact through the glass pane. "Sir, Commander Argat will speak with you." She called out as she waved him in.

"Argat, I am Vice Admiral George Bryant and I command the Fleet that met you, today. I am sorry for any losses. We only believed we were defending ourselves, our people and our territory. In our Empire we offer our hand in friendship when we meet someone. We offer the right hand; because, it is usually the one that holds a weapon. We are in effect welcoming discourse without the threat of battle. I offer you my hand now." Bryant said as he extended his right hand toward the alien. There was a substantial pause.

"Thank you, sir. I welcome discussion with you." Argat responded as he took Bryant's hand. George noted that, though the skin was silken, the touch was cold and clammy.

"Very good, sir." Bryant responded with a smile as they shook hands. He went on slowly; maintaining intense eye contact with Argat; though, he did not know whether or not Argat could gauge his sincerity by his facial expression. "We do not wish to attack your worlds. In fact, we can barely maintain the space we control, now. Humans are a curious lot; and, it was that curiosity that dragged us all the way out to the borders we have now. As we spread out, we met similar species who wished to share in our technology, wealth and system to create a strong mutual bond. Inside that territory are nearly fifty other species, we do not govern. We control the

space around their systems; but, we leave them alone. The Empire exists for the benefit of its members; not for the demise of non-members. The border we protect was set as a goal nearly two centuries before we ever got there. It was a goal to create a buffer that would give the Empire space to defend itself. It was also a large enough region to use for the study of this part of this galaxy. The only battles we have fought since this expansion were either with our own people to quell rebellions like the ones at Rho; or, to defend ourselves against outside attacks like yours. I personally have suffered because of decisions made at Rho. I was forced to make some very harsh decisions at one of those incidents, myself. I cannot express to you the depth of guilt and remorse I have felt because of this. But, it was necessary. We have seen these rebellions last centuries and kill millions, if not quelled completely and immediately. We do not take those actions lightly. They are done for the benefit of the more than five hundred billion citizens we protect. We believe that, a small minority should not be able to threaten the well-being of the vast majority. We have not acted aggressively toward anyone as we expanded." Bryant stopped there to allow his words to penetrate and to give Argat time to respond. There was another long pause.

"Yes, I understand your meaning; and I sense your remorse in the actions you felt necessary at Rho. But, taking those actions into account; along with the fact that, yours is an Empirical state; and, looking at the relatively fast expansion of your Empire; can you blame us for thinking we should act to prevent an attack?" Argat was quite eloquent as he responded.

"No sir, I cannot blame your people at all. But, I do wish to prevent a war. If your people attack, we would be forced to bring all available defenses to face the threat. If we each put hundreds or thousands of war ships on the field, millions will die. This is unnecessary; since, we would never attack you, in the first place. I am prepared to take steps to ensure your confidence in our trustworthiness. I have the power to make agreements for the Empire to establish new relationships, protect our territory and improve the commerce for our people and their partners. Do your people make such agreements with others?" Bryant finished.

"Yes, Admiral we do. We adopted the idea from your people. Over centuries of watching you, it was one of the things we adopted that improved our lot." Argat replied.

"Good. Do you know what a treaty is?" George asked.

"Yes sir, we like the agreements you call treaties. We have treaties with several other systems farther away from Sol than we are located. Are you proposing such a treaty?" The alien asked.

"Yes, Argat; I am. I have the authority to negotiate such an agreement for the Empire; but, I would need to meet with someone at a similar level from your world. I would like us to trust each other and be friends - not enemies." Bryant offered.

"I am not authorized to conduct such a negotiation. However, I am sure my people would send a representative or empower me, if they knew all this." The gray said.

"It was my intention to release you, anyway. What is left of your armada is not a threat to us; and, we do not keep or kill our prisoners. We will assist in reviving your vessel; and, I will release you, in the hope that, you will go back and speak to those in authority. I sincerely desire us to reach a peaceful settlement; so, we can enjoy peaceful relations with each other. We would trust your people as a neighbor; since, you spent centuries visiting us without relative harm. It would be good to know we have a friend on our border." Bryant replied with a smile.

"Very good, Admiral. I will convey your wishes to my people." Argat attempted to return the smile to George, unsuccessfully.

"Please call me George. On my world friends call each other by their first names. I hope we will become friends." The Admiral said as he stood and offered a hand.

"Thank you, George. You may call me Argat. I too hope we can become familiars." The gray responded. Surprisingly, he had finally chosen a correct but uncomfortable word to convey a thought. His command of English impressed George.

With that, the meeting ended. Bryant sent off the expansion proposal and battle summaries the next day as promised. The report was filed within the structure of existing normal digital documentation; but the proposal was presented as a one hundred eighty-page document complete with supporting graphs, charts and ancillary references. He had been able to take a little time to personally see Argat and his contingent off on their thirty-seven light year trip home. Assuming the Gray's technology had similar limitations, Bryant knew he would not hear back for between two and three weeks, at the earliest.

.....

You will be receiving another handout, now. It brings you up to the present." I finished as I tapped my data pad and turned to exit the room.

Chapter 9 Expansion!!

May 23, 2248

"As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." **Abraham Lincoln**

On Tuesday May 23, 2248, George Bryant received a bulletin from headquarters. By then, he had negotiated a treaty with the Grays. The Empire would create a small dent in its outer boarder at Lambda Bootes. Essentially this would cut a notch into the border allowing for three light years' territorial claim around the entire Lambda Bootes system. Since, it was not inhabited by humanoids or members of the Empire this was a small price to pay for peace. In return, the Grays agreed to a mutual non-aggression clause; to establish immediate diplomatic relations with the Empire; and, to meet to negotiate mutually beneficial trade pacts at the earliest opportunity. George had again been heralded as a hero of the Empire. The Boots' embedded press corps filed story after story about him and the incident. He was called to Headquarters and presented with the Orion Peace Award by the Emperor, in person. This award had never been presented to a military representative. In nearly two and a half centuries, it had only been awarded to diplomats twice before. But, it was the bulletin that really meant something. It was directly from the C&C; and copied to the Emperor, First Minister, Council Members and all OESA Quadrant, Theatre and Fleet Commanders. It made official the adoption of the Boots' Fleet expansion plan which would commence in the Boots Fleet, immediately. For a bulletin, it was a relatively long document, outlining the entire plan, presenting new chain of command block diagrams and generalizing capital and operational budget increases for each level to attain the goals outlined in the plan.

George had been in constant contact with Bill Stephenson throughout the wait; and during a visit to headquarters, had sat with him updating Stephenson on the specific plan for Boots should the overall proposal be approved. So, it was less than a day later when, Bryant received warrants promoting the appropriate people to the correct levels so they could be assigned to the positions George had reserved for them. In addition, there was a warrant for Marie's promotion to Commander for her work in aiding in the peaceful resolution of the Gray situation. Locally, she had already risen to the rank of Lieutenant Commander; but, George had expressed his desire to elevate her and the divisional staff to departmental level. They had already aided more than four hundred after the great loss of life during the battle with the Grays. Many of those had

suffered greatly at the death of friends; and, would have normally gone to Earth or Rigil for help. Boots had kept them functional and had helped them recover because of Marie and her people. She was also awarded the C&C Order of Merit.

Bill sent an additional private memo to George. He advised him that, he had lobbied the C&C to make Counseling a service wide divisional operation; but, wanted it to go departmental. He had not pushed for that; because he wanted to offer the departmental headquarters command to Marie; since, she had created the whole structure. But, he didn't want to make that offer until George and Marie made their relationship more permanent "if you get my drift". He knew, if she was made a departmental HQ commander, they would transfer her to Rigil; unless, she was married to a Fleet Commander. Then, they would allow her to operate from his Fleet. It was Bill's way to give his blessing and prod them along. During the waiting period Marie and George had become closer. She virtually lived in his quarters, now. He could no longer envision life without her. They both found it hard to keep the outward appearance of a professional relationship. Both wanted only to be in each other's arms, when they were together.

Once he had a full grasp on the document's contents, he called in his chief.

"Come in." He called as he waved without raising his head, when Moahu knocked on the door frame.

"I guess you failed me, Moe." He said as he held the data pad displaying the document over his lowered head for Tahu.

He raised up and watched Moe a few seconds after he felt the pad's removal, from his hand. He couldn't seem to erase the ear to ear grin on his face as he watched the Chief navigate the document page by page. Thank goodness the Chief never looked up at George as he read on.

"Wow, this is great, Admiral. They went for it all." The Chief called out.

"Yes, you will be busy Moe. You need to prepare positional offers for Tom Stevens, Grace, Steven Nichols, Marie Ste. Laurent and Brigadier Malcolm. You need to arrange a meeting; so, I can go over plans and expectations with them. Once they accept the offers, you need to post the announcement of their promotions. You also need to post only the basics of the expansion; so, all our personnel will understand what is happening. And, most importantly you need to arrange the promotion ceremony and one hell of a party for them all - even better than your last one; if you can top it. Can you handle all that Moe? I'd like to have the offers on my

system in an hour.' Bryant said through his big smile; then added. 'And Moe - you did a great job. Thank you.'

"No sir. Thank you for the opportunity. I can't believe I almost rejected this position. I love this job. And this makes it worth all the work" He said as he shook the data pad in the air; then, banged into the doorframe in his haste to exit the Admiral's office without so much as a "by your leave". George could only chuckle about it. It was great to see Moe so enthused.

Fifteen minutes later, his system enunciator alerted him to an electronic memo. It was from Moe and all the offers were impeccably done and complete. George added his signature; then, sent each to its appropriate recipient. Half an hour later, the enunciator announced more incoming. As he opened the e-mails, he saw, they were responses from all concerned accepting their offer and agreeing to attend a meeting at thirteen hundred hours. Another alarm turned out to be a memo from Moe advising of the meeting at thirteen hundred and that Hangar-A would be empty for the ceremony at fifteen hundred hours; and A and B, on both Carriers, would be set up for the dinner / dance to commence at eighteen hundred. There was also a request for authorization for galley overtime for both carriers. They would bring in additional teams to get it done on time. He okayed the expense.

At thirteen hundred all the requested personnel were at his door; along with Moe and his personnel, accounting and logistics managers.

"Let's head to the boardroom. We'll have more room there." George ordered as he grabbed his data pad.

"Everyone get comfortable. Moe get the galley to send up refreshments and light food. We'll be here about ninety minutes." George ordered.

When everyone was seated and relaxed he hit an icon on the pad sending an image to the projector.

"This is the plan for the Fleet as it will be when this is all done. As you can see, we will essentially have four Groups that cannot officially be broken into squads. Each Group will have a Carrier, a Cruiser two frigates and a sub. Two supply vessels are actually going to be attached to the Task Force Commands and will be servicing two group commands. Each Carrier will house a Group Commander who will report to a Task Force Commander. The Task Force Commander may use each Group independently or together. Group Commanders will hold the rank of Commodore Level seven. Task Force Commanders will be at Rear Admiral level eight. Each

Carrier will also hold a regimental marine command at the rank of Colonel which is level six, with multiple battalion commands. Two regiments will be under the control of the Task Force Level Seven Brigade Commander and the Brigade Commands will be under the command of the Fleet Level Division Command who will be a level eight general officer. The marine regiment will be staffed at a level around two thousand including operational and command personnel. This will put the division at a level just under nine thousand including command staff. That means that, each Group will incorporate five warships manned by around ten thousand three hundred personnel, in total. Fleet capacity will rise to twenty warships, four supply vessels and between thirty-five and forty thousand, including staffs. So we will need to acquire two additional carriers, two additional frigates and two additional subs along with all the people it will take to man them and create the commands and staffs we need to manage the operation. We will need nearly eighteen thousand additional people to man all this. Three more people will need to move into flag positions for the new Commands; and we will need two additional Brigadiers; once, General Malcolm is ensconced as a division commander. This will create openings which will ripple down through the Groups. We will also need additional senior officers to command the new vessels and senior staff for the departments and shift commanders. Again this will ripple down through the Groups. So, you will all need to build a list of recommendations for the senior staff you will need and who will replace them in their current positions. Once you have figured it all out you will need to create a list of new personnel you will need to fill new or vacated positions. I have one of Grace's officers as a Group Commander, already. I will need one more recommendation from her and two from Tom's Group. You may also draw from headquarters or other Fleets to fill those most senior positions; but, I caution you. It is important to develop the rising stars within our own Fleet. You will be surprised at what you will find; and, you'll maintain a lot of loyalty for it. We need to fill those other five senior positions, quickly. Those people need to be in on the planning and development. I will want your recommendations by tomorrow. We will need to complete promotions and assignments within the week. Once all our internal moves are complete and we begin to draw outside personnel, there is a formula provided by the C&C; so, all Fleets will share in new graduates from the Academies. For every new officer and enlisted we take on, we will be able to draw one experienced person from each Quadrant Command. So, our ratio will be one new for every four experienced people.

While we were all waiting for HQ, Stephen was developing a plan to accept the new builds. There are already two carriers, two subs and a frigate in various stages of assembly that are allocated to us. The additional frigate parts are being produced now and its assembly will begin within the month. So, Commodore Nichols has prepared a list of specialists he will need to supervise assembly and testing; and for worthiness trials. He will be drawing from all your existing personnel; but, you will get all these people back within four months. They are all on temporary assignment, attached to his temporary Hardware Acquisitions Command. Moe, he has also called for one of your accountants and one person from logistics. I hadn't thought of that need; but Stephen tells me that, if we want to keep things within Fleet procurement policies, it would be wise to have the experts on site. These people will be travelling between Boots Fleet, Rigil, Earth and 44 Bootes to keep up with all the assemblies. The total Acquisition Command personnel need is seventy-four people; so, I have released the Admiral's Craft for his use. It is the only jump capable vehicle big enough to handle the requirement; but, small enough to be efficient. It will be their homes for the next four months. Stephen, feel free to use all the facilities and stores. I want you all to be happy and comfortable. We are asking a lot of your temporary command. Stephen is scheduled to leave here with his Command on May 29th; so, I would like to hold the additional flag level promotions before that. That way, he will know who he will be dealing with. Grace and Tom have to determine who gets existing assets and who gets the new ones. I assume Grace will give Stephen the Columbia Group; since, he will be away most of the time; but, if you want to give him the new group that's okay, too; since, he'll be able to deal with himself okay.' George had to pause for the chuckle that went through the room to die off.

'You'll all need to develop your staffing plan and training plans for new and promoted personnel. You will need all the ship execs to arrange quartering for all personnel as it changes. You need an indoctrination plan; so, newcomers are made aware of Boots policies and expectations, immediately. You will need to keep personnel and payroll updated on your plan and its disposition at all times. We need everyone paid the right amount, on time. I know money isn't that important when your room and board and all your daily needs are covered; but, we all need to know we can rely on our supervisors.

You may also need to draw on Counseling Services during this. People are going to be under a great deal of stress. Headquarters has promoted Marie, here.' George waved his arm towards her as he said it. 'They are pressing to take this division service wide, after all the good it

did during the Gray encounter. The division is expanding to have representation on every ship; so, your logistics, human resources and payroll people will have to look out for that, too. And all the Execs will need to quarter those people, too. There is more regarding Counseling; but, I have to talk to Marie, first. We will probably have a further update for you, in the near future. Does anyone have any constructive thoughts they could add to this?" Bryant asked as he finished.

"Yes sir, I have one that may be important.' Moe raised his hand as he chimed in; then, continued. 'There is a lot of duplication here. Task Force 1 and 2 will have to do a lot of the same things. All the Groups will have to do similar things. It may help to have meetings and work together on those things that are common at similar levels. I know Task Force Commanders may want to work with their Group Commanders on personnel changes; but, Group Commanders may benefit from meeting with each other to resolve common issues. I can also see our Fleet Commander wanting to work out issues with the Task Commands; but, those that affect the Groups should include the Group Commanders, too. That way we don't make assumptions that won't work; and we are all working on the same page all the time.'" Moe finished.

"I see what you are inferring here, Moe; and, you're right. I think I have a way of ensuring we don't duplicate; and, we communicate properly. If we wish to meet with someone or some level on issues or an issue that concerns the expansion; we should make the arrangements through Moe. We would notify him of who the proposed attendees are and what the subject matter is with a brief description of what that entails. He can look over the request and suggest additions to the attendee list. Once okayed, Moe sends out the meeting requests. Of course, this only pertains to all the expansion stuff including the Fleet, Marines and Counseling. Normal operations go on as usual. What do you think of that idea?" Bryant asked as he looked around the room. He thought there was full consent; but, wasn't really sure of the response.

"All in favor of all expansion communications going through Commodore Moahu - raise your hands." Bryant commanded.

Everyone promptly raised an arm.

"Okay, then, that's the way we'll handle this whole thing, from start to end. This goes for acquisitions, too.' He directed at Stephen. 'If you have an acquisition situation that affects a party, send it to Moe, first. If he thinks it affects or may affect others in the future, he will suggest who to add to the communications.'"

"That's a good idea, Admiral. It may avoid me having to do something more than once."
Nichols responded with a smile.

"Anyone got any other constructive ideas?" Bryant asked.

"I've got one.' Marie piped in; then continued. "Wouldn't it be more efficient to have personnel prepare a list of promotable people within other Fleets and Commands. And another of people who would take lateral moves. There are lots that will not move because they are married or just made a move. It would be good if we were looking at a few thousand names instead of a couple of million." Marie suggested.

Moe and his personnel manager mumbled back and forth and exchanged looks.

"Yes, it would save a lot of time. Personnel will prepare a list of promotable people. They'll include a brief history, their specialty, their last move date, current rank and current posting. If you want more; you will then, have to look them up. We'll also give you a list of upcoming Academy graduates from all the institutions; so, you can draw on freshly trained officers and enlisted personnel. I hope that's satisfactory; because it's going to take a lot of man hours to do; along with all the other duties these people have." Moe finished.

"Moe, that sounds great. I don't think we can ask any more of personnel than that.' Bryant interjected. 'Is everyone okay with that?" Bryant directed at those around the table.

"Until Marie asked, I think we had all accepted that we'd have to deal with the personnel records from the entire service. I think it's more than anyone expected." Grace chimed in as everyone else nodded assent.

"Anything else?" Bryant asked.

There was a long silence.

"You may want to grab a coffee, tea, cold drink and snack. It seems it came in here a while ago without us noticing. But, you better hurry. It's getting close to the promotion ceremony time." Bryant said with a laugh as he motioned to the refreshments on the side tables. He rose to leave the room. Malcolm stayed with Bryant until he was seated at his desk, in his office.

"What can I do for you, Ian?" George asked as he sat down with a hand extended to indicate the General should grab a chair.

"I want to thank you for everything, George. You have done more for the Marine Corps than anyone else ever has. And, you've done a lot for me." He said earnestly.

"You're very welcome Ian; but, I didn't do anything special for you. You earned this a long time ago. I never felt right with the Fleet marine compliments classed as a Brigade; strictly because the leader of such a wide spread organization, imbedded in such a diverse base should have been a Divisional Commander. I sought the Fleet expansion, first. But the increased marine contingent follows naturally. We recommended a little more than doubling it to ensure it would be Divisional in nature. Anyway, no one works harder than you. And not many officers I know are better leaders. I will be happy to pin those stars on your collar. I'd like to add one more thing. Because your marine and I am fleet oriented does not mean we cannot fraternize once in a while. Marie and I would like nothing more than to enjoy an evening out with you and yours. Just say the word." George finished.

"Aye, sir; I will. And, thanks again Admiral." Malcolm said softly as he rose and made for the door.

At fifteen hundred everyone that could be there jammed into Hangar A aboard the Columbia. It started with Grace who was promoted to Rear Admiral. Then, the announcement was made regarding expansion of the Fleet, establishment of the Task Force Commands and Creation of the two additional Group Commands. The re-assignment of the two Rear Admirals came next. Stevens was assigned Task Force 1 and Tonaka Task Force 2. Following that, Nichols was promoted to Commodore; then, assigned as Columbia Group Commander. It was announced that he would temporarily be detached from the Group to command a special team that would oversee acquisition of the new vessels. Malcolm was then elevated to Major General. The synchronized expansion of the Marine contingent with the Fleet was announced. Malcolm was then officially assigned as Commander of Marine Division Boots Fleet. A marine colonel and lieutenant colonel were elevated to the level of Brigadier Generals then assigned to command the Task Force 1 and Task Force 2 brigades. The one named Svesion, a Lupan, was temporarily assigned to the team overseeing acquisitions. He and four other marines would test out and bring back their heavy equipment aboard the Carriers when they came home.

Marie was awarded her medal first; then promoted to Commander. She was now a Fleet favorite and everyone in the hangar went crazy for her. A final announcement was made to the effect that, the expansion involved three more flag level promotions and a chain of elevations of additional senior officers plus the addition of a lot more personnel. The next moves would be forthcoming within the week.

The following dinner / dance party exceeded expectations. The new flag officers were able to add to the head table humor presented on both Carriers. In all, somewhere around six thousand attended the promotions; and close to nineteen thousand were able to partake in the festivities.

As Bryant surveyed the large assembly, he realized that, Boots was as much a family as a military command. Everyone seemed to support each other. During the evening, he and Marie danced a dozen slow pieces aboard both carriers. At two hundred thirty hours, on the way to his quarters, he stopped her in an alcove and asked her to marry him. With tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks, she accepted. He told her of Bill's plan to take the Counseling Division Service wide; and then, give it full departmental status. He told her Stephenson planned to offer her the position of Headquarter Department Head; but, that she could run it from Boots if she was married to Bryant. They began their wedding plans the next day.

On Thursday May 25th, 2248 Bryant summoned all his senior officers to his office one at a time with Marie present. First they informed Tom, then Grace, then Moe, then Malcolm. After that, they told Steven Nichols and Olivia Hurst together; since, they had become an item, too. Finally, they called in the two new Brigadiers and let them know together. When that was done, they recorded a video message together for Admiral Stephenson. They told him invitations would follow; but, George asked if he would be best man; since, Marie's father would be there to give her away. Then, they recorded a message for the Emperor; asking Edward III to attend and be the ring bearer. After that, they sent a message to her parents in Waterloo Canada, on Earth. They asked them to attend and asked her father to give her away. They also expressed their wish to buy their wedding outfits as a thank you; and asked if they could bring her two six-year-old twin cousins and their parents along so the cousins could be flower girls. They would buy the girls' dresses, shoes and accessories. They explained that, all guests would be placed in relatively sumptuous suites; though, they may not all be aboard the Columbia. By the wedding date, all four carriers would be present; so, there were many extra flag and senior officer level quarters available for assignment. They would make all the facilities of the ship available. Guests would be able to use the gymnasiums and pools; and, would be welcome at theatres, barber shops and hairdressers, at no charge. All meals would be supplied; as would beverages in the watering holes aboard the ships. A special trip of the system and the nearby nebular cloud would be offered to all none-service attendees. Her parents knew; but, were reminded to tell the civilian participants that all but the shuttle craft had gravity; and, all vessels had comfortable

environments. They should pack as light, as possible; since, daily cleaning services would be free should they need laundry done or touched up during their stay. Stewards would attend to their quarters and their needs.

By the 26th, the Task Force Commanders forwarded a list of three they recommended for elevation to Group Commands at the rank of Commodore and another list of three to replace the Captains positions that would be vacated. Secondary promotional needs created by those elevations could be handled at the Task Force level.

On the 27th, with much less fanfare, the six officers were elevated and assigned to their respective positions. Most didn't yet have a ship to command or plant a flag on. On the 29th, they saw Nichols and his large team off to the assembly yards.

The next two months were busy for both George and Marie. He had to oversee the changes that would enable the expansion. There were endless promotions and transfers. The Task and Group Commanders faced the same issues along with an endless list of reassignments. George also had to evaluate and approve recommendations sent almost daily by Commodore Nichols. Marie had to oversee the establishment of her HQ command center; which, would be aboard the Columbia. This change would be made public immediately after the wedding; when, she would be elevated to Commodore a rank befitting a headquarters command officer. The change would involve a lot of work. She prepared bulletins for all Fleets on the protocol and configuration of the departments; along with proposed Fleet budgetary necessities, personnel requisites, office space requirements and interdepartmental interaction that would be required. All the while they worked on their wedding plans. Nearly fifteen hundred were invited to the ceremony and five to eight thousand would be expected to attend the reception, all to be held at Boots Fleet. They settled on Sunday July 23rd for the big day. They were inviting the C&C, the Quadrant Commanders, two Theatre Commanders, Vice Admiral Blackman and several of his people, a lot of staff people and six hundred from within Boots Fleet; along with family and friends from outside the service. Gogorra, Blackman, Nichols and Stevens were asked to be ushers. George asked Moe to be his "Sergeant at Arms". George's craft would return with its team for two weeks from July 17 through July 30th; and, would be pressed into service to shuttle those without other transportation means, from Earth and back when the whole thing was over. As a thank you, George was paying for his future father-in-law's suit; which would be done by Banerjee. Bill Stephenson arranged fittings for him at Banerjee's Earth outlet; and shuttled him back and forth

for visits to headquarters. It helped make him feel special. Marie paid for her mother's dress. The remaining members of the wedding party were OESA who would be in dress uniforms; so, no one else needed any special attire. It would be a full military wedding conducted by an active ship's Captain. Olivia Hurst, now Captain of the Columbia, would do the honors. Other guests would be shuttled to the Fleet from Earth aboard newly inaugurated vessels as they made their maiden flights on their way to service. In all, the four hundred who would come from Earth would be shipped back aboard a warship in the guise of a shakedown cruise. They would have elegant staterooms for transportation each way and the best menu imaginable. There was so much involved that George and Marie used some of Moe's staff to help out. No one ever complained. They were all family. And, it was, after all, an official function sanctioned by the C&C and Emperor as a publicity event. The OESA did a press release on the wedding on June 15. From that point on it was in the daily news; treated like a royal wedding. Sixteen additional members of the AP would join those already imbedded in Boots Fleet to cover every aspect of the wedding. Each and every day, the imbedded members visited various Fleet personnel for interviews about the event. At least once a week they asked for time with Marie and George separately - though sometimes, together.

When the day finally arrived, all, but one frigate, were attached to the Fleet and at least eighty percent staffed. The last ships arrived laden with passengers for the wedding. These were all the last guests. There were constant comments from them about the service they were experiencing amongst the Fleet; and, the love the personnel seemed to have for the Fleet Commander. This aspect became part of a major story about the day before the wedding; in which, they interviewed George, Marie, Marie's parents, Admiral Stephenson, the Emperor and finished with the two flower girls.

The wedding itself was completely recorded for replay on Rigil, Earth and the other member planets, by the networks. It was a site to behold. George, accompanied by his best man and ushers was announced by the Sergeant at Arms as they entered the Columbia's Bridge from his bridge office door and took their places on the elevated stage. All but civilians and the bride were dressed in full OESA dress uniforms. Attendees filled the massive compartment and spilled out into the corridor. As the five-piece orchestra began Wagner's traditional "Bridal Chorus" the Sergeant at Arms announced the bride, her father, the handmaids and the flower girls who made the slow-step march to the altar from the boardroom doorway to the Flag Bridge. Once Marie

was in place by her future husband with her father and bridesmaids at her side, the Emperor stepped into place just behind and to the far right end of the groomsmen. Olivia delivered the traditional ceremony that included the honor of a ship's captain to join couples in the lifelong bond of matrimony. When she called for the rings Edward III stepped to Bryant's left presenting the bride's wedding ring to him. George placed it on her finger. He then presented Marie the groom's ring; which she slid onto George's ring finger. The crowd was treated to one hell of a passionate kiss when it was finally called for by Captain Hurst. Then, the party stepped over to the registry, which had been brought from Rigil, and signed it making the marriage official. Large square confetti filled the air as the bride and groom headed for the exit.

The ceremony was followed by a small gathering of the newly married couple, the wedding party, Marie's parents, her cousins, the Emperor, the C&C and the Quadrant Commanders that were not part of the wedding party. Time was taken to have a few drinks together while George and Marie presented each with very special gifts as a thank you for their participation. The one that touched everyone the most was when George gave the Emperor his "Medal of Courage".

"This was given to me to honor my courage. The event and reason is unimportant, to me; because I don't feel like I was ever a hero. That being said, it is our way to honor those who perform under pressure.' George paused and turned to Edward. 'Sir, I present this to you; because, I feel I should pass it on to someone with more courage. You and your family have always had the courage that allowed our civilization to survive and flourish. If not for you, there would not have been a George Bryant to receive it in the first place. I do value this award; and, I am honored to be in your service. This is my attempt to honor you. I am just one of half-a-trillion subjects who love you and feel this way. You have always performed for us, under pressure.'" With it was a special OESA certification.

"Though it is normally the policy of the OESA and the Orion Empire that no meritorious award may be sold, gifted or held by other than the original recipient, we herein give special dispensation to George T. Bryant to pass this award to Emperor Edward III in honor of his meritorious service to the Orion Empire. This action is taken with all our loyalty, love and affection, this 23rd day of July, 2248 in recognition of all he has done for his people." It was signed by the First Minister, the Secretary of Defense, the C&C, the Quadrant Commanders, and all the Theatre Commanders with a special place for George and Marie.

"I guess I can't have anyone charged for doing this. I'd have to throw the entire government and the OESA into the brig, for this - leaving us totally unprotected.' The Emperor started with a chuckle as he wiped tears from his cheeks and eyes. 'I would like to thank you all for this; but, especially George and Marie. I know how much his career means to him; so, I know this really meant a lot to George. I will treasure it and the certificate, always. I also want to thank the happy couple for inviting me; and, allowing me to play an important role in their ceremony. I will also treasure that memory forever.' He raised his wine glass and continued. 'To George and Marie, I wish to offer my heartfelt congratulations, on this special day; and, my wishes for the very best for them in each and every day that follows for the rest of their lives. I hope, we can all be together to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary, when it arrives. We all love you George and Marie.' He elevated the glass; took a small sip; then, went on. 'I have one more thing I want to announce; though everyone might take back my award for spilling the beans. Later today, it is to be announced officially that, Marie Bryant will be elevated to the rank of Commodore and assigned to the position of Headquarters Commander of the Counseling Department. This was a determination made earlier; but, held until now, so that, Mrs. Bryant would be allowed to assume her command with her husband in Boots Fleet. Had this promotion been granted earlier, she would have been relocated to Rigil to assume the post. Congratulations Captain Bryant on your impending elevation and reassignment. Now that there are two flag officers in the family, you'll have to work hard at making us a few little Admirals to admire." He raised his glass for another sip as the entire room responded a resounding "Rah" for Marie Bryant.

The press played up that announcement - big time. There were headlines like, "Admirals Marry", "Whose Flag Do They Sleep Under", "Royal Wedding" and "Prince Marries Countess". Regardless of the attempted humor, the images did justice to the moment. It certainly appeared to be a Royal Wedding.

The C&C, First Minister and Defense Secretary met with the Emperor, in a secret meeting between the private celebration and the reception. There was a great round of back slapping that went on in that room. They were ecstatic over the elevation this event gave the image of the OESA. They all felt that, George and Marie were the ultimate faces to represent it.

The reception is hard to describe. Most of the arrangements for it were handled by Moe. After his previous adventures, it goes without saying that, it was a stellar event. All but ten raptors were moved and lashed outside the hangars of each Carrier. The remaining ten fighters

sat in the launch tunnels of each vessel - out of sight; but, ready to go, just in case. The Columbia, Grenada, Dominica and El Salvador's hangars were all decorated and outfitted identically for the meal. Each sported a five-piece orchestra to play soft mealtime and a variety of dance music through the evening. Each was to repeat its entire sequence at midnight; so, the majority of the Fleet could attend the meal.

When it all started, the main head table was on the Columbia. Bill Stephenson rose first.

"Good evening folks, I hope you're all enjoying yourselves. Most of us only attend an event like this once in a lifetime; so, let's make it count. I want to tell you that, I knew this would happen. I could see George had flipped for Marie the first time they met. It was for a meeting at my office; and this athletic coordinated guy tripped over everything on his way in. He was so red, I thought he was just another thermometer in the Rigilian heat. And Marie too. She worked for me; so, I was used to seeing her. But, not like this. She was breathing heavy and light headed. And, she kept calling me, George. So, when he asked to promote her and move her to his Fleet, I knew what was up. He said it was business; but, I knew better. She said it was business, too. Can you believe that? Then I heard he even spoke French to impress her dad. I can tell you, I never thought of that one when I was trying to impress my dates' fathers. That's a new one. At least now they've done the right thing. They don't need to hide, anymore. What am I saying? They never could hide with all that press they get.' By this time the crowd was in stitches. Some were laughing so hard tears were streaming down their cheeks; including George and Marie. 'Okay, it's time to get serious. These are the greatest two young people I ever knew. They are smart, loyal and honorable. It is a good match. And the OESA isn't losing an Admiral. It's gaining a team of Flag Officers.' Bill turned to face them. 'George and Marie, you are loved by your Fleet, by the OESA, by the Emperor and by all the Empire's citizens. We all wish you decades of happiness together with a love for each other that's undying." He lifted his glass and took a sip to a resounding "Rah" that went through the entire hall.

"Now, I'd like the groom to say a few words." Bill said and left the podium.

George rose and approached.

"After that roast, I think I'm speechless - for the first time in my life. But, I'd like to thank Admiral Stephenson for his best wishes. Most of all, I'd like to tell my beautiful new wife how proud I am of her. She is truly the most wonderful woman in the Empire at this moment - to me, of course - I mean -. Sorry Emperor Edward, I didn't mean to offend you.' He stammered and

feigned a look of fear as everyone roared. 'But, I have to tell you, it's tough having one of your bosses as your best man. Yeah sure, he's a model of an elder statesmen to me. But, he's always running off to the washroom. I wasn't sure he'd be at my side during the wedding.' Bryant said secretively with a sidelong look to the audience as they all roared. 'And, it was a little dangerous up there. You could get serious lacerations on all those medals or hung up on the ribbons and lanyards up there. Being a groom was tough under those circumstances.' He made the pretense of wiping perspiration from his brow as the crowd laughed harder. 'And we almost killed ourselves getting out of there. We couldn't see. Between all the photo flashes and the blizzard of large rectangular confetti visibility was zero. I want to take a minute to express my love to my wife. Marie, you are truly the love of my life.' He said to her; then, turned to the audience and continued quietly. 'But, I want to tell all of you that I was a little scared. When I met Marie, I thought she was this sweet little innocent thing with a great brain. But, when I took her on the Admiral's craft to the Boots Fleet, for the first time, I discovered another side - much tougher - much more sinister. I saw her handle twenty graduate cadets just assigned to the Fleet. She was like a trainer breaking stallions. She was my worst nightmare of a drill sergeant. Those twenty people have never said a sideways word, since. They are scared to death, to this day. So, I can tell you that, I was a bit leery of making this permanent. Please keep an eye on me. Watch for bruises - please.' George paused for effect as the crowd roared; and Marie was laughing so hard she was tearing in her champagne. 'Anyway, it could be worse. I could be marrying Bill Stephenson. But, I want to be serious for a moment. I want to thank the Emperor, the C&C, the Quadrant Commanders and all our friends and family for coming. And I wish to thank you all for your best wishes for us. I especially want to say a few words to Marie's mom and dad. *Merci de nous soutenir et de partager votre amour. Vous avez soulevé une femme intelligente, belle et talentueuse que je chérirai toujours. Et pour cela, je vais te chérir, aussi.* Bill, don't say a single word!' George admonished loudly to everyone's laughter. 'For those who didn't understand I will translate. Thank you for supporting us and sharing your love. You raised a smart, talented and beautiful woman who I will cherish always. And for that, I will cherish you, too. Finally, I want to thank Boots Fleet. They are our family, too. We love them all. The well wishes and feeling we have received from so many are greatly appreciated. We will not forget it." George finished and tapped Bill on the shoulder as he returned to his chair. Bill rose to the microphone.

"Well dad, it's that time that all the brides' fathers dread. It's time to get up and say a few meaningful words." Bill said as he directed an opened hand toward Marie's dad.

"Hello everyone. Though George speaks French to me out of respect, I can speak English; so you will all understand me - I hope.' He said with his eyes raised to heaven. 'My name is Phillip; and, I am Marie's father. Marie was always a beautiful and intelligent girl. But, there was also something different. She was always independent and a little sassy. She always had a mind of her own. The fact she is a doctor of her profession and now a Commodore has made us very proud. But, we were most impressed when she brought George home. A girl could do much worse. George is a very honorable man; and, that is all a father can hope to see his little girl end up with. But, to top it off, he is a successful leader. I know I speak for my wife Alisa, when I say, welcome to our family, George. And, don't be a stranger. Come visit; eat a little ratatouille; drink a little wine and talk in French about the galaxy. We love you both and wish you the best." Phillip finished by raising his glass and taking a sip.

Bill rose to the dais. "Would anyone else have a toast to offer. Some of you may need to curry a favor or two with your bosses.' He said to light laughter. 'It's time for dinner. It's a massive buffet with delicacies from Earth and many other exotic places in the Empire. If your smart, you'll peruse the entire offering before you decide on your meal. There's plenty for all and a lot of dishes are prepared fresh to order. Wine will be kept supplied on the tables; but, the bar is open for anyone who wishes some other beverage. And your steward will get you something if you wait for service at your table. The bride and groom want you to enjoy." He finished as he stretched an arm towards the fare at the food servers.

The meal was sensational; but, everyone at the head table ate very lightly. They had to repeat this all three more times; so, it was important not to overdo it at any one session. "We are off to the El Salvador; but, we'll all be back to cut the cake. Make sure everyone keeps on having a great time. " George directed to Grace who would stay behind, this time. They would leave one wedding party member at each location as they left; and, pick them up on the return visit.

Aboard the El Salvador, they repeated the same speeches, toasts and jokes. They joined in on the meal and again kept it light. They left after one dance, an hour later.

On the Grenada, the dinner was winding down and the dance music was starting. They interrupted it to do their routines; ate a little more; danced a little; and left for the Dominica.

They arrived on the Dominica at midnight; just in time for the second sitting. They repeated all the routines and began the meal with everyone. They begged off and returned to the Columbia around a quarter after one in the morning. On the Columbia, they cut the wedding cake and served a few people. Then, they slow danced a few numbers before leaving to return to the El Salvador. There they cut a second cake, slow danced and left to return to the Grenada where they repeated everything before returning to the Dominica to repeat it all again. They returned once more to El Salvador, before going back to the Columbia to collapse in bed out of exhaustion around three hundred thirty hours.

At eight hundred hours, they met the crew of the Admirals craft; boarded it and took it for a day into the system's nebular cloud. They spent nearly all of that day making love and finding stars through the view ports without ever donning any clothing except robes when a steward required entry.

On the same day, the El Salvador, took all the non-service wedding guests on a tour through the region highlighting the same cloud; though they never entered it. The guests were surprised at the beauty of the system with its three remarkable stars and the sheer magnificence of space. Its elegant sparkling jewels on a black velvet background highlighted by the colored blotches and dark shadows of nebulae made it a remarkable vision. Many commented on having gained an understanding of why people wanted to serve in this environment.

George and Marie spent most of the next day with Phillip and Alisa. Phillip was always animated and often comical, when he spoke. But, he did say one thing that touched them both, deeply as they sat near the living room viewing window in George and Marie's quarters. "Every man wants to be king of his castle, eh? But George, you are king of this gorgeous realm; and, you have made our Marie your queen. Il est étonnant! Truly amazing." He seemed to be in awe.

All the higher-ups left that day, after taking care of one piece of business. They conducted Marie's promotion ceremony. The Emperor presented her award; and the C&C participated in the promotion with Bill. Then, the C&C officially reassigned her; attaching her headquarters to Boots. There would be a small group of people working for her at headquarters on Rigil; but, operational decisions would be made on the Columbia. Then, all the muckety-mucks departed for their various Command centers.

Marie looked spiffy in her new flag uniforms sent along with Bill Stephenson by Banerjee. Until the Emperor's announcement, it had all been a surprise to most people.

On the July 29th, nearly five hundred guests boarded the El Salvador and left for Earth; including Marie's parents. It was sad to see them go; but, they all seemed personally content; and, happy for Marie; and, seemed to truly adopt George as a son. They were as proud of him as they were of Marie.

The two were back to work on the 30th. Expansion was almost complete. They were about to attach the final frigate to the Fleet. There had been a little personnel shuffling in the last few days. The Fleet was still about seven hundred short of full staff. It would take a couple of months to complete this part of the operation. In the meantime, one frigate in each Group would run on four shifts. In each case the vessel with the most experienced Captain was chosen. Four shifts were not a problem, if it did not go on indefinitely. Most vessels had operated under those conditions during war games. But with eight hour shifts instead of six, most personnel would get strung out more quickly when you include all their off-shift duties and responsibilities. It essentially meant that each person would work a minimum of eleven hours a day instead of nine. That's a long day for anyone; if, you're doing it day after day. Over the next two months they would bring each ship up to full complement a department at a time. Little by little, each would get to five shifts. For the moment, Boots was the only Fleet that could operate in four mission regions at the same time.

After long discussions, it was determined that, Boots would begin practice operations immediately. The four Captains with the reduced crews were called in and advised of this independent of the rest of the Fleet. They were asked to keep an eye on their people; and advised that they could be excused from these exercises every once in a while to take off the pressure. They all seemed to feel that, if it didn't go beyond the two months, they could handle the load with the reduced crew. Bryant expressed to the other members of the senior team that, it would be a good test of leadership. He discussed this with his Task Force Commanders. Which of these Captains knew how to get more out of his people without killing them. And, which ones knew when enough was enough; and, were not too proud to say so. He did not want to pass this down to the Group Commanders. It would be a test for them, too. Let's see which ones can spot the people who can go all the way; and who will know when to call it quits. Both are signs of good leadership. What you don't want in a ship or Group Commander is a person who will drive on, regardless of the condition of his people.

Over the next two months, Boots ran continuous exercises; while completing patrol assignments; as they brought the Fleet up to full compliment. Two of the short staffed Frigates made it all the way without damaging their crews. Both Captains worked at giving individual people extra relief as they saw them in need. One of the other Captains did ask to opt out of one exercise and one patrol mission; using the three days to rest the entire crew. The final one really blew it. He drove his crew to near mutiny. Several asked for transfers just before the final newcomers arrived and a few made similar requests, after they were at full staff. To his credit, it was the Group Commander Evan Aldridge who saw this coming and advised Task Force Command. Stevens replaced the Captain with the Executive Officer and took the ship down for several days' rest; advising Bryant he was a frigate short for that period. To his credit it was Nichols who advised his frigate Captain to rest a crew; before, any problems developed. Upper echelons would not know of the Captain's own abilities, for a while; but, Nichols value rose dramatically. In exercises, Nichols had also proved his tactical superiority to all other Group Commanders in the Fleet. Whether on offense or defense, his Group always overcame its opponent. In Group or Task Force operations they were always the best. Bryant called in Grace.

They decided to keep a close eye on Stephen. He would be ripe for early promotion. He had superior tactical skills; good management capabilities and was a great leader. They would not want to hold him back, they decided. When review time came, they would recommend promotion; even if, there were no openings in the Fleet. He seemed so good, it would be a shame to hold him back by waiting for a Boots opening.

Chapter 10 Justice

Tuesday August 14, 2255

"The mind is everything. What you think you become." **Buddha**

We are on our way back to Theatre Command which is still at Rho. Admiral Nichols, on advice from his JAG officer decided to send a small vessel with a team of investigators. They felt we could document the privateers' crimes well enough to make our point in court; so, they did not send a ship large enough to assist in towing any large objects.

I expressed my concern to the Marine Captain in charge of the team. My feeling was that; the destroyed cargo vessel was very good evidence to return to the courts. It showed the scarring of the attack and was full of blood evidence. He agreed; so, I spent the next day with my engineering people discussing how we could tow the left-overs of the cargo carrier without damaging the Shenzhen.

Lt. Cmdr. Chatz, my Chief Engineer, came up with a towing rig for the job. Rigs already existed; but the carrier was in rough condition; and, its irregular shape would create a lot of sheering force in a vortex. His rig was an adaptation of the standard one that would make the connection between the two vessels a little more secure and flexible. He advised that, the engines would not be able to handle this load on a continuous trip to Rho. I decided to break the trip into two jumps. We would head to Sigma Corona Borealis and park for a day to allow him to do some engine checks and maintenance, if necessary. Then, we'd jump to Rho. In all, the trip would be a little longer at just over thirty-three light years; but, the break would ensure the dependable performance of the vessel and the safety of its crew. Sigma1 Corona is an amazing five-star system with a beautiful planet orbiting Star 1 slightly into the warm section of its Goldilocks' zone. The planet is a water one with very large uninhabited island continents. The second and third stars in the system are somewhat brighter and form a very close binary system that is the center of this trinary. The pair emits intense radio waves generated by their violent interaction that may be the reason for the lack of insect and animal life on the planet. It is lush with self-pollinating and rhizome producing plants. A fairly wide variety of early fish and water mammals exists in its waters; which are incredibly clean and clear. Testing during previous visits have found no parasitic, viral or bacterial components in the water that are harmful to humanoid life. Some of my crew will be able to spend a day enjoying the pristine beaches that are

widespread along the vast coastlines. There are limited mountain ranges and no truly cold zones; except those above twelve thousand feet elevations. The planet is shielded from stellar radiation by a strong magnetic field; indicating an active core; and, a relatively thick ozone layer in the upper atmosphere. It is safe for visits of up to a month. Permanent residence is not recommended without proper shielding against the intense radio waves.

At the moment, we are at the beginning of the first jump. We entered the aperture an hour ago. We will make our one-day stop in paradise in three days fourteen hours, from now. In the meantime, we have lots to do. We have the remains of the cargo vessel in tow. Our forensic team is scouring the large sections of some of its cargo modules we have aboard. We have prisoners in our brig. We have some of the victims aboard as guests and one still in our sick bay. We have the investigation teams small craft filling a shuttle bay; and, its team aboard as additional guests who are assisting in our investigation. We are intensely monitoring all systems because of the extra load; and, scanning surrounding space in continuous sweeps to ensure we do not add any new issues to the existing ones. Besides all of that, there is the urge to make our guests feel at home; so, those involved with them, spend time to ensure their happiness.

Then, there are the regular duties we have to perform. In my case, its running my own bridge shift; reading each and every shift report; updating ships logs; and, sitting with my senior staff once a day for evaluations and personnel updates. And, that does not include the junior officer training I have to do once a week. In fact, it's time to do it right now.

.....

"Group." Someone yelps as I enter the room.

"Rest easy!!" I call out before anyone can move.

"Does anyone have any observations to make about last week's session and handouts?" I ask.

'Yes Ensign." I respond to the young lady with her hand elevated.

"Sir, it sounds like the wedding was truly unbelievable!" She observed with tears in her eyes. It's still a girl thing.

"Ensign, unbelievable is an understatement. I was there; so, I can assure you that; I will probably never experience anything like it again. First of all, the Admiral's wife is a remarkable beauty with an incredible personality. I know what you're all thinking - she really raked me over the coals, in my early days at Boots. But, in all honesty, I would marry her, if I could. She gushes

warmth, life, enthusiasm and empathy in the most genuine way. She was absolutely the most beautiful bride I have ever seen. She was the one officer not in dress uniform. Banerjee made her an incredible gown. It was white with off white panels that had a barely noticeable bluish tinge to them. There was a short train that followed along on the floor and the dress was hooded instead of veiled. Otherwise, everyone wore full mess uniforms with lanyards, braids and swords. The whole ceremony was like something out of a fairy story. From there, the bride and groom went to a small gathering with the wedding party and the senior Admiralty. I was not in that room; but, I hear the Emperor made his friendship and trust of the wedding couple well known. And of course, there was the reception to beat all of them. Held aboard four carriers, over twenty thousand were served by the time it was over. You could imbibe every kind of exotic food and beverage found in the Empire and a few from other worlds. What impressed me the most was the effort those two made to ensure they made all of us feel they were thankful for our attendance. It was like work for them. They made two one-and-a-half hour visits at each reception. I think that, they worked very hard to appear to have a good time to make us all feel like we meant something. They only had the day after as a honeymoon. The following day was spent with family and close friends. They must have been exhausted; when, they returned to work the day after that. The other thing that amazed me was the extremes they went to for all the guests. People were shuttled forty-light years and back. Four galleys worked double crews for double shifts to serve everyone the ultimate buffet. But, you know what was really important.' I pause to look around and take in the quizzical expressions. 'It was the ultimate love they continually showed each other throughout all this mayhem. And, you can still see it today; if, you are lucky enough to be in the presence of both at the same time. Don't forget; he is a full Admiral responsible for six hundred thousand people and incredible defensive power; and, she is a Vice Admiral with ten thousand throughout the service at her beck and call. And yet, they are the most genuine human beings I know, today. There is nothing arrogant about either of them. They are warm, fun and very thoughtful. In their minds, the OESA works because of all the people subordinate to them; not because of them. They both feel they are only there to steer people in the right direction. Admiral Bryant continually says that, people tend to do the right things; if, you give them the chance and you've trained them properly." I stopped for a question.

"Which Admiral Bryant says that, sir?" The young ensign asked.

"Both, now. But, I think Admiral George Bryant originated the idea. Anyway, I am off on a tangent. Are there any other questions about the last history lesson?"

"Yes sir.' A young man paused to gain the attention of the class. 'You are saying that, Admiral Bryant is responsible for the four Group system we use today throughout the service; and that, Vice Admiral Bryant is responsible for developing this amazing counseling service we enjoy today?" The ensign observed in a questioning tone.

"Yes, I am. And there's much more to come. He is responsible from some even more inventive organization we take for granted, today; and Marie Bryant changed attitudes that were pervasive in the OESA and even in society, at the time. We take for granted the change she precipitated and live with it like it always was.

.....

Though they were already running patrols and fleet exercises, by then, George sent a message to Theatre and Quadrant Commands that; they would engage in normal operations on September 15, 2248. He advised both commands that, he had his staff recover information on the history of previous patrols and would follow the pattern employed throughout the first three months of 2248. This would allow him to prepare a comparative report for them highlighting efficiency after the expansion against efficiency before. He would concentrate on providing two information channels for them. The first would compare individual mission efficiencies. The second would compare Fleet efficiencies over the entire period.

Admiral Bryant knew that the Quadrant Commanders and C&C especially would need these numbers to justify continuation of the expansion over the entire OESA. He was aware that they would be in the clear for a while longer. But, he also knew that the legislators and bean counters would begin to question the whole idea as time wore on and costs continued to mount.

He added a second report based on a compilation of Commodore Nichol's findings during quality control, operational and failure analysis testing and during shake down cruises. This would allow the C&C to order the additional assets with the required changes already in the finished machinery. Though the ships would cost slightly more, up front, the final costs would be greatly reduced.

They were on their way to 14 Hercules on September 15, 2248. They would jump into it; check it out; and, use it as a base of operations for the first patrol. Two Groups would be detached to go to Rho Corona and Eta Corona Borealis dual system and the other two would

engage all the space in the center of this triangle which was roughly ten light years on each side and ten light years in height. There are twelve systems of all types within the boundaries of this wedge; including but not limited to Hip 83389, Wolf 9564, Ross 640 and several more. This will be an intense mission. Columbia will work its way out from 14 Hercules, while Grenada spirals out from Eta Corona. El Salvador would start at Hip 83389 and Dominica would center at Chi Hercules. It would be interesting to see how quickly this patrol can be completed working from four distinct points.

Boots Fleet parked outside the 14 Hercules system at thirteen hundred hours on September 18. Columbia went in to ensure the system was quiet with the three other Groups at the ready. Once it was declared secure, the three other Groups jumped out. Columbia studied individual landmarks and potential hiding places in the system for another ninety minutes before jumping to L 1489-5. It's a small orange main sequence dwarf star; the mother of four planets in orbit around it. One has a pre-space industrial humanoid species that is centered on a warrior type culture that has been handed down for a couple of millennia. Nichols keeps all Columbia personnel off the planet; since, it is considered a great and honorable accomplishment to kill potential threats on sight. His object in a system like this is to ensure no space faring parties are using it for the wrong purposes. In both systems, he has proven how efficiently he can use the tools at hand. Ships are detached to examine specific interests; but, are never out of sensor or weapons range. He never allows any one vessel to get more than a hundred and fifty million miles from the Columbia. It's a distance that would allow big Carriers to get to any of the vessels in less than ten minutes, without jumping. The Columbia becomes the center of a spiraling ball that completes inspection of an entire system in around ninety minutes. These maneuvers require constant navigation plotting and course corrections and beg the utmost attention from the helm; but, allow completion of the inspection very quickly. The whole waltz is complicated by the obstructions that must be avoided. To accomplish the feat, they also require the same kind of detail from the Columbia's sensor department; which takes control of; and, must keep all vessels' short range sensors in their relative positions, throughout the exercise. He has effectively figured out how to use his Group like a single four hundred-million-mile diameter vessel circulating through a system. Long range sensors are less of an issue; because of their distance from the flotilla; but, still require coordination as the Group moves through its patrol. Bryant was amazed. He considered himself relatively intelligent; but, knew it was not likely he would have

ever considered doing a patrol in this manner. He would speak to Grace when her two Groups were rejoined.

Columbia finished her five assignments in less than ten hours and jumped back to 14 Hercules. There it waited alone for the others to return. El Salvador returned five hours after Columbia. Stevens reported in to Bryant. It was pretty standard stuff.

"Tom, I saw something really cool when we were on patrol. Come over to the Columbia when Grace gets back. We all need to talk about it." He signed off.

"Commodore Nichols can you give me a file of your entire Group's course movements, over your five assignments, please? Bryant requested of the man at the Group Command station on the same bridge.

"Aye Admiral. You'll get it in five minutes. Is there a problem?" Nichols asked.

"Not for you Commodore; but, the rest of us have some re-evaluation to do." Bryant responded with a chuckle.

Grace returned on the Grenada a couple of hours later. Bryant asked her to shuttle over and meet with him and Stevens. The Dominica arrived an hour after that.

"Well gang, you are not going to believe what I saw today. Just when I thought there was nothing new I could learn about Fleet and Group patrol missions; someone teaches me a lesson." Bryant was laughing as the other two looked at him quizzically; which, made him laugh all the harder. This started them laughing too.

He clicked on the icon of the navigation file he had and selected it be played in objective mode. That means they would view the motion from outside of the Group. When it was ready, he turned to them.

"Watch my screen' he motioned his head to the graphics in the air above his desk. 'You won't believe what you're seeing." He finished as he activated the file and they watched five ship shaped icons and hundreds of sensor ones spiral through the space of a star system then reset to what was another location and repeat the pattern.

"What the hell is that? What are we looking at?" Stevens asked as he and Grace looked in to each other's eyes in wonder.

"This is a Group doing a patrol in five different systems. Watch it again. They can generally complete the entire operation in ninety minutes without missing a cubic millimeter of space." Bryant answered with a chuckle as he restarted the video.

"Who the hell is that? What Group is this, George?" She asked.

"It's one of yours Grace. It's Nichols in charge of the Columbia Group. It's like watching a ballet. It is so smooth and synchronized you can barely tell when a vessel breaks off; checks out some anomaly and rejoins the motion. I cannot believe it. I actually lived through it. It is marvelous to be a part of that circus ride; especially if, your using the view ports.' Bryant said with admiration in his voice. 'This man has found a way to increase the speed of a patrol by forty percent without missing anything and without endangering any one vessel. My feeling is that, we should adopt this Fleet wide; but, I did not want to impose it. I offer it to you. Use it if you want. But, I will be setting higher standards on patrol efficiency.'" He finished with a laugh.

"I don't know about you, Tom; but, I absolutely love it; and, I love that man for figuring it out." The admiration in Grace's voice was palpable.

"I will adopt it, too. I've never seen anything like it, either. And, I've been at this game for thirty years." Stevens countered.

"I didn't want to step on any toes; so, I haven't said anything. I think we should get the man in here and tell him what we think.' Bryant said. 'After a little poke in the eye, of course.' He added with a smile.

Grace paged him to Admiral Bryant's office.

"Commodore Nichols reporting as ordered, sir." He said at attention.

Bryant pointed to the space above his desk as he started the graphics. "What the hell is this?" He asked sternly.

There was a considerable silence as Stephen seemed to be trying to figure out what he was watching. "I don't know, sir. What do you think it is?" He asked.

"Think. We know what it is. It's you doing your patrols; and we have to say, we love it. It is the most efficient and thorough way of doing them we've ever seen. Even Tom hasn't seen it before and he's been on these ships since the OESA was founded." The four broke into laughter.

"What made you think of orchestrating your patrol in such an elegant fashion?" Grace queried.

"I assure you that, I was not attempting elegance. The idea was to find a way to use the new Group configuration to its maximum capability. This was my first trial of the concept." He responded.

"Trial... This was a trial? It was executed with precision - like you've done it a hundred times before!" Bryant observed.

"No sir. This was the first attempt; since discussing it with my Captains and sending them the navigational math formulae and order of operations.' Nichols responded. 'We did conduct this maneuver once with each helmsman at a simulator. But, this was the first actual attempt." He added.

"Well, consider it a success. If it's okay by you, we want to adopt it Fleet wide. We will call it the Nichols Patrol Maneuver; so, all future helmsmen and Captains will know where it came from." Bryant said.

"No problem, sir. The Fleet is welcome to it. I would be happy to have contributed to overall Fleet efficiency." Nichols replied.

"If it works out on a wider basis, we will send it on to the Quadrant Commander. Right now, it looks like everyone should adopt it." Bryant added.

They were finished the patrol a couple of days earlier than it had been done in the previous record; so, Bryant recorded that and stopped where they were for two days of exercises teaching Nichols' system to the other Groups. When they left for the next patrol at Tau Bootes they were up to par on the new system. George would be interested to see how efficiency checked out on this mission.

The trip from 14 Hercules to Tau Bootes would be completed in two jumps. They would first travel twenty-six and a third light years to HD130948 in Bootes; then, they would jump the additional seventeen light years to Tau. This was about five light years longer than the direct route; but, allowed them to do it without discomfort to the crew. They would stop at HD 130948 for a full day to ensure everyone recovered their space legs.

This time they would arrive at Tau; check it out and disburse to cover all the stars in a triangle with it, HR5273 and 70 Virgo at the points. Wolf 515, LTT 13826, Diadem ABC and Ross 837 along with the three points were among the thirteen that would make up this patrol. It would be a good test. After all Groups secured Tau, there were twelve more systems to distribute among the four groups. Each Group would make four jumps and visit three systems by the time they all returned to Tau.

They exited the jump on Friday September 29, 2248 at eleven hundred hours Quadrant regional time. All four Groups jumped out to their first targets separately at thirteen hundred. At

twenty-two hundred hours on Friday October 6, 2248 Columbia was the first to exit the return jump at Tau. El Salvador Group followed an hour and a half later. At two hundred hours on October 7th Grenada and Dominica landed at virtually the same time. It had taken just over seven and a half days to complete a patrol that took nearly two weeks, six months earlier. Bryant called all the senior tactical staff to a meeting.

"I don't want to waste a lot of your time, folks; so, I will get right to the point. That was an outstanding mission. We completed it in fifty-two percent of the time it was done the last time. I know the reconfigured Fleet helped; but, this is way beyond the forecasts. The difference between the forecasted twenty-eight percent improvement and the forty-eight percent actual improvement has to be Stephen's new patrol maneuvers. I wanted to thank and congratulate him for the effort; and, I wanted to congratulate you all on executing it so well, the first time. I would like all the Group Commanders to forward their mission helm maneuvers to my station. If you're not sure what I want, ask Commodore Nichols. He has done this once already. I would like our Quadrant Commander to see these elegant ballets for himself. I will have the Task Force Commanders join me in making the recommendation to Bill Stephenson. You have all outdone yourselves. We will take a four-day shore leave at 44 Bootes, as a reward to you and all your personnel. Make sure everyone gets a couple of days ashore. Does anyone have anything to add?" George asked.

"Yes sir.' Responded Group Commander Evan Aldridge. 'It was a bit scary at first. If you watched through the viewports, it looked like we faced collisions from time to time; but, in the end, it all turned out to be a very sexy slow dance. Commodore Nichols and his Captains did a great job of training us all on the simulators. But, I am sure that, some of us will have to travel to pass this on to others; so, we should be sure to reinforce the notion that, though it may look scary, it is all well planned-out allowing all the regulated spacing and no one ever actually comes close to each other; if, it is all executed correctly. It is the most amazing experience I ever had. It's a new way of observing space from the viewports. My hat is off to Stephen; and, our teams who have executed it so well." Aldridge finished.

"Thanks Evan." Nichols said quietly.

"Thank you Mr. Aldridge. We will take your observation and recommendation into consideration; and, I am sure Stephen is thankful of the praise.' Bryant said.

'He does have a point, though. Several of you and your people will have to travel to pass on what has been developed here. If you become one of the chosen, I wish you the best. Let's get back to work, now.'" Bryant finished as he turned to leave the room.

.....

"Okay folks, I have to end this for today. As you know, things are far from normal. There's a lot going on aboard the Shenzhen and I need to be available for anything that may come up. I am sending you a pretty lengthy handout. It's the last one. It'll bring you up to the present time. But, I want to point out that, using your head while you're doing your job goes a lot farther than just following orders. Look at Admirals Bryant and Nichols. Their ability to think on their feet is what got them where they are. If you work like that, one of you may be C&C one day. Dismissed!" I called out over my shoulder as I quickly exited the room.

Chapter 11 Mobile Fifth Command!

Monday January 29, 2249

"More than once have most promising opportunities been lost for want of men to take advantage of them, and victory itself had been made to put on the appearance of defeat, because our diminished and exhausted troops have been unable to renew a successful struggle against fresh numbers of the enemy." Robert E. Lee

By the time the first of nearly thirty Quadrant Three communication drones appeared off the port bow of the Columbia, on January 29, Boots was the talk of the service. They had completed another three patrol missions. That made five since completion of their expansion. And, to complicate matters they were often short a Group Commander and several Captains who were sent to train other Groups on the Nichols Patrol Maneuver. Boots was sitting at Chi Draco enjoying a well-deserved break.

The first message only hinted at trouble. But, each got progressively more urgent in tone. What seemed like a minor intrusion, at first, was detected at BD+22 583, a fairly bright yellow star, by Eridani Fleet on January 15th. The incursion grew to a flood over the next few days; as the attackers made a second entry into Empire territory at CD-46 9733 in the constellation Lepus on January 18th. By the 20th, it was apparent to Bryant that, the minor intrusion was the point of one pincer that made up a pair that was attempting to meet at Alpha Taurus. They would take a bite out of Empire space equal to nearly twenty percent of our total territory.

From the few prisoners that had been captured, it was apparent this was a species that evolved to fight. They were large, heavy framed and motivated. Though not as technologically advanced as the Empire, they were tactically sound in their planning. They did not speak our languages; but, our language processors easily deciphered their language; which was full of guttural grunts and growls. Most were a full ten centimeters taller than the average humanoid; and, easily forty percent heavier with their extra skeletal structure and plating. Massive skulls protected a brain case the size of our own. Interrogators had determined that they were a caste society; with the upper echelon raised from birth to fight. It seemed little effort was made in the sciences in the social areas like medicine. Support castes concentrated on developing space craft, weapons and battle training at all levels. Their ships were relatively small and sturdy with no artificial gravity and minimal shields. Hulls were designed to withstand weapons fire; but, could

not handle our fire power. However, the ships were extremely fast and maneuverable in open space; generally travelling at around thirty percent of the speed of light.

When Bryant received the nineteenth drone on Tuesday February 6th, it was apparent, the Empire was losing what was actually a war. Taurus, Eridani, Pictor and Reticula Fleets had combined as much force as they could against this enemy who had twelve hundred craft in our space, by then. Fear of losing ten Empire worlds and a hundred systems was palpable in the message. The one thing that really helped Bryant was the graphical mapping of the battle zone sent with messages. Though this enemy was tactically capable, they seemed to think in two dimensional terms. They came into the Empire between ten and minus ten-degrees declination over a three-hour wide swath and did not vary from that region.

Bryant prepared a memo for the C&C with a copy to Quadrant Three and Theatre Command. In it he offered his services in the region provided he could take another fully complimented Fleet. He proposed taking Draco which was now at full strength and having Borealis, Serpens, and Virgo spread out to cover the weakness created by the temporary move. He informed them that, from the battle site maps, he could see a way to repel the invaders. He had a tactical plan and would be able to eliminate them with minimal losses to the two supporting Fleets. The one proviso he had was that the two Fleets would be under his command and he would be detached from any Theatre operation; giving him the freedom to do what was needed. He advised them he would move Boots to Barnard's star, for communications purposes.

Boots made the twenty-five light year jump to Barnard's; arriving on February eleventh. A communications drone was waiting. There was an encrypted message from HQ and another from Quadrant Command.

MEMO

From: *Flt. Adm. B. Williamson C&C OESA; Flt. Adm. D. Dickinson C&C OESA*

To: *V. Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Boots Fleet*

Re: *Invasion*

Date: *February 4, 2249*

"George,

This is a field promotion. You are temporarily elevated to level 10 Admiral. Draco is assigned to your temporary field command. Your proposal has been accepted. Draco will meet

you at Barnard's February 13. We here, and the Emperor, wish you and all your people the best of luck. Take care.

Notice of the promotion and assignment has been sent to all Quadrant, Theatre and Fleet Commanders; but, this has not been described as a temporary Field Promotion in order to solidify your command, quickly.

Brian Williamson Fleet Admiral C&C OESA

David Dickinson Fleet Admiral C&C OESA"

George,

If anyone else said they had a plan but didn't tell us what it was, I'd tell them where to go. But, I know if, you can't do this; no one can. This is a tough enemy. Not as technologically advanced; but, smart, big and mean. Alexander the Great once said "I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion."

Remember, they may be technically weaker; but, they appear to be led by lions. Don't forget to change your rank insignia. Remember that though, Vice Admiral Palakiko is sharp, she can be a real ass sometime. But, she does not screw with more senior ranks. You are detached from Quadrant Three until reassigned by the C&C. Congratulations on your promotion and reassignment. Good luck! Take care of yourself and my daughter.

Bill Stephenson OESA Quadrant Three Commander

"Moe, could you come into my office, please? It's important." George called his Chief on his system.

Moe appeared a minute later. "Yes sir, how may I be of service?"

"Please sit. We'll be here for a bit. I just received these.' He handed the pad with the memos to his Chief. 'I need you to witness my removal of Level 10 insignia from the safe as per the memo. Then I need you to prepare the appropriate announcements and make sure they are forwarded to Draco when they arrive. Do not discuss any promotions for this operation as a Field promotion, ever. As you can see, the C&C wanted me to grab authoritative command, quickly. I also want you to prepare a warrant granting a temporary field promotion to Grace Tonaka to the level of Vice Admiral. She will replace me as Fleet Commander. Then, I want the same type of warrant elevating Nichols to Rear Admiral. He will take over Grace's task force. We need to make Malcolm a Lieutenant General as a Corps Commander and he needs to choose a

replacement and fill all the ripple positions, accordingly. You need to get them all in here, immediately without so much as a hint as to why. You also need to prepare a warrant elevating you temporarily to the rank of Rear Admiral and Chief of Staff for Mobile Fifth Command; which our combined force will be called. There will be more, later. And, there won't be any parties, this time.' Bryant joked as he tilted forward to open the safe. The insignia was a circle of four silver stars enclosing the number ten. He removed three sets for movement between uniforms. 'Could you do this for me?' He asked as he closed the door.

"It really adds something to your appearance, George.' Moe said with a grin as he pinned on the stars. 'Is there anything else, sir?"

"Yes, could you also find Commodore Bryant; and have her report, too." Bryant ordered.

Moe left the office. Marie showed up a couple of minutes later.

"What the hell is going on, Admiral?" She asked with her eyes focused on his collar points.

"Have a seat. There's a lot going on; and, it isn't all that good. I will need your help. I'd like you to take a look at all the mail from this point on." He said as he handed her his pad and sat back to give her time to read.

"So, we're going to fly half way across the galaxy to save the Empire. Is that what is inferred here?" People gathered outside were noticing how animated she'd become.

"Well...not halfway; but, you are essentially correct?" His feigned naivety triggered a soft laugh from her.

"So, why am I here? You need your tactical people, right now." She said quietly.

"But, I needed you, first. I wanted you to be the first to know everything. I will need your help, too. All those people outside the door are about to have their responsibilities increased dramatically. I need you to sit in and keep an eye – evaluate them. I need your empathy. I need to know if anyone can't handle what I will ask them to do. Is that okay with you?" He asked Marie.

"Of course, I would support you in any way I can. I love you George. I am a bit afraid of where we are headed, myself; but, I will support you no matter what. Let's get the ball rolling." She said with a smile.

He raised his right arm pointing to Tom, Grace and Moe and waving them in.

"Welcome, I have news. Everyone take a seat and a deep breath." He advised.

"What the heck is happening, Admiral?" Grace asked with her eyes fixed on his collar points.

"My promotion is part of the discussion. I have been receiving memos from HQ and Quadrant Command at the rate of about five each a day for the last week and a half. We have been attacked and are losing a war. The enemy came in between plus and minus ten-degrees declination at Lepus and Eridani in a pincer attack. There are twelve hundred enemy vessels in our space, as of the last update. They are fierce fighters. We have captured some of them; so, we know a little about them, now. I have been tasked to form a special command under Headquarters which will be called Mobile Fifth Command. Draco fleet will join Boots, on the thirteenth, in this new Command. Both Fleets are officially detached from the Theatre and Quadrant Commands they served. I was promoted to Admiral to head the operation. I have a lot of intelligence and have already formulated a preliminary tactical plan. We will have some time to go over the plan. We will jump from Barnard's to Aldebaran on the fourteenth. In the meantime, I have to structure my Command and Boots needs some restructuring because of it. Though the moves may become permanent, any promotions you receive are temporary, for now. As far as anyone else knows, they are permanent. This is how the C&C wanted it; so, there is no question of authority and I take immediate control of both Fleets. All notices will be posted as if they are permanent promotions and assignments. However, you will be paid accordingly, if you are elevated to a new level. I've decided to make Grace the Fleet Commander. This is not a slight to you Tom. You are as capable of taking the Fleet. But, it's her turn to be first. Grace will be elevated to Vice Admiral and will be Boots Fleet Commander. Grace, I want to elevate Nichols to Rear Admiral and have you assign him as your replacement. He has a real tactical knack. You and he will need to fill the hole he leaves and all the other all the way down. Below executive officer assignments, you won't have to promote. Just reassign. Will you take the Fleet, Grace?" He asked.

"Yes sir, I'm your man; even if, I am a woman." They all chuckled when she made the crack.

"Okay, Moe has the warrants and orders. We will do the promotions and reassignment, right here and now. I will generate the master keys for the operational codes for both Fleets, right now. After the promotion, you will relieve me; and I will transfer Boots command codes to you. When that happens, all others will be rescinded. You will have to generate new ones for your people and re-issue as people fill the holes. You will even have to re-issue to those who did not change rank or assignment. All codes change with a new Commander. It's a lot of work. But,

you should be able to generate your Task Commanders' codes in about ten minutes. They will also have to re-issue to the level below them; and so on, down the line. Once you are promoted, assigned and have command, we will call in Nichols and do his elevation and reassignment. Then, we will do Moe and Malcolm. We need them elevated because I don't want my Chief to have a problem with someone subordinate to me; and, Malcolm will need to have control of all the Marines in both Fleets; so, he will become a Corps Commander. There will be two more elevations. One will replace Malcolm and the other will replace the Brigadier he chooses to raise to Division Commander. Does everyone follow, so far? Does anyone want out? Though I would be hard pressed, in some cases, I would be able to use others, if this scares the hell out of you." Bryant offered. Everyone seemed to understand that this was all necessary and were happy to comply.

A chime sounded on his system. When Bryant checked it was a couple of Moe's postings.

BULLETIN

By order of the C& C of the OESA with the consent of the Emperor, Boots and Draco Fleet are detached from Quadrant Three Command, immediately. By the same order they have been assigned to the new Mobile Fifth Command.

Commodore Tahu Moahu Boots Command Chief of Staff

BULLETIN

By order of the C&C George T. Bryant has been elevated to level 10 Admiral, effective immediately. Effective immediately Admiral George T. Bryant has been assigned as the Commander of Mobile Fifth Command.

Commodore Tahu Moahu Boots Command Chief of Staff

"That's great, Moe. Your first two postings just appeared. Everyone on Boots is aware something is happening. Let's get this rolling."

Over the next hour, George elevated and reassigned Grace. Then, they called in Nichols who understood and accepted the temporary promotion and reassignment. They conducted his promotion. Then, they conducted the ceremony transferring Boots codes to Grace. She immediately generated the codes for Nichols and Stevens. Nichols advised Bryant and Tonaka that Captain Ana Arce should be elevated and assigned as his replacement. Grace went over her file, quickly; giving Bryant a nod. She was called to Bryant's office. A warrant was prepared by

Moe, quickly; and, she was ushered right in, when she arrived. Once she understood the situation she agreed. The promotion was completed and the Task Force Commanders transferred operation codes to their Group Commanders.

"You may need Admiral Nichols to show you, how; but, you and all the other Group Commanders must re-issue Command Codes to all your Captains." Grace advised.

"Admiral Bryant, may Commodore Arce and I take your leave?" Nichols requested.

"Dismissed.' Bryant responded; then, turned to Moe. It's time to do yours, Moe. Then, we better get Malcolm in. Grace, you may wish to elevate your Chief. It's not urgent. It may be wise, though. It's tough for a Captain to tell a Commodore what he is supposed to do." Bryant laughed as he turned to Moe and read the warrant; then pinned the level eight rank insignia on both collar points.

"Congrats, Moe. Can you post these, while I speak to Malcolm?" He asked. Moe waved in Ian Malcolm as he left.

"With the exception of Grace and himself, Bryant felt Malcolm's responsibilities could be the most taxing of all; so, he took a half an hour to give him a full tactical update; including all the intelligence he had. Then, he explained the plan as it stood, now; including the fact that, someone would have to be in command of both Divisions of Marines. He made sure Malcolm understood this was a field promotion and could be temporary; but impressed on him that he was the person he wanted in charge as the Corp Commander. George also explained to Ian that, he would have to recommend one of his Brigadiers for temporary elevation to Major General in charge of Boots Divisional Marines. He finished by advising him that he would enjoy all privileges and monetary benefits until the job expired, if it did. He explained that no promotion could be discussed publicly as temporary and showed him the memo from the C&C attempting to ensure they gain immediate control over the situation. Malcolm accepted. Moe had returned by then; so, the two conducted the promotion.

Malcolm recommended Brigadier Svesion to replace him. Bryant looked over his record.

"I see he was part of the acquisition team. How are his tactical skills?" Bryant asked.

"As a major, he ran three tactical ground operations. He has a good head. But, we're all out of practice, a little. It's been a while since we had this kind of action. I don't have anyone that's better; and, I don't believe the other Fleet does either." The General summed up with an indisputable argument.

"Okay, let's do it. But, we'll both have to keep our eyes on him; and steer him if he seems to be going astray. Give him a little head, though. I got a big surprise from Nichols. You may find you have a diamond in the rough, like I did. Call him in." Bryant finished.

Ten minutes later the Brigadier appeared and they went through it all again. He was in for the whole thing; so, they conducted the ceremonies.

"Ian, I've keyed up new command codes for your new position. Don't install them, yet. When you do, you will eliminate all those below you. The problem is the Draco Fleet. If we manage to make contact before they arrive, their Marines would be disabled, automatically. Enter them when the other Fleet is parked here and issue new codes to your sub-ordinates. They in turn will have to issue codes to their subordinates and so on down the line. Congratulations to both of you. We will get together when the other Fleet is here for tactical meetings." Bryant finished.

Bryant heard the blink, blink, blink of his system enunciator. He opened the mail. It was more Fleet wide postings from Moe.

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC
To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C
Re: Invasion
Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander, a Mobile Fifth Marine Corps Command is established, immediately, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III. Boots and Draco Fleet Divisional Marine Commands will receive direction from and report to this center from now on.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Commander

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC
To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C
Re: Invasion
Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Command be advised that, effective immediately, Grace Tonaka has been elevated to the rank of Vice Admiral and assigned as Commander Boots

Fleet, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Commander

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander be advised that, effective immediately, Stephen Nichols is elevated to the rank of Rear Admiral and assigned to the position of Task Force Commander of Boots Fleet Task Force One, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Commander

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander be advised that, effective immediately, Ian Malcolm has been elevated to the rank of Lieutenant General and assigned to the position of Mobile Fifth Marine Corps Commander, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Command

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander be advised that, effective immediately Anna Arce has been elevated to the rank of Commodore and assigned as Commander Columbia

Group, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Command

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander be advised that, effective immediately Brigadier Svesion is elevated to the level of Major General and assigned as Commander of Boots Fleet Marine Division, in accordance with OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Command

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobil Fifth RAC sub-Commands, OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

By order of the Mobile Fifth Commander be advised that, effective immediately Tahu Moahu is elevated to the rank of Rear Admiral and assigned as Chief of Staff for the Fifth Mobile Command, in accordance with the OESA regulations and the consent of the OESA C&C and Emperor Edward III.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Mobile Fifth Command

Then, George composed the following notes.

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: OESA C&C

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

Sirs,

You will find enclosed several warrants for field promotions of staff required to meet the needs of the temporary command established to deal with the current critical tactical situation. We have christened this the Mobile Fifth Rapid Action Command (Mobile Fifth RAC). These staff changes permit me to gain full and immediate control of both Fleets you have assigned to my command. All parties involved understand that, these elevations may be temporary. However, they have all been handled publicly as if they are permanent. We will depart Barnard's star on the fourteenth, the day after Draco Fleet arrives here. This allows one day to make additional moves required to ensure complete command and control of this second Fleet. In addition, you will find attached today's postings; so, you may gain a perception of the atmosphere created by these changes. I would hope you would concur with my orders that were necessary to establish a proper chain of Command and coordinated operations of this tactical unit.

George T. Bryant Admiral Mobile Fifth Command

He called in Moe; asking him to check and send the memo to the C&C and the Emperor, immediately.

Then, he left the office for the day and went back to his quarters to wait for Marie. They spent a quiet evening visiting the Star Gazer pub for dinner and a few drinks with the rest of the senior staff and their better halves. The rest of the night was spent in quiet passionate embrace. Neither slept much. Too much was happening.

In the morning, after breakfast, he went to the office and began a memo for posting throughout the entire Fifth Mobile Command.

MEMO

From: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

To: All Mobile Fifth RAC Personnel All Mobile Fifth RAC Commands

Re: Invasion

Date: February 13, 2249

All,

I want to take a minute to relay to you all a little of what is happening, within our Empire. We are currently at war in the Lepus and Eridani systems; and, that war is not going well, at the moment. In an effort to reverse our losses, the C&C have established this new mobile command, with the assent of our Emperor. It is our task to travel to space that is

foreign to most of us; and drive the invaders from our territory. To facilitate this, Mobile Fifth Command has been endowed with the assets of both the Boots and Draco Fleets; and, has the authority to engage any further assistance it may need from tactical units, in the war region. As you know, by now, I have been elevated to Admiral and tasked with Commanding this operation and achieving its goals. To create a strong chain of command, I have elevated and reassigned several people; with, the full consent and knowledge of the C&C and the Emperor. All this disruption must be disconcerting to some; but, I must ask you to bear with us. All my actions are designed to achieve our goals as quickly and efficiently as possible with as little injury or loss of life to our own personnel as I can manage. Though I would like to win the upcoming confrontations, my priority is the wellbeing of those in my command. Your understanding and cooperation in these trying times is appreciated.

George T. Bryant Admiral, Commander Fifth Mobile Command

The enunciator sounded from the system as he finished his memo. There were two encrypted messages. He called in Moe.

"Can you witness this, please?" He asked his chief as he punched in the decryption keys.

"Note it in your log. One is a message from the C&C. The other is from...the Emperor." He finished as he opened Edward's, first.

MEMO

From: Emperor Edward III

To: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

My dear friend George,

I am suffering a little knowing you are about to risk your life, your command, your loyal people and the love of your life to attempt to save our Empire. I read the memo you sent yesterday. I have asked the C&C to cooperate in any way they can. I believe they would have, anyway. They are big fans of yours.

If you need anything else from us to succeed at this endeavor, you need only to ask. If we have it to give, you will get it.

Tell all your personnel we hold them in our hearts and hope your ships' shields protect them from harm. Keep them close to your heart. They are all such wonderful souls. And give the special lady of yours a hug for my wife and I. We love you both like family.

Your dearest friend.

Edward Delnikov Emperor of the Orion Empire.

MEMO

From: The Team at HQ

To: Adm. G.T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

Re: Invasion

Date: February 12, 2249

George,

Whatever you need to do to accomplish your goals with the least possible loss of life is okay by us. Your actions to this point have all received our approval. We will try to make anything else you need available to you. Just let us know. Please note that, where you come into joint operations with other Quadrant / Theatre Commands, they have been ordered to follow your lead. You have full operational field command. Keep your people as safe as possible. Look after that beautiful wife and all the wonderful people in your command; and, keep your head low.

Your friends

Brian Williamson Fleet Admiral C&C OESA

David Dickinson Fleet Admiral C&C OESA

William Stephenson Admiral Quadrant Three Command

"Moe, I'm going to forward you my memo. Please post it to the entire Command; and ensure Draco does, too. Please also post these replies from the Emperor and the C&C throughout the entire command. They will help cement my command of the force." Bryant said as he wiped a tear off his cheek.

He forwarded the two memos to Marie marked FYI; so, she could see them, first.

Draco appeared out of an event horizon at eleven hundred. George knew all messages including all the memos would be transmitted immediately. A shuttle departed a few minutes later. That would be Vice Admiral Palakiko making her way over to report in. She would be

greeted by Captain Olivia Hurst, Admirals Nichols and Tonaka and a full honor squad complete with boson to pipe her aboard. Tonaka was to notify him as soon as she was aboard.

He entered his key code and transmitted it; immediately rescinding all her Fleet Operating Codes; but, assumed the existing new ones Grace had activated, the day before. Palakiko was dead in the water; until he issued new codes.

"Vice Admiral Palakiko reporting as ordered, sir." She stood at attention in front of his desk.

He rose. "Welcome Admiral. I am Admiral Bryant, your new commander. Draco has been assigned to the new Fifth Mobile Command. Did you receive all the correspondence regarding this change?" He asked.

"Yes sir; and, I'd like to say, you have received some very impressive support. But, regardless of that, you are now my commanding officer; and will have my full cooperation, as a matter of course. I would like to ask you what the hell is going on, anyway?" He could tell she was still in the dark by her tone. The war must not be public knowledge to those not involved. At least, not yet. You can't hide a war for long.

"Have a seat and I'll give you a quick update. I have extensive tactical meetings planned for our trip to the site. It all started three weeks ago. We were attacked by an invader. They struck at our border in two thrusts and are now attempting to close a pincer. The attack took place in Eridani and Lepus. If they succeed with the pincer movement, they will own twenty percent of our space. Mobile Fifth was formed quickly; because a defense was discovered. But, such an attack would have to be delivered from outside the battle field. I have established my Command and its staff and have a complete chain of command. We moved to Barnard's to be close to Rigil for communications and close enough for you to get to us quickly. Tomorrow, we will make the first leg of the trip jumping sixteen light years from here to Epsilon Eridani. That will take three days; so, we'll park for half a day to give everyone a break. Then we'll jump to Gamma Lepus which will take another four days. We'll take one day's rest there. Then will make a long jump from there to Aldebaran. We will do that jump at thirty percent. Even at that it will take nearly six days; so, we'll need a day before any action. Aldebaran will essentially be our staging point. Based on the intelligence I have, it's the best place to run my tactical plan from. Of course, we need continuously updated intelligence and field reports; but, as it stands now, we will use a pincer, to counter attack. This species seems to be two dimensional in their logic

patterns. They have stayed strictly between plus and minus ten-degrees declination; so, we will attack from above and below. I want the entire senior team to travel together, until we get to Aldebaran. We will offer our Columbia hospitality to you; so, you, Grace, the Task Force Commanders and the Group Commanders can sit together and work out a very detailed plan that covers all possible alternatives. We need to plan everything a dozen different ways; because it is a big field. But, I believe, at the moment that, if we attack closer to our border we will interrupt supply and communications lines while damaging the rear of the main body. Three full fleets are fighting from inside our territory; so, this should really stress them. The three Fleets in action do not seem to like to use their raptors much. They may be small; but, raptors have a lot of firepower. If all five fleets attacked with half our raptors at the same time, it would mean they'd face two hundred and fifty additional enemy vessels on top of our massive ones. Anyway, we have time to refine the details. By the time we get there, the whole plan might not be feasible and we may need plan B, or C, or D. That's why I say we need to plan a dozen different ways to skin this cat. You on board? Are you ready to move over here and put your nose to the grindstone with us?" He asked with a smile.

"Get me quarters and I'll be moved in tonight. I need a couple of hours to pack and to meet with the team. We need to leave some people in charge if all the senior commands will be here." She added.

"Your quarters will be issued by Captain Hurst, when you get here; but, they will be on this deck, of course. I have to issue you, new command codes. All Quadrant three ones have now been rescinded." Admiral Bryant said as he went to his system to generate the codes. One additional thing I would like to do is take a walk through two or three of your vessels. This would not be a formal inspection - more like a little socializing with some of the officers and crew. I would not want to be formally piped aboard any of them. I would prefer to visit like anyone else. I'd also like to get your past week's logs and a copy of your logs for a week ending five weeks ago. It will give me a very small peek at what your people have faced recently. Finally, I will access the full files on your senior Commanders. This is not for critical purposes. I want to attach faces to files. I want to feel I know some of these people before we are introduced. The plan would be to get those files first. I'll spend a few hours on that, right after you return to the Israel. That is still your flag ship, right?' She nodded as he continued. 'I'll visit your flag ship before we leave, tomorrow. Then I'd like to visit your Task Force Two Commanders Flag ship

during our first stop. It would be nice to see one Cruiser at the second stop. Finally, I'd like to see a Frigate and a sub on the day we land at our staging site. Remember, these are unannounced walk-through visits. They're not about the ships. They're about the people. That is, unless you need something. You can point out deficiencies, if you need to. In fact, if you have any serious ones, you should let me know, now. We can alter the plan. A day or two stop at the shipyards at Earth or Rigil would not be out of the question if you have anything that's patched and can't be repaired properly in normal operations. I will post a new Mobile Fifth Amendment to the Rules and Regulations. We will no longer pipe flag officers attached to mobile Fifth aboard vessels. This will be reserved for visiting Flag officers. We will no longer require staff to acknowledge each of a duty or senior officer's entry in a space. They will acknowledge the senior once per shift. After that, officer will come and go without all the disturbance to stations' operations'." He stopped for her interruption.

"Well it's about time. These kinds of protocol rules were enacted by people who lacked confidence and had giant egos. It's nice to work for someone who doesn't feel like they should be treated like god; because of a few stars. You are a refreshing find, Admiral." Vice Admiral Palakiko was almost yelling.

"...One more protocol issue, Admiral' Bryant added; then continued. This informality extends to our interaction, too. We will follow Service protocol on, first meeting. For example, you come in here and report, as usual. After that, I am George and you are...?" He let the question fade into the room.

"My species uses a single name. My friends call me Pal, in informal conversation, George. You may call me that." Pal responded.

"Good, and let your people know that, too. That will be the protocol between all flag ranks meeting together. This will extend to senior officers in meetings. On the floor, anyone junior to your rank will still refer to you as Admiral or sir. So, when you're with your Commanders, in private, it's Fred, Alice and Pal; once the initial formalities have been observed; and, the formalities resume as the meeting adjourns. By the way, this is the policy Headquarters employs; despite their own Rules and Regulations." George said with a laugh.

"I think that, I will be very happy working for you, George. I am very impatient with arrogance and pomposity; even if it happens due to regulations. My impatience often shows

through. I better get a move on. I have lots to do before I move in. Would you excuse me, sir?" She stood at attention.

"You're dismissed, Admiral.' George said officiously; but with a smile as she turned to leave. He rose and extended his hand. 'It's nice to have you as part of Mobile Fifth. I should tell you that I requested you. You have a bit of a rep; but, I knew you had the capabilities I needed."

She shook his hand, warmly. "It's nice to be on board, sir. The rep comes from my impatience with arrogance and stupidity. I am not a "yes man" and that doesn't play well, sometimes. But, I am a team player. By the way, Bill told me you requested me. And, I know that "rep" is public knowledge. So, I dropped the chip off before we jumped to Barnard's. Thanks for the opportunity." She said as she turned to leave the room.

Marie appeared outside his office. He waved her in.

"I got your mail. The memos made me tear up. You are loved, George Bryant.' She said as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled her face to his for a kiss. 'But, you're especially loved by me.'" She finished through the kiss.

"Kiss me again but peak out the corner of your eye. Take a look out there." He pressed his lips to hers as they both snuck a look and broke into laughter.

People were going about their business, pretending not to notice. You could see the very quick sidelong glances; followed by, the intense effort to focus straight ahead, unnaturally.

They both broke into uproarious laughter.

He tapped into the system, when Marie was gone. "On my way. - Bryant" was his short message to Pal. He contacted the captain for a shuttle and made his way to shuttle bay three as directed.

George always enjoyed the shuttle trips. The lack of gravity over such a short distance was great. It actually relieved all the pressure on skeletal joints; which tend to decompress considerably during a fifteen-minute flight. He was met at the docking ring by the ship's Captain, a Rear Admiral and the Fleet Commander who all saluted and waited for his acknowledgement.

"Admiral George Bryant and shuttle crew requesting permission to board." He said to the Captain.

"Permission granted, Admiral... and welcome aboard the Israel, sir. I am Captain Thomas Hurst.' He responded. 'Your pilot should feel free to use any of our facilities; while you're here.

The main entre is roast prime rib in the mess hall. Would you like a tour of my baby?" He spread his arms palms up to indicate the whole ship.

"I know it's a big service; but you wouldn't happen to be related to Captain Olivia Hurst aboard Columbia, would you?" Bryant asked as he could see the tall blonde haired young officer break into a wide grin.

"Yes sir, Olive is my sister." He responded still sporting a smile from ear to ear.

"Well Tom, if your half as good as Olive, we're facing a day with two Hurst siblings in the Admiralty registry. She is a gem; and quite enamored with Boots' Task Force 1 Commander. They are a real pair. You'll have to join us all for dinner and a nice evening. We all do it a couple of times a week. And, to answer your question; yes, I would like to see a little of your baby. But, mostly I'd like to meet a few of her people. Remember, we don't want to intimidate. I would like to meet with people in as relaxed an environment as possible. I really just want them to see that their superiors are just people, too; and, that, we really do care about them." Bryant instructed.

"Okay, let's go. And, we'll try to ensure people are comfortable." Captain Hurst said.

"Sir, do you need me to accompany you?" Pal asked.

"No Admiral; but you can if you want. You and your Task Commander can stay with us or go back to work. I know you need to prepare a lot before you move to Columbia, so feel free. And, it's my experience that, the more silver stars there are in a space, the more rigid people become. They will warm up faster; if, I only have one officer with me." He offered.

"Okay then, I'm going back to finish up. Rear Admiral Laft should do the same. We'll leave you to your mission. Have fun, Admiral." The Draco Commander offered, genuinely.

Hurst started by introducing him to the Shuttle Bay One Commander who actually commanded the teams in all the Shuttle Bays. They spent five minutes together before moving on. Over the course of the next two hours, he met people in engineering, medical, weapons, environmental; and spent a little longer with those in the galley; all enjoying a few good belly laughs. They went to Hangar One and spent time with pilots and crew on the flight deck. They visited the navigation bridge, stopping at a few stations. They ended the tour on the Flag bridge winding up at the office of Vice Admiral Palakiko.

"You have a fine team, Captain. And, you've done a great job, Admiral.' He said to her. 'I went over your logs. We are very like-minded. Anyway, you have a lot to do. And I have a move

to make today, too; so, I better move on." He added as he extended his hand to Pal first; then, Hurst.

"Where are you moving to, sir?" Pal asked curiously.

"I still inhabit the Fleet Commanders office, on the Columbia. Layout and signage dictate that I can't be lazy. I have to give it up. Grace will need it, now.' George responded with a smile. 'I'll see you back on the Columbia later.' He directed it at the Vice Admiral; then, turned to the Captain. "And, there is no need for you to accompany me, Captain. I can find my way."

"No sir, I wouldn't hear of it. I will walk you back to the Shuttle Bay." He responded as the two turned and left Admiral Palakiko.

Aboard the Columbia, he called on Grace and informed her, he would begin his move. She very courteously resisted; but, relented after he pointed to the signage and reminded her it was in this locale for a reason. He contacted Olivia and asked for a new office space and door signage. She placed him in the one perpendicular to Grace; just around a corner from his old one. The view would be a bit different; but the similarity was astonishing. An hour later, he noticed the gilded sign on his door that must have been done while he was so focused on putting things away correctly. Admiral George T. Bryant, it said on the first line on the glass door. The second line read Commander Mobile Fifth Rapid Action Command. When he was almost done, he called on Moe.

"Can you please witness, what I am removing from this safe, he said as he opened it." He took all insignia for Level Eight and above. The Fleet Commander had the authority for Level Seven field commissions and permanent elevations at and below Level Six. If he needed any of it, he could get it from Grace. He also took the lock box that held the Fifth's keys generated by the C&C. This was the hard copy that was held in case he was incapacitated. Someone had to be able to take over, if something went wrong. He removed the digital copy of his personal logs and the Fifth's Command logs. The Fleet log archives had to stay with Grace. On a trip to Rigil, one of the supply vessel Captains had been asked to deliver a package to Bryant personally. It contained Quadrant level certificates and warrants for awards and promotions and a supply of an assortment of medals and ribbons. So, he removed that case for storage in his new office. Finally, he removed a case that held his personal awards. The warrants and certificates were on the wall in frames; but, the actual medals were kept in his safe. Moe recorded the inventory of what had been removed and listed what was left on a second document, for Grace.

George encrypted a message to her containing the safe's digital code and advising her to change it, upon first use.

Returning to his new office with Moe he placed the Fifth's secured materials in the safe in front of Moe and changed its entry code via the data pad. He spent the next half hour hanging pictures, award certificates and promotion warrants; along with a framed print out of the memos he received the day before from Edward III and the C&C. Two armed marines suddenly appeared and took up posts outside his office at either door pillar.

"What's going on?" He inquired.

"We were assigned by the regimental security office, according to General Malcolm's order, sir.

He booted his office system; signed in; and, had just sat behind his desk when Pal and her entourage arrived at his door.

"I see you're all moved in. It looks good; though a lot like the other one." She said with a smile.

"Why don't you all come in and grab a seat.' He offered warmly as Marie arrived. 'Can you all give me a moment, please?' They nodded assent as he punched up Malcolm. 'General, why are there two guards outside my office?' He asked.

"It's protocol, sir. OESA regulations say that all officers at your level and above must be secured, at all times. It even specifies the number of armed guards we must post." Malcolm responded.

"I know the regulations, Ian; but, do we have to post them outside my door. Can't we put them at the entrance to this bridge. If they check everyone coming on the bridge, there shouldn't be a threat in my office. This will make people very uncomfortable." George said.

" I can appreciate your concern. I am amending the order, right now sir. They should move shortly. Malcolm responded.

"Thank you, General." Bryant said as he disconnected and turned back to his guests.

"We haven't done introductions, yet; so, I will start. Admiral Palakiko this is the Headquarter Counseling Commander and my lovely wife Commodore Marie Ste. Laurent. Marie, this is Vice Admiral Palakiko.' He said as the two smiled and took each other's right hand, politely 'And, this is the rest of her mob. I'll let the Admiral do the introductions; since, I have not been introduced to most of them, myself." George finished with an outstretched hand

and a bow directed at Pal. He waved in Moe who was lingering outside the door at a polite distance.

"I would like you all to meet Rear Admiral Laft the Draco Task Force One Commander' She placed a hand on his shoulder and continued to identify each as she went through the introductions. 'And this is Rear Admiral Will Davies Commander of Draco Task Force Two. And this beautiful young lady is Commodore Mary Firth Commander of the Israel Group. And, here you have Commodore Ti Tsung Commanding Kenya Group. And, my Deltan compatriot, here is Commodore Paliko Commander of Lebanon Group. And, finally we have Commodore Roger Charlesworth the Commander of Jordan Group." She finished.

Everyone clambered about the newcomers, welcoming them, echoing names to ensure correctness and making small talk. This went on for about ten minutes. Then, Bryant gave Grace a nod and she waved in her six commanders.

"Now, if you can all hold it down, for a few minutes, I would like to take this opportunity to have Boots Commanders introduced to the Draco ones' Admiral Bryant called over the din; which, quickly subsided. 'Most of you have met Grace; but, I'll start there, anyway. Admiral Palakiko, Rear Admirals Davies and Laft, and Commodores Firth, Ti, Paliko and Charlesworth, I would like to introduce Vice Admiral Grace Tonaka the Commander of Boots Fleet. Grace has an incredible Command resume with both Borealis and Boots. 'Bryant had placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. 'The rest of these clowns belong to her; so, I'll let her take over and do the honors.' He said.

"Hi folks, I'm Grace; and, I'll take you through my family.' She placed a hand on Steven's shoulder. 'This sexy old bugger is Rear Admiral Tom Stevens the Commander of Task Force Two. Both Admiral Bryant and I worked for him in the past. His career was stalled by the lull in OESA growth that occurred fifteen years ago. Since then, he has been passed over despite his obvious skills and attributes; until Admiral Bryant got to him. Now, he's on fire!! He's the guy to go to when you run into something you've never encountered before. He's seen everything since the big bang. And this handsome guy is Rear Admiral Stephen Nichols, the Task Force One Commander. You noticed I didn't call him sexy. It's because his girl is Captain of this ship and she might put me on the end of a torpedo and hit the launch button.' She paused for the laughter. 'You might recognize the name...as in... the Nichols Patrol Maneuver. Yeah, he's the one you can blame when you're trying to negotiate those complex maneuvers.' Again she had to pause for the

laughs. Then, there is this gorgeous Amazonian; who is single, by the way, you gentlemen. She is Commodore Ana Arce and she is commander of Columbia Group. And this amazing specimen is a full blood Navajo Chief known to us as Commodore Tsoh Shash in charge of Grenada Group. Here we have Commodore Azul Cielo the Commander of Dominica Group. And finally, this is Pintar Orang Commander Espanola Group." She finished with a flourish as everyone clapped spontaneously.

"Okay, okay...let's keep it down.' Bryant said; then waved more people into the already crowded room. 'First of all, I want to introduce you to the most important person in this room.' He placed his hand on Moe's shoulder. 'This god-like being is Rear Admiral Tahu Moahu; and, he is my Chief of Staff. Without him, nothing would happen. He's the guy you come to if you want to push along requisitions, I have to sign. He's the one who makes sure my orders, directives and posting make sense and follow Rules and Regulations. He's the guy who passes my orders to my sub-ordinates. I have a tendency to just go to someone and ask for something. Moe makes sure we follow the chain of command. Then, I want to introduce you all to the man we may all beg to, in the near future. He ensures our security. A lot of our intelligence comes through his people. He makes sure we are internally defensible from boarding parties. He is the one who will arrange the boarding parties we might want to initiate. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Lieutenant General Ian Malcolm and he is the Commander of the Fifth Mobile Marine Corps. Your Marine Division Commanders will take their lead from him and report to his office. Unlike a lot of people in our service, General Malcolm has seen considerable action in space and on the ground. He's definitely the right person to lead our more than seventeen thousand marines.' He paused; allowing all to spend some time milling around and talking to each other. 'This is a large group. It's too large to occupy this room any longer. So, I am going to suggest that, we all break from here and reconvene in the Columbia's Admirals' Mess. We can spend the evening getting to know each other. It will make it much easier to work together. You may enjoy calling someone by name more than yelling hey you. We should enjoy this evening. Starting tomorrow, we will spend eight hours a day locked in a suffocating environment; planning the defeat of our invaders. This meeting will adjourn to the Admirals Mess. Your all dismissed!" Bryant called over the din; and, rose to his feet.

In the mess hall at their adjoined tables, Bryant stood up. "I want to ask one more official question before we sink into nonsense. Did everyone get quarters that were satisfactory? We

don't want anyone to be unhappy.' He finished and looked around the table to a chorus of nodding heads. Everyone seemed happy. 'I assume you left orders with your commands; so, they know you'll be here for a while. Our object here is to build a plan with all the possible alternatives. But, that will begin, tomorrow. For tonight, let's relax and enjoy. We'll eat; then, head to the bar for some finger-foods, music, fun and dancing. But remember, we start at eight hundred hours, tomorrow.'" Bryant said with a sly look on his face.

Their party of thirty spent an hour and a half in the mess hall. By the time they left, they had already consumed a dozen bottles of wine and a dozen beers between them. The polite quiet had evolved to a noisy interaction between all of them. No one seemed uncomfortable. Everyone was included in the conversation and humor. Grace and Tom roasted each other; as did Pal and Laft. After that, Moe and Ian Malcolm got into the act. There was a lot of rollicking laughter, until everyone ganged up on George Bryant. They all had little stories they could twist humorously. It took the six nearly an hour to finish the roast.

By the time they entered the bar, they were all in fine spirits, to say the least. The festivities continued to twenty-three hundred; when, about half the party decided to leave for the evening. Everyone knew the load they'd bear from here on. The rest dwindled out over the next hour.

.....

"I was glad to hear that no one went on into early morning hours; or, got hammered out of their minds. Today will be tough because of the intensity. Hopefully, we will get used to the pace. Coffee, tea, juices and sweet rolls should appear, shortly; in case, you missed breakfast or need something else. Feel free to help yourself throughout the morning. We'll take a break at ten hundred. We'll break for lunch at twelve hundred; and we'll do an afternoon break at fourteen thirty. We'll plan to get out of here around sixteen thirty hours, every day. Try and relax in your evenings. Homework's only going to dull your intensity the next day. I know some of you very well. Others I am just getting to know. But, from your files I can say, we have as much tactical brain power gathered in one room as anyone could muster.

I am sending you all the tactical updates I have up to now. This will allow you to see the progression of the war to now. All the updates from Vice Admiral Metas Elevadas commanding Eridani are generally eight to nine days, after the fact; so, we have never had a current or real-time view of what's happening out there. However, Elevadas has our jump schedule; but, no idea

of the plan after we get to the staging area. I kept him in the dark, in case of capture. He is forwarding updates to us timed to meet us at our stop-overs. So, as we approach the battle zone, we will not be as far out of the picture. For the last two weeks, I have used the computers to project the battle based on the reports we do have. This generally gives me a few probable current situational outcomes to that date. From that, I have maintained a personal picture of how I see things, currently. Any of you could look at the probabilities and build a different vision of the current situation. Anyway, you will have all the updates and projections to attempt to get the best picture you can.

The marines from Eridani, Lepus and Taurus have formed a joint intelligence battalion nearly five hundred members in size to co-ordinate all intelligence movements. Their information has been coming to me via General Malcolm who gets three reports a day. These too are six to eight days out of date; but, give us an idea as to how this enemy functions tactically.

From all these sources, one thing you will all note of is that our opponents think two dimensionally. What I will point out; is that, they came into our territory from plus to minus ten-degrees declination; and never exceed those boundaries. They look to their fronts, rears and sides; but, don't really pay attention to the space above and below those boundaries. At this time, it appears to me that this is their Achilles heel. My initial reaction to what I saw is that, we take a Fleet above and below and attack their rear interrupting supply and damaging the rear while the other three Fleets are still engaging them from the front. If I had to launch that operation, today, I would send three Groups from each Fleet and hold one in reserve at each battle line. And, I would attack with half the six Carriers raptors in the lead; placing three hundred guns and twelve hundred missiles ahead of the heavy craft. That would allow for a second launch of the same size, always holding three hundred in reserve as they are refueled and serviced. No supply vessels would be permitted in the battle area; until after the initial attack; so, we could determine how to protect each of them; as, they resupply a Task Force. When attacking we would drag one frigate from each attacking Group behind us to come into the battle a little late. Their perspective might give us a better view of the field as a battle develops. We would use our reserve to counter any counter attacks. They would use probes to monitor their own space and ours at all times. They would have orders to fight under specific conditions. Initially, we would take no prisoners; aiming for total destruction of any vessels we engage. If the battle turns in our favor, we could revisit that philosophy if conditions permit us to attend captures. Communications drones would

be in constant transit between Boots and Draco to keep each apprised of the others situation. All communications drones launched during battle will be run at forty percent to reduce communication time. All sensor probes will be programmed to run their drones at forty percent to reduce update time. Badly damaged vessels would be towed from the field and assisted when the opportunity arises. Destroyed vessels would be ignored until a battle ends. Mourning our losses during battle will only lead to additional loss of life.

Our initial attack would come from top and bottom in the form of an arc with Boots heading along the border in one direction as Draco heads in the other. This will put considerable distance between the two bodies of three groups and their reserves. But would permit us to cut a path through the enemy lines. As we cross along their rear, we would have to be prepared to bring individual groups to bear on weaknesses we see and return them to the Fleet as quickly as possible.

So, using the information we have and the battle plan I outlined as a guideline of all the things that must be managed your jobs break into the following sections.

First, we will need better updates. Is there a way to get information from the battle field faster?

Second, we will need more timely intelligence. How can we improve the information and how quickly it gets to us?

Third, based on the first two, we will need to project all the different things an opponent may do in response to our action.

Fourth, we have to develop a plan that is based on the best possible information at the moment of attack.

Fifth, we have to develop several alternate plans to use in responses to actions we project the enemy may take in Step three.

Sixth, we need a reserve strategy. How much. Where to put them. When to use them.

Seventh, we need an exit strategy in case we get into trouble using the reserve in item four for assistance in this stage.

I believe we should break into groups for this. A group should deal with the battle field update problem. Another Group should handle the intelligence issue. A third group should be looking at all information as it unfolds and projecting how our enemy reacts to attacks and changes in attacks. A fourth team should be looking at our potential reactions to theirs. A fifth

team should be dealing with the reserve issue. You sometime need reserve when you see you've almost locked things up. Sometime you need them to cover your exit, when you're in trouble. You always need them to give you additional battle field intelligence. You always need them to help in any mop up. The sixth team should be taking the results from the other five and assembling an overall tactical plan with specifics for each Fleet and each Group. Remember, our attack is the most likely to succeed if it is a surprise and is delivered in an unexpected manner to throw the enemy off balance. These two things can overcome massive deficiencies. If you have surprise and originality along with the intelligence and communications advantage, you are probably going to win a war. The object of a plan is to use all your assets to your best advantage with the ultimate goal of defeating the enemy without losing them.

The last thing I want to add is that you should use every asset you have. That includes your people. If you think you have a ship's Captain who is the ultimate in figuring out intelligence problems, then, he or she should be in here, too. If you know someone who employs incredible simplicity and elegance to deal with complex tactical problems; then, that person should be here, too. Don't be afraid to bring in sub-ordinates. We have lots of room to put them up during our jumps.

I will leave it up to the four Tactical Commands to determine the makeup of any discovery groups. The Fleet Commanders will need to oversee all the groups; so, all the Groups can draw on their tactical knowledge. Don't forget to use any engineering help you may need to resolve impediments. And remember to draw on Moe and his assets for research information.

During this period, I will be the one in and out of the room. I will receive the communications updates and get security updates as they come in. I will be the one to actually order all the jumps; so, you can all concentrate on your tasks.

But, I will also be working on my plan. It is a fairly good beginning; so, I will be attempting to improve it as our picture improves. It can be our fall back if we don't come up with a better one. Or, it can be our plan with parts modified by ideas you generate. So let's get to it. I'll be out of the room for the next hour. Are there any questions about what I have said?" He asked.

"Yes sir, I have a Captain I would like to include in these meetings.' Nichols interjected. 'Others probably do, too. Can we not break to build our team with the others we think we need.?"

"Certainly, you are all very responsible grownups. You will not be locked in here; but, a certain amount of work must be done each day if we are to have our plan by the time we reach

the staging area. We will have one day there to adjust for battlefield actualities. Then, we go!" The Admiral responded.

"Anyone else?" He asked; then he paused for a moment; and turned to leave the boardroom when there were no additional questions.

When Bryant slipped quietly back into the room he was astonished. Eight more people had joined the team. Three were Boots Captains, one was from the Detroit's Engineering Department and another was a Boots' Marine Major; he recognized all those faces. But three others had obviously come over from Draco. He monitored conversations as he roamed the room; but realized the boardroom wasn't really big enough for this. He mulled it over for a while as he continued to wander. He was happy. They were building an Esprit de Corp as a combined command; instead of, just being two Fleets operating together.

"Could I have your attention, please?" He called out and waited for the din to die down. "I have two things for you. The first is that you don't have to be stuck in this room. The group working on the plan can be in tactical. The group working on intelligence could be working with the Marines; and, so on. Various departments have assets and people you may be able to draw on. When I am working a battle plan, I am generally all over the place. Stellar navigation has the best star charts, for example. Anyway, you could all plan to be here two or three times a day for an hour each time; and, work from other areas that would assist you. It would also prevent you all from suffocating. This tactical planning group has grown considerably; and, the room is taxed to hold everyone. There is one more thing I forgot to mention earlier. If you have a lot of information on how your enemy reacts to things and you want to make it predictive; you would be wise to draw from counseling services. You would not believe how many times Commodore Bryant has given me insight into an enemy that helped resolve a situation. The Grays are an excellent example of that. Anyway, it's up to all of you. Provided you have self-discipline; the entire ship can be your laboratory. The other point is a piece of news valuable to all of us. At my request, pleading, prodding and begging, engineering and astrophysics have worked together to develop a way to keep a worm hole open for long periods while moving one aperture, as needed. We couldn't travel through it. It takes too much energy to keep one that size open, indefinitely. It would be very tiny. They refer to it as a nano-wormhole. It can intersect the larger ones we travel through and the aperture can travel inside with us. At the same time, another engineering team found a way to continuously re-columnate a group of lasers to keep them from deteriorating

in the wormhole. One beam can be surrounded by eight that protect it. The importance of this is that, we should be able to receive nearly instant updates, even as we travel in FTL. A message sent on a laser in a wormhole between two points ten light years across would take about nine hours to reach the destination, instead of just under two days. From the battle field, we are talking less than two days for a message to reach us here at Barnard's; and, as we travel closer the time is reduced. It also means that, we can receive these messages while in flight. We have sent a message by the old "snail mail" method advising them of the advance and asking them to watch for the aperture of our nano-wormhole which we will open and direct to their location. This means that, about six days from now, while in the vortex, we will start receiving continuous updates and intelligence as we travel the rest of the way to our staging area. It also helps in our communications during battle. The enemy seems to be as limited as we have been; so, this should give us a real advantage. I have asked engineering to find a way to adapt this to our long range sensor probes; so, they don't have to send drones; but, can send continuous streams of data in near real time. Please use this information in your planning and calculations. This is a major development." Bryant finished as the whole room broke into applause, hoots and hollers.

Pal approached him. "You know, sir; you've made the whole job a hell of a lot easier. No matter what we considered, that was the main stumbling block. We would never be truly sure of what we should do; until, we were almost right on top of the battlefield. I just wish you would have told us; but, thank you, anyway." She said sincerely.

"I couldn't tell you. My degree is in astrophysics; so, I knew the concept sounded feasible to me when I suggested it; but, until they succeeded it was just another one of my crazy attempts at junk science. Anyway, don't thank me. It was engineering and astrophysics." He said.

"Yes sir, but, it was you that had the vision to come up with the idea. Whether they did the grinding or not, it's your genius that made it possible." The Vice Admiral responded as everyone broke into a cheer.

"One thing you might explain is why do you really need to transmit nine lasers?" Stevens asked.

"Eight lasers act like an insulator and the one in the middle is the conductor carrying the data - like a wire. The outside ones protect the core from being assaulted by the forces in the wormhole. That way, the data stays intact. That idea is not so special. It's a pretty logical extension of applications we already have. But, the continuous nano-wormhole that can be

moved as we travel is the big leap. I must admit that, I am kind of a little proud of that one. I screwed around with the Casimir for half a day, a while back and realized it would open useless wormholes at almost any level. The problem was that the less energy you put in the smaller the event horizon. I was thinking in terms of travel at the time; so, it seemed like a wasted effort. We couldn't use less energy for FTL. But, when this war started, the idea kept haunting me. My brain kept trying to tell me I could use this for this war. The more frustrated I became with the communications problem, the more the wormhole preyed on my mind. So, when it occurred to me that you could send a message through it, I pulled out my old university textbook and did the math. It turned out a wormhole that weak could be dragged all over the universe. And, it seemed to me that, it would pass through the energy of the vortex without interfering with our jump. It's too weak to affect a jump. So, I gave engineering and astrophysics the idea and my calculations. I didn't hear a thing until they actually had built and tested the model. Tom it just seemed like a hunch with a little bad math attached. I really didn't believe it would work. And you know what, Pal. I haven't done that kind of work in over twenty years; so, I had good reason to be unsure and not want to tell you." Bryant finished.

"It's okay, boss. We all understand. I'm just glad they didn't prove your idea on the day we land at the staging site. Thank goodness we haven't even left, yet." The Draco Commander observed.

"Anyway, keep working towards a scenario. It will help develop and prove a good framework for battle; even if, it requires major last minute alterations. We should be able to solidify whichever plan we need several days before landing; because of the communications improvements. We'll be able to do very fine tuning as we approach the field." Bryant ordered.

There was a lot of laughing and talking as they broke for lunch, later. Meantime, George advised all the ships in both Fleets to prepare for the first jump as in their orders from their Group Commanders. At fifteen hundred he released the order to the Fleet Commanders' systems. Each had programmed their systems to generate their orders to Task Force Commands. This would domino down through the ranks to all the people in command of the bridges on the various ships. All orders would reference a plan number. Helmsmen and propulsion would only have to enter the plan number to activate the correct flight plan. The entire Mobile Fifth began to move. Each approached its jump point. They suddenly all disappeared, at the same instant.

Chapter 12 The Spiel?

February 26, 2249

"Impossible is a word found only in the dictionary of fools." Napoleon Bonaparte

George was taking a few private moments, before the meeting. Aldebaran is a swollen giant near the end of its life. Its system is veiled with a thin wisp of dust and gas that probably indicates it has belched off a great deal of its mass, already. A denser hollow orb of smoky grit and gas surrounds it several light-years out. Four planets still orbit it; but, it is likely that, several more have been swallowed up as the star expanded. Two remaining ones are rocky; but, were originally probably gas giants; whose extensive atmospheres evaporated as the star's outer perimeter approached. One is in now in what would be called the habitable zone of the star and sports a considerable amount of water over nearly ninety percent of the surface. It appears to have little life, if any; but, has been a good source of water and gas supplies in a pinch. A dim red dwarf orbiting at an average distance of ninety-one billion kilometers is a fairly bright point in the sky, from this perspective. This kind of red giant is intriguing. You never know when it will puff off its exterior and die. You certainly don't want to be too close; which is why George chose it as the staging site.

It is almost dead center of the two edges of the incursion; which are now at the three-hour-ten-minute and five-hour-five-minute right ascension points. The invasion, after spreading inward from its two arms, essentially now forms a wedge. At its innermost battle line, the war is raging between plus and minus two degrees; while, on the border, enemy forces can be found between plus and minus ten-degrees declination. It takes in both Theatre Command regions of Quadrant One Command; so, there are sixteen full fleets to draw from, minus the five already in the fight.

The new communications system had worked well throughout the journey. From February 20th on, Fifth Mobile RAC was in continuous receipt of information no more than forty hours old. Updates became even more current as they approached. At Aldebaran they are now in constant receipt of updates and intelligence that is no more than a couple of hours old from the most distant sources.

The meeting George was hosting was to finalize a plan to work from. They would make a choice; and do the final tune up in twenty-four hours; just before launching the counter attack.

This gathering was with just Fifth Mobile's upper echelon. Admiral George Bryant, Vice Admiral Grace Tonaka, Vice Admiral Palakiko, Lieutenant General Ian Malcolm, Rear Admiral Stevens, Rear Admiral Nichols, Rear Admiral Laft, Rear Admiral Davies and Rear Admiral Moahu. These nine people had overseen what turned into a forty-eight-person team that developed all the scenarios. His eight sub-ordinates had sent him four plans; each with a multitude of alternatives as reactions to enemy action.

Meanwhile, he was noting how the surface of the big red star actually looked like it was boiling. He had never seen it before this. In fact, he had never seen most of the stars in the Empire up close. An officer might see two or three hundred in a career; but, there are thousands. He turned to the door in response to a knock on the frame.

"Rear Admiral Stevens reporting, sir" He was at attention in front of the desk.

"Welcome, Tom. Take a seat and relax." Bryant responded. "Seems like you're a bit early, though."

"Yeah George, just a little. I wanted a minute with you." He replied.

"The others will be here in a minute; but, I wanted to talk to you about our recommendation. The plan we like has been sold to the rest of us by Stephen. I don't mean that as any kind of insult. Point by point he ran us through comparisons with the others. He presented sixty-four variations of all the plans in computer simulations. I just want you to know that, our choice is not a cop out. We really are sold on the plan. Everyone'll be here; but, Stephen's going to do most of the talking; if, you're okay with that. I have to tell you that, he has one of the finest tactical minds, I've ever seen." Tom finished.

"Tom, you don't have to prepare me. I already know which plan they like. I could tell by the way they were presented. Don't worry. I will make the choice in the end. It could be one of the four or another one I've dreamed up. But, you're right about Nichols. I could see his imprint all over these. He's going to be a real winner, at this game. Anyway, this meeting will be relaxed. Grab a drink from the bar and just wave everyone else in as they get here." Bryant said with a smile.

Ten minutes later, everyone was seated on the two couches and four chairs with Bryant at his desk. Each had a drink in their hand.

"Well folks, today is the day of decision. I have all the plans; and, I know you're recommending plan one. And, I know you have reservations; because, you believe, I'll think you

took the easy way out. But... I don't. It's still the best idea. I noticed the changes to the plan. I think I like them; but, can someone take me through them?" He looked into all the stunned faces; as, silence prevailed for several minutes.

"Well?" He prompted.

"Sorry, sir. We're all a little stunned that you know our recommendation. May I ask, how?" Nichols spoke up.

"It's the way they're written. Everyone does the same thing. They build a bunch of plans; but, they write up the one they like the best just a little better than the others. I mean it's written to sell it. The others just present the facts. Plan one is a presentation. The others are monotone monologues in style. And, you think I will think you took the easy way out; because, it's based on my initial idea. I don't; because, you've added a lot to it. I think you made it better; but, you have to take me through the changes." George finished.

Stephen Nichols took George through the entire plan four times in the next hour and a half. Each time, he brought up a different simulation accounting for major differences in enemy response. During each play-back he changed parameters several times; incorporating minor variations caused by enemy reactions. He took the time to slow or stop action on several occasions during each play-back to show George why his original plan needed the changes. In all; though they really only ran the four simulations, it was like running a dozen.

"Approved, as is!" George snapped.

"What do you mean, sir?" Pal asked.

"I mean I like it. It's approved just like it is. I have to call and make arrangements with a couple of Theatre Commands; and, our people are pretty whacked from the trip. All the time dilation from the last jump has really disoriented everyone. So, I will say we execute at seven hundred hours the day after tomorrow. You need to issue all your orders. A couple of maneuvers in this plan require some pretty fancy flying; so, I would think you would all want to program parts of them. This is great work people. It was something to see you all pull together like you did. Let's see if this time next week, we can be sitting here having a drink in celebration of having thrown an aggressor out of our Empire. Can I buy you all lunch?" He said with a smile.

Everyone acknowledged that lunch together would be a great idea.

"Okay, I'll meet you in the Flag Officers mess in half an hour. Finish your drinks and leave when it's convenient. I have some work that will not wait." He said as he turned back to the system to dictate some memos.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0021

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Admiral Zelená Tráva Theatre One Commander, Admiral Inang'aa Mkali Theatre Two Commander

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: February 26, 2249

Please detach the following Fleets from your commands for three days. duty with us. Though they will face some action, they will be used in a mostly diversionary maneuver, by us. I will release them back to you as soon as possible. They will be asked to move into action from their current locations based on timing within our counter- attack plan. Fleets to Release Eridani - currently at Beta Eridani / Pisces - currently at Gamma Ceti.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Admiral G.T. Bryant

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0021b

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Kura Neko Commander Eridani Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: February 26, 2249

Fleet Commander Neko,

You will have, or will receive orders from your Theatre Command to detach from the Theatre. You are attached to the Fifth Mobile RAC, until further notice. We have attached an encrypted guideline regarding a new communication system we are using. Two-way communication is available as the initiator is moving at five times the standard delivery speed. Please configure and engage this system, immediately. This is a far more secure

communications system that cannot be tapped. It eliminates the need to constantly launch communications drones. This technological advancement has also been applied to our sensor system. That bulletin will be attached and encrypted, too. In the meantime, you are already in position for the required maneuver; so, please, do not move. Please configure your fleet in a defensive posture, in the meantime. This message will take three days to reach you. We will contact you in four days; using the new system. We welcome your participation in this endeavor.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

George T. Bryant Commanding Fifth Mobile Command

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0021c

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Arian Bicell Commander Pisces Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: February 26, 2249

Fleet Commander Bicell,

You will have, or will receive orders from your Theatre Command to detach from the Theatre. You are attached to the Fifth Mobile Command, until further notice. We have attached an encrypted guideline regarding a new communication system we are using. Two-way communication is available as the initiator is moving at five times the standard delivery speed. Please configure and engage this system, immediately. This is a far more secure communications system that cannot be tapped. It eliminates the need to constantly launch communications drones. This technological advancement has also been applied to our sensor system. That bulletin will be attached and encrypted, too. In the meantime, you are already in position for the required maneuver; so, please, do not move. Please configure your fleet in a defensive posture, in the meantime. This message will take three days to reach you. We will contact you in four days; using the new system. We welcome your participation in this endeavor.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

George T. Bryant Commanding Fifth Mobile Command

George applied the current standard encryption as he saved each file. When he put the folders together including the messages and each bulletin he encrypted at that level, too. Then, he forwarded each entire package to their respective fleets, via the old drone system. Boots would move to three hours at twelve-degrees declination and Draco would jump to five hours by minus twelve-degrees declination in the morning. They would keep communications open throughout the maneuver. Once in position, they would send new orders to the other two Fleets. He spent the next two hours accessing records on the Fleet, Task and Group Commanders of both Fleets he had just enlisted. When he left to go to their quarters to meet Marie as she came home, he was quite confident in the new additions.

When they walked into the Flag Officers mess hall, George and Marie spotted all the others, and their significant others, seated at three tables grouped together. No one was eating, yet. But, they were enjoying a beverage and light conversation.

"Afternoon everyone. I have one piece of business news to give you; then, we stay away from it for the rest of the evening. Eridani and Pisces Fleets will be conducting the diversions. They don't know the details, yet. They are already in position; so, I asked them to hold. I sent them all the plans for the communications and sensor system upgrades; and, ordered them to adopt them. We will contact them in four days and send them the maneuvers they need to make and their objectives." George stopped and was about to say no more business; when, he was interrupted.

"What upgrades, George?" Marie asked.

"Oh...I guess I didn't tell you about..." He was cut off.

"You really don't like taking credit for things, do you?" Stevens howled; then continued. "The man comes up with the idea for the biggest technological advance the OESA has seen in a couple of centuries; and, he doesn't even tell his wife...not to mention that she is a Headquarters' Commander.

Marie, your husband came up with a way to speed up communications. And it works. I can get a message from someone ten light years away in one fifth the time it took before. And, I can get that message while I'm moving. And, the message is more secure. It's much harder to tap

into. We've used it successfully and we adapted the idea to the sensor system. We can monitor our outer perimeter with much less lag time." Tom finished.

"Is that true, George. You invented it?" Marie asked.

"Not alone! It was an idea I had; but, I needed all kinds of help to make it work. It was a team effort." George sounded defensive.

"Yes but, was it your idea, in the first place?" Marie asked.

"Yes, Marie; it was." He answered.

"And, you didn't even tell me. I never met a person with so little ego; but, this takes the cake. I know you don't like to brag; but, you can at least tell me about things like this!" She howled.

"Okay snookums in the future I will brag to you about the things I do.' He said in a squeaky nasally voice as he feigned the hen-pecked husband. Everyone broke into laughter. 'Seriously Marie, I would have told you if I'd remembered. Things have been a little hectic, you know. I have had a lot on my mind, lately. One hundred fifty thousand people are looking to me to lead them against an enemy who wants to tear each and every person in the Empire apart." He was cut short, again.

"What do you mean a hundred and fifty thousand?" She was cut off as she wailed again.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you about that, too.' He was cut off again as the entire table roared with laughter. 'Two more Fleets are attached to Mobile Fifth, now.' He looked over at the Boots people. 'See, I told you all at the wedding reception to watch me for bruises. She's a pretty tough cookie." The uproar got even louder. Draco people nudged Boots ones looking for information on the wedding reception.

The evening went very well, after that. Everyone stayed on the light side. There was a lot of ribbing and mini-roasting.

There were slight differences in the trajectories of the two Fleets; so, Draco jumped out first. Boots left half an hour after. Boots would jump forty-four light years to where its maneuver would begin and Draco forty-five. Both would be running at forty percent. That meant considerable time dilation when they exited. But, it also meant they would not be so disoriented from a long jump. Both Fleets would be able to continue with the maneuver. They would slow to twenty percent only to exit their apertures; then accelerate to thirty in regular space, with the option of forty, to make their moves. Part of the plan, was for Draco to make two very short

stops in route. This would be where Columbia would contact them; since only the initiator could keep their end of the communications link moving. At that time, Columbia would initiate contact via the new system. Draco would resume when it received. Because of that, Columbia would actually reach the start point, first. They would stop and run full long range sensors to see if they could pick up the other two Fleets as they ran their maneuver. Timing all this took a lot of math work and transmission times were exceedingly hard to calculate; because, the two stop points were required by Draco; and, Boots would keep moving as Columbia transmitted directional vectors. It was all complicated by time dilation which would have cashed out when Draco stopped; but, would still be growing in the Boots Fleet.

At three hundred thirty on Friday March 2, 2249, Columbia opened one communications channel from the vortex to Pisces and another to Eridani at three hundred fifty hours. This also took considerable effort to compute; since, Bryant wanted the message to get to the two Fleets at the same time; but, at the promised time, after they had configured their systems.

The first message read:

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0022

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Arian Bicell Commander Pisces Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C

Date: March 3, 2249

Fleet Commander Bicell,

You are requested and required to move your Fleet to the following coordinates. RA 4hr: 0min: 0s / Dec +12Degrees Displacement 85LY - perspective is Earth You must be there in twenty-two hours. Velocity 40 is authorized. You will be conducting a diversionary action; so, the object is to draw attention from the actual point of attack. Once at above location, reduce speed to exit vortex. Split your force in two and travel negative Z axis at real space velocity 40 until contact is well established. Engage enemy long enough for them to believe yours is a real attack. Continue on Z axis; until you make contact with Eridani Fleet. Turn west along ecliptic towards RA 3hrs: 0min: 0s engaging enemy along the way, until you have left the battle field. Find a safe spot and stand down. Report results to Mobile Fifth Command.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

George T. Bryant Commanding Fifth Mobile Command

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0023

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Kura Neko Commander Eridani Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C

Date: March 3, 2249

Fleet Commander Neko,

You are requested and required to move your Fleet to the following coordinates. RA 4hr: 0min: 0s / Dec -12Degrees Displacement 85LY perspective is Earth You must be there in twenty-two hours. Velocity 40 is authorized. You will be conducting a diversionary action; so, the object is to draw attention from the actual point of our counter-attack. Once at above location, reduce speed to exit vortex. Split your force in two and travel positive Z axis at real space velocity 40 until contact is well established. Intensely engage enemy long enough for them to believe yours is a real attack. Continue on Z axis; until you make contact with Pisces Fleet. Turn east along ecliptic towards RA 5hrs: 0min: 0s engaging enemy along the way, until you have left the battle field. Find a safe spot and stand down. Report results to Mobile Fifth Command.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

George T. Bryant Commanding Fifth Mobile Command

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0024

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Admiral Zelená Tráva Theatre One Commander, Admiral Inang'aa Mkali Theatre Two Commander

Date: March 3, 2249

C.C: OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant I Command

A major action will commence in a cube shaped area along our outer border between RA 3:0:0 and RA 5:0:0 between declinations -10 and +10 degrees and from 90 to 100 light years from Sol system; but, possibly extending out to 105 light years, against our enemy at eight hundred hours March 5, 2249.

You are requested and required to have all Fleets already engaged in action begin heavy attacks and bombardment in their areas by seven hundred hours. At that time, two diversionary attacks will begin, too. The enemy appears to be incapable of dealing with speeds higher than thirty percent in normal space; so, faster velocity approaches are recommended. Normal Space Speeds to forty percent are authorized for distances less than half a light year, at a time. By eleven hundred hours all forces should return to the duty status they were at before the bombardment began.

Our objectives are

- 1) Cripple supply lines*
- 2) Decimate enemy reserve forces where they are the heaviest, at the widest part of the wedge they have created.*
- 3) Destroy as many front line vessels as possible.*

All attacking forces should reserve substantial firepower. Attacking forces should maximize firepower by deploying a substantial portion of fighter craft to start the attack.

Further, you are requested and required to establish a temporary supply depot at BD+22 583 Co-ordinates Ra 03 52 05.598 Dec+22 40 17.87 - 87.6 Ly from Sol. We will be expending substantial resources for a period estimated to be around two weeks from the dates above. By March 10, 2249 it is projected we will need to resupply.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Admiral George Bryant

As they negotiated the vortex they were receiving constant intelligence and positional updates. It was important to have accurate and timely information; if, the planned maneuvers were to have any effect. Each of the two Fifth Fleets would begin a run at their specified point; travelling at high speed; exiting a jump at a known enemy stronghold and engaging them; jumping to the next known location and engaging the ships there and so on along the entire

swath. It would involve a series of half to one day jumps and battles with small contingents all along that front. If they weren't stopped, Bryant estimated it would take two weeks to cross the expanse; projecting enemy losses at close to four hundred vessels and Fifth losses in the range of twenty percent. But, if they succeeded, they would effectively cut a fire break through the forest of enemy vessels.

They reached the starting point for the maneuver on March 4th at twenty-three hundred twenty hours settling in a thin nebular cloud for the night. By now, everyone involved was in constant contact with them. Quadrant One had its Theatre Commands quickly configure the new communications system and were a central hub for a lot of information; since, both just happened to be relatively centrally positioned for the operations north and south of the ecliptic. This kept them and the Quadrant Command in relatively close contact with everyone concerned. Both Fleets would drop a reserve at these starting lines; which would travel the same arc in a continuous vortex at only twenty percent. This would allow them to lag behind the main bodies; but, catch up as the Fleets exited to engage enemy formations. All the while, these reserve Groups would be in contact with their Fleets.

Based on intelligence, Boots would travel an arc beginning at RA five hours, zero minutes, zero seconds, declination plus twelve degrees at a distance of ninety light years from Earth. This arc would bottom out at Right Ascension four hours, zero minutes, zero degrees, declination zero degrees; at ninety-seven light years from Earth. It would continue on from there to RA three hours, zero minutes, zero-degrees declination plus twelve degrees; at a distance of ninety-five light years from Earth. Draco would travel nearly a mirror image of the Boots course; with the exception of minor variations needed to engage the enemy in their run. At each stop, a Fleet would secure the landing area; then branch out to additional nearby enemy formations returning to the stop to jump out to the next point. Travel by the main three Group bodies of the Fleets would be at forty percent both in and out of jump vortices. Sensor upgrades would allow them to detect enemy positions before the enemy even realized they were there; unless they dropped in right on top of the invaders. All raptors were advised to pick a target the moment their sensors indicated one and fire as early as possible when in range; then, alter course immediately. The advanced sensors would permit them to fire before they could be seen and to move before they had been located. Fifth Mobile would enjoy one fifth the sensor lag the enemy seemed to have. These rapid in - rapid out devastating attacks were designed to do as much damage as possible in

a quick action, demoralize the enemy by displaying formidable firepower, faster approaches and maneuvering and allow them to see the superior sensor and communications systems Empire forces enjoyed.

On March 5, 2249, Boots reached its first targeted fleet at eight hundred hours precisely; with weapons firing and raptors launching minutes after exit from the wormhole, a quarter light year from the enemy. In the darkness of space, a hail of unseen spears inevitably destroyed whatever targets they found; and, were joined by the volleys of particle bursts, missiles and torpedoes; as, Mobile Fifth reduced the distance between the two forces. Fourteen enemy vessels were destroyed before the enemy altered course towards Boots; which, indicated when they detected the three Groups. By then Raptors were on top of them flying in and out through their formation; landing one hit after the other. Three hours after jumping in, the enemy jumped out. Columbia stayed put to mop up; while the other two Groups headed out to repeat similar actions upon nearby ancillary enemy formations. Constant communications indicated these confrontations took a similar turn. There was a twenty-four-minute lag in communications between Mobile Fifth on the Columbia and Draco Fleet; but, all updates and reports indicated similar results. In the meantime, George was receiving continuous updates from both the diversionary Fleets and the ones on the Front lines with various lags in reporting due to distances. Those reports were similar in nature. Grenada and El Salvador returned to Columbia by twelve hundred thirty hours, that morning. The results were most encouraging. Boots had lost three Raptors. Draco had lost two. Three Pisces fighters had been destroyed along with five from the Eridani Fleets. The four Fleets involved in the diversionary and main counter attack had not lost a vessel or sustained any serious damage employing the technology and tactics used. Things did not go quite as well along the front fifteen light years inside the border, where the enemy was extremely concentrated. Five Fleets jumped into heavy concentrations using the new technology and the same tactics as Mobile Fifth; but, had stood and fought a long pitched battle at the normal twenty percent velocities. This was an intentional strategy employed to gain full engagement of the enemy in those regions to keep them from reinforcing those facing the counter attack. They would continue to engage over the next several days. In their own right, this force was doing considerable damage; but, the enemy was inflicting losses on them, too. A report from Theatre One received around thirteen hundred hours indicated that by eleven hundred thirty the five fleets had lost fifty-four raptors, two frigates and a Cruiser. The Carrier Burundi was

badly damaged; and temporarily out of action and had suffered considerable casualties. His report to the C&C at thirteen hundred hours, that day put OESA losses at thirty-three hundred and seventy-one with another twelve hundred eighty injured. In all, they had lost three war ships; one was out of service and nearly seventy raptors were gone. To this point the enemy lost ninety-one war ships crewed by an estimated one hundred thirty each; eleven civilian supply ships; and over two hundred fighter craft. and had withdrawn from the areas where the counter attack started. Based on intelligence, Bryant projected their losses at around thirteen thousand dead and five thousand injured. He sent two messages out - one to Pisces and one to Eridani.

Memo

To: Commanders Pisces and Eridani

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth Command

C.C: OESA C&C, Theatre One Command, Theatre Two Command, Quadrant One Command

Date: March 5, 2249 13:10 hours

Commanders,

I commend you on your performance. Your people are acquitting themselves very well.

I want to convey my condolences at your personnel losses. I can only offer the fact that this action must be done to protect our citizens and rid us of this invader as a buffer to your feelings.

Reports from all engagements indicate we have suffered losses. Though they are tactically acceptable ones, they are very hard to swallow. The same reports indicate we are prevailing in this initial phase.

I would like to say thank you and reiterate that, I feel your losses with you.

An action message will follow shortly.

George T. Bryant

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0025

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Arian Bicell Commander Pisces Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: March 5, 2249

Commander,

You are ordered and required to continue to apply intense continuous pressure at your attack point and surrounding systems; until

1) The need for Fleet resupply within three days becomes apparent

or:

2) your corrected chronometer readings reach Nineteen hundred hours, that day.

When either of the above conditions are met, jump your entire Fleet, to meet Boots Fleet at RA 5H, 0 M, 0 Sec, Dec. +12 degrees at a distance of ninety light years from Sol. You will drop one group to hold this region and follow Boots with the remainder of your Fleet; dropping a Group at each subsequent invasion. Your Groups should be advised to only attempt to hold against forces no more than ten percent superior. Should stronger resistance be presented, they should notify all Commands, immediately; so, adequate assistance can be dispatched. This tact shall prevail regardless of any technical advantages your Groups may enjoy over the enemy.

You will have time to resupply your attack vessels from your supply vessels at this first stop. Supply vessels should be parked at the second and third attack point, after that.

Admiral George T. Bryant Commanding Mobile 5th Command

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0026

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Kura Neko Commander Eridani Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: March 5, 2249

Commander,

You are requested and required to continue to apply intense continuous pressure at your attack point and surrounding systems; until

1) The need for Fleet resupply within three days becomes apparent

or:

2) your corrected chronometer readings reach Nineteen hundred hours, that day.

When either of the above conditions are met, jump your entire Fleet, to meet Draco Fleet at RA 5-hours, 0-minutes, 0-seconds, Declination -12 degrees at a distance of ninety light years from Sol. You will drop one group to hold this region and follow Draco with the remainder of your Fleet; dropping one Group at each subsequent invasion. Your Groups should be advised to only attempt to hold against forces no more than ten percent superior. Should stronger resistance be presented, they should notify all Commands, immediately; so, adequate assistance can be dispatched. This tact shall prevail regardless of any technical advantages your Groups may enjoy over the enemy.

You will have time to resupply your attack vessels from your supply vessels at this first stop. Supply vessels should be parked at the second and third attack point, after that.

Admiral George T. Bryant Commanding Mobile 5th Command

Bryant knew that may not be the end of it. The enemy may hold until they were utterly destroyed; in which case, he would be forced to draw four additional Fleets just to be able to hold the twelve attack points in each of Boots' and Draco's paths. He was aware that, each additional Fleet he drew, weakened other sections of the Empire. He hoped it wouldn't come to that.

By March 13th, George could tilt his chair back and smile into the air with some sense of satisfaction. The war was definitely not over, yet; but, Boots and Draco had been wildly successful in their endeavors. Each had jumped into four battle zones and taken them in relatively short order. Then, each would jump vessels to surrounding areas and clear out smaller remote enemy contingents. The Marine intelligence was incredibly accurate. On several occasions the Marines had to board enemy vessels and fight for control. Both Fleets now held a considerable number of enemy prisoners in their brigs. George used several opportunities to let Malcolm know how much he appreciated the job he was doing. But Malcolm went up ten points in one of the subsidiary battles, the day before. They ran into a wily enemy captain who kept darting in and out of an asteroid belt. Malcolm came up with the idea of taking one of the larger shuttles into the belt to lie in wait. As the enemy craft passed, the shuttle deployed grappling hooks then pulled themselves into the ship; finally forming a soft seal over a portal. They blew the portal and took the vessel in hand to hand combat. This group of invaders did not seem to be familiar with our Marines personal armor or weaponry. Though hand to hand and compartment

by compartment fighting went on for over an hour, they were easily captured with only a few minor injuries to our team.

Including the casualties from outlying Fleets, and those from yesterday's battle the OESA had lost just under eleven thousand people, six war ships and one hundred seventy-one raptors. Theatre One and Two Commands oversaw all the logistics for resupply. They had established the bases, as asked and had gone to great trouble to ensure materiel was moved even closer, if needed. They even pushed to draw replacements like Raptors from uninvolved Fleets. Even the six war ships were supplanted by requisitioning an entire Group from a Fleet and assigning its ships to Groups in need. Full strength for those in the field was constantly maintained while the enemy's strength was bleeding away by a sizable amount, every day. To date, in actions initiated or requested by him, George tabulated enemy losses at approximately three hundred seventy-five ships, nearly nine hundred fighter craft with casualties totaling around sixty thousand dead twenty thousand wounded and seven hundred captured.

He started composing.

DIRECTIVE

Date: March 13,2249

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile Command

To: Quadrant One Command

Subject: Enemy prisoners.

C.c. OESA C&C, Quadrant Commanders, Theatre One Commander, Theatre Two Commander

Commanders,

I am aware that we currently hold a substantial number of captured enemy troops scattered throughout Fleets engaged in this conflict. Could you please forward me a list of these parties by rank, if it can be determined? From those we hold prisoner, I need to find the party with the highest rank. I am seeking a member of the upper echelon of the Command in charge of this invasion. It would be nice to find a captive at a rank equivalent to Admiral, Vice Admiral or Rear Admiral. It is imperative that, I be included in direct interrogation of a senior

commander. It may help shorten this war. This will be an important requirement in documenting all prisoners captured at future engagements.

Your assistance in the matter is greatly appreciated.

Admiral George T. Bryant

Memo

Date: March 13, 2249

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile Command

To: OESA C&C

Cc. All Quadrant Commanders, All Theatre Commander

Subject: Support Forces

Sirs,

As you are aware, we have made substantial progress in our efforts to expel the invading force from our territory. We have regained a considerable region, previously lost to the hostiles. However, each time we retake ground, we are required to leave a force behind to prevent the enemy from returning to the area and using it as a place it can stage attacks from. We are currently using all the forces at our disposal in both offensive and defensive roles. Could you please assign two additional Fleets to my Command to hold territory we recapture? I believe Theatres One and Two cannot sustain additional transfers; so, I am asking you to divert this help from other relatively nearby resources. Pisces and Eridani Fleet have done an excellent job, for me. They took some losses in the original offensive role they played; but, have taken none in the current duties they conduct. I am looking for help to perform a similar task to the one done by those two Fleets, at the present moment.

Thanks in advance for your assistance. I look forward to seeing you both and all the Quadrant Commanders soon, with good news.

George T. Bryant

All the memos and orders were encrypted and transmitted. It would take three days for documents going to HQ to get there; even with, the improvements in the system. But, he had copied the Theatre Commanders, too. Some were considerably closer and would be able to return a reply in twenty-four hours. Whatever happened, George was prepared to order the next attack. They would jump to the next action and hold it themselves afterward, if they had to. He would

jump to the one after that with three Groups and no reserves; if, that was required to get the job done.

At seven hundred hours, they exited into the next system located at RA four hours thirteen minutes, twenty seconds, declination seven-and-a-quarter degrees at a distance of ninety-two light years from earth. Again, it was somewhat one sided, at first; and, even when the enemy got their bearings they couldn't hit what they couldn't find. The raptors were giving all hell; while the warships would fire and move to fire again. The mayhem within the close battlefield was complicated by the one-on-one dogfights. OESA raptors made short quick moves at forty percent; usually confounding the enemy fighters; while their own sensors could track the opposing vessels in near real-time, at these short distances. For the second time, Bryant eyed a sight he had never seen in all his duty time in space. So many ships turned into fusion balls at the same time that, even the dark vastness of space could not diminish the flare. George was thankful they were watching on screens. Everyone would have been blinded had they viewed this live without heavy welding type glasses. A short while later, he realized seven vessels had exploded in the same instance, by their burnt out carcasses and the flotsam left behind. In short order, another eight rival warships were extinguished; and, the enemy Fleet jumped out. Grace ordered two groups to visit four surrounding systems; while Columbia mopped up. It was six hours later when they returned reporting having expelled three squads from the four systems. By the following morning the mop-up was complete.

At eight hundred hours on March 14, George received memos from two Fleet Commanders.

Memo

Date: March 14, 2249

To: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

From: V. Admiral Azul Cielo Commander Gemini Fleet

Cc: Theatre Three Command, Quadrant 2 Command, C&C

Admiral,

Thank goodness we have already enabled the new communications system. I received your request for help a few moments ago. I am currently located at Hip 35265 (Gemini). Position is RA 07 17 09.532 Dec. +33 05 31.39 at 89 Ly. Commander Theatre Three has

advised us to participate, if needed. Can be there in five days nine hours at forty percent. I will relieve whoever you have left in the systems Boots occupies with Gemini Groups and will follow your Fleet to your next location. We are happy to protect your advances. Leaving now for your current location.

Azul Cielo

Memo

Date: March 14, 2249

To: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

From: V. Admiral Naabaahii Commander Orion Fleet

Cc: Theatre Four Command, Quadrant 2 Command, C&C

Sir,

When we engaged our new communication system, we received your request for help. The chart you attached leads me to believe I can be of assistance to your Draco Fleet. We were advised by Theatre Four Command to respond to any request for help you may generate. We are currently positioned at Beta Eridani. Location of this system is RA 5h: 7m: 50.98s Dec - 5 deg.: 5m: 11.2s. Distance 89 Ly to Earth. This puts us 39 Ly. from Draco at current position. We will relieve current Group and follow to Draco's next location. We all want to help. We're excited about your progress. Commander authorized 40% if you called for help. We will meet Draco Group in four days eighteen hours.

Naabaahii

That was the turning point. He would advise Boots and Draco to leave their reserve Groups at their current positions and start for the next target.

By March 21 both Fleets had cleared their next targets and were up to full strength with the additional support to hold captured ground. They were receiving steady reports from both Quadrant One Theatre Commands of widespread victories along the main front. Nearly a thousand enemy vessels had been destroyed over the entire war zone. The next morning the enemy started jumping out. But, they still had not found the one invader they wanted; so, George went to the system, again.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0039

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: All Fleets engaged in action to repel invading force

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

March 22, 2249

Commanders,

It is imperative that, all our forces endeavor to prevent any further retreat by our enemy. We need to meet with the leader of this attack. By meeting someone in the major Command Chain, we may be able to prevent another attack! It appears, we have won this encounter; but, we do not relish the idea of another.

Please prevent any further enemy jumps; until, these vessels have been boarded and checked out thoroughly. They may leave when your Fleet Commanders are sure they do not contain the leadership.

Admiral George T. Bryant Commanding Mobile 5th Command

George had asked Marie to visit the prisoners in the Brigg of the Columbia, way back on March 14, when seventeen were transferred there. She had spent considerable time with them. She had commented on the bad temperament, complete absence of any kind of manners or etiquette and their obvious lack of hygiene. But they had spoken too little to give her insight about their psychology. Now, he made it official by calling her into his office.

"Marie, have you found out anything about what makes these Neanderthals tick?" He asked.

"Yes, but it took me a long time. First, they didn't talk. When they did, the translator interpreted nothing but insults and curse words. Can you imagine that, they have twenty-two different words to call someone a coward? And they have thirty-seven words for honor. First of all, they're a warrior culture. They believe that to die in battle is the ultimate. They have no moral, ethical or religious code that I can detect; so, the more viciously they kill you the better. That's why all the hand weapons. They like to do it up close and personal. They believe in honor. You give a person a fair chance to defend themselves; then, you kill them. They wouldn't kill a helpless infant or an old woman. But their honor is kind of warped. It doesn't matter if they pick a weaker opponent. In fact, they look for weakness. Then, they attack and kill and brag about it in the stories they pass on as if it was some great warrior feat. They only respect force and

power. If you met one and smacked him in the head, he would respect you; if, he sensed you could back that up. However, if you did that and couldn't prevail, he would be insulted and kill you, on the spot. It's a weird culture. Oh yeah, I almost forgot that, during conversations, they spoke of superior and inferior levels to their own rank. I prepared a chart with their name of rank and its comparable in our system. The ranking system is all land based. There are no Air Marshals or Admirals - just Generals. And the other thing is that, I think I know where they came from. I believe they travelled a long way to attack. I think they are from a system we know as Acamar one hundred sixty light years from Earth." She finished.

"Very good report; with, some excellent insights.' George said with a smile. Do you know what ranks we do have down there?" He was referring to the brig.

"We have some enlisted, a couple of Lieutenants, a Captain, two Majors and one that would be a full Colonel in our system." She responded.

"Grace, can you come over to my office." He queried through his communicator.

"Aye, Admiral; I'll be right there." Her voice answered in his ear.

"Reporting as ordered, sir." She said as she came up on his office doorway a minute later.

"I need you to accompany Marie and me to the brig. You will both observe."

Down on the lowest deck where the cells were, Bryant spoke to the young Lieutenant in charge. The young officer had the enemy Colonel moved to an interrogation room. Bryant waited nearly fifteen minutes before going in to ensure the man was seated, when he entered.

George walked in at a brisk pace went directly up to the man and kicked the back of his chair upending the Colonel ass over tea kettle. When the officer tried to rise, he kicked him in the ribs. Then, he let him nearly completely stand when he drove him in the head with a right cross knocking him to the floor again.

"You can keep trying to get up all day; and, I can keep knocking you down. I can do this as long as you can!" He growled in a low voice; then, proceeded to insult the man by finding as many ways as he could to call him and his people cowards. That was the last straw for the Colonel. He came at Bryant low in an attempt to take his legs out from under him. George side stepped and kicked him in the butt as he flew past driving him into the floor on his face. "I was told you think your people are tough. You fight like an old woman." He told the man who turned over, sat on the floor bewildered and asked. "What have I done to you to deserve your wrath, sir?"

The language interpreter had been working overtime echoing each person's words in the other's language.

"Your people attack mine for no reason; then, run from the battle when we fight back. We are insulted by this. You treated us like you thought we were someone weak to take advantage of. Now you leave; when, the fun is just beginning." Bryant responded.

"We leave before our entire defense force is destroyed. There is no point in fighting until one's complete annihilation. There is no honor in stupidity." The other answered as if it was a matter of fact.

"Then, why did you attack us in the first place. You say we were destroying your entire defense force; but, you have only seen a small percentage of our force. It is ludicrous to start a fight with someone so much stronger than you; unless you have some other way to turn the battle." Admiral Bryant responded.

"You say it is a small percentage. We saw hundreds of war ships and thousands of fighters." The colonel's tone was disbelief.

"You saw only a few Fleets from the areas you attacked. There are eight operational commands in our space. You struck in two. They sent a portion of their forces. We could have sent many times the number we did; but, that would not have been a fair fight. The difference between us is that, we don't start fights; but, we study our enemy and win the fights. Our Empire is two hundred light years across with over one hundred member planets that support it. That doesn't include the materials we can acquire from the other fifty-four hundred systems in our territory. How big is your system?" George asked.

"We are an Empire, too. There are three members in our space." The other sounded defeated now.

"What is your name? It would be nice to call you by name." George said.

"I am Colonel Vzirst and I commanded the ship you took me from." The officer responded.

"Vzirst, I am Admiral George Bryant. I command all the forces that were fighting against you." The man seemed to rock on his rump as he shook with shock.

"You are the man in charge?" He asked. "Your battle tactics are remarkable!"

"Yes, I command all the ships, fighters and people that were sent to repel you. And, when I needed more power, I asked; and, my superiors gave it to me. They could have sent more and more ships, fighters and men; if, I asked." He said.

"So there are commanders above you?" Vzirst asked.

"Yes, but just two. They are the men at the top who run our military service together. And we have an Emperor we answer to - like a King. But, I am next in line to them. I have the power to speak for our Empire. And, I would like to speak to someone who can represent your people. Is that possible?" George asked him.

"Yes, but not from here. I would need to be able to speak to him. Our leader is General Yanigg. He knows all his ship's commanders; so, I would be able to talk to him. He is close to where you captured me." The colonel said.

"Maybe, I can arrange that. I don't want to fight your people, anymore. I don't want to annihilate them. Bears do not fight mice." Bryant's last shot was designed to create resignation. He wanted the Colonel so convinced of their power that he would go tell General Yanigg what a stupid mistake they made.

"I will have you returned to your cell with the others. I will call on you again; if, I can find a way to work things out." Bryant said as he rose and left the room with his back to the prisoner all the way.

"Why the hell did you attack him like that?" Grace asked in a hushed gruff tone emphasizing her displeasure.

"Relax Admiral; You explain it, Marie." He turned to his wife.

"It was absolutely necessary. It's the only interaction our Colonel in there understands. And, don't worry about him. They probably treat each other that way in normal conversation - kind a like a greeting. It's a societal thing we picked up during interrogations. It's how they impress each other. Spend a little time watching him when he's back in the cell. He will get great pleasure recounting this tale. George used his attack as a means of gaining the man's attention and respect; and, showing him he was someone worth listening to. I dare say that, this one officer's measure of us has risen thirty percent, after that. And, he will influence others. George got more information from him in half an hour than we got in two weeks." Marie was chuckling.

"So, how do they view women?" Grace asked.

"Entirely the opposite to men. It's archaic by our standards. A woman is a sexual object. And, they have been in space long enough to look at the females of different species comparatively. I could sense his sexual attraction to me. In fact, that's why he told me as much as he did. His view of our society was quite low, though; because I am in a position of authority. A

woman's place is in the home - barefoot - with baby at her breast - making dinner for her man - the king of their castle, in their society. So, when Admiral Bryant kicked the snot out of the Colonel, on top of our service thumping the crap out of theirs, his rating of our Empire went way up." Marie finished.

"I think I've seen everything now. It's like looking in on Earth six centuries ago. Anyway, remind me not to get Admiral Bryant really angry, in the future.' She said as she broke into a real belly laugh. 'That poor bugger didn't know what hit him.'" She managed through moments of eye tearing, suffocating laughter.

"Colonel Vzirst is my new best friend." George said through his own laughter as he noticed the tears now streaming down Marie's cheeks.

"Admiral Tonaka, can you notify your Task Force and Group Commanders to meet in my office, right away?" George asked.

He dropped Marie off at her office, on the way to his; arriving before the others. George went immediately to his system.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0041

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Boots Fleet Commander, Draco Fleet Commander, Pisces Fleet Commander, Eridani Fleet Commander

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: March 23, 2249

Commanders,

We urgently seek discussion with General Yanigg, the leader of all enemy forces in our territory. I have strong intelligence that leads me to believe that, this man is in our space. Use all means, at hand, to prevent any further enemy vessels from leaving the region. I believe his is in one of the forty-one systems retaken and held by our forces. Discourse with this person is imperative if we wish to prevent additional future hostilities between our two Empires. An information memo and video will follow.

Admiral George T. Bryant Commanding Mobile 5th Command

Memo

To: *Boots Fleet Commander, Draco Fleet Commander, Pisces Fleet Commander, Eridani Fleet Commander*

From: *Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth Command*

Cc: *Theatre Four Command, Quadrant 2 Command, C&C*

Re: *Video Attachment*

Date: *March 23, 2249*

Commanders,

Some recent events have given us new insight in dealing with the species that recently attacked our Empire and is still parked in regions we control. This is a warrior species that holds great contempt for any other, until proven otherwise. They view strength with respect. The attached video presentation will present the only method that can be employed to achieve meaningful discourse with these people. You will note the quiet friendly conversation that occurs, after the distasteful opening sequence.

George T. Bryant

George attached the video log recorded during the Colonel's questioning in the interrogation room.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0042

CLASSIFIED

From: *Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command*

To: *Commanders - all fleets supporting Fifth Mobile not included in TAM - FM49-0041*

C.C. *OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command*

Date: *March 23, 2249*

Commanders,

You may permit all enemy forces in areas outside the main counter attack battle zone to depart from our territory. We have solid intelligence leading us to believe that General Yanigg, the leader of all enemy forces is located in the regions now controlled by the fleets directly participating in the counter attack.

Keep Mobile Fifth apprised of the status of enemy forces, in your region; so, we can release you to normal duty, at the earliest possible moment, for the safety of the Empire.

Admiral George T. Bryant Commanding Mobile 5th Command

George heard the system enunciators of data pads and looked up to see all of Boots senior officers, outside his door. He waved them in, with a "Take a seat." to eliminate any formalities; and activated his office camera to record this session.

"I wanted to talk to all of you about the mail you all just received.' Bryant said; then went on kind of quietly. " I just wish the Draco Command was with us for this meeting. Anyway, the video has a somewhat distasteful beginning. And, I am sorry you have to see me act in such a fashion. But, watch it to the end. You will see the results I get. Also refer to the counseling directive on dealing with our enemy personally. It explains more. The point I want to make is that we need to capture this General Yanigg. We need him treated rather harshly, when we get him; but, once we've gained his respect, we need to show him respect, too. When we capture him, I need him dealt with by only those who can handle the situation the way you see it handled in the video. If someone cannot do it, they should not be making the initial capture or contact.

What I am trying to accomplish here is a face - to - face with this man; where, I can convince him it is not particularly wise or efficient for his people to look at territorial gains in our Empire. It appears they are a relatively small Empire; and, it will take them some time to rebuild their military force. But I don't want them thinking they can just do this again. I hope I've made myself clear to all of you. I want this man; and, he needs to be handled correctly. If there is a rights issue that develops over this, I will take the heat. I am recording this session to send on to Draco; and, for your protection. I will send you all a copy of this; so, you have proof you were ordered to conduct these affairs in this manner for tactical and strategic reasons.

They sat in the system for another ten days receiving continual reports of enemy Fleets and independent vessels jumping out. In each case their vortices were traced back to the same system one hundred sixty light years from Sol. There was no doubt about it; the invasion was over. The twenty-four groups of the six fleets now involved in patrolling the recaptured territory continued to block the formation of enemy jump wormholes. This is relatively easy to do. Sensing the building field is a simple matter. Once a disturbance develops that will form the wormhole, you simply fire a low yield weapon into its center to throw it out of balance. That region stays so unbalanced for the next several hours that; the vessel would have to move away from it to try again. It was Monday April 29, 2249, when George received word that an enemy formation indicated they wanted to parley. Two and a half hours later, he received word from the Group in the first system Boots had cleared that they believed they had General Yanigg. They sent a video

of the individual's initial interrogation. George was astounded. It was Arian Bicell the Commander of Pisces Fleet doing a perfect impression of George's interrogation. By the end of the recording, the two were on respectful terms with each other.

It was a nearly thirty-three light year jump. George had to decide who should make the jump. A few things weighed into the decision. He needed to keep all reacquired holdings secure; until he was sure they were cleared of all enemy. But, he needed to keep the General's Flotilla in place; so, he had a way home. He made his decision and composed the orders.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0048

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Arian Bicell Commander Pisces Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: April 29, 2249

Commander,

It is imperative that I speak directly to your prisoner. Please have him advise his people he will be attending meetings with the Commander of the opposing forces; and that, two ships may stay to return him home; but all others must leave Orion Empire Space. Move the prisoner to the brig of one of your frigates which is to make best speed to our location. This prisoner is to be treated with respect, at all times.

The balance of the Norway Group, at your current location, should remain there to monitor the remaining vessels; until, they leave with the General; or, you receive other orders from this office. A subsequent TAM will deal with the balance of your Fleet.

Admiral George T. Bryant.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0049

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Vice Admiral Kura Neko Commander Eridani Fleet, Vice Admiral Arian Bicell Commander Pisces Fleet, Vice Admiral Palakiko Commander Draco Fleet,

Vice Admiral Grace Tonaka Commander Boots Fleet

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Command

Date: April 29, 2249

Commanders,

Please advise your groups to ensure all enemy forces have left the area they currently patrol. Once they have confirmed this, all Groups except those referred to in TAM FM49-0048 should jump to Mobile Fifth position, at best speed.

Admiral George T. Bryant.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-0050

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: All Fleet Commanders in support of Mobile Fifth Counter- Attack

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA Quadrant 1 Commander

Date: April 29, 2249

Commanders,

Please advise your groups to ensure all enemy forces have left the area they currently patrol. Once they have confirmed this, all Groups except the one referred to in TAM FM49-0048 and TAM FM49-0049 should notify their originating Theatre Commands that, they are ready to resume normal duties and hold position for receipt of orders.

Admiral George T. Bryant.

Memo

To: All Fleet Commanders currently attached to Mobile Fifth Command, all Fleet Commanders currently directing operations in support of Mobile Fifth Command

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth Command

Cc: Theatre 1 Commander, Theatre 2 Commander, Theatre 3 Commander, Quadrant 1 Commander, Quadrant 2 Commander, OESA C&C, Secretary of Defense, Emperor Edward III

Date: April 29, 2249

Commanders,

Because of your outstanding support and the brave actions of many people within your commands the counter-attack to end the invasion of our territories has been successful. Several supporting Fleets have been released to regular duty. I know that you will all need some time to reflect on the losses you have experienced; but, try to take solace in the fact that together, we repelled the most powerful attack ever launched against our Empire. Though the fighting is essentially over, there are still a few issues to resolve. It will take two to three additional weeks before everyone is back to where they should be; except those who paid the ultimate price.

I would like to thank the team that participated in formulating such a complete strategic philosophy; and, the largest, most coordinated and most complicated tactical plan ever executed in the history of the Orion Empire. I would also like to thank those Fleet, Task Force and Group Commanders who executed it so precisely. Most importantly, I would like to thank all the Officers and enlisted personnel working under those commands for giving us one hundred percent of their motivation, energy and expertise, one hundred percent of the time. Though, I have not spoken directly to them, regarding this, I know I am expressing the sentiments of the Theatre, Quadrant and OESA Commands and Emperor Edward III. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

George T. Bryant

.....

The Frigate Beijing jumped into the large nest of vessels now accompanying the Columbia, still the flag ship of the Fifth Mobile Command, on Wednesday May 2, 2249. Columbia Group had been joined by the rest of Boots Fleet and some other Groups from Pisces, Eridani and Draco Fleets. The rest were due to arrive within the next three days.

The Beijing carried General Yanigg the commander of the force that invaded OESA space. Its Captain requested orders. Through his Chief of Staff, Bryant ordered them to transfer the prisoner to the brig of the Columbia. He had already arranged with General Malcolm that the General would be the cell mate of Colonel Vzirst before being moved to an interrogation room with Admiral Bryant. He was about to direct his system to feed the cell monitor to him, when the system chime sounded. It was mail from headquarters; which, he decrypted immediately.

Memo

To: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile

From: OESA C&C

Cc: All Quadrant Commanders, All Theatre Commanders, All Fleet Commanders, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister, Emperor Edward III

Date: May1, 2249

Admiral Bryant,

We would like to thank you for expressing the sentiments we do feel to the people of your Command so eloquently. We would also like to thank you for the successful completion of the most serious action our Empire has ever faced.

The threat you repelled, the assets required and the method used has us all looking at options. Please prepare a proposal outlining what you think would be required for the permanent placement of a Rapid Action Command like Mobile Fifth. We would like to meet with you to discuss this proposal, at your earliest convenience, after outstanding issues pertaining to the recent attack are resolved by you.

In the meantime, your Assignment will be continued indefinitely pending this discussion.

Please do not release Pisces, Eridani, Boots or Draco Fleets from Mobile Fifth Command. This Command will be continued, at least until, after our discussions. You are ordered and required to remain in Command of the Mobile Fifth Command, until further notice.

Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral David Williamson OESA C&C

George checked to see exactly which Groups were in proximity of the Columbia. To his surprise, all Fleet Flag ships were present. He notified the Fleet Commanders to meet in his office at fifteen hundred hours. Then, he called Moe to the office.

"I want you to read this." He handed his data pad to his Chief.

There was silence followed by a strange noise from Moe.

"Sorry Admiral. We can't whistle. That's our way of expressing amazement. It looks like Mobile Fifth will be permanent.

"Yes it does Moe; and, I need you to do some of your marvelous magic. I envision the new Command as the Fifth Quadrant Command with two Theatres and sixteen full Fleets. I also see it

with additional autonomous vessels unattached to any Fleet that can go anywhere, at any time, at the bidding of their Theatre Commands. The big problem with Fifth Mobile is the Mobile. We would need a moving station we can take anywhere to operate as a Command Centre. The problem is size. We cannot use a standard Carrier; because, they will not handle a Quadrant Command Staff. The Theatres have to be mobile, too; and must be able to hold their Command staffs, also. All three need to be able to support their Fleets; so they need to be massive storage hubs that can distribute supplies, weapons and ammunition to their subordinate Commands. The Mobile Command and its Theatres will each need support vessels of their own. They will need provisioning vessels that run between the stations and our planetary logistics centers. Each will need a four-ship flotilla that can defend the mobile base. Each Theatre Command requires a full mobile hospital. Then, there is the Marine Command. At Theatre Level it'll be a Corps. At Quadrant Level, it's a full Army. Theatre Commands run lean. They generally have management staffs of between forty-five hundred and five thousand; while, the Quadrant would normally need between fourteen and fifteen thousand to meet all personnel demands in their subordinate Commands. However, we're going to have to find a way to adapt to run with a staff of no more than five thousand to fit the mobile structure. In effect, you're increasing the OESA by more than twenty-five percent of its current size; but, you're effectively doubling its strength from outside attack. This is because without it attached to any specific sector, Mobile Fifth can move in its entirety to wherever a threat is. That means the full Quadrant Command and Mobile Fifth is in a region to handle a threat. Between engagements, it would be used to patrol regions at its discretion giving the constant appearance of strength throughout the Empire.

What I need from you is a full proposal for the C&C based on that vision. I need objectives, proposed schedules, proposed command structure, proposed acquisitions, projected capital expenditures, staff requirements at all levels and functions, projected annual budgets for the first five years of operation, implementation costs; and expected benefits to the Empire; as, this entity grows. You need to use this last battle, as much as possible. We need to show how much help we had to draw; and, when, the proposed Mobile Fifth would be able to handle the entire operation, alone. I need it to be polished, elegant, attractive and finished by May 16. Can you do it?" He asked his Chief.

"It sounds impossible, sir; but, I'll find a way." Moe responded enthusiastically.

"Moe, this means a promotion to you from this temporary level. I would be a level eleven Admiral. You would be promoted to Vice Admiral. No one deserves it more. That is; if, you want the job." Bryant said.

"Sir, when I was a ship's Captain, not so long ago, I would have said no. But, having done a similar job for quite a while, now, I will accept without reservation.' The Rear Admiral replied. 'I better get going. I have a lot of work to do; if, you'll excuse me Admiral?" He added.

"Moe, you're going to get fired before you start; if, you don't start calling me George, when we're alone. Dismissed!" Bryant said with a laugh as the Chief turned and left the office.

George knew this would be a big chunk for the upper echelon to swallow. They were probably thinking a bit smaller. From this most recent experience, he knew that, the proposal was really what the Empire needed. Mobile Fifth would be able to answer an attack anywhere in the Empire, from where ever they were, in three weeks or less, with an irresistible force. He had a lot of work to do on his own. If the plan was accepted, he would need a full chain of command; and, he'd need it quickly. You could grow into some things; but, to have the ability to perform all the actions required to complete the task would take a formidable command structure and staff, from the very beginning.

He sent the memo to Marie; then, contacted Malcolm, Marie and Grace to join him at the Brig station on the first deck.

"I need you all to keep an eye; while, I'm in the interrogation room. It's imperative that, I get your thoughts on this guy, after." George said as he turned and marched into the interrogation room.

The two prisoners began a rise to their feet.

"Sit your asses down in the chair before I decide to kick the hell out of you both!" He roared with his face set in anger. There was low mumbling between the two that the interpreter could not pick up. Both sat down.

"My colonel tells me you are an honorable man. There is no need for violence." The General said quite meekly, for a warrior.

"Don't tell me how I can act. I'll decide how to handle things here.' George hollered. 'I'm trying to decide whether or not to have you executed for what you did to my people. Why did you attack us?" George was extremely forceful; but, no longer yelling.

"We attacked on orders from our Emperor and ruling counsel. We did not know how strong your Empire is. We would not even have attempted such a thing had we known." The general said in earnest.

"What is your name, sir? I need to call you something other than a fool! Only a fool would attack without knowing the strength of his enemy. It is a sure road to defeat or complete annihilation." George growled.

"I am General Yanigg, Commander of our Defense Force.' He answered. 'I alone am the one you should execute. I am responsible for this war.'" He added.

"I told you that, I would make the decisions, here. Do not tell me who to execute and who should live. If I want to end every one of your people left in our space; that is my prerogative.' Bryant was growling again. 'I want to show you something. Come with me'" He finished as he rose from his seat and turned to the door.

"Come with us.' George said to the rest of his party as he came through the interrogation room door. 'We do not need a guard, Malcolm. I have no fear of these men. We would kill them where they stand if they tried anything, anyway. Activate a mobile translator, please.'" He finished, still in the doorway; so the interpreter would translate his words.

They marched silently through the corridors, up the elevators and onto the Flag Bridge.

"Look!" He said pointing out the observation window. "That is only half the force we used in this region. The rest are on the way. They will all be here in two days. We used a similar sized armada at the battle front and another to run our diversions. And all those ships are less than a quarter of our total capacity. Should I order them all to head to your home planet and finish this for good?" He asked quietly.

"I cannot tell you what you should do, sir. You have made that clear. But, I will ask that you do not. We are not a match for your Empire. We know that, now. I can only assure you that, we would never attack you again." The General was speaking quietly, now.

"General Yanigg do your people have treaties with other people?" Bryant asked.

"What is a treaty? General Yanigg asked.

"When you conduct business between each other, like when someone buys land from someone else, do you sign an agreement; promising to carry out your part of the deal?" Bryant asked.

"Yes sir, we sign contracts that make a deal official. Why do you ask?" The General responded.

"Because a treaty is an agreement between two Empires. Some are contracts where they agree to not attack each other. Others make it easier to conduct trade. Some make your neighbors your allies in battle. Would you be prepared to sign a treaty? Would you sign a contract that guarantees you would never attack us or our allies and trading partners again? A contract that would establish a zone near our territory where you are not allowed to travel without permission from our government. I believe you are an honorable man; and, would not break your signed agreement. If your people would sign such an agreement, I would let you and all your people return home; and, we would not attack your world. I would prefer to consider you a friend. Peace is more honorable than war if it is good for both sides." The Admiral finished.

There was a considerable silence.

"May I speak with my subordinate alone, for a few minutes?" Yanigg asked politely.

"Yes sir, we will stand over there and turn off our translators. Wave when you want me to return." Bryant responded.

The two alien officers spent several minutes in animated conversation. Bryant knew from body language and gestures that Yanigg was asking Vzirst's opinion. They waved Bryant and his team back.

"Yes sir. My associate believes it would be honorable to make such an agreement. He says you have proven to be an honorable man. He would trust such an agreement made with you." The General answered.

"General, do you have authority to sign such an agreement, for your people?" George asked.

"I would have to get approval from my superiors, first. If we can communicate with them, I could get that. I am quite sure they would accept my conclusions in this matter. Once I have the approval, my signature would carry the authority of our Emperor. Can you sign this *treaty*?" He was having a little trouble getting his head around the word.

"Sir, I can sign the agreement without approval from anyone else. Our Emperor designates certain people to make these agreements with other worlds and empires. I am one of them. I would like you to be my guest aboard this ship while we wait for approval from your Emperor. Most of your force has been sent home; but, some have been held, here. We can have one

communicate your message. From here, it would take nearly twelve days for the message to get to your world. They would need a day or two to discuss your proposal. Then, it would take another twelve days for the return message. You could stay here for that time as our guest; or, we could let you return to one of your ships for that time. However, we would not let your ships leave our space; until, we know what the response is. Once we have an answer, we would let you leave; whatever it is. But, we would probably see each other again when we attack; if, your government refuses this offer." George explained.

"I understand; that would be satisfactory. But, I would like to stay aboard one of my ships where I will get the food I like." The general answered.

"That's fine. The two ships we held are in another system. It will take three days to get them here. In the meantime, you will be our guest. I will allow you to spend some time with our chef; so, you can describe some foods for him. He will try and make you foods similar to the ones you eat now. You will be allowed to travel through this ship; but, there are areas you will be restricted from; and, at least one of our people will accompany you, at all times; including security outside the door of your quarters. And during the time you are with us; or, on your own ship, we may have to move. We have other duties to attend. But, I caution you; if, one of your vessels attempts to direct a travel route towards your home, before we have your Emperor's answer, we will stop or destroy it. Do you understand my terms?" Admiral Bryant asked.

"Yes sir, and I agree to them. Consider this a contract. You can be assured we will not try to leave; and, we will respect your wishes; until, we are allowed to leave." Yanigg answered.

"Good, then let's begin our new relationship properly. We have not been introduced. I am Admiral George T. Bryant. I command a fairly large group of Fleets of warships. My immediate supervisors are the Commanders of our entire Military and our Emperor. Our empire contains more than five thousand worlds. Just over one hundred of those worlds are inhabited by humanoids similar to us that are members of the ruling counsel of the Empire. However, the Emperor has the final say in any matter. Our defense service is called the OESA which stands for Orion Empire Space Agency. We have sixty-four fleets of twenty-eight of these large war ships you have seen supported by two hundred and fifty-six large supply vessels. We are distributed into four quadrant commands with two theatre commands in each quadrant. Each theatre Command holds eight of the fleets and has its own station and support vessels including a hospital ship. My command is known as the Mobile Fifth Command and is in addition to those

quadrant commands and is structured like a separate one that can rapidly move to any location to fight any invader. This force is incomplete, at this time; but, will have two theatre commands with eight fleets each, sixty-four supply vessels; and, two hospital vessels. In addition, each theatre will have an additional twelve vessels not attached to fleets that can travel through the empire dealing with smaller issues by themselves. Each fleet can launch four hundred fighter craft. So, in all, you face more than two-thousand of these large, powerful warships continuously supplied and twenty-six thousand fighters. I tell you this only so you'll understand who we are. But, I repeat that, I would rather be your friend than your enemy. Now tell me about you." George said.

"I am General Yanigg. I am the supreme Commander of our Empire's Defense Force which is responsible for all tactical operations in our Empire. Before this attack, we had twelve-hundred of our raider sized war ships which are much less powerful than your warships. Each raider can launch ten fighters; so, we have twelve thousand fighters. We are supplied by convoys of civilian craft. We have very little supply capability within the service. But, it is not just a numbers game. I see that your force is technologically superior. You can go faster, maneuver better; and you have better command and control because of advanced communications and sensors. I also saw tactics that, I have never seen before. I have learned a lot from my defeat. I also see that you are a people of honor. This is very rare and we respect that above all. I can assure you that, regardless of my Empire, I may not become your friend or ally; but, I will not be your enemy, anymore." The General sounded quite sincere in his pronouncement.

"Follow me to my office.' Bryant commanded as he turned and walked with his party and the two aliens in toe. 'Sit and relax. I can offer you a drink of some beverages that are special on my world. They are powerful and can affect your judgment, if you drink too much; but, they can make you feel very good, too." Bryant offered.

"Yes Admiral, we will try some of these drinks; but, you will have to choose for us. We don't know these drinks." Yanigg answered.

George poured them each two fingers of Cuddy Sark then sat at his desk and contacted Olivia Hurst for officers' quarters for the Colonel and Flag quarters for the General.

"Oh, this is quite good. We have a drink like this on my world. But, this is smokier than ours. We use our drink at celebrations. It eliminates most inhibitions." The General said as he rolled the glass; catching the light in the golden liquid.

A steward and two security people showed up at the door.

"These people will show you to your quarters. The chef will be there soon to speak to you about food. Your quarters are not together and will be on different levels; but, you may visit each other any time you wish. If you want to take meals with others, you may use our dining lounges. We call them mess halls. We have separate ones for General Staff, Officers and enlisted people. You may eat in the General staff or Officers mess halls. We have a barber shop, some stores and a bar on board along with a lot of other services. There is a bar in your quarters with drinks like the ones in my bar. Feel free to try them all, if you want. The steward will show you the devices in your quarters and how to use them. if you want something, else; just ask for it. You will be treated like honored guests." George said as he stood and directed the men towards the door.

When they were gone, he sat with Marie, Grace and Ian discussing their view of what had transpired. They were impressed with his progress. Marie felt the General was being authentic and sincere - that, he really believed the Orion Empire was a strong and honorable society, they could at least tolerate. George dismissed them and sat at his system composing.

Memo

Encrypted and Classified

To: *OESA C&C, Emperor Edward III, Office of the First Minister, Secretary of Defense*

From: *Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth Command*

Cc: *No other copies distributed*

Sub: *Peace Talks*

Date: *May 3, 2249*

All,

I am pleased to inform you that, discussions with the enemy whose attack we recently repelled are making positive progress. Our impression here is that their warrior caste society attacked for little more than the glory of winning another war; and, subjugating another people. Though quite intelligent, tactically capable and technologically advanced, they seem to have been poorly prepared for what they faced in the endeavor. They knew little or nothing about us; did little if any intelligence preparation; and, had not even determined the size or strength of the enemy they would face.

Though they took a fool hardy course, they seem to be a people who are honorable and can be trusted to keep their word. The leader of the attack - General Yanigg - has sent communications to his Emperor requesting the approval to negotiate a peace treaty. In the meantime, we are still holding prisoners in our brigs. We have made the General and a subordinate Colonel our "guests" aboard the Columbia. We have detained a few enemy vessels, in our region for tactical reasons; though, all others have been cleared from Orion Empire space.

Communications with General Yanigg's superiors is delayed by distance. Messages must travel sixty-five light years each way, by drone. In the meantime, the General and I will begin treaty discussions in the hope of having a document ready, when his authorization arrives. My goal here is just to keep them at a distance from our space. They are essentially aggressive by nature; so, it is possible a change in leadership could create the conditions for a future attack. However, they pride themselves in their honor and believe it dishonorable to break a promise or contract; so, I believe a treaty is the means to keep them in check through future generations. To achieve our treaty objective, we will obtain agreement from them not to trespass in our, or our allies' territory. Further to that, we will establish a buffer zone outside our territory which will secure our border and our trading partners. This enemy appears to be a very proud species; so, I do not believe we should attempt to extract reparations. I believe that any such penalties would serve to belittle them; and, would result in termination of our treaty sometime in the future.

We must be prepared to demonstrate that, we would back such a treaty with force. I have stressed that it is only through our good will that we do not attack and disable their offensive capabilities permanently. In that light, it would be a wise idea to negotiate defense and non-aggression pacts, with our partners; with, the aim of holding large joint military exercises outside our borders, as a demonstration and constant reminder of our strength.

I believe any treaty with this enemy should be concise and simple not including any other goals but peace, non-aggression and prevention of trespass.

During the period of negotiations, I am holding all Mobile Fifth Fleets at this location. Such a show of force seems to impress this enemy and serves as a constant reminder during peace talks; so, I intend to conduct war games and maneuvers in this region, during negotiations.

I estimate the treaty will be signed on or before May 25, 2249.

In response to your memo of May 1, 2249, I will be available for the requested meeting no earlier than Thursday May 31, 2249 due to the aforementioned treaty negotiations and travel times.

During the period of the war just ended, I attempted to keep you apprised of actions, as they occurred by copying you on all Action Orders and Memos and doubling the daily reports. I am sure you are aware that all parties in Mobile Fifth Command and additional supporting forces acted with the greatest courage and in the interests of the Empire. Many thousands of OESA personnel died or were injured in this endeavor. I would like to propose a memorial event in their honor. The size, scope and date of this event should be determined by your offices. It must also be obvious that, many of the Fifth's personnel distinguished themselves. I am preparing warrants for Command Level Awards to many of those. However, a special few distinguished themselves at an intensity that should be recognized at a higher level. In that light, I will prepare recommendations for OESA merits and Imperial awards.

I remain your loyal servant and friend.

George T. Bryant

By May 6, 2249, all ships in the Fifth's Fleets were in station alongside the Columbia. As a reinforcement to his earlier show of power, George conducted a small demonstration for the benefit of his enemy counterpart. As they stood at the viewport in his office looking out over the Armada, one of the subs momentarily disengaged its cloak; shocking the enemy commander. This was made to appear just a matter of normal Fleet activities.

"Admiral, it appears you have invisible ships, too." The General said.

"No sir, they are not invisible. They use a technology called cloaking shields to hide them. They essentially project point by point image of the space around them one hundred and eighty degrees out of phase. From any point around them or above and below, they appear to be invisible. There are four of these ships in every fleet. We do not usually show them or discuss them. It was an accident that this one appeared. The commander of that ship will now spend several hours moving about under cloak to ensure his position is secure. Those vessels are armed with a host of missiles and torpedoes. They have particle weapons, too; but, never use them under cloak. The particle stream would give their positions away." Bryant responded.

"Most impressive! Most impressive." The admiration in the General's voice was apparent even in the translator version.

The last group to join the buildup was the one escorting the enemy vessels. They were dwarfed by the OESA frigates that secured their positions. It was another demonstration of the differences in the two forces.

During the subsequent weeks Bryant prepared his list of merit nominees. He worked on his list of the people he would be comfortable within his immediate command chain who were qualified. Moe trod between offices continually seeking counsel on the presentation he was preparing. Bryant, Yanigg and their supporting staffs met regularly. On the twenty second, a single incoming enemy vortex was detected. The exit aperture was quickly surrounded. Everyone stood down when its intentions were clear and it was escorted to a berth near the Columbia. A shuttle left the craft and docked at Columbia's docking port one. It held the message from the enemy leadership. Their tone indicated they were somewhat apprehensive about retribution from such a powerful foe and were anxious to prevent an attack. They approved the General's request to negotiate the treaty. Over the three weeks the two men had already reached a straight forward simple agreement. The enemy knew itself as the Spiel; and, they would not be permitted into space within one hundred and twenty light years surrounding Sol; unless with prior approval; unless, the vessel was a diplomatic one certified as such by the Orion Empire. Both parties agreed not to engage in provocative or belligerent behavior towards each other; or, their allies and trading partners. A diplomatic chain was to be created in both Empires with officials stationed in either's territories as a means to maintain discussions and reduce the chance of misunderstanding. Lists of allies and trading partners were imbedded in the agreement. By May 23, 2249, the agreement was signed and sealed and the peace was official.

"Sir, you and your ships are welcome to leave, at any time. We have released all prisoners of war to your vessels over these past weeks. However, if you would like to stay two more days, we are holding a celebration tomorrow night. We are not celebrating a victory; because, we do not celebrate war. We are celebrating the bravery of our personnel and the peace we established here today. Would you and your people like to attend the party. It will be held throughout the entire command. Two of the large carriers in each Fleet will host celebrations. There will actually be two parties that day. The first will start at eighteen hundred hours to twenty-four hundred; and the second will run from zero hours to four hundred thirty in the morning. This is

so nearly everyone in the command can attend. There will be food, drink, music and a lot of fun. Your people can attend either party that their duties permit, if you permit it and if they want to attend." The Admiral extended the invitation with genuine warmth.

"We have become very good at negotiating Admiral. There are two things we would want; if, we are to attend your celebration. I am impressed with your kitchens. They took great pains to prepare our foods; and, were very successful at it. They also prepared some of your foods that were very good. We would ask that, your celebration includes some of our dishes; and, some of the wonderful delicacies of your world. Especially pancakes and maple syrup. They are amazing. My second demand is that we be allowed to transport some of our special beverages to the ships we will attend. You may wish to try them. We have many you would like. One is much like your Cuddy Sark. Another is like your Cognac. But, ours are just a little stronger than yours." He finished with a great belly laugh.

"I agree to your demands. I am just making all the arrangements and sending out all the notices. You will be notified officially in a little while. Thank you for staying with us and attending." The Admiral responded with a laugh.

Chapter 13 The Fifth RAC Forever

May 31, 2249

“It is no use saying, 'We are doing our best.' You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary.” Winston Churchill

At fourteen hundred, on Thursday May 31, 2249, eighty exit apertures appeared in the space outside the Kentaurus system and the entire Mobile Fifth exited and coasted towards orbital positions around Rigil executing orbit burns placing them in a tight formation in synchronous orbit around the planet. George reported in for Mobile Fifth, first. Then each Fleet Commander reported in listing all the ships in their Command. Headquarters welcomed them and ordered George to report to the C&C by fifteen thirty. That gave him time to shuttle down and spend a few minutes with Bill Stephenson, first.

"Admiral!" He was at attention as he stood in the doorway.

"Get the hell in here and relax. You don't have to stand on ceremony, my boy. You are an Admiral, too; you know?" Stephenson said with a raucous laugh.

"Technically, you still outrank me Bill. I have a ten on my collar. You wear eleven. So, you see, I have to suck up to you." George responded with a smirk.

"Bullshit. We should all be on our knees to you, my boy. You pulled our pants back up. This whole event has been an embarrassment to the OESA in some respects. You've been the only bright light in the whole thing." Bill said.

"Not the only one, sir. Thousands served with me and thousands died." George responded.

"I know; I know, my boy; but, without you, none of it was possible. Your press contingent did an excellent job, by the way. That proposal the bigwigs want from you better be good. They'll give you anything you want, right now! I think the Secretary of Defense would kiss your bare ass on top of the Assembly building, in broad daylight, with the Press Corps present; if, you demanded it. Over five hundred billion citizens believe the OESA is George T.

Bryant!" Stephenson's enthusiasm was overwhelming. 'Oh sorry George, would you like a drink?" He added.

"Just a water, if you don't mind, Bill. I have a meeting with the C&C, shortly. I want to have a clear head. We had a hell of a celebration, after the signing. It's been nearly a week; but, I think I'm still recovering." George replied.

"Yeah, I get it. You should have seen the celebration, here. I bet there's no champagne left anywhere in the Empire." Stephenson said with a laugh.

They sat and talked for another ten minutes; before, Bryant excused himself and headed over to the C&C side of the top floor.

"Admiral George Bryant reporting, as ordered, sirs." He said to both men who were in Dickinson's office, as had been prearranged.

"Relax George and take a seat.' David said. 'That was one hell of a job you did. Your reports were always concise; but, it was the press that really radiated the intensity of the situation through the entire Empire. It was a tough job and you did it well. I'm not sure any other man in our territory could have accomplished it.'" He observed.

"I must add my congratulations and admiration. You did a marvelous job. We are all in awe. What amazes me is how short a time you took to deal with such a strong invasion, over such a wide area. It seemed like you had your fingers on all the thousands of control buttons at the same time.' Brian added. 'Would you like a drink, George?" He added.

"No sir. I'm fine for now. But, can I take a rain check?" Bryant asked and received a nod.

"Did you prepare a proposal, George? David asked.

"Yes sir, and I'll send the data version to your system. But, I have it here in hard copy; because it is detailed and lengthy. That makes it hard to study on a system.' George said as he dropped the six hundred page bound proposal on Brian's desk. 'I think that is the most paper I've seen in one place in my entire life.'" He added.

David pulled his chair around; so he was sitting within eyeshot as Brian leafed through the book.

"I can see it's impressive. You probably make your case very well; but can you give us the condensed version verbally?" David asked.

"Of course, sir. It'll take about an hour; if, you have that much time now. And I'll need to tie my pad to your system; so, we can display some relevant graphics, if that's okay, sir." Bryant added.

"Use what you need, George. And, I can tell you that, both our schedules are clear for the day. The Emperor and First Minister cleared their schedules, too. They want to be called in when we think the time is right. They are both here at headquarters." Brian said.

"I think they should come in, now, Admirals. The proposal is extensive and costly; but, it's based on experience; so, I believe it is necessary. It would be wise if they hear it all. If you like it, we will need to present a unified front. Besides, I think I can sell it to them if they can hear it from me." Bryant said.

"Okay, George. It'll take a few minutes to get them here. Do you want to take a break before we start - you know - use a washroom - get a drink?" David's tone had concern. 'I know this a lot to ask so soon after what you've been through.' He added.

"That's a great idea, sir." George said and rose to head into Dickinson in-suite. When he returned, he poured a black coffee from the insulated carafe and placed it beside his seat. By then, it was time to greet the Emperor and First Minister who had appeared. He detected a note of near awe towards him; as if, he was their superior.

"Shall we begin?" Dickinson said once the greetings were over, small talk was exchanged and everyone was seated.

"Gentlemen, before I get into the meat of the proposal I want to explain where it's coming from. When you assigned me the task of repelling the invasion, I looked at the size and extent of it and came up with a foggy notion I called Fifth Mobile. It was intended to be a rapid response team that could move about to conduct the actions necessary. But, I knew at the time that, I would need more and more assistance in the endeavor, as the battle progressed. Tactically, to repel an action of that size, you need to place pressure on the battle front while you perform diversionary maneuvers. This all takes the enemy's eye off the points where you will make the real strike. And, in this case the real strike was best conducted as a pincer; so, we could come in at two points and close a loop around a great deal of their forces in the rear; crippling supply lines and reducing reinforcements to a minimum. After that, you keep the pressure on at the front and counter attack slowly reducing the enemy to a meaningless force. But, this all takes a lot of people, hardware and support. You need the forces for the front, the diversion and the counter-attack. At the same time, you need to maintain your own resupply and reinforcement. But, what drains resources the most is that after each successful battle, you must leave forces at the site; so, the enemy won't just return and take it back. I knew at the beginning that; the counter attack would probably take a minimum of six fleets to conduct all its required operations. In addition, I was aware the frontal actions required eight fleets to hold the enemy along the eighty-five light year line we had drawn. Then, I needed the two fleets that conducted the diversion. So, in all,

that was a full Theatre Command. So, I set up Mobile Fifth like a Quadrant; just in case we needed more help. Thus, the name – there are four quadrants; so, ours would be the Fifth such command. If the enemy had not succumbed when it did, we would have needed two more fleets, immediately and two more two weeks later to hold ground we recaptured. So, you see a sizeable force is needed for a Rapid Response force.

Few people consider that, in addition to all those forces, you need to hold a reserve. There are several reasons for it. This additional force presents an immediate resupply of ships and people, to replace losses. It can also be used as an additional force to conduct a secondary diversion or counter-attack to turn a battle you may not be winning. And most important of all, it can be used as a protective force to aid in a withdrawal; if, you get into trouble. An effective reserve should be no smaller than twenty percent of your total assets – one third would be preferred.

Regardless of who actually commands it, I am essentially proposing the creation of a fifth quadrant command. That command would be fully mobile - not based at headquarters. Two theatre commands would accompany it to regions deemed necessary. Its daily job would be to patrol areas of the Empire to temporarily reduce the load on a Quadrant or even two Quadrants at once and to project power in the regions it visits. With the current forces, a region would seem extremely well fortified with the presence of another sixteen fleets. It would also be tasked with parallel diplomatic and planetary assistance duties in support of what is needed in a region. Its specialized operations would be to attend natural disasters and repel invading forces. Its two theatre commands would be structured the same as those in the existing Quadrant Commands; with the exception that, each of those commands would have twelve additional frigates not assigned to Fleets. These vessels would be tasked with autonomously patrolling space within the theatres current field; conducting reconnaissance and support at the captain's discretion; within mission parameters set by theatre command. We would be able to respond to any threat, anywhere within the Empire, from anywhere within the Empire in less than three weeks; including recovery time for long distance jumps. This would allow the remaining OESA to protect and defend the realm as usual. It would take a force that is much more technically advanced than ours; or, that is twice the size of the one we faced before we would need to draw additional help. Essentially, a regional Theatre Command would only have to conduct holding operations; until, we arrived to repel invaders.

I realize it is a considerable investment. Capital expenditures would be about thirteen and a half billion sovereigns over four years. That is equal to about a third of our current capitalized assets. Its operating budget would be in the vicinity of thirty-five billion sovereigns a year; which is slightly less than a current quadrant command. That is because of Staff level efficiencies gained by the configuration we propose. So, the initial investment is somewhat more than a regular Quadrant Command; because, it is mobile and has the additional recon capabilities. But, I believe the war that just ended pinpoints each and every need we are trying to answer in this proposal. And, I feel the costs are justified; because, Fifth Mobile would essentially double our defensive strength for an investment of twenty-five percent of the current force.' George said as he held up the book. 'You will find it presented in more detail than I offered in here. There are projected timelines, capital budget estimates, expenditures and budgets for the first five years, the proposed chain of command and all the information needed to support it. Please, take a good look at it. It's a long read; but, once you've absorbed it all, I think, you will find it reasonable. Does anyone need any questions answered or further explanation?" George finished.

Questions, answers and explanations took another two hours. By the time the meeting was winding down, everyone in the room understood the proposal, its costs and the projected benefits gained by adopting it. It was the First Minister that tipped their hands.

"George, we are not at all surprised by this.' He said as he held up the proposal. ' We've been in countless meetings and discussions about what has happened and have come to similar conclusions. We were not as detailed. You are working from first-hand experience; so, we understood that you would know best. Your proposal is a little grander than we had envisioned; but, it is realistic based on the supporting data you have presented. The council and representatives are very concerned; and, are awaiting some kind of proposal. They all know we need to act. What I think will happen here is that, we will take your proposal and study it for a week. We will have financial people look at the acquisitions, proposed budgets and capital expenditures. We will have logistical people look at the acquisitions and timelines. And, the C&C will look over the tactical assessment and the Chain of Command. It might take us a week; but, it won't be longer. It probably wouldn't take that long; but, the Secretary of Defense could not be here. Her cousin died on the weekend. She is at the funeral, today. So we will need a day or two to apprise her. We may make a few minor changes. That is our prerogative. But, I think in the end, you will see it approved relatively intact. And, though with your usual humility you

stated that it should happen regardless of who commands, I think, it goes without saying, we would all want you to run it." The First Minister finished as all heads in the room nodded assent.

The Emperor cornered George as the official part of the meeting ended. "George you did our Empire a great service. And, your proposal is exceptional. You have provided us all the data to support it. That is so refreshing. Thanks again and say hi to that sweet girl of yours." He said as he shook Bryant's hand; then turned to leave the room.

"Good job, Moe!" George said after returning to the Columbia and calling in his Chief. "The meeting went very well. I think Fifth Mobile will be pretty much the way we proposed; and permanent. And, it looks like they'll give her to us." Bryant added.

"Sir, I am astonished and amazed; but, I have to get back to my office. There is so much to do I better get started, right away!" The Chief of Staff was almost out of breath with excitement; and, didn't seem to know whether to turn left or right to get out the door.

"Relax, Moe. Take a breath. Take enough time to absorb it all. Relish it for a bit. It isn't even official, yet. You can start work on it tomorrow. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? You worked hard for this. That's the second proposal in a year, where you had to do six months' work in less than one." George said slowly, softly and firmly with his hand on the man's shoulder.

"You're right, George. I am wound up like the mainspring of an old mechanical clock. I'll see you tomorrow." He said softly; as, he turned and exited the office.

George sent an e-mail to all the Fleet Commanders and General Malcolm to report to his office in twenty minutes. Then he asked Marie to walk over. When she arrived he filled her in on the meeting. They talked about the personal implications for a few minutes before some Fleet Commanders began to appear. He asked her to stay for the meeting.

"Welcome everyone. I did not want to hold this little get together; until Mobile Fifth's future was resolved; because, I wouldn't have known what to say." He said rather solemnly.

"So, it's all over and everyone goes back to the old way, eh?" Vice Admiral Palakiko interjected.

"Let's not be so cynical Vice Admiral. Fifth Mobile will live and will probably grow. It looks like a proposal I presented to the C&C, the First Minister and the Emperor will be accepted. If so, Mobile Fifth will be equivalent to a Quadrant Command and will have two Theatre Commands and sixteen Fleets. But, it will also have twenty-four additional frigates

assigned to the Theatre Commands, for autonomous reconnaissance. My first goal is to retain the four fleets we have to reduce acquisition time and have the other Quadrant Commands share in the pain. Then, I will need to establish my Command. I may have misinterpreted your reactions to our interaction; but, I think you have enjoyed working with me and I know I have been very thankful to have worked with all of you. Some of you have been given temporary promotions; which, you will retain, if you stay. Others will be offered more senior positions. At any rate, I will only try to retain Fleet Commanders who wish to stay. It will be tough going. Unless there is some kind of miracle, it will take us forty months to grow from four to sixteen Fleets and acquire our Mobile Command Vessels. The cost to the empire is substantial. The capital budget for that period of time will total somewhere around thirteen and a half billion sovereigns added to existing OESA capital budgets. Our personnel requirements will fall in at somewhere around five hundred ten thousand including mobile hospitals and command staffs. Our annual operating budget will be in the vicinity of thirty-five billion sovereigns for the entire Command. One-time special charges for trials, testing and deployment will be in the neighborhood of five hundred million sovereigns. So, if you agree to come along you will be under pressure all the time. But isn't that the way our jobs are most of the time. It's only a matter of scale.' Bryant finished - he paused. 'I should be extending offers to you and many of your people in about ten days. But, you can let me know before that; if, you don't want to be a part of this big project. Please do not discuss this matter with anyone else, yet. You're all dismissed.'" Bryant finished.

Over the next week, Bryant was called to several meetings with the C&C; with, the Secretary of Defense in attendance twice. He was asked to be at the legislature by nine hundred hours on Thursday June 7, 2249 to be available to answer any question the representatives might have. When he saw his proposal presented to the legislature it was in quite a different format. The Secretary of Defense presented a detailed outline of the plan including its goals and the projected benefits of adopting it. The government voted on that proposal, first. Then the treasury presented the Capital budget for the project over the next four years in detail. The legislators then voted on the capital budget. The treasury then presented the increased operating budget for the OESA for the rest of the year, and the next four. It was discussed in detail and voted on. Finally, logistics presented the timeframe on acquisitions; how and when each of the three hundred seventy-five vessels would be acquired. Someone was thinking like him. He was to retain the four fleets he had; and, some acquisitions would be diverted to replace the vessels and people he

absorbed. The legislature voted to approve this scheme. Then, the C&C presented a plan to amend the Space Agency Act for a change to the configuration of the service and the Rules and Regulations to include the Fleets and positions needed to fulfill the proposition. When they were done a vote was held. All proposals were unanimously approved. Everyone doing presentations seemed to understand the entire proposal. Bryant did not have to answer any questions. The Council and the Emperor added their assent the next day. At thirteen hundred hours on June 8, 2249, George received the following communiqué.

Memo

To: *All Quadrant, Theatre, Fleet Commands*

From: *OESA C&C*

Cc: *Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister, Emperor Edward III*

Date: *June 8, 2249*

Commanders,

Please be advised that, the OESA with the consent and assent of the Emperor and the Secretary of Defense have taken the steps necessary to enshrine the Command known as Fifth Mobile Rapid Action Command within the permanent structure of the Service.

This Force will be a permanent Rapid Response Force that will grow, over the next four years, to a strength capable of defending the Empire against attack in any region without compromising our defenses, elsewhere. In addition, the force will rotate continuously throughout the entire Empire as a supplement to normal patrols to create a "show of force" at various regions, as needed. Additional to that, it will function to assist in diplomatic, humanitarian and scientific missions.

This force will have structure, strength and authority identical to the existing Quadrant Commands with the exception of twenty-four additional vessels for reconnaissance purposes. The permanent postings for the Fifth Mobile Commander will be announced in the coming days.

In order to facilitate vessel deployment and staffing of this new command, Boots, Draco, Pisces and Eridani Fleets will be renamed and assigned to it. These fleets will be replaced within their Theatre Commands, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Thank you all for your understanding and support.

Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral David Williamson OESA C&C

Memo

To: *Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC*

From: *OESA C&C*

Cc: *Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister,
Emperor Edward III*

Re: *Promotion & Reassignment Offer*

Date: *June 8, 2249*

George,

As you know, a proposal has been presented to the Emperor, the Counsel and the Legislative Assembly by the Secretary of Defense and the First Minister, on behalf of the OESA, for the establishment of a permanent Rapid Response Force to be called Fifth Mobile Rapid Action Command (Fifth Mobile RAC). This approved proposal establishes the operation as a permanent Quadrant Level Command Structure.

This communication is to offer you the position of Commander of Fifth Mobile RAC. You would be elevated to the rank of (Level 11) Admiral and Assigned as its Commander. Your rate of compensation would increase to one hundred forty-five thousand sovereigns per annum. Medical / dental care will be provided to you by the OESA. Your retirement plan remains as it was; since, it will automatically increase in value with your increase in remuneration. You would enjoy executive living conditions at OESA expense and would be assigned your own travel vehicle. You would need to employ a full command structure to be able to run this command.

The command will consist of Two Theatre Commands, each housed in a Super Carrier class vessel; and, each comprised of eight fleets of twenty warships and four supply vessels each structured the same as existing OESA fleets. Twelve additional frigate class vessels would be attached to each Theatre Command for autonomous operations, such as remote reconnaissance, under the direct control of their respective Theatre Commanders. The Two Theatre Commands would each also employ four supply vessels and a mobile hospital. In addition, a Cruiser and three frigates would be attached to each Theatre Command for defense of the station.

Mobile fifth will be housed in a super carrier similar in size to the Theatre Commands with a Cruiser and three frigates attached for its own protection.

We have all been very impressed with your performance over all your years with the OESA; so, it is our sincere hope you will accept this elevation and assignment.

Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral David Williamson OESA C&C

George used his system to contact the C&C on video voice protocol. He advised them that he needed to have several other promotions HQ approved and administered, at the same time to ensure a smooth beginning for Fifth Mobile RAC. They asked him to send a list, quickly. They needed several hours to get them in the works, today. Then he composed his written response to their offer.

Memo

To: C&C OESA

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Mobile Fifth Command

Cc: Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister,
Emperor Edward III

Re: Promotion & Assignment Offer - Command of Fifth Mobile RAC

Date: June 8, 2249

Gentlemen,

You have honored me with your offer to elevate me and assign me the Command of the new Fifth Mobile RAC.

I feel humbled that you feel I deserve to command a force of over half a million people; and, that, you feel you can entrust in me, their care and wellbeing.

I would like to advise you of my intention to accept your offer. I am looking forward to building and Commanding a Force that can be so useful to the Empire and Emperor Edward III.

I would like to assure you that, I will do everything I can to prove your faith in me is warranted. I will do my utmost to make Fifth Mobile RAC the very best possible command it can be; to achieve all its goals and objectives; and, to reach its maximum strengths and potentials as quickly as possible. I will try to make you proud of Fifth Mobile RAC.

Admiral George T. Bryant

George laughed out loud, when a reply came back a few minutes later. The C&C must have everything composed and ready. They must be transmitting it all this way just to keep it in logical sequence.

HQ Administrative Action Order #OESA-Admin-49-3248

NOT CLASSIFIED AT ANY LEVEL

To: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile Command

From: OESA C&C

Cc: Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister, Emperor Edward III

Sub: Promotion

Date: June 8, 2249

Admiral,

You are ordered and required to appear and report to the C&C of the OESA at eight hundred hours on Monday June 15, 2249, at the office of Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson at Headquarters on Rigil, for a meeting in the presence of the Emperor.

After the meeting, we will relocate to the public amphitheater for your elevation to the rank of (Level 11) Admiral and your assignment as Commander of Mobile Fifth RAC.

Further, you have been nominated and approved for the award known as The Emperor's Award of Special Distinction for your performance in recently repelling a large invading force. The award will be presented immediately after your assignment ceremony.

Numerous promotions and reassignments will occur during these ceremonies; so allow at least two hours for the completing of all objectives in this presentation.

A short reception will be held at twelve hundred hours.

A dinner will be held in your honor at nineteen hundred hours in the dining hall.

You are permitted to invite up to five hundred guests to the promotion ceremony and up to twenty-five guests to the dinner. The reception is a closed function. You may only invite your spouse to this event.

We are most pleased to be presenting you this elevation, senior assignment and award. We look forward to seeing you.

Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral David Williamson OESA C&C

Command Administrative Action Request # 5Mob RAC - 49 - 001

Date: June 8, 2249

To: C&C OESA

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC (pending)

Cc: Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Office of the First Minister, Emperor Edward III

Date: June 8, 2249

Gentlemen,

Regarding your recent offer to me and my pending assignment to Commander of Fifth Mobile RAC there are several promotions and reassignments I need to place into nomination; so Fifth Mobile RAC can hit the ground running.

My requests are based on the fact that Theatre Nomenclature will continue in the format and fashion it has been.

That I will be able to choose naming convention for my Fleets (I have chosen unused constellation names)

*That, I'll be able to choose the naming convention for my Carriers and thus my Groups.
(I have chosen names based on Viking Myths and Legends*

Based on the above;

- 1. Theatres will be designated as Theatre Nine and Theatre Ten*
- 2. Boots Fleet will become Aquarius Fleet*
- 3. Draco Fleet will become Sagitta Fleet*
- 4. Pisces Fleet will become Phoenix Fleet*
- 5. Eridani Fleet will become Pegasus Fleet*

I would like to nominate the following officers to the designated ranks and positions

- 1. V. Admiral Grace Tonaka - to Theatre Nine Commander elevated to rank Admiral Level10*
- 2. V. Admiral Palakiko - to Theatre Ten Commander elevated to rank Admiral Level 10*
- 3. R. Admiral S. Nichols - to Aquarius Fleet Commander elevated to V Admiral*
- 4. R. Admiral T. Stevens - to Sagitta Fleet Commander elevated to V Admiral*
- 5. R. Admiral T. Moahu - to C.O.S. Mobile Fifth RAC elevated to V Admiral*

6. Lt Gen. I. Malcolm - to Marine Army Command 5th elevate to General (10)

*7. Com M. Bryant - remains in position - elevate to V. Admiral (9) **

I will be able to permanently elevate and assign all others within my command to levels required and assignments needed to establish a complete chain of command, under my own authority as Commander Mobile Fifth RAC.

** Was instrumental in reaching peace agreement in the war just ended.*

There are several people I would like to present Command level awards to for special service during the recent war.

Two additional nominations will follow for elevations of Marine Officers to the Level of Lt General for each Theatre Command Marine Corps. These may have to be completed within our command, after your approval.

However, I would like to nominate others for recognition at HQ level

1. V. Admiral Grace Tonaka for bravery in the face of overwhelming odds

2. V. Admiral Palakiko for bravery in the face of overwhelming odds

3. R Admiral S. Nichols for Tactical Excellence on the field of battle

4. Lt. General Ian Malcolm for bravery and original thinking under great pressure on the field of battle

5. Commodore Marie Bryant for distinction in her invaluable assistance to achieve a peace agreement.

Details of their invaluable and incalculable performance can be found within the logs of the past two months submitted to HQ.

It would be appreciated if these promotions, assignments and awards could be completed while Mobile Fifth is at HQ and before the mayhem we will face during expansion.

Admiral George T. Bryant

He sent the memo to the C&C and began calling in all the people; one at a time.

"Vice Admiral Grace Tonaka reporting, sir." Grace said from the doorway.

"Take a seat Grace, old friend. Read these. Start with the one on the screen. It's a memo from the C&C. Then read to the end." He sat in silence as she read.

"Say what?" She said to herself. "Just a minute; I have to read this again. I misunderstood something." There was a tremble in her voice, now.

"Admiral, I mean George; Oh...I don't know what to say." She seemed very shaky.

"Just say yes. We'll shake hands; and you can go have a meltdown in your own office." He said with a smile.

"Oh... Yes... Yes... Yes!" she yelled. "And, thank you. I won't disappoint you." There were tears on her cheeks as she shook his hand.

"You may not talk to anyone about this yet. The others on the list do not know, yet. When I talk to others, I will send them to your office; so, you can all discuss it, privately." He said with a smile.

"Yes sir." She said as she left. He watched her for a bit as he called for Palakiko. Grace was so shaken, he thought she might faint.

"Vice Admiral Palakiko reporting as requested, sir." Pal was at his door.

He repeated the same procedure with Pal. And to his surprise, this sassy, no nonsense woman reacted just like Grace.

After that, it was Nichols. He handled it the same way with one difference. After Nichols agreed and swore to silence, George told him he wanted Stephen to handle the acquisitions again. "I know it's a very tough job. This time its fifty times bigger. But, you are the best man for this Stephen. You've done it very well, before. It will mean leaving your new Fleet in the hands of one of your Task Force Commanders. I know that can be tough. Will you do it?" Bryant asked.

"Of course sir. There would never be a question of whether or not I would do something you asked for." Nichols responded.

"Okay, I'm sure you want to talk to someone about this; so, head to Grace's office." Admiral Bryant said as he stood and offered his hand.

Next, he called in Stevens. He followed the same procedure. He assured Stevens he'd catch up to Grace soon. He told him Pal was a mover and shaker who'd get a Quadrant soon. He'd get the next Theatre Command opening. Stevens told him he was just glad his career was moving again and not to worry about it. He was sworn to secrecy and sent to Grace's office.

He handled the rest including Marie exactly the same way. Then, he and Marie walked to Graces' office, together. They closed the door behind them, when they got to Grace's place. The eight were comfortable there; so, they told jokes and laughed a lot, for a while.

The next day he called in Nichols, first thing.

"Steven, can you check the yards and see if any super carriers are under construction?" George asked.

"Already done, sir. I checked on all vessels under construction. There's two Cruisers at 44 Bootes not earmarked for anyone and one for Columba fleet. At Rigil shipyard number one, there are two standard carriers. One is earmarked to replace the one severely damaged in the war. One is earmarked to replace one in Mensa Fleet under the lifetime program. We could push for that one.

Shipyard two has two super carriers under construction. Completion time on one is fourteen weeks. The other is six months off. They were supposed to be partially completed and held for the lifetime program. Earth shipyard has three frigates under construction; but, they're replacing destroyed vessels. But here's a good one. There's now a second shipyard there, too. They are building subs and frigates; but, the subs are the focus there. They have two uncommitted subs finished and a frigate almost done. Then, there's the new shipyards at 61 Virgo. Three new yards were put into service in space and a host of production plants on the ground six months ago. They are building the entire line. There's a finished super carrier at yard one, there. It's not spoken for. Yard two has two regular carriers finished that are unclaimed and yard three has two unclaimed Cruisers. It seems the C&C anticipated you losing a lot more ships than you did. They stepped up production to meet the expected demand. I think you want to put in the word for all the untagged vessels; while, the C&C and Emperor still think you can walk on water." He laughed.

"Good job Steven. Send me the list. I'll have Moe claim them, right now. Then we'll apply a little pressure on promotion day.' He laughed. 'You never cease to amaze me, Steven." He said with a smile as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Amaze is a good thing; isn't it?" Stephen said with a smile as he headed out the door.

Bryant called in Moe. He passed on the list and asked him to requisition it all for Fifth Mobile RAC for distribution throughout the Command.

By June 2250, Fifth Mobile RAC was way ahead of schedule. They had all the mobile command centers and their escort flotillas. The Mobile Fifth Flag Ship was christened the Valhalla. Theatre Nine's Vessel was the Midgard and Theatre Ten's was the Asgard. The command was sporting four Fleets per Theatre. Carina, Columba, Centaur and Delphiniums had been added at full strength since last May. Fifth Mobile and its two Theatre Commands were at

around half-staff. Everyone had to work hard. But, it was enough staff to handle the half strength Command. They had received two of the ten supply ships that would keep the three command ship warehouses full. Both hospital ships were being assembled in a special yard. One would be ready this time next year and the other six months later. But, despite shortfalls Bryant felt he could exert real power immediately, if Mobile Fifth had to. They were regularly conducting patrol assistance. There are always issues in an Empire the size of Orion. They had used their great resources to help at two natural disaster sites. Things had gone full tilt; since last year's promotions and awards. Staffing was an issue. The service had to establish two additional Academies; one technical the other command. The OESA needed an additional twenty thousand graduates per year over the next four years on top of the ten thousand they would have normally had; just to keep on target. Distribution of graduates was done on a fair and equitable basis. For every new cadet the Fifth took, they could draw an experienced person from each of the other Quadrants who then had to replace them with Academy grads. That way, everyone got the same number of raw graduates and experienced personnel. Personnel often complained that they moved so much flesh every day they were like a meat market. But, everyone knew the importance of staying on track.

By June 2251, Fifth Mobile was up to six fleets per Theatre Command with the addition of the Grus, Vulpecula, Ursa Minor and Scutum Fleets. To date the Carriers were the Odin, Thor, Freyja, Mjolnir, Loki, Baldr, Embla, Sif, Freyr, Geror, Gefjon and Tyr. Theatre Nine had the hospital ship Joan of Arc fully staffed and functional, at this point.

By June 2252, things had really changed. Mobile Fifth was still growing at a steady rate. The past year had seen a slight slowdown in construction and the earmarking of several vessels for other Fleets to fulfill the lifetime program and to fill the last holes in the other Quadrants caused by the war a couple of years before. But that wasn't where things were really popping. In December 2251, after nearly fifty years of service at the age of seventy-one Fleet Admiral David Williamson retired, effective the end of the year. He had been C&C for thirty-five years. The position was immediately offered to Bill Stephenson. He was elevated to Fleet Admiral and assigned as C&C by the Defense Secretary with assent of the counsel and the Emperor. He searched for a replacement. The five Commands discussed it with him and Dickinson several times. George pulled him aside one night in early January.

"Bill there's only one person to replace you. A very good manager. An excellent tactician; and deep knowledge of Quadrant Three." George told him.

"Yeah, who's that?" He asked past the rim of his glass as he tipped it for another sip of scotch.

"The only person I know, who could do for Three what you did, is Grace Tonaka. She's been a "ten" for two years, now. She was instrumental in our battles during the war. She's great with people; and, she knows your policies; and, would continue most of them. She always felt that Three had the best Quadrant Commander." Bryant responded with a grin.

"Yeah, maybe. But, I got to think it over a bit." There was a slur in his voice.

But, the next day, the C&C offered her the Command. She accepted the proposal.

But, it didn't stop there. It was less than a month after Grace stepped up to the plate that Gogorra resigned. His career had stalled and he would be on full pension at an Admiral 10 rate, anyway; so, he retired. Grace offered Tom Stevens the job.

After the promotion of Tonaka to Quadrant Three Commander, George held her spot open for a while. He had been aware of her dislike of Gogorra; and, believed he would not stay on with her in charge. When Tom Stevens took the position, He offered Stephen Nichols the position of Theatre Nine Commander. On February 1, 2252, Steven Nichols was elevated to Admiral Level Ten and assigned as Theatre Commander. He had two other nominations approved and filled the two Fleet Commander positions open at the time.

By June 2253, the other eight supply vessels were in place. Parts of the last two Fleets for each Theatre Command were there. The three Command vessel staffs were at seventy-five percent of full strength; though some ships in the Fleets were on four and some on the full five shift rotations It was slow going, now. Ship yards had run full tilt, since the war. Another two had opened in February but had not put out a finished vessel, yet. The originals had closed for a two-month break starting April 15, 2253. It was Nichols who detected the sheer exhaustion most of the workers were experiencing. He started watching as quality fell and mistakes and accidents increased. It wasn't long before he realized it was systemic. Bryant contacted the C&C on Nichols advice. Fear of severe work place injuries or death led to the shut downs. No one could fault them. They had done everything asked of them, for more than two years. They were all sent on "vacation" at full wages. Hopefully, everyone would return fully rested on June 15. They were well ahead of schedule; so, the delay didn't affect the original projections.

Mobile Fifth RAC started receiving the first of the twenty-four extra frigates in October of 2254. Theatre Nine was assigned the Shenzhen on December 10, that year. She had been through proving and pre-trials and had a light cruise, when she came home to Theatre Nine. On December 15, 2254, once her new crew had been designated, Lt. Cmdr. Kurt Brubacher was promoted to Commander and assigned as her Captain. The next two months were spent in heavy shake down cruises and crew drills. By the end of February 2255 the Shenzhen was running smoothly. It was ready for full reconnaissance missions; and, Fifth Mobile RAC assets were at full complement; while, personnel were almost there - at ninety-four percent.

Chapter 14 On My Way to The Top

Wednesday August 22, 2255

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Mahatma Gandhi

It was eleven hundred hours, when we docked the Shenzhen at the Midgard, the Theatre Nine Flag Ship. It was pretty standard for me to report in, when returning to base. I made my way to Admiral Nichols office.

"Captain Brubacher reporting, sir." I stood at attention.

"Hi Captain. Relax and take a seat." He mumbled without looking up from the document that held his attention.

"Sorry Kurt, I didn't want to lose my place. It's the patrol schedule for next week for both Theatres. What can I do for you?" He asked.

"Sir, we're just back from HD 156668 via Sigma Corona Borealis. We took the long way back; so, we could rest our engines for a day at Sigma. I gave most of the crew the day on Sigma. It's really beautiful there." I explained.

"It's nice you gave your crew some shore-leave; but, why did you have to rest your engines? Nichols asked.

"Because, I disobeyed your orders, sir. I brought the cargo vessel back with me; and, additional evidence from the pirate ship. Sir, I did it because, the towing unit of the cargo ship has a lot of evidence that pertains to the charges. Your experts just wanted pictures and samples; but my own criminal investigator said the cargo ship hull was important evidence itself; so, I hauled it back." I explained.

"So, you believe the criminal investigator we sent was wrong; but, your embedded one was right." Nichols statement was really an inquiry.

"Not really, sir. I didn't know which one was right. And, to my amateur eye, the hull does look like evidence. So, instead of being wrong and losing the case in court or not convicting of the more serious charges, I thought I'd take my licking from you. I really want the privateers to pay for what they did. It was murder, piracy, theft, destruction of private property, resisting; and, there is evidence of a lot of other incidents that is aboard the pirate vessel. Your man wanted us to leave it behind, too. Since, I thought it might lead to additional charges, I brought it back, anyway." I finished my explanation.

"And, you were right to do what you did. You faced conflicting expert advice and your own intelligence. You were on site. I was not. You know, I don't want robots who just obey commands. I want my senior officers to think for themselves. Sometimes, you have to decide the right way to handle things yourself. That's why you're the Captain of the Shenzhen. I'll have our prosecutor's lab people take a look. But, in the end, it doesn't matter what they find. You did the right thing; based on the on-site information. Keep your ship parked. Stay for a day. I don't have new orders for you, yet. By the time you leave, you'll know for your own peace of mind, how it turns out." Nichols said with a smile as he stood; indicating I was dismissed.

I used my personal pad to tell my people to secure the Shenzhen and come aboard the Midgard and use its facilities for the night. The Massive Super Carrier has everything you could want. Each time we land here, I take discovery tours of the Midgard; but, I've never seen all of it. These ships are astonishing. The two decks that fascinate me most are deck three, the lowest unsecured level, and deck four. Deck three is entirely designed for storage of gasses, dry goods, frozen foods, mechanical parts, electrical parts, medical supplies, clothing, boots and shoes and refrigerated perishables. Nitrogen, oxygen, argon, hydrogen and methane are the major gasses stored in standing twenty-meter-high by four-meter-diameter tanks. There are nearly three thousand of these massive cylinders secured in place on the deck. There are eleven hundred fifty nitrogen tanks, two hundred and seventy-five oxygen tanks, five hundred argon tanks, six hundred hydrogen tanks and ten methane tanks in an area that takes only a third of the twenty-three-meter-high deck. Half of these tanks are tied together with lines that allow them to feed supply via ports on the hull for resupply of other vessels. The other half is used for Midgard operations. Most gases last a long time on board these ships. Everything is recycled. Even our own human waste and the decomposable wastes we produced are recycled by breaking them down to their constituent elements and recombining those into pure gasses, liquids and solids. Other disposed items are dealt with in more traditional processes. Most of the ship board gas storage is to replenish the miniscule losses incurred in the recycling. Argon is actually expended by the ion engines and particle cannons. It has to be replenished from shipments originating on planets with it in their environments. Hydrogen is used in very small quantities in the fusion reactors with stores of Lithium. Fissionable materials are not stored. Some weapons have small amounts as do the fission reactors. But reactor cores are dealt with in space dock; while, weapons come shielded and with their payloads already installed. The only recyclable item not stored on

this level is water. Water is recycled or generated by chemical process and pumped from the lowest engineering deck to the upper most deck, for storage. Because of our positive gravity, storing it in that fashion assists in maintaining a constant pressure for use ship-wide.

Aft of gas storage is a vast area holding massive upright shelving in rows that stand from floor to about half a meter from the ceiling. Each cubical division in the racking is identified by RFID tagging. Massive automated turret trucks are guided through narrow aisles to the space they will store to or retrieve from. The racks are sectioned by application. Dry food materials have their area. Clothing has its location. These stores are drawn by departments at the various command levels for distribution. A little aft of mid-ship the freezers are constructed much like the dry goods racking. Freezers are floor to ceiling; each door identified as a division. Millions of pounds of meats, fish, frozen desserts, frozen vegetables, frozen fruits and freezable cheeses are stored or retrieved by automated turret trucks. The smallest storage area is the refrigerated stores. Most of the goods in this section are perishable; and, have limited lifetimes, even when cool. That's why high density vertical farming is executed atop the upper deck of every vehicle. All OESA vessels can reap as many as four harvests of many vegetables and two of most fruits. For that reason, refrigerated goods are stored to last only two weeks. Ships galleys will then switch to frozen fare for the period required to reach the first fresh harvest. After that, they will oscillate between frozen and fresh; as, the vertical farming permits. Using this system, Fleet attached vessels can generally run two weeks between visits from their supply vessels. Each supply vessel stores enough to resupply an entire Group before returning to the Theatre Command for restocking. Theatre Commands can store enough in their holds to completely supply all eight of its Fleets, once; while maintaining its own operations, before needing to be restocked. Mobile Fifth Command can handle a full refill of each Theatre Command once, while maintaining its own operations, before needing materials from one of the fifteen planets they can draw from throughout the Empire. There is a considerable protective barrier, after the refrigerator area; and aft of that stackable racks store thousands of rods, spears, missiles and torpedoes. Though the handling beyond this section is automated, the storage and removal of these weapons is done mostly by hand, here. Each and every weapon in the section is checked for age, physical condition and fidelity. The fear of a fuel or radiation leak in this section is the cause of the stringent security and working methods employed here.

I love to stroll the deck above this one. Along its port side, occupying a third of the ship's width is its Mess Halls and kitchens. It holds the massive enlisted mess; with its large non-com alcove. This takes up nearly two thirds of the total length, on that side. It is placed amid ships with the Officers' mess located from just aft of it to the rear of the ship. There is a relatively small Senior Officers' mess running from the bow on that side to the enlisted mess. Officers from the level of Commander up to Fleet Admiral can eat in this space; though Captains and Flag Officers can order food for delivery to other areas. There are two wide hallways running the length of the deck separating the mess section from a center section and that area from the spaces along the starboard side. In the center section, a huge sick bay runs from a mid-ship's hallway to within one hundred feet of the bow and fills the entire width of the center section. It boasts full radiological, pathological and biological diagnostic services and labs, a pharmacy, six operating rooms, six trauma rooms, three dentistry areas, a fracture clinic; and sports a twenty bed temporary ward and fifty semi-private beds. A staff of fifty doctors, twenty technicians, forty nurses, four dentists and hosts of assistants and orderlies see to the patients in the sick bay. It is capable of handling nearly any problem and enjoys representation in twenty-four specialties amongst its staff.

Four massive elevators are just across the hall from the sick bay main entrance in the transverse hallway.

Across the hall from sick bay in the aft portion of the Midgard is a mall. It holds a men's shop, a lady's wear, a sporting goods retailer, a jeweler, two barber shops, two hair salons, a four screen movie theater, a live action theater, a night club, a bar, a family restaurant and a high level bistro. In the foredeck, from sick bay to the bow is a full gymnasium, a multipurpose sports area, and an Olympic sized swimming pool with solar lighting, lots of decking and about fifty reclining deck chairs.

The starboard side of this deck is dedicated to training of all types. There is a three thousand seat amphitheater, three lecture halls, a four class elementary school, a four class four laboratory secondary school and a large section of classrooms and labs devoted to college / university level training.

In all, it is an amazing deck that mimics travelling main street of Anytown, OE; complete with street lamps and faux-cobblestone flooring echoing its streets.

Because of their size, the Midgard, Asgard and the Valhalla all have a senior command handling nothing but accommodation. On this ship, Commodore Olivia Hurst is the "Bursar". So, I contacted her for accommodations and advised that others from the Shenzhen may also stay over. I quickly received mail designating my quarters and installing my pass code to the room, for the evening. I notified my personal steward to drop one set of daily uniforms and change of undergarments in the room.

I went to the room and washed up; then left for the pub. Nichols and Hurst were already there, sitting together at the bar having a drink. I tried not to disturb them; but, was waved over by the Admiral, as soon as he saw me. "Would you like to join us for a drink and some snooker?" He asked.

"Yes sir, I'd enjoy that." I said with a smile.

"Drop the sir, in here. It's Stephen and Olivia in the pub; when, you're in our party." He said with a smile.

"That's a nice offer; but, it's too easy to slip, afterwards. If you don't really mind, I'd prefer to address you both formally; no, matter how familiar the setting." I answered.

"Always in control; eh Brubacher? Ever since that first incident. You should forget it. We all have; until, you remind us. Stick to the informal. That's my last order of the evening." Nichols laughed.

"Okay. Okay. I'll join you and Olivia for the evening. And, snooker would be great." I replied.

Two games of snooker are enough, for me. Though, I can keep the game competitive, Nichols is somewhat of a shark. He understands the bank action of the table perfectly; and can apply English that makes the cue ball do exceptional things. "Okay ... Okay, I give. Can we just go sit down and talk? I need to retain some of my personal dignity to be able to maintain command of my ship." I said in an exaggerated manner with laugh.

"Sure, we can go back to the table if you want to quit." Nichols said with a sly smile.

"Not quit ... retreat regroup and come at this from a different angle. Isn't that what you teach in you Academy tactical classes?" I shot back; referring to his guest lectures at the War College.

"The Valhalla and the Asgard will be here soon, Kurt." Nichols quiet tone, as we retake our seats, suggests that the information isn't quite public knowledge.

"Is something going on." I maintain the confidential tone of the conversation.

"I am not sure. Admiral Bryant was a bit evasive in his message. He just asked us to hold position and said the two ships would join us here. Based on the time he sent the message; and Asgard's position, at the time, both vessels and their support ships should jump in any time. You know, he still wants to give you a Carrier, eh? It's just a step in his plan. He wants you to have a star on your collar as soon as possible.

Part Two
Chapter 15 The Loki Step
Wednesday October 3, 2255

“It’s one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” Neil Armstrong

We're just parking at Midgard; now located at Gliese 777 a large yellow white star in Cygnus. We've been on a variety of patrols since our last visit here, in August. From the window, I can see it's pretty much a normal day, at Theatre Nine. There are a couple of Admiral's personal crafts docked and the usual array of supply vessels waiting to dock for loading or unloading. On Sunday, we were in Lyra at the HD170651 star system when, I received orders to report to Admiral Nichols at Theatre Nine, located at the Gliese 777 system. It was thirteen hundred, when I received the message. As we dock, it is five hundred hours - just a little early to report in. My bridge watch ends at six hundred; so, I will go eat some breakfast; then, cleanup and change uniforms. I should be able to report to Nichols by seven thirty hours.

Once relieved I head down to the Officers Mess; selecting scrambled eggs, pea-meal bacon, fruit cocktail and toast, to eat. I finish off the tray with a cup of coffee. I take a half hour to eat the meal; and, head out to my quarters to shave, brush my teeth, shower and change.

"Captain Kurt Brubacher reporting, as ordered, Admiral." I snap as I stand at attention, in is doorway.

"Relax Captain, take a seat." Nichols gestures towards a chair. 'I needed to see you to complete a few business items. First, I want to update you on the privateer investigation. The hull you brought back turned out to be important to the prosecutor. One of the pirates has made a deal for his testimony. The evidence is now overwhelming; and, he agreed that he'd be executed; if, he didn't cooperate. He led us to the two vessels and crews that got away. He's not the ring leader. With the evidence, the surviving witnesses and his testimony the others are toast. He'll get twenty years. The others will end up being executed.

Then, I wanted to speak to you directly about your application to the War College. It's been accepted, at all levels. Midgard, Asgard and Valhalla are all extensions of the new War College; so, you may start your courses immediately. You need to register, at the school on level four. Each Command offers all the classes; so, you can attend whichever is convenient to stay on schedule.

Finally, we have a spot for you in Phoenix Fleet, that we want you to take. Vice Admiral Leeds just received her final Carrier, the Loki. We'd like you to take it immediately. Both Admiral Bryant and I feel, we need you to have a star on your collar by this time, next year. Things are bubbling again. If you could stay near the Valhalla, you'd find the Emperor's Craft there as much as it is at Earth. He also spends a great deal of time with Stevenson, Tonaka and Blackman who is now Commander of Quadrant Two. I don't know all the details; but, something's happening; and, Bryant wants you in on it. So, the plan is to assign you as the Loki Captain. You will spend the next year running her on patrols; and, going to the War College. Then, you will be promoted. The Loki has thirty-six hundred forty officers and crew; and nearly six thousand aboard. The bigger assignment offers ten percent more money, better quarters; and, a larger personal staff. The size of the command alone means your responsibility will increase dramatically. Though under the tactical command of the Group Commander, a Carrier Captain still sees a lot of independent action; often breaking off with a cruiser or a couple of frigates on some autonomous mission. The Carrier is always in command in those situations; since, regulations clearly state that the Captain of the larger vessel is senior to those of the smaller ones. Then, there is the coordination of the vessel with its space born offensive power.

Kurt, we waited for you; because, we agreed with you that, you were getting valuable experience running an autonomous command. But, I have to tell you that, I cannot be sure we will be able to pull out the chair and welcome you to the table, again; if, you don't take this assignment. Admiral Bryant is preparing for a major shuffle, in a year. Everything has to be in place for it, now; so, all the right moves can be made then. Officers like you need time in their new assignments; so, the next move is warranted. It is not as simple as just deciding someone should be promoted; especially when you're talking about flag level positions. Nominations for promotion of junior and intermediate officers are handled in bulk lots of up to fifty. For the most part, they are "rubber stamped" by the council and legislature. But, each nomination for flag positions is scrutinized, independently. Up to and including level six, nominations are confirmed by the council in groups based on the recommendations of all levels above their commanders. Levels seven and eight are nominated individually and scrutinized by the Secretary of Defense who must also recommend them. Then, they are voted on by the council who recommends them to the Legislature. Above level eight, each specific nomination goes to the Defense Committee. They employ OESA Security Services to investigate every aspect of the nominee's life and

service record. The Committee must sign off on each of these selections; before, the Secretary can recommend them. From the Secretary, the file goes to the First Minister, who examines it and advances it to the Emperor for personal perusal; before he signs off and sends it back to the council. The nomination must receive two thirds majority vote of the council; before issuing a warrant for promotion and reassignment. While that happens, the Emperor's office generates a white paper authorizing that and other promotions. Each is dealt with specifically in its own paragraph of the document; and, has its own registration number for entry into the Admiralty. That white paper is matched with the nomination and sent to the council; which forwards the documents to the legislature. Each individual senior flag promotion requires enactment of an act of the legislature. This is because, at the level of Vice Admiral and above, an officer is considered the direct representative of the Emperor and the legislature. So you see, scrutiny gets more severe; as, you go further up the chain. Your record must reflect the experience required for any new level and assignment to pass the inspections your nomination will receive.

So, I will need an answer, in the next twenty-four hours; along with, your recommendations for nominees to replace you on the Shenzhen."

"Admiral, I will accept the reassignment. I am ready to make the move. I would like to officially recommend Lt. Commander Savign as my replacement." I respond.

"Why Savign? She's only been an exec for a year. And she's only been an LC for the same period. There are others in the Theatre that are more experienced." Nichols answered.

"Yes sir, I am aware of that; but, she's been with me through the Rho incident and the privateer problem. I don't need to say that; no Commander can be on duty one hundred percent of the time. She's shown great poise and depth when in command during tough situations. She has great tactical skills and has given me some superior advice, when I had complex decisions to make. She's also a more than adequate manager and has the loyalty of the crew. I thought that, if she had the Shenzhen, she could get six months' experience actually handling the tactical situations herself. Then, I could request her on the Loki; where, she could get the pilot training she would need. Down the road, she will make a great Carrier Captain; and, probably has a future at much greater responsibility ahead of her." I reply.

"Okay then, I will issue the warrant, immediately. She will be promoted to Commander and assigned as Captain of the Shenzhen, effective immediately. I want to transfer you here, temporarily. The Academy General Officers' program generally takes a year to complete during a

posting; but, it is an independent learning program. You will shuttle between the three Command vessels to pick up courses that will put you on a schedule to complete the War College program in less than six months. You will officially take the Loki, today; but, your XO will run her for two weeks. She'll be here later today, with Admiral Leeds aboard. We'll do all the promotions, this afternoon. You will man the Loki, after that; and, write all the orders needed for the Exec. Then, you will move here for the two-week period. I'll fill Leeds in when she reports at noon. When you return to the Shenzhen, advise Savign of the offer; and, tell her I need a written response. In the meantime, let Commodore Hurst arrange your quarters, here; and, begin moving in what you need for a two week stay." Admiral Nichols orders.

"Aye sir. I'll be aboard in an hour." I respond.

I shuttled back to the Shenzhen. In my office, I called in Savign who was off-duty and asleep, in her quarters. I began emptying the office safe of those items that would come with me; and, boxed up the few personal items that graced the desk and walls.

"Lt. Commander Savign reporting as ordered, sir." She is at attention, when she snaps out the statement.

"Relax Commander; and, please take a seat. I have news for you." I tell her.

"What's happening?" She asks quietly as she closes the door and sits in a chair opposite me; examining the box on my desk, inquiringly.

"I've been re-assigned. I will be the new Captain of the Carrier Loki. She's brand new; and I suspect, needs the same kind of shake-down we did for the Shenzhen." I explain to her.

"Congratulations, sir. So, who's been transferred to replace you, sir?" Savign asks.

"Theatre had a couple of candidates to take over; but, I made a recommendation and gave them all the reasons it should take precedence." I answer coyly.

"So, who will take over the Shenzhen, sir." She prods.

"Savign, if you agree to take it, you will be promoted to Commander and assigned as the Captain of the Shenzhen, this afternoon. Do you want it?" I ask.

"Yes sir, of course; but, I've only been an Executive Officer a year. Usually people move to a master's position after two to four years as XO." She has incredulity in her voice.

"That's true; but, you know the ship and her crew. You have participated in a couple of pretty tense tactical situations. Some execs don't get that much experience in three years. And, the crew is already loyal to you. You won't have to prove yourself to them. Day to day, you just

have to use what you already know; and, have done. In tactical situations, you will have to draw on those two incidents, service history and your own intelligence. You will do just fine, Savign." I offer.

"Thanks for the confidence, sir. I will accept the promotion and assignment." Savign responds.

I immediately prepare a message to Admiral Nichols.

Memo

To: *Admiral Steven Nichols Commander Theatre Nine*
From: *Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Shenzhen*
Re: *Pending Command Changes ESS Shenzhen*
Date: *October 3, 2255*

Admiral,

I have advised Lt. Commander Savign of the impending changes; and, advised her of the offer to promote her to Commander and assign her as Captain of the Shenzhen. She has accepted. Written confirmation will be received, shortly.

Kurt Brubacher Captain

"Savign, you have to prepare a memo to Admiral Nichols accepting the offer, immediately. Copy me on it. Make sure you thank him for showing confidence in you and relay the fact that the promotion was discussed with me. The changes will take place this afternoon. You will be advised of timing.

I will take command of the Loki; as you take command of the Shenzhen; but, I will be temporarily located on the Midgard. I have also been accepted to the War College; so, I will be travelling between Midgard, Asgard and Valhalla to get a head start on all the courses. They want me to finish the program quickly. It seems they have plans for me and want a star on my collar, in a year. You may not discuss that with anyone. And, you may not discuss the moves with anyone until the Shenzhen receives the formal announcement from Admiral Nichols.' I finish as I see the Loki exit a jump point one hundred thousand kilometers to the starboard side of the Midgard. 'I better get a move on. My new boss just arrived.' I tell her as I point out the window. 'Once you receive the official announcement from Theatre Nine, you can begin moving in to this office. You will need to recommend an executive officer. Admiral Nichols will want to do that promotion and re-assignment, at the same time. Other ones that ripple from that one can

be handled in the field. Once you have his authorization, you will be able to do them, yourself. The appropriate rank insignia is in that safe. I will send you the combination in a memo. The first time you open it, you should change it to one you will remember. Command codes will change at the handoff during the ceremony, this afternoon. You will be allowed to have up to fifty representatives from the Shenzhen present for the ceremonies. I suggest, all of shift one, two, three and five's bridge crews; since, four will be on duty then. You should also invite all the department heads. That way, there is no doubt in any of your senior command that, you are the boss, now. Don't forget the memo to Nichols. It should be the first thing. You're dismissed, Captain." I sum up with a smile.

"Thank you, sir. I'll get right on it." She responds as she rises, salutes and leaves my office.

The enunciator on my pad tells me I have a message. It is a copy of the memo from Savign. I direct it to my internal system and face the darkest wall; so, I can read it clearly.

Memo

From: Lt. Commander Savign Executive Officer ESS Shenzhen

To: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander

Re: Your offer of Promotion and Assignment as Master of the ESS Shenzhen

C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Shenzhen

Date: October 3, 2255

Sir,

Captain Kurt Brubacher relayed your kind offer to me, this morning. I accept the promotion to the level five rank of Commander and the assignment as the Captain of the ESS Shenzhen, with humility. I am surprised at the confidence shown in me by all concerned; considering, the limited time I have been an Executive Officer. I will not let any of you down and will try to make you proud of me. Your confidence is appreciated.

I would like to recommend the promotion of Lieutenant Eugenio Volpe to the rank of Lt. Commander assigned as Executive Officer of the Shenzhen to fill the vacancy created by my promotion. The Lieutenant has been First Officer on shift one under Captain Brubacher for a year; and, has worked closely with me on the personnel issues of his shift. He is uniquely qualified to fill the position and has the confidence and loyalty of the entire crew. I will forward recommendations to you for other openings created as a ripple from these moves; after, examining the service listings of available personnel.

Lt. Commander Savign

My system announces other messages, immediately after I finish reading Savign's. Through the transparent walls I can see Savign finishing a discussion with Volpe. Volpe goes back to his station and begins composing a message. He is probably sending his acceptance to Admiral Nichols.

Memo

From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander

To: Lt. Commander Savign Executive Officer ESS Shenzhen

C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher

Re: Promotion to Master of the Shenzhen

Date: October 3, 2255

Savign,

I am happy you are accepting the promotion and position offered you; and, I am sure you will do very well in the job. Your career has been outstanding, to this point; so, there is no reason to believe otherwise.

I am also accepting your recommendation for Lt. Volpe. Please, feel free to make the offer to him, once you have received the memo announcing your pending promotion.

Congratulations

Admiral Stephen Nichols

Memo

From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander

To: All officers and crew ESS Shenzhen, Theatre Nine Fleet Commanders, Mobile Fifth Command

C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher

Re: Master of the ESS Shenzhen

Date: October 3, 2255

All,

Please be advised that effective this day, at sixteen hundred hours, Captain Kurt Brubacher will be reassigned.

Lt. Commander Savign, currently Executive Officer of the Shenzhen, will be promoted to the rank of Commander and will be assigned as Captain of the Shenzhen, at that time. The

promotion ceremony will take place at sixteen hundred hours in the amphitheater aboard the Midgard.

*Congratulations to Lt. Commander Savign.
Admiral Stephen Nichols*

Memo

*From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander
To: All officers and crew ESS Shenzhen, Theatre Nine Fleet Commanders, Mobile Fifth Command
C.C. Lt. Commander Savign, Captain Kurt Brubacher
Re: Executive Officer ESS Shenzhen
Date: October 3, 2255*

All,

Please be advised that Lieutenant Eugenio Volpe, currently ESS Shenzhen's Second Officer and First Shift First Officer, will be promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and will be assigned as Executive Officer of the Shenzhen.

The ceremony will take place in the amphitheater of the Midgard at sixteen hundred hours.

Congratulations Lt. Volpe.

Admiral Stephen Nichols

At eleven hundred, as I am packing up the belongings in my quarters, my system chimes again.

Memo

*From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander
To: All officers and crew ESS Loki, all officers and crew ESS Shenzhen, Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet, Mobile Fifth Command
C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher
Re: Assignment of Master of the ESS Loki
Date: October 3, 2255*

All,

Please be advised that Captain Kurt Brubacher, currently Master of the ESS Shenzhen, will be reassigned as the Commander of the ESS Loki. The Loki is a Carrier class vessel; so, this is by no means a lateral move. Captain Brubacher has commanded the Shenzhen for a year. It is one of our autonomous frigates; and, he has been exposed to some very serious tactical situations. Captain Brubacher has been awarded several commendations, over the time of his career; including the OESA order of Merit.

Captain Brubacher will spend the first two weeks of his assignment aboard the Midgard getting an intense start on War College Programs. He has been accepted to the Academy War College program; and, will be eligible for promotion to Flag Ranks, after successful completion.

Reassignment and transfer of command of the Loki to Captain Brubacher will take place in the amphitheater of the Midgard at sixteen hundred hours.

Congratulations Captain Brubacher.

Admiral Stephen Nichols

Memo

From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander

To: Captain Kurt Brubacher

Re: Pending reassignment

Date: October 3, 2255

Kurt,

Please shuttle over to the Midgard, at your earliest convenience for a meeting with me and Vice Admiral Leeds. I would like to do the formal introductions; so, the two of you know each other before she officially assigns you the Loki.

Stephen Nichols.

As it happens, I am done packing, when the last message comes in; so, I call in my steward. I ask him to ship two of the bags to the Midgard and the rest of the boxes and bags to the Loki. Then I head to the shuttle bay.

"Captain Brubacher reporting, as requested, sir." I am at attention as I bark out the announcement.

"Relax Kurt and take a seat. This is Vice Admiral Helena Leeds of Phoenix Fleet." He directs a hand in her direction.

She is a mid-thirties tall medium colored beauty who wears a flag uniform very well. Confidence exudes from her regal bearing.

"It's an honor to meet you Admiral Leeds." I respond with my hand out to her.

"It's my honor too, Captain. You have an impressive record." She answers as she returns a warm, firm and very dry handshake.

"Thank you, sir. I only hope I will fuel your confidence in me. I would not like to let you, Admiral Nichols or Admiral Bryant down, ever." I respond.

"Don't worry, Captain. I'm sure you'll do just fine. Things are still a little fluid in Phoenix. They're also still changing in the OESA. Expansion isn't complete, yet. Fifth has taken a lot of people; and many Fleets are short staffed throughout the entire service. I am sure there will be a need for your tactical skills at a Flag level soon enough.

I want to tell you right now that, there is still no Commander for your Group. Loki Group is running under the direct control of the Task Force One Commander and me. Since, Loki is my flag vessel, it is seldom without a Flag presence; but, it is a lot of extra work for the two of us. I am seeking someone to fill the spot; but, we're pretty diluted, right now. If it isn't inhabited when you finish the War College program, I will include you in the considerations. Just don't screw up in the meantime. That would throw a wrench in the whole idea.

I will tell you now that, though I have never met you, Admirals Bryant and Nichols speak highly of your service over your ten-year history; so, I am confident you will do well." She finishes with a smile.

"Thank you, Admiral. I will try to earn those compliments, in your eyes, too." I respond.

"Very good, Captain. I think we know where we stand. I will be transferring your Command Codes in the sixteen hundred ceremony; but, you need to meet with your Exec and senior staff, now. They need to know the plan for the next couple of weeks." Leeds replies.

"Your dismissed, Captain." Nichols says as he rises.

I rise. "If you'll excuse me, Admirals?" I turn and leave the room.

I shuttle over to the Loki. I am received as if I am already ensconced as the Master. My executive is a Deltan. This is a familiar situation.

"Captain Brubacher, I am Commander Elasima." The young man offers a salute with the introduction.

"I am Captain Kurt Brubacher, Commander Elasima. May I have permission to come aboard?" I respond with the formalities.

"Permission granted; and, welcome Captain."

We head to the Captain's office, first. It is much larger and more elegantly finished than the one on the Shenzhen. It has quite a large conversation area with two couches, two arm chairs and a coffee table surrounding an area rug, at the end of the room opposite the desk. It also enjoys a couple of large viewing ports.

"What do your friends call you Commander?" I ask.

" They call me El, sir."

"You may call me Kurt when we are in private. May I call you El?" I ask my Exec.

"Yes Kurt. That would be fine." He responds.

"El, how far along are you on field testing and shake down of the Loki?" I ask.

"On what, sir? We have not done any field testing or shakedown, Kurt. No one has even suggested it. Is that the testing to ensure the Loki is safe and dependable?" The exec asks.

"Yes, it is known as proofing the ship; and, involves intensive static testing and repairs; followed by, progressively more demanding cruises. The idea is to prove the ship is sound at conditions well beyond her normal use. That way, we will know she is safe for standard operations and can be demanded to do more, in a pinch. No vessel is to be put into service without the proofing – it's part of OESA Rules and Regulations." I explain.

"Admiral Leeds must have wanted to hold off until you came." El sounded defensive.

"Well, I'm going to be away for the first two weeks of my assignment; so, you will be doing the initial testing. Based on what we found on the Shenzhen; and what Admiral Nichols found with some of the carriers, I have created a plan. I will let Admiral Leeds know you are acting under my orders. Testing and shakedown can take five to eight weeks, with repairs. You will run the first two weeks. The crew might hate you, afterwards. It's the most labor intensive part of the whole process. Ten days in, you will take the ship to one of a selection of planets I have included. You will give the crew a rotating three-day leave. Then you will return the ship to the Midgard running at point two during your jump. That excursion will be the first shakedown; but, the crew will be happy with the rotating leave.

You must follow the plan closely. There are many things to watch. We don't want to have a flaw that causes the Loki to blow up in space. We want to find the problems. Don't let people

make up fake ones; but, the more you find the better. There are twenty-two million moving and operating parts in this ship. Any one could be faulty. My blueprint specifies what to watch; and, at what times. You need to break up responsibility for parts of the program. Use only those senior officers you are sure you can trust. If you aren't sure of one, use someone more junior that, you know can handle it and record that in your logs. Your personnel records should reflect the operation intently. When I come aboard in a couple of weeks we should know who is capable and who is not. I don't want to leave someone in charge of a bridge watch; if, they are incapable of handling it. I only trust you; because, your appointment was determined by Admirals Leeds and Nichols; and, I trust them. But others may have gotten to positions they don't deserve. This is a new ship with a new crew. The crew is part of the testing and shakedown. It and the ship must operate as a unit, after this. I will also be asking Admiral Leeds to temporarily move her flag. If something goes wrong, we don't want a Senior Admiral aboard. Are you up for it, El?" I finish.

"Yes Kurt. I can handle it." He responds confidently.

"Good. Then, let's get the rest of the senior team in here. And, see if you can have someone get the box marked office from my quarters and bring it here. I'll start moving in now." I say.

"Yes, Captain. If you'll excuse me. I'll have everyone here in half an hour. The box will be up here forthwith." El responds.

"Dismissed!" I snap.

I spend the next five minutes looking over the office and enjoying the spectacle of the surrounding space; before, being interrupted by a steward.

"...The box you requested, Captain." The attendant stands at attention in the door.

"Bring it in. Are you my steward?" I ask.

"Yes sir, I am Leading Crewman David Angstrom; and I am one of two of your day shift stewards. You have six in all - two in each of three shifts." The Crewman responds.

"Can you keep a secret, crewman?" I ask.

"What's that, sir?" He asks.

"No. I don't have one for you. I am just asking if, you can keep one." I chuckle.

"I like to think so, sir." He responds.

"Good David. We shall see. I don't want my stewards to have to leave a room when I am talking to senior staff; unless, I ask. I want all of you to be able to complete anything you have

started. I will immediately demote and replace anyone passing on anything they hear in my office or quarters. Is that understood, Crewman?"

"Yes sir, perfectly." Angstrom responds with a bit of a shudder.

"Pass that on to the other stewards; and, to the stewards of the Senior Staff. There is an old saying from Earth's second World War that goes: "Loose lips sink ships." But, it's not just the security issues I'm worried about. Loose lips can cause a lot of disruption. No one talks out of turn on this ship or they may find themselves maintaining the heating system at one of the Academies. Tell me now if, you can't live with that. If you can, I will make you my senior steward and promote you to Petty Officer." I explain.

"Yes sir, I can handle it." David answers.

"Good. So, all the other stewards will work under your direction. I will post the promotion, right now. But, you make sure that, they all understand the rules; because, as their boss, you can catch hell, if they screw up. Understand?"

"Yes sir. I'll make sure they get it." He says as I punch in the announcement. I open the safe and acquire nine sets of PO's embroidered cloth chevrons and three jewelry sets. I hand them to the young man.

"This announcement won't appear until seventeen hundred hours. I am not officially in Command, until after sixteen hundred. However, you may tell the other stewards of the promotion and give them your orders regarding this matter. Get those insignia on your uniforms.' I explain; then continue. 'I need you to put this office into some kind of order. In the box, you will find pictures, awards and other paraphernalia that would go on the walls, table, desk and credenza. There is also a group of items in a separate box inside the big one marked - safe. That one should be left untouched and sealed; except to leave it inside the credenza. I must put those items away, myself. I also need my quarters put together. Half my belongings are aboard the Midgard for the next two weeks; but, I need my quarters put together; allowing for the additional wardrobe and personal items that will show up in two weeks. This is all stuff I would normally do, myself; but, I have numerous meetings and a Theatre Nine ceremony to attend to. You are the boss, now; so, you can have the other first shift steward take on some of this. Make sure he understands the rules, first. During my upcoming meeting, neither of you will be required to leave this office; until, you're finished anything you've started. Just keep on working quietly.

You may not interrupt. If you have a question, go on to something else. Ask it when the meeting is over. Is that all clear?" I ask.

"Yes sir." He answers; then, turns to activate his personal communications as he calls for his shift-one partner.

When the other appears, there is a whispered five-minute discussion during which the new PO holds out a hand to display the new insignia; and, the other Crewman looks up at me - I nod. The new PO begins working on the office while the other disappears.

Officers begin showing up at the door. I welcome them in and ask them to sit. In the end, there are nine guests, in the room. The couches, arm chairs and office chairs are filled. I pull my desk chair over to the conversation pit. I turn on my office recorder.

"We will be on a first name basis, in this office; but, because I am new, I will ask you to introduce yourselves the first time you need to speak. I am Captain Kurt Brubacher the new Commander of the Loki; and, you may all call me Kurt; after, the initial formalities have been observed. However, you may only be that relaxed in a private setting. I am sir or Captain, out there.' I point out the window. 'I will also tell you that, this meeting is being recorded. A transcript will go to Admiral Leeds, immediately after we adjourn.

The first order of business is that; I do not officially take command of the Loki until sixteen hundred hours. At that time, all command codes will be deactivated. We do not want to be dead in the water; so, I will send you a Senior Staff wide memo; so, you all have my mailing address. You will send back your name rank and assignment. When the codes are deactivated, I will issue new ones to you electronically. These will be prepared ahead. All I will have to do is hit "send" and all nine of you will get your new codes. Enter them immediately. Then, generate new ones for those subordinates you have who require them. Make sure you issue them at the correct level. We should have control of everything five minutes after I enter my codes.

The second order of business is security. What goes on between you and me remains between us. You do not discuss it outside in the presence of people not privy to it, in the first place. I will replace any officer that breaks that rule. You all know the OESA Rules and Regulations. If I am fomenting rebellion or being unpatriotic, it is your responsibility to report it, to my superior. Otherwise, what goes on between us is for no one else; unless, it goes out as a posting. Commander Elasima, I need you to stay after this meeting. We need to get the Marine Colonel in here. The navigation bridge should have a security contingent. No one should get on

this bridge unless cleared and checked. Anyone not belonging here, has to be invited onto the bridge. The Exec will be cleared for access by me. The Shift Commanders will be cleared for access, by the Exec; and they must give the security people a list of those on their shifts who are permitted on the bridge. The same goes for the Flag Bridge and the Flight Control Tower. An old world war two expression was; 'The value of security is self-evident. It wins the war and the peace'. I want you all to remember that. When it comes to our common surety, we will operate this ship as if we are at war, at all times. Does everyone understand? Can you live by these requirements? If you can't, let me know now. I will transfer you to a less sensitive position and find a replacement if you can't comply.' I pause to give time for responses. I see nods of assent from everyone; so, I continue.

I am glad you all agree.

The third order of business is the testing and shakedown of this vessel; which has not even begun. I went back to the shipyard log for the construction of the Loki. They never did one. I checked the ship's logs; since, she was attached to Phoenix. We have never completed it. The OESA requires proofing of each and every vessel; before, it is put into service. More important than that, I don't want the deck under my feet to suddenly disappear when, the ship blows up. Each and every engineering, tactical and the medical installation has equipment that must function correctly or someone may die. Even the galleys can become a hazard in battle situations. For example, if we lose a reactor and have to run another at one hundred and ten percent of maximum, we do not want to blow up the ship. We do the testing to ensure that, the ship and its systems will not fail us. We do the shakedown to be able to predict how much the vessel can take. All the while, we are trying to find her failure limits; so, we can employ the maximums, if needed. All the while, we are also tuning the staff to the vessel. The two aspects must work as a unit.

I have had experience at this. My last command was the ESS Shenzhen; and, I took her right from dry dock. I can tell you from that operation that, you don't find the problems; unless, you look hard for them. From that and Admiral Nichols records, I have developed a manual for this procedure. It is seventy-five pages long plus appendices including testing parameters and performance reports. You will receive the entire manual, now.' I click send on my data pad to forward the document to all nine. 'Read it all - not just the parts concerning your area. You need

to know what others are doing; in case, they need to ask you for assistance to facilitate their operations. The ship is an integrated unit. No one works in a vacuum.

For the first two weeks, El will take command of the process. That phase is all testing except the last step, in about ten days. That is the first light shakedown cruise. Of course the implied schedule only applies if you don't find anything major. Something that stops the whole ship for days, or requires docking at a facility, will cause a major hiccup in the timing. The timing is only a guideline. Even a stubborn minor problem can delay you; if that assembly is needed in the next stage of testing. You cannot go on; if, things are already out of whack. If you need to make a major repair, stop and do it. Do not try to continue on with the testing if there is a major issue, in any system. Timeline is less important than safety. No one cares if we take a little longer; as long as it means, the ship won't kill anyone.

You must accurately complete the reports required, at each step. If El does not receive a report from someone during a phase of testing, he cannot go on to the next. The report must be handed to him personally. The person handing it in will sit with the Exec as he inserts the results into the Failure Mode Testing software that will extrapolate the failure limits of the tested area. If a test falls below the recommended failure limit, the part or system has failed. If it is up to or exceeds the limit, the test was successful. We are trying to project a point where a system will fail; even if, it passes today. Testing and shakedown are progressive. They take the vessel through increasingly difficult requirements; so, it doesn't make sense to go on to the more stressful one if the one before isn't done successfully.

During testing and shakedown, you will be graded, too. El will be looking at your performance and reporting; as will I when I return. You must pass this phase, too. If you do not, you will be reassigned and someone else will fill the more senior role. This is life and death stuff, people. After this, we can work at becoming friends and shipmates. But, for now, you must prove yourselves. This ship cannot be taken into regular patrols or battle without certification from her first Captain and that Captain's Executive Officer that; she is sound. It's not just the ship and her crew. We may fail our Group or Fleet; if, we don't do this task with motivation and professionalism. Everything else depends on this.

Once I return, we will take a day for me to go over all the reports, failure mode analysis and crew evaluations. This may sound like a lot during a day; but, El will be keeping me up to date throughout the testing. After that day, we will disembark about fifty-five to sixty percent of

the crew, at Theatre Command. This phase is done with a two shift skeleton crew. If we blow up the ship, we don't want to kill the entire crew. The next two to four weeks will be spent taking the ship through more and more stressful shakedown jaunts that will tax her. We will return to the Theatre to exchange some personnel or take on more, on each trip; depending on the systems we are tasking. When we are sure, the entire crew will return and we will continue with longer and more difficult cruises; until, we complete the whole program.

During the first phase of testing, the CAG should have the fighter maintenance teams powering and testing all systems on each and every Raptor. During shakedowns, time will be allotted for the CAG to launch groups of vessels for stress testing. At the same time, medical should be testing all its diagnostic and treatment equipment. During the shakedowns they attend, they should be running intense emergency response drills. When I say the ship operates as a unit, I mean the whole vessel and all of its crew.

Once the shakedowns are complete, I will take a day to go over them with my XO. When we are certain we have acceptable results, we will sign off on the Loki's fitness. We will also complete any transfer, reassignment and promotion recommendations, at that time. The following day, we will present the documentation to Admiral Leeds, together. She will order the ship into service - or not.

When everything is certified, the Admiral will probably order a series of drills. Some will be independent; some will be in a Group; some will be in a Task Force and the last ones will be Fleet wide. This is to sharpen our skills within the environments the Loki will function. It's up to Admiral Leeds; but, these could take from two weeks to a month. So you will all be very tired two or three months from now. I will ask her for ship-wide rotating leaves, at that point.

Does anyone want to opt out? If you don't feel you can make the cut, you should go now.' I pause for a response. 'Does anyone have any questions?'

"Lt. Commander Laura Brent Chief Medical Officer asking; what happens if, the ship blows up during testing or shakedown."

"Everyone aboard would all die, of course. - But, let me say that, the manual establishes a means of testing each part of the ship a little harder at each phase. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all failures can be stopped and the system shut down. Failure mode is used at each step; so, we can determine if a system might fail at the next increment; allowing us to complete preventative repairs; so, we can avoid that risk in the coming phase. The likelihood of a ship wide

catastrophic failure is almost non-existent; if, we follow the plan exactly. Using this mode on the Shenzhen, we were able to find seventy-four failures and potential ones without risking the ship or its crew. In the end, it took us two weeks longer than projected; but, the ship was as safe as we could make it. I ran it for the next year under some pretty stressful situations without even coming close to a breakdown or failure. There is a second benefit to the procedure. If, the crew that does it is the one that operates the ship; it helps them gain confidence in their vessel and their abilities to know and operate it." I explain to her.

"Thank you, Captain. You are saying that because it is progressive, the testing and shakedown are relatively safe procedures." She asks.

"Yes Commander. Each step is secured by the one before it. That's why there can be no shortcuts. Anyone not doing their job at one hundred percent can endanger the whole ship and crew. The greatest risk is of people not being professional or not staying motivated. I will tell you that, it is tedious, demanding and sometimes boring work. It can cause people's attention to wander. That is why I stress that, they must stay motivated and professional. Everyone's lives depend on everyone else being at one hundred percent, during the whole time. And, I must tell you all that, you must impress on your people that; if, they are having a bad day, they should ask for relief; and, you should listen to them. Relieve anyone that feels they cannot remain focused, at any time. The hardest time will be the first four days of shakedown; when, we run on a skeleton crew. It's hard to relieve people when your short staffed. If you run into that and cannot resolve it, report to El or me. We will find a way to resolve it; even if, it means we have to stop for a day. We must not let an accident happen; because, someone wasn't relieved, when they should have been. A side note to that point is that, anyone needing to be relieved on two or more days of the procedure should be sent to Medical. There may be something wrong with them. For example, a simple shortage of iron can make a person feel so tired they cannot remain focused or attentive. Am I right, doctor?" I ask Laura.

"...One hundred percent right, Captain. I can issue an outline, to all the Senior Officers, of signs of fatigue to watch for that can have a number of causes, if you'd like, sir." She offers.

"That would be great doctor. Does anyone have any other questions or observations? I ask. There are no takers; so, I go on.

I know I sound like a serious hard-ass, right now. And, the XO will seem like one, too. But, its only because we have a brand new ship that probably has a lot of bugs hiding in it. We'll

work hard at coming together as a crew, after this is out of the way. Good luck everyone. Everyone except El is dismissed." I end the meeting. Everyone rises and leaves.

"Office Recorder - cease recording. Convert voice recording to text and send to my data pad.' I order the system, then. What did you think, El?" I ask.

"I don't think anyone thought of you as a hard-ass. I think that none of us ever thought of the problems you could have aboard a new ship; and, we're probably all thankful we have a new Captain who knows what to do. All we ever saw was its shiny newness. No one wants to die unnecessarily. I think it went well. Do you want me to call in the Colonel now, Kurt?" I nod my assent as he finishes.

When Colonel Siskalis arrives, there are none of the usual formalities. We are both level six officers.

"You wanted to see me Captain Brubacher? I am Colonel Siskalis." The massive man explains.

"Yes Colonel. We need to talk. I am concerned, at the moment. May I ask if this is your first Regimental Command." I ask.

"Yes Captain. I was promoted from a Battalion Command on the Espanola." He responds.

"What a small world. I spent a year on the Espanola as Second Officer. Anyway, I ask because the security requirements are different at the Regimental level. The Regimental Commander is responsible for Group wide security. This includes security on the Bridges and Flight Control Tower. We would not want an intruder taking command of our ship; or, taking Admiral Leeds hostage. Regulations require you to post security at the entrances to each of the spaces I mentioned. They stipulate two per shift minimum. However, from experience, I recommend half shifts of two. It is boring work. Half a shift is about all anyone can take before being bored out of their mind. Don't misunderstand me. I do not mean to intrude in your area of responsibility. I just wanted to make sure that, you just hadn't gotten around to it, yet. It is not regulation; but, I would also ask that, you post security at engineering areas like the reactors and the environmental oxygen generators; so, no unwanted intruders can get at them. It's just a thought." I use my most ambassadorial tone.

"As a matter of fact, I was just in the process of writing the orders for bridge security, when your Exec called. And later on the Midgard, I was going to ask for a meeting with you

about your thought on securing other sensitive areas. I am glad we agree." Colonel Siskalis' response is sheepishly unconvincing, as he rises.

"Thank you Colonel. I am sure the Admiral will be relieved when, she sees what you've done." I respond as I offer my hand to the departing officer.

I turn to my system and send out a communiqué.

MEMO

To: *Vice Admiral Helena Leeds*

From: *Captain Kurt Brubacher*

Re: *Meeting*

Date: *Oct. 3 2255*

Admiral,

I am still aboard the Loki; winding up business. May I see you, now. It is important.

Kurt.

I receive a reply inviting me down to her office, immediately.

"Captain Brubacher and Commander Elasima reporting for our meeting, sir." I announce, while at attention.

"Relax gentlemen; and, take a seat, please. What's on your mind Captain?"

"Sir, I have to ask a delicate question, at the risk of my new command and off the record; if that's okay with you." I tell her

"Go ahead, Captain. We can make this unofficial; if you would like." She offers.

"Yes Admiral. I think that would be better. Admiral, can I ask when you were promoted to this level?" I speak softly and in my most apologetic tone.

"I was a Rear Admiral until a month ago. Phoenix is my first Fleet Command. Why do you ask?" She queries.

"Well sir; it's just that regulation stipulates that, no ship is to be run in normal operations; until, certified fit by her first Captain and that Captain's Executive Officer. The regulations on determining fitness are quite specific. There is a testing and shakedown operation that takes four to eight weeks; depending on any required repairs." I am still speaking softly.

"Good catch, Captain. I do remember that regulation; but, have never been in this situation before. I had completely forgotten it." She responds admiringly.

"There's more Admiral." I offer.

"Go ahead, Captain. Let me have both barrels." She laughs as she makes the statement.

"Sir, regulations also state that no Senior Flag officer shall even board an uncertified vessel. This is because the loss of a Vice Admiral in a ship's mishap would be too great." I advise her softly.

"Good catch, again. I don't even have to check. Though I'd forgotten it, I remember that clause, too. What do you propose we do?"

"Well sir, I would welcome you making Loki your flag vessel, after we certify it; but, I recommend you move to a certified vessel ASAP. Then, we should take Loki through the procedure." I offer in a more commanding voice.

"Who can supervise the procedure?" She asked.

"I have taken part in two certifications under Admiral Nichols, when he supervised the first expansion of Boots Fleet. I also ran the certification program for the Shenzhen. The first assigned Captain is supposed to supervise the process, anyway; so, why don't I run it, Admiral? I ask.

"Yes, that would be good; but, what about the war college?" She asks.

"It's no problem. I will still attend. I have prepared a manual on the proofing procedure. Commander Elasima will take the ship through the static testing phase; reporting to me at each step. The ship can remain right here at Midgard. It shouldn't be moving position for the next two weeks. Then, I will board the Loki and take on the rest of the job myself. The Commander is fully aware of process. I will send you the manual, now.' I tap my pad; then continue. 'It is about a hundred and twenty pages long including the appendices. I've also held a meeting with the Loki's Senior Staff about this matter. I am sending you the transcript, now.' I tap my pad, again. 'If you're in agreement with this, it would be wise for you to send a memo to Admiral Nichols telling him the Loki is out of service pending certification; you are leaving it at Midgard, during the testing phase; and that, you are moving your flag. Don't mention me in the memo. It doesn't matter who brought this matter up. It only matters that, you are following regulations.'" I finish.

"This brings up another problem, Captain." The Admiral says.

"What's that, sir?" I ask.

"I took over the Fleet when it was almost completely formed. I don't know which other ships may not be certified." The Admiral offers.

"That's easy to check, Admiral. The certifying officer has to go to the Fleet Commander and present the documents. The Fleet Commander then orders the ship into service. If you go to the previous Fleet Commander's logs, you should be able to match the orders to the vessels. Your COS can probably help you with that; especially if, the chief was the previous Commander's, too." I explain.

"Very Good thinking, Captain. Your supporters are right. You are a bright one. Anything else?" The Admiral asks.

"One more thing, Admiral. After the ceremony; when, I am actually in command of Loki; you should write me an order grounding the vessel and order me to conduct or supervise testing and shakedown of the vessel. You should copy that order to Admiral Nichols. It officially accounts for the grounding and inactivity of the ship." I advise.

"You sure know which side your bread is buttered on!" She responds admiringly.

"I was taught by the best. When you spend most of your career under the watch of Admiral Bryant and under Admiral Nichols wing, you learn the right way." I answer.

"Why such a close bond; if, you don't mind me asking." She enquires.

"It's not in my file and it's not common knowledge; but I got off to a very bad start with both Admirals Bryant, as a midshipman. He was a Vice Admiral and she was a Lieutenant, at that time. They gave me a second chance; and, I made the most of it. Since then, they have always kept an eye on my performance and career. Admiral Nichols was enlisted in my cause by Admiral Bryant. The two have always been close. Since that one episode, I have always endeavored to give the OESA my very best. Before I do anything, I ask myself how it would be viewed by the service, Admiral Bryant and Admiral Nichols. That has always motivated and guided me." I explain.

"I won't ask about the details of the episode. Your academy records are excellent; and, your career has been exemplary; so, I will accept it at face value and tell you they tried to enlist me, too. And, you just sold me on your cause.

I just want to ask your Exec if he is sure of his responsibility in the testing and shakedown of the Loki' She enquires and watches as he nods his assent.

"Your both dismissed... and thank you." She says with a smile as we rise to leave.

When we'd both left the Admiral turned to her system and began to write.

MEMO

*From: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet
To: Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Theatre Nine
C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki (pending)
Re: ESS Loki Carrier Craft Vessel
Date: October 3, 2255*

Admiral,

I am advising you that, it has come to my attention that the ESS Loki is currently uncertified. Due to this situation, I am taking it out of service, immediately. This may affect Phoenix patrols at the Group, Task or even Fleet level. I am also auditing to determine if any other recently acquired vessels or equipment have slipped through the cracks.

We are assembling a team to take the Loki through testing and shakedown cruises.

I will be temporarily moving my flag to a certified vessel. I will advise you, after completion of the audit determining which vessels are okay.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

MEMO

*From: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet
To: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki (pending)
C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Theatre Nine
Re: ESS Loki Carrier Craft Vessel
Date: October 3, 2255*

Captain,

It has come to my attention that the ESS Loki is uncertified. First of all, I would like to apologize for any inconveniences this causes. The Loki was acquired just before I took command of Phoenix Fleet.

I wish to ask if you have had any experience in certifying a new vessel; since, the ship's first assigned Captain must sign off on its worthiness with the First Officer. Please immediately advise me of the role you may be capable of playing in completing this task.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

I send the following message as soon as I receive Admiral Leeds's memo.

MEMO

From: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki (pending)

To: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, Commander Elasima Executive Officer ESS Loki

Re: ESS Loki Carrier Craft Vessel

Date: October 3, 2255

Admiral Leeds,

While in Boots Fleet, I participated in the certification of two vessels, including a Carrier, under the direction of then Commodore Stephen Nichols. This was during the first expansion acquisitions when Boots was expanded to four Groups. During the addition of Fifth Mobile I led the certification of the ESS Shenzhen and certified the vessel as its first Captain. During that process, I constructed a manual for the procedure; which can be easily modified for conducting the procedure on a Carrier Class Vessel. I will use my experience during testing of the Espanola and Admiral Nichols records of other Carrier certifications to modify the manual. I feel confident I can lead the process, delegating some of the testing portion to my new first officer, while I am aboard Midgard. I should find it easier with the Loki grounded at this location. I have met my new Exec; and, I have no reservations about Commander Elasima's abilities.

Captain Kurt Brubacher.

I don't know where the day has gone. It's thirteen thirty and I have to meet Admiral Nichols at his office an hour before the ceremony. I shuttle back the Midgard, shower dress and change.

At fifteen hundred, I am at his office.

"Come in, Captain; and, relax." He waves me in. "By all the mail that's flying around, it looks like you're having quite a day. Good catch, Kurt." He says through a grin.

"Sir?" I am playing stupid.

"Don't play dumb with me. Helena is very forthcoming. She sent the memos to cover all butts. But, she'd already called, face to face, and filled me in on everything. I know it was you who caught the mistake - or maybe mistakes; and, had the solutions all worked out. What'll happen on the Loki while, you're taking classes?" Nichols asks.

"I met with my Exec. Then, we met with the senior staff. Everyone has a plan for the testing and shakedown. Elasima will run the daily testing, receive the reports and complete the

Failure analysis for the day's operation. He will forward it to me, at the end of each day. I will examine it and counsel him on anything to look out for. With the Loki here, I can even take a run over and deal with him directly. But, I want to delegate it to him. I don't really want to mother him. The Loki will be done testing around the time I'm done with the courses; so, I will board and take over the slow cruise; which is the last of the testing. We will take her to where the crew can get a little rest; and, I will declare three days of rotating leaves. Then we will head back to the Fleet at twenty percent. The next weeks will be spent doing shakedown cruises that stress specific system. Repairs will be done as needed; including any that require dock time. I told the team that it's quality, and not speed, that matters in this process. We don't go to the next step if there are unresolved issues with the step before it. They seem to understand. They are aware of how attentive, professional and motivated they have to remain through the process; so, no one will die because of a failure. I'm sending you the manual I prepared for this. It's the bible we're all following. I am also forwarding the transcript of my staff meeting; which, I recorded." I finish as I tap on my data pad. Nichols opens the files, one at a time.

"This manual will take a while to look over; but, your meeting transcript looks great. This is the perfect example of why Bryant and I want to push you along. You are smart, authoritative, tactically skilled and a good manager. By your last command, I know that, this "tough love" displayed in the first meeting will turn into camaraderie. And, you have tact; as, you displayed in the way you handled Vice Admiral Leeds and tried to handle me. You can be trusted. I have asked Admiral Leeds to give you your head, when possible. If there is a Group situation and the Task Commander can't be there, she will give you temporary field command of the Group. That will give you experience and keep your whistle wet." Nichols explained.

We spend the next half hour just chatting about the old days with just two Groups, nearly four squads, no Mobile Fifth and no Task Commands; and, projecting the future based on where we are at now. It is relaxing and fun; but, at fifteen forty hours, Nichols rises.

"We better get going. It takes ten minutes to get there and another ten to get positioned. That's if everything goes to the schedule." He laughs.

We walk silently down the corridor. We exit the lift nine levels below on six and turn left heading for the large amphitheater. Everything goes like clockwork. I am reassigned, first; since, all other moves stem from that. The other promotions and assignments take another hour. By seventeen-thirty hours, we are on our way to a small dinner buffet. At nineteen hundred, I excuse

myself and my senior officers. We have a lot to do. We grab a small meeting room on the same level of the Midgard.

"Have you all looked over the manual?' There are nine nods of assent.

'Anyone have any questions; or, observations?' I ask.

"Yes Captain, I do have an observation for the rest of the team. I went over the manual carefully; and, I believe that, if we follow it to the letter - and in sequence; we will find all consequential problems while maintaining a safe environment. I can see that, experience and a lot of thought went into this. I was also elected to be a kind of spokesperson. We all agree that you are not a hard-ass - you are just trying to look after our wellbeing. Some of us know people on the Shenzhen. We think you are concerned for our safety. We are happy you came along just in time to stop us from flying around in a potentially dangerous vessel. We will do the job as you asked us to do it.' The Lt. Commander was just about yelling as she looked around at her other officers. 'Let's welcome our new Captain." She finishes as she puts up her right arm.

The other eight do the same as they all call out in unison. "Rah." It is the traditional OESA cheer.

"We'll drop over to the Loki, in an hour to take a tour. I know the Carriers; but, I need to meet some of her crew and just chat with them a little. And, I want all of you with me; if, you don't mind. In the meantime, let's all head to the bar and have one to celebrate our good fortune." I suggested to a chorus of nods and verbal assents.

We all enjoy a drink together then shuttle over to the Loki; starting the tour in engineering. A party of ten of the ship's senior officer makes everyone nervous; so, we spend time in each department relaxing everyone. Then, we make small talk with them. We go to weapons, after an hour in engineering; then, to medical; repeating the same process, at each location. After three hours, I make my apologies to the other senior officers and tell them I must get back to the Midgard.

I am extremely busy during the two weeks of classes. They are intense. And, it's an independent learning program; so, I pack in all I can. Some nights are spent travelling; so, I can be on another command vessel in time for a class. Though they are nearly fifteen light-years from each other, the two Theatre Commands are each only ten-light years from the Valhalla. So, by planning carefully, I can go from the Midgard to the Valhalla; take a class; then, go to the

Asgard; take another class; then, go back to the Valhalla. This means I never have to travel more than eight hours in one shot.

Each night, I get reports from the Loki. Testing is going well. Fusion reactor one has a problem in its cooling system at one hundred ten percent of maximum volume. It was fixed by a specialist from the Midgard; so, we wouldn't have to take it to a dock. The shielding in one section of the ship is fluctuating, when we are drawing a lot of power for other systems and stressing the shield with energy hits. Loki's own engineering team found a loose power coupling and fixed it. Day five of the testing is the most frustrating. It involves the AMPE engines. They both cut out at power equivalent to thirty-five percent of light speed, in static testing. This is not good. We usually travel at twenty; but, can go up to forty percent in an emergency. During shakedown, we have to test it to forty-five percent. We are looking for a Failure Mode prediction of near sixty percent; not thirty percent.

All carriers have a great deal of engine expertise, on board. You don't want to be stranded in normal space thirty light years from help with no FTL engines. It turns out to be a defective particle trap. One trap holds hydrogen particles; the other contains the anti-hydrogen. The hydrogen trap is cutting out as its field has to contain more particles, at higher demands. Though the anti-matter trap passed, it seems prudent to change it, too. Anti-matter protons coming in contact with the trap housing could destroy the ship. So, I order them to pull both and check out the numbers on them. They are from the same production run. I order them both replaced with ones from a different batch. Fortunately, the Midgard had stock. Ours is the same as the bad one. Day eight finds problems with two banks of fifteen dual cannon assemblies, in one of the gun placements. Again it turns out to be particle traps; which are the same as the ones in the AMPE engines. They have the same batch number, too. Again, we requisition two from the Midgard to replace the one in the failing unit and the other placement. Both the engines and the cannons test out to one hundred and ten percent; and, project to twenty million shots before failure. This is nearly double the requirement. Its excessive for the cannons; but, the engines could pulse twenty thousand times in one twenty light year trip. Day twelve brings problems with the Ion Propulsion. It is the field coil that magnetically accelerates gas to high speed just before charging. It is made by the same company that supplies the trap coils. By day fourteen, the testing phase is still not finished; as I leave the Midgard and board the Loki. I spend an hour

going over the accumulated results with my XO. We still have twenty percent of the testing phase to complete; before, we can go on to the shakedown runs.

"Elasima, I am going to let you finish this phase. You are handling it just fine. I will spend my time on the bridge, studying for my program and visiting the crew. It will give me a chance to get to know a few more people." I explain.

"Thank you for the confidence, Captain. And, good luck with your studies." He responds.

Testing finally ends after three weeks. We found an unusual number of issues. Most related to one company's production. I prepare a preliminary report for my superiors.

MEMO

From: Captain K. Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

To: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Theatre Nine

Re: T&S ESS Loki

Date: Oct 24, 2255

Sir,

This is a brief preliminary report on the testing and shakedown of the ESS Loki. Today, the testing phase was finished, to our satisfaction. My XO, Commander Elasima managed this operation, under my supervision. I must say that, he has been most thorough and professional. It has taken us a week longer than projected to complete this phase; because of extensive required repairs and modifications; necessary to make the vessel flight worthy. For the most part, this has been caused by failures of electrical parts manufactured by one company. I will attach a list of the offending items. This ship was at risk of failure or catastrophic explosion from the time of its delivery. We will begin the shakedown phase tomorrow morning. I will keep you apprised every few days. A final extensive report will be presented, at the end of shakedown cruises.

Captain Kurt Brubacher.

I order the helm to set a course taking us from HD75829 to HD 75809 a yellow star just one and a half light years away. Astronomers are still studying their motions to determine if the two stars are a binary. I order us to jump with velocity set to five percent of light speed. It will take twenty-eight hours and fifty-five minutes to make a jump that usually takes a little over seven hours. We will be able to test all systems except propulsion at full power, or greater. I

order the shields set to one hundred ten percent of maximum. We crawl to the jump point on a long acceleration ramp; first with the IPS than with the AMPE system. Both operate flawlessly. When we activate the Casimir emitter it opens the jump vortex in the correct location and trajectory; and we are off. The entire crew diligently spends that twenty-eight-hour period monitoring all systems carefully and reporting their readings every fifteen minutes.

We are all very relieved when we finally arrive at our destination. The system boasts two GLZ planets that support life and one is a paradise supporting a beautiful intelligent humanoid species.

"Post your leave bulletin.' I tell my Exec. 'It's still your show; so, you should do it; and, in your own name. Just copy me on the memo.'" I add.

A moment later there is a chime notification from my data pad.

MEMO

From: Commander Elasima Executive Officer ESS Loki

To: All officers and crew ESS Loki.

Re: Testing and Shakedown

B.C.C. Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

Date: October 26, 2255

All,

I am pleased to inform you that, arriving at HD75809 has completed the testing phase of our task. There is still a lot to be done; but, the next phase of the operation will be managed by Captain Brubacher.

I want to take a moment to thank you all for a job well done. We have completed a daunting task and eliminated many dangerous issues, at the same time. We have brought this vessel to a state of readiness capable of completing the required shakedown cruises. We did it as a team. And, we did it without injury to any of our crew.

In recognition of a job well done. I am placing the entire vessel on rotating shore leaves. Department heads and shift commanders are asked to provide a timetable for your crews; so, all personnel may enjoy equal time ashore during the three-day period. I will hope that all will have a great time; but, will remember they represent the Loki and the OESA, when ashore. I

ask you not to abuse this privilege. It is imperative we depart HD 75809 at thirteen. hundred hours on Monday October 29th OESA time; if, we are to maintain our mission timeline.

Commander Elasima

"I guess you had it ready to go, eh El?" I ask.

"Yes sir, that was the plan.' He responds with a wide grin. "May I ask where you're going?" He adds.

"I will take full advantage of the next shore leave. I will grant a week after the shakedown. And, I will take the full week; since, I have you, a second officer, a third officer and a fourth officer to rotate in command, in place of me. But, I need to complete this final day's analysis; and, put the complete testing into a package that will be part of the overall report. Then, I need to study like hell. The course I am on is intensive. And, I will rotate with the other three shift Commanders to run the bridge. You are ordered to take the entire three days ashore. You've worked your ass off; and, you deserve it. But, I am staying aboard, this time." I explain to him.

"Thank you, Captain. I appreciate the compliment; and, the leave. I will enjoy it. But, I have a question that's been nagging at me." El states in an enquiring manner.

"What's that, Commander?" I ask

"What do they teach on that course, anyway? They sure have you working your butt off." He asks with genuine concern.

"Well, it is the equivalent of two full time university level semesters. There are six classes in each one. The same subjects are taught in each - just more advanced in the second one. It is classed as a fellowship over and above your graduate degree. You can add PHD/GOP after your name, if you want. But, we use titles so much that, I would never use it. I don't ever display my PHD - without this designation. Anyway, the courses are Military Law, Defensive Tactics, Offensive Tactics, Regional Strategies, Accounting for CEO's and Managing Human Resources in a large enterprise. But, they are very different from anything you've seen in the Command Program. Military law concerns treaties and sovereignty. It also includes the makeup and conduction of military tribunals and trials. The next semester is an in depth look at the Criminal Code. The tactical courses concern Defensive and Offensive tactical planning at a Group level, Task Force level and Fleet Level. The second semester is tactics at the Theatre and Quadrant Levels. It's probably okay to just pass it; if, all you want is a star or two. But, if you want to go to the very top, you need to really learn it. I can see that this gives a potential Flag Officer the

grounding needed to go to the top. The rest will be gained by experience and on site lessons from your immediate Commanders. The Accounting and Human Resources programs take you all the way into HQ. You learn a lot about why things are done; not just how to do them. And, you learn a lot of the ins and outs of the service, in those programs." I explain.

"Wow, it sounds like a lot." El says.

"Yes but, at your current level your commander recommends you for the program; when, he says you're ready for promotion; if, he feels you are Flag material. I can tell you that, I would recommend you, so far. Keep up the good work! Anyway, you don't seem to be afraid of work; and your Academy marks were excellent; so, I think you'd breeze through it." I stop before I get carried away and turn it into a pep talk.

"Anyway, thanks for the information. And, thanks for the leave. May I be excused, please?" The Commander asks.

"You're dismissed; and, make sure you enjoy your leave." I offer with a smile as El turns to leave the bridge.

There wasn't a lot to do in command of the bridge while the ship was orbiting, for three days. Aside from asking for status, every quarter-hour or so, I had a lot of time on my hands; so, I decided to do my analysis of the final test, from the bridge. Each day, I had spent three to four hours just going over all the reports and numbers; before, running the Finite Analysis software; which analyses sub-systems and parts individually; determining their weaknesses. It takes things a little deeper than the Failure Mode Analysis. I would do this part at my station. When the shift ended, I would finish the software portion at my desk, in my office; then, begin composing the actual report for that phase.

I call up the data on my pad; then, send it to my internal com. Everything from the flight is there. Quarter-hour reports on performance of engines, shields, environmental, navigation, power generation and usage, recycling, gravitation, inertial dampening, computer throughput. network demand, network performance, CPU and every other system and sub-system you could think of; except weapons. They were not tested throughout the trip. Weapons testing would be done during each of the coming shakedown cruises. Medical and the Galleys ran different kinds of testing; during the run. Medical put all systems into intense operation with no patients. Their reports included the hardware used in pathology, diagnostic imaging and a host of other areas. They even ran all the surgical operating room lights continuously for the twenty-nine hours. The

Galley kept all ovens, burners, fryers and heat units running, off batteries, for the twenty-eight hours. The hangar bays fixed static loads to the magnetic catapults and cycled them fourteen thousand times during the trip; recording the vibration and loads of each cycle. The launch bay doors were opened and closed fourteen hundred times simulating the launch of fourteen thousand raptors in groups of ten. Compartment doors were closed and sealed four thousand times during the excursion and docking seals were tested a thousand times during the same period. While all the ship testing was going on, each raptor was latched in place and run at twenty percent velocity for a hundred hours while temperature, vibration and efficiency of engines were monitored. Shuttles were put through the same testing. Even the high tower turret trucks in the storage area were put through a thousand withdrawal and insertions of items. In all there were nearly a thousand pages of reports to digest. Over a hundred and ten failure analysis would come from those reports.

After spending the shift going over the numbers, I begin entering them into the program, at my office station. The final step is put them all together in one final analytical calculation. According to the testing results, we should be able to run everything on the ship at one hundred twenty percent of maximum for ten years without a failure. Of course, that analysis does not include incidents out of the norm; like the vibrations experienced when your ship is hit by an enemy missile. However, that analysis would be done, too; in the next phase.

I work straight through to four hundred hours on that first day; finally quitting for efficiency reasons. I head to bed; waking at ten hundred thirty in the morning. After a cleanup and breakfast, I get right to it; and by the time the shift starts at eighteen hundred, I have completed all the analysis. With that in hand, I will compose the report from my duty station. In the end, I don't really get much time to study; but, the report is finished by the end of the stay at HD75809.

I meet with my senior officers on October 29th at eleven hundred hours.

"I hope everyone had a great shore leave. I know it wasn't very long; but, we have tight time restraints on this mission. Our Fleet Commander needs to know she can count on Loki; and she needs to know that, quickly. We will do a much longer shore leave at the end of our shakedown. We will head back to the Midgard, today. The object is to program our acceleration ramp to reach twenty percent of light speed in under twenty minutes before entering the jump vortex. That will stress the Ion Propulsion system to its limits; and, put a little strain on the

AMPE system, too. We will sustain twenty percent in the vortex, testing our stabilizers throughout the jump. For those who don't know, the shielding is shaped to stabilize us in the vortex. By adjusting its shape, we can change the attitude of the craft in relation to the vortex walls. This usually allows us to make the ride more comfortable. The object of this exercise, is to ensure that, we have full command of our shield system. The aim of the trip is to prove that the vessel can be stressed in a rapid acceleration curve and will travel safely at standard speeds. Based on testing and the trip here, I would project only minor issues, today.

We will park at the Midgard when we reach HD75829, for a day; to disembark the entire crew that makes up shifts, three, four, and five. Some will be retrieved in a few hours; others, should arrange for quarters. During the offload time, we will requisition and store any supplies we need; then, offload all the warehousing team; except one supervisor and a skeleton crew to fill any urgent need that may come up during the next test. We will also analyze the results of the trip to HD75829, we just made. We will do that together; so, you will become familiar with the process. If we are satisfied that, the results of the flight met expectations; we will start the first shakedown cruise. If not, we will take the time to repair and adjust anything we found. Those should be minor issues; so, we will go on to the cruise, after repairs. The cruise will mimic the acceleration ramp we just ran; but will take us to twenty-three percent of E. We will travel back to HD75809 holding that speed in the vortex. We will stop to analyze the results; then, return to HD75829 at twenty-five percent of max speed. When we have returned, we will analyze all results and make any adjustments. We will need to focus on reported structural integrity, propulsion, shielding and chronometer results. Chronometer time dilation should be within one nano second of calculated value; or, we need a new control module for our cesium unit. When we are satisfied all is well, we will begin the next shakedown; which is a return to HD75809 at twenty-seven percent of max. The failure analysis at this point; should give us a picture of how safe the ship will be at speeds up to double standard mode. If we find only minor variations, we will bring the rest of the crew back. The tests that follow will be at much longer distances; and we will need a full crew. The next step will be a run to HR5070 which is twenty-two and a half light years, from here. We will do the entire run at twenty percent over four and a half days; then stop for a day to analyze the results. While stopped we will do a series of raptor launches attempting to achieve seven seconds per launch. Raptor flight plans will take them on a half hour winding trip at various speeds; firing cannons set to twenty percent. A report on all aspects of

each and every fighter must be received by EI, before we leave the star system. When we are sure all is well, we will return to HR75829 at twenty-five percent. That trip will take a little over three and a half days. We will follow the same procedure for analyses as we did at HR5070. If we had to change the module in the chronometer, we will have to check it closely again to ensure the new one meets specifications. We will be two days at the Midgard at this point. The analysis of the Loki takes roughly the same time at each step; but, we will need the additional day to complete the analysis of all one hundred ten raptors. I will have each of you do some of them; so, you continue to get more familiar with the Failure Analysis and Finite Analysis software. Also, at this phase, I will have EI do the vessels overall results. I will check all your numbers, of course.' I add with a smile and stop for the chuckles to die down.

That will have been the most crucial test. We will have a good idea of how hard we can push this vessel and what her strengths and weaknesses are. From then on, we will be pretty sure that we will not face any catastrophic problems caused by a ship's flaw.

If we are still satisfied, we will head back to HR5070. Our acceleration ramp will take us to thirty-percent in normal space and we will hold it during the three-day trip. At HR5070 we will stop to analyze. You will be doing all the grunt work, on this leg. EI will do the overall. And, I'll just spot check the results. When we are satisfied, we will head back to the Midgard this time looking for thirty-five percent in normal space and throughout the jump. It will take about sixty hours to reach HR75829. This leg will be the hardest on the communication system. Maintaining communications during a jump is complex; but much harder at thirty-five percent. However, analyses of this data, will have to determine if indicated problems are operator error or system problems. We don't want glitches in our com lines; but, we also don't want to hunt for a problem that isn't there. Seven of you will do the grunt work of the analysis. The eighth will do the overall, and EI will check all the numbers. I will just quick scan them at this point; because, your all new at this. If we are happy, we will go to the last step. We will jump from the Midgard to 14 Hercules; doing the entire trip at forty percent. That means, we will be at 14H in just four days seven hours. If we like the analysis, we will head to Phoenix Fleet at a leisurely thirty-five percent.

We will be docked with the Admiral's temporary flag ship for three days while we assemble all the results into a report. It will end up at about six hundred pages plus all the certifications. We need to certify every sub-system of the vessel, every raptor, every piece of

medical equipment, all galley equipment, all warehouse machinery, every light and heavy piece of marine armor, every weapon system, the engine systems, the shield system, the communication system, the environmental system, the recycling system, the hangar launch chutes, the hangar launch doors, the shuttle bay doors, the docking seals and locks, the Casimir system and the remanufacturing system by serial number; so, make sure all that grunt work for each part stays in tact with all its system wide data. After that, we combine it into an overall certification of the vessel highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, if any. When we are finished, you will know this ship, like a good old friend; and, you will be confident in her ability to look after us; if, we look after her.

.....
"Captain Kurt Brubacher reporting, Admiral." I snap, while at attention.

Today is a special day. It is Tuesday December 18, 2255 and I am reporting to Vice Admiral Leeds. She has Phoenix Fleet at Eta Corona Borealis, now. I have the certifications of the Loki, in hand, on my data pad; along with a prepared memo, to reduce any angst she may have at the size of the report. I also have a box under my arm containing hard copies of the five hundred ninety-seven-page report and the four hundred twelve certifications. Many of the certificates are for up to as many as thirty-five subsystem serial numbers. We have actually accepted eighty-two hundred twenty units; plus, the ESS Loki. I had hit the send button; as, I approached her door. I had already asked permission to see her.

"Take a seat, Captain; and unload, please. What do you have there?" She asks.

"I have your holiday gift from the officers and crew of the Loki." I tell her as I begin to lay out the hard copies on her credenza; before, I take my seat.

"This is the hard copy report and all the certifications, for the Loki, I am required to present you. I have sent you a soft copy and a memo; so, you don't have to actually read all this." I say; just as, the chime on her data pad sounds. She opens the mail.

"The file is huge!" She exclaims.

"Yes, sir. The report is nearly six hundred pages and there are over four hundred certificates. That's why I sent the memo." I explain; as she opens it.

MEMO

From: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

To: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

C.C. *Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, Commander Elasima Executive Officer ESS Loki*

Re: Certification of the ESS Loki

Date: December 18, 2255

Admiral,

My team and I have completed the very detailed and demanding job of certifying the ESS Loki. The procedure was not without incident. Initial testing revealed problems that, at the least, could have greatly interfered with the vessel's ability to support the Fleet. At the worst, some issues could have led to catastrophic failure with loss of all the ship's personnel. These issues were repaired and or modified prior to the shakedown phase of the operation.

During shakedown, the vessel was taken on trips of various lengths stressing her systems from below standard to one hundred twenty percent of overall required maximum performance. Failure analysis indicates that the vessel is capable as a combined unit of actually achieving one hundred twenty-five percent of required maximum performance for up to ten days before a non-catastrophic failure would occur in her power generation system. At accepted maximums, failure analysis indicates all systems will function as expected before a major overhaul would be needed of power, propulsion, weapons and shielding systems in five years. This is not to say that, the Loki is immune from failure and the need for repairs; but, the likelihood of her successful operation over the five-year period is indicated at 99.99555% by the best analysis means available.

With that being said, both Commander Elasima and I have signed her certifications. We feel she is a great ship that will service us for a couple of decades, with distinction.

We have presented our nearly six-hundred-page report in both hard and soft copies for your examination; and, have included the more than four hundred sub-system certifications and the final over all certification of the ship to you.

We hope this meets your requirements and needs.

I must add that, though El and I both expected to find the need for personnel changes during such a demanding process, we were pleased to find the Senior Officers, Officers and Crew worked as a team. I am proud of my Loki personnel. This brought them all together as a well synchronized team.

In the interest of fairness to them, I ask that the Loki remain detached for another two weeks; so, I may grant them a generous leave. They are tired; and, they have earned it.

With my deepest respect,

Captain Kurt Brubacher

"Very good, Captain. ...Very good, indeed.' The Admiral was smiling. Then, she continued. 'After the problems you initially encountered, I did not think you would be able to present the Loki, until the New Year. So, you and your team may take her wherever; and, be back here by January 3, 2256. I want you to know how impressed I am, with you... and your team. I especially liked that first meeting you held. You set the ground rules very well. Since then, you seemed to have gained their loyalty and respect. I have received ten e-mails from your senior officers; who seem to have gone on some kind of letter writing campaign. They all love you; and, expressed their appreciation of the detail you enforced during the Loki shakedowns. They all appreciate your teaching skills. It seems that, most of them feel they learned enough to conduct the same trials on a new ship, themselves. That is a real confidence builder.

I also want to convey the gratitude a lot of people feel over your manuals outlining the procedure. There has been a flurry of mailings about the subject. I have been copied on e-mails between Admiral Nichols and Admiral Bryant; and between Bryant and Admiral Stephenson. It seems Admiral Bryant is imbedding a reference to them in the appropriate section of the Regulations amended for use in Mobile Fifth and Stephenson is pushing to place the same reference into the OESA Rules and Regulation. Your manuals are the law in Mobile Fifth and will probably be the law in the Empire, shortly. Everyone is very impressed; especially Admiral Nichols; who has done more certifications than anyone else.

How are your War College courses going?" She startled me with the off-topic question.

"Fairly well Admiral. I managed to keep up during all the stops at the Midgard. I even pulled ahead of my personal schedule, on my own, during one of our stops. I just wrote the first semester exams. My marks came in, yesterday. I can send them to you, if you want." I offer.

"It's not necessary. I will get an official copy. It'll probably come today; if, you received it, yesterday. How'd you do?" She asked.

"...Three hundred percent, one ninety-seven and two ninety-ones." I respond.

"Impressive considering the length of time and the stress you've been under. How long for you to finish the second semester." She asks.

"It's hard to say; because, I need access to a Command Carrier regularly to stay on track. I can do a lot of the work in my quarters; but, I need the College for some lectures and the tests and exams." I explain.

"It's not a problem. I think we can find excuses to visit Midgard; and maybe even Valhalla, from time to time. I can even send Loki on errands to Midgard every once in a while. How long would it take you; if, you have regular access?" She is pushing, now.

"I can finish in six weeks; if, I have regular access; and, our patrols are fairly standard. A war would kind of slow me down. But on regular patrols, I can work on it four hours a day and still meet my obligations to the mission and the Loki. Why do you ask, Admiral?" I ask.

"Because, I am really sold on Kurt Brubacher, now. I want that star on your collar, as soon as possible. I need a Group Commander. And, you will make a great Task Force Commander in a very short period of time. I am going to push Admiral Bryant to put you on an accelerated fast track. It's not just your performance in Phoenix. Your tactical history as the Captain of the Shenzhen is excellent. You have all the skill needed to run your own Fleet. You just need a little more experience at higher levels." The admiration in her voice was quite obvious.

"Thank you, Admiral. I appreciate the confidence. I will just try to keep thinking of the current moment, though. I have to concentrate on the Loki and the War College. That way, I won't let you down. In the end, it will get us both what we want. I want to be C&C, one day. You want a Task Force Commander, quickly." I offer to kind of cool things down a little.

"Yes, your right, of course. You have to keep your eye on all the balls your juggling, now." She replies.

"Admiral, may I ask if you will be returning your flag to the Loki. We would be proud to fly your pennant on her. She is a great vessel, now." I ask.

"Yes, Captain. I intend to announce today that; I will be restoring the Loki to my flag ship on January 3. I liked her before she was safe. Now, I will probably fall in love with the ship. You're right. The Loki is a great ship. I will write all your orders, immediately. You will receive them within the hour. Your dismissed, Captain." Leeds snaps officiously.

My enunciator chimes an hour later, aboard Loki.

MEMO

From: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

To: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, Commander Elasima Executive Officer ESS Loki, all ship commanders Phoenix Fleet

Re: Certification of the ESS Loki

Date: December 18, 2255

Captain Brubacher,

Congratulations on achieving such amazing results in such a short timeframe. Your performance and the performance of your team has been outstanding. I would also like to thank you and your team for the comprehensive performance reports and the four hundred twelve certifications involved in this process. Commendations have been added to your file and those of all your senior officers.

*Please be advised that in response to overall certification 49-71412*Loki, I am placing the ESS Loki on the active duty roster; effective immediately. We are proud to attach such a fine vessel to Phoenix Fleet. It is comforting to know that, Loki has completed such stringent testing, repairs and shakedowns and is as safe a ship as it can be.*

In light of the completion of such a daunting task, I am detaching ESS Loki from the Fleet, until January 3, 2256. Please feel free to take her where your people can enjoy a long rotating leave. However, be sure not to go too far. You are to report for duty at nine hundred hours on January 3, 2256. Give our best wishes to all your officers and crew.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

MEMO

From: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

To: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, Commander Elasima Executive Officer ESS Loki, all ship commanders Phoenix Fleet

Re: Phoenix Command Flag Vessel

Date: December 18, 2255

Captain Brubacher,

Please be advised that, effective ten hundred hours January 2, 2256 the ESS Loki will become the Command Ship of the Phoenix Fleet. Please make all necessary arrangements for me to move my Phoenix pennant to your vessel. Please also arrange to have quarters available for my command and personal staff and me.

In the interest of efficiency, please arrange for the Phoenix Command office and my staff offices to be ready on the Loki's flag bridge. I look forward to the move.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

MEMO

From: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

To: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

C.C. Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, all Officers and crew ESS Loki

Re: Commendation

Date: December 18, 2255

Captain Brubacher,

Your performance since joining Phoenix Fleet has been outstanding. Your service record and past accomplishments correspond to what I have seen at Phoenix.

A system for conducting testing and shakedown of new or overhauled vessels has never formally existed within the OESA. I must convey to you that, Admiral Bryant has inserted reference to the two manuals you authored on the subject in the OESA Rules and Regulations as amended for Fifth Mobile Rapid Action Command. Fleet Admiral Stephenson is seeking to amend the OESA Rules and Regulations for the entire service to include these references, too. It is my feeling that, your report on the results of the ESS Loki should also be referenced as a guideline to the final results we are seeking in this process. I have forwarded your report to Fifth Mobile Command for Admiral Bryant's examination.

I must also congratulate you on the speed you achieved the melding of the crew of the Loki into a functioning team. These are people who now feel they can do anything; if, they do it together. I believe you have a fine future in the OESA; and can look forward to rapid advancement. This commendation will be placed in your permanent file for future reference.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

I call in my XO.

"El, I am sending you three memos. Take a moment to read them. Then, post them ship wide. Everyone should feel excited about our recent accomplishment. I will have a course for you in an hour." I explain.

"Aye, aye, sir." He responds with a big smile and a salute, after quickly reading the memos.

I call up the current locations of Fifth Mobile ships; looking for Command Carriers parked near good systems for vacations. Valhalla is sitting five minutes, ten seconds, east of 14 Hercules; so, I set that beautiful system, as our destination. Travelling to and from the Valhalla from that system is a half-hour proposition at normal speed of twenty percent. The other advantage is that, 14 Hercules is only seventeen light years from our current location; so, it's three and a half days each way from Phoenix. If we head out now, we will have seven full days at 14 Hercules; and, I can head out to Valhalla on two of them. If I take the four lectures I still need on the first visit on December 23, I can be ready to write the mid-semester tests on a second visit on December 28. I will have to travel to and from in off hours to give myself maximum time on 14 Hercules. If I am lucky, I will get four days' leave, myself. I call El into the office, again.

"Commander Elasima reporting, sir." El says.

"Sit and relax.' I respond. 'We are at Eta Corona, right now. The Valhalla is here.' I point out the location on my pad. 'We can jump to 14 Hercules; which is a great vacation spot. It takes about three and a half days, each way. That leaves seven days for rotating leaves ashore. It also means, I can reach the Valhalla in a half-hour, by shuttle. I would need one of our thirty shuttles on December 23; and, another on December 28. That would allow me to take in four lectures, I need; and, write the mid-term tests. I will travel in off hours; so, it takes only a day each way. Can you plan all the leaves and shuttle usage around that program?" I ask him. I do not want to impose my needs on the rest of the crew.

"I don't think it's a problem. We would get there on the twenty-second. That's when the first shuttles would go down. One third of the ship could go then. The next third could go late on the twenty-fourth; and, we'd return the first group as we bring the second. The last batch could go down early on the twenty-seventh; as, we bring back the second group. We would bring the last ones back late on the twenty-ninth. We would have thirty shuttles on each day we need them; and, we'd still have twenty-nine others for the rest of the stay for emergencies and in-betweeners. That's six hundred at a time going down. We would make six trips each way on the travel days. Everyone would get leave. The marines have their own shuttles for boarding and landing party assaults. They can use those. I don't think it would pose a hardship." El responds.

"We need to get back an hour before we have to report. We are still light on marines. The Colonel detached a thousand to other carriers in the Fleet. He didn't need them for the trials. We

need to get them back; so, we are at full complement; when, the Admiral comes aboard the Loki. Can you set up the timing with the Colonel?' I ask the XO; then continue. 'He may want to grab them all right now, before we leave. That's okay, too; but, we need to jump in a couple of hours.'

"I'll look after it. We'll get a schedule ready and get everyone on board." El offers.

"Good, and I'll post a memo about the leave, right now." I respond as El turns to leave.

The memo granting leave is well received. Everyone is happy with the choice of locations. It tells everyone to watch for the rotation schedule the Exec will post.

El advises the Colonel wants to get his people, now. He wants them to get leave, if they can. El arranges it. by the time we jump out; and, we are at full complement of nearly six thousand.

.....

One thing I really hate is all the formality in the regulations. Bringing the Phoenix Flag and the Admiral aboard is part of quite an elaborate ceremony. It's a wasted hour, for everyone. I will not have those protocols observed; if, I ever get control of a theatre or quadrant. The Admiral should be piped aboard, as usual; but, the change of flag should not be so ceremonial.

Anyway, it's January 3, and we reported on time. On the way back, we made sure the Loki was "ship shape and bristle fashion" for the Admiral's arrival. I have no way of telling her without sounding sappy; so, I haven't; but, I really like her. I am glad she made the Loki her flag ship.

"I will expect you to have dinner in the Admiral's mess with me - say nineteen hundred." Her statement is almost an order as we wind up from the flag transfer ceremony.

"Yes, Admiral. I will see you there." I respond; as, she turns towards her office and walks away.

I expected her COS and maybe, a Task Force Commander in the mess hall; but, we are alone. At dinner, she asks about the college.

"I wrote the midterms when Loki went to 14 Hercules, on leave. My marks should come in a few days. Meantime, I am pushing ahead with second term studies." I explain.

"Good because, the whole Mobile Fifth is moving. Anyway, Nichols has given us assignments that seem particular close to Midgard. I think he did that for you; but, it's not been mentioned. How long will it take you to finish?" She asked.

"That depends on the move. The longer the jump is to the new location, the more I will get done. If, I only have my bridge shift and an hour or two of administration a day, I can get a lot done. If we do a five-day jump, I could finish; with the exception that, I would need two lectures on the Midgard. Then, I'd have to write the finals. I could have final marks in two weeks; if, we are in a long enough jump, now." I explain.

"The jump is fifty-six light years. The Fifth will reassemble at Gliese 777 in Cygnus. That's an eleven-and-a-half-day jump at normal cruising speed; so, I suspect we'll stop over at HD193664 in Draco. That's almost an exact half way point. It would not be unusual to give us a two-day break there; which means, you would have day two to go aboard any one of the Command Carriers. Then, we will probably get another day or two at Gliese 777; so, you might avail yourself again, there. I haven't received the orders, yet; but, I think that's the way it'll go. I think Bryant picked his target for you, too." Admiral Leeds finished as if she was deep in thought.

"So, you believe Admirals Bryant and Nichols are conspiring to push me through the War College Program. Creating all opportunities, they can, for me?" I chuckle.

"Not just them!" She blurts out as her face gradually reddens.

"You're in on it, too?" I ask.

"I knew you'd certified the Shenzhen and worked on two others; when, I read your file. Why do you think I made the Loki my flag; and brought it to Midgard. I knew you'd ground it, immediately. I also believed that if you were using Midgard as a base, you would take the opportunity to go as far as possible on the War College Program. You didn't really believe I had forgotten to have a Carrier certified, did you?' She laughed. 'I suggested it to my cohorts and they went for it. And, I was so happy to see you are as driven and motivated as I thought. Look at me. I am almost exactly your age. How do you think I got where I am, so fast? Bryant believed in me, too. He even gave me a second chance, once. We have more in common than you know. I have selfish reasons for this. The flag levels have been diluted. There are some on the way up who look good. But, I need a leader with good tactical skill, right now. There's no one actually in line who has your skills. That's the selfish professional side of me - cold, calculating and driven. Then, there's the personal side of this, too. It's the real reason I made Loki my flag, again." She stopped short.

"What personal reasons could you have? I ask her. She paused. There was a long silence that seemed like hours in the tension that had risen above the table.

"I will say this once. If you don't like what I say, tell me straight out. It will never be mentioned again; and, it will not affect our professional relationship. I am too selfish to screw up my career.' Again, there was a long silence. 'I... er... well... I... oh hell, I'll just say it. I think I am heavily attracted to you. In fact, I would say that, I've fallen for you." Silent tears left her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

I knew I had been attracted to her the moment I saw her. As we interacted I had been drawn to her more and more; but, buried it all under my work. After all she is an Admiral; and, she is my boss. "Well, that is a surprise. I have been keeping myself under such tight control, almost since we met. You don't come on to your boss - especially if your boss is a senior Admiral. I can honestly tell you, that I am falling for you too, Helena." There! I said it. I finally admitted it – to her – to me! The cat is out of the bag.

"Professionally, I need you to drive to take a Task Force, quickly. Rear Admiral Chan is not up to the job. I would send him to the Headquarters pool. He would make a great COS for someone. But Task Force One is very weak. We have no leadership at the Command and none in the Loki Group. Either I do all the thinking for this Task Force; or, we are crippled. Believe me, my objectivity is not clouded on this issue. Any Fleet Commander would want you for a Flag position.' She is calm and logical, now. 'It was the plan from the beginning; before, I met you. The personal part came after that. I found us so kindred. I found you decisive, intelligent, smart, forceful and very confident. That is appealing in such a handsome package. It wasn't hard for attraction to turn into more."

"I have an idea.' I said and paused for her to slow down a bit. "I feel the same way; but, I am really uncomfortable with the Flag Officer - Officer thing. Let's try to keep it professional, for just a while. When I have a star, we can make it more. When I have two, we can take it further still. When I have three, I will ask you to marry me." He said as she broke into gushing tears.

"Do you really mean that?" She asks haltingly between the convulsions of her sobs.

"Yes, I mean it - all.' I said as I rose; leaned over the table; cupped her chin in my right hand; and, kissed her gently, but firmly, on the lips. She responded warmly. There was a real

connection. I broke the contact. 'I need it to be like that, though. Can you live with that agreement?' I asked.

"Yes, you'll have a star in a month or two. It will seem forever; but, I can live with it." She responded through sobs, again.

Chapter 16 Clean Up this Mess!

Thursday March 20, 2256

"Behind every great fortune there is a crime." Honoree de Balzac

I am still in shock as I stand below the stage in the amphitheater of the Valhalla. I did not expect to be here, at this time; but, a full level eleven Admiral has to do the honors when promoting someone to level eight. When I received the offer, I thought it was an error. The offer came from Admiral Nichols instead of from Vice Admiral Leeds.

MEMO

From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Theatre Nine Command

To: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

***C.C. Admiral George T. Bryant Mobile Fifth RAC Commander, Vice Admiral
Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet***

Re: Offer of Promotion and Re-assignment

Date: March 3, 2256

Captain Brubacher,

It is my pleasure to advise you that you have been nominated and approved for promotion to Flag Level. A nomination has also been made to have you reassigned to a Flag Level Command. Both these nominations were made by Vice Admiral Helena Leeds who is happy to have you take a position that has been very difficult for her to fill competently.

You have displayed excellent character, motivation and intelligence in all the assignments the OESA has given you to date. You served with distinction in several positions within Boots Fleet until being reassigned as master of an autonomous frigate the ESS Shenzhen. After a year in command of the Shenzhen with several taxing tactical situations under your belt, you were asked to take the assignment of Commander of the ESS Loki Carrier Class Vessel. You took a new vehicle and turned it and its crew into a working unit; while under the added pressure of attending War College classes. In that light, I must mention that, you have graduated the fellowship program with highest honors; achieving an overall average of ninety-seven point five percent. In all, you have been an impressive member of our team.

In light of the above, you have been nominated to be elevated to the Rear Admiral (Level 8) rank. This nomination was made by Vice Admiral Leeds and was recommend by me. On passing it to Fifth Mobile, it was recommended by Admiral Bryant after conferencing with your Commander and me. The Council approved it unanimously and it received final approval of the Secretary of Defense.

Vice Admiral Leeds also nominated you for the Assignment of Commander Task Force 1 within the Phoenix Fleet. Again the nomination was recommended and approved at all levels. We are seeking a response from you by no later than twelve hundred hours, Thursday March 13, 2256. If you respond positively the ceremony, along with all others that ripple from this move, will take place in the amphitheater of the ESS Valhalla at thirteen hundred hours Thursday March 20, 2256. Following the elevation ceremony, a small gathering will attend a cocktail party. A dinner will be held in your honor in the ballroom of the Valhalla at eighteen hundred hours on March 20, 2256. You may invite up to five hundred to the elevation ceremony and up to one hundred to the dinner. The cocktail party is a closed affair. If you advise us positively, please include the number of guests you will invite to each affair.

Deepest Regards

Admiral Stephen Nichols

It had taken me a few days to get my thoughts and all the personal details together. I responded with the following message.

MEMO

From: Captain Kurt Brubacher Commander ESS Loki

To: Admiral Stephen Nichols Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Nine Commander

*C.C. Admiral George T. Bryant Mobile Fifth RAC Commander, Vice Admiral
Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet*

Re: Offer of Promotion and Re-assignment

Date: March 7, 2256

Admiral Nichols,

It has taken me so long to respond to your offer because I was utterly dumfounded by it. While I had thought an elevation and reassignment was in the cards, for me, I did not expect to be elevated two levels in both rank and assignment. The generosity of the offer; and, the confidence you have shown in me is overwhelming.

I am pleased to accept your offer to elevate me to the rank of Rear Admiral and Assign me the command of Phoenix Fleet's Task Force One Command.

In the days since receiving the offer, I have accessed all of Phoenix Fleet's personnel records; and can see Vice Admiral Leeds's dilemma. I find no one that, I feel I can recommend for the position of Loki Group Commander. While there are those who could occupy the position and even manage the Group fairly well, there are none that possess all the combined skills that make a good tactical commander as well as a strong administrator. I would be doing a disservice to Phoenix Fleet, Theatre Nine Command, Mobile Fifth RAC and the OESA, if, I recommended someone from my available pool of candidates. Since I do not have access to Theatre Nine, Fifth Mobile RAC, or HQ files, I was unable to dig further to find a suitable candidate. I believe that, my first responsibility to Task Force 1, will be to find the right person; once, I have access to all the files. I would like to recommend elevation of Commander Elasima, currently Executive Officer of the Loki, to the position of its Captain. In the six months under my command, he has proven himself worthy of the job. All other positions arising from that promotion should follow his recommendations. He will make a fine Captain.

As far as guests go, Admirals Bryant, Vice Admiral Leeds, Commodore Hurst, you, and Admiral Stevens are essentially my family. I would hope all of the above can attend my promotion; which is a testament to their patience and skills. In addition to those, I would like to invite the entire Senior Officer Staff of both the Loki and the Shenzhen to this affair. That only totals around fifty-six; but, they are the people I would like to attend both the ceremony and the dinner.

I would like to thank you again for the kind offer; and for, your tutoring and coaching throughout my career. I will look forward to seeing you when I report to Admiral Bryant's office aboard the Valhalla on October 20, 2256.

Captain Kurt Brubacher

I called in Elasima and showed him the offer and my response. He congratulated me and gushed at his own pending promotion; effusively thanking me for the recommendation. I explained that, I only made the recommendation; because, he deserved it. Ten hours after sending the e-mail response to Admiral Nichols, I received the following.

MEMO

From: *Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander*
To: *All Fleet Commanders Theatre Nine*
C.C. *Admiral George Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC, Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C*
Re: *Reassignment of Rear Admiral Lee Chang Commander Task Force 1 Phoenix Fleet*
Date: *March 7, 2256*

All,

I am pleased to make the following announcement on behalf of the OESA.

Admiral Lee Chang Commander Task Force 1 in the Phoenix Fleet is reassigned as Commandant OESA Academy Rigil.

There is no more important role than that of getting our young entry level people off to a good start. Their education and training is paramount to our success and serves as the foundation for millions of successful careers. Admiral Chang has served the OESA with distinction for over twenty years. We thank him for his past service and wish him success in his new Command. An announcement pertaining to his replacement is forthcoming.

Good Luck Admiral Chang!

Admiral Stephen Nichols.

Twelve hours after that one, the following message was received.

MEMO

From: *Admiral Stephen Nichols Theatre Nine Commander*
To: *All Theatre Nine Fleet Commanders, all personnel Phoenix Fleet*
C.C. *Admiral George Bryant Mobile Fifth RAC Commander*
Re: *Phoenix Fleet Task Force One Commander*
Date: *March 8, 2256*

All,

I am pleased to announce that, effective March 20, 2256 Captain Kurt Brubacher will be elevated to the level of Rear Admiral (8) and assigned as Commander Task Force 1 Phoenix Fleet. Though a twostep elevation is unusual, Kurt has earned it with his stellar performance record. After more than eight years in various assignments within Boots Fleet, Lt. Commander Brubacher was elevated to Commander and assigned as the Captain of the ESS Shenzhen. Four months into that assignment, he was promoted to the rank of Captain. After a

year aboard Shenzhen, he was assigned the ESS Loki; which, he ran for six months before his current nomination. Captain Brubacher was responsible for authoring the two extensive manuals we now use to proof new vessels acquired by Fleets. He was decorated for stopping a rebellion at Rho Corona Borealis. Captain Brubacher has a PHD in aerospace Engineering graduating from the War College with the highest marks of any graduate finishing the General Officer Fellowship Program. We are sure that, Rear Admiral Brubacher will display the same tactical, management and personnel skills in his new position as he showed us in previous ones.

Congratulations Captain Brubacher and our very best wishes.

Admiral Stephen Nichols.

So, now I am standing at the side steps that grace the right side of the stage in the Amphitheatre; waiting with El for our promotions. I am not surprised to see the Emperor on the stage. It seems like, he is always at the Valhalla.

After fifteen minutes of warm-ups and welcome speeches, I am called to the podium. Admiral Bryant does the first presentation.

"OESA Command Order number 215903-9568 - To all citizens within the limits of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light years from the Sol system in all directions; and, encompassing all star-systems, anomalies, energy, matter, life forms and representative governments and citizens within that region; and to all conducting business of any fashion with the Empire; let it be known that, on Friday, March 14, 2256, the Council and the Secretary of Defense of the Orion Empire, in white paper OESA 215903-75622 paragraph three; did approve the nomination of the C&C of the OESA and its Mobile Fifth RAC Commander with the recommendations of the Theatre Nine and Phoenix Fleet Commanders to elevate a member of the service to a Flag Staff rank; requiring entry of the candidate's name on the Role of Senior Officers. By order of the C&C and Mobile Fifth RAC Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; Kurt Brubacher is upgraded to the level of Rear Admiral with all the rights and privileges prescribed in the aforementioned regulations and protocol; and that, any and all serving, engaged or employed within Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher's commands; present or future; and, any and all conducting business with; or, having present or future interest in the Orion Empire, shall pay respect, obedience and loyalty to the rank he possesses as prescribed by the law of the Empire.

Let it be known that Kurt Brubacher was elevated to the grade of Rear Admiral, his name added to the Role of Senior Officers; and that, this order was signed and sealed; all in the presence of witnesses and the Emperor's delegate, on Thursday March 20, 2256; at Mobile Fifth RAC Headquarters. Signed, Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C, Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson C&C, Admiral George Bryant, Mobile Fifth RAC Commander.'

Admiral Nichols came forward. He pinned the two stars flanking the number eight on my right collar point; while, Admiral Bryant pinned them on my left one. Nichols handed me my new lanyard and braids. Bryant handed me the warrant. They stepped back and saluted. I returned the salute. We all turned to the crowd of nearly five thousand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher." Bryant said as the crowd rose to their feet.

"Rah" was the call from the synchronized five thousand voices.

The crowd broke into a loud roar and thunderous applause as the press slinked forward, in the aisles; each photographer seeking the ideal position; flashes firing in succession temporarily blinding me. They must have taken a hundred and fifty pictures.

"Okay let's settle down. We have a lot more to go." Bryant called out with both hands raised, palms out. He stepped back and Vice Admiral Leeds came forward. I couldn't help but noting how beautiful she was in her dress uniform. I couldn't help but think of how much I wanted her. It took restraint to wait this long.

'OESA Command Order number 215903-9569 - To all citizens within the boundaries of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light years from the Sol system in all directions; and, encompassing all star-systems, anomalies, energy, matter, life forms and representative governments and citizens within the region; and to all conducting business of any fashion with the Empire; let it be known that, on Friday, March 14, 2256, the Council and the Secretary of Defense of the Orion Empire, in white paper OESA 215903-75622 paragraph four; did approve the nomination of the C&C of the OESA and its Mobile Fifth RAC Commander, on the recommendation of the Commander Theatre Nine and the Commander Phoenix Fleet to assign Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher to the position of Commander Task Force 1 Phoenix Fleet. By order of the C&C and Mobile Fifth RAC Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; let it be known that, on this day, Kurt Brubacher is assigned as Commander of Task Force 1 Phoenix Fleet, a

position outlined and described in the aforementioned regulations and protocol; and that, any and all serving within Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher's Command; present or future; and, any and all conducting business with; or, having present or future interest in the Orion Empire, shall pay respect, obedience and loyalty to the rank and position he possesses as prescribed by the law of the Empire. Let it be known that, Rear Admiral Brubacher is responsible for all personnel, hardware and assets belonging to; and / or assigned to Task Force 1 Phoenix Fleet; and, is, responsible for the peace keeping and security of the space as assigned by the Commander Mobile Fifth RAC through the Commander Theatre Nine and the Commander Phoenix Fleet, as defined and described in the article twenty-four section three - b of the OESA regulations and protocol ; and that, this order was signed and sealed; all in the presence of witnesses and the Emperor Edward III's representatives on Thursday March 20, 2256; at Mobile Fifth RAC Command. Signed, Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C, Fleet Admiral Brian Dickinson C&C, Admiral George Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC.'

With that, Admiral Leeds handed me the Phoenix Task Force 1 patches and its Commander's Pennant; then stepped back with her hand outstretched. 'Congratulations, Rear Admiral Brubacher.'

Helena stepped forward, beside me, took my hand and raised it in the air.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I present Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher the Commander of Phoenix Fleet Task Force 1." She called out. Everyone stood again.

"Rah." was chorused by a little weaker chorus, this time; but, the cheers were louder and much more prolonged. The camera flashes poured down on me, again. As it all died, I was about to leave the stage when a voice interrupted me.

"Not yet, Admiral. There's still more.' Admiral Bryant's voice called out from behind.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to present Edward III Emperor of the Orion Empire.' He added.

"I only remember a few people who have come to my attention like Kurt Brubacher. They are all in this room, right now. There's Admirals Bryant, Williamson, Dickinson, Tonaka, Stephenson and Nichols. Now, there's a group of new ones on the way up. Admiral Stevens, Vice Admiral Leeds and Rear Admiral Brubacher are the latest additions to this list. I have personally signed the warrant for awards for all of them, before. These are all wonderful people who give their all and risk their lives for the Empire, each and every day. Usually, I am called to

speak of heroism or bravery. These people have all shown that. But every once in a while someone comes along to contribute something else important to the Empire. I can think of George Bryant coming up with the idea for the communications system we use in space, today. He sped up the travel time of a message by five times; and, made it possible to receive it while in FTL flight. That's a pretty fair engineering feat for a tactical genius commanding thousands of people. Then there was Admiral Nichols who found a way to do patrols that improved efficiency by fifty percent; at a time when, we were struggling to meet our obligations in the Empire. The complex ballet dance is still known as the Nichols Patrol Maneuver years after he devised it. And, all the Fleets use it in their patrols. Now, Rear Admiral Brubacher comes along. We have been receiving and doing shakedowns on vessels since the formation of the service. Everyone did a pretty good job. Few have died over nearly two centuries because a ship was faulty, when it went into service. But it was all hit and miss; and everyone did it differently. That is until Kurt Brubacher wrote a manual for Testing and Shakedown of New Carriers and another for Non-Carrier class vessels that standardized the process and ensured we check, stress and certify each and every sub-system of these vessels before putting them on active duty. And, he provided reports for a Carrier that are now the standard for what the result should be and how they should be presented. His report on the ESS Loki is five hundred ninety-seven pages and he issued four hundred and twelve certifications of the vessel and its systems. The testing was exhausting for the participating team; but, ensures we have taken every measure possible to come as close to guaranteeing the safety of a new vessel as is mathematically feasible. We were all so impressed that the manuals, report and certifications are now referenced in the OESA Rules and Regulations. It is presently the standard way all vessels are proofed for active duty. Some time ago, it became apparent that these creative contributors deserve some kind of recognition. So, we created an OESA award known as the OESA Award of Excellence. It is presented to a member of the service for a major non-combat related contribution. Those types of contributions usually improve safety, efficiency or average vessel lifetime; so, they are evaluated and a substantial financial award is attached to the warrant. These people do these things to improve the service; not for reward. I would bet that, most people in this room did not know this honor existed. It has only been bestowed twice before. But, now we would like to present it to a deserving person.

"OESA Command Order number 215903-9570 - To all citizens within the limits of the Orion Empire; comprising all space within a region extending in a spheroid one hundred light

years from the Orion Empire central government, at planet Earth; by order of the C&C and Mobile Fifth RAC Commander as prescribed by OESA regulations and protocol; Kurt Brubacher has been awarded the OESA Award of Excellence for his selfless contributions to the OESA and the Orion Empire. This action was in response to the creation and standardization of a method of proofing new vessels before putting them into active service.'

He read the order as I stood in front of him at attention; then, Edward III pinned the medal on my left breast pocket. Edward handed me the warrant as Admiral Bryant stepped forward and handed the Emperor an envelope which he passed to me. 'Congratulations Kurt, we truly thank you for such a valuable contribution. I heard about the condition of the Loki. We could have lost six thousand souls. You did a great job.' He said as he shook my hand vigorously to boisterous cheers from the crowd. Edward sort of guided me. We both turned to face the crowd and the flashing cameras.

The rest of the day is a blur. All I could think of was Helena. I sort of wandered through it all until the dance floor opened up, after dinner. We did several slow dances tightly entwined. I know I blushed when Admiral Bryant's voice came from beside us on the dance floor.

"Now, this really brings back memories; doesn't it Marie?" He said as they laughed.

I can feel the heat in my face and Helena's red, too. The blush is a dead giveaway. I do remember congratulating Captain Elasima, sometime after that.

All the Fifth Mobile Fleets and the autonomous frigates are parked around the Valhalla. Savign boards the Loki at eleven hundred. She comes to my new office. I have made Loki the Task Force 1 Flag ship.

"You are looking mighty spiffy, Admiral." She says as she lifts my right collar point just a touch.

"How are you Savign?" I asked as I shook her hand vigorously. "Take a seat and take a load off." I finished.

"I'm fine and the Shenzhen is great. The entire team misses you; though, we are all very proud of you. We were all so happy about the promotion. Thanks for inviting us to the shindig. We all thought it was very thoughtful. What else is new?" She asked in a strange tone; insinuating she really knew something.

"Not much, really. I've got a lot of problems. I need a Group Commander for Loki Group. And I need to find out the condition of my staff. I don't even know if I have a Chief of Staff. If

so, I don't know if the Chief is any good. I may need a lot of people." I answer; trying to avoid the inevitable.

"Come on - you know what I mean. We all saw you climbing all over that Admiral. Looked like love to all of us." Savign tries to simulate a sly grin. She never could smile.

My mind is still on Helena. I moved my quarters to the Flag deck, immediately on returning to the ship. We ended up spending three hours in her quarters; but, I went back to mine for the last hours' sleep. I was lucky, my stewards woke me up at seven hundred; or, I'd have been late. Elasima had moved my old team; instead of assigning me a new one. He did add three more stewards as allowed a Rear Admiral. Dave Angstrom started them on the right track.

"Okay, don't talk about it in port. Keep it on the Shenzhen. We are a little crazy about each other. That had nothing to do with the promotion. After testing out the Loki, Admirals Bryant, Nichols and Leeds cooked up quite a scheme to get me through the War College as fast as possible. All the time, they were planning this Task Commander job; but, I worked under the impression I was trying to get the Group Commander job. It was all Bryant's idea. He liked my skills and he liked my record. Helena and I were working so close; it was almost predictable. We are two of a kind. I had been on the Loki four months and was more than half way through the war college program; pushing hard for the Group Commander job, when it struck us. But they all had their plan together while I was doing the Loki trials. We kept everything purely professional, until my promotion." I explained.

"You mean - last night?" She squealed.

"I didn't say that. I just misspoke." I stammered. 'Anyway, I have to get going. I haven't met with my new staff, yet.

"Well, it's been great. Try to keep in touch. Drop a line once in a while. We all still care about you on the Shenzhen." She said as she rose with her hand out. We shook hands and she left.

I checked the directory. It listed the name Captain Amrit Singh as my COS. I composed an e-mail advising the ships in the Task Force that, I needed to see all Commanders, immediately. It took nearly twenty minutes for everyone to shuttle to the Loki and appear at my door.

There was seating room for twelve in the conversation area of the office. But there were eleven ships' captains, two Brigadiers, two Colonels, and a Commodore at the door. I buzzed Dave Angstrom.

"Dave, can you get two office chairs for the desk and three additional chairs in here, quick. And order rolls and breakfast beverages for seventeen. We may be here for a while." I said and clicked off after he acknowledged.

"Everyone in here. We can start with some of us standing.' I said. 'The first issue is the most urgent. I don't want to enter my command codes; until you are ready. Once I do, you are dead in the water until you enter new ones I issue you. Everyone got their pads?' I ask and look up for nods. There is a hundred percent assent; so, I continue. 'I will send a blank message to all Task Force One Commanders. You will return it with your name, command name and rank. That will give me an easy list to work with. I will generate new codes for each of you. Once I have them in the reply messages, I will enter my codes. Then, I will hit send. You can enter your command codes in you pads and issue new ones to your subordinates from here. Advise them to continue the process down the line. We don't want to be out of service for more than fifteen minutes. It's dangerous." I said as I tapped my screen to send out the blank messages.

I started receiving replies in a couple of minutes. It takes a moment to read each one. I would look up and call a name. When a hand rose, I would generate a code for the e-mail and add the name, rank, command and command code issued to a spreadsheet. Once I had all the replies complete and all the codes in the spreadsheet I looked up.

"Is everyone ready?" I asked. There were nods all around.

I went to the Change Command app. I punched in the name of the Command and it self-populated a lot of the blocks. I filled in the name, rank, title and serial number block. After a pause it prompted me for the command code. I entered it. There was a pause. "Change of Command successfully completed." Came up on the screen. Then, I went to "Issue new command codes for subordinate commands." All the sub commands came up with an empty block for the code. I selected enter from spreadsheet and directed it to the document. The blocks all filled with alpha numeric characters. I checked them against the list. When satisfied, I hit enter. "Subordinate Command Codes entered successfully" appeared on the screen. Then I went back to the mail app selected all and sent the messages out. I could hear enunciators going off all over the room a minute later. People typed furiously repeating what I had done. I kept getting messages from the Command App that, this ship or that command had been activated. Twenty minutes after convening, everyone in the room was reactivated.

"Don't forget to pass it down. We don't want a ship crippled because a propulsion system tech can't work." I said.

I punched up a message to the Task Force personnel explaining that activation codes had changed and anyone not having a new one should contact their immediate supervisor STAT. Once I was sure we were as complete as we could be from my office, I started my office recording system; and, continued the meeting.

"The extra chairs are here. Take a seat if you are standing. This meeting is being recorded; so, watch your language. That is not to say you should hold back. Feel free to comment or ask questions, at any time; just keep it all sanitized. We could be here a while. Feel free to grab a drink and a roll, anytime.' A few rose to go to the trays on the table. I waited a few minutes.

The next order of business is security. There are nineteen thousand eight hundred and ninety-three OESA personnel in this command. There are another twenty-eight hundred forty civilians distributed amongst all the ships. That number includes press corps, civilian wives and children and civilian subcontractors like barbers, tailors and bar managers. So, I would say that out of twenty-three thousand people there is a relatively good chance that one is spying for someone. It may be an enemy. They may be an industrial spy looking for space technology. Or they may just be someone naively passing information to a different arm of the OESA.' I paused and looked around. Many eyes had widened. This was a train of thought that had not occurred to many. 'So, here is the new Task Force 1 policy about security. Business is not discussed or displayed in the presence of anyone it does not concern. That means you don't go to your quarters at night and tell your wife. It portends that; if, I tell you something related to business it is for you. It is not repeated. If I'm fomenting rebellion, it's your responsibility to tell someone superior to me. Otherwise, what we discuss is between you and me! That goes unless there is consent to pass it down; or, it is posted common knowledge information. Task Force 1 will always operate as if we are at war; as far as security goes. Consider everything classified; unless, you have direction that it is not. Is the security policy of Task Force 1 understood?' I look around for consent.

'Good. Now, the next step is to conduct the same meeting with all your senior officers. This policy isn't just for you. If you need to convey information to them, it may be sensitive. They should not pass it on; unless you authorize it. Anyone, breaching the security policy will be

relieved of whatever their job is. Loki already runs that way; because that was my policy when I was her Commander. Everyone else needs to get on board.

The second issue is the condition of our ships. I conducted the readiness evaluations for the Loki. It had several potential catastrophic faults built in; though, it was in service. In particular, we ran into serious issues with electrical equipment produced by one company. I am sending you the list of offending parts. It has the batch numbers of the production runs that were a problem. If your ship has those parts with those batch numbers, I want them out, now. I will give you an example. One part is a coil that generates the magnetic field in the particle traps. The one in our matter trap was defective. The same part was defective in one cannon assembly. The problem was that the AMPE anti-matter trap had the same batch part number. Even though it was working at the time, it would have failed. Anti-matter coming into contact with the trap housing means the ship blows up. So, I am sending you all a memo. It has the offending parts, their batch numbers and the assemblies they are in. Make sure your engineering people check thoroughly. One moment of carelessness could mean six thousand lives.

My last order of business is the Group Commands. Thor Group seems to run well Commodore. But, without a commander for Loki Group we have a problem. It means I have to stay with Loki; when, we split the Task Force. I may want to go with Thor for some reason; but, I can't. I have not found anyone in this Fleet that can fill the bill. There is no insult intended to any of you. Most of you are new at your commands; and, haven't been exposed to tactical situations. It is impossible to accept a person for a tactical role; if, you have no way to determine if they can do it. So, I will be going through the entire OESA system looking for a candidate. In the meantime, I need Thor to run like a fine piece of machinery; so, I don't have to babysit. Are you okay with that Commodore?' I pause for a nod. 'Good, I will need all the ships' logs for the fifth of this month and the twentieth of last month, from each Captain in Task Force 1. I want your logs for the same dates, Commodore. I would like the Brigade logs for the first two weeks of last month from each Brigade. I am not looking for anything specific. This is not some kind of secret investigation. I am trying to get the flavor of the way you run your ships and commands. I will need those, today. I will also expect reports on your mechanical - electrical investigations, by tomorrow. We will be receiving orders soon; and, I don't want any problems in any ships we have in service. Are there any questions or comments?" I ask.

"Yes sir.' One Captain has his hand up. I nod. 'Sir, it's a lot of work to get you those specific logs, today and get those checks done by tomorrow." He observes. I see the Commodore cringe out of the corner of my eye.

"What's your ship, Captain?" I demand.

"The ESS Thor, sir." He responds.

"How many people on the Thor do you command, Captain?" I ask.

"Six thousand and nine, sir." He replies.

"I didn't ask how many people are on the ship. How many people work for you, Captain Levinson?" I remembered his name from the Command Code exercise.

"I'm not exactly sure, sir. Somewhere around thirty-five hundred." He responds.

"So, if thirty-five hundred people work for you, are you checking for the defective parts yourself? Are you going to retrieve those logs yourself?" I ask him.

"Well sir, I would ask my Chief Engineer to look after the part issue. I would get the logs myself." He responds.

"I have two questions for you. How many people work for the Chief Engineer? Why would you get the logs yourself? You have five senior subordinate officers who have access to them. Why wouldn't you ask at least one for help?" I ask; then, turn back to the assemblage. 'Do you see what's happening here. I don't want to hear that you can't do it; or, it's too hard. I have had to do these things myself; and, still have to. You have to be able to delegate; and, you have to ask for help, when you need it. But never tell me you can't do it. I try not to ask for the unreasonable. Sometime there is an urgency to things; so, we need them quickly. But, I temper that with the knowledge of what's really possible. Any other question or observations?" I ask.

"Yes sir.' El pops up. 'When will we receive the parts list?"

"Right now, Captain." I lift my pad locate the file and mail it out to them.

"Anyone?" I ask and there are all negative nods.

"OK, that's it. We'll break it up. I need you to stay Commodore. Everyone else is dismissed." I snap. "Room recorder – off. Convert the last audio file to text and move it to my personal pad." I command my system.

"Commodore Ngyuen, what do your friends call you?" I ask him.

"They call me Can. It is my first name." He responds.

"When we meet in private, you will first pay the required respects. Then, you will call me Kurt. Never in public; but, always in private. May I call you Can?" I ask.

"Yes Kurt, I would appreciate the informality." He responds.

"I had one question for you, before the meeting; but, now I have two." I inform him.

"What do you want to know, Kurt?" He asks.

"Well Can, where did you get that guy that's commanding Thor. I can't believe that discussion." I ask.

"He had the Command, when I took the Task Force. Chan protected him. He liked having inferior people. He belittled them and used them; but, he was happy having them there." Can responds.

"Well, I don't like it Can. Are there any more like that?" I ask.

"I have two more. They are not as bad; but, they shouldn't command a ship. Two of the three shouldn't be first officers. The third one could command a supply vessel, maybe." He replies.

"Okay, I'm about to start a major search for a Group Commander. I can add three ship's Captains. Are you okay with that?" I ask

"Yes sir. I would appreciate the relief." Can answers.

"Do you know if Loki Group has the same problem?" I ask

"No sir, it doesn't. Because Admiral Leeds had to stay so close to it, Chan couldn't have his way. She would order changes where they were needed. There was constant friction between them. She must have overruled him about a dozen times in the last few months. But, it was always about Loki Group. She couldn't leave it to check out Thor. Without a Group Commander and with Chan like he was, she had to sit on the Loki Group." Can answered sincerely.

"My other question is about Amrit Singh. Is he still here?" I ask trying to hold back a chuckle.

"Yes Kurt. He's probably in his office, now." Can responds.

"Is he a good Chief?" I ask.

"My COS is much better. Maybe, Singh would make a good bookkeeper. But, he can't run your staff. If I remember, you have two hundred seventy-nine staff. He might be able to run a group of six people. His desk is piled high. There is paper everywhere. He doesn't know what to do next." The Commodore explains.

"So, I need to look for a Group Commander, three Captains and a Chief of Staff." I mumble.

"For a start, sir. Remember that, Phoenix was the last Fleet assembled in the expansion. All the others were complete, by then; and, all the ones with losses in the war were replenished by that time. We essentially got the bottom of the barrel." It was a frankly honest opinion.

"Can you spare two hours?" I ask him.

"For you I can. You're the boss." He laughs.

"Good. Let's go to the staff offices.

We thread our way through the bridge and out the doors to the office. Singh's is first on the left in the corridor. We walk in without knocking.

"Admiral it's good to see you." Singh says from his chair.

"Captain, get on your feet." I yell. "Your first encounter of the day with your superior demands certain protocol. Regulation requires you to seek out your new Commander, at the beginning of your first duty shift, after his arrival. Where were you? It's nine-thirty hours, now." I am still yelling.

"Well sir, I didn't think..."

"No, you didn't; and, you don't. I can see that by your office. Give me the latest expense statement and asset sheet for the Task Force, please?" I ask. I am still yelling.

"I can have them to you tomorrow, sir." Singh responds.

"Tomorrow - what the hell is wrong with you? You should not have all this shit all over your desk. The staff should be working on it. When, I ask for something you should be able to get it from the staff in a minute. What was your last job, Captain?" I demand.

"Sir, I was the second shift Lieutenant Commander in Engineering aboard the ESS Detroit." He says.

"That's where I know you from. You were on the Detroit when I was the Exec. How the hell did you get a Chief's job?" I yell.

"It was available and sounded interesting; so, I posted for it." Singh explains.

"You're fired, Captain. You are demoted to Lieutenant, immediately. We will find you a place in an Engineering Department. Get out of here right, now. You're restricted to quarters until I place you." I yell.

"But sir... my wife..."

"I am sorry for your wife. It's not her fault. You got yourself into this mess. You'll have to explain it. Take your Eagles off, right now. I want to see your other two sets in my office in an hour. I will give you a Lieutenant's double bars, at that time. Throw the Eagles on the desk. Go to your quarters and get the other sets. After I have them you are restricted to quarters. I will discuss this with Admiral Leeds. Your application for the job is fraudulent. You may face charges for this. Now, get out!" I snap.

I type up a memo to Helena on my pad.

MEMO

From: Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Phoenix Fleet Task Force One

To: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

C.C. Phoenix JAG services offices

Re: COS Task Force One

Date: March 21, 2256

Admiral,

There is a potentially serious problem in the Task Force 1 staff office. I have relieved the Chief, immediately. I have taken the summary action of demoting him to Lieutenant and will reassign him to an Engineering Department, where he actually belongs. Things are such a mess here that, I believe an audit and full investigation of the office and Amrit Singh is in order. I also believe his application for the position may have been fraudulent, in the first place. This is quite a surprise to get on the first day on the job.

Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher.

"Can, will you take the offices on the left side of the aisle? I'll take the ones on the right. Let's get all the staff into the amphitheater, immediately. I need to meet with them." There is urgency in my voice.

"Right away, Kurt." He says and takes off into a doorway.

I head into the first doorway on the right. "Which Office is this?" I ask as everyone jumps to attention when they realize the Commander is at the door.

"This is payroll, Admiral." A female ensign offers.

"Are you in command of this Group of people?" I ask her.

"Yes sir. I am the payroll supervisor." She responds.

"I have relieved the Chief of Staff. Until I have a replacement, I will run the staff offices myself. We will be having a meeting in half an hour in the amphitheater. Please have all your people put on their nametags and report there for the meeting. I need to see everyone, from all shifts." I order.

"Aye sir. We will be on time."

I stop to punch up a note to Captain El; locking up the amphitheater for the meeting. Then I repeat the same procedure I followed in payroll in the other nine offices on my side of the corridor. In the last office I decide to ask another question.

"Are the only Task Force 1 offices in this corridor?" I ask the human resources super.

"No sir. If you go through that hallway door, turn left and go through the next doorway there are two more in that short hallway. On the left you will find purchasing and acquisitions and on the right is logistics." She says with a smile.

"Thank you very much." I say as I speed off through the doorway. I repeat the process in the final two offices.

"Ladies and Gentlemen can I have some silence, please? The first order of business is to separate you by department; so, I will know who I am talking to. There are seventy-five seats in the front row and there are eighteen departments. Let's have a supervisor from every department in every fourth seat in that row. Take the middle seat and seat your assistant or assistants to either side of you. All staff should fill the seats lined up with your four in the rows behind you. So, from the front, I will see each department from the front to the back of the amphitheater. Once you are seated, let's get the supervisors up here. Grab a piece of paper. Write your department along its length near the center. Write your name below that. Fold the paper like a tent and place it on your lap, like this.' I demonstrate and sit down with my place marker on my lap.

'Hopefully, I will know at least all the supervisors' names by the time we're done.' I stop and tap a message to my steward to bring sweet rolls and refreshments for two hundred eighty-five.

'I am Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher; and, I am essentially your boss. You would normally work directly for the Chief of Staff; but, I have relieved him of duty. Things are definitely not like they should be.' I stop to give time for the seating shuffle. Dave and his people begin showing up with the snacks a short while later.

‘Please, feel free to help yourselves to something.’ I point to the side-table; and, allow more time for those who rise to retrieve something.

‘I will ask questions of you. Please don't answer them. Write them down. You will come to my office and we will go over the information I need.

Mary, your card says you are payroll. Do you have any outstanding complaints? If so, I need to see each one. If you have some, I will also need you to prepare a list from Human Resources, Elsa. I will need a brief synopsis of that persons work history. Mary, I will also need to know if the payroll ledgers are up to date. Accounting cannot be accurate if other departments submit inaccurate results. I will need to know how many people you are paying.

Elsa, from you I will first need Amrit Singh's local file. I will call up the OESA dossier on my system. From you I will need a special search. I will need to find a new COS. Loki needs a Group Commander. Task Force One will also need Three new ships' Captains. One must have his pilot's wings. There is no one in our local directory that qualifies. I will need you to search all other Fleets, Theatre, Quadrant and HQ Commands to find qualified candidates seeking a move. We will need to vet them all very well because of the mayhem in the whole service caused by expansion. You may want to come to me for requirements for both the COS and the Group Commander. See Commodore Ngyuen for information on the three Captains.

Fred your card says you are accounting. I need to know if your ledgers are up to date. I need to know if the asset sheet is up to date. I need to know our budget for the current year. I need to know our current expenditures for this year. I also need you to go over the ledgers of those from Task Force One for anyone with the privilege to charge expenses to Task Force One and Phoenix Fleet. We need to examine those closely and make sure they are not being abused.

Logistics, I need a report of what you received year to date and what you shipped or issued year to date. I also need you to order a full inventory of stores and reconcile receipts, issues and stock. We need to know inventory losses - especially weapons.

Legal, I want your department on notice, now that I have asked for an investigation of Amrit Singh. A lot of his practices may have been illegal. He may also have filed a fraudulent application to get the COS position.

Everyone here will need to go through their department and audit for problems. I have requested a full audit of the staff offices; so, if you can correct an issue before that starts, things will be a lot better. I don't want others to suffer for Singh's short comings.

All of you will have to go to Singh's office. It is in a real state. You need to go through anything on his desk, in his drawers and on his system. If it belongs to your department take possession of it and get it into your records. Anything left over comes to me. Nothing should be thrown out. Once you've dealt with Singh's leftovers, clip all the little papers together in a wrapper that states their current disposition. Don't throw it out. It may become evidence. We have about three days before the shit's going to hit the fan. We can mitigate the shock if we work hard, now. We will find us a COS who can do the job properly. Are there any questions?" I finish.

"Sir, is Captain Singh going to face criminal charges?" Mary from payroll asks.

"I am not sure he really did anything illegally. That will be determined in an investigation. I suspect he did; even if it was accidental as a result of ignorance. Regardless of that, he has been relieved, demoted and will be reassigned due to severe incompetence. He is now a lieutenant and will be assigned to an Engineering job; which is where he really belongs. Any more questions?" I ask and get a room full of negative nods. 'Remember, we need to work hard, fast and smart. Department managers use all your people to get this all done. Come see me if you have a question; or, you find something really out of whack. I have to tell you all, this was my first day on the job. When you start an assignment like this, the one thing you need to be sure of is your staff. With a good staff, you can resolve any other issues. Today, when I came into a new job with a host of issues, I did not have a Chief and could not be sure of my staff because of the Chief. Ours is a life and death business. We need all the little things in the background to work correctly; so, we can defend our Empire properly. I really need your help, right now. Your all dismissed." I ended the meeting.

My system chimed. It was an e-mail from Helena.

Kurt,

Jag on the way. Auditors on the way. Investigation will start in five days. Sorry about such a bad first day. Chan should be fired, too. He protected Singh.

Helena.

It's only been one day and things look a hell of a lot better. Payroll already checks out pretty well. There doesn't appear to be any criminal activity. Two people never got their raises for promotions. Accounting is another issue. They have already detected very large irregularities in both Singh and Chan's OESA credit cards. It is early but, it looks like Chan is into the OESA

for one hundred fifty thousand sovereigns. There are about a thousand sovereigns questionable with Singh's account. Those charges could turn out to be legitimate. HR did intensive searches very quickly. They visited me three times, yesterday to clarify requirements. I now have four candidates for COS and Five for Group One Commander. They found Can eleven ships' Captains who want to make moves. Most are double moves. They are each trying to find a Fleet that will take them and their future spouses; so, they can be together. I am sure we can use the extra help. We are short, anyway. Logistics found extensive shortages. No weapons are missing; but, there are a lot of shoes, clothing and personal electronic devices gone. Our JAG offices were advised of pending Mobile Fifth investigators, this morning. I am already gaining confidence in the staff personnel. They seem okay. It's beginning to look like it was Chan and Singh. Can Ngyuen was in today to discuss the Thor Captain. He is interviewing now; and has two he likes for the job. He asked how we handle the current Captain. I told him, when he knows who he will hire and has a commitment and start date, I will handle the dirty deed. This guy will never be a ships' captain. He has to be redirected. I need to study his file closely.

I begin scanning the files of the four available Candidates for a Group Command. There is one I know. She is experienced. She has married a ship's Captain; but, there is no way for her current Group to assign him where they can be together. I get an idea.

"Commodore Ngyuen, can you shuttle over and come to my office, please?" I ask after tapping my implant for internal communication.

"Aye sir, I will be right over." The response sounds very positive.

"Commodore Ngyuen reporting as requested, Admiral." He says while at attention in the doorway, twenty minutes later.

"Take a seat and relax. Would you like anything? I want you to see this file." I said as I handed my data pad over.

"No thank you, Kurt. I finished a coffee just before I shuttled over." There is a pause as he reads the file. "Very impressive. It looks like you found a Group Commander." He says with a smile as he returns my pad.

"Maybe. There is a hitch. I want you to read this file." I say as I hand the pad back.

"Brother; did you ever hit the mother lode. This is my Carrier Captain. I don't see the hitch." He says with his hands raised palms in the air.

"The file is not quite up to date. They are married. They come as a matched set." I responded.

There is a pregnant pause. "So, you are asking me if, I will take Loki Group and you can give Anna Arce Thor Group; so, her husband can fill the Captains' chair. I would be happy to comply. It is the best thing for the Task Force. It solves a lot of problems, in one fell swoop.' He observes. "I accept. Go ahead and make the arrangements." He finishes.

"How's the other searches going?" I ask.

"Fine, I will submit my final choices to you for approval. Once I have it, I will send offers. It looks like we will be resolving things very quickly." He says with a smile.

"Do you need anything." I asked.

A loud belly laugh came from deep inside him.

"What's so funny, Can?" I ask.

"Never once did Chan ask that question. You haven't been here a week. No sir, I am fine for now. Will you excuse me?" He says as he rises from the chair, still chuckling.

"Of course. You're dismissed." I snap officiously through my smile.

I begin to compose a memo.

MEMO

To: *Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet*

From: *Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1*

Re: *Candidates for current and pending position vacancies.*

C.C. *Admiral S. Nichols Theatre Nine Commander, Admiral G. Bryant Mobile Fifth RAC
Commander, Commodore Can Ngyuen Commander Phoenix Thor Group*

Date: *March 31, 2256*

Admiral,

I am attaching two personnel files for your examination. They reference Commodore Anna Arce and Captain David Simmons. Anna is the commander of the Columbia Group and David is Captain of the ESS Espanola. They were recently married; and, are requesting transfers to be together. It seems there is no way their parent, Boots Fleet, can meet those needs; since, others that would have to accept reassignment to make room have refused.

I have worked extensively with both officers. Both my personal experiences with them, and their file histories, make them candidates to fill our current needs.

To make their assignments their common ship, I have spoken to Commodore Ngyuen. He will accept reassignment to the Loki Group Command. That would make it possible to assign Commodore Arce the Thor Group and assign her new husband command of the ESS Thor. The Thor is in desperate need of a new Captain. The current one will be demoted and reassigned. He is incapable of handling command of a vessel.

I am excited by this opportunity. It solves a lot of problems, in one shot.
Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher.

Ten minutes later, I receive the following reply.

MEMO

From: Vice Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet
To: Rear Admiral K. Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1
C.C. Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC, Admiral S. Nichols Commander Theatre Nine, Commodore Can Ngyuen Commander Phoenix Thor Group
Re: Candidates for current and pending position vacancies.
Date: March 31, 2256

Admiral,

I like your plan for filling the needy positions in Phoenix Task Force 1. I am approving your transfer of Commodore Ngyuen to Loki Group Command, provided all other details fall into place. I would be happy to have both Anna Arce and David Simmons in the fold.

Despite my approval, you will have to wait for a positive response from Admiral Bryant.
Good job.

Vice Admiral Helena Leeds

Two and a half hours later, I receive a response from Admiral Bryant.

MEMO

From: Admiral George Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC
To: Rear Admiral K. Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1
C.C. Vice Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet, Admiral S. Nichols Commander Theatre Nine, Commodore Can Ngyuen Commander Phoenix Thor Group
Re: Candidates for current and pending position vacancies.
Date: March 31, 2256

Kurt,

I have discussed your plan with the Theatre Five Commander and the appropriate Fleet Commander who was hoping to get someone in trade. I explained that Phoenix is short of people with the skills needed to fill the positions that would be vacated. The Commander relented and has authorized transfer of Commodore Anna Arce and Captain David Simmons. I wish to advise you of something that is not common knowledge. David is a direct descendant of the founder of the OESA.

I hope this solves your needs; and please convey my best wishes to the newly united Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. Good Luck.

Admiral George Bryant

I don't usually get as excited as I did; when, I read the approval. I decide to compose the offer to both, immediately.

MEMO

From: Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1

***To: Commodore Anna Arce Commander Columbia Group, Captain David Simmons
Commander ESS Espanola***

***C.C. Vice Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet, Admiral S. Nichols Commander
Theatre Nine, Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC, Commodore Can
Ngyuen Commander Phoenix Thor Group, Theatre Five Commander***

Re: Candidates for current and pending position vacancies.

Date: March 31, 2256

Commodore Arce,

I would like to offer you the position of Commander Thor Group within Task Force 1 of the Phoenix Fleet. This is essentially a transfer. There would be no change in your rank or the assignment level. Some duties may vary slightly from your current ones due to specific Fleet and Task Force regulations and protocols. You would establish your Flag on the ESS Thor; which, would become your home.

Captain Simmons,

I would like to offer you the position of Commander ESS Thor. Thor is a carrier class vessel housing the Thor Group Command. This is essentially a transfer. There would be no change in your rank or assignment level. Some duties may vary slightly from your current

ones due to specific Fleet and Task Force regulations and protocols. Thor would become your home.

To both candidates,

I was excited when I saw your availability and understood the reasons behind the situation. I enjoyed working with both of you in past assignments. You are both competent, capable officers capable of rising to the top. At the same time, your need solves several issues within my Command; so, I will state bluntly that, Phoenix Task Force 1 needs you both. I believe you would be happy here; would enjoy the challenges; and, would rise as our fleet matures. Phoenix is a relatively recent addition to Mobile Fifth Command.

I ask you to forgive me for the variation from normal protocol; but, I make these offers in a single communication because of the circumstances. I wanted to assure you both that you would be posted together.

We are desperately in need of a competent Captain for the ESS Thor and a competent Group Commander. The Group Commander opening had been in the Loki Group. However, I discussed the matter with the current commander and he has agreed to reassignment to Loki Group. That clears the way to have you both on board the Thor; and, solves my issues. I would hope that, you would both accept the offer I have made.

Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher

I begin to go about my business. The internal investigation is going well. It is now quite obvious that, Chan has absconded with a lot of funds. But, we now have the accounting situation in hand. Normal activities can continue. It is really only a blip in my Task Force One Budget. The pilfering of supplies is less apparent. The shortage is considerable; but, still barely affects my budget. We will need the official investigation to find the culprits. The search for my COS has been fruitful. There is one at HQ that wants a move to a field command. She lost her husband two years ago; and, decided she should see as much of the Empire as she can. The HQ file shows a great history with the exception of the nine months, after her loss. It looks like she is over the hump, now. She is a Quadrant COS; so, she holds the rank of Commodore. It is acceptable; but, the highest rank a Rear Admiral's COS can hold. She will not have to accept a demotion. Under the circumstances, I do not need approval. There is no elevation and HQ indicates, in the file, they will release her. I am allowed to make this kind of offer for my Chief on my own under those conditions. I decide to write.

MEMO

From: *Rear Admiral K. Brubacher Commander Phoenix Fleet Task Force 1*
To: *Commodore Anita Enzulio COS Quadrant 2 Command*
Re: *Offer of reassignment to a field command*
C.C. *V. Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet, Admiral O. Blackman Quadrant 2
Commander, Mobile Fifth RAC Command*
Date: *March 31, 2256*

Commodore Enzulio,

I would like to extend the offer for you to assume the position of Chief of Staff Phoenix Fleet Task Force 1. This would be a reassignment. Your rank would remain unchanged; and, your duties would be very similar; though the responsibilities are a fraction of a Quadrant Command. I believe you would initially find the position a challenge, despite the reduced size of the operation. The previous Task Force Commander and the previous COS left the Task Force in quite a state. It will take a real expert to get it running smoothly within a reasonable timeframe.

I believe, I would be the envy of all Commanders within Mobile Fifth, should you take the position. I would expect to lose you to a better offer, in relatively short order. But, I believe that, you would enjoy the field assignment and we would benefit from your management, in the meantime.

There is a hidden benefit to a field assignment. Your remuneration rate would remain as it is. But, field assignments include lodging, food and many other benefits; as, a reward for giving up the permanence of ground assignments. Most of us bank considerable sums of money, over our careers. I sincerely hope you accept this offer.

Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher.

It wasn't even five minutes later, when my pad started chiming. I received the following messages.

MEMO

From: *V. Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet*
To: *R. Admiral K. Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1*
RE: *Commodore Anita Enzulio COS Quadrant 2 Command*
C.C. *Admiral S. Nichols Theatre Nine Commander*

Date: March 31, 2256

Admiral Brubacher,

Another great catch. I hope you get her; so, I can entice her to the Fleet Staff. I have met Anita. She is a wonderful person and a real bulldog. At the rate you are going, it looks like you will have Task Force 1 running like a fine machine, in another week. Good Luck.

Vice Admiral Leeds

MEMO

From: Admiral S. Nichols Theatre Nine Commander

To: R. Admiral K. Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1

RE: Commodore Anita Enzulio COS Quadrant 2 Command

C.C. V. Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

Date: March 31, 2256

Admiral Brubacher,

You are probably not making any friends in the flag ranks. You're stealing all the good ones. Good job Kurt. Keep up the good work. We need your task force fixed quickly; so, Phoenix is fully functional.

Admiral Stephen Nichols

.....

The JAG and audit units arrived on April 2. They interviewed me immediately. They know I just took over and found this mess. They are aware that, Helena hasn't been Fleet Commander very long. I am happy that, they are okay with the steps I took. I made them understand that, I would have had to ground the unit; if, I hadn't investigated and straightened up enough to make operations possible. Audit keeps coming to me with Chan's expenses. They want to know if this or that could be legitimate, for any reason. Part of their team is working on the warehouse issue. The two services share information. Anyway, that was all yesterday. Today, they are working silently and diligently. My enunciator sounds again.

MEMO

To: Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1

From: Commodore Anita Enzulio COS Quadrant 2 Command

RE: Your offer for the COS position, in your command

C.C. V. Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet, Admiral O. Blackman Quadrant 2

Commander

Date: April 1, 2256

Admiral Brubacher,

Thank you for your kind offer. I agree that, many offers may come my way while under your command; but, I find your current problems intriguing. I did some checking here. It looks like you initiated a JAG investigation and an audit.

I am accepting your offer, effective immediately. Admiral Blackman has arranged my transport; so, I should appear at your office door on April 7, 2256. Whatever happens in the future, I think I will enjoy the experience this position will offer. It sounds like, I will have to rebuild your staff and its processes, from the ground up. (Is that expression used in space?) I am not sure of my arrival time. I am not good at those kinds of calculations; since, I have never done any navigation.

I look forward to our partnership.

Commodore Anita Enzulio

I tapped my implant.

"Commodore Can Ngyuen.' I directed the system. 'Can everything we discussed has panned out. The new Task Force Commander and your new Carrier Captain should be here in a few hours. Can you come over here with that gem that's running the Thor?" I asked.

"We'll be right over." He responds.

Ten minutes later they report, at my door; looking like Frick and Frack. Nguyen is relatively short and Captain Levinson is quite tall.

"Take a seat, gentlemen. And, shut the door please, Can.' I say as I motion towards the conversation area. 'How do you think you're doing as the Captain of the ESS Thor, Arthur?" I ask him as he's taking his seat.

"I don't know, sir. I am really not sure." There is puzzlement in his voice.

"I have to evaluate you as a poor Commander, Captain. But, it's not entirely your fault. You were promoted through three levels very quickly; as, we went through the expansion. My feeling is that; you weren't ready for either of the last two promotions. What do you think?" I asked him.

"I am really not sure, sir. I do feel over my head a lot of times." He answers.

"Well, you are going to get a second chance. You will be relieved of command of the ESS Thor and demoted to Lt. Commander. You will be assigned as the fifth shift Bridge Commander on the ESS Loki. You will get some training here. In a year, we will reevaluate and see if we can make you a Commander and a First Officer. Hopefully, you'll be trained and ready for your own Command a couple of years after that. How does that sound, Captain?" I ask.

"It's disappointing, sir; but, it is also a considerable relief. I do feel the Thor is too much for me. And, the experience has really reduced my confidence level. It would be a little embarrassing, though. But, in the end, I still think I'd have to say you're right - and thank you." The young officer responds.

"If you remove your eagles, I will pin your new insignia on your collar. Commodore Ngyuen will have all your stuff moved over. Report to Captain Elasima on the Loki. He's expecting you. And, don't worry about the embarrassment. Everyone will accept you, in a little while. And, in a few years, no one will remember; when, you're back on a bridge of your own ship.' I finished as I pinned on the new rank jewelry. 'Commodore can you stay please? You go find your new Captain, Lt. Commander. Your dismissed." I said as he rose.

The young man left the room and closed the door behind him. I waited for a minute; until, he entered the lift.

"Well, what did you think?" I asked Can.

"That was very smooth. You fired him; and, he felt like you did him a favor." The Commodore said with admiration apparent in his voice.

"The trick is the self-evaluation. People having trouble are honest if you ask them for their own evaluation. Some make excuses at first; but, you can usually turn those, too. The other thing is showing the positive side of a move that results from this kind of situation.

Anyway, I will be posting all the announcements, now. As soon as they are public, you should start your move. When Anna Arce gets here, we will do the warrants right here. I will issue you Loki Group Commands; but, you will have to transfer Thor commands to her. You know the procedure." I instructed.

"If you'll excuse me Admiral, I will get going." He said.

I nodded as I began typing.

MEMO

From: Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Phoenix Task Force 1

To: All Phoenix Task Force 1 personnel
C.C. V. Admiral H. Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet
RE: Pending changes in Task Force I
Date: April 3, 2256

All,

I would like to advise you all of the following changes.

Effective March 31, Amrit Singh was relieved as COS Task Force 1, demoted to Lieutenant and reassigned to an engineering position.

Effective immediately, Captain Arthur Levinson has been relieved of Command of the ESS Thor. He has been reassigned as a Bridge Officer on the Loki.

Effective at fifteen hundred hours this date, Commodore Can Ngyuen will be reassigned as Commander Loki Group.

Effective fifteen hundred hours this day, Commodore Anne Arce will take Command of Phoenix Task Force 1 Thor Group Command. Anna has already commanded a Group, in Boots Fleet, for a considerable time. She has a stellar record.

Effective fifteen hundred hours this day, Captain David Simmons will join Thor Group as Captain of the ESS Thor. Captain Simmons comes from the ESS Espanola; which he commanded for the last eighteen months.

Commodore Arce and Captain Simmons are husband and wife.

Effective April 7, 2256 Commodore Anita Enzulio will assume the post of Chief of Staff of Phoenix Task Force One. Commodore Enzulio was the Chief of Staff for Quadrant 2; but, developed an urge to see more of the Empire; to our good fortune. She will have the daunting task of bringing the staff offices up to normal efficiency. Please assist her in any way you can. She speaks for the Command in most matters.

On a special note, the incident with the Staff Offices of the Chief of Staff has led to an extensive investigation and remedial actions. Teams are on site from Fifth Mobile RAC JAG offices and Fifth Mobile RAC Accounting Audit Services. This incident could result in some persons being criminally charged. Please bear with the investigating staff; and, assist them, if asked. Your understanding in this matter is appreciated. The incident nearly grounded Task Force 1.

Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher.

Anna was piped aboard with David in tow, at fourteen-ten hours. They appeared at my door ten minutes later. I invited them in and notified Can. We spent the next thirty-five minutes chatting. I broke it up at fourteen-fifty-five; so, we could get everything together. Helena arrived for the quiet ceremony. I read the warrants assigning them to their commands and congratulated them. Then we did all the transfer of operational Command Codes. Everyone excused themselves to go and supervise the coding percolating down through their commands.

"That went well, Admiral. You have sure accomplished a lot in a few days. In fact, your stamp is all over this Fleet, already. A lot of people have taken notice. You should be very proud." Helena said softly as she stood very close to me.

"I'm just doing my job. And, I wouldn't want to let the girl I love down." I responded softly.

"I've got to go. But you'll get your reward tonight." She said as she let the back of her hand brush my groin as she turned toward the door. I almost groaned out loud.

.....

I feel like it's the holidays, today. First, the two investigative teams advised me they were finished. When I inquired, they advised me that both Chan and Singh would face charges. Singh was actually hiding the embezzlement for Chan. A third person in the warehouse would be charged. That was a Chan scam, too. He used the leading crewman to help remove materials from the storage. Then, Chan offloaded the goods and sold them on alien planets. Singh colluded in that operation, too; and, received his "cut" for everything. Singh and the young crewman would be taken, now. Admiral Chan would be arrested at the academy on Rigil by OESA security forces. Next, I was advised that, Commodore Anita Enzulio was being piped aboard and welcomed by El. She reported at my door ten minutes later.

"Welcome Commodore you are right on schedule. This is the best April 7 anyone could have. It's like a birthday. Have a chair and relax. I've already announced the appointment; but, I have to give you Command Codes. That means your team will be down until you issue to them. I will assemble them. We don't expect you to work today; but, we need this meeting, now. In a closed space alone or with other senior officers, you may call me Kurt. May I call you Anita?" I asked the handsome late fortyish woman. I broadcast a message to the entire staff office to assemble in the same configuration as before, in the amphitheater in fifteen minutes. I advised El; so, he could allot the room.

"Yes Kurt, you may. And thank you for the pleasant welcome and the warm smile." She said as she took a chair.

"I just received the reports on the audit and the Jag investigation. The losses are accounted for; so, your team won't be hindered by them. Three people are headed for prison. My predecessor, your predecessor and a leading crewman from the warehouse are headed out. Two are on their way, with JAG. The third, Admiral Chan, is being arrested on Rigil, today. So, the office may need a lot of reworking; but, you are starting with a clean slate.

"I have been leading your team as best I could. I do not pretend to know your job; but, based on my needs I could direct them, clumsily. I have also been handling my own appointments; and, orders, directives, announcements and memos; which, have not gone through your office, for the last ten days. There was no way to maintain or establish protocol under the circumstances." I finish.

"No problem, you had difficulties to work around. We'll try to get things ship shape as quickly as possible. Shall we go?" She said with a bright warm smile.

I rose and we exited the office. We were joined at the lift by Admiral Leeds.

"Off to the amphitheater?" She asked.

"Yes Admiral. This is Commodore Anita Enzulio the new Task Force 1 Chief. Commodore, this is Vice Admiral Helena Leeds. Where are you headed, Admiral?" I asked.

"We've met before. But, welcome Anita. I am Helena. I'm headed to the amphitheater to spy on you; if, you must know.' Helena said with a smile as the two women shook hands. 'Besides, I want Anita and I to be close friends. After you get your house in order; and, you find a new Chief, I might be able to entice her to take on my staff. We could trade Kurt." She said with a laugh.

"It's a little early, Admiral. Anita just got off the shuttle. Besides, she might not want to move. Maybe she'll like the vacation atmosphere. And, maybe, I won't want to part with her." I said with a wink.

"And, just maybe, I can help you both at the same time. Task Force 1 is in pretty desperate shape, right now. I need two to three weeks to establish processes and get people working with them. From then on, the job will get a little easier every day. Compared to Quadrant 2, both your staffs together are pretty small. I may be able to spend an increasing amount of time with your

people, too, Helena. You might end up with two first class chiefs. Then, you can trade us back and forth as you like." She said with a laugh as we approached the amphitheater.

"Group!!!" Someone snapped as we stepped through the doorway. Everyone leapt to their feet and came to attention.

"Take your seats." I said ignoring Helena's superior rank. I had called the meeting; and, she said she was just auditing.

"I would like to introduce you to Commodore Anita Enzulio.' I extended my right hand towards the Commodore. 'She is your new boss. She has my full support and speaks for me in every order she gives or writes; so, please give her your full support and cooperation.

Commodore, our little configuration was for my benefit, when I called a meeting a while back. People are positioned by department from front to back of the hall. Every fourth seat marks the positioning of another department. You will note that each department head has a place card bearing the department name and the name of its department head. The meeting is now yours." I said.

"Good morning everyone." She yelled into the microphone.

There was a chorus of sheepish responses.

"Good morning everyone. " She yelled even louder.

"Good morning Commodore." The crowd roared.

"Much better; but, you can still improve. You must use my name; and you must smile, when you reply. My name is Commodore Anita Enzulio -E - N - Z - U - L - I - O she said as she turned and wrote it in grease pen on the white board. It's on the board now; so, you can use my last name. But, if you can't remember, call me Commodore Anita in public. If I am in your department; and, there is no one from any other department or command in the room, we may talk in first names. But service protocol requires you to pay the respect of using my rank when others are present. That goes for Admiral Brubacher; and even Admiral Leeds. Now, let's try it again. Good morning everyone!" This time it was not a yell, but loud and cheery; as she pointed to her mouth to highlight her smile.

"Good Morning Commodore Enzulio." A roar echoed back. This time it sounds like happy not angry voices and everyone was smiling.

"Very Good. You have not had a lot to smile about, lately. I think things have been tough for a long time. Things don't look so bad considering. It looks like most of you went about your

business despite Captain Singh and Admiral Chan. That took a lot of strength and we are proud of you. And, we are proud of the work you did; since, Admiral Brubacher took over the Task Force. For a little while, I will come into each office in the morning and say good morning to you so we can practice what we just learned. If you have to smile, every day, it will become easier; and, you will find you will become more positive. We must get you out of any "Funk" you may have been pushed into, over the past six months.

And I will tell you there is justice. Admiral Chan, Captain Singh and a Leading Crewman from the warehouse have been arrested and charged. They are all facing heavy jail time. The good thing about it is that, none of you got caught up in the embezzlement; and, you all tried to do your jobs, correctly. The facts bear testimony to that. From here on, you may want to take notes.

It won't take long for us to straighten things up. You are all competent and capable. The biggest problem will be processes. Did Singh follow protocol; or, did he take shortcuts. I will work a little with each department. We will look at the process. We may have to change a few completely; but, we may only have to modify others a little. Still others might only need to be tweaked. And a lot are probably okay, as they are.

When you came to Phoenix Fleet, you all had skills, training and experience that made you a valuable commodity. Tomorrow morning, that's the you I want to meet. Not the you Captain Singh tried to create. We want the pure accountant, lawyer or encryption specialist.

The Flag Officer who commands a large body is responsible for all aspects of his Command. That's why Admiral Brubacher has a staff; and, that's why he stopped everything and called for an investigation, when he smelled something foul. He is the final responsible person for all the departments you represent. He is also responsible for all the tactical decisions the Task Force has to make. That's why we're here. To lighten his load. We keep his appointment calendar. We take his notes and write promotion and assignment warrants. We take his e-mails and write his tactical orders. We filter them down to the Group Level; and, we report everything back to the Fleet. - all in his name and on his behalf. But, we take those orders, warrants and messages and look them over and make sure they conform to the protocols in the Rules and Regulations. We edit and get his approval before sending anything out. With all the warehouse withdrawals, payroll distributions, promotions, demotions, attacks, withdrawals, meetings, acquisitions, memos, personnel evaluations and all the other areas of responsibility, we will

handle a thousand decisions a day, in his name. They must convey his meaning without breaching regulations or protocol.

I only tell you this because, it does not look like Singh had his office doing all those things; so, your work level will rise, over the next while. It will rise just to handle what our offices were supposed to handle, in the first place. I can only imagine how busy Admiral Brubacher has been over the last ten days. He had to do a lot of the detail stuff himself. And, in the mayhem he may have missed some things; like, forwarding a promotion or reassignment to payroll and / or human resources. So, we will go over everything he has done that, we should have handled, in the last ten days; and, correct any missteps. From e-mails I have read, I can remember a few, right off the top of my head. The Admiral had a meeting with his marine chief a while back about security. A transcript of that meeting should have been posted with the Task Force amended Rules and Regulations. Another one was an informal meeting he had with senior officers that also included security precautions. That should be cause to amend the R&R protocols, too. Once a Commander demands or orders something, it becomes the law of the Command; until, changed by that or a subsequent Commander. He helped you out over the last ten days; so, we will help him out now. Does everyone agree with my plan and assessment?" Anita finished and looked around to a chorus of nods. Many of the nearly three hundred actually looked relieved.

"Are there any questions? Do you all understand, what I am trying to convey?" She asked as a hand went up in the front row.

"Yes... Mary." She said; as she read the name off the place marker.

"Commodore Enzulio, I have an observation. May I present it?" Mary asked.

"Yes, of course. Any observations or opinions you have are welcome. Go ahead." Anita said and leaned forward to listen intently.

"Commodore, first, I want to say we are very thankful you took this assignment. We were all afraid we might get another Captain Singh.' A round of applause exploded. When it stopped Mary went on. 'We all saw the struggle Admiral Brubacher endured; and, we'd have done more, if we could. But, we could see he needed to handle most of it because of the possible criminal aspects; and, we didn't know about handling all his communication, appointments and orders. I want to say, we all feel very bad about this. But, we are happy, too. And, I think we should thank him for all his patience, consideration, hard work and the loyalty he showed us. I think we should

give him an OESA cheer!" She yelled as she stood with her right arm in the air. Everyone else rose.

"Rah" The chorus was delivered in the fashion Commodore Enzulio had just fostered.

"Thank you all. I am finished; so, I'll turn this back to the Admiral." Anita projected a bit.

"Isn't she something? I may not know anything else; but, I know how to pick people who do. Do you like your new Commander?" I yelled.

Marie's right arm rose again as she stood up. Everyone followed.

"Rah" the chorus was delivered in Anita's fashion.

"Admiral Leeds is here. I want to bring her up. She will have a few words for you." I said as Helena rose from among them and came forward.

"Hi folks.' She was speaking softly. 'You know, it did not occur to me until I heard Commodore Enzulio, just how traumatic all this may have been on all of you. She is so right. We are so proud of all of you. You did your jobs as well as you could under the conditions of the time. And, it's so nice you noticed Admiral Brubacher's efforts. He has worked so hard on behalf of all Task Force personnel and for me. Before becoming Task Force Commander, he had the Loki; and, I don't think I'm exaggerating by saying, he took a death trap and turned it into the best ship in the Fleet. And, then he faced all this mess with Task Force 1. Personnel issues caused by rapid expansion, illegal activities, security issues and unfilled positions.' She paused. Then yelled. "How about a cheer for him?"

Again it was Mary who stood with her hand in the air. Everyone followed delivering a loud call. "Rah"

I took over the podium.

"Mary. After the meeting, you might want to spend a few minutes with the Commodore. You are a natural leader. She may want to use that. What's that you say. 'I cup my right hand to my ear; then, drop it. 'Oh, she paid you for that.' I said naively to a chorus of laughter. Then I continue. 'Okay. We established that we love all of you.' I said as I waved a hand to the audience. 'And, you love all of us.' I waved a hand to the two women Flag Officers and me. 'Oh boy, this is really getting sappy.' I said as I shook my head in feigned disgust. 'There are seven thousand requisitions, two hundred orders, twenty warrants and seventy-five memos I have to send to your offices, when we leave here. Your all dismissed.'" I said with a laugh and a wave as

the staff rose in laughter and actually applauded. This is the first meeting I've attended where, people applauded at the end.

"Wow, you missed your calling." Anita said.

"Yeah, I didn't know I was hiring a stand-up comic when I asked for you." Helena added.

"Ah come on. You two aren't going to gang up on me, are you? I was just trying to make them feel good about themselves and their situations." I feign sadness.

"And a very fine job you did of it, too, Stanley." Helena said reminiscent of Oliver Hardy in the ancient comedies,

"You ain't so bad yourself, Admiral' I answered. 'Let's stop for an early lunch or brunch; or, whatever it's called." I suggested to the positive nods of the others.

Chapter 17 The Conspiracy

Monday June 1, 2257

"Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws." - Plato

It's been over a year since my unexpected promotion and my assignment as Phoenix Task Force 1 Commander. I can honestly say, the last three months have seemed like leave. Things were so busy for the fifteen months, after I was assigned the Loki, that; the next three made me realize, I am like a marathon runner doing a cool down lap. But, the Task Force is running smoothly. We have not faltered in any assignments. Reviews of Phoenix and Task Force 1 conducted by my superiors have been outstanding.

It took three weeks for Anita to get things really straightened out in the Staff Office. Singh proved there's nothing like an amateur to really screw up the works. But, she is my right arm, now. At least when, she's not crossing over to the other side to work with Helena's COS. That office is ticking like a watch, too.

For her part, Helena's been a great boss. And, a great lover, too. Our biggest impediments have been Nichols and Bryant. They keep wanting the Phoenix Group close to the Midgard or Valhalla; but, we still go on about patrols we are assigned, in the region. The Fifth has moved to all four quadrants of the Empire, during the last four months; so, I think Anita's seen more than she thought she would. Even the most basic red dwarf, we all take for granted, strikes her with awe; when, we approach it. And, she can't get enough of emission nebulae. She stood at a viewport for hours; studying the Lagoon Nebula; when, we were working at Zeta Sagittarius. She'd be happy to go six to eight hundred light years out from Earth, where some truly dense and beautiful ones reside.

Anyway, Nichols will call Helena and the two Task Commanders into his office for some lame brained excuse, when we're near Midgard; and, Bryant will do the same, when we are near Valhalla. We've spent as much time on those ships as we have on the Loki. One thing I began to notice as early as my War College days was how often the Emperor is at the Valhalla. And, sometime Bryant and he are at the Midgard, when we pull in. There have been other times when Stephenson is with them, too. And, I get the impression that, they are watching Helena and me. Sometimes I see them sideways-glancing at the two of us while talking softly through hand

covered mouths. I am not sure about Harter Brocken my counterpart in Phoenix Task Force 2. All eyes seem to be focused on Helena and me, when all three of us are present. Sometimes, there are other Flag officers nearby on the station, too. I notice the same interest in some; and not in others. It seems like a group of us are being assessed for some mysterious purpose. Or, maybe I'm just paranoid. I am so doubtful of these observations; I haven't even mentioned them to Helena.

Helena is another story. Or, I should say that; ours is another story of growth over the past year. We still don't live in a single apartment. We would not want to shock our subordinates. So, we spend three or four hours a night in one or the other's quarters. Both are spacious and elegant; so, we don't really care whose unit we're in. Three hundred or four hundred in the morning will see whichever one is in the wrong apartment relocating to their own. But, we would marry at the drop of a hat. It wouldn't take much. My third star or the threat of a war could push us into a quick one. We have lots of ship's captains to perform the ceremony, quickly.

The quiet time has been good. It has taken me out of the spotlight, for now. I feel like the whole year; after, I was promoted to the Loki; I was under a magnifying glass. It seems like everything I was exposed to during that period was faulty in one way or the other and fixing those things brought me attention. I feel like, I was holding my breath through all of it; and, am just catching my wind, now.

Right now, Valhalla is positioned outside the 61 Virgo system, not quite twenty-eight light years from Earth. And, that is something else I've noticed. Most of our designated patrol areas haven't taken us more than thirty light years from Earth, in the past year. It means, we can usually bring the entire Fifth to Earth in less than a week; and, in three days if, we travel at forty percent. Anyway, Phoenix has been ordered to patrol a 66000 cubic light year cube centered at Ross 695 and Task Force One is patrolling half the cube while Task Force Two patrols the other. The thing is that Task Force One has the half cube that nearly meets 61 Virgo. Loki Group is at that end of our half. I would bet, that Loki will be called to Valhalla, soon. We are only two hours from it at standard speed; and, could be there in an hour, if need be. This is another thing I've noticed. Phoenix Fleet is always close to either the Valhalla or the Midgard; but, the Loki Group is always closest of all. For the last year, the ESS Loki could get to one of these pointless meetings in a few hours, or less.

Sure enough, the expected message arrives in the afternoon requiring us to report to Admiral Bryant aboard the Valhalla at eight hundred hours Tuesday June 2, 2257. I had Ngyuen order the Loki to head to Valhalla at four hundred thirty hours the next morning.

"Good Morning you two. Forget the formalities and grab a seat.' Admiral Bryant says; waving his hand towards the spacious conversation area. 'That is, unless you need breakfast. There's scrambled eggs, pea-meal bacon, fruit, toast and assorted beverages. Help yourself." He offered; directing us to a side-table.

We both took only a coffee; then, took a seat on each end of a sofa. Bryant sat leaning toward us on the opposite side of the coffee table intently holding our eyes.

"I'm going to bring in a few other parties, in a couple of minutes. I just wanted to say that, I wouldn't be surprised if you were both wondering, what the hell is going on.' He paused for a moment. 'The Emperor has been observing you both. He studies our reports on Flag Officers; but, he likes to be able to envision the ones he is interested in. There is something in the wind. I am sure you guessed. We can't tell you yet. It's too dangerous. But you are part of a plan; and things will start changing for you both, today. And tomorrow, you will know what you want to know." He rose, went to the door, waved someone toward the office and came back to sit down. It was great to know; I had not been paranoid. We were being watched.

As the three people enter the room we both bolt to our feet.

"Vice Admiral Leeds and Rear Admiral Brubacher, I want to introduce you to Emperor Edward III, Fleet Admiral William Stephenson; and, you know Admiral Nichols, of course.' He directed his hand toward each man as he introduced him. 'And, gentlemen, this is Vice Admiral Helena Leeds and Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher." He said using his hand the same way to indicate us.

"Please, everyone be seated.' The Emperor said. 'This will be an informal meeting. We will not stand on protocol, here. We are all friends, here. Aren't we?' He asked as he leaned in towards us holding our gaze. 'May I ask the two of you a personal question? And it does concern both of you." The Emperor asked.

"Yes sir, of course." Helena answered.

"I have watched the two of you in the corridors, many times. And, I have seen things. A sneaking hand touch, here - a coy little glance and light blush there. Are you in love?' He paused and waited; but, no answer was forthcoming as we stared at each other in amazement. 'It is not a

crime, you know. Two of our most famous and valued Admirals are a husband and wife team who met on the job." He said with a warm smile as I glanced over at Admiral Bryant.

"Yes, your highness, we are. We are only waiting for the right time." Helena answered.

The Emperor took her right hand in both of his; patting the back of it with his right hand.

"There is never a right time for anything. There is just a time. You throw a dart at a calendar to pick a date; and, you do whatever it is, on that day. That's all there is to life, my dear. It's funny you don't realize that in your personal lives yet. Your professional lives already reflect that attitude. If it needs doing - do it." He spoke softly with a warm smile. Helena sobbed.

"Why did you ask, if you feel it's alright, your majesty." I ask.

"People in love are very trustworthy. They do not want to upset their romance by doing something that can damage it. So, they will pick a side; and, stay with it; so, they don't disturb their norm and upset their love. Do you see what I am saying?' He asked to our nods. "I need to trust you both; and, knowing you are lovers makes it easier. Call me a sentimental fool; but, it has always worked for me." He finishes with a chuckle.

"What do you mean, you need to trust us." I ask; as, the Emperor still held Helena's hand and was patting it to comfort her as she sobbed.

"We will share a big secret with you. A dangerous one. A secret that could get you killed – or me, for that matter. So, I needed to know I could trust you, when we do share it. But, today, there is other business we must finish; before we get to that. I have one more question for you. It's very personal, too. I find it hard to ask such a favor." The Emperor says.

"Sir, I know I am your loyal servant; because, you have always been a gentle leader. And your family was always concerned with the citizens' wellbeing. And, I am very sure that Kurt feels the same way.' She pauses. I nod. 'I don't think we could refuse any request you make, no matter how personal." Helena answered for the two of us.

"After our meetings are done tomorrow, I want the two of you to announce your wedding. You may have the grandest wedding. We will make it an official function; and the OESA will pick up all the costs. You will be able to fly your families to your Carrier for the affair; and, you will be able to use the four Carriers of a Fleet to hold your dinner." The Emperor finished.

"You mean like Admiral Bryant's wedding was handled? That is very generous." I respond with doubt apparent in my voice.

"Not so much. There are strings attached. But, I'll tell you that Admiral Nichols and Commodore Hurst have agreed, too. They are fine with the strings." He added.

"I am shocked." Helena said as she rose and stepped toward Nichols. I followed.

"Sir, I am so happy. Congratulations. I have to see Olivia before I leave." She said and I followed her with my best wishes and a vigorous handshake.

"I will tell you this much, now. Both weddings will be timed far enough apart to be used as good diversions. They will put the entire Empire to sleep with romantic dreams; just, when I need it to happen. I cannot tell you more, now. The rest is for tomorrow. Admiral Bryant will fill you in on today's happenings.

"First, I have to ask you how Anna Arce is doing?" Kurt.

"She's ready for the next step, sir. Sometime I wonder why I'm the boss. She could run the show, by herself." I answer.

"That's exactly what I wanted to know. Do you feel you have to keep Loki as the Task Force One Flag Vessel, Helena?" George asks.

"Not really, sir. Since Kurt straightened up the mess, either ship could fly the Task Force pennant.

"Good, then here's what's going to happen today. Bill here is creating a special office. It will be the C&C OESA Inspector General Branch. It will be staffed by about forty-three to forty-six hundred; like a Theatre. That will allow for all the audit materials to be examined by an independent expert staff in each field under the command of the Special Examinations Branch Commander. This person and the investigative team will go from Quadrant to Quadrant, Theatre to Theatre and Fleet to Fleet examining every aspect of their operations and their tactical missions. It will have a two-fold purpose. The first is to ensure that each and every aspect of all commands complies with regulations, is legal, moral and ethical. This branch will weed out all the General Chans and Captain Singhs in all field commands. It will ensure that operations are conducted as they are meant to be. It will investigate all the minutia of each operation, no matter the security level. The Commander will actually lead many of the investigations. It's second purpose is to gain intelligence. The information we will give you tomorrow will explain the need. We need the best guess of who is loyal to the idea of the Throne and the Crown; and, who is actually loyal to the Emperor Edward, the man. We also need to know who's first loyalty is to their Command Line.

Bill was able to get the new Department through the system by holding up the incident with your former COS and the former Admiral Chan. By the way, they were sentenced, today. Chan got twenty-five-years hard labor. Singh got twelve years. The crewman got five years. It's fitting considering the mess they made and the trust they broke. Everyone is well looked after, in the service, even the regular crewmen. There is no need for that kind of greed.

The new department would be HQ; but, would be housed on the Valhalla. The story will be its temporary; because of current space constraints. But, putting it here will lock down security on the intelligence part of it; and will make it mobile.

So the plan is that, Bill will release the announcement, at the end of this meeting. Kurt will be promoted to Admiral Level 10 and will head the new operation. If you take it, you have six weeks to get it running and four months to get it to one hundred percent - not a day longer. You will have the staff we spoke of; a generous personal staff and your own Admiral's Craft. Your salary will be sixty percent higher than now. That's standard for level 10. Besides accountants and legal people, you will need a large staff of trained criminal investigators, enforcement staff marine guard battalion to enforce your will if you need to; and, a fair sized intelligence battalion. Malcolm will supply you with two hundred from throughout Mobile Fifth. You will have sixty criminal investigators, thirty cops, fifty intelligence officers and sixty fighting marines fully armed and equipped. Of course all two hundred are fully trained marines; so, you could exert considerable force, if needed. You will also have a large press corps contingent attached to your operations. We need you to make a lot of noise on the criminal side; but, the intelligence side should be top secret. But, you will need a carrier to move that many investigators to a site; so, the Loki will be at your disposal. You just have to ask Helena. You may even need to use a Task Force or Fleet to exert your will on a larger resisting force. We will keep Phoenix Fleet close to the Valhalla, from now on. Essentially, the Phoenix Fleet is going to guard the Valhalla. It may become a target soon. Some people won't be happy about these investigations. Helena, you will send a message to the Thor offering The Task Force to Anna Arce with an elevation to Rear Admiral. Helena, you must tell her to leave immediately; if, she is accepting. She can confirm on route. She can bring Dave with her. Helena, you may want to offer him the Group Command. I believe he's the most experienced Captain you have with Carrier Duty. He's decisive and smart. If you offer it, and he accepts, let me know. We need to have the Warrants ready when they arrive. They do not need to know everything. But, we can tell them of Kurt's new appointment;

because, it'll be in the announcement, anyway. We will do the ceremonies, when they arrive. Kurt, you need to draw a second complete set of uniforms. Banerjee has an outlet on the Valhalla. You will have permanent quarters on the Loki and permanent ones here; and, you will travel quite a bit. You will be allowed to draw people from all five Quadrant Level Commands, all ten Theatre Level Commands, all the Fleets and the Academies. Try to make each move a promotion; and, try not to pick on one command, too much. Try to keep it fair. Helena, you will have to find a new Carrier Captain, probably. I know you are light at Phoenix; so, you may draw a seasoned Exec from any Fleet in Fifth. I will force it.

We picked Kurt for several reasons. The most important considerations were his most recent experiences. Picking up on the Loki faults and doing such a thorough job proves his knowledge of the vessels and their needs. Building a working staff in such short order proves he can handle the job; given proportionate time to do it. And, he had a sharp eye for the illegal crap that was going on and knew what to do about it. And, he acts quickly and decisively. Another reason is his loyalty to me, Admiral Nichols and Admiral Leeds. And, finally he is smart and empathetic. When he becomes aware of what's going to happen, I'm sure he will stand with Edward. The last part of the plan is your wedding. It has to be scheduled for six months from now. Stephen will marry Olivia a month before. Two royal weddings in a month will keep a lot of people and the press dazzled. We will need that diversion. Can you live with that time frame, Helena?" George asked.

"If it's going to be that big a splash, it'll take that long to plan." She responded.

"Okay, the most important part. What do you say Kurt?" George asked. There was a couple of minute pause.

"Making a decision like this, without knowing everything, is very hard. The secrecy makes it tough. But, I have always trusted you, sir - and, Admiral Nichols. I have admired you and made you my model. So, I will take a shot and say I'm in all the way; no matter what is said tomorrow. I believe you would not do, or ask me to do, the wrong thing. I accept the promotion and the reassignment; and, I'm relieved you all know about Helena and me. Thank you for that Your Highness. You are very perceptive." I said with a smile.

The meeting broke up. Helena received confirmation that Anna and Dave had accepted and were on the way. Anna had detected the urgency in the message. She had authorized forty

percent of light speed, in the jump. They would land at seventeen hundred hours, in full dress uniforms. The rest of the day was a whirlwind.

MEMO

To: All OESA Field and Headquarters Commands & all personnel
From: Fleet Admiral B. Dickinson OESA C&C, Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C
C.C.: Office of the Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Emperor Edward III
Re: New Headquarters Command
Date: June 1, 2257

All,

Recent events have made it apparent that, though we trust the majority of our personnel, that trust cannot be blind; and, we must be aware there is always a very small percentage of any group that will take advantage to satisfy their lust for power or, their greed for wealth. To highlight this point, I will point out that former Rear Admiral Lee Chan, Captain Amrit Singh and Leading Crewman Huard Bolger were sentenced to long prison terms for a vast embezzlement scheme. It became apparent during the same investigation that; there had been a widespread abuse of personnel, by the same perpetrators. Besides the abuse, the scheme involved a large theft of money and an operation designed to steal OESA materials and sell them on the Black Market. This is an unacceptable situation.

To root out any other such criminal conspiracies, deter any future ones, detect abuse of personnel and the misuse of power in any venue of our organization, we wish to announce the creation of a new Headquarter Department.

Be advised that by the authority of the C&C, with the approval of the Orion Empire Council, the Orion Empire Representative Assembly, the Secretary of Defense and Emperor Edward III; and, effective immediately, an investigative Headquarters Department to be named the Inspector General Branch (IGB) has been created and entrenched in the Rules and Regulations of the OESA.

This investigative branch will hold full headquarters department status; but will be temporarily housed in the ESS Valhalla, due to constraints in office space. It will be commanded by a Level 10 Flag Officer, in perpetuity; and, will be manned by a staff of nearly five thousand personnel. Embedded within its structure, a full investigative and enforcement

branch will be authorized and warranted by the Empire to enforce its laws and the Rules and Regulations of the OESA. They will have the full powers of arrest and detainment held by any other such agencies throughout the Empire. Since this department will have the full authorization to investigate the minutia of all operations of any Command, each and every member of the department will be painstakingly vetted and granted the Empire's highest level of Security Clearance. An investigative order from the Commander of the Branch (Inspector General) will carry the same authority as a criminal warrant or subpoena issued by a court of the Empire, or in the name of the Emperor. All personnel presented with, or made aware of such an order, will yield full access and offer no interference in any investigation; as, outlined in the official order. Your compliance to the Branch is not just requested; but, required by the amendments made to the OESA Rules and Regulations.

We trust you will understand the need for this change; and, the fact that this new Department is under tight control by C&C Staff Offices to ensure it does not abuse these wide ranging powers. The new department is also under the scrutiny of a new sub-committee authorized by the Defense Committee of the Orion Empire Representative Assembly. The Department's Commander and representatives will be required to appear before, and report to, this sub-committee, on a regular basis. It is not our intent to create a police state, or to restrict the freedoms our citizens enjoy.

Fleet Admiral B. Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C

MEMO

To: All OESA Field and Headquarters Commands & all personnel

From: Fleet Admiral B. Dickinson OESA C&C, Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C

C.C. Office of the Orion Empire Secretary of Defense, Emperor Edward III

Re: Inspector General Branch Commanding Officer Appointment

Date: June 1, 2257

All,

Please be advised that at seventeen hundred hours, this day, Rear Admiral Kurt Brubacher, currently Commander Phoenix Fleet Task Force One will be elevated to the rank of Admiral (10).

We also wish to advise you that, effective seventeen hundred hours, this day Admiral Kurt Brubacher will be assigned as Commander OESA Inspector General Branch.

Admiral Brubacher has had a distinguished career with our service. He has demonstrated keen abilities as a trouble shooter and investigator; and, has contributed to our institution tactically and organizationally. He has a daunting task ahead. Staffing a new full department, establishing operating protocols and procedures and beginning investigative operations in the required timeframe will not be an easy job. We expect his department to begin functioning in six weeks; and be fully operational in four months.

Congratulation to you, Kurt; and, best of luck.

Fleet Admiral B. Dickinson OESA C&C

Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C

Other memos, from Admiral Nichols, regarding promotions and reassignments rippling from my promotion flew through the system. When Anna and David arrived, they were hustled into Admiral Bryant's office. He spent ten minutes summarizing and highlighting the changes and the need for them; without conveying the underlying intelligence reasons. He pretty much stuck to the line in the announcement from the C&C. The rest of us entered the room, after that. Both Anna and David were somewhat stunned when the Emperor entered the room with us.

Following that, we went to the amphitheater. It was well represented with people from both Loki and Thor; along with, a multitude from the thousands on the Valhalla. The ceremonies went off to a lot of fanfare; but, without a snag. It took less than an hour to do all the promotions and assignments. There were only very brief statements; instead of the usual long speeches from the event hosts.

From there, a select group went to the lounge for a cocktail party. I did have two glasses of champagne, this time. Helena toasted me. Bryant toasted me. The Emperor toasted me. When I could move away from the more senior officers, I sought out Tahu Moahu who I recognized from our time in Boots Fleet.

"Vice Admiral Moahu, can I have a moment of your time?" I ask as I take his elbow and gently guide him away from other ears.

"Yes, Admiral; of course. What may I do for you?" He inquires.

"First of all, please call me Kurt." I offer my hand.

"And, you may call me Moe. My friends call me that. Any friend of Admiral Bryant is a friend of mine." He said with a smile as he shook my hand.

"I guess this is my first official function for my new Command. You are COS of Fifth Mobile and that means you command a very large staff. My Command will need a large staff; about a third of the size you run. I know that, the service is stretched thin, now. I know I am not going to be able to grab a Chief who is doing this job, already. Besides, I would not want to cripple some other large Command by stealing their Chief of Staff. But, I assume you meet other Chiefs in your duties and know some of the senior people in the other large Command Staff Offices. I am also assuming that, a Command the size of yours would have a Deputy or Assistant COS; or, some other such person you consider your right hand. So, I need your advice." I stop.

"What would that be Kurt?" The Fifth Chief asks me.

"I need to know if you could recommend an assistant or deputy of a large Staff office in a Quadrant or Theatre Command that would be able to take on a Chief's job; and, build the staff, from the ground up?" I ask softly. There is a very long pause. I can see his internal computer is crunching the numbers and variables.

"I can think of one, I could recommend to you. She is a young Finnian Commodore who is deputy COS in Admiral Mkali's Theatre Two Command by the name of Rohkea Sielu. He has a top notch COS; so, you shouldn't harm the operation. It will take time to fill the hole; but, they will carry on. I mention her because she is very dynamic; and, is looking for a more exciting challenge. Your new operation might be just the thing for her; and, for you.' He said with a smile. 'Shall we get another drink?' He moves on as if we hadn't spoke of business.

"Yes, let's do that." I respond with a smile as we turn toward the bar. We pass the time chatting for fifteen minutes. People began leaving; so, I corner Admiral Stephenson.

"Sir, may I have a moment of your time, in private?" I ask.

"Certainly Kurt. And, call me Bill, in private, please!" He barked with a smile.

I used his elbow to steer him out of earshot of the others.

"Bill, it has come to my attention that, a young Commodore who is a deputy COS in Theatre Two is looking for a transfer. Would you help me pry her loose? I think I'd like to make her my Chief. Her name is Rohkea Sielu." I add.

"Go ahead and make the offer. I'll text Mkali, right now. She's yours; if, she agrees." He says.

"Thank you, sir. Having a Chief now will shorten my time putting together a staff." I reply.

"I just love your attitude, my boy. I love the way you sought out Moe for help; and, the way you came straight to me. I think we picked the right man for the job." He laughs aloud as he finishes sending the message.

I couldn't believe I was so transparent that; he knew I was picking Moahu's brain. I excuse myself and go off to prepare one of my own messages.

MEMO

From: Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander OESA Inspector General Branch

To: Commodore Rohkea Sielu Deputy COS Theatre Two Command

Re: Offer of Promotion and reassignment

Date: June 1, 2257

Commodore Sielu,

Your desire to move to a different style of Command has come to my attention.

I believe that, the OESA Inspector General Branch (IGB), and added challenges, may be what you seek. This department will run continuous blitz type, surprise investigations of all other Commands in the OESA; except that, of the C&C Office, which falls under the purview of an Orion Representative Assembly committee. It should be a fast-paced, exciting and busy operation. Our staff would be comprised of up to four thousand; representative of all OESA departments. A portion of each department would be engaged in managing our own operations. The rest of each department would be forensic experts in their fields; able to analyze data and evidence we recover in investigations. An additional five to six hundred would make up the investigation and enforcement division of the Inspector General Branch. Though a Headquarters' Department, The Inspector General Branch would be housed aboard Mobile Fifth Command's flag ship, the Valhalla. Travel to remote investigation sites would be facilitated by the Phoenix Fleet or one of its sub-commands. We would usually be housed aboard the ESS Loki during these trips.

I would like to offer you a transfer to the Inspector General Branch and the Position of Chief of Staff. You would have the daunting task of building a complete staff from the ground up. However, that responsibility will be mitigated by certain guarantees of staff availability made by the C&C.

You would be promoted to the level of Rear Admiral (8) to enable your control of this operation. The Inspector General Branch is essentially a Field Command; and the Valhalla travels all over the Empire; so, you also gain the ability to see all the worlds of our realm.

Though I would hope you will accept this offer, I will need your immediate response. Since the COS spot is the first link in a very long chain, time is of the essence.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General

I send the message; knowing round trip time for a reply is two and a half days. Then, I go to seek out Malcom.

"Hi, General Malcolm, I'm Kurt Brubacher." I introduce myself with my hand extended. He takes it and we shake hands warmly.

"Everyone knows who you are, Admiral." He responds with smile. "Are you enjoying your party?" He inquires.

"Yes General, I'm getting a lot of work done." I reply.

"Is that so. I suppose this is no social call, then." He asks.

"We could go over and get another drink and chat for awhile. I just wanted to set a time I could see you tomorrow, to go over the Marine Contingent in my new staff." I explain as I start creeping toward the bar.

"I have a morning meeting; but, I'll be available anytime through the rest of the day; if you come by my office." Ian responds.

"Fine, I'll see you there. Yours is a big command; isn't it, General? Somewhere around seventy thousand with staffs, isn't it? What's it like to command an operation that big? I query.

"Well Kurt, you did twenty-five thousand. It's not much different; except in significant tactical situations. You have more sub-ordinates in the levels immediately below to help get the job done; so, it doesn't seem that much worse. Most tactical situations occur suddenly; and, at the Division Level; so, I don't see a lot of that, anymore. Tactical would only come to me; if, there was a very wide war affecting the entire Fifth, at the same time. But marine tactical plans are more like planning a skirmish. The wide area planning is actually dictated by the Theatre and Quadrant Commands; since, our forces are assigned ship by ship to each Fleet. So, I don't have the luxury of sending the fourth division here and the third there; because they will be where the Fleets take them. My job is more like a policy maker. What to do when you board a craft; or, the tactics used in ground attacks. I manage an army of one hundred forty thousand; but the Field

Commanders really control its tactics. It would be a different story if I was asked to put fifty thousand troops on a planet. I would take overall command of a force like that. Why do you ask?" Malcolm inquires.

"Oh, I don't know. I think it's because this new assignment makes me feel I will never have a larger tactical command. I think I may be trying to vicariously experience it through you." I answer with a smile.

The party in the hangar deck is incredible. Each of these spaces is fifty percent bigger than on a standard carrier. Using one for a bash like this means you can really hold a lot of guests. The event seems familiar. It is patently Moe's doing. I brought Helena as my guest; not as a Fleet Commander. That way, she ends up seated on my left at the head table. At nine hundred in the morning, we reported to Admiral Bryant's office. George, Stephen, Bill Stephenson, Helena, Edward III, Malcolm, Blackman, Tonaka and I ringed the conversation area. The Emperor started the discussion.

"When the first Emperor Edward founded the Empire with Old Tom he expressed his dread at a dictatorship. He and Old Tom worked to craft a constitution that would create a hybrid cooperative government halfway between a dictatorship and a democracy. What they came up with was a representative government that respected the people; but, could be controlled by my predecessors to get things done. But, through all the generations of my family since, we have all been taught to detest the fact that, we are peoples' rulers. None of my family has ever wanted that. I don't really want that. Each Emperor planned to leave the position. People should control their own destiny; even, if they make mistakes.

Because of the way my family has run the Empire over all the generations, people are unaware that they really live under a dictatorship. The constitution really gives all the power to the Emperor. Without my assent a bill does not pass. I have the power to start a piece of legislation and order it passed, in the end. And because, there are maybe two hundred statutes from all the one hundred worlds and the Empire's legislative Assembly that are counter productive to the people I do interfere a lot more than people realize. These aberrations represent only a couple of bills on each world and for the Orion Legislature every year; so, no one really notices how much interference there is. There are more than eleven thousand acts passed every year in all the different assemblies; so, I do not step in on a large percentage of the business. I

nullify about one and a half percent of the statutes sent to me every year. And, what I say is the end of the road. There is no one to check on me. This creates two problems.

The first is that, we cannot be certain that every Delnikov will follow the pattern. It is possible for me to leave the Empire in the hands of a tyrant. This could be catastrophic. That person would have the power to make the lives of most of our half-trillion citizens unbearable. To prevent this, each and every Emperor has sought the right moment and the right way to turn the Empire into a democracy. The problem is that we are all weak. People love the Delnikov dynasty because they have never been ruled by a tyrant. They love us because their lives are rich and full and comfortable. But there are no guarantees.

The second issue is that it is a daunting job. Constitutional responsibility means I have to read and understand every one of the eleven thousand bills. Even if my Governor General on some remote planet is to sign a bill, I still have to authorize that Governor General. The law does not give him the power of assent. It places that power and responsibility in my hands. So, despite how romantic and magnificent people may see the throne, the life is actually drudgery. There are no long vacations. I have worked without a vacation for thirty years. Even my poorest subject hasn't done that. I can tell you - I am very tired. Bill, will you take over." The Emperor finished.

"About eight years ago, I met the Emperor at a party, on Rigil. We became fast friends. When I took over Quadrant Three, he started visiting me regularly. He would talk about abdicating and ridding himself of the responsibility and guilt. I would try to counsel him against it. I understood his arguments and empathized. But, I always counseled him to stay with the status quo. He was making the same sales pitch to all the Quadrant Commanders and the C&C. The problem was that several commanders and one Fleet Admiral were so adamant about keeping the constitution as it is, Edward was afraid he would tear the Empire apart if he relinquished his throne. And, he knew resignation would not end the system. His heir would replace him; regenerating the whole system. The meetings continued; but, now seeking a way to overcome the obstacles to changing the constitution. He did have sympathetic ears in one C&C, Quadrant Two Command; and Quadrant Three Command. But that was not enough strength to force the issue.

He met George at a promotion ceremony and took a liking to him. They became friends and he had another sympathetic ear. He was smart enough to pass to George that Quadrants Two and Three and one C&C sympathized with his point of view. When George created Mobile Fifth,

the Emperor began visiting him and having the same kinds of discussions he had with me. George went from sympathetic to proactive; trying to come up with a way through the dilemma that would give Edward what he wanted without causing a civil war throughout such a vast Empire..." Bill was interrupted by Edward.

"You see, by the time Mobile Fifth was about six months old, it became apparent that Quadrants One and Four would actually use force with the backing of one C&C to maintain the system as it is. In my mind, a real Civil War would be a failure. It would destroy the work the Delnikovs before me and all the past legislatures did to build such a wonderful Empire. About eight months ago, George came up with an idea that gave us a way through the fog. George you want to explain?" The Emperor put the ball in Bryant's court.

George took over. " What, I realized was that people had the view they could not survive without the throne. After all these generations, there is no one who actually experienced the world the first Delnikov and Old Tom saved us from. But, we told stories, taught history and maintained libraries that reinforced the history. Everyone knows the terror the Earth had experienced. And citizens from other worlds had their own problems that had been cured by entry in the Empire; so, they fear the loss of it, too. So, what I propose is that we don't get rid of Edward. We don't let him abdicate. Instead, we crown him King." George finished and paused for reaction.

"I don't get it! That doesn't change anything. That would make it a monarchy." I said.

"Okay, that's true.' George and all the others except Helena and I were laughing as he went on. 'We essentially control things to create a constitutional monarchy. That's not a great term; because it generally refers to a parliamentary type system, which is based on parties. What I am proposing is a representative constitutional monarchy. It's kind of a hybrid. It's like a republican government in that it has a representative government with a head of state. On the other hand, it is like a constitutional monarchy because it has a representative government with a Monarch as head of state. The assembly would hold all the power. The Monarch would be a figure head. At first Edward did not like the idea. He wanted to abdicate and ride off into the sunset. But, I convinced him that the Imperialists would never let it rest. There would be an ongoing civil war; if, the Delnikovs did not stay involved in some way. So together, we constructed a step by step plan that should prevent a civil war; but, would be revolutionary.

"Step one - Edward presents a bill to the legislature elevating him to the status of King and seeks ratification. Of course he doesn't really need it. He could just write the law and sign it and that would be it; under this constitution. Hopefully, some will wake up and realize that. The object here is to create a resistance to the move. If no one speaks up within a short period, we will generate a negative response designed to draw a following. I suspect, this will start an uproar. If it does not and the Assembly ratifies the change quietly, we have achieved the first step. If it does, it will give the Emperor an excuse to call in help to keep order. That will be Mobile Fifth Command. We would deploy in a bubble surrounding Earth and Rigil; not including the regions protected by Quadrants Two and Three. Those Quadrants would pull their inside forces in tighter to Earth. Essentially, we would be in a position to forcibly repel any other Quadrant that wished to take a stand; and, we would be in a position to detain the other two Quadrant Commanders. Once there, the Emperor would not take action to have us leave.

Step two - would be the Emperor presenting a new constitution to the Assembly. This constitution would echo the old one in most respects; but, would rest final authority for all legislation generated by both the Assembly and remote governments, with the Orion Assembly. It will essentially remove the need for Royal Assent for a statute to become law. Any bill would be law when passed by the Assembly and would require the Royal signature as a formality. It would also rest final approval of all remote governments' legislation with the Orion Assembly; again, with Royal assent being only a formality. The new constitution would embed the same bill of rights and the same clauses for distribution of representation. It would sustain the clauses that guarantee election of the representatives by the general population. Nothing would change except Orion would be a democracy instead of a representative dictatorship. It's at step two we really expect problems.

The first minister, half the council, one third of the assembly one C&C and two Quadrant Commands appear to be Pro Emperor; or at least, pro status quo. They like things as they are. They honor the office, throne and crown of the Emperor, not Edward the man. In a strict sense, their loyalty is not to the Empire; but, to its throne. And that's the difference. I believe our loyalties are with the Emperor, the people of the Empire; and, the representatives of those people. I also believe we are humane enough to see how much suffering this system has caused the Delnikov family over the generations they have held power. And most of all, I believe we see

that Edward is right and sooner or later the nature of the dictatorship has to change. Sometime in the future our sovereignty will be ruled by an autocrat or a despot.

If step two is received as expected, the First Minister will ask Dickinson to deploy forces to sustain his wishes; and, will attempt to declare Marshall Law and a temporary suspension of the constitution. Suspecting or even knowing Admiral Stephenson's view, Dickinson will attempt to deploy forces, on his own. We will be monitoring all C&C communications, by then; so, we will be aware of the orders. We will use your enforcement force to arrest Admiral Dickinson, at that time, Kurt." I interrupt Admiral Bryant.

"Just a minute George, my purview does not include the C&C of the OESA." I interject.

"Your investigative responsibilities do not include it; but, your charter is to enforce the statutes, laws and constitution of the Orion Empire; and, Admiral Dickinson will have breached several laws and the constitution, at that point. Your authority and power is very wide ranging. Detecting a Quadrant, Theatre or Fleet Commander attempting to carry out the order will require you to arrest the officer for attempting to carry out an unlawful one. Once Dickinson is all wrapped up in the legal system, Admiral Stephenson will recommend to the Secretary of Defense and the Emperor, or King by that time, the temporary elevation of Admiral Blackman as C&C of the OESA. Whether or not the Assembly and Counsel approve the nomination, the Emperor will order it; making it a legal appointment. Throughout this entire operation, we must follow the Rule of Law. We must never be in a criminal conspiracy and must always be in a position of defending the constitution and statutes.

Step three will be the C&C ordering a review of both Quadrants One and Four by your department, Kurt. The excuse will be that; they are suspected of attempting to act on the unlawful order. If you find they have, you will arrest them. If not, you will keep them very busy. In the meantime, your branch has to maintain your operations throughout the rest of the service. The size of your staff is not written into law or regulations; because no one knew what resources you would actually need. If at any time, you need more resources, just ask. During your examinations and investigations whether they are normal ones or special ones you are trying to identify who will support the Emperor's point of view. You may find a Theatre Command or Fleets in Quadrant One that are loyal to the emperor; or, are accepting of democracy. We need to know who we can approach and who we can't. No Quadrant or its sub-commands can act without an order, or authorization, from the C&C. Since, anyone attempting to support the First

Minister's request or attempting to foment rebellion against the legal under takings of the government will be breaking the law, you will be required to arrest them for carrying out an unlawful order or fomenting rebellion. Our effort here is to kill opposition attempts to use force by continually hammering them over the head with the letter of the law.

Step four is securing the situation. Once we are sure all opposition is contained, the Emperor will demand his constitutional edits are dealt with in the Assembly. He will ask for ground forces as a means of quelling potential violence and calming the situation. General Malcolm will deploy forty thousand troops to the Capital at the Assembly, the Council and the Emperor's palace; and ten thousand to Headquarters on Rigil. The show of force should not just prevent a rebellion. It should shake the Assembly into approving the new constitution. Remember that, only two thirds of the members need to vote in favor. Once passed the Emperor will sign it into law. Pro democracy forces will remain in place for at least thirty days to ensure stability. Any attempt to break the democracy will be dealt with as a rebellion. Meantime, the C&C will go about their business ordering Quadrants One and Four to concentrate forces on the outer ring of our territory. Quadrants Two and Three will appear to be doing the same; but they will concentrate four Fleets of each Theatre on the outer ring. The others will stay very close to Earth and Rigil. We will all stand down, after two months.

Any subsequent investigations should exonerate any of us and prove that we only acted in the bests interests of the King, the laws and the constitution of the realm; as, they were at the time of the incident.

Over the next year, the Quadrant One and Four Commanders will be replaced by loyal Theatre Commanders; unless, they turned and acted with us during the skirmish. If they are replaced, you will get a Theatre Command within a year. Someone else will take over your new department. What do you think?" Bryant asked me.

"I think it sounds good. But its a little thin. I think we need more thought on the Emperor's role. I believe he should play a bigger part. For instance, when the First Minister tries to step in, I think he should ask the OESA for assistance and accuse the First Minister of attempting to overthrow the government. That request gives us legal authority to take all the actions you are fostering. There's also the timeline. When does the Emperor make his first request? Then, there's my new staff. It's already too small. I can see that. If I am supposed to already be conducting investigations all over the realm; and then, I have to arrest people in Headquarters and conduct

investigation in Quadrants One and Four the staff is not going to be able to cope with it. Remember, half that staff has to run the department; so, the other half can do their jobs. If I need a thousand investigators and enforcement officers, two thousand forensics specialists and a thousand legal people, then, I will need four thousand to support them. We are looking at more like eight thousand people just to start; and, it may take more. We won't know until we run for awhile and see what the load requirement is. The one good thing is that, around the eight thousand mark, you won't need to add support staff for every one in enforcement. You might need a few more people every time you add another hundred." I observed.

"Did you catch all that, Bill?" George asked.

"I did; and, I agree about the Emperor's role. He could make our end easier and safer. As far as the department goes we guessed at forty-six hundred; so, accounting did a pro forma on that; and, we doubled it when we went to the counsel and assembly. You are clear to nine thousand, if needed. The budget approved should give you the funds to equip and run a staff of ninety-two hundred travelling field personnel. Does that allay your fears, Kurt?" He finished as I nodded.

"I never would have imagined it... here I am in a plot to overthrow the Emperor that is the scheme of that very Sovereign. The irony is not lost on me." I chuckled as I mumbled feigning my most naive look.

The tension in the room dropped as everyone broke into laughter.

My enunciator sounded. "Excuse me for a minute I said." as I rose and called up the mail.

MEMO

From: Commodore Rohkea Sielu Deputy COS Theatre Two Command

To: Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander OESA Inspector General Branch

Re: Promotion and reassignment

Date: June 1, 2257

Admiral Brubacher,

I received your offer for the elevation to Rear Admiral and assignment as Chief of Staff of the Inspector General Branch, with some surprise. I was not expecting any offers under conditions that currently exist in the service.

*Please advise me of the date you would like me to start; so, I can arrange transportation.
I accept your offer.*

Commodore Rohkea Sielu

MEMO

From: Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander OESA Inspector General Branch

To: Commodore Rohkea Sielu Deputy COS Theatre Two Command

Re: Promotion and reassignment

*C.C. Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson OESA C&C, Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth
Mobile RAC, Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet.*

Date: June 1, 2257

Commodore Sielu,

You are needed, immediately. A vessel will arrive for you at sixteen thirty hours on June 3; and will convey you to the Valhalla, at high speed.

You will arrive here twenty-two hundred hours June 5. Please report to me at eight hundred hours June 6, 2257.

Just a note to inform you that, after being familiarized with all aspects, requirements and objectives of the department, the staff will be considerably larger than previously discussed.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

I tap send and both messages go out. A few seconds later, there are chimes in the room. I motioned to Helena and mouthed her a message. "Can you arrange that transportation, please?" She nods and begins tapping on her pad. Bill and George both look up from their pads with smiles.

"I'll get you a warrant." Bill says.

"Is everyone satisfied? There is still time. We can brainstorm and refine the plan, over the next couple of months." Bryant offers. "We've got to get going. It seems business is continuing, as we are sitting here." He adds with a smile.

We break up the meeting. I walk out with Helena. "Thank you. You did me a big favor." I say with a smile.

"That's okay. You'll pay for it, tonight. Can we get together tomorrow about the wedding? I know you're busy, today." She asks.

"Yes we can. I would like nothing better than to get at least the major planning going. I am sorry we have to dance to the OESA tune." I reply.

"Oh don't worry about that. Every girl wants a royal wedding. I'm happy it turned out this way. I just don't know where I'll be able to find a pair of glass slippers." She answers with a giggle.

.....

I am very relieved. Commodore Rohkea Sielu has arrived, we met and discussed the situation. Roh and I have agreed on a general construct for the department; and, both feel we need security investigators, first. All our people will have to be vetted carefully. There can be no question of their honesty. But, there also has to be no question of allegiance. I prefer to have those with no feelings on the monarchy. Allegiance to the Empire, itself; and the constitution will be the primary objective. Then, we need all personnel to have superior qualifications.

By the time that discussion was over, Admiral Bryant was ready to do the honors. Roh was elevated and assigned. We had a small cocktail party with only people within our little secret group. Roh was gently brought up to date; while, we all watched her intently.

"I find it unbelievable that people would resist democracy, in favor of dictatorship - no matter how benign and beneficent that dictatorship has been. The Emperor is right. It could turn to an autocracy, any time after he passes away. And, I find it sad that, people are not more receptive to his needs. It sounds like he's actually in pain." She observed in no uncertain tones.

We cornered Malcolm during the reception; arranging to meet immediately after the party.

.....

"Ian, we have gone over all the objectives of the department and have agreed with Bill and George that, the original staff requirements for this operation were sorely underestimated. The Branch will need nearly double the original deployment planned. We have a list of our initial requirements for you; but, the most important, now are security investigators. We need twenty-five people from you qualified and experienced in security investigations; and, deserving of promotion. In addition, we need people that, you know are pro-democracy or at the least, pro-constitution and very loyal to you. We will need one at the rank of Lieutenant, we can promote to Captain. That officer will head the twenty-five-man team and should be moved first; so, he or

she will have a say in the company. These people will thoroughly investigate and vet the ones to come; so, their status should be unquestionable, now." Ian cut me off.

"Admiral, I have your man, now. He is the Deputy Chief Security Investigator in my own team. He knows the others I will recommend, personally; and, will be able to correct us if, we are making a mistake in that first group of twenty-five. He is a Captain now; so, it would be wise to promote him to Major for the new job. I think you will find you'll need a level four, anyway. If, your staff is going to be that big, you will need a larger group than twenty-five in the security division, by the time everything washes out. Designating it a battalion Command, from the start, would be smart. That way, he'll have the capacity to create teams. Ten man platoons in two platoon companies. Four companies in the Battalion. I would say forty-three is the minimum. That will allow four teams to work at the same time; allowing much more throughput. You can meet him and interview him right after we're done here, if you wish." He finishes.

That would be great, and thanks for the advice. I will take it; but, can you spare that many investigators?' I ask as he nods. 'Our needs for the other marines are much greater than originally believed. Based on the needs set out by Bill and George, we will need to be able to conduct several field investigations, at the same time and over multiple locations. Our new projections indicate the need for four hundred intelligence and investigators, four hundred enforcement and seven hundred military marines. We don't necessarily need them all, right now. We can get away with half; and build over four months; but we will need to have seven hundred fifty vetted, trained for our specifics and in place in six weeks. Are either of those targets a problem?" I ask.

"I have seventy-seven hundred security investigators deployed through the Fifth Mobile Fleets. There are another one hundred and eighty between the three Command Vessels and another eighty-five in my staff. There are the same number of criminal investigators in Mobile Fifth. There are three times that many enforcement officers in Mobile Fifth and there are ninety thousand troops to draw from for military strength. Your needs will create a slight temporary reduction in our efficiency; but, if I distribute those losses properly, it should barely be noticed by the remaining team.' He assures us. 'I have lists prepared based on your previous requirements.' He said as he tapped his data pad. Mine chimed a few seconds later. I opened the e-mail; then, the attachment. There was a spreadsheet six hundred names long with affiliation, service number, rank, length of service and a ranking number on each line. The scoring was explained at the bottom. 'Would you like to meet the Captain, now, Kurt?" He asked.

"Yes General, can you sit in with us?" I asked.

"Certainly.' He said as he tapped his internal communication module. 'C. Sparks.'" He said; and paused. 'Captain, could you come to my office, please?" The General said.

Two minutes later a young man walked up to the doorway, snapped to attention and called out. "Captain Christopher Sparks reporting, as requested, sir."

"Come in and relax, Captain. I want to introduce you to Admiral Kurt Brubacher our new Inspector General and Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu his Chief of Staff in the new OESA Inspector General Branch. Admirals, this is Captain Christopher Sparks. Chris has a masters from the Academy in Criminology and a Bachelors and Masters from the University of Florida in Psychology; which has served him very well in reading people. He can smell a rat from a mile away. We commissioned him a Lieutenant when he came to us from the Academy four years ago. He ran a four squad platoon of investigators for two and a half years. They did some impressive work. We promoted him to Captain; then, and gave him Command of a Company that runs four platoons like the one he had. The distribution of his platoons include three security investigation ones and one criminal investigation group. His criminal investigation team was the one that came to the Loki, when you called for help, Admiral. Chris is a fan of yours, I must tell you. The nitty gritty is in his file; but, I can tell you that, I trust him implicitly; and, would recommend him for any Command up to and including a Regiment level post." The General finished.

"May I call you Chris, Captain?" I asked as the young man nodded assent. 'Well Chris, I deeply value General Malcolm's appraisal of you. He is a man I have been involved with for a long time; and, he has the complete trust and confidence of Admiral Bryant; which is enough for me. I have couple of questions for you. They are hypotheticals. The first is about your loyalties. I will give you a little scenario. You are pressured by two groups. You are unsure of both. You don't know their real motives or objectives. One Group is espousing something that seems to contradict the law or constitution. The other is espousing something that appears constitutional; but, unethical. You do not have enough information to determine which is really correct and are torn between them. General Malcolm gives you orders that support the first group who appear might be breaking the law. What would you do?" I finish and pause. There is a long silence. I could see he was weighing all the facts I had given him. It was a good two minutes before he responded.

"Based on the fact I do not have all the facts on either group; and, both seem to contravene my internal sense of right and wrong, I would defer to the General's decision. General Malcolm is an honest and fair commander who acts based on the facts; so, I would have to assume, he knows more than I do; and, is not generating an unlawful order. I am loyal to him and the Empire; but, in this case, I would follow him." Chris answered.

"I have just one more question for you. If the Emperor came to you today; not me or General Malcolm; but the Emperor himself; and, said to you he wanted to change the constitution and make the empire a true democracy; how would you respond to him?" I ask.

"Well sir, that one is easy. He is the Emperor. He has the power and authority to make that decision and to change the constitution. I also think that, despite his nature we are always at risk of an authoritarian in the future; and, we should be mature enough to be able to run our own affairs. So, I would support his decision without reservation. - Hypothetically, of course, sir." He said seriously and without reservation.

"Those were excellent answers Chris. I want to offer you a new position. When we came in here I was looking for someone to head up our security investigative team. But, that battalion would fall under a regimental commander who would direct security, criminal investigation, enforcement, intelligence and a sizable battalion of infantry to exert force, if needed. This is a large force in terms of our department; but, a relatively small one in military terms; so, it would be Commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel. That Colonel would have Battalion-level Commanders to handle each group who are expert in their area of command; which, kind of takes the pressure off of having to be a great infantry tactical commander. Would you be interested in Commanding our entire Marine contingent? I am prepared to offer you a promotion to Lt. Colonel and assign you as Regimental Commander of the Marine Forces of the OESA Inspector General Branch. It is a daunting job. You need to help build your Regiment from the ground up. There is nothing in place, yet. We have lists supplied by General Malcolm. Your investigative, enforcement and intelligence people would have to be vetted very carefully; because they will be doing some of the work clearing everyone else in the Branch; and will be investigating remote Commands, as the need arises. You and those personnel would have the highest level of security clearance in the Empire; so, we cannot make any mistakes in these areas. You would work very closely with my COS and General Malcolm; since, he is supplying most of your people and will be an excellent advisor for you; though, you will no longer be attached to his Command. Would you

like to take on the challenge?" I ask and pause. Again the pause is long as Chris appears to weigh everything I've said, carefully.

"Sorry, sir.' The wait had been nearly five minutes. 'I was just considering your hypotheticals against your actions when you took over Phoenix Task Force One; and, the details of the assignment you just offered. And, I was thinking of General Malcolm who is sitting here in support of you; and, my trust in him. I would be happy and proud to command the Regiment, sir. I accept your offer.'" The young man says with a smile.

"Good, I'm glad that's settled. I couldn't have held my breath, any longer.' I comment and pause as everyone chuckles. 'You will have to concentrate on the security personnel, first; and your Deputies. We need you to be in a position to start clearing a lot of other people, we need. The Branch will have a staff around eight thousand. Your contingent is going to end up around twelve hundred. It will be something like a company of forty-three-security, a battalion of two hundred criminal investigators, a battalion of two hundred enforcement, a battalion of two hundred intelligence and a battalion of five hundred infantry personnel. You will need to vet your security company commander yourself. Then, the two of you can clear the platoon commanders together. The four of you can assess your squad commanders. And the group can work on clearing the squad personnel. Once, you have enough in place, we can begin sanctioning investigative and intelligence people for those sub-commands; so, you can enlist them to aid in the clearances, over the short haul. When those groups are strong enough, we will begin moving droves of people to us. During all this, we need to authorize a deputy Branch Commander, a deputy COS and the department heads for the Chief's staff. We require completion of all those positions in two weeks. We must be in a position to hire the rest quickly over the following three and a half weeks. We need to be at a strength where we are operational in five and a half weeks, from now; and we need to be at full strength in four months. It is daunting; but, you have to remember that, most of the people you are clearing have already been investigated and authorized before; albeit, in a less stringent process. You must unlock all their closets to find any skeletons that might be obscured. You have another advantage; in that, you have worked with many of the people on the General's list and already know who are good at their jobs. The one proviso I have to set in your clearances is that; you ask each and every one the same two hypotheticals, I asked you. If the don't respond in a like manner to you, I don't want them in our service. They must be loyal to you, our new Branch, General Malcolm; and most of all, Emperor

Edward III, the man. Do you understand the task at hand and the obligations you are taking on?" I ask.

"Yes sir. I'll make it happen." Chris responds.

"Okay, your promotion and assignment will take place at eleven hundred hours, in the Amphitheatre. I want everyone to know who my Chief of Investigations and Enforcement is. There will be a small cocktail party and luncheon in the lounge, after it. When you receive the public notification of your promotion, you need to go to Commodore Hurst and be assigned appropriate accommodations and office space, immediately. You need to start right in, immediately after the cocktail party and luncheon. Your dismissed... Colonel." I say with a smile as Malcolm and Sielu chuckle.

"I just love your two questions. The hypotheticals were a great way to gauge the way someone leans." Malcolm says.

"I'm satisfied; but, I really like the way that man thinks things out; before, he opens his mouth." I observe. 'I think we're done here, General. I'll see you at the ceremony, on the dais.' I say; as, we all rise and Roh and I turn to exit. I put out the announcement.

MEMO

To: OESA - all Commands & all Personnel

From: Admiral K. Brubacher Commander OESA Inspector General Branch

Re: Commander I.S.I.E. Department OESA Inspector General Branch

Date: June 6, 2257

All,

Pleased by advised that, effective this day at eleven hundred hours Captain Christopher Sparks of Fifth Mobile Marine Army Command will be elevated in rank to the Level of Lt. Colonel and transferred to the OESA Inspector General Branch; where, he will assume the role of Commander I.S.I.E. Department of the Inspector General Branch.

For purposes of general information, I.S.I.E. is the Intelligence, Security, Investigative and Enforcement active field personnel of the Branch. This will be a Regiment sized command staffed by a projected eleven hundred forty-three warranted personnel engaged in investigative and enforcement activities. The personnel of this entire regiment will be vetted and approved for the highest level of security in the Empire; and will have the full force of the Empire to enforce its laws, investigate potential criminal activities and detain and charge citizens if

criminal probable cause exists as described in enacted statues and embedded in the OESA regulations. The protocols for receiving this investigative force; bearing a legal order of the Inspector General, have been outlined in a previous announcement by the C&C and are imbedded in those regulations. Congratulations Captain Sparks.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General

Chapter 18 Opened for Business

Monday July 13, 2257

“Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction.” John F. Kennedy

It's been a tough six weeks. I'm just glad I had that quiet three-month period before all this hit the fan. Helena and I did the basic planning for the wedding back in June; setting the wedding date at Saturday November 28 which is exactly four weeks after Stephen Nichols and Olivia Hurst. When we made the announcement, the press went wild. It got the same coverage as theirs; then, everything went crazy with speculation and exclusive reports on the two weddings. Bryant was right. It has become a real distraction throughout the Empire.

We're at operational level, now. We have the full marine contingent and about sixty percent of all the other staff we will need. But, one thing has become apparent.

MEMO

To: Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C OESA; Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C OESA

From: Admiral K. Brubacher OESA Inspector General

C.C. Admiral G. T. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

Re: Facilities

Date: July 13, 2257 08:00 hours OESA time

Sirs,

We have reached a staff level of forty-three hundred personnel and are operational, as of this morning. However, to be fully functional we will be at a staff level of around eighty-five hundred.

One thing that has become very apparent is that, Valhalla does not have the facilities or space to accommodate such a large addition. My search for another facility that would accommodate our needs was fruitless; and, the strain on everyone aboard the Valhalla is creating insufferable conditions.

To alleviate this situation, I would like to point out that former ESS Orion, OESA registry number CCFS3472 is sitting in the bone yard at Rigil, after recent decommissioning under the lifetime program. I would like to propose that, she be reconditioned, refitted and proofed for assignment to the Inspector General Branch. Refitting would involve removing all

offensive weaponry systems from her body. Without worry of battle, she could be manned by a four shift crew of twenty-eight hundred eighty; and, a great deal of her hangar space could be recovered for additional quarters and supply storage space. Refitting her in such a manner would allow her to house our projected staff of nearly eighty-five hundred and her crew of twenty-eight hundred eighty personnel. I understand the combined staff of over eleven thousand exceeds the projection for the Inspector General Branch; but, it is a relatively inexpensive way to house the operation, while maintaining our necessary mobility. It also removes the need to keep a Group at our disposal.

Please respond at your earliest convenience.

Admiral K Brubacher

Right now, I am looking over potential targets. It's too early to target the Quadrant One and Four Commands; so, I am deciding how to determine where else to go, now. After some thought, I've decided we should start smaller. It will give us the data we need to refine our procedures. So, in the end, I have decided to initiate two Fleet level general investigations, at the same time. We have not developed an official order, yet. This will be my chance to work it all out.

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH

ORDER OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT

Order Number IGB257-0701 Antlia Fleet

Att.: Vice Admiral V.S. Bandera Commander Antlia Fleet

You are advised that, on this date, July 13, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of the Antlia Fleet. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as required by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated July 13, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH

ORDER OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT

Order Number IGB257-0702 Lacerta Fleet

Att.: Vice Admiral D. Coreora Commander Lacerta Fleet

You are advised that, on this date, July 13, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of the Lacerta Fleet. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as required by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated July 13, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

MEMO

From: Adm. K. Brubacher Inspector General

To: Lt. Colonel C. Sparks Commander I.S.I.E. Department Inspector General Branch

C.C. Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC, Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu

Chief of Staff Inspector General Branch

Re: General Investigations and Audits

Date: July 13, 2257

Colonel Sparks,

You will find two Investigation Orders attached. One is for Antlia Fleet. The other is for Lacerta Fleet. You will need a team of two forensic personnel from each of, Accounting, Human Resource, Legal, Engineering, Communications, Weapons, Logistics disciplines and eight armed infantry soldiers to support a squad comprised of three criminal investigators, two intelligence agents and three enforcement officers for each investigation. You are authorized to requisition the use of a thirty person shuttle craft and their crew for each of these operations. Handheld Conventional / laser weapons are authorized; but, should employ rubber bullets for the conventional and minimum setting for the laser operations. Use of deadly force is not authorized; except in defense of your teams.

You will find the positions of both Fleets by accessing the encrypted OESA "Deployed Vessels" page on our site. Access to the DV page requires entry of your OESA identification number and your security clearance number. Good Luck to your teams.

Admiral Brubacher.

During the period since Chris Sparks came aboard, he and I spent many sessions working on the design of badges and warrant cards. Badges are mostly symbolic; but, do indicate instantly the authority of the wearer. Warrant cards are the real identification that carry the authority of the OESA; so, they are critical. They have to be impossible to counterfeit and must carry data that confirms the identity of the wearer. A nice characteristic on the wish side of our list would to make both theft-proof. What we have developed is a card that contains enough holography to make it nearly impossible to fake. In addition, it contains a hidden RFID chip that ties to another one in the badge and a sub-dermal one in the investigator. If any of the three parts are separated by more than ten meters, they trigger an alarm. The card and the badge have an additional data unit in them that notifies any nearby OESA data systems the identification has been compromised. The same device immediately confirms identity with systems in proximity to the warrant card if all three parts of the system are together.

Chris stops in my doorway.

"I've got my two teams. Our stuff is aboard the shuttles. Did you want to speak to them?" He asks.

"Yeah, sure." I answer as I rise. We head through the corridors to the shuttle bay. Teams of thirty men and women are in formation beside each shuttle.

"Group!" some one hollers as we enter the bay. Everyone snaps to attention and salutes. I return it.

"Stand easy." I snap as I near them. "You all know the mission. You've all helped develop the protocols and the systems we're using. But, these are first missions. Try not to make too many waves; but, don't be afraid to assert your authority, if needed. Don't forget, your warrant card supersedes even an Admirals rank, in the matter of this investigation. Don't be intimidated. If any of you encounter resistance, report to your local commander. The commander will deal with it. If it can't be dealt with, I need to know, quickly. We will bring additional support to you - a Fleet, if necessary. So, stay positive and try to stay relaxed. A service cheer!" I called as I raised my fist right arm.

"Rah." Came the loud chorus.

They all climb aboard their shuttles. I wave to the faces in the portals; then, turn and leave the shuttle bay; so, it can be depressurized. I watch through the viewing window as they depart;

then, Chris and I go on to our offices. I call a meeting with the COS, her Deputy, Colonel Sparks and his four majors and the department heads from accounting and human resources in my office.

"Welcome everyone. I wanted to tell you that, you've all done a great job. We are operational; and, have just launched our first two investigations. That's a considerable feat in the six weeks from the birth of the Inspector General Branch. I must congratulate you all. Team one is two days out at Antlia Fleet and team two is three days out at Lacerta Fleet; so, we won't begin to get feedback for that long. In our offices we will need two forensic teams set up to receive and analyze the data from the remote teams. They are not likely to discover anything but the most obvious; but, the forensics teams here will be able to sit in the quiet of their offices and really tear apart the information they receive. We need to do it quickly. We are not just looking for criminal activity. We also seek to ensure these commands are following regulations and protocol. So, you will be looking for breaches on those two fronts, too. Everyone else in your departments has to continue on with there jobs. We need internal accounting, payroll and human resources to stay up to date. We need our own security investigations to move on quickly so we can continue our growth.

Growth is a problem, though. I know we are becoming cramped. And quite frankly, we're becoming a pain in the ass for Mobile Fifth Command. But, I have taken steps to alleviate the situation. I have asked that the Inspector General Branch be assigned its own modified Carrier permitting us to house our entire staff and offices in one mobile station. I proposed a plan that would achieve this with relative cost efficiency. I am awaiting a reply. So, there is hope; but, even if that plan is approved, we will not get relief for four to six weeks.

Anyway, I wanted to thank you all for your hard work. Does anyone have any observations, comments or questions to present?' There was a long pause with negative head shakes. 'Dismissed.' I barked. Everyone rose and left my office.

.....

I finally got a report from the team at Antlia Fleet, this morning. They inform me that, they were refused permission to board any ship by the Fleet Commander. They advised him they had a legal investigation order; and, he would be charged with a felony and arrested; if, he didn't comply. After some back and forth, the mission commander reminded Vice Admiral V.S.

Bandera that he could request a Fleet or two to the location to enforce the order. Bandera relented.

My enunciator sounded. It was mail from the C&C.

MEMO

From: *Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C OESA*
Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C OESA
To: *Admiral K Brubacher OESA Inspector General*
C.C. *Admiral George Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC*
Re: *Inspector General Branch - Facilities*
Date: *July 15, 2257 16:00 hours OESA time*

Admiral Brubacher,

We are sorry we took a little longer to reply to you; but, we quickly investigated any other alternatives to your facility problem that may be available; since, your option seemed a little expensive.

First, I would like to congratulate you on going operational, on time. This is an incredible feat considering the daunting task and the limited timeline. You have proven once again that, our faith in you is justified.

As far as your facility issues go, we have found the following alternative which is more cost effective; but, follows the line of thought you were working on.

The ESS Kalamazoo Registry number SCS3589 is a supply vessel, in good condition and not due to be retired under the lifetime program, for nearly five years. She would require no systems reconditioning and no testing and shakedown phase. Her last full reconditioning was five years ago. This move would be a simple transfer of assets. We can advance her replacement in her current Fleet with a new unit that is yard ready and has already been proofed for service. This will affect that Fleet by the cost of the new ship; but, your unit will only need to handle the used ship's write-down value; which is twenty-five percent of the vessels original value, plus the refit. Refitting the vessel for your service would involve reconfiguring three-and-a-half storage decks, for additional quarters and offices. She would sport a slightly larger operating crew; since, engineering operations would have to be enlarged to handle increased recycling and environmental needs. The housekeeping crew, galley teams and ships compliment of stewards would also be increased to reflect the increased personnel.

She would undergo a cosmetic refinishing. The remaining cargo decks would remain as they are. This storage space is needed for supply of your crew and the vessel itself. The benefits of this action are:

1) The yard would drop all other work – on hand, pre-constructed modules are a good fit for the extra living quarters, dining facilities and other infrastructure needs - refit time is estimated at two weeks.

2) The vessel is already configured in a defensive only mode; so, no weapons refit would be necessary.

3) Value of this vessel is much lower, refit is much less costly and it will be crewed by about six hundred which falls well within your maximum budget.

4) Testing and proofing shakedown of the enlarged recycling and environmental systems would be done on route to you.

5) The vessel would be in your hands and ready to move in, in far less time - alleviating yours and Admiral Bryant's concerns in a much more favorable timeframe.

The vessel would have separate quarters (slightly increased by removal of existing mess halls) for its operating crew, Quarters for up to eight staff and guest Flag officers, quarters for two hundred twenty-five senior commissioned officers, quarters for 1300 commissioned officers of other rank and quarters for seventy-eight hundred enlisted and non-commissioned officers. When the existing mess halls are removed some space not devoted to quarters would be used for a small amphitheater. A new, small flag mess hall, a six hundred seat officers mess and a twenty-eight hundred seat non-com / enlisted mess would fill nearly half of one deck. There would be a very large multipurpose room that could be used for large gatherings and promotions. This room would be finished with a stage and a chandelier at its midpoint. Medical would be increased in size. The half deck would include a mall, gymnasium and swimming pool. The vessel would also have a Commander's Office, the COS office, eight senior administrative offices, twenty-five administrative offices and separate office spaces for nineteen departments staffed by eight thousand. Former weapons storage areas not included in the accommodation and office refit would be reconfigured as a shuttle bays for four large long distance shuttles. The rest of this space would store large stocks of Marine Corps' weapons and ammunitions. A separate dock would be added for your Admiral's Craft; so, it

can ride on the bottom of the ship. The shuttles are new and available, now. They would be charged to your asset ledger and would require testing and shakedown.

We have recently seen this vessel during a Fleet inspection. This is a Carrier sized vessel without the island. She is in fine condition. And, we have been shown plans by the yard of what could be accomplished, in such a short time. Because of its large open spaces, this ship can actually handle the refit for quarters, messes and offices much better than a retired Carrier class vessel would. Supply vessels are full FTL capable; so, she would be a valuable addition to your team.

The current crew would not transfer with the craft. All vessel staffing would be your Command's responsibility, at your Command's expense. The ship would be delivered by a skeleton crew that would require return transport.

We have examined the vessel's service and maintenance records. It has a pretty standard looking history and has had no major difficulties in the recent past. It carries adequate repair stocks and has an experienced engineering team, looking after it, at this time.

Of course the SCFS3589 would retain her registry number but, would need to be rechristened. We suggest the ESS Examiner a fitting name unique to her purpose. We assume you will accept this compromise; so, we have written the appropriate orders to the Fleet and Yard. Unless we receive a negative response from you, we will continue targeting delivery of the vessel to you by Friday August 7, 2257.

Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C OESA

Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C OESA

I decided to respond even though I was accepting the plan and the response is not required.

MEMO

From: Admiral K Brubacher OESA Inspector General

To: Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C OESA

Fleet Admiral William Stephenson C&C OESA

C.C. Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

Re: Inspector General Branch - Facilities

Date: July 16, 2257

Admirals,

Though, you didn't require this response, I thought it wise to write and confirm my desire to accept the plan you outlined for Inspector General Branch Facilities. I will be happy to accept the refitted vessel registry number SCS3589, under the conditions you outlined.

I am very happy with the fact, you found a way to reduce this Commands overall costs. More than that, the improved timeline will make everyone's life here a lot easier. I am sure Admiral Bryant will appreciate it, too.

I will look forward to receiving the "Examiner" Friday August 7, 2257; and, will participate in the return of the skeleton crew. Thank you.

Admiral K. Brubacher

I call in the senior team and show them all the memo; asking Roh to post it. I suggest we all go for a drink. I contact Helena and invite her on the grounds I have great news. We all have a little too much.

.....

Today, when the new ship arrives, we'll have a christening ceremony; then, I'll install the crew; we've scraped together. Roh and the HR team helped a lot. We looked at all the non-supply vessel crews and made lists of XO and Second Officers that might want a change. We did the same with Deputy Department Commanders. In the end, there were nearly five hundred officers' files harvested from all the Fleets. I went through those myself. We would only need ninety-two from the most senior to the most junior officers; because a lot of departments were already staffed in the existing command. The ninety-two were to handle all the Bridge, Engineering and Medical operations and the Captain and Exec positions. I would make inquiries to two hundred and reduce it from the ones that accepted. At the same time, we compile nearly two thousand files of various non-comms and enlisted specialists that could handle the ship's systems by department; and, sifted those down to one thousand to fill the positions throughout the vessel. We would need four hundred eighty in those ranks. Once more, we inquired of all those looking for six hundred to respond favorably. The best were always those with issues caused by a marriage or seeking a promotion. From the responses, I whittled my choices for Captain to two and offered one the Captaincy of the ship; holding the other applicant in reserve. But Lt. Commander Shane MacDonald responded favorably; so, that job was done. He was close by in Auriga Fleet; so, we made the move quickly. Then, we included him in the exec choices. Both were included in the choices for second, third, fourth officers, engineering chief and medical

chief. That team worked together to select the rest of their administration. They all worked with human resources to fill the squads and platoons that would operate the vessel's systems.

At present, they are all waiting in their quarters, the mess halls and the pub for a call that will come when the ship exits its jump. We will gather at the docking port; Christen the vessel the Examiner; Go aboard and man the stations. Finally, on the bridge, we will have a dedication ceremony, as we hang the registry plaque on a bridge wall. The captain will record the event in his ship's log. I will record it in mine; and, it will all be official. Then, we will take about an hour tour of our new Examiner. We'll notify the Inspector General Branch that the Examiner and crew is departing with the Inspector General aboard. Then we'll ask the Valhalla for permission to undock and depart. The Captain will open the sealed orders I generated; and we will leave for the space dock at Rigil.

Since the day I accepted the plan, things have really popped. Both remote investigations finished. There were no major difficulties with either Fleet. Both were cited for minor protocol violations. The Commander of Antlia Fleet, Vice Admiral V.S. Bandera, had an official reprimand added to his personnel file by me, for failing to comply with a duly issued lawful order as outlined in the OESA regulations. This would be good for us. He would be pissed off and spread it around. The damage to his career would motivate others to comply without hesitation. We also continued on the breakneck pace to come up to full capability. As of today, we had the full complement of marines, the command staff was at eighty percent; and, the ship's compliment was complete. Right now, the Inspector General Branch staff was at seventy-five hundred sixty-four; including me. Once the two teams made it back, we spent three days pouring over their notes and accounts to modify and streamline our protocol and processes. In the last couple of days, I had visited everyone promoting the idea of getting packed up. We would move to the Examiner; as soon as, it arrives, from the shipyard.

Helena and I spent time with George. George told me it was my decision; but, he would support the Examiner moving in tandem with the Loki; as long as, we stayed out of the way during patrols. He advised Helena that, he still wanted to keep her Fleet and Auriga close. The Emperor was still a regular visitor; and he wanted the extra support in case someone tried to attack.

My system enunciator chimes. I check the message and see our new ship just popped into our locale. I navigate my system and tap; sending the crew of the ship the notification; and,

triggering an automated public address announcement. Then, I say good-bye to the senior staff and head for the docking bay. I officially take command of the vessel from the pilot. When SCS3589 is christened ESS Examiner, we go aboard. On the bridge we do the dedication and hang the brass plaque. Then, with everyone in tow, I blindly lead the tour of our new ship. We are stunned. She's like a hotel. Something like the cruise ships that used to sail Earth oceans. The Examiner seems almost opulent; and quarters and facilities are much more spacious than I had envisioned. There are a couple of odd nooks on each level; probably caused by refitting a supply vessel to be a personnel carrier. But overall, the yard did a great job.

"Captain, here are your orders." I say officiously as I tap my pad.

He reads. His head snaps back as he smiles.

"Are you kidding, sir?" He asked.

"It is no joke Commander MacDonald. We are treating the trip to Rigil as the second last leg of a shakedown. The trip back will be the last leg. Follow those orders precisely, Captain." I said.

"Aye... Aye, Admiral." He barks.

"Engineering - environmental and recycling to one hundred percent.

Ion Propulsion to ready. AMPE to ready. Helm - all thruster to the ready. Navigation set station keeping. Bow thrusters to one hundred - Ion propulsion to sixty percent until notified.' He checks a chronometer and waits for two minutes. 'IPE and bow thruster off at my command. Off! Starboard and Port thrusters at one hundred on my command. On!' again he watches the chronometers. 'Helm watch for any drift. Thrusters off! Bow and aft thrusters to one hundred at my command. ON' he watches the chronometer. 'Helm watch for drift, again. Thrusters OFF! Starboard bow thrusters to fifty, aft port thrusters to fifty. On! Helm call out angle of rotation.'" He orders.

The helm begins calling as the ship rotates; noting every five-degrees deflection. At eighty-five the Captain interrupts.

"All stop!' He barks and seems to be feeling the drift. "Thruster to my command. Port bow and starboard aft thrusters fifty percent two second burst on my command. Thrusters now! All thrusters to station keeping.' He waits for the ship to fully stop. 'What's are current heading, helm?"

"Zero nine zero degrees, declination zero, sir." The helm calls out.

"Helm, set course for Wolf 359. Propulsion IPE and AMPE engines zero to twenty percent C ramp thirty minutes. Set Casimir field for one and a half million kilometers out at one hundred percent. IPE off when we cross the threshold." The Captain finished his order.

The delivery pilot steps forward and begins to protest.

"Don't panic, Lt. Commander. We'll have you back to the yard on time.

We cross the jump point.

"IPE off. Helm, I'm sending a stabilizer program that will run for a couple of minutes. Engage it right away.' The captain is watching the chronometer. The ship begins to tilt first one way; then back; then, the other way; then, back. Propulsion AMPE to twenty-two percent C.' He watches the chronometer again. 'Propulsion - AMPE to twenty-five percent C. Engineering, I need a recording of all system readings since launch and for the rest of the trip to Wolf 359. Helm and propulsion - steady as she goes to Wolf 359." He leans back into his chair on the command station. Sir, I read your manuals on testing and shakedown. This is really great." He says with a smile.

"Yes, but, this is not really the whole deal. This ship was already in service. We're just proofing because it's new to us. I'd like to know if, we're going to have any issues. But, she looks pretty good, so far. And, she sure is a pretty little thing.' I finished with a smile. 'Pilot, we'll do Wolf in three days eighteen hours instead of four and a half. We'll stop at Wolf to do some tests. Then we'll do Wolf to Rigil in one day instead of one day eighteen hours. Total trip time will be five days seven hours; including stopping for the tests. Normal trip time from 61V to Rigil is five days. Do you think you can handle a seven-hour delay? We'll do the trip back direct in two and a half days instead of five; after stopping for a day to finish the testing on the shuttles. Commander MacDonald, can you have an officer do a survey of your crew's reaction to their quarters in about another hour. We need to know about ventilation, environment and bathroom systems." I finish.

"Aye Admiral." The Captain responded.

.....

Today I'm issuing an order for the entire team to move from Valhalla to Examiner. Everything went well on the trip to Rigil and back. The shuttles were impressive. They can take thirty-five each and have births and a small lounge / cafeteria / mess. We took them up to thirty-five percent; which surprised all of us. Shuttles are usually governed at twenty-five percent. I ran

all the results through the Failure Fault and Finite Analysis software. The ship should be fine. The COS has all the cabin assignments ready. We won't be completely moved over until late tomorrow. But, we'll restart investigative operations from there, then.

MEMO

From: Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General
To: All personnel Inspector General Branch
C.C. Admiral G. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC
Re: Inspector General Branch - Facilities
Date: August 16, 2257

All,

I have the pleasure to inform you that our new "home" the Examiner, docked at the Valhalla, has passed all tests and inspections; and is ready for you to embark.

Please have all your belongings moved over as quickly as possible. This goes for quarters and offices.

We must all be thankful to Admiral Bryant for his hospitality; and, his generosity in providing shelter for us, until we received the Examiner. It has put a strain on Mobile Fifth RAC resources and personnel. We are grateful.

You can access a map of the ship on our site. It will show you where your quarters and offices are. The doors of all quarters have a small identification plaque on each; and all office spaces are properly labeled. Both apartments and offices are furnished. You are asked to move only personal belongings and work materials.

Personnel of the marine contingent are asked to double check for weapons. Do not leave any behind.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

.....

We're on our way to park in open space between Procyon, Sirius and DX Cancer. The three stars are officially positioned in two different constellations; but, are serviced by Quadrant Two, Theatre Three Commands. Cancer Fleet is centered at DX; while Canes Minor is centered at Procyon; and Canes Major Fleet is at Sirius. I cut the investigation orders and wrote the team orders, a few minutes ago. We will conduct three investigations, at the same time; holding one large shuttle in reserve; in case, we need to provide additional support to one of the teams.

Though they are considered "friendly forces" in our quest, I must execute our operations judicially; and, must maintain the appearance of fairness and neutrality.

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH
WARRANT OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT
Order Number IGB257-0803 - Cancer Fleet

Att.: Vice Admiral Sestinas Commander Cancer Fleet

You are advised that, on this date, August 20, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of the Cancer Fleet. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as compelled by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated July 20, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

Note: a copy of this order has been posted to the office of the OESA C&C

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH
WARRANT OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT
Order Number IGB257-0804 - Canis Major Fleet

Att.: Vice Admiral R. Bolingbrook Commander Canis Major Fleet

You are advised that, on this date, August 20, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of the Canis Major Fleet. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as compelled by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated July 20, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

Note: a copy of this order has been posted to the office of the OESA C&C

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH
WARRANT OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT

Order Number IGB257-0805 - Canis Minor Fleet

Att.: Vice Admiral Gigantean Commander Canis Minor Fleet

You are advised that, on this date, August 20, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of the Canis Minor Fleet. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as compelled by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated July 20, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

Note: a copy of this order has been posted to the office of the OESA C&C

MEMO

From: Adm. K. Brubacher Inspector General

To: Lt. Colonel C. Sparks Commander I.S.I.E. Department Inspector General Branch

*C.C. Admiral G. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC, Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu
Chief of Staff Inspector General Branch, Office of the OESA C&C*

Re: General Investigations and Audits

Date: Aug. 20, 2257

Colonel Sparks,

You will find three Investigation Warrants attached. One is for Cancer Fleet. The second is for Canis Major Fleet. And, the third warrant is for Canis Minor Fleet. You will need a team of two forensic personnel from each of, Accounting, Human Resources, Legal, Engineering, Communications, Weapons, Logistics disciplines, eight armed infantry soldiers to support a squad comprised of three criminal investigators, two intelligence agents and three enforcement officers for each investigation. You are authorized to requisition the use of a thirty-five-person shuttle craft and their crew for each of these operations. Handheld conventional / laser weapons are authorized; but, should employ rubber bullets

for conventional use and minimum setting for the laser operations. Use of deadly force is not authorized; except in defense of your teams.

You will find the positions of the three Fleets by accessing the encrypted OESA "Deployed Vessels" page on our site. Access to the DV page requires entry of your OESA identification number and your security clearance number.

The three systems these Fleets are currently parked in are within close proximity to each other. I have ordered "Examiner" to a position central to them. Examiner departure from its current position will take place at eight hundred hours, this day. ETA at our destination will be five hundred fifteen hours, August 24, 2257. I have authorized velocity of thirty percent for the first leg of our mission. Our position will place us no more than three light years from each target; so, maximum travel time by shuttle will be fifteen hours or less. Communications lag between each location and the Examiner will be three hours. Good Luck to your teams.

Admiral Brubacher

During the three and a half day trip to our position, I have scheduled three promotion ceremonies and one large cocktail party luncheon. We have acquired the last of our commissioned personnel; and, there are nearly one hundred promotions and assignments to do. This has been a source of a lot of work for me and the staff, over the past couple of months. With officers' promotions come the ceremonies and parties; and all the paperwork and notifications. Since, our people perform a service wide function, these notices require wide circulation. In the meantime, Helena and I have almost completed all our wedding plans. It is imperative to have them done by the end of this month. People need their invitations in time to adjust their schedules. It has been a busy time.

.....
MEMO

From: Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General

To: Vice Admiral Gigantean Commander Canis Minor Fleet

Re: Our examination of your fleet - warrant number IGB257-0805

Confidential

Date: August 31, 2257

Admiral,

The investigation noted above yielded no deficiencies in your Fleet operations worth citing in a report. To the contrary, the Canis Minor Fleet was cited as being a "model" of how a field operation of this size should be run. Since these investigations are multi-faceted, deep and thorough, you should be very proud of your operation.

However, my investigators did find an issue, I feel is worth bringing to your attention; since, a Fleet Commander cannot keep a personal eye on each of his thousands of subordinates and every piece of hardware in the operation. The young lieutenant responsible for the Asset Sheet within your Accounting Department seems to be in over his head. He is very socially interactive and is very well liked. Because of that, people both below and above his position seem to be protecting him.

My team found his work often piles up; requiring "all-nighters" to restore the records to a current state. He is also responsible for generating inaccuracies that are corrected by those previously mentioned. While this is a situation that has resulted in no harm to your operations, I felt you should be apprised of it; so, you could take whatever steps you feel are appropriate. I believe that, a Commander of a Fleet as efficient as Canis Minor would wish to know of such issues.

I would like to thank you for the warm welcome you gave our investigative team and for the cooperation you and your entire Command offered throughout the investigation
Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General

I order the ESS Examiner to return to ESS Loki. We will need a week to plan our next operation; which will be a Theatre Command.

OESA INSPECTOR GENERAL BRANCH

WARRANT OF GENERAL INVESTIGATION AND AUDIT

Order Number IGB257-0906 - Theatre Nine Command

Att.: Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Nine Command

You are advised that, on this date, September 6, 2257 this warrant has been generated ordering the investigation of all aspects of Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Nine Command. You are ordered and required to comply with all persons of the investigating team, as compelled by statute and described in OESA Rules and Regulations. Further you are ordered and required

to avail all facilities, information systems and data storage devices and make available all personnel that are part of your Command and / or any of its sub-commands.

This order was generated Sunday, September 6, 2257 by,

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

OESA Inspector General

Note: a copy of this order has been posted to the office of the OESA C&C

I call in Colonel Sparks. I show him the warrant.

"I chose Theatre Nine for a reason. Admiral Nichols and I are friends. This should give us a chance to establish a process for this size command. We should be welcomed at Nine. Or, I could lose a friend, I guess.

You are still in Command of the actual mission. I am going to spend time with Stephen. Hopefully, I can ease any pain he might feel." I explained; as, I tapped my pad to send his orders.

MEMO

From: Adm. K. Brubacher Inspector General

To: Lt. Colonel C. Sparks Commander I.S.I.E. Department Inspector General Branch

C.C. Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu Chief of Staff Inspector General Branch

Re: General Investigations and Audits

Date: September 6, 2257

Colonel Sparks,

You will find an Investigation Order attached. It is for the examination of Theatre Nine Command. You will need a team of six forensic personnel from each of, Accounting, Human Resources, Legal, Engineering, Communications, Weapons, Logistics disciplines and twenty-four armed infantry soldiers to support a squad comprised of nine criminal investigators, six intelligence agents and nine enforcement officers for this investigation. You are authorized to requisition the use of three thirty-five-person shuttle crafts and their crews for this operation. Handheld conventional / laser weapons are authorized; but, should employ rubber bullets for the conventional and minimum setting for the laser operations. Use of deadly force is not authorized; except in defense of your teams.

The ESS Examiner will make the initial trip from the Loki to Zavijava, where Theatre Nine Command is currently parked. It has been ordered to depart immediately and will arrive

at Theatre Nine Wednesday, September 9, 2257 at seventeen hundred hours. Shuttles will only be required for ship to ship on-site transfer. I will be accompanying your team, on this investigation.

Admiral Brubacher.

"Thanks for welcoming us so warmly, Stephen. We are not always received kindly by everyone." I offer as we sit down in his sumptuously spacious office.

"You're welcome, Kurt; and I know what you mean. I was at a seminar with Vice Admiral V.S. Bandera, last week. He says you killed his career. After I dug the facts out of him, I told him, he killed his own career. I'm glad you chose Nine as your first Theatre Command audit." He responds, with a smile.

"So, you understand?... I needed to start with someone who would give me a little slack. We use each first investigation to refine the process for the next ones. I knew that, Theatre Nine wouldn't have any serious issues; and, probably not many minor ones; so, I thought it would be the best place to learn. It also gives the impression of non-partisanship. We could keep the heat on Quadrant One and Four; but, it not only wouldn't look fair; it wouldn't be fair. I would like to stay above board and even handed. I would like the Inspector General Branch to be a valuable, productive operational aid to the OESA." I say.

"And, it should be. When your department was conceived, I came back to Midgard and advised my people of its creation, purpose, responsibilities and authority. I made sure they knew that, when your people show up, they are to feel welcome.' Nichols explained. ' Why don't we head down to the club for a drink. You got a hundred people here to do the work for you; and, another eight thousand parked outside; if, you need more help. I hear the ESS Examiner is quite a vessel." He says.

"Yeah, in fact why don't we have that drink in its pub. Then I could show you the newest thing in floating headquarters." I reply with a smile.

Once in the pub, Lowry's, aboard the Examiner, Stephen orders a glass of chardonnay and I order a draught beer.

"Where did you come up with the name Lowry's for this place? It's pretty catchy." He inquires.

"It's sort of a theme. We are an investigative unit. The ship is the ESS Examiner; so, we decided to carry the investigation theme through the ship. Justin Lowry is a famous fictional

detective created by an author named K. L. Davis in the late twenty-first century. Banerjee's outlet up the corridor is called Jake's after another fictional detective; and, so on. We carry the theme throughout. The main mess hall is called Shamus's and the officers' mess is called Devon's Eatery for Charles Devon - just adds a little fun to our lives. Some of those stories were pretty badly written; but, they appealed to the masses. Those detectives are referred to regularly, by people." I explain.

"That is a good one. All the Commands should do it. We're a tactical military command. Based on that, we should rename our pub Paton's Place and officers' mess Eisenhower's Eatery. We could use old WW2 military leaders' names. I like the idea." Admiral Nichols says with a chuckle.

"You know, Stephen, I meant to ask you something when we were back in your office.' He leaned in as I spoke. 'I came across an interesting situation during our investigation of Canis Minor Fleet. They came through it with flying colors, by the way. We cited them with a positive recommendation for excellence. But, during the investigation we found a person in a senior accounting position who was way over his head. Other people had been covering for him. Since, I had the knowledge and I know a Commander of a large Command cannot possibly know every little thing going on with each and every officer and crewman, I advised Admiral Gigantean. I felt that, I would want the knowledge; if, I was in his shoes. Would you like us to do that for you? Even if there is nothing negative to cite - let you know personally and confidentially of any potential weakness?" I asked quietly.

"That would be most thoughtful. I'd accept that kind of information with thanks." He responded genuinely.

.....

MEMO

From: Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General

To: Admiral Stephen Nichols Commander Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Nine Command

Re: Investigative Audit GB257-0906 - Theatre Nine Command

CONFIDENTIAL

September 19, 2257

Admiral,

I would first like to thank you for the warm welcome and the fine hospitality you afforded our investigative team during our visit ending September 15, 2257. It can be most unnerving having a team of that size uprooting your command. Conditions can develop that make the process tense and uncomfortable for the investigation team, too. You and your people handled the situation with aplomb.

I must compliment you on the professional way Theatre Nine Command operates. We found no deficiencies of any type in any operation within the Command. It is a textbook example of how an operation of this size should be run. This opinion appears in the report forwarded to the OESA C&C and copied to your superior Admiral George Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC.

I have attached a very short list and supporting reports on four members of your Command. Though, they have not managed to negatively impact any final outcomes within the operations, they appear to personally operate far below the standards of their peers and your expectations. Information in this paragraph and in the attachments is for your use only and has not been distributed to anyone else.

I congratulate you on the state of your command and thank you again for your warm hospitality.

Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General

We are parked with the Loki, again; so, I have been able to spend considerable time with Helena. Daytime is packed with planning and arranging all the fine points of the wedding. The wedding party, their attire, the cake, the menu, the music, invitation lists, the bride's dress, dance music and dinner table layout have all been determined and are locked in. Location was a big issue. I wanted it aboard the Examiner. Helena wanted it aboard the Loki. But, Stephenson and Bryant convinced us it should be aboard the Midgard or the Valhalla. Their bridges and hangars allow for a much grander event. Considering the Midgard was already the site for Stephen and Olivia's wedding, we chose the Valhalla, with the Loki doing second duty for the dinner. The Phoenix Fleet would be parked at the Valhalla for the event; since, invitations were extended to all off-duty personnel who could attend. The wedding dress is something to behold. It is an original design by Helena, herself. The dress is various shades of white silk, satin and taffeta. The bodice is long and relatively sleek flaring from calf to the floor with only a two-foot train dragging behind. The snug waistline sports a white faux cummerbund that suggestively wraps

around Helena's delicate waistline. A white / off-white Cavalry-styled two button single breasted over - jacket sporting wide lapels and epaulets give the whole ensemble a military flare. She went to great pains to make sure the creatively elegant design fit within uniform specifications in the Rules and Regulations of the OESA; then, went to a lot of trouble to get it approved by the Secretary of Defense and the Office of the OESA C&C, as official flag level dress attire for state functions. Along with the one for the wedding, she had a second version made and approved in more traditional service blacks and grays. As uniforms, both versions can now be worn fully garnished with rank insignia and service medals, ribbons and lanyards. Her maid of honor and handmaids, all officers from the service, will wear full military dress uniforms to accompany her. The military look and complementary colors of the bride and her handmaids is a striking picture to behold.

The whole thing created quite a sensation; when, the bride and her party were asked to model for press corps pictures released to the public. Since the bride would now be in uniform during the wedding, it's planned with much more military flare. For instance, all will be asked to rise for the Orion Empire anthem just before the actual ceremony begins. The groom, best man and ushers will be saluted by the wedding official, when they arrive at their stations. There will be a salute and present arms with ceremonial swords as the bride completes the wedding march to her groom and she too will be saluted by the official; when, she takes her place. The Emperor will present the married couple to the attendees at the end of the ceremony. These are not plans we just went along with for the Empire's official function. We planned it all together, over the months since the announcement; taking all the right steps to get every included military action approved. We also spent considerable time with George and Marie Bryant discussing their experience. Being the first, they were the obvious people to go to for advice. We are luckier than them. The Valhalla hangar has handled big events already; and, it's calculated it can hold over nine thousand for dinner with serving stations and bars set up in fifteen different locations. The Loki hangar will be used the same way; but to scale. We will have a dinner seating at nineteen hundred hours and another at twenty-three hundred thirty hours; allowing for a total of thirty thousand to be served throughout the evening and night. But, we will only have to travel between two vessels instead of four like the Bryants did. Since, it is centered in the Valhalla, Moe took command of all the facility and dinner functions. All guest travel arrangements were being handled by Moe and my COS Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu. Roh decided that since, the Examiner

was built for nearly seven hundred more personnel than we currently have, it should go to Earth and Rigil to pick up all non-service wedding guests and bring them to the Valhalla; then, return them to their homes, when the event ends.

Meanwhile, business has to continue; so, I create a schedule for investigations and post dated warrants for all the Commands on that calendar; which was double encrypted. I stored a copy for Colonel Sparks and one for me, on the system; so only, he and I could access those documents. I key the encryption for his file to his command codes and for my file to my codes. I call him in and advise him; explaining that investigations must continue; even through periods like my upcoming wedding; and, that he is essentially running that end of the show, for now.

Sparks, Roh, the investigations battalion commander, the enforcement battalion commander, the intelligence commander, the commander of the forensics accounting group and I sit together refining processes and procedures from past experience. We agree that all future investigations will be in multiples of thirty-five; using the established team breakdown with the addition of additional intelligence people inserted as investigators. Once all that is made clear, I adjourn the meeting; asking only Sparks and Roh to stay behind.

"Chris, do you remember the two questions I asked you before deciding to make you my marine Commander?" I paused and waited for a positive indication. 'You asked the same question of everyone you hired; so, your intelligence people should understand the order you will give them all. As they are roaming a command during an investigation, they are to view everything in the light of those two questions. If they discover something that seems to be contrary to the answers required, they are to dig in quietly and get all the details and report to you and me. The other thing they are to watch for is tactical orders without a link to the C&C. In other words, a Fleet or Task Force Commander orders an action that does not seem to relate to orders from the superiors all the way up the chain of Command; or, responsibilities outlined in the Rules and Regulations. These actions could just be a Commander extrapolating; or, following Rules and Regulations, in a perceived emergency. Or, a link up the chain of command that is not obvious may exist. But, if they suspect a Commander is issuing unlawful orders, they should acquire all available facts and contact one or both of us. I must know of it, without delay. I have the means to investigate tactical orders up the chain of command. If they turn out to be unlawful, we will make arrests, immediately; even if, we have to turn a team around and go back to the Command and do it.

The schedule on the server is brisk. You have four thirty-five-person long distance craft. We don't know where a Fleet will be a month from now; so, a lot of the investigations could involve long distances in shuttles. We will move the Examiner to centralized positions, when possible. But, we won't be able to do that in a lot of cases. The schedule is based on the size of the investigation. If you are examining a Quadrant or Theatre Command - it seeks to do only one other Fleet investigation at the same time, to mete out the shuttles properly. If your orders are for all Fleet examinations, it will schedule four at the same time. The schedule sets up four and a half days travel each way, six days for the investigation and two days after return for forensic wrap-up and reporting. So every seventeen days, from now on, your people are starting new investigations. Rotate your people regularly. You have enough people so each team should only have to hit the road once every three or four months. I need your results, late on the second day you are back to the Examiner, from a mission. Thirty percent velocity is authorized for travel to and from all missions. That means you can look at the schedule for current targets thirty-four light years or less from the Examiner. If we are too far from one, exchange a mission with another elsewhere on the calendar; but, do the maximum in each seventeen-day period; and never exceed four and a half days travel time each way, at thirty percent. Always remember that, the shuttle crew must reset chronometers, after a jump. I cannot put the intelligence protocol I just laid out in writing. It would not be a very good intelligence operation if there was stuff left around for people to find or steal. The warrants lay out the scope of the investigations; except intelligence. But this intelligence protocol must be an understood part of each investigation. Are you okay with that?" I finished.

"Yes sir. You are essentially giving me an unwritten order that intelligence is a part of every investigation we do. The order is unwritten because it is intelligence. You are saying that, intelligence officers will be imbedded proportionally. I read that as thirty-five personnel; the way we laid them out before for a Fleet investigation with the intelligence officers imbedded as investigators. Proportionately, that would be one hundred and five for a Theatre or Quadrant Command. You are saying we must test for loyalty to Edward III versus the Crown and loyalty to the Commander over Edward III. We are also searching for unlawful tactical orders. I would assume these are orders issued that are in someway negative to the Empire or a part of it; or, contrary to orders of the C&C, the statutes of the Empire or, OESA Regulations. If we suspect any of these circumstances, we are to gather evidence and report, immediately. I understand and

will carry out that directive. I understand the need for secrecy. In that light, the portion of each future team that is intelligence officers will be the only part of the team that knows their real purpose. Everyone else will believe they are investigators, sir." Sparks finished.

"Chris, I want you to understand that this is not just paranoia or a whim of mine. When we were chartered, I was instructed of this avenue of our operations by the C&C, Admiral Bryant and Admiral Nichols in the presence, and with input from Emperor Edward III. I can tell you, for a fact, that Edward has good reason to fear a coup; and, is supported in that suspicion by the C&C and several Quadrant Commanders. That is the reason, the intelligence aspect was added to our responsibilities. They believe that coup will come from inside the OESA; since, the only military units large enough to conduct an operation like that would be within our service. They have suspicions as to who; but, not enough evidence to accuse and arrest them." I explained.

"Sir, I never had any question of your motives. I know you are loyal to Edward and your superiors are loyal to him. And, I understand the order embodies the highest authority. Don't worry, we'll get it done." Colonel Sparks said as he rose from his chair.

Chapter 19 Manipulations

Monday November 16, 2257

"Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." - Napoleon Bonaparte

Wow what a ride. The Inspector General's Branch has gone crazy. The teams finished the reports for a round of investigations on Tuesday October 6; and, the shit hit the fan. There were two targets in that round. A one hundred ten-person team, led by Colonel Sparks himself, dropped on Quadrant Four on September 21. Another team of thirty five boarded the Flag Carrier ESS Guyana to do an Audit of Puppis Fleet a Quadrant Four Theatre Eight operation. After reading the reports, I asked Admiral Bryant to send Phoenix Fleet to transport ten of my Enforcement Officers back to ESS Guyana to serve four arrest warrants; and, support them with force and Marines, if necessary. In the meantime, I would take the Examiner to Rigil; accompany one hundred forty-five officers, as a show of force, at Headquarters in the four shuttles; and serve at least seven arrest warrants on Quadrant Four Command. I would speak directly to Fleet Admiral Stephenson. Sparks Teams had struck gold. They had discovered evidence of a plot, at both ends of a chain starting at Quadrant Four and ending in some or all of the Fleets in Theatre Eight Command.

The evidence was in electronic communications between the Quadrant Four Commander and the Puppis Fleet Commander of a plan to use force to squash anyone, including the C&C and the Council, supporting constitutional changes in the status of the Throne. From these two Commands, it looked like it involved the Theatre Eight Commander and several Fleets; under his Command. However, the same information seemed to clear the Theatre Seven Commander and the Fleets under her Command. She had told the Quadrant Commander he was fomenting rebellion; and, she would report him, if he continued. So, Quadrant four Commander Admiral Naabaahii had just avoided Theatre Seven and continued his plan with Theatre Eight and its Fleets. When I first read the report, I was nearly sick to my stomach. It hurt me deeply; because, I remember when he helped in the war that created Mobile Fifth Command as the Orion Fleet Commander. He had come to the aid of Admiral Bryant when he was having trouble holding recaptured areas in 2249.

In the Puppis Fleet, we arrested the Fleet Commander, both Task Force Commanders and the Fleet COS. At Quadrant, we arrested Naabaahii and his chief and five department heads.

Naabaahii wept silently; as, we put cuffs on him, to take him away. I don't believe it was out of fear of the coming legal action; but, more from humiliation of having been caught breaking the law. Puppis Fleet Task Force One Commander physically resisted. I don't know where he thought he would go; if, he succeeded. In both locations, the teams spent another three days really tearing things apart. They attempted no on site analysis. Instead, Command data for every discipline, along with all communications, was copied to the Examiner system; so, we could forensically analyze everything. We rescheduled the next visits on the calendar to October 13; replacing those on the docket with the Theatre Eight Command and the Orion Fleet.

I reported to Fleet Admiral Stephenson. At first, he was shocked and saddened at the thought of anyone in the service being charged with anything so serious. He got over it quickly, though; almost rubbing his hands in glee. One of two questionable commands would be unable to respond to an unlawful order or request, from the First Minister and / or the council. This would actually work in the Emperor's favor; when, he submitted his first Constitutional change. I advised him that, we were extending the investigations to gather more evidence; IGB would be auditing all the Fleets in Theatre Eight. He asked me if we could do Seven, first. He would need to be sure he could trust the Commander; before submitting her nomination as Quadrant Four Commander. Both, Theatre Commands would have to be run by their remaining senior officers; until, replacements for the Commanders could be named.

By October 13, all my teams had moved. I had placed a large team at Theatre Seven and a regular team at Orion Fleet, a Theatre Eight detachment. On the Examiner, the forensics people kept crunching all the data. Day after day, we sent orders to HQ for additional apprehensions. They would have Marines at Headquarters and in Theatre Eight lay the charges and take the offenders into custody. By October 19, the team at Seven gave me a preliminary remote report advising that Seven, and its Fleets, appeared to be out of the loop except for the one communication received trying to enlist them in the conspiracy. I sent a preliminary report to Stephenson; advising of the investigation of Theatre Seven; and, advising a detailed report would follow.

By October 15, the report from Orion Fleet exonerated its Commander of direct complicity. He was in constant written communication with his Task Force Commander; discussing the Quadrant Four plan. All three felt Naabaahii was nuts; but, played along because

he was the boss. They planned to ignore any request to deploy at Rigil or Earth. The problem is that they did not advise the C&C or another Quadrant Commander of the scheme.

Because the situation was still fluid, the C&C split command of Quadrant Four between Admirals Tonaka and Blackman, temporarily. The Auriga Fleet Commander was elevated to Admiral (10) and assigned as Theatre Eight Commander. Auriga's Task Force 1 Commander became the Fleet Commander. The holes were temporarily filled; but, the investigation was ongoing.

We spent the next round of investigations concentrating on Theatre Eight Fleets. There were six more to investigate. We handled them all at the same time; by, having Eight call in a couple of Fleets and using the Examiner for those; while four investigative groups did remote audits by shuttle. Our staff is big enough.

Late on the fifteenth I ordered the Examiner to make for Theatre Seven at forty percent. The shuttles left from our position off Theatre Eight; since the Fleets were all relatively close to it. Seven was at Chi Orion about fifty light years from where we were, near 61 Virgo. It is exactly a five-day trip, at forty percent of C; so, the ship really worked hard; but, my people were in reasonable shape, when we arrived in good time. All four remote fleets travelled within fifteen light years of the Theatre Command; albeit in all different directions; so, the shuttles could reach those Fleets in a day and a half or less. We gave our people a one-day break when we arrived on site; then, sent them off to those Fleets. There was a personal consideration involved in rushing like that. We needed these investigations done as quickly as possible; but I needed them done fast enough for Examiner to leave the scene in time to reach Midgard for the Nichols' wedding. The remote teams followed in the shuttles; but, the teams running from the Examiner blitzed their targets. We double-teamed each Fleet Command with teams of seventy and copied all their data to our system. Forensics began sifting as the data came in and continued all the way home and at Midgard, when we arrived. Only a few charges were laid on site; citing very obvious infractions. Based on evidence, we sent out arresting officers and orders for other arrests, after arriving at Midgard.

The Nichols' wedding, on October 28th, was incredible. I was barely back in time for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. I had a front row seat for the ceremony; since I was one of the ushers. Admiral Bryant was the best man. Marie Bryant was the Maid of Honor and Helena was one of the Bridesmaids. With her slim but pleasing build, incredible looks, elegant manner and

chic styling Olivia could have been posing for a bridal magazine. She was stunning in a Banerjee original studded with rhinestones trimmed along the plunging neckline by alternating real Swiss topaz and diamonds; eliminating the need for jewelry to grace her neck. The whole thing was reminiscent of the Bryant wedding. Representative officers and crew from all eight of his Fleets and Midgard were at the wedding; along with Blackman, Tonaka, Stephenson, Williamson and several Theatre and Fleet Commanders from throughout the service. Edward III attended as a footman. Close to seven hundred filled the flag bridge with the large viewing port as a backdrop to the wedding ceremony. Eight thousand from all the previously mentioned commands took part in the dinner on the Midgard's Hangar Deck.

Fortunately, I am the boss in my domain; as is my Helena in her bailiwick. We were able to sleep in the morning after the wedding dinner.

By Monday November 2, a group of prosecutors visited the Examiner for a meeting with the senior members of our teams and myself. We spent two days going over all the data from the most recent Quadrant, Theatre and Fleet Investigations. They brought charges against forty-four. Thirty-one were already in custody. We now had control of the Quadrant Four situation; so, I was able to transmit arrest warrants to HQ, Theatre Eight and the Fleets involved. The other eleven were detained and shipped back to Rigil for trials.

Also on November 2, Emperor Edward III passed a modified constitution to the Council and Assembly. It contained the passages making him King of the Orion Empire and his family heirs to that throne in perpetuity. There was little public flack at first; since, the recent wedding and the waves of arrests had drawn the attention of the press elsewhere. But, regardless of the lack of interest, the First Minister reacted almost as predicted. And, regardless of expectations, it was sad when he did; because, he had been a friend of the Emperor and his closest associate for more than thirty years.

But, within hours of Edward's request for the change to the Orion Constitution, the first minister was monitored sending a demand to Fleet Admiral David Williamson to position forces to support him; in an action to take control of the government, suspend the constitution and declare Martial Law.

Williamson generated an official Tactical Action Message to Theatre Two Command; ordering Admiral Inang'aa Mkali to move six Fleets to Earth and restrict travel through space near Sol. He was to repel any force from entering space within five light years of the system and

put two fleets in orbit over Rigil. He was to put thirty thousand marines on the ground, on Earth to take control of the Council, Assembly, Emperor's Mansion and facilities and local and regional law enforcement offices in and near the capital. On Rigil, he was to deploy ten thousand troops to take command of the OESA under the direct control of Fleet Admiral David Williamson. The order was authorized and signed by both C&C. Of course Stephenson's signature was counterfeit.

I saw this information nearly immediately; since my intelligence forces were the ones monitoring these people. I was shocked to see the limited support. The Quadrant One Commander was not compromised. Neither was the Theatre One Commander. Giuseppe Ettore, the First Minister and David Williamson had planned to attempt the coup with support from Quadrant Four and only half of Quadrant One forces. When they lost control of Four, they were left with only Theatre Two Command to turn to. I advised the Emperor and Fleet Admiral Stephenson immediately of a planned coup. I issued arrest warrants for Williamson for issuing an unlawful order, forgery and fomenting rebellion; Ettore and Naabaahii for fomenting rebellion; and, issued orders to Colonel Sparks to serve the warrants and formally arrest and detain the accused. The problem with serving the warrant on Naabaahii was that his Theatre Command was at 41 Aries, twenty-seven light years from my current position. If I wanted to stop him, I had to come up with a way to get to his Command, quickly. I had an idea.

But first, I notified Fleet Admiral Stephenson, the Secretary of Defense and the Emperor of the impending arrests and the evidence the warrants were based on. This would give Stephenson a reason to ask the Secretary of Defense to suspend Williamson and open nominations for a temporary replacement.

Then I wrote a general communiqué; kind of like the old "All Point Bulletins."

MEMO

URGENT!!

From: *Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General*

To: *Quadrant Two, Three, Four and Mobile Fifth RAC Commanders*

Theatre One, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Commanders

Re: *Arrest Warrant for Admiral Naabaahii Commander Theatre Two Command*

Date: *November 2, 2257*

All,

This evening, the Special Investigation Branch uncovered a coup against Emperor Edward III. This scheme is related to earlier arrests made throughout Quadrant Four Command. Lawful arrest Warrants were issued and served on First Minister Giuseppe Ettore and Fleet Admiral David Williamson resulting in their arrests and detainment. The First Minister has been charged with "Fomenting Rebellion" and "Conspiracy to Overthrow the Lawful Government of the Orion Empire". Fleet Admiral Williamson has been charged with "Issuing an Unlawful Order, Forgery, Conspiracy to Overthrow the Lawful Government of the Orion Empire and Fomenting Rebellion". However, a third major player was involved in this plot. Admiral Naabaahii was ordered by his accomplice Fleet Admiral Williamson, in the name of both C&C, and in the form of a Tactical Action Message, to deploy his force at Earth and Rigil and take control of the Council, Assembly, Emperor and the OESA; when in fact, Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson had not authorized the action. All such orders of the C&C require consent and signature of both members, according to statute and OESA Rules and Regulations. It does not appear that, Admiral Naabaahii is an innocent dupe in this rebellion. Evidence indicates, he has been a member of ongoing treachery, during the past seven months. Tonight's attempted overthrow was discovered almost immediately after Fleet Admiral Williamson generated this order.

It will take nearly two and one half days for Theatre Two Command to retrieve all its Fleets, before heading for its targets. We do not expect Theatre Two Command to "stand down" without threat of punitive action. Admiral Naabaahii has also been officially charged with Fomenting Rebellion and Conspiracy to overthrow the lawful government of the Orion Empire.

All commands in proximity of Theatre Two Command, other than Theatre Two Sub-Commands' are asked to converge on Theatre Two immediately and prevent all units from jumping to their targets. Use of force is authorized; but, should not be required if his jump points are destroyed, as created. It should take little time for Admiral Naabaahii to see the futility of his actions and stand down and surrender. All forces in the vicinity of the Sol and Kentaurus systems are asked to take defensive positions to protect these regions from the intended actions of Theatre Two Command. Use of deadly force is authorized; but, should only be a last resort.

You are asked to detain Theatre Two Command's Commander and return him to OESA headquarters for required action; and, prevent his command from taking any further action against the OESA; or the Orion Empire. Investigations are ongoing to determine the depth of involvement of Theatre Two Sub-Commands and any others that may have participated in this plan.

Thank you all for your cooperation.

Admiral K Brubacher

Shortly after sending this broadcast, I received the following communiqué.

MEMO

URGENT!!

To: Edward III Head of State Orion Empire, Council of First Ministers of the Orion Empire, Secretary of Defense of the Orion Empire

From: Fleet Admiral William O. Stephenson C&C OESA

C.C.: All Quadrant Commands, Mobile Fifth RAC, Inspector General Branch

Re: C&C of OESA and ongoing operations

Date: November 2, 2257

All,

Tonight's events have stunned us all. I am especially shocked that Fleet Admiral Williamson would be a party to actions designed to interfere with the Emperor's constitutional right to govern our Empire. His authority does not just come from the constitution. It has been earned over generations of rule of the Delnikov family that have always been conducted fairly and in the best interest of the Empire and his half trillion subjects.

Though stopping such a conspiracy was a very positive action, it has had a negative effect on the Empire's ability to defend itself; since statutes and OESA regulation require that all Tactical Action Messages and operational orders issued by the Office of the C&C, in the name of the OESA, are with the consent and signature of both officers appointed to that position. Those laws and regulations do not allow for operation of this Command by one person.

In that light, I would ask that you, at least temporarily, suspend Fleet Admiral Williamson from duty. I also ask that you, at least temporarily, elevate a replacement and appoint that person C&C OESA to serve alongside me. This is an urgent requirement. The

OESA is unable to lawfully defend the Empire, at this moment. An intrusion into our space would be met by automatic responses from Fleets following protocols of the Rules and Regulations in the region; but, any wider required actions would be unlawful.

In the interest of expediency, I would respectfully like to nominate Admiral O. Blackman, currently Quadrant 2 Commander, for temporary elevation to Fleet Admiral (12) and assignment as C&C OESA. Admiral Blackman is the next logical candidate to assume a role as C&C. He has had a long and loyal career; and, has always worked for the good of the service and the Empire. This would have to be done in the form of an order and not an offer; since, time does not permit making an offer. Official ceremonies would have to be postponed and the elevation would need to be conducted, by you as soon as possible to re-enable the OESA.

Yours respectfully,

Fleet Admiral William O. Stephenson.

I received the following message just the next morning.

MEMO

URGENT!!

To: *Fleet Admiral William O. Stephenson C&C OESA*

From: *Edward III Head of State Orion Empire*

C.C.: *All Quadrant Commands, Mobile Fifth RAC, Inspector General Branch*

Re: *C&C of OESA and ongoing operations*

Date: *November 2, 2257*

Admiral Stephenson,

In response to your urgent situation, we convened an extraordinary meeting of the Council and First Ministers; with the Secretary of Defense and me, in attendance.

Since your need is immediate and affects the defense of our entire sovereign space, we have agreed to temporarily suspend Fleet Admiral Williamson from duty and temporarily elevate Admiral Blackman to Fleet Admiral (12); provisionally assigning him as C&C OESA. Permanence of this promotion will be based on criminal court findings in the matter of the charges against Fleet Admiral Williamson.

The Secretary of Defense and I will travel to your offices, on Rigil; arriving at five hundred hours November 3, 2257 to conduct this elevation and appointment. Please have Admiral Blackman present and ready to assume his duties at that time.

We are aware that, the Inspector General Branch vessel ESS Examiner is currently parked at Rigil. We would want Admiral Brubacher in attendance at the ceremony.

Respectfully yours,

Edward Delnikov (Edward III)

After a very disturbed sleep back on the Examiner, I shuttled down to Rigil at four hundred hours the next morning to attend the ceremony. We occupied a room I had never been in on the executive level. It is the first door, after the central elevator, located on the south side of the corridor. The room claims more than six-thousand square feet. There is a very large table with sixteen places at one end of the room; and, a lectern at the other end. Towards the table's end of the space, a fully stocked bar stands witness to special events, probably, held here. I stood witness with a considerable group, at that ungodly hour, to the promotion. Then, the Secretary and the Emperor approached me.

"Admiral Brubacher, I would like to thank you personally. And, on behalf of the Empire, I would like to commend you. How convincing is the evidence?" The Emperor asked.

"Your majesty, we have the Tactical Action Message issued to Theatre Two Command by Fleet Admiral Williamson. It shows both C&C authorizing it. We have Admiral Stephenson's sworn, and verified, statement that he never even saw or discussed this order. We have an e-mail chain going back many months; conspiring to carry out this action; should you attempt any constitutional changes. The e-mails describe the planned action in great detail. We have the previous arrests and all that evidence that ties to this. It will be hard for any defense counsel to refute everything. I have no doubts; our evidence is strong enough to convict all the perpetrators." I explained.

"Do you expect to find any more participants?" The Emperor inquired.

"Yes but, only within the Quadrant One Theatre Two Command. It is apparent that the Theatre One Commander had nothing to do with this. She was approached some months ago and brushed it off as some kind of stupid prank; never believing the C&C would be involved in such a plan. We are still not sure of which Fleets in Theatre Two are involved. We don't know if all the Fleets responded to orders from the Theatre Commander. One very positive point is that

these conspirators bypassed the Quadrant Commander completely; knowing that Command would not be a part of it." I explained.

"Very good, Admiral. We will copy you on all subsequent communications that we generate as a result of this incident; and, will order the C&C to follow suit." The Secretary added.

"Thank you, sir. I am just glad that, our operation began to unravel this thing a few weeks ago. I am loyal to the Emperor and the Empire. I would not have wanted this rebellion to succeed." I added as we all shook hands; and the two leaders turned and exited the room. A short while later, I received another memo.

MEMO

To: *All Commands of the OESA, All OESA Personnel*
From: *Edward III Head of State Orion Empire, Office of the Secretary of Defense*
C.C.: *Orion Council of First Ministers, Orion Empire Representative Assembly*
Re: *OESA C&C*
Date: *November 2, 2257*

All,

We are saddened to advise you that, effectively immediately, Fleet Admiral D. Williamson has been suspended from duty as OESA C&C.

Please be advised that, effectively immediately, Admiral O. Blackman has been elevated to the Rank of Fleet Admiral (12) and will assume the second chair as C&C OESA.

These actions were precipitated by recent events. Please give Fleet Admiral Blackman your full cooperation, loyalty and obedience.

Edward Delnikov Emperor Orion Empire

MEMO

To: *Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson C&C OESA; Fleet Admiral O. Blackman C&C OESA*
From: *Edward III Head of State Orion Empire, Office of the Secretary of Defense*
C.C.: *Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General*
Re: *Recent rebellion*
Date: *November 3, 2257*

Gentlemen,

The events of recent days have left me concerned; and, the Council, Assembly and Secretary of Defense shaken. It goes without saying that, our Empire has always conducted the business of governing in a civilized manner; and that, attempts to circumvent legal and constitutionally valid efforts to legislate, govern or modify the constitution for the improvement of the Empire are detested.

Since there is uncertainty over whether or not the threat has been completely resolved, I ask that you dispatch OESA field forces to protect the space around Earth and Rigil; and, deploy adequate ground forces to protect our citizens and government operations on Earth and OESA operations on Rigil, for a maximum period of ninety days, unless otherwise directed by this office. Please keep the Inspector General Branch Apprised of all action, in the matter. The Council, Assembly and Minister of Defense are aware and in agreement of this request.

Edward Delnikov

Within minutes, I received the following communication.

Tactical Action Message #CC57-1211

CLASSIFIED

*From: Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson C&C OESA Fleet Admiral O. Blackman C&C
OESA*

To: Admiral G. T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

C.C. Inspector General Branch

November 3, 2257

You are ordered and required to deploy your Command to protect the space around the Sol system; and, citizens, all government facilities, the Emperors residence, representative bodies and supporting installations, on Earth; and, the space around the Kentaurus system and all citizens, facilities and grounds of the Rigil OESA Headquarters and supporting installations, as you see fit to protect those targets from possible attack or disorder. You are ordered and required to keep the Inspector General apprised of any actions taken in regard to this order.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

There is a twenty-two and a half hour communications lag between Rigil and 61 Virgo, where Valhalla is sitting. It took until November 5, for further action to become visible to me.

Tactical Action Message #FM57-1239

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral G.T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

To: Admiral Palakiko, Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Ten Commander

*C.C. Office of C&C OESA, Inspector General Branch; General Ian Malcolm
Marine Army Commander Fifth Mobile Command*

Date: November 4, 2257

1) You are ordered and required to place all forces under your command on Maximum Alert Status in response to a threat from within the Orion Empire.

2) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy your Command to protect the space around the Kentaurus system and the space in the corridor between the Kentaurus and the Sol System. Please deploy ground forces on Rigil as directed under an action order to be generated by General I. Malcolm Commander Marine Forces Fifth Mobile Command.

3) Further still, you are ordered and required to take steps to keep the Inspector General Branch apprised of your actions.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Admiral G. T. Bryant

Tactical Action Message #FM57-1240

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral G.T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

To: Admiral S. Nichols, Theatre Nine Commander

*C.C. Office of C&C OESA, Inspector General Branch
General Ian Malcolm Marine Army Commander Fifth Mobile Command*

Date: November 4, 2257

1) You are ordered and required to place all forces under your command on Maximum Alert Status in response to a threat from within the Orion Empire.

2) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy your Command to protect the space around the Sol System. Please deploy ground forces on Earth as directed under an action order to be generated by General I. Malcolm Commander Marine Forces Fifth Mobile Command.

3) Further still, you are ordered and required to take steps to keep the Inspector General Branch apprised of your actions.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Admiral G.T. Bryant

Tactical Action Message #FM57-1241

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral G.T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

To: General I. Malcolm Commander Mobile Fifth RAC Marine Army Command

C.C. Office of C&C OESA, Inspector General Branch

Date: November 4, 2257

1) You are ordered and required to place all forces under your command on Maximum Alert Status in response to a threat from within the Orion Empire.

2) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy ground forces on Rigil to protect and defend the OESA Headquarters and all citizens, ancillary facilities, structures and support operations against insurrection and rebellion with a strength capable of repelling a divisional attack.

3) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy ground forces on Earth to protect and defend the Government installations and the Emperors citizens and facilities; including all ancillary facilities, structures and support operations against insurrection and rebellion with a strength capable of repelling a divisional attack.

4) Further still, you are ordered and required to increase the security level on all vessels within and supporting your command to a level compatible with a Maximum Alert Status.

5) Further still, you are ordered and required to take steps to keep the Inspector General Branch apprised of your actions.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

Admiral G. T. Bryant

Tactical Action Message #FMG57-1242

CLASSIFIED

From: General Ian Malcolm Commander Fifth Mobile RAC Marine Army Command

To: Lt. General Svesion Commander Theatre Nine Marine Corps

C.C. Office of C&C OESA, Inspector General Branch

Admiral G.T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

Date: November 4, 2257

1) You are ordered and required to place all forces under your command on Maximum Alert Status in response to a threat from within the Orion Empire.

2) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy ground forces on Earth to protect and defend the citizens, Government installations and the Emperors facilities; including all ancillary facilities, structures and support operations against insurrection and rebellion with a strength capable of repelling a divisional attack, in the following manner.

2a) 4 Regiments strength to patrol and defend the Capital under command of two Brigade Commanders.

2b) 3 Regiments strength to defend the Representative Assembly under the command of a Brigade Commander

2c) 2 Security battalions to guard and protect members of the Representative Assembly under the authority of a Regimental Commander

2d) 2 Battalions strength to defend the Council Offices managed by a single Regimental Command

2e) 1 Security battalion to guard and protect Councillors controlled by its Battalion Command.

2f) 2 Companies to defend and protect the Emperor's premises and facilities under direction of a single Battalion Command

2g) 1 Security company to accompany, guard and protect the Emperor under the direction of their Battalion Commander

2h) 1 armored Battalion positioned for support of the above under the direction of their Battalion Commander

2i) All other forces held in reserve for relief and counter attack

3) Further still, you are ordered and required to increase the security level on all vessels within and supporting your command to a level compatible with a Maximum Alert Status.

4) Further still, you are ordered and required to take steps to keep the Inspector General Branch apprised of your actions.

5) On – the – ground coordination should be via a commanding Divisional Command working under your direction.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

General Ian Malcolm

Tactical Action Message #FMG57-1242b

CLASSIFIED

From: General Ian Malcolm Commander Fifth Mobile RAC Marine Army Command

To: Lt. General Miyuki Akiyama Commander Theatre Ten Marine Corps

C.C. Office of C&C OESA, Inspector General Branch

Admiral G.T. Bryant Commander Fifth Mobile RAC

Date: November 4, 2257

1) You are ordered and required to place all forces under your command on Maximum Alert Status in response to a threat from within the Orion Empire.

2) Further, you are ordered and required to deploy ground forces on Rigil Kentaurus to protect and defend its citizens and OESA installations; including all ancillary facilities, structures and support operations against insurrection and rebellion with a strength capable of repelling a divisional attack, in the following manner.

2a) 3 Regiments strength to patrol and defend the city of Rigil New York – controlled by a single Brigade Command

2b) 2 Regiments strength to defend the OESA Headquarters Facilities – under direction of a single Brigade Command

2c) 2 Security battalions to guard and protect internal OESA HQ offices – under the authority of a single Regimental Command.

2d) 1 Regiment security to guard and protect Flag and Senior Officers – under the direction of its Regimental Commander.

2e) 1 Battalion to defend and protect Flag Officers' residences – under the authority of its Battalion Commander

2f) 1 armored Battalion positioned for support of the above – under its Battalion Commander's direction.

2g) All other forces held in reserve for relief and counter attack

3) Further still, you are ordered and required to increase the security level on all vessels within and supporting your command to a level compatible with a Maximum Alert Status.

4) Further still, you are ordered and required to take steps to keep the Inspector General Branch apprised of your actions.

5) On – the – ground coordination should be via a commanding Divisional Command working under your direction

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Thank you.

General Ian Malcolm

Among all the TAM communications is the following memo.

MEMO

From: Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson C&C OESA, Fleet Admiral O. Blackman C&C OESA

To OESA - All Commands - All Personnel

C.C. Secretary of Defense, First Minister's Office, Office of Emperor Edward III

Re: Appointment Theatre Two Command

Date: November 4, 2257

All,

We are pleased to advise you that Admiral Tsoh Shah has temporarily been elevated to Admiral (11); and assigned as Quadrant Two Commander. At the moment this is a temporary field promotion within our authority as outlined in OESA Rules and Regulations.

You are also advised that Admiral Tsoh Shah's name has been placed into nomination with the Secretary of Defense to be permanently elevated to the rank of Admiral (11); and, assigned as Commander Quadrant Two.

Field elevations, though temporary, carry the same rights and privileges of rank as permanent ones. Field assignments carry the same responsibility and authority as permanent ones.

Fleet Admiral W. O. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

My system mail was crazy for the rest of November as TAM orders flowed down through the commands in Mobile Fifth RAC. Being in the midst of such a massive tactical move was really interesting. What surprised me, was not the way we had controlled the Emperor's situation to this point; but, the way the press had been distracted. Oh, they covered the earlier arrests in a couple of single stories. They covered the arrests of Williamson and cohorts for a whole day. But all the rest of the reporting was based on speculation leading up to the Nichols' wedding; then, coverage of the wedding itself; and now, it had turned to rehash of that event and speculation on our coming wedding.

On November 6 2257, the Emperor makes a big push on the Council and Assembly. Though he seldom exercises it, his power is absolute; so, they relent and approve the modifications to the constitution making him and his family the official royalty of our Empire. The coronation date is set at December 15, 2257 well after our wedding, as a courtesy to us. Edward does not want to steal our thunder, he says. Even so, he is already being referred to as King Edward; whenever he comes up in the news.

Admiral Bryant had recalled all his forces to the Valhalla and jumped to Earth and Rigil; arriving on November 13. By the fifteenth, he had deployed his space forces as desired, around the planet; and, Malcolm and his subordinates had positioned all ground force where they wanted them, on both worlds.

As I sit in my office at OESA this November 16, there are armed guards in the corridors; and following us around all over the place, while on the ground. Walking through Rigil New

York's downtown is fascinating. There are armed Marines on every corner and walking along the streets. Light tanks can often be seen rolling around from here to there to honor deployment and mission orders. I don't notice it so much; because; I have residence on the Valhalla, or on the Examiner, or even on the Loki; but, a lot of people are followed home; where, there are armed guards at their residence all day and night long. Tonight, I'll go back to the Loki. Helena and I are still ironing out final bugs in the wedding; and, we need the comfort we can give each other, in such trying times. There'll be another flap in a couple of weeks. Two days after the wedding Edward will present his next constitutional changes.

"Admiral, can I see you?" Colonel Sparks asks from my doorway.

"Of course. Come in Chris; and, take a seat. Do you want a drink?" I point at the fully stocked bar, as I finish.

"No Admiral, but thanks. First, I want to tell you I was exceptionally pleased with what we just accomplished. Now, I understand what you were talking about; when, you gave me the intelligence directive.

Then, I wanted you to know that, I edited the schedule and saved it back to the server. You'll have to open my copy to look at it; then encrypt it and save it for yourself. It was all out of whack, with what just happened; so, I corrected it to account for units we investigated early; or bypassed for the ones we ended up doing. I assume we are going on with investigations and audits. It's still a seventeen-day cycle. We could shorten it a day, now. We have all processes pretty well streamlined, now. But, I think we should leave it seventeen days; so, we don't rush. It'll give everyone time to take a little more care. I also wanted to know if the intelligence directive still applies; as, you laid it out, before." He finishes.

"First, I'm glad you attached the intelligence work to the arrests we made. Second, we will continue with intelligence as I directed - always. There may still be more in this case; and, there will always be threats to watch for. Third, leave the cycle at seventeen days. I agree with your assessment. A little more time to get things right won't hurt. And, finally thanks for editing it. I will take a look; but, I'm sure it's fine.

You've done a fine job. I am going to recommend your elevation from Lt. Colonel to full Colonel. I am impressed. I have the authority level to approve your promotion, myself; but, I never do that; so, others check my thinking. It's too easy to be biased. But, I am sure you'll get it.

You've earned it. You'll be eligible for the War College General Officer program, at that time." I explain.

"Thank you, sir. Is that all?" He asks.

"You're dismissed." I say. Then I set myself to writing a memo to Roh; asking her to look over young Sparks' record to determine if she feels him deserving of a promotion to full Colonel. I ask her to write a recommendation to me, if she thinks he is.

There are so many details to any wedding; but, one this large is incredible. We are lucky that, Moe is looking after details on the Valhalla and we have similar help for the Phoenix Fleet. We spend the whole evening going over every little nuance; like, the way the napkins should be folded or rolled and secured. We spend that night in warm embrace. It feels so good. Things have been a little too tense, lately.

.....

MEMO

From: Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson OESA C&C; Fleet Admiral O. Blackman OESA C&C

To: Admiral Kurt Brubacher Inspector General

***C.C. Emperor Edward III; Secretary of Defense; all Quadrant Commanders;
Fifth Mobile RAC Commander***

Date: November 26, 2257

Admiral Brubacher,

It gives us pleasure to advise you that you have been nominated and approved for the Emperor's Cross (to be renamed King Edward's Cross). It is the highest award presented by the Emperor to citizens of the Empire. You are being cited for your extreme contribution in foiling the recent rebellion; and, for your super human efforts to bring the Inspector General Branch from a newborn department to full operational capability in under four months. Your service, tactical skills, organizational contributions, energy and boundless effort have not gone without notice. This award will be presented Monday February 15, 2258 at OESA Headquarters on Rigil Kentaurus.

Thank you for your service to the Empire.

Fleet Admiral W. O. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

Today is an especially busy day. The forensic examination of the Quadrant One, Theatre Two Command and the Orion Fleet, along with, the complete investigations of four more Theatre Two Fleets are all on my desk. I have to go through them carefully; check and edit their summaries and sign off on them. I end up generating Arrest Warrants for one more Fleet Commander and his two Task Force Commanders. Other Fleets were exposed to communications; but, did not intend to participate. I carefully examine all the records and make sure that, in the summaries, I point out that, it is an offense to have information on a criminal conspiracy and not report it; but, I am not pressing charges. However, I make it clear that a reprimand has been entered in each Commander's personnel file.

Back on the sixteenth, I advised Chris Sparks of my intention to promote him. Roh looked over the file and his recent performance with the IGB and agreed. I have prepared his personnel file, the warrant and called him to my office.

"Lt. Colonel Chris Sparks reporting, as ordered sir." He snaps officiously.

"Colonel, you're out of uniform. You're improperly dressed." I say sternly.

He fumbles; checking his shirt, belt, collar insignia.

"You have the wrong rank insignia on. Why aren't these on your collar, Colonel?" I bark with a smile; as I point to the Eagles on my desk.

"You mean I got it?" He yelps. 'Here, I'll put them on.' He says with his hand out.

"No Colonel, we have to do this right." I say and begin reading the promotion warrant. When I am done, I remove his silver oak leaves and pin the silver eagle atop the number six on his two collar points and handing him two more sets. I put out my hand. 'Congratulations Colonel Sparks, you earned this.' I say with a smile as we shake hands warmly. 'I'll buy you a drink in the pub, after work. Bring a guest. I know I will.' I add.

"Yes sir. I'll be there. I'll contact you when I'm finishing to see if you're ready, sir." He responds as he turns and leaves forgetting to pay the usual respects, in his excitement.

We meet in the bar at seventeen hundred. I am accompanied by Helena. Chris has a sweet young Ensign on his arm. I use her name three times in early conversation; but, can't remember it an hour later. We enjoy a light dinner and a few drink before breaking for the evening.

.....

Today, I've scheduled a light work day. After all, the big day is tomorrow; and there is always a lot to do the day before. I'm tidying up records; like, the personnel notification of

Sparks promotion and forwarding the warrant to all appropriate levels; so, it can receive the perfunctory approvals and registrations. I am also taking one last read of yesterday's investigation reports; before sending them off to the C&C and the appropriate commands. Then there's lunch. I don't know how many have asked me to have lunch. I think it will turn into quite the little do.

After the two-hour lunch, I head back to the quarters I still have on the Valhalla to check out the dress uniform I will wear, tomorrow. Dinner is a little more relaxed for everyone but those at the head table. We will all still be in our blacks; but, everyone else can wear daily grays, for comfort. Helena, Marie and Olivia will all be wearing the new dress gowns Helena designed. She will change into hers from her wedding one, after the cocktail party, following the wedding.

I lay out the appropriate rank insignia and call in Dave Angstrom. He and my original stewards have followed me along on the ride to my current rank and position. He is now a Chief Master Petty Officer in charge of a team of eight.

"Dave, can you have two of my shirts pressed; and have two sets of slacks and dress jackets steamed and pressed too, please. I put out two sets of insignia and ribbons and lanyards and one set of medals. I only need the medals on one uniform. Put the insignia on both shirt collars, will you?" It's really an order.

"Yes sir. You can't be too prepared. Will you need me in the morning, for your personal preparations, sir?" He asks.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea. I always have a lot of trouble with the bow tie; but clip-on ones don't look very good with a tailored formal suit." I say with a smile.

"Can you have a daily uniform pressed, right away. I think I'll wear it to the bachelor party, tonight." I ask.

"Aye, sir. We'll have it back in an hour; if, that's okay, Admiral." Dave responds.

"That's fine Chief." I answer.

I putter around my quarters; reorganizing things that are already okay. I chuckled, when I realize that I am experiencing a slight case of jitters. I guess everyone has some nervousness over such a big change in their lives. But, what is really changing. I love Helena and she loves me. Our relationship won't alter, that way. We will not have to skulk around to each other quarters, anymore; but, we already enjoy a great physical relationship; so, being quartered together shouldn't change that, either. Neither of us have been carousers. We've both had casual

relationships, before; but, we were too busy with careers to get serious. It took meeting each other to change that. I guess it's the commitment. Your saying you will be there if the other is sick or in trouble. You will be their backstop for the rest of your lives together. But, I already feel that, I would give up my life for hers; if, it was required to protect her.

At nineteen hundred thirty hours, I head to the Valhalla number three shuttle bay to motor over to Lowry's on the Examiner. George had decided it was fitting; since, it was my pub and I had even named it. The weightless fifteen-minute ride and docking to get there is relaxing. The atmosphere allows me to unwind a little. My mind even wanders; and, the shuttle pilot has to tell me when we are actually ready to disembark.

Sort of tongue - in - cheek, Commander MacDonald, Captain of the Examiner, has me piped aboard. It is acceptable protocol; but, we stopped it a long time ago. I am always moving between the Valhalla, the Examiner, the Midgard and OESA headquarters; so, it seems a real pain. But, he says it's the last time he'll get to do it for Admiral Brubacher; since, by tomorrow I'll be Admiral Leeds.

The group is already in Lowry's, when I step in the doorway. Bryant, Nichols, Stephenson, Blackman, Moe, Sparks are just a few of those present. In all the group is around twenty. They raise a loud cheer; stomping and hollering as a welcome and an attempt to embarrass me.

They immediately start with a B52 toast. It's a tradition that has survived more than two centuries. I whisper to the bar tender to keep bottled water coming for me; alternating between straight and sparkling. It will keep up the impression I am tipping back; and, dilute any alcohol I do consume. I do not want a big hangover, on my wedding day. And, most importantly, I do not want to play the fool. We are all the senior managers of over three million. The press is embedded, everywhere.

"What's up Kurt?" Bryant asks; sensing my reservations.

"I'm just being careful. I don't want a big headache, tomorrow; and, this is my Command ship. I don't want my people seeing me falling - down drunk. I'd like to have fun; but, keep it a bit controlled; if, you don't mind." I respond.

"I still outrank you; and, I'm ordering you to have fun." He counters to a raucous round of laughter.

"Yes sir!" I snap as I salute smartly.

But, I decide to keep my head and stick to my plan. I will sip a drink for every couple of bottles of water I consume. And, I'll be gone by one hundred hours in the morning, at the latest; maybe sooner if, there's any half naked women popping out of cakes, or some such nonsense. I'm not interested in inking my pen in any other well. Helena is the woman for the rest of my life.

There is a lot of laughter through the evening. The loudest is the response to Admiral Bryant's story of Marie and the new midshipmen; though, he is careful to never even infer, I was one of them. He embellishes Marie's actions a little more each time he tells it; and it's always new to those like Sparks who haven't heard it before. Even those of us who have, love the way he tells it.

At one hundred hours I excuse myself from the table; as if, going to the men's room; and slip out the door of Lowry's unseen; heading for my quarters on the Examiner. Though I didn't consume that much, the booze helps. Despite my nervousness, I drift into a deep sleep almost immediately, when my head hits the pillow. The next thing I know; a steward is knocking at the door at eight hundred in the morning.

I brush my teeth and order breakfast; dressing in last night's daily uniform; to head back to the Valhalla. My two dress uniforms are set up for me in my quarters, there. I shave and shower; wear dailies to the Flag Bridge; so I don't wrinkle everything. I'll carry one dress uniform there. The ceremony is at eleven hundred. I'll change in the bathroom adjoining Bryant's office.

.....

I make life and death decisions for thousands every day; but, I'm more nervous waiting for Helena to appear than, ever before in my life; as, I stand at the edge of the raised platform with my best man on my right. We are half turned; watching down the center aisle for her to appear. The hundreds on the bridge, the star-field backdrop and the atmosphere barely register; as, anticipation piques me like thousands of little insects crawling around all over and inside me. I am probably the only person in the Empire who hasn't seen Helena in her gown. It was modeled for everyone; but, she was careful that I never see the images; honoring the centuries old tradition that the groom should not see his bride in the gown, until the wedding. As the Orion Empire anthem begins, we all snap to attention.

As the anthem ends, two rows of marine honor guards forming a corridor respond to a present arms order by drawing swords and crossing them above the aisle as a small live orchestra begins Wagner's Bridal Chorus. Two bars into the march, Helena appears arm in arm with her

father; walking in short glide steps behind two young children spreading flower pedals ahead on the pathway to the "altar". She is stunning. The gown is incredible. It takes her rank insignia, ribbons, lanyards and braids without appearing garish. Hundreds of flashes fire; as, she takes each step; making her, all the more, a surreal image. Behind her follow four bridesmaids dressed in the new dress uniform she designed. Despite my love of Helena, I am struck at Marie Bryant's sheer beauty in the exclusive gown.

Four ushers step into line beside Admiral Bryant. The Emperor falls in behind George. He will present the rings. It is incredible that all seven of us can stand in this tight formation without entangling our ceremonial swords.

As she reaches me, Helena releases her father and takes my hand. He moves off to the left returning to his wife in the first row of guests. Helena is sobbing quietly.

"Your crying?" I whisper softly; afraid that, she is having second thoughts.

"I know. I'm happy." She chokes out softly through the sobs.

"Through the centuries it has been a ship captain's privilege to join ship born couples in matrimony... ' Commander MacDonald, the Examiner's Captain, begins; and, I drift into somewhere; until my mind registers that he said; 'Do you Kurt Brubacher take Helena Leeds to be your lawful wedded wife...' After my response, I drift again. I am lost in the depth of her gaze. Helena is absolutely bewitching to me, at this moment.

In the back of my mind I hear her say; "I do." Helena is still sobbing quietly. Most of those in attendance are too.

I snap back to the reality of the moment.

"You may now kiss the bride." I hear the Captain.

I turn Helena to me; take her in my arms, oblivious to the crowd behind. Our lips meet. We pull our bodies together. It is a long slow kiss that draws audible gasps from women on the flag bridge; and, then - applause.

"Ladies and gentlemen, officers and enlisted personnel, I present to you Mister and Misses Kurt Brubacher." The Emperor calls out as we turn to face them.

We walk under crossed swords down the aisle as the orchestra plays a few bars of Mendelssohn's Wedding March; then, something I helped choose; but, can't remember the title of, at the moment; as, the crowd tosses oversized confetti above our heads. We head to the Flag

Bridge Conference Room to be joined by the wedding party, the bride's family, the press and a few other specially honoured guests.

Tables are filled with hors d'oeuvres like thinly slice smoked turkey breast rolls stuffed with salmon, Russian sturgeon caviar with onion crackers and a hundred other offerings. Bottles of red and white wine grace the tables. A bar on either side of the room offers any beverage those of us in the room could imagine; and, stewards circulate with trays of champagne filled crystal flutes. Everyone takes a glass. There is the ringing of someone striking a crystal with a piece of silverware.

"Ladies and gentlemen could I have your attention, please?" Admiral Bryant calls out. He has his arm around Marie who is tight at his side. As best man, it's his responsibility here and at the receptions to make the first toast.

"I have known Kurt; since, I took him for assignment from the Academy a good number of years ago. He has always been a man of honour and hard work; and, he is loyal to those close to him; including those in his command. It hasn't been as long but, I've known Helena quite awhile; and, she is a force to be reckoned with; so, Kurt better be careful, from now on.' He pauses as people in the room laugh. 'I want to extend our best wishes to Mister and Misses Brubacher. We hope they have a long and very happy life together." He finishes as he raises his glass.

"Rah!" The room calls back, in response as they all raise their glasses.

"Now it's my turn!" The Emperor calls out.

"Kurt and Helena have served the Empire faithfully for most of their adult lives. They have done many things to personally make my life a little better and safer. I owe them a lot; as do, all the citizens of our wonderful Empire. We cannot thank them enough. I want to wish them a long and very rich future together, on behalf of me and my family and all of the Empire." He finishes as he raises his glass.

"Rah." Everyone responds again and sips.

"Okay everyone let's enjoy. There's lots of fine food and drink; and, a host of good company to enjoy. Here's to all our friends!" I call out as I raise my glass.

"Here - here." The room responds with raised glasses.

We spend the next hour milling about and visiting. People have dropped gifts on the tables. I have my stewards pull them all together and we spend part of the time opening them; mostly for the benefit of our guests. One is a draft from the Emperor for one hundred thousand

sovereigns. We thank him without making a scene. We go back to conversation for awhile, after opening the presents.

"Sir, your gift is too generous. I am uncomfortable accepting it." I whisper when we finally corner Edward.

"Nonsense my boy. You have made a big difference in my life; both now and in the future. Just accept it gracefully and enjoy it. It is a small amount to my family. A token of our thankfulness." He says with a warm smile as he places a consoling hand on my left shoulder.

"Well... we thank you, sir." I feel the tears well up in my eyes and notice Helena sobbing softly again. I guess she's happy. Edward gently rubs her back consolingly, for just a moment.

The cocktail party breaks up at fourteen hundred. Helena and I pay short visits to both the Loki and the Examiner for short gatherings. We are toasted and gifted at each. While on the Loki, she asks her steward to move her eveningwear to my quarters on the Valhalla; and, to attend her there, for the rest of the day. Then we head to my quarters on the Valhalla to make love and get a little rest.

Chapter 20 A New Beginning

Sunday November 29, 2257

"The true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good." -

Samuel Johnson

After boarding the Shield Maiden, Helena's Admiral's Craft, we gave her Captain orders to just cruise slowly to a point away from the Loki, for a day; where we could return to it, in another day.

Being with nearly twenty-five thousand people on three different vessels the day before, makes it seem like heaven, to be in silence. We spend most of the morning just laying around our quarters unclothed and talking; taking panicked breaks for love making. I think it's the first time we've had a couple of days alone; since, we met. We finally dress at noon to head to the lounge for lunch at thirteen hundred.

In the lounge, I have the steward turn on the system and navigate to a news site. We are shocked, immediately. The Emperor has wasted no time. There is a headline story about the new constitution he submitted to the Assembly and counsel. However, it's being crowded out by coverage of our wedding. There are even images of the Shield Maiden. We laugh at the knowledge the press is even following us out here.

"I guess we better close the drapes in your bedroom, from now on." I remark; bringing Helena to tears with laughter. I have the steward turn off the news.

The stewards serve an elegant and delectable luncheon with wine. An original creation of baked apple and plum on a graham crust is served for desert. The chef aboard my craft is very good; but, hers is amazing.

We lounge about highlighting various stars and space phenomena to each other for the rest of the day; stopping to cuddle in each others arms, from time to time. We end the evening early; heading to her quarters around twenty hundred hours. We look naively at each other and laugh when she closes the drapes. She takes on a devilish nature after undressing; aggressively tearing back the drapery - her nudity in full view.

"If they want to look; let 'em. I want to see the stars." She sassily feigns anger bringing me to tears with laughter.

I am not upset by this. Her body is so amazing, I know every man in the empire would be jealous of me; if, they could see it. So, all the more power to us; if, the press manages to snap a picture. We fall asleep around one hundred thirty hours in the morning, after consuming a bottle of chardonnay; and enjoying each others pleasures for hours.

Waking at eleven hundred in the morning is something I realize I could enjoy, every once in awhile. We run off to brush our teeth and make love in the shower. Then, we dress and head to the lounge for brunch. It seems too late to order breakfast in our quarters.

I grab my pad and activate my system with a coffee still in front of me. I navigate until I reach a copy of the full Constitutional proposal.

"This is an impressive document. Edward has deeply considered everything.' I say and look up. Helena is attentive; so, I continue summarizing. 'It enshrines the same human rights and bans the same things as before. No political parties. No organized religions. Representative government based on the same formula as before. The assembly is elected every four years. It elects a president to execute state business, at the beginning of the new term. The president picks portfolio holders to sit as his cabinet, for up to the four-year term; each approved by vote of the assembly. The cabinet runs the day to day business of the government departments within their portfolios. It replaces the council. Today's assembly sits for another two years before another is elected. A vote of the assembly, on any matter, does not require assent of another arm of government; but, is signed by the President and King as a matter of protocol. The assembly holds the power of assent for all legislation passed by all our remote planetary governments. Nothing is law until approved by the Orion legislative assembly. The president is Chief Executive and Commander in Chief of the military. The King is honorary Head of State. The president signs agreements with foreign powers which can be overturned by a vote of the assembly. The Empire will become the Orion Federation. It's a real hybrid; kind of like a federated constitutional monarchy." I explain as I change to the news.

There are considerable objections to the proposal. Edward did an on camera speech to explain it; telling us all that a dictatorship is dangerous; and that, we were mature enough to handle government as a democracy. He reminded all that, we had two centuries of experience, in what makes for a good life, to draw on. He explained that, the job of Emperor, as it is now, is too all consuming for one person. He reminded everyone that, though we may all want our descendants to do the right thing, he could never be sure if a future king could become a tyrant

and despot. For his last act as Emperor he would make it an order that the Assembly accept the document by unanimous vote and each and every member would sign it to represent their worlds; and that, the Assembly would sit and elect its president, immediately; so, there would be no interruption of government. - Or, the assembly could do it all voluntarily. He ended by telling everyone that he only wants the best for all; and, democracy is the best way to insure that outcome.

Images from Earth and outlying worlds appear relatively calm; but, the thousands of marines in the streets are visible in the story. The real issue would be the OESA. There are still forces within that could offer considerable resistance. A couple of weeks back, Theatre Two Command had been stopped and their Commander relieved. Quadrant Four Commander had been relieved, before that incident. Though major Command level resistance seemed already under control, individual Fleet Commanders could try to take things into their own hands. A single Fleet is a formidable force. I turn off the news.

The rest of our day is quiet as the Shield Maiden cruises slowly back to the Valhalla; still in Earth Orbit. At twenty hundred, we dock at the Loki. We spend that evening and night in her quarters, thoroughly sealing our marriage contract. I shuttle over to the Examiner at eight hundred hours in the morning.

.....

I just sit behind my desk, when my system enunciator rings.

MEMO

Priority Action Message

To: *All OESA Quadrant Commands, Fifth Mobile RAC, All OESA Theatre Commands
Inspector General Branch*

From: *Office of OESA C&C*

C.C. *OESA All Commands,*

Re: *Forces Resisting Constitutional Changes*

Date: *December 1, 2257*

All,

This is to advise you that, three OESA Fleets appear to have gone dark. Since all Fleets are required by Regulations to communicate with their Theatre Commands, at least, every six hours, we have no recourse; but to believe, they have gone dark and may be proceeding to

Earth and Rigil to take hostile actions; in an attempt to prevent enactment of proposed constitutional changes. Capricorn Fleet, Crater Fleet and Ara Fleet are currently listed as missing. They may or may not be still flying their fleet pennants. However, it is wise to assume that any vessel not displaying Fleet identification is, in fact, one of the suspected ones. A list of registry numbers is attached to this message, for identification purposes.

All Quadrant Commands and Mobile Fifth RAC should redeploy their forces to repel such an attack.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

A flurry of TAMs followed.

Tactical Action Message #FM49-5761

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral George T. Bryant Fifth Mobile Command

To: Admiral S. Nichols Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Nine Command

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA All Commands, All Quadrant Commands, All Theatre Commands

Date: December 1, 2257

Admiral Nichols,

Please examine the Priority Action Message received a short while ago from the C&C. Also, consider carefully, the last know positions of the three Fleets, in question. From your investigations, please redeploy your Fleets close to the Kentaurus system, if necessary, to place the greatest resistance to attack in the most likely positions, they would land. Please also deploy all twelve undetached vessels between Rigil and Sol to engage in reconnaissance as a means to locate these Fleets.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

George T. Bryant Commanding Fifth Mobile Command

Tactical Action Message #Q20-5733

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral Tsoh Shah Quadrant Two Commander

To: Theatre Three Command

**C.C. OESA C&C, OESA All Commands, All Quadrant Commands,
All Theatre Commands**

Date: December 1, 2257

Admiral,

Please examine the Priority Action Message received a short while ago from the C&C. You are ordered and required to redeploy your Fleets close to the Sol system, to place the greatest resistance to attack in the most likely area rebels would land.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral Tsoh Shah

Tactical Action Message #Q20-5734

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral Tsoh Shah Quadrant Two Commander

To: Theatre Four Command

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA All Commands, All Quadrant Commands, All Theatre Command

Date: December 1, 2257

Admiral,

Please examine the Priority Action Message received a short while ago from the C&C. You are ordered and required to redeploy your Fleets to maintain as much patrol capability as possible, while stretching your resources as far inside the seventy-one light year sector divider, as is feasible. I have ordered Theatre Three Forces to pull tighter to the Sol system. You must attempt to maintain protection of our outer borders; while reinforcing as much area vacated by Theatre Three, as is possible.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral Tsoh Shah

Tactical Action Message #FT9-5766

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral Stephen Nichols Fifth Mobile Theatre Nine Commander

To: All Theatre Nine Fleets

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA All Commands, All Quadrant Commands, All Theatre Command
Date: December 1, 2257

Admirals,

Please examine the Priority Action Message received a short while ago from the C&C. I have spent considerable time with the Theatre Nine Tactical Department Team analyzing tactics of the three Fleet Commanders, in question, their points of departure and probable targets of each, based on the belief they are working in concert.

All Fifth Mobile Theatre Nine Fleets are ordered and required to change communications codes to those specified in document A795231; and, to change tactical message encryption to those specified in document A795232. This will prevent the rebellious Fleets from monitoring tactical plans and orders, when they are within range.

Fleets are ordered and required to redeploy to the following positions.

For the protection of Rigil

Carina Fleet	14hr 29min 43sec	Dec	-61.5°	@4.361Y
Columba Fleet	14hr 35min 50sec	Dec	-61.0°	@4.361Y
Phoenix Fleet	14hr 39min 40sec	Dec	-61.2°	@4.361Y
Ursa Minor Fleet	14hr 35min 40sec	Dec	-61.0°	@4.361Y

For the Protection of Sol

Scutum Fleet	12hr 30min 00sec	Dec	-10.0°	@.401Y
Sagitta Fleet	13hr 0min 0sec	Dec	0.0°	@.401Y
Grus Fleet	12hr 39min 40sec	Dec	-10.0°	@.401Y
Dorado Fleet	13hr 0min 0sec	Dec	+10.0°	@.401Y

For reconnaissance all autonomous Frigate commands should form a picket line from 14hr, 35min, 50sec Dec -61.0°, @4.361Y to 12hr, 30min, 00sec Dec -10.0°, @.401Y

All positions relative to Sol

While three Fleets are involved, I believe that, I would send two to Rigil to neutralize control of the OESA, first; if, I had planned this attack. On that basis, the principal defense should be there. All attempts should be made to peacefully contain these fleets; but, lethal force is approved, if required, at the discretion of Fleet Commanders.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral Stephen Nichols

Tactical Action Message #FT10-5746

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral Palakiko, Fifth Mobile RAC Theatre Ten Commander

To: All Theatre Ten Fleets

C.C. OESA C&C, OESA All Commands, All Quadrant Commands, All Theatre Command

Date: December 1, 2257

Admirals,

Please examine the Priority Action Message received a short while ago from the C&C. I have read the report of Admiral Nichols and the Theatre Nine Tactical Department Team analyzing tactics of the three Fleet Commanders, in question, their points of departure and probable targets of each, based on the belief they are working in concert; and Theatre Ten Tactical Department Team; and, I agree with their conclusions.

All Fifth Mobile Theatre Ten Fleets are ordered and required to change communications codes to those specified in document A795231; and, to change tactical message encryption to those specified in document A795232. This will prevent the rebellious Fleets from monitoring tactical plans and orders, when they are within range.

Fleets are ordered and required to redeploy to the following positions.

For the protection of Rigil

<i>Aquarius Fleet</i>	<i>14hr 29min 43sec</i>	<i>Dec -60.5°</i>	<i>@4.361Y</i>
<i>Canis Minor Fleet</i>	<i>14hr 35min 50sec</i>	<i>Dec -60.0°</i>	<i>@4.361Y</i>
<i>Centaur Fleet</i>	<i>14hr 39min 40sec</i>	<i>Dec -60.5°</i>	<i>@4.361Y</i>
<i>Delphinium Fleet</i>	<i>14hr 35min 40sec</i>	<i>Dec -60.0°</i>	<i>@4.361Y</i>

For the Protection of Sol

<i>Vulpecula Fleet</i>	<i>12hr 30min 00sec</i>	<i>Dec +10.0°</i>	<i>@.401Y</i>
<i>Telescope Fleet</i>	<i>13hr 0min 0sec</i>	<i>Dec 0.0°</i>	<i>@.401Y</i>
<i>Reticulum Fleet</i>	<i>12hr 30min 00sec</i>	<i>Dec +10.0°</i>	<i>@.401Y</i>
<i>Pegasus Fleet</i>	<i>13hr 0min 0sec</i>	<i>Dec -10.0°</i>	<i>@.401Y</i>

All positions relative to Sol

For reconnaissance all autonomous Frigate commands should form a picket line from 14hr, 39min, 40sec Dec -60.5°, @4.36LY to 12hr, 30min, 00sec Dec +10.0°, @.40LY

While three Fleets are involved, we believe that, two would be sent to Rigil to neutralize control of the OESA, first. On that basis, the principal defense should be there. All attempts should be made to peacefully contain these fleets; but, lethal force is approved, if required, at the discretion of Fleet Commanders.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral Palakiko

In a short time, the C&C sends another communication explaining they have analyzed Nichols' tactical plan; and are ordering all Commands, within support range of the positions outlined in his and Palakiko's orders, to support their actions. Their Commanders are ordered to detach the selected Fleets and place them under Stephen's command. All commands are ordered to follow his lead on communications. In very short order another twenty-two TAMs triggered the enunciator on my pad.

I send an order to Commander MacDonald to switch to communications protocols in the previous messages; then send an e-mail asking him to check with medical on the number of trauma patients we can handle, in an emergency.

A short while later he replies; explaining that, medical advises they can handle up to eight, initially; projecting another six per hour for an additional five hours. They project, they would reach maximum limit on bed space, at that time. They further advise, they are equipped to handle everything up to class three trauma.

I send a memo to the C&C, copied to all other commands advising, the Examiner is close to the projected Rigil engagement and will assist in any medical needs, if required. I add the position we would park at; copying it to the Examiner Captain. We are half a light year from it. We jump out a couple of minutes later. MacDonald deserves a promotion.

We exit the jump out of sight of, but nearest to, the Phoenix Fleet, still parked off Rigil; but, now at the new position. I head for the Examiner's bridge; order the Captain to deploy short range sensors; and, long range at one eighth light-year. In less than ten minutes, I should be able to follow Phoenix.

When we finally see what's within our sensor range, it is obvious we are close to Phoenix. There are nearly sixty of their sensors in our general direction; even though, we can't see any ships. Commander MacDonald readies our weapons; which are defensive only. We do not have offensive weapons like torpedoes or missiles. We do have a gun placement with two bow and two rear facing neutral particle cannon banks; and, we are capable of launching anti-missile missiles and counter measures like chaff made from foil and hot flares. MacDonald sets everything to "station keeping"; so, we hold steady in this exact position. If they're coming, the first won't make it here, until tomorrow afternoon; so, we just sit and wait.

I contact Helena. We aren't quite close enough for vocal communications; so, we e-mail each other. I end by telling her I love her; and, ask her to be careful. She says I should know that is not in the job description; but, she always takes care. The waiting is terrible; so, I decide to get some sleep; and, rejoin the bridge crew closer to the expected arrival of our foes.

.....

"Holy shit." I say to no one else; since, I'm alone. "I slept in." I growl as I look at my night table clock that is indicating Wednesday December 2, six hundred hours. I wanted to rise by five hundred. Mentally, I had calculated possible arrivals for the rebels; if, they used different velocities. The earliest the first one could be here is six hundred hours; so, I wanted to be up and ready for action by then. I rush to clean up and dress; head by the Officers' Mess to grab a coffee and croissant; and gulp it all down; as, I'm stumbling to the bridge. It's six hundred thirty when I take a seat. I try to stifle a burp. People in close proximity look my way.

"Good morning, everyone." I say cheerily holding as naive a look as I can on my face.

They all respond; then, go on to monitoring their systems and the space around us. A steward enters the bridge with a tray holding pots of coffee, cups, spoons, cream, sweetener and rolls of all types. I rise and grab a coffee, quickly; giving everyone that ingenuous smile again.

"...Slept in." I say to the shift duty officer.

"Yes sir. It happens to all of us." She mumbles uncomfortably.

Business goes on as usual. Every fifteen minutes, the Bridge Commander asks for reports; and, in a specific sequence, everyone returns their status. This goes on until the change of shift at eight hundred hours. The Captain appears at the same time; though it's not his shift on the bridge. The ship's status exchanges start up again; the new shift sounding exactly like the previous one.

At nine hundred hours, I realize there is something I forgot to do. I type a message to Sparks; ordering him to suspend all investigative audits, temporarily. I explain that we are needed here in case of casualties; and, his shuttles would be used to transport them. I also advise him there may be a need for the services of his enforcement people and his troops. There is a flash on the long range screen as I send the message. I stand and peer at it. There are more.

"Captain, we're picking up weapons fire ten degrees to port on our current declination." The officer manning the sensor station snaps.

"Very good, ensign. - helm set a course ten degrees to port zero zee axis. - Propulsion set velocity on IPE to ramp to fifteen percent in thirty minutes. - helm execute move." MacDonald orders officiously.

"There are continuous status updates from the sensor station, the helm and the propulsion station as we accelerate.

"Captain, we have three ships in visual range." The sensor station reports.

"Put it up ensign." MacDonald orders.

The screen changes. After a moment's analysis, I realize I am seeing the Shenzhen in battle with a Cruiser. There are several more ships in the distance unengaged. The Shenzhen shouldn't be a match for the Cruiser but, Savign is taking pot shots at it while conducting some elaborate evasive maneuvers. It is an astonishingly skillful approach; and a real tribute to the maneuverability of a Frigate.

"Captain, can you identify that Cruiser?" I inquire.

"Sensor Station, can you identify the Cruiser?" The Captain snaps.

"No sir, they fly no pennant and we're not close enough to read the registry, sir." Comes the response.

"Comms, I know this sounds like a stupid question; but, any transponder signal?" He shouts.

"I have two, sir. One ship is the ESS Shenzhen. The other is the ESS Olpae." The radio operator responds.

"The Shenzhen is friendly. The Olpae is the one we want.' I interjected. 'If the Olpae is here; then, it's Ara Fleet that landed here.' I add as I walk up to the screen. 'If that's the Olpae and its Ara Fleet then, this should be the Flag Ship.' I say as, I reach high and point to a spot on the

massive screen. 'Can you get a fix on that ship? These spots are the whole Group.' I say as I point to one blotch after another.

"All stop! Go to Station Keeping.' MacDonald calls out; then turns to me. 'We got it admiral.' MacDonald says as he receives data on his pad. 'I'm sending it to you.'"

I receive his information and compose a message.

MEMO
URGENT!!

From: Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General

To: Vice Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet

Re: Position of Ara Fleet - Flag Ship

C.C. Admiral S. Nichols Commander Theatre Nine, Admiral G. Bryant Fifth Mobile RAC

Date: December 2, 2257

Admiral Leeds,

We are in direct view of a battle in progress between the ESS Shenzhen and the ESS Olpae. Shenzhen is acquitting herself well; but needs assistance. In the distance, we can see the rest of Olpae's group which includes the Flag Ship of the Ara Fleet. We have pinpointed the Flag's position as; 14hr, 39min, 40.31245sec: Dec -61.4831° @4.36035Y; which is very close to both your Fleet and Carina Fleet; and, in the vicinity of, all eight Fleets posted to this area. I hope this is of some assistance to you.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher

I am forced to use Helena's maiden name. The system won't recognize her married name for several days, yet.

"Creep in a little closer, Commander." I order.

"Helm dead ahead. - Propulsion IPE zero to ten in twelve minutes. - Execute." He orders the bridge team.

We are almost right on top of the battle, now; but, I can see several ships clearly in the background. The Shenzhen is hit; but, keeps up the avoidance course; while lying in as much ammunition as she can. One quarter of the Cruiser Olpae is dark.

We see jump exit points abruptly opening all over the region we are observing. I recognize some of the ships of Phoenix and the Reticulum Fleets surrounding the portion of the Ara Fleet,

we can perceive, from our perspective; as, more jump points open above and below it. We make out ships from each of the two Pegasus Task Commands. Task Force One is above Ara and Task Force two is below them. All incoming Groups have launched a host of fighters. Ara Fleet responds in kind. The local area resembles a space inhabited by an angry swarm of bees; as, the four Fleets and hundreds of Raptors engage in the deadly dance; turning the dark cosmic background as bright as sunrise. All ships engage the Ara Fleet. We observe continuous bursts of weapons fire maintaining the brilliance, on the black background. First, it is the Olpae spraying particle shots and spears on the newly arrived vessels; while maintaining weapons contact with the Shenzhen. Then, the intensity increases; as the new arrivals return fire at a ferocious rate. For a few more minutes, we can discern constant flashes from farther off in the blackness, like a hectic lightning storm in a summer's nighttime sky. Suddenly, there is silence and space is still. The friendly ships, we discern from this perspective, are sending shuttles out to Ara vessels; boarding the vessels; doubtlessly arresting the senior officers. I order enforcement personnel to each vessel, to facilitate arrests. This battle is over!

Captain MacDonald sends out messages to the three Fleets offering our medical services; and, any Marine assistance needed to control the captured vessels. All the while, we have been creeping toward the action. We are in a great position to offer aid.

“All stop! Set all thrusters to station keeping!” Mac Commands.

Half an hour later, a message comes in from Nichols, to the affect that, both Ara and Crater Fleets have been overpowered at Rigil. An hour later, we are informed that Capricorn Fleet was repelled at Sol, in similar fashion to what happened here. There was a short pitched battle; but, Capricorn was defeated by the three Fleets that overpowered it. In some respects, that was a worse confrontation. Capricorn put up fiercer resistance. The response from Vulpecula Fleet was a spear among hundreds launched by the Carrier ESS Bulgaria that penetrated the Engineering deck; piercing one fission and one fusion reactor; destroying the ESS Cambodia; flag ship of the Cambodia Group, Capricorn Fleet Task Force One and Capricorn Fleet. All hands were lost. It's all over; but, the mopping up; and, tallying the dead; and, ministering to the injured. Will humans mature out of the need for war, I think to myself. Then, I recall the last war - and the Grays, before that. If we didn't have our own wars, we'd have been in no condition to defend against outside enemies. It's strange. We will remain in the middle of this, for a while, now that the battle is over. My enunciator sounds-off, for the hundredth time in two days.

MEMO

From: *V. Admiral Helena Leeds Commander Phoenix Fleet*

To: *Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General*

Re: *Defense of Rigil*

Date: *December 2, 2257*

Admiral,

We have prevailed. Thanks for the heads up. Some Phoenix ships are a little scraped up. A few injuries. Shenzhen was badly hit, though. They did a great job, until help came. Thank you again.

V. Admiral H. Leeds

I head back to my office and put on the news. My feed is from Rigil; so, they are reporting on the battle there. They are showing nighttime scenes looking up into the clear sky from the ground. You can see the flashes in space. It looks like stars going nova. They cover it frantically for a short period; then, break for additional speculation on the recently married couples. Then, they deal with old stories of previous arrests for rebellion. The battle only gets about fifteen minutes' attention in each hour; until, the journalists realize, it is part of the larger plot including all the previous arrest. Then, it is the only topic; including all the unfounded speculation. My enunciator chimes again. There is an operational order and a message from the C&C

MEMO

From: *Fleet Admiral W.O Stephenson C&C OESA, Fleet Admiral O. Blackman C&C OESA*

To: *Admiral K. Brubacher Commander OESA Inspector General Branch*

C.C. *All Quadrant Commanders*

Re: *Ongoing Investigations*

Date: *December 2, 2257*

Admiral Brubacher,

This is a personal communication from the two of us to commend you on the work your team did in weeding out the widespread conspiracy that wove its way through our service. The service is indebted to you for uncovering this plot.

An organization such as the OESA cannot flourish without the absolute commitment of all its personnel to the Chain of Command. When senior officers begin to take sideways actions, of the own accord, that are contrary to this philosophy, we can reach a point where

the whole system is in jeopardy. The defeated rebellion is an example of people taking a stand, based on a political bias, that is in opposition with the operations of the service - we are apolitical by charter.

We firmly believe that, investigative operations into this criminal enterprise must continue to determine if there are any other culpable officers; before, we can move on to permanent changes in the OESA. This is a result of being doubtful of the personnel we have to draw from to satisfy the many vacancies that now exist and will be created in the near future.

This incident brought a few inadequacies to light. First, we noted with horror that, your personnel were at serious risk of injury and even death, twice. The first was when a Fleet Commander refused your team's lawful warrant and attempted to forcefully resist their investigation. The second was when you were forced to put your Flag Ship, the Examiner, in harm's way to assist in tactical operations, at Rigil. We are aware, you did all you could to assist in the battle; though, your operation is not equipped for offensive actions.

Next, we realized that, the Inspector General Branch has not got the assets or resources to conduct the operations we have continuously asked of you.

In light of these realizations, we are proposing the following to the Secretary of Defense, the Orion Council, the Orion Legislative Assembly and Emperor Edward III.

1) Though now considered a department of the C&C office of the OESA, the Inspector General Branch should be elevated to the status of a full independent Headquarters' Field Tactical Command equal to a Quadrant Command or Fifth Mobile RAC.

2) That the I.S.I.E. Department staff levels be increased from a Regiment Level Command to a Division level; specifically, to foster a needed increase in its intelligence, investigative and enforcement capabilities; and that all investigative, intelligence and enforcement operations of the OESA, currently within the Judge Advocate General Department and the Military Intelligence Department, be incorporated into the Inspector General Branch.

3) That operational support staff levels be increased, as needed, to support the other proposals within this brief.

4) That a sub-command be created at the Theatre Command level to accompany, protect and project force for the Inspector General Branch during mobile operations.

5) *That capital budget be increased for the purchase of two Carrier, two Cruiser, Four Frigate, two Special Covert and two Supply class ships and ancillary hardware to include two hundred Raptor Class Fighters. And that, future budgeting be flexible to allow for IGB changing roles and responsibilities.*

6) *That personnel and operating budget be increased to support proposals 2,3,4, 5 and 7; including, qualified raptor pilots and Marine Commands for War Ship deployment.*

7) *That the ESS Examiner be replaced with a Super Carrier class vessel with all offensive weapons systems intact, modified for operations of the Inspector General Branch; and be accompanied by a support flotilla; as are all our other mobile Station Commands.*

8) *That the Commander of the Inspector General Branch be a Flag / General Officer of Level Eleven category.*

9) *That the Commander of the I.S.I.E. be at the level of Major General*

10) *That the Commander over all Marine Forces (corps level) of the Inspector General Branch be at the level of Lieutenant General.*

11) *That the mobile force Commander, though equipped as a Task Force, be at the level of Admiral (10); and that, this officer be designated the Deputy Inspector General; and, the Command be categorized as a Theatre Command.*

12) *That the Inspector General Branch charter be broadened to include examination of all remote and local planetary governments.*

Though somewhat costly, we believe this would allow us to achieve an Inspector General Audit of every Command in the OESA twice annually and every planetary government every two years; and, would allow the Command to carry out its responsibilities safely and efficiently. We also believe that, rolling all other investigative, enforcement and intelligence operations into the Inspector General Branch would be more efficient and cost effective for the entire OESA, in the final analysis. We would like your opinion on the matter.

We would also like to offer you elevation to Admiral (11) and renew your assignment as Commander Inspector General Branch. If you accept the offer, we would need your recommendations for all senior positions outlined in the above description.

We would also like to inform you that, this concept is being vigorously promoted by the remaining Quadrant Commanders. We look forward to your response.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

OFFICE of the C&C OESA
Operational Command Order

From: *Flt. Admiral W Stephenson C&C OESA,*

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman C&C OESA

To: *Adm. K. Brubacher Commander Inspector General Branch*

C.C. *All Quadrant Commanders, Commander Fifth Mobile RAC*

Re: *Investigation of recent rebellion*

Date: *December 2, 2257*

Admiral,

You are ordered and required to continue all investigations pertaining to the recent rebellion:

1) until all subordinate personnel under the command of the ring leaders are cleared or charged.

2) until all leads pertaining to this incident have been exhausted.

Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

I summoned Rear Admiral Rohkea Sielu and Colonel Chris Sparks to my office; waving them in informally, when they arrived. I turned my pad around opened at the memo.

"I don't want to send these to you; but I want both of you to read them. There's a letter from the C&C followed by orders." I said as I handed the pad to Roh, first; then, turned my chair and sat silently while Roh read; then, handed the pad to Chris who read them, too. Neither said a word. Both looked stunned.

"Well... what do you think?" I asked.

"I have to tell you Kurt that this makes sense. We almost got our asses shot out from under us; when, you wanted to aid the Shenzhen. A little muscle would have been great, then." Chris said.

"Sir, I think it's great. It's good to have the offensive power, all right; but, IGB is superior at investigation, enforcement and even intelligence, now. Why not roll it all under one roof and give it some clout? No one's going to screw with the Inspector General Branch if, it's configured

like that. And, it would be nice to use our audit capabilities to ensure planetary cooperation and honesty. Orion is a big territory. Some of these people have to be taking advantage of the system. I think its good for our Empire; not just for the OESA," Roh said.

"I understand what the C&C are saying. They've got a lot of gaps in senior positions. They need to promote people up through the ranks; and, they don't have a clue who they can trust, anymore.' I counter; then, continue. 'On top of that, there's the points you've both made. I think I will answer positively and accept the job. We'll have to find a Corps Commander. Chris, they'll have a problem with a three level jump; so, I'm going to recommend you head I.S.I.E at the rank of Major General. It's essentially the same job you execute, now; but, about four times as big. If you say yes, I will need you to dig into JAG and Military Intelligence to find out how many people in our disciplines they employ. Do you want it?"

"Yes sir. And, I don't think I'd want the Corps Commander job, yet. I'm enjoying the direct involvement with the aspects of the department. I would lose that - maybe after a year or two as a Division Commander." The colonel responded.

"And Roh, your job will really expand. The extra I.S.I.E personnel and a Theatre Command structure below will really add to your staff and work load. I'd need you and all your people to crunch the numbers. Total cost of all the personnel and assets. You need HR to start looking for people. I have a Theatre Commander, in mind; but, the Marine Corps Commander might take some doing. You'll have to find an experienced Division Commander seeking promotion or a move, somewhere. Of course, you'd be elevated to Vice Admiral, if you agree to take the job." I said with a smile.

"You know me, sir. The bigger the challenge; the better. I would have to say yes to the offer." She responded.

"Good, I have a special job for you Roh. Can you excuse us please, Chris?" I waited for him to exit. 'I need you to look over Vice Admiral Helena Leeds's file. Get anything you need from HQ or Mobile Fifth. Then, ask me any other questions you have. My instincts are to take her on as my Theatre Commander. But, I'm not sure if it's because of bias. I believe she is qualified for the job. It would be nice for us to be together; but, I don't believe that's the main reason I want her to take the Theatre. I want you to have an objective look; and see if, you'd offer her the Command; if, this was your Command.' I stopped and looked at her pained face. 'You can never talk of this. It could end up in a divorce." I finish.

"Sir, I'm uncomfortable with the task. But, I'll do it for you." She says as she rises. She turns and leaves the office.

I prepare two promotion warrants elevating Sparks to Brigadier; and, Commander MacDonald to Captain. I send them with a side memo to the C&C.

MEMO

From: *Adm. K Brubacher Commander Inspector General Branch*

To: *Fleet Admiral W Stephenson OESA C&C; Fleet Admiral O. Blackman OESA C&C*

Re: *Your personal memo to me - IGB future*

Date: *December 2, 2257*

Admirals,

You are always too kind in your view of my performance; but I do appreciate it. I reviewed the proposal you are sending to the Government and feel it needs only one modification, for the time being. Initially, the original Fleet should be configured as two Carrier Groups with proper command structures. This detail may have been understood by you. However, since it was not specified, I felt it deserved mention. Otherwise, I agree whole heartedly with your concept; which is based in the knowledge that the workload for the Inspector General Branch will continue to be challenging; with ongoing criminal investigation and the day to day Inspection Audits of Commands, at the increased rate you seek. The addition of planetary audits will also add to the workload. I feel it would be a positive step for an organization the size and scope of the OESA. With seventeen hundred twenty-four deployed war ships, three hundred sixty supply vessels, eleven super carrier Mobile Command Bases, ten hospital ships, four academies, eight shipyards and three million eight hundred thousand personnel, it makes perfect sense that an internal watchdog would need to be large enough to be capable of achieving its objectives.

In fact, when you review the above numbers, it is apparent, even your current proposal may not be quite enough. Regardless of that, it is a positive step. Additional expansions can be planned, as needs become apparent.

I would be honored to accept elevation and assignment as Commander of the enlarged Inspector General Branch.

In the interim, I believe, it is necessary to increase our investigative and enforcement capabilities now, to be able to handle the on-going criminal investigations and maintain investigative audits at the increased rate you expressed. I would like your permission to increase I.S.I.E. levels to Brigade strength, immediately. I believe our total staff levels will still fall within current budgetary constraints. I would also ask your authorization to acquire two additional large shuttle craft to facilitate the increase in operations; which should fit within our current capital allocation.

In that light, I am attaching a warrant to elevate Marine Colonel Christopher Sparks to Brigadier and assign him the position of Brigade Commander. Colonel Sparks is currently attending the War College; has nearly completed the program; and, has achieved excellent marks. I would not execute the warrant until he graduates, in a couple of weeks. This elevation would also prepare him for the future expansion; allowing me to seriously consider him for a division level command position.

As a matter of normal course, I have also attached a warrant to elevate Commander Shane MacDonald, the Master of the Examiner, to the rank of Captain. With the current personnel situation, it will be hard to choose promotable Officers, for the coming expansion. Shane has proven to be a very competent ship's commander, with an excellent tactical sense; and, has already acquired his Raptor training. The promotion would allow me to nominate him for acceptance to the war college; making him eligible for future flag level promotion.

*Your kind offer and consideration of this Command's other needs is greatly appreciated.
Admiral Kurt Brubacher.*

Since we are parked off Rigil, I should receive a response, in good time. In the meantime, I decide to visit Helena. With all the action, we haven't been together in more than a day. I contact Commander MacDonald and arrange for a standard shuttle to the Loki. Her ship is a quarter light year away. The trip will be an hour and a half each way at standard velocity. I notify Roh that, I'll be gone for a day.

.....

After greeting each other, we head to Helena's quarters through the corridors and lifts. I am struck by all the action on the Loki. Repairs and restorations are being conducted everywhere.

"Battle damage?" I ask.

"Yeah, when we got your message, we jumped to the position you sent and the Botswana Group opened fire on us; as, we exited our jumps. They weren't screwing about. They threw everything but the kitchen sink at us; including anti-matter. One AM detonated a little too far off our hull; so, our shields were able to hold; but, this is the result.' She waved her hand at the construction crews. 'I have nine dead and twenty-seven injured - some severely. We barely managed to avoid several spears they fired. They were really trying to kill us." She's exasperated at the thought.

"How did you prevail?" I asked.

"Sheer numbers. We had three full Fleets jumping in. Two surrounded their perimeter and one split into Task Forces that came in above and below them. They stood down quickly; when the numbers and ferocity of attack became overpowering. I don't think most people had their hearts in it. A lot were just following their Commanders' orders. Once it came down to killing friends and colleagues, they backed off fairly quickly. The Shenzhen took quite a beating, though. They have twelve dead and over a hundred injured. The island on the Thor took a hit. Shields absorbed most of it; but, the XO was killed; and, Thor will be in dock, for awhile." Helena explains.

"It's not common knowledge, yet; but, the matter's not over. The C&C have tasked the Inspector General Branch to continue the investigation to unearth everyone culpable. Murder charges will be laid; if appropriate. I can assure you of that." I relate as, we enter her quarters and begin frantically tearing at each other's clothes.

After our beasts had been tamed, we sit and talk for a couple of hours. I show Helena the memo and orders from the C&C. She is more impressed with the orders; commanding the Inspector General Branch to dig deep, in the matter of the rebellion. We enjoy a late lunch together; then, I board my shuttle to head back to the Examiner.

.....

I had a good night's sleep in my quarters, before heading to my office to continue working on a plan for the potential expansion. We will need to separate investigative, enforcement and forensics in each staff department into two separate sections. One would be devoted to audit type investigations; the other to criminal investigations. They will require protocols for when audit turns into criminal. Intelligence will need to be processed separately, too; though its personnel would be deployed throughout the other two branches of I.S.I.E. As far as staff goes, we need to

have a few people in HR, Accounting and Payroll who are cleared for the intelligence operation. The others would see their entries as blocks only. We also need to change intelligence parameters. They would need to operate some personnel independently on planets; and, even covertly within Commands. We would need a part of our budget for paid informants. The other important aspect would be our interface with JAG. My system chimed.

MEMO

From: Fleet Adm. W. Stephenson C&C OESA; Fleet Adm. O. Blackman C&C OESA

To: Adm. K Brubacher Commander Inspector General Branch (IGB)

Re: Items under consideration in correspondence of December 2, 2257

Date: December 3, 2257

Admiral,

We wish to advise you that, we clarified the Group Command issue in our plan and submitted the proposal for approval. There is a lot happening on Earth, at the moment. There is likely to be changes in governmental operations, soon. So, we are pressing for approval of the plan, now.

We have considered your other requests. You may make the following interim changes.

1) Promotion of Colonel Sparks is approved pending successful completion of the War College Program.

2) Your request to increase staffing of I.S.I.E. to Brigade strength is approved.

3) You are authorized to increase you operational staff, as required, to facilitate the expansion of I.S.I.E.

4) Your request to purchase two of the large shuttles has been modified to four and approved. You may not have the physical space for all the vessels, at the moment; but, taking delivery of two ASAP and the other two later will resolve this issue.

5) Your matter of course promotion of Commander Shane MacDonald does not require our approval. However, we realize your concern in that, ships' Captains, of vessels with the Examiner crew size, generally hold the rank of Commander. However, the Examiner holds nearly ten thousand personnel; greatly increasing its Captain's responsibility. And, you are correct to attempt to alleviate future personnel concerns, now. We are approving your request to promote the Commander to Captain and will accelerate his application to the War College, when it is received. Thank you for proposing the interim measures.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

MEMO

From: Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson OESA C&C

To: All Operational and Field Commands

Re: Fleet Admiral D. Williamson

Date: December 3, 2257

All,

This is to advise you that, Fleet Admiral David Williamson C&C OESA has resigned his position and commission, effective immediately.

Admiral Williamson served the OESA with distinction for his entire adult life. I am saddened to receive this news; and, even more disturbed at the causes for it.

Regardless of recent events, I wish the Admiral the very best in future endeavors.

I would like to further advise you that, formal application has been made to the Secretary of Defense, the Orion Representative Assembly and Emperor Edward III to make the elevation and appointment of Fleet Admiral Blackman to his position as C&C permanent.

In a further development, Edward III has asked the assembly to take up his proposal for changes to the Orion Empire Constitution by Tuesday December 15, 2257; and, come to a resolution by no later than, Tuesday December 29, 2257. This gives the Assembly two full weeks for debate and procedural issues.

Thank you for your attention.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson C&C OESA

Wow, that's the first time I've seen a single name at the bottom of a document from the office of the C&C; but, since Blackman is one of the subjects of the letter, I understand. I call in Sparks.

"Colonel Sparks reporting, as requested sir!" He was at attention in my doorway.

"Come in Chris; relax and take a seat' I said. I want you to read these two pieces of mail." I added with a grin as I copied him on the one with my response the HQ proposal and their answer to me. He read quietly.

"I had to read it all twice.' The excitement was audible. 'I guess I better finish my program. I've been lucky with the Asgard sitting so close to us. I've been able to shuttle over a couple or three times a week. I need two more lectures. Then, I have to write exams. So, I should be done in four weeks; because, it'll take two sessions for the exams." He explains.

"Well you better get to it.' I have plans for you. It would fit better if, you could finish in two weeks.' I said as he rose from the seat. ' While you're here, can you get together a list of the Fleets and Commands involved in the recent rebellion. You'll need to take it; and, set an investigation schedule for going back into all those stations and digging deeper to see who else is culpable. The mission objectives would be to try and determine who was actually an enthusiastic partner and who went along; because, they felt they had to follow orders. I also need to know who gave commands to fire on friendly vessels. There are quite a few deaths from the incursions here at Rigil. Some people will have to pay the price for that." I relayed the C&C sentiments.

"Yes sir, we'll get right on it.' He rose from the seat. 'And, thanks for the confidence and the recommendation." He said with a smile as he stood at attention.

"You're dismissed Colonel." I barked with a smile as I nodded to him.

Then, I called in MacDonald. When he arrives, I advise him of the promotion; and, the coming expansion; advising that, at the level of Captain, with the War College program complete, he would be eligible to promotion to Flag Ranks. Then, I read the warrant and replace his commander's insignia with the new ones; giving him two extra sets.

"I'm sending you a form. It's an application for War College. Valhalla, Midgard and Asgard are all approved as extension schools of the Academy; so, you usually won't have to go too far for lectures and exams. If you do two to three lectures per visit, with extra visits for exams, you can complete the whole thing in six weeks; if, you really want to. That'll leave your Exec. in charge a lot; which is good experience. We need promotable officers. Congratulations, Captain. You're dismissed." I say with my hand out and a smile. He extends his hand and we shake hands, firmly.

Next, I call in Roh with the senior officers of her Accounting, Human Resources Payroll, Logistics and Purchasing departments.

"Everyone come in and relax.' I call out; as I wave them into the office. 'I have a lot for all of you. We've been authorized to increase I.S.I.E. to Brigade strength. This brings up several issues for all of you.

That command will grow by around a thousand people, or more, now; and, will be run by a Brigadier. So there'll be a lot of work for HR, Accounting and Payroll; not to mention all the equipment those people will need. We've also been authorized to purchase four new large shuttles for the I.S.I.E. to use for missions. We'll need two pretty soon; but, we can hold off on the other two for a bit. We need to get them built if no extras are in the yards, though; so, we may have to order all four at the same time. Then, there's staff. You may need small increases in staff; so, you can accommodate an increased I.S.I.E and resources. Let me know. Finally, you will need to separate a couple of people in each of your disciplines who can handle very secure functions for the Intelligence people. Their role is changing. Your special people will keep separate personnel files, for instance. That way sensitive stuff is only in your file; while all the other pertinent info is in both files. Accounting will need to structure ledgers so expenses and capital items are in secured files and entries to the common books are referenced block totals from that. We need a separate slush fund accountable to someone in your office. It's for paid informants. There will be times when we will offer money to someone in a position to give or get us information. That needs to be itemized within your separate ledger; but recorded as a block expense, with reference, in the main Command ledgers. Right now, our role is changing enough to handle all the increased investigative activity; but, it will change even more later. The C&C has proposed making Inspector General Branch the only Investigative, Enforcement and Intelligence operation. That means all of JAG's and the Military Intelligence Department's people will move here. Mobile Marine Commands' enforcement and investigation operations, will come under our operational authority; though, they will still be under their command's tactical authority. The last item is promotions.' I tapped my pad as I said it. 'I'm sending Roh the promotion of Shane MacDonald to Captain. It needs to be processed. That's it. Any questions?' I ask to negative nods. 'Dismissed.' I bark. Roh stays behind as the others leave.

"Admiral, I finished examining files and making subtle inquiries of Helena's previous Commands. Her record is spotless. She has successfully managed all her commands on the way up the ladder. I'm no tactical expert; but, it looks like she has good skills there, too. And, her people have always been loyal to her. I would hire her to a position another level higher with no hesitation." She finishes with a smile.

"Very good. I just don't want to show favoritism. She is my wife after all.' I explain with a smile. Then, I add. "Thank you Admiral. Your dismissed."

.....

MEMO

From: *Adm. K. Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch*

To: *V. Adm. Rohkea Sielu COS Inspector General Branch,
Adm. Helena Leeds OFSA IGB Command Theatre Commander
Commodore Shane MacDonald IGB Theatre Group 1 Commander
Commodore Elasima IGB Theatre Group 2 Commander
Maj. Gen. Christopher Sparks Commander IGB I.S.I.E.*

Re: *Expansion under way*

Date: *February 16, 2258*

All,

I thought I should send a quick note on expectations to all of you. We will be receiving the new ESS Examiner, in the morning. She still needs to undergo proofing. Commodore Elasima and I have had experience at this process. Normally, I would like to attend such an operation; but regulations forbid a senior flag officer from even boarding an unproofed vessel. In that light, Commodore Elasima will command the endeavor, with Commodore MacDonald assisting to gain experience. The Captain and three shifts of crew of the current Examiner will disembark it and embark the new one. We will remain parked until, their task is complete; so, two shifts can maintain operations, here. We were fortunate to have received our other new vessels after they went through their testing and shakedown phase; since, it is a major undertaking. Proofing the new Examiner will require three to eight weeks; depending on problems encountered during the process.

I would also like to make you aware that Lt. General Svesion the new Commander of IGB Marine Corps Command will be arriving on the current Examiner, this afternoon.

It will be good to board the new Examiner, when it's ready. I know we are cramped but I ask you to bear with me. I want to thank you all for your hard work since the creation of IGB.
Adm. K. Brubacher

I send it out as I begin to think back. What a ride it's been. Not all that long ago, I was promoted to my first Command on the Shenzhen. Now I'm a full Admiral running a Fleet of twenty-five vessels with a station holding fourteen thousand; and, my wife, who was my Commander back in the day, is now my Deputy.

On Saturday December 26, 2257, in a special sitting, the Legislative Assembly voted unanimously to accept the new constitution; with the proviso that, it did not take effect until January 15, 2258. Every member of the Assembly signed the document, as the elected representatives of their planets; along with, Emperor Edward III. Monday December 28, 2257 was Edward's coronation; delayed from the previously announced date. He became King Edward I. It was a daylong event honoring his predecessors, him and his descendants. At the end of December, Sparks sent out four teams to the three fleets and the Theatre Command that had spearheaded the rebellion. It took between two weeks and sixteen days, on-site, for each team to turn their assigned command upside down and inside out. The result was ten more arrested; but, another forty-four suspected senior and flag officers in positions to stop or prevent the action were cleared. In early January, we took delivery of our first two of the four large shuttles and began to receive additional personnel transferred from other assignments at other Commands. In the third week of January, Sparks sent a large team to Theatre Two and three small teams to Quadrant Four Fleets to answer the question of why there had been suspicions about the Quadrant Four Command. There turned out to be three Fleet Commanders that had attempted to incite rebellion and failed. It was communication between them and the Theatre Two command that made it appear the whole Quadrant Four Command was at risk. Three more were arrested, there. But, in a surprise move, though they had all resigned or been dismissed from the OESA, the new President pardoned all those whose crimes did not include the deaths of others. It was of no consequence. Without their positions at the OESA they had no pedestal of power to continue the rebellion. Eleven people were left to stand trial for Fomenting Rebellion and Participating in a Conspiracy Causing Death. One was David Williamson. He committed suicide the same day he was charged. On Friday January 15, 2258 the new constitution went into effect with a lot of fanfare; and accompanied by representatives from the Gray's delegation. We are now the Orion Federation; and, because we are a democracy the Grays feel, we're worth a second look.

On Saturday January 16, 2258 the Assembly passed a newly written law officially changing the name of the OESA to the OFSA and embedding its Charter in the new Constitution. On the same day, the Legislative Assembly passed the budgets of the service; which, included the expansion of the Inspector General Branch. On January 17, 2258, I received "official" notification of the expansion plan with the offer of promotion and assignment as Inspector General.

On Tuesday January 19, 2258, The expansion of the Inspector General Branch was publicly announced; and, I was promoted to Admiral (11) and reassigned as Commander Inspector General Branch in a Headquarters ceremony complete with cocktail party and a ballroom dinner party in the building's massive party facility. Sparks and Roh were promoted and assigned in the same event. The day after the promotion I received a memo.

Operational Action Order

Office of the C&C

From: Office of the OFSA C&C; Office of the Secretary of Defense

To: Admiral K Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch

C.C.: All Quadrant Commanders; Fifth Mobile RAC

Re: OFSA Executive Planning Committee

Date: January 20, 2258

Admiral,

Over one hundred years ago, paragraphs creating the OFSA Executive Planning Committee (formerly the OESA) were embedded into our Rules and Regulations; and, secured by statute law. The OFSA Executive Planning Committee consists of all Level 11 and Level 12 Flag and General Officers, in the service of our organization.

Its purpose is to evaluate the current condition and status of the OFSA and develop plans that will be used in forecasting and budgeting the year to come. This committee is required to meet monthly, at a minimum. Though we call other extraordinary meetings, the regular ones are scheduled on the 28th day of every month at sixteen hundred hours.

You are ordered and required to appear, in person, at the office of Fleet Admiral William Stephenson on the 28th day of every month, from here on. You are asked to bring your Chief of Staff with abbreviated records, from your command; so, any and all questions or planning involving your Command may be dealt with logically and completely. Dinner will be served on these occasions.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

Fleet Admiral O. Blackman

It was two weeks after that before, we started to receive our additional warships. They had all been available but were delayed; because, it was agreed they would be tested and proofed

before delivery, if possible. Wonder of wonders, there were almost enough vessels in all necessary classes to fill the order. The major exception was the Examiner. There was a Super Carrier in the ship yard; but, it was unfinished and required extensive modification for the duty it would do, in IGB. Adding the Theatre operation increased personnel in all departments by a total of nineteen thousand nine hundred seventy-five; and, adding the extra Super Carrier and her flotilla crew members totaling over ten thousand brought our strength to forty-one thousand two hundred seventy-six. First, I offered Helena the Theatre command. She hesitated until, I told her it was the Deputy Inspector General Position with a promotion to four stars; and that, the entire Command was slated to grow rapidly. Once she agreed to take on the position, we began the hunt for personnel. We have acquired about two-thirds of the officers and ninety percent of the crew we need for Theatre operations; so, we expect to stay operational on a four shift basis for a while. Little by little, we will grow into the standard five shift structure. The problem with the entire service is that, things have been changing so fast, over the past five years, the OFSA hasn't been able to keep up with Academy graduates. IGB is at a state where, we can execute fairly benign investigations by shuttle craft; or, support more dangerous ones with Group or Task level power. On the intelligence side, we have paid informants on twenty-one planets; including Rho Corona Borealis and agents on five. We have agents imbedded in nearly every OFSA command already. When the new Examiner returns from trials, Helena will move to it with me. She is here most of the time, already; but, has a temporary Command set up on the Carrier Travis Donnelly - named after a fictional detective created by author Reginald Dawson. Most of my Theatre Command personnel came from warships; but a percentage who were doing duty as officers and crew on hospital and supply vessels are in positions that needed filling. So, on my orders, Helena has been running war game exercises and drills continuously.

We all got one hell of a shock with an incoming communique.

MEMO

From: Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

***To: All Quadrant Commands, Mobile Fifth RAC Command; Inspector General Branch;
All Theatre Commands***

Re: Nomination of Fleet Admiral O. Blackman - Disposition of C&C

Date: January 22, 2258

All,

A few days ago Fleet Admiral Blackman asked to see the Secretary of Defense, in my presence. When we convened, he advised us that, he did not wish to permanently fill the position of C&C; instead wanting to return to his command in Quadrant Two. Needless to say, there was a great deal of discussion with the two of us trying to convince Admiral Blackman to accept the post. He felt he could not; for personal reasons.

We did not need any approval to restore him to Quadrant Two Command; since, he had been approved for that position and had taken only a temporary assignment as C&C. So, we agreed to return him to the post. There was a flurry of communications activities; offering the position to another Admiral, nominating that officer, and nominating officers, to fill the positions vacated as a result of that move; and, subsequent vacancies created by it, throughout the senior ranks.

Though we have several qualified applicants, the position was offered to Admiral George Bryant; who promptly refused it on the grounds that, he would like to remain in charge of a Tactical Field Command.

We are pleased announce that, Admiral Grace Tonaka, currently commander of Quadrant Three will be elevated to Fleet Admiral and will assume the post of C&C effective Saturday January 23, 2258.

We are pleased to announce that Admiral O. Blackman will resume command of Quadrant Two, effective immediately.

We are pleased to announce that, Admiral (10) Stephen Nichols, currently commander of Fifth Mobile RAC Theater 9 will be elevated to Admiral (11) and will be assigned Commander Quadrant Three, effective Saturday January 23, 2258.

We are pleased to announce that, Commodore Olivia Hurst will be elevated to Rear Admiral (8); and, assigned as COS Quadrant Three Command.

We are pleased to announce that, Admiral (11) Tsoh Shah's temporary promotion has been made permanent and he has been reassigned as the Commander of Quadrant Four.

Two senior Flag positions opened due to the recent rebellion will remain unfilled, for a short period of time.

Fleet Admiral W. Stephenson

On Saturday January 23, 2258, most senior Admirals and many officers and personnel from Fifth Mobile and Quadrant Three Commands gathered at HQ, for the elevations. It was the usual all day splendid event.

On January 29, 2258 the Inspector General Branch (IGB) formally closed its investigations into the rebellion. Though our report to superiors included a summary of evidence and the naming of all criminal participants, we presented JAG with only the eleven criminal files they would need. This included Williamson's file; though, he is now deceased; because; he was under indictment when he put a gun to his temple. Having his criminal file with all the evidence will give JAG the means to respond, if ever accused of badgering him to his death. JAG now had all the proof needed indicating, they were acting within the bounds of their charter; when, Williamson took his own life.

Friday, January 29, 2258 was also a watershed day for the new Federation. It was the day that Gray delegation presented a formal request to the President to open negotiations for expanded trade, mutual defense and expanded representation and interaction between our two sovereignties. As they made the presentation, they included mention of the fear they had always felt in living next door to an expanding dictatorship; but, the respect they now have for King Edward, who actually led the move to democracy. That statement silenced the final remaining detractors speaking out against the constitutional change to representative government.

On January 30, Admiral Naabaahii pled guilty on all counts. As the next senior Command to Williamson, all the prosecutorial force JAG could muster, was focused on him. Over the next several months, the other nine remaining charged participants would plead guilty on all charges.

Things kind of moved to a routine, after that. Grace Tonaka settled into Headquarters, the Nichols settled into the Quadrant Three Section of HQ, Helena and I settled into our existence within our hybrid Headquarters Command; and, IGB began to do regular investigative audits at an average rate of eight a month; while, continually suffering the pains of growth.

On February 5, Brigadier Sparks came to me with a great plan. He wanted to embed three full teams and three shuttles aboard each of the two Group Commands; leaving two on the Examiner. Those teams would not be responsible to the Carriers' Regimental Commanders; but, would take orders from him. The advantages appeared to be that; each battalion could run company level investigations from the shuttles; or battalion strength with Group force for the larger ones. It also meant that, the Groups could be used to place shuttles in close proximity to

Fleets before deploying the shuttles. The other two teams and shuttles on the Examiner would be handled the same way. Examiner would get them close or support them with its own firepower and that of the flotilla. I approved the plan and we notified the team. I made a major decision right then. It will be the policy of IGB to embed a mixed investigation company into each squad, from now on.

It took about a week to implement the Brigadier's plan. By the twelfth, we were starting Group level operations directed by Helena, at the Brigadiers request. In the first round, Examiner stayed close to Rigil. There was still a major event coming; and, we were waiting for the new Examiner.

I was awarded the King Edward Cross, yesterday Monday February 15, 2258, for my part in putting down the rebellion. Now, I am sitting in my office waiting for the new Super Carrier and Major General Svesion; for whom, we have a ceremony scheduled at seventeen hundred to promote him to Lieutenant General and assign him as Corps Commander of IGB Marine Corps.

It's eleven hundred when a big flap starts outside my office. I go out to see. Everyone is staring out the view-window at the hulk pulled up beside us. The SCC2258-27, which will be the new Examiner, has arrived; and, it's a monster, when this close. The Examiner's pilot will come aboard to officially deliver it; so, I head to the docking port, on the starboard side, to sign for it.

"Captain Hecuba with your new vessel, Admiral." The Venation, from a system in Virgo we know as HD126053, says; as, he offers a brisk salute.

"Thank you Captain, the proofing crew will be moving in over the next few hours. Then they'll give you a ride back to the yard. It'll be one of the proofing trips." I say with a smile as I sign the delivery receipt; after, retuning his salute.

"She's a beauty, sir. Would you like to see her?" Hecuba asked.

"I would love to take a tour; but, I can't. Regulations don't allow a senior Flag Officer to even board a new ship; until, after it's been tested and proofed." I said; as, I shook my head feigning sadness.

"Oh, that's too bad Admiral... It must just kill you to see this beauty; and, not even be able to step aboard." The Venation says sympathetically.

"Yes it is; isn't it." I say softly and turn and walk out of the docking bay. most of our crew is just outside the doorway. 'Hop to it!' I say with a smile to Commodore Elasima. 'I want her back as soon as possible and in one piece - and, don't scratch the paint!' I add with a laugh.

I can hear him calling orders; even when I'm at the end of the corridor on my way up to my office.

I look up when there's a rap on the doorframe.

"Major General Svesion reporting, as ordered, sir." Says the man at attention, in my doorway.

I stand and return his salute. "Come in and have a seat, General. Would you like a drink?" I ask extending a hand to the bar. "I have everything you could want." I add with a smile.

"Yes sir. I'll have a Bourbon, if you don't mind? Two fingers with equal water, please." He responds with a smile.

"No, no... don't get me wrong. I'm not your bartender. Help yourself." I said with a laugh.

"Of course, sir. Sorry." He blushes as he rises to get the drink.

I follow pouring a couple of fingers of J&B over ice. "Let's sit over there." I say pointing to the conversation pit. He grabs an arm chair. I take a seat near him on the sectional.

"General we have your promotion and assignment planned for seventeen hundred. You will be elevated to Lieutenant General and assigned as IGB Marine Corps Commander.

IGB is the Inspector General Branch. I run it and Admiral Helena Brubacher is the Deputy Commander and Theatre Commander. We are the only people in the Branch who outrank you. This is an odd configuration, from your point of view. The basic functions of the Branch are:

First, - investigative audits. We are tasked with examining every other Command in the OFSA. We also do similar type audits of Federation member systems; looking for exactly the same things we seek out in the small audits.

Second - enforcement of statutes, the constitution and OFSA Rules and Regulation. - We are the chief police force within the Federation; tasked with arresting suspected offenders when a crime is detected by us; or a complaint is filed by others.

Third - intelligence gathering. - Twenty-four hours a day, we are gathering hard intelligence from within all OFSA commands, on all Federation member planets and on a lot of non-member worlds in our space. Some is gathered electronically. Some is gathered by sensors, observation posts and satellites and the rest is gathered by the hard work of on-site covert agents.

The actual agents for all three types of operations are all Marines within the I.S.I.E. Division. In terms of Divisions, it is a small one with a total of twenty-eight hundred agents. At the moment, there are four hundred investigators, six hundred intelligence agents and eighteen

hundred enforcement officers. Enforcement is broken in to two classes. There are six hundred officers who actually make arrests and twelve hundred troops for show of force and tactical situations. All I.S.I.E. Brigade members and the forensic staff members carry badges and warrant cards issued by IGB under the authority of the OFSA and the Federation granting them the authority required to carry out these tasks; along with, the highest security clearance in the Federation. You will also be an authorized agent carrying a badge and warrant card and will be granted the same level of clearance. The badges only give a quick visible indication that, the bearer is an official enforcement agent of the government. It is the warrant card that actually indicates the authority and clearance that has been granted. You will be fitted with a sub-dermal electronic device that mates with one in your badge and one in your warrant card. If the three pieces get separated, they give off warnings that can be received by all OFSA communication systems. The I.S.I.E. Division is broken into sub-commands at the regimental or battalion level. It is Division level because it is slated to grow considerably. The Division is Commanded by Major General Christopher Sparks. He has been in investigative and intelligence commands most of his career. So, in terms of actual I.S.I.E operations, I would give him his head, until you get to know operations and protocol, if I was you.

Again designed for future growth, the Theatre Command is essentially two Carrier Groups with a regiment on each Group Carrier and a Brigade on the new ESS Examiner; but, it too is slated to grow to Theatre strength. An I.S.I.E. company and three thirty-five-person long range shuttles are attached to each Group. Right now, we are at a point where, we could run ten Fleet examinations simultaneously. When we reach full size, we will have thirty-two I.S.I.E. companies attached to Carrier Groups.

Right now, investigative audits and criminal investigations are conducted in two manners. The first method is to send a small team in a shuttle or group of shuttles. The second is to send a Group or both Groups to support the operation. Basically the Carrier Groups support I.S.I.E. actions. We try to schedule examinations in three or four closely deployed Fleets at the same time; so, a Group takes the shuttles to a central point. That way, teams don't spend two weeks in a shuttle.

Because we are a relatively new Command, we have no idea how big we will have to be. Are you still in for the assignment? I query, with a smile.

"What did you mean by dangerous investigations, Admiral?" The general asks.

"During the rebellion, we sent an investigative team to a Fleet that refused to allow us to board. We won out by guile, in the end. We were also in the middle of the Rigil battle. But, we did not have offensive weapons; so, we risked a lot to aid the Shenzhen and the Theatre Five Fleets in the battle. So, there are tactical situations. And, we have not done a planetary examination, yet. Without force, this could be a problem. And, there could be tactical ground operations involved, in some cases." I explain.

"Yes sir. I would like the assignment. I would like to grow with the Inspector General Branch." He says.

I conduct the ceremony at seventeen hundred. The warrant had been preapproved.

.....

I really love my office, on the new Examiner. It's even nicer than the C&C have. It's more modern and not as ornate; but, has a lot more built in technology and comforts. It is very spacious. The new Examiner is a beauty; as the Venation Captain Hecuba had observed. I officially placed her into service today, after taking the weekend to go over the testing and shakedown reports.

MEMO

From: Adm. K. Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch

To: IGB - All Commands

C.C. OFSA C&C

Date: March 15, 2258

All,

I have received, examined and inspected the report of the proofing team, on the testing and shakedown of the new ESS Examiner.

This is to advise you that, as of today, Monday March 15, 2258, the new ESS Examiner has officially been placed into active service. The entire personnel body currently on the old vessel Examiner should immediately commence moving to the new ship. We will be joined by additional personnel over time.

If you are unsure of cabin or office assignments, please check with your immediate supervisor or the office of the Chief of Staff. I hope you all enjoy your new homes and work spaces.

Admiral Kurt Brubacher.

Both Helena and I moved here, earlier today. Our shared quarters are a wonder. Senior Flag quarters are amazingly comfortable on any Carrier; but the improved Super Carrier design distinguishes between single and married Senior Flag Officers. Ours is a three-bedroom two-bathroom apartment with eat in kitchen area, full dining area, living room, salon, lots of closets and storage and an office. All the rooms are spacious and elegantly furnished; since Flag Officers often entertain in quarters. The kitchen is equipped professionally; so, a chef can be brought in for a dinner. We have incredible viewing windows spanning nearly the entire wall in any room on the outer hull. But, I have work to do.

.....

MEMO

To: *Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson C&C OFSA; Fleet Admiral G. Tonaka C&C OFSA*

From: *Admiral Kurt Brubacher Commander Inspector General Branch*

Re: *Inspector General Branch Year End Report*

Date: *Fri. December 31, 2258*

Sirs,

You will find attached to this summary, two sets of books for the yearend review. The first set take in the period from June 1, 2257 to December 31, 2257. The second set takes in the period from January 1, 2258 to December 31, 2258 today.

In summary I can say it has been an extraordinary period. Today's Inspector General Branch is not the conception of eighteen months ago. Starting with one vessel, four shuttles and a team of forty-four hundred just six weeks after inception; we have become a force that can meet its vastly expanded expectations and objectives. Today's IGB is a Field Command of forty-nine vessels with over ninety-eight thousand people, in its multi-faceted operations. It has experienced continuous expansion, well beyond initial expectations, since its birth.

IGB has now become the primary investigative, auditing and law enforcement operation within the Federation; and, provides all internal and external intelligence services to the OFSA and the Federation Government. It is capable of assisting in tactical operations, if required.

The scope of our operation is wide.

1)Investigative audits of all OFSA Commands.

2)Criminal investigation within all OFSA Commands and as requested by all OFSA member planets.

3)Arrest, detainment and incarceration of criminal suspects in enforcement of the statutes and constitution of the Orion Federation and the Regulations of the OFSA

4)Forensic assistance to planetary investigative agencies as requested

5)Operation of central forensic data bases

6)Investigative Audits of all Orion Federation member planets.

7)Overt intelligence services - gathering internal and external intelligence from communications, sensors, satellites and observation stations.

8)Covert intelligence by the placement of embedded operatives within OFSA Commands, Federation Member Planets and in sovereign territories outside the boundaries of the Orion Federation.

9)Security services to OFSA HQ, government institutions; and, as requested by the OFSA, the Orion Federation and Orion Federation Member Planets.

Our responsibilities are supported by the ability to carry out small benign operations; those of medium risk and size; and, large, possibly dangerous ones requiring the support of considerable force. We have the capability to display or engage our forty-nine warships, including our mobile command station; and to land up to twenty-two thousand troops as a show of force. Our vessels include the latest criminal forensics labs and computer systems. Nearly ten thousand IGB members are warranted to enforce the statutes and constitution of the Orion Federation.

Financially, we stayed within our approved capital expenditure budgets in both 2257 and 2258; and were slightly below budgeted expenses in 2257 and .005% above budget in 2258. As our personnel and assets begin to level out and meet our needs, it should be possible to project and meet accurate financial budgets in the future. Expenditures and expenses increased, as dramatic needs appeared one after the other, in the past eighteen-month period.

Our results speak for themselves. We were greatly responsible for detecting the rebellion of 2257 and enabling the defeat of it. We have completed audits of all eighty fleets, ten theatre commands, four quadrant commands and three planetary governments in the eighteen months; since our christening. Our objective of two audits per command per year and ten planetary audits in the coming year, will require more assets and personnel as outlined in our

budget projections for the coming year. Bearing in mind the 2257 rebellion, Deputy Inspector General, Admiral Helena Brubacher runs tactical exercises, whenever time and workload permits it.

I must add that, in my mind, a great deal of the credit for IGB success must go to both yourselves and the Orion government. Our continuous growth has only been achieved as a result of your novel approach to our needs. We are a necessary service. You make it possible. Thank you.

Admiral K. Brubacher Inspector General

It'll be a couple of days before, I hear back about my yearend report. HQ has a massive accounting staff and a CCIA system to crunch all the yearend reports; so, we all get our performance assessments, quickly. In the meantime, other things are happening. I receive the following communication on January 2.

MEMO

URGENT!!

From: V. Admiral J. Coquinas Commander Draco Fleet

To: Quadrant Three Command, Theatre Six Command

C.C. OFSA All Commands

Re: Border Region

Date: January 1, 2259

Sirs,

Please assist! We are currently hovering with our entire Fleet stretched in a line from R.A. 17h, 32m, 10.56855s Dec. +56° 11'. 3.2738" towards Iota Bootes but 98.9 Ly. from Sol in an attempt to join the end of a line formed by Boots Fleet stretching from RA 14h, 16m, 4.92995s Dec. +51°, 22', 2.0267"; also at 98.9 Ly. in response to a considerable buildup of unknown vessels, just outside our border. This means that forty warships are attempting to cover an arc 105 Ly. in length. Our advantage in long range sensor performance allowed their detection. We do not believe they have seen us, yet. The force is sizable. We count nearly four hundred vessels within range of our long-range sensor probes. Their intentions are unknown.

V. Admiral J. Coquinas

Shortly after that one, I receive another.

MEMO

URGENT!!

From: *V. Admiral A. Urquhart Commander Boots Fleet*
To: *Quadrant Three Command, Theatre Five Command*
C.C. *OFSA All Commands*
Re: *Border Region*
Date: *January 1, 2259*

Sirs,

We are currently at R.A. 14h, 16m, 9.92995 Dec. +51° 22'. 2.02667" at 98.9 Ly. from Earth. We have stretched our twenty vessels in a line in the direction of Draco Fleets Flag Ship at 17h, 32m, 10.56855s Dec. +56° 11'. 3.2738', in an attempt to cover an arc of our border 105 Ly. long. We have deployed L.R. Sensors and are observing a large force of unknown vessels, just outside the border. Please assist.

V. Admiral A. Urquhart

I decide that, we should respond; since, we are relatively close; and, we now have a sizable force.

MEMO

From: *Admiral K. Brubacher Commander IGB*
To: *V. Admiral J. Coquinas Commander Draco Fleet;*
V. Admiral A. Urquhart Commander Boots Fleet
C.C. *OFSA All Commands*
Re: *Border Region*
Date: *January 1, 2259 - Twenty-two hundred thirty hours*

Admirals,

We are currently at 16 Cygnus, relatively close to you; and will immediately move to render assistance. Though we are the IGB, we can offer considerable force; and, are all tactically experienced. I have forty-nine warships, including our Command vessel and its flotilla, at my disposal. In addition, we carry a combined force of six hundred Raptor Class Fighters. Our estimated time of arrival on-site is January 3, 2259 at two hundred hours.

Please continually forward updates, including sensor files, while we are on route.

Also, expect a response from Admiral Bryant commanding Fifth Mobile RAC. ESS Valhalla, his flag ship, is currently at Hercules BD+29 2979; which is about forty-six light years from you. You will not receive response from him; until, a day and a half after you get this one. His best arrival time would be early January 7, 2259; if, he elects to jump all vessels without reforming the Command. Best of luck. Try to hold on until we get there.

I will assume command of operations, when we arrive; but, will relinquish to Admiral Bryant when Fifth Mobile RAC gets there.

Admiral Brubacher

I call in Helena; and, immediately start preparing orders.

Tactical Action Message #IG49-0007

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral K Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch

To: Admiral H Brubacher D.C. Theatre Command IGB Command

C.C. OFSA C&C, Admiral G. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

Date: January 1, 2259

1) You are ordered and required to use all forty-nine warships in IGB, including Command and flotilla vessels; and, all other IGB assets, in an action to assist Draco and Boots Fleet in defense of our boarder.

2) You are ordered and required to move all IGB vessels to a staging point at R.A. 16h, 1m, 53.3457s Dec. +58° 33'. 54.905'' at 96 Ly, relative to Sol to carry out orders that will be issued, at that time. Forty percent of C velocity is required.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral K. Brubacher

I send the order and the previous e-mail chain to Helena; just as, she knocks at my door.

"Yes, Admiral." She says officially; as, she stands at attention.

"Come in and take a seat. I just sent you some mail.' I finish the sentence; just as, her enunciator sounds. Her eyes widen; as, she looks at the screen. 'I think the chain is self-explanatory. The staging point puts us halfway along their line. We can jump everyone out, from there. I was going to deploy, along the line; but, I realize that, no one's going to attack along a one hundred light year front. It makes more sense to form an arrow head or use two in a pincer.

Spreading out allows us to form a pincer, penetrate their lines; then bring it around their rear. I think they're just staging. Anyway, we'll get more intelligence, as we travel. We can refine everything along the way. You've got orders to issue, Admiral." I said officiously with a smile; as, I rose and applied my lips to her cheek.

"...No time for the personal.' She said. 'Excuse me, please?"

"You're dismissed." I said; as, she turned and left.

A short while later, I am copied on her orders. They are quite explicit; so, the Carriers are protected when entering and exiting their jumps. It is eighteen hours before we start getting intelligence; but, it is very interesting. We add that information to our border observatory data. Enemy lines are thin, in most places. The thickest point is about seven light years straight out, from our staging point. We stay together; combining our thoughts, throughout the rest of the jump. Information is continuously getting closer to real time. We decide on an immediate jump out; after exiting, at the staging point. We will split our force and jump in two groups to points just on either side of the central mass of enemy vessels. Assuming they would jump to engage the weak line, we could turn in towards our territory, at their rear. I write the orders to Helena. She writes them to the vessels splitting them into two Fleets. While she passes down the orders, I write additional ones for Boots and Draco.

Tactical Action Message #IG49-0008

CLASSIFIED

From: Admiral K Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch

To: V. Admiral J. Coquinas Commander Draco Fleet;

V. Admiral A. Urquhart Commander Boots Fleet

C.C. OFSA C&C, Admiral G. Bryant Commander Mobile Fifth RAC

Date: January 2, 2259

1) You are ordered and required to redeploy your vessels distributing one Task Force Command along the outer portions of each end of the line; and moving the other into a dense pattern; positioned for six light years from a point one light year from the center of the line, on each side. All intelligence indicates the enemy are attempting an arrow head or wedge attack in the center of the line. Outer enemy forces are not strong enough to do any serious

damage; or, to reinforce the center of the enemy line. The center of each half of the line may be left unprotected. The enemy is too weak in this area to be any threat.

2) You are ordered and required to command your outer Task Force to be prepared to act as a reserve force; coming to the middle of the line, if required.

3) You are ordered and required to be ready to redeploy; instead of maintaining the positioning in item one; if the enemy splits its main force into two for a pincer attack, in reaction to our moves. Our sensor advantage gives us the chance to move before the enemy is ready. Redeploy your main forces opposite his strength.

Any unnecessary communication regarding this matter should be avoided. All steps should be taken to secure this information should communication be necessary.

Admiral K. Brubacher

MEMO

From: Admiral K. Brubacher Commander IGB

To: V. Admiral J. Coquinas Commander Draco Fleet;

V. Admiral A. Urquhart Commander Boots Fleet;

Admiral H. Brubacher Theater Commander IGB Command

C.C. OFSA C&C, Quadrant Three Command, Fifth Mobile RAC

Re: Explanation of Battle Tactics

Date: January 2, 2259

Admirals,

Based on the apparent wide distribution of enemy forces along our border, I thought I should explain my orders, to you. All intelligence indicates that; ninety percent of the enemy forces are concentrated in a four light-year center portion of the line along our border.

Though, they could be planning a spearhead attack, it appears to be a wedge. This is inconsequential, at this stage; since defense is similar, in both cases.

We will have forty-nine IGB and twenty Draco and Boots war ships including twelve covert vessels and thirteen hundred fifty raptors concentrated along a four light-year stretch, of the border.

IGB is moving a Fleet plus (24 ships) to each of two positions two and a half light years on either side of the center point of this mass; and right on the one hundred light-year border

line. This will place us to the sides and slightly behind this mass of vessels, if they attack our line; allowing us a pincer movement for an immediate counter-attack, from their rear.

If, the enemy redeploys to counter our positions, we will move again; moving half the IGB vessels, on each side of center, toward the middle to allow us to hold the mass; while attacking through the middle and splitting outward in two pincer arms to again be able to attack from the rear. Hopefully, they would redeploy again.

The object is to delay the enemy long enough for Fifth Mobile RAC to arrive with their two Theatres; totaling sixteen fleets. Between the IGB moves and your moves, the enemy may feel forced to redeploy, over and over again. Each move takes up more valuable time. If they elect to attack, instead, we will be in the best position to tie them up, until help arrives.

Remember that, Theatre Five can support the action with additional Fleets, if necessary.

You are asked to resist as hard and as long as possible to give both IGB forces an opportunity to attack and do as much damage from the enemy rear as possible. Remember, it could take as much as two hours forty-five minutes for us to engage from our staging position. Though not certain, I believe, we have the technological advantage in both sensors and communications. From what I can see, we also possess much heavier craft with superior firepower. That, with an immediate surprise pincer style counter attack from their rear, may make the difference.

The only reserve we will be holding back is the Task Force each of you will have left on the ends of the line; since, this looks like a do or die situation. Use your Raptors wisely. Always hold some of those in reserve; but, deploy the ones you use quickly; if, a battle is apparent. This gives us up to an additional one thousand weapons platforms near the mass of enemy vessels, allowing for reserve. Remember, sudden thirty and forty percent normal space velocity moves, from a twenty percent cruise, work well in close battles. Just make sure you set the acceleration ramp; so, you don't kill everyone on the vessel. I'll see you on the other side. I have every confidence; because, you are the best. Good Luck!

Admiral Brubacher

We land at the staging point on December 2, at twenty-three hundred fifty hours; and, jump right out. I prepare the redeployment orders; so, I can send them, quickly; but, do not log them; in case, I don't have to release them. We are in position by two hundred hours, as

promised. Sensors are deployed within minutes. There is a five-hour delay in what we see; but, the enemy should have around a one-day delay in their data; if, they seek as much range as us.

Some of their fleet is far enough from our border to be out of sensor reach; but, a large portion is viewable within about half an hour. We are still getting information from the observatories. The enemy hasn't destroyed them, yet; but, that'll happen just before an attack. It gives us a real advantage; because it comes in at nearly ten thousand times the speed of light via the new technology George designed; so, it's only five hours behind, too; but, it is already there; so, we aren't staring at blank screens for five hours.

We watch and wait. A day later, the screen shows the enemy is redeploying to our pincer points; as, we hoped. We begin the moves; splitting our two arms and moving half of each toward the center. They won't see this for a day. A day and a half later, we see them on the move again, from the pincer points; back to the center. I order our people to restore the pincers.

One thing Helena and I notice is that though, we make all our repositioning jumps at forty percent light-speed, the enemy makes theirs at fifteen percent. I am beginning to believe their ships are incapable of jumping faster because of structural weakness.

On January 6, 2259, the enemy is creeping toward the border; in an attempt to shorten their attack time, without appearing to be making a hostile move. I calculate, it will take twenty-nine hours for them to get within half a light-year of the border employing fifteen percent jumps. We hold fast. This move still fits within the plan. In the middle of all this, my system chimes.

MEMO

From: Flt. Adm. W.O. Stephenson OFSA C&C; Flt. Adm. G. Tonaka OFSA C&C

To: Adm. K Brubacher Commander OFSA Inspector General Branch

Re: Year End 2257 Budgets 2258

Date: January 3, 2259

Admiral,

Thank you for your report "Year 2258" which also included the period from June 1, 2257 to December 31, 2257. Your staff is to be commended. The reports were extremely accurate and thorough. We also appreciate the insights in your letter summarizing the period and the report.

Though we are sure the last eighteen months has been stressful, you have done a remarkable job. Our long term plan for IGB assumes fairly continuous fast growth to meet objectives. You will note in the attachments that your capital and expense budgets for the year 2259 are approved. We noticed you projected the need for four additional carrier groups in this period and have our shipyards working to fill those needs; though they will need your order to deliver. This will bring your "fire power" to the equivalent of four complete Fleets and your personnel to the vicinity of one hundred ninety thousand by the end of this fiscal year.

*Continue the good works. Our regards,
Fleet Admiral W.O. Stephenson
Fleet Admiral G. Tonaka*

"I will." I thought. "I will."

At six hundred hours on January 7, sensors pick up two hundred sixty exit apertures opening between my two Fleets and to our rear. Just like the ancient John Wayne westerns, I've seen; the cavalry has come to the rescue, in the nick of time. George asks if there is anything he can do. I relinquish command to him and his superior force. He advises he will deploy sixty vessels to each pincer point and hold sixty in the middle. He also advises he has eighty more vessels two light years back. He orders us two light-years back of the line; and, orders Boots and Draco back to the outsides. We are all to be held in reserve. No one died, yet. All my chess moves saved those two overwhelmed fleets.

I watch as he deploys about forty percent of his raptor fighters; making more than fourteen hundred additional craft visible at any one time. He also orders three subs spotted throughout the front to momentarily uncloak; then, go dark again. I understand the ploy. Now the enemy will know there are cloaked ships; but, won't know how many.

I will not see this battle. I'm like a sports fan. I love this man's tactical and wider strategic skills. I would love to see it; and, cheer him on. I'd feel the same if it was Stephen Nichols. They are the maestros of space warfare. Aside from the messages I monitor, I won't know the details of what happens here for quite a while. It's nearly a year until, I get to audit Fifth Mobile RAC, again; and, get to read all the logs and communiqués in detail. I have to wait until then to tell that story.

End

“There is never a right time for anything. There is just a time. You throw a dart at a calendar to pick a date; and, you do it on that day.” Emperor Edward III in **Righteous Reign**
by T. MacDonald