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BOOK TWO
OF THE LAST LEGION SERIES

FIREMASK

The background of the cover features a soldier in advanced, grey and black armor with a helmet. The soldier is holding a large, black, futuristic rifle. The scene is set against a city skyline at night, with illuminated buildings. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a battle scene. A large, black shield with a gold border is positioned behind the title.

"Complex plots, intrigue,
and great descriptive nar-
ratives of battle
and combat"
—*SF Site*

CHRIS BUNCH

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE STAR RISK SERIES

FIREMASK

Chris Bunch

PROLOGUE

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Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Maxims for a Lone Warrior, Fighting Against a Host

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Appendix](#)

[Also Available](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

Maxims for a Lone Warrior, Fighting Against a Host

Before battle, meditate on the thirteen ways of fire:

1. Its power is far greater than any charger, yet it hides in a child's robes.
2. Bright, angry, it gladdens the heart of he who uses it.
3. Its sight weakens the foe, for he knows the mercilessness of what he faces.
4. Set properly, it will never surrender.
5. Once fire rages, the warrior may pursue his own course.
6. It needs little encouragement to shoulder its arms, little food other than a scattering of twigs, and fights on without rest until the end.
7. It fights its own battle, leaping here, there, and no sayer can predict its course.
8. It carries almost all before it, and they are its victims or allies; the wind becomes its steed, the earth its fortress, and only great waters are its final enemy.
9. Behind its mask the warrior can devise his own stratagems in leisure and concealment.
10. With fire guarding his flanks, the warrior may fight with all his heart, knowing he has given himself a perfect shield.
11. It attacks all that the enemy has, wagons, horses, victuals, as well as swordsmen and archers.
12. Even its wounding is terrible and few survive.
13. Its barren aftermath gives nothing to the host but desolation and despair.

Consider well the ways of fire, its masks and tactics, then make war with its soul in your belly.

— *Maxims for a Lone Warrior
Fighting Against a Host*
by Lai Shi-Min, late
The Emperor T'ai Tsun
(ca. 630 C)

CHAPTER

1

Langnes 37421/4Planet/Gathering

Starships snapped into real space, slashed toward the system's fourth planet. As they closed, bays slid open, and small C-shaped fighting ships, the lethal *aksai*, darted out and held close formation on their mother ships.

It could have been an attack, but was not.

The Musth clanmasters were assembling to decide what might be done with the humans occupying the far-distant Cumbre system.

Or, at least the clanmasters who felt the matter of interest or value; perhaps twenty percent of the Musth clans, no more. Others might choose to involve themselves later, might remain neutral.

To the Musth, 4Planet was held, in mythology, to be the homeworld, although most of their scientists believed the race had simultaneously evolved on a dozen, perhaps more, planets; proof the universe belonged to them, buttressed by the ease with which they had conquered their home cluster and expanded beyond.

4Planet was temperate, with large continents, low mountains, lakes, much of the land covered with veldt, grassy plains interspersed with small forests. The sun was G-type, but the light was starker, more blue, than a Terran would feel comfortable under. Its climate was a bit chill for man, although it seldom snowed. Rainfall was seasonal, sparse but heavy when it came.

It had not always been like that. Over the millennia, it'd been plowed, mined, deforested, and built up, and then the Musth had gone out to the stars.

4Planet, almost abandoned, was encouraged to revert to its natural state. Cities were leveled, and the ravaged land contoured and planted, polluted rivers and lakes made to run clean, and the world was as it had been, at the dawn of Musth time.

With population pressure gone, the few million Musth who chose to remain on 4Planet built semi-underground villages, one clan holding each settlement.

Only one small continent still showed the Musth's technocracy. Here were military bases, great landing fields, roboticized factories and yards, and the slender bureaucracy the Musth needed to administer their thousand thousand worlds. This was Gathering.

In the center of it all was a two-kilometer-wide cylinder with a domed rotunda. This building, three hundred meters high, was where the Musth came to deal with problems beyond the immediate reach of a clanmaster, or to settle a feud when one or another of the warring groups requested intervention.

The building had no name, which the Musth found logical. As the only one in their empire used for these purposes, it needed none.

There was a wry Musth proverb: “The only reason we Musth do not rule All-Cosmos is we need one eye for our race’s future, one eye for our personal destiny, and one eye to guard our backs, and the First Cause only gave us two eyes each.”

In the cylinder’s walls were suites, each with a small landing platform wide enough for a pair of ships. A clanmaster could arrive, well guarded, and conduct whatever business was necessary without leaving his suite, using the elaborate electronics array. Each suite was completely independent, with its own power generator and available air supply for those who were worried about an enemy trying to gas them.

If the controversy was solved, then the masters, their subordinates, delegates or relatives, could choose to meet in the flesh.

There were almost five hundred clanmasters assembling. Some ruled several worlds, some controlled a trade or craft, others commanded fighting fleets.

While the *aksai* banked and circled overhead watchfully like Earth swallows, the clanmasters entered the building, each computer-routed so no enemies would find themselves sharing airspace and seizing the moment.

They came out of their small flits arrogantly, as befitted a master race; two meters tall, more when they reared back on their small tails, their coarse, yellow to reddish brown fur gleaming, small heads peering about on long, snakelike necks, quick in their motions as they moved into their quarters.

All wore weapons belts, none of their armament ceremonial in nature.

That night, before the assemblage began, coms flashed to and fro as strategies, tactics, and ideas were sent back and forth.

At sunrise, the meeting began.

Wallscreens opened, dividing as necessary as clanmasters appeared on them. Other masters activated their monitors but preferred to remain invisible.

Aesc, former “ambassador” to the Cumbre system, presented the Musth’s case. There’d always been tension between the humans and Musth, but within the last time sequence, it had exploded into violence as what he called the lesser beings, the ‘Raum, slightly smaller and darker than other humanoids, had revolted against their masters. And they’d attacked the Musth.

“Why?” a clanmaster asked. “I know little of humans, barely enough to loathe them. But I thought our differences were settled, at least in their eyes, when we made peace before.”

“The ‘Raum,” Aesc explained, “have a common belief, that they are destined to rule not merely their race, but all space, all time, all beings.”

There were noises of amusement, somewhere between purrs and growls. Someone said “heresy,” and there was more mirth.

“Leader Wlencing had the opportunity to fight them on occasion,” Aesc went on. “Once in league with the human army.”

“Your views, Wlencing,” a clanmaster, Keffa, requested.

“The ‘Raum are what the humans call,” and Wlencing used a Terran word, “ ‘wormsss,’ or slimy beings. Cowards, who avoid face-battle, not much in the way of warriors when they’re driven to combat. But they were able to hurt us quite badly when they sent a manned suicide bomb into our mining headquarters on the third world.”

“That,” Aesc said, “sparked our withdrawal, as the documents provided show.”

“I have read them,” Keffa said. “And you intervened when Wlencing had not finished my question. I care little of these fools who believe themselves superior, especially when you say they have been destroyed.”

“Not destroyed,” Wlencing said. “Defeated, driven back into their warrens.”

“By the human army, which is my main interest and which my question was about,” Keffa said. “What of them?”

Wlencing considered, head darting from side to side.

“As warriors, some fight very well, especially those who have been trained to seek personal battle. As an army, in prolonged war, I have less information. The fighting with the ‘Raum was little better than a series of skirmishes.

“Against us? Since the Confederation that we once fought against seems to have withdrawn their support for this sector, their fighters are unsupported, frequently forced to improvise or do without. I will admit one advantage humans, or at least some humans, seem to have over our race is being able to find alternative solutions quite readily.”

“Perhaps,” an older clanmaster, Paumoto, said, “because their tools are so frequently inadequate to the task.” There was a ripple of agreement.

Paumoto spoke for the most militant of the Musth, those who wanted to devote all the race’s energy to obliterating the stumbling block of humanity. Only Man had presented a threat to the Musth and vice versa. Other intelligent races encountered were either unambitious, not imperialistic, far less advanced or, most commonly, not oxygen-based, and therefore welcome to the worlds Man and Musth found harsh, uninhabitable.

Thus far, Paumoto had gained only marginal support, most of his race either having no contact and hence no interest in humanity, or believing Mankind was a tottering, dying race that would vanish of its own stupidity.

One of Paumoto's strongest allies was Keffa, who unfortunately had far too much wealth and too little seasoning.

"That may be true," Wlencing said once the amusement died down. "But I do not take our enemies lightly. Still, I have full confidence that we can destroy them if we fight cleverly."

"I admire you, War Leader," Paumoto said, "and your more perceptive fellows, for realizing what I've been warning for half a generation is the truth, that we must confront Mankind, on our terms, as soon as possible."

"This galaxy, and the ones around it, can support only one master, and we must put Man in his place before he can grow stronger! The perhaps-chaos of their Confederation offers us the perfect opportunity."

"Thank you," another clanmaster, Senza, said, "but I must remind you what happened to make some of us worry about Man."

Thirty-five E-years earlier, the Musth had sent a major colonization group into a mineral-rich cluster both races had discovered. They took over worlds already claimed by Man, began to exploit the system. The Confederation struck back hard, destroying most of the Musth force, and made a harsh treaty requiring them to cede half a dozen systems in the sector to the humans, as well as the systems that sparked the war.

The clanmasters shifted uncomfortably, some ears cocking in anger. No Musth liked to be reminded of the past, especially if it smelled of failure.

Senza was generally regarded as unbalanced, even a calamity bringer, and probably would have been brought down if he wasn't extraordinarily careful about his personal safety.

He was also grudgingly accorded respect because he was the unquestioned head of the ubiquitous and vital *Polperro*, or "Reckoners." The *Polperro* were a unique clan, able to recruit from any other of the Musth, since they were the race's diplomats and lawyers, the lubricant that kept the race from perpetual civil war.

Unlike most of the other Musth, Senza had voluntarily visited Man's worlds and returned impressed. He thought each race had much to learn from the other, and might consider an alliance rather than enmity. His views were popular only with the young Musth who could break from tradition, or the more radical elements of the clans, those who wanted change from the existing order.

"The past is dead," growled Keffa.

Senza moved a paw diagonally, signaling doubt.

"It is," Paumoto said with finality, "as far as this debate. The question now is, what to do about the men in the Cumbre system? This moment, this chance. Suggestions?"

"We should return with warriors, not miners," War Leader Wlencing insisted. "Hit first, hit hard, and the system is ours. We already have listeners in place, so we shall face few surprises. If the Confederation still exists, they'll be faced with a done deed. If they do not" — he held out a paw,

extended its claws — “we will have returned to our former path of conquest. There does not seem to be another option, nor, if we take this way, the risk of us suffering any real damage.”

“What of the humans who don’t conveniently die,” Senza asked. “Should we set stinging-ones on them?” These near-insects were part of one of the Musth’s less pleasant hand weapons. Held unconscious in grenades, they swarmed anything moving when the grenade burst.

“We are not monsters,” Wlencing said. “I would hardly kill cubs or breeders without provocation. We could not allow them to escape after our victory, for fear they’d bring back the Confederation.

“But isn’t there always a place for workers, doing tasks we would rather not? In the mines or even as serving class? Those who survive, and have no desire to oppose us again, might be more useful to us alive.”

“No!” Keffa snarled, eyes reddening in anger. “When a Musth cannot do his own labor, whether it’s clean or filthy, when we think ourselves too good for work, we are ready to pass on, to allow a stronger, more virile race to rule! Senza may have thought he was jesting, but I think he has the correct solution. Brutality now would prevent future complications.”

“Keffa certainly has confidence,” Senza said. “As yet, we have mounted no campaigns, and already we are discussing the spoils and how we shall murder those we’re too stupid to deal with in other ways.”

“Do you doubt our ability to conquer?” Paumoto demanded.

“Certainly not,” Senza said. “If, and I emphasize *if*, we decide on war. Let me ask, before the words become more fiery, just how many of the clanmasters here want a fight with Man?”

“We’ve hardly begun to talk about — ” Keffa said.

“That, certainly, is the direction of this meeting, so I think the amount of interest in such an extreme passage would be interesting. I call for such a consensus.”

That was Senza’s right, and paws touched sensors in each suite.

Seconds later, a screen showed the tabulation:

About a third in favor, a third against, a third undecided.

“Our *great* race,” Senza said, putting slight emphasis on great, “hardly seems to perceive Wlencing, Paumoto, and Keffa’s destiny as obvious.”

“Are you saying we should accept our defeat?” Aesc said. “Accept being driven from Cumbre?”

“According to the documents, you and War Leader Wlencing chose to withdraw, in order to consult with us. That is hardly being driven anywhere.”

“How do you think the humans will perceive it?” Aesc hissed.

Now there were rumblings throughout the building.

“I do not care how the humans perceive it,” Senza said. “What they are is what they are. I happen to have far greater faith in the destiny of our race to worry overmuch about humans.

“I will also add I am not impressed by your performance, Aesc, nor you, Wlencing. You involve

yourselves in what was a most minor operation, seeing no doubt great advancement therein.

“I do not see many riches having been gained through your actions.

“Now, you want to increase our involvement in the system. I think this is foolish. I think we should pursue one of two courses, which I suggest to this gathering.

“First, we permit your involvement with the Cumbre system to continue, but with no greater commitment than before. I enter this for a vote at this time, but request my fellow clan leaders wait until my second suggestion is offered.

“That is that we retreat from the Cumbrian system entirely and restrict our presence there to a purchasing team or two, and trade for the minerals the system has.

“It is perhaps inevitable we shall encounter other races than the ones we have to date, races which are as ambitious as we are and who also share the same carbon-based cycle.

“If we can learn from Man, study their weaknesses, could not those same lessons be applied when we encounter other aliens, and decide whether they are our enemies or our allies?

“Think well on these two matters, clan leaders. We may, in what appears to be a very minor matter today, be setting policies future Musth will praise or curse us for.

“Now I call for a vote.”

Senza was not surprised at all when both his measures failed handily.

“Now that that foolishness has passed,” Paumoto said, “we can return to the real issue and forge a more sensible sentiment. I suggest we return to Cumbre, but with a larger force than before, one mostly composed of warriors. The detachment would be led by Aesc, since he is most familiar with the system, and his second-in-command would be Wlencing. Be aware I would like him to be the second in everything, not merely military.

“Rather than have our main elements stationed on Silitric, and our headquarters in a remote section of their home-world, we should establish posts in every city on the planet.”

“I don’t understand their purpose,” Aesc said.

“On the surface,” Paumoto said, “to attempt to lessen the tension between our two races. But in reality, to monitor exactly what these men are planning, thinking, and to be ready for an instant, violent response if that is required.”

“Or, perhaps,” Senza added cynically, “Paumoto is suggesting them as targets, so that if men wrong the Musth, they will have an opportunity close at hand, and we will then have enough reason to retaliate for such a massacre instantly.

“Is that an element of your thinking?”

“I would hardly allow myself to speak for a policy that might mean the deaths of some of our people, would I?”

“No,” Senza said. “You would not *speak* about it.”

“There shall come a time, Senza,” Keffa put in, and, the clanmasters could see on their screens,

his claws needled in, out, “when your cleverness shall turn against you.”

“Is this a challenge?” Senza said. “To my clan, or to myself? If you are challenging me personally, you should remember I said time past I would accept no offers to duel. Blood settles little which you’ll learn, Keffa, as you grow and age. If you age.”

“Enough,” Paumoto said. “I would wish to put my suggestion to a vote, reminding those who are in favor of the measure they will be required to assist in the funding and equipage of this expedition.”

The tally was taken slowly, over several hours, as various factions argued back and forth or withheld their votes until one side or the other won the argument or presented recompense.

At the end of the time, 112 clanmasters involved themselves and their clans, with only a scattering of votes against the proposal. Senza, like most of the others, remained neutral.

“Is that enough?” Aesc asked Wlencing privately.

“More than,” the War Leader responded. “For the ones who favor the measure are the ones rich in weapons, warriors, and power, and once the inevitable happens, the others will scratch to join us.”

“This marks a new beginning.”

“It shall not be long,” Wlencing said firmly, “that all Musth will join us, and the day of man’s removal from our path shall arrive.”

• • •

The next day, as Senza’s mothership offplaneted, his aide, Kenryo, came to him.

“Your student Alikhan, Wlencing’s cub, remained on 4Planet.”

Senza lifted a paw, indicating mild surprise.

“He’s chosen to serve with his father, on Cumbre.”

“Which means we have lost another battle,” Senza said. “Another one chooses the violence-way the way that requires no thought, no reasoning.”

“You denigrate your teachings, sir.”

“In what way?”

“I do not think Alikhan is completely insensate, that his time with us was wasted, that your thoughts were ignored.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” Senza said. “But if you are right, then the cub may be troubled by the contrast between what we believe and what his father will practice.”

“I fear,” he said somberly, “his final decision, as many others he has made, has a strong probability of being made in blood.”

CHAPTER

2

Cumbre/D-Cumbre

“And don’t you love this peacetime army,” *Alt* Garvin Jaansma, Commanding Officer, Intelligence and Reconnaissance Company, Headquarters, RaoForce, panted. “Duding in custom-tailored uniform ankling down a promenade, the rattle of good silver in your pants, every admiring eye on you, the goddamned palladium ... whatever the hell that is ... of all that’s good, right, and just in society?”

“Shaddup and help me bang this friggin’ form back where it’s supposed to be before Monique buries us in quikset,” his executive officer, *Aspirant* Njangu Yoshitaro, grunted.

Both officers, barely twenty E-years old, wore torn, sweaty undershirts, work boots, and cement stained pants.

Hosed down and in the midnight blue dress uniform of the Force, they would look a great deal better, particularly Jaansma.

He was tall, almost two meters, blond, with a natural weightlifter’s body, and an open, firm face. If he lived long enough and didn’t desert, he could end up in a high command position strictly on appearance. He was the descendent of a longtime circus family, and had enlisted hastily after setting Earth tigers loose on a mob.

Njangu Yoshitaro was a bit shorter than Jaansma, slender, dark-complected and -haired. He was less handsome than striking, and his eyes were constantly calculating. He never talked about his background, or about his criminal record that’d put him between enlistment or conditioning.

The two met as raw recruits, on the last troopship from the Confederation capital of Centrum, and had distinguished themselves enough as soldiers and covert operators during the recent ‘Raum uprising to be offered commissions.

They were currently at the bottom of a five-by-five-by-six-meter hole that they, and a half-dozen other Intelligence and Reconnaissance soldiers had dug using explosives, antigrav hoppers, shovels, and obscenities.

A cool wind blew down the mouth of Dharma Bay, toward Chance Island and D-Cumbre’s capital of Leggett. The sand was clean, the sky improbably blue, and the surf curling white against the ocean.

At the bottom of the hole, nobody could see anything entrancingly tropical, though. A battered,

obsolete Cooke lowered toward them, its cargo bay filled with fresh concrete, First *Tweg Monique* LI at the controls. Lir, if you discounted her muscles and steel-toothed attitude, looked less like the stereotypical hard-ass noncom than a model or actress.

“Ready to pour?” she called.

Njangu looked skeptically at the plas form around the pit.

“You realize if she screws it, and buries us alive, she’ll take over the company, don’t you?”

“Thank Allah and his all-girl band that she is happy being the brains behind the scenes,” Garvin said, then shouted, “Let ‘er go.”

“So she claims,” Yoshitaro muttered, and whatever else he added was inaudible as concrete gushed down the nozzle held by a sweating striker.

“Why,” Yoshitaro tried, when the rumble died a bit, “are we, two big-time, supposedly bright officers, standing underneath a goddamned Cooke, when we’ve done everything to get rid of the worthless bastards because they crash so much?”

“Pure intellect,” Garvin suggested. “And it’s my turn to ask questions: Who the hell came up with this idiot idea of leading by example?”

“You did, you dolt. I think you got it out of some manual.”

“What a dipsh,” Garvin said. “We coulda been strolling around, supervising, with maybe a cold beer in each hand. Instead — ”

“You mention beer and cold in the same sentence, and I’m gonna throttle you, even if you do outrank me,” Yoshitaro managed, coughing as dust clouded them.

“Empty,” Lir called. “Going for more.”

“Why are we so *special*?” Garvin said, then shouted, “Take it up!”

“Why’s she driving, anyway? How’d that friggin’ Dill manage to get out of the scut work flying cement around, anyway?”

“He’s playing test pilot. This is his big day to Die Gloriously over on Mullion. So he’s too busy and big-time for us.”

“Asshole. Shows what happens when you commission an elephant.”

Lanbay Island, once utterly uninhabited and uninhabitable, was being turned into a tiny fortress, with half a dozen missile pits and a central command bunker being built on it.

On other islands, on the arms of Dharma Island circling the bay, on Mullion Island and many of the other islands and small continents sprayed across D-Cumbre’s middle, more fortifications were being hastily built. Some would be manned immediately, but most would only be used if the Musth fulfilled their promise of months earlier, and returned with warriors.

Or if Alena Redruth, “Protector” of Larix and Kura, came back with warships and a stronger offer of “protection.”

The Strike Force was very busy, and gloomily expected to be still busier in the future as it

deployed out from the comfortable, easily targeted Camp Mahan on Dharma Island.

It'd once been called, rather grandiloquently, Swift Lance, the Confederation force holding the Cumbre system and keeping the colonists safe, as often as not from each other.

Two local years earlier, when Jaansma and Yoshitaro had arrived, Swift Lance had been the very model of a lazy, button-polishing peacetime garrison unit. But the 'Raum uprising brought reality in with a shock.

Now it was commanded by *Caud* Prakash Rao, and it was officially RaoForce, the Force, or commonly the Legion, when its soldiers needed a label that wasn't obscene.

It had taken massive casualties in the Rising, including its then CO and most of his staff, and surviving soldiers like Yoshitaro and Jaansma had been rapidly promoted. The formation was rebuilt with recruits from the local population. As Jon Hedley, once CO of I&R Company had predicted, a lot of them, frequently the best, came from the defeated 'Raum. If a recruit, man or woman, showed unusual familiarity with weapons or tactics, no one in the Force asked where she or he had learned, but instead marked them for early promotion.

RaoForce was nearly up to its authorized strength of ten thousand. But it was far weaker in equipment than before the shooting had started. There still was no communication, let alone supplies or equipment, from the Confederation, and the Force was learning to rebuild total wrecks, do without or improvise from whatever could be found in Cumbre's civilian sector.

Everyone knew time was short, and wondered where the next enemy would come from, and whether it would be human or Musth.

• • •

Dec Running Bear stretched behind the controls of the sleek lim, now incongruously anodized in camouflage pattern.

"If you're stiffening up," *Caud* Rao offered from the rear of the luxury lifter, "I can fly this beast."

"Nossir," Running Bear said. "Just reminding myself I'm not dreaming, and gonna wake up still flying a Cooke."

Rao looked at him skeptically, went back to his quiet conference with *Mil* Angara, the Force executive officer, and his aide, *Alt* Erik Penwyth.

Rao, medium height, dark, stocky, early fifties, could have passed for a 'Raum. Angara's still-athletic body was beginning to lose the fight with gravity and desserts. Erik Penwyth had hair a bit long for an officer, a long aristocratic face and nose to match. Not your usual recruitment poster grouping.

Something had happened, Running Bear knew, something big. The evident casualness of the thre

officers was deceptive. But it wasn't his affair.

He thought about Rao's volunteering to take the controls of the lim. That was a change from the old days. *Caud Williams* was nice enough, but he never would've thought to play driver.

Hell, pushing this lim around, a gift from the momentarily grateful Rentiers of D-Cumbre instead of a rickety Cooke dripping with autocannons, was a big change.

Running Bear touched his new rank tab and the Confederation Cross, the empire's highest award on his breast. His wounds were bothering him a little, but he didn't really mind. The pain kept reminding him he should've been quite dead after doing a last stand like he was that white-eye Cutter or Cluster or whatever the guy's name was, and not be whining about whatever was bothering him.

Changes ... he glanced out the driver's window to his left, at the beaches of Leggett, then the wasteland that'd been the 'Raum ghetto, the Eckmuhl, mostly destroyed in the 'Raum's final, desperate counterattack.

He still wasn't sure if he liked the idea of serving with people who'd been shooting at him not very long ago, but when he'd brought it up once to Rao, the officer had told him to never mind, and so he had. Especially after one of the 'Raum strikers in his section had taken him home on pass, and Running Bear had met the striker's sister.

Not that there was much to do even if you did somehow find a social life. Leggett was rebuilding, but not as quickly as anyone liked. The war had cost money, not just lives, and the ensuing peace hadn't brought much in the way of prosperity, since there still was no offplanet market for the minerals on C-Cumbre.

The AmerInd shrugged. Not his business, nor concern.

"Coming in, sir," he said, and banked the lim down toward the new prefab that was Planetary Government, not half a kilometer from where the old building had vanished in a boil of flame, along with most PlanGov officials.

The lim grounded, and the three officers got out. Penwyth carried a small projector and screen.

"Find a shady spot and get something to eat from the canteen," Rao said. "This is liable to take all day."

"Yessir," Running Bear said, and lifted away.

"Here we go," Rao said. "Penwyth, kick me if I don't kiss the proper asses, since you know Rentier high society. We want to make sure they give us what we want."

Penwyth grinned slightly, but said nothing. He was, indeed, part of D-Cumbre's upper crust. He enlisted in the military for no known reason, then been commissioned from I&R in lieu of being court-martialed for pretending to be an officer, since he got away with it.

"It'll be interesting to see what happens," *Mil Angara* said. "It's bad enough being isolated, without the nasty little secret we're about to hand them."

"Especially since," Penwyth said, "a lot of people I know have friends, sometimes even relatives"

on Larix or Kura. There'll be howling. But they'll have to recognize the truth."

"With all this logic on our side," Rao said, "we've got to be doomed." And on that note he led the way into PlanGov.

• • •

"They say," *Alt* Ben Dill, Commander of the Mobile Scout Section recently folded into Intelligence and Reconnaissance, "if it looks good, it'll fly good."

"Can't flippin' argue with that," said *Haut* Jon Hedley, head of the Force's II Section — Intelligence. Hedley was a gangling, profane, lazy man who somehow could hike any of his soldiers into the ground while yodeling and skipping backwards, then carry their packs into camp while they crawled home.

Both men were lying, both knowing half a hundred examples of air/space craft with lines that sang, and performance that killed.

Dill was not quite the size of a Terran elephant; late twenties, prematurely balding, and naturally big in every direction without ever having to work out. There were those who'd made the mistake of thinking anyone that big couldn't move that fast.

He'd commanded the Grierson — the standard Aerial Combat Vehicle — Garvin Jaansma had been assigned to when he joined the Force, showed talent as a covert insertion specialist during the 'Raum Rising, been commissioned and tasked to restructure I&R's new integral flight section. Despite his inherently casual attitude about everything, Dill could fly a Grierson, or anything else he'd gotten behind the controls of, through the eye of a needle without touching metal.

Dill ambled around the Musth *aksai* toward its command pod. It was one of half a dozen that'd been abandoned, in various shades of disrepair, when the Musth pulled out of the Cumbre system.

The Force had quietly taken the ships, as well as other scrounged or "acquired" non-military aircraft and spaceships to a new, secret airbase hastily cut out of the jungle on Mullion Island. There, technicians began laboriously figuring out not only how the *aksai* flew, but how they kept on flying.

Hedley hoped they wouldn't need these ships, whose cost and maintenance were buried deep in the Force's classified intelligence budget, but preferred to prepare for the worst.

"Are you sure you're going to fit, Ben?" he asked. Unless around higher-ranking outsiders, no one in I&R ever called anyone other than his first name or just "boss."

"Be a bit tight," Dill said. "But I've laid off the beer for a week, so I should slide in, properly greased."

Two techs stood nearby, next to a starter cart and a jury-rigged boarding ladder.

Dill walked once more around the *aksai*. "Don't see anything dangling, so I might as well give it a shot."

He checked his flight suit, made sure its various emergency devices were functioning.

“Tell Mother I died game,” he said, and went up the ladder to the cockpit. It creaked, but held.

The concave *aksai* varied from model to model as to the number of fighting positions, from one to four, all of them prone and in pods in various places along the body, about twenty-five meters from horn to horn. The pilot lay in his pod not quite in the center of the C-curve. Dill crawled backwards into the flight pod.

“I fit, I think. Nobody use the word ‘claustrophobia.’ ”

He closed his eyes, let his fingers run over controls never meant for man. Dill had spent every minute the techs let him in the cockpit, memorizing the controls and the functions computer analysis logic, and ground rehearsal suggested. Labels had been cut and stuck on the sensors to help him out. Dill preferred tactile memory.

“Start it up,” he ordered, touching the sensor that slid the clamshell canopy closed around his face. He keyed the human com that’d been welded into the cockpit, set on a seldom-used frequency.

“Chase One, this is Experimental-Alpha. How you hear this station?”

A civilian stuntcraft commandeered by the Force soared a thousand meters overhead.

“Ex-Alpha, Chase One. Strength Five.”

“This is Alpha. Engines being started. Let me know if any significant pieces fall off.”

A microphone click responded.

Dill felt the Musth ship vibrate, and watched the techs’ hands swarm over the starter cart. Bar lights flashed on the canopy, were level with each other, went away. Dill appreciated the Musth instrument design. If it wasn’t a problem, it wasn’t there, and none of the bar lights were currently flashing violet, the Musth emergency color.

The vibration went away.

Dill touched sensors. Everything seemed to be as it should.

He keyed another Force-added box.

“Ex-Control, this is Ex-Alpha,” Dill said. “Telemeters on. Beginning first flight test.”

On the ground, *Haut Chaka*, normally commander of Golan element, a heavy Zhukov section, touched his throat mike.

“This is Experimental Control. Telemetric recording ‘kay. Standing by. Good luck.”

“All Ex stations,” Dill said. He frowned, annoyed that his voice had just a bit of hoarseness to it. He’d already done static and tethered ground-level tests on the *aksai*, so there wasn’t any reason to be nervous. None at all. “Lifting.”

His fingers brushed a control, and the *aksai* bobbed, then came clear of the ground. He touched it a little harder.

The fighting ship rose straight up, waggled a little.

“Landing gear up,” Dill said, and the skids slid into their slots. “Switching to secondary power

and beginning programmed test,” and the *aksai* accelerated, started to climb, wiggled frantically for a minute.

“Son of a bitch,” Dill muttered.

“This is Control,” Chaka’s calm voice came. “What happened?”

“Critter’s about as easy to fly as balancing a plate on a stick. Shut up and let me concentrate.”

Haut Chaka ignored the insubordination, eyes fixed on the three screens showing the *aksai* overhead.

“ ‘Kay,” Dill muttered. “Got it now.”

He pulled the *aksai* back into a climb, fed power.

“Ex-Alpha, this is Chase One,” the pilot of the stunt plane said. “You went past me like payday. On full power, climbing after you ... you’re still pulling away from me.”

“Power setting, half-power, I think,” Dill said. “The mother seems to work. Beginning aerobatic routine.”

He touched other sensors, and the *aksai* banked left, right, rolled, suddenly spun for an instant, corrected itself.

“Shit, this bassid’s delicate,” Dill said. “Try that one again.”

Once more he went through the memorized routine, at various altitudes, stages of power.

“She seems to want to motivate,” he said. “First hairy routine.”

He nosed over, sent the *aksai* screaming toward the far-distant ocean below.

“Radar has you at Mach 7,” Chaka said. “Passing through five thousand meters.”

“Feels like. Beginning pullout. Lemme know if the wings fall off, if that’s what they call these wiggly guys on either side of me.”

Dill touched the base of a sensor, and the *aksai* lifted, bobbed, then smoothly swooped back up into the skies.

“Bird’s got a nice gimmick,” he said. “Antigrav cuts in when you pull more’n, guesstimate, five Gs. I could do this all day long and not puke more’n once or twice.

“Stand by Chase One, I’m gonna yump for space. Control, you’ve alerted Big Ears? I’d hate to get my ass shot off as an unknown intruder.”

“That’s affirm,” Chaka said. “Everybody’s turning a blind eye.”

The warning stations at C-Cumbre’s north and south poles and on the moons of Fowey and Bodwin had been alerted to see nothing and notify no one of the tests.

“Ears ... eyes ... what a confusion. Yow! Chase One, I just blew past you like you were parked. Chase Two, this is Experimental Alpha. Do you have me?”

A converted private yacht just out-atmosphere opened its mike.

“Have you roarin’ and ready, Alpha.”

“Advancing to two-thirds drive,” Dill said. “And let’s see what Kailas looks like. Experimental

One, clear.”

Two hours later, Dill touched his mike sensor.

“Experimental Control, Experimental Control, this is Experimental-Alpha, inbound from the far side of the moon.”

“I have you, Ex-Alpha.”

“This sucker scrambles,” Dill reported. “Wish I had stardrive clearance. It’d be interesting to see what happens when I hit the big red button.”

“That’s for another hero, later,” Chaka said. “Bring it on home. It seems like we’re a success.”

“Wait ‘til I land,” Dill said. “If I land. Then break out the champagne and promotions. But it does look like, assuming we can get those other sluts in the air, the Force has got some new toys.”

• • •

PlanGov at one time had been led by Confederation officials, most killed in a ‘Raum suicide strike. Now PlanGov was a Council of some twenty men and women, all Cumbre natives. *Caud Rao* had to lay down the law quite firmly to keep the Rentiers, the self-appointed rulers of the system, from simply appointing twenty of their own, and had forced the aristos to put three ‘Raum, one merchant, one fisherman, and two miners, both also ‘Raum, on the board, as well as a nonvoting observer from the Force. The positions were initially named by caucuses of the various classes, but free elections had been promised within a year.

It didn’t give the majority of the population majority rule, but it was a hopeful beginning.

The Rentiers had been hit as hard as anyone during the ‘Raum riots, and so the Council members were mostly younger than traditional elitists.

Among the new executives were Loy Kouro, the dapperly handsome heir to *Matin*, Cumbre’s biggest and most conservative news source and publishing trust, whose father had died in the blast that destroyed the PlanGov; and Jasith Mellusin, who’d become the heir to Mellusin Mining in the same explosion.

The two had another thing in common: Garvin Jaansma. Kouro had become his enemy after a minor brawl at a party; Jasith had been his lover, then suddenly broke off the relationship, without offering any explanation, when the fighting ended.

Caud Rao waited until the Council’s normal business came to an end, then requested his matter be held in camera, which was promptly granted. It was still close enough to the insurrection that the Rentiers hadn’t forgotten who’d kept their corrupt regime from being completely destroyed.

“There probably isn’t any question more important to us,” *Caud Rao* began, “than what has happened to the Confederation, or, rather, why Cumbre has been cut off from any contact with the mother worlds.

“We don’t have a complete answer, but we have a partial one, with supporting evidence:

“The worlds of Larix and Kura, supposed longtime allies of ours, have been systematically cutting off any convoy or single ship passing through their sector.”

Rao paused, waited for the outrage and shock to settle. He nodded to Penwyth, who set up his equipment.

“Not only have convoys not been reaching us for more than two local years, but none of the starships offplaneting from Cumbre have returned, no matter what their destination within the Confederation.

“We determined to find out, if we could, what was happening. We acquired a small transport, roboticized its controls, and fitted it with the most elaborate sensors we have access to. A second, manned ship completed the task force.

“The first ship was programmed to follow the standard astrographic plots between Cumbre and Centrum, the Confederation capital. Most frequently, these plots pass close to Larix and Kura, with the third or fourth jump beyond Cumbre entering their system.

“The first ship was to make a jump, then, immediately on return to normal space, launch a missile with stardrive capabilities. All data received by the ship’s sensors was to be ‘cast on a tight beam to the missile. If the datalink was broken, the missile was to enter N-space, and send out a targeting signal for the second ship to home on.

“On the first jump, nothing happened, and the second ship’s crew signaled the first to make another jump. Again there was nothing untoward.

“However, the third jump was very different. When still in hyperspace, the first ship was swept by detectors. When it exited N-space, it was immediately challenged. Since there was no crew aboard to respond, the ship was attacked.

“I have full records of events to this point for anyone interested. However, the most important data is from this point forward.”

He nodded to Penwyth, who touched sensors and the screen lit.

“This,” Rao explained, “is a composite image from various sensors aboard the roboticized transport. Here, you can see a ship appear from hyperspace. This ship has been identified, plus or minus less than point-one percent, as being a Confederation *Remora-class* destroyer leader.

“The flagship of Alena Redruth’s fleet is such a ship, the *Corfe*.

“This isn’t necessarily conclusive, however. Over two hundred of that class DL have been commissioned in the last twenty years, and some might have fallen into the hands of pirates, if such exist.

“At this point, our transport has been electronically challenged, ordered to take up a certain orbit and prepare for inspection. The challenge is preemptory, and no part of the signal says who the challenging party is.

“Of course, our ship failed to respond.

“Now, you see three other ships, here, here, and here on-screen? These are very unusual, brand new *Nirvana-class* patrol boats.

“Now, these ships are very new, very classified, and all are supposedly reserved for Confederation Home-world troops.

“How my predecessor, the late *Caud Williams*, learned of their existence, how he was able to request some of them, is beyond my ken. But he did, and those ships were also on the *Malvern*, the mysteriously high-jacked ship, together with other supplies and more than seven hundred fifty fresh recruits.

“Only three of those recruits, incidentally, were able to evade the ‘pirates,’ and make their way to a lifeboat to Cumbre. Two of them still survive, serving in the Force. The third man, an experienced Confederation soldier, absolutely identified one of the ‘pirates’ as being another Confederation veteran who’d left the service to join Alena Redruth’s forces. Unfortunately, this third man didn’t survive the recent ... unpleasantness. However, his friends did, and one of them positively identified this soldier as being among the ‘pirates,’ and later saw him some months ago, as part of Alena Redruth’s staff when they visited C-Cumbre.

“The reason that none of you have heard of these three is because the late Planetary Governor Haemer and *Caud Williams* ordered them to keep silent.

“Those *Nirvana-class* ships, by the way, accompanied Protector Redruth on the *Corfe* when he visited the Cumbre system last. I don’t know if *Caud Williams* failed to recognize those patrol craft, or chose to keep quiet, or possibly informed Planetary Governor Haemer of them. Both men are dead now, so it doesn’t matter.

“But the evidence now is quite clear. Our supposed friend, Alena Redruth, is the pirate, the one who’s successfully blockading Confederation ships, if any, from reaching us and vice versa.”

The Council grew into a hubbub of shock, disbelief. Rao waited patiently.

Kouro was the first to speak or rather wail, somewhat coherently.

“But what does this *mean*?”

“It means, just for openers,” Rao said, “we’ve got more than one enemy to worry about. The next time Protector Redruth offers his support, I imagine it will be made in even stronger terms than before. A man who’s willing to chance angering the Confederation certainly will have no hesitation seizing Cumbre’s resources, given half a chance.”

“And what will we do?”

“I’ve taken a vow to the Confederation,” Rao said. “As have all my officers. If anyone attempts to overthrow the legal government of Cumbre, we’ll fight.”

“But they’ve got starships, heavy equipment, a far larger army, don’t they?” This came from another Council member.

“So the fiches tell us,” Rao said.

“Can we beat them?” This was from Jasith Mellusin.

“I don’t know,” Rao said honestly. “That’s why I came here. We need to put Cumbre on a war footing immediately, or face the likelihood of attack, possibly invasion.”

“Another question,” Jasith said. “This is important to me, and to my father’s mining companies, which I’ve inherited. Before the war, when Protector Redruth visited us, he said that he wanted to increase the amount of ore shipped to his system, that he was going to build a lot more ships than he had.

“But this hasn’t happened. My advisors told me the matter was never brought up again to my father, and we can’t find any memos or contracts in our files. Do you have any idea what might’ve happened?”

“I don’t know,” Rao said. “If I were cynical, I’d say that Redruth is waiting for a more favorable opportunity.”

“Like just taking them?” Jasith asked.

“I’d guess that thought must’ve occurred,” Rao said.

Jasith made a face, but said no more.

“One question that’s a little aside from the main matter,” a woman asked quietly. She was new to the Council, a ‘Raum appointee, and Rao puzzled for her name. Jo Poynton.

“Yes?”

“I’m not familiar with interstellar travel,” she said. “Is the only route, if that’s the correct word, through Larix and Kura?”

“No,” Rao said. “But it’s the most economical and commonly used by far.”

“If the Confederation was still intact, or still concerned about frontier systems like Cumbre, and if they had repeatedly tried one route without success, wouldn’t they most likely try a second, or a third?”

“I certainly would, if I were a Confederation official.”

“Yet nothing has come from them since the *Malvern*,” Poynton said thoughtfully.

“So even if we believe your investigation, which certainly sounds credible, the question remains. Something must have happened to the Confederation, to the thousand thousand worlds of our empire, something beyond the petty machinations of this Redruth.

“We know from reports by newly assigned troops and emigrants there were civil risings throughout the empire, including major riots on Capella. Many worlds were put under martial law. There were unconfirmed reports that entire sectors of the empire dropped out of contact or, worse, declared some sort of unilateral independence.

“But what catastrophe could have produced this sudden silence, this complete breakdown of all communications?”

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