

BOOK THREE OF THE FIGHTER QUEEN SAGA

AEW
Science
Fiction



THE FIGHTER KING

JOHN BOWERS

The building rocked as another bomb went off, but he was into the main room now, barking commands at the holo vid.

The holo materialized in the middle of the room, showing a hollow-eyed anchorman who looked as if he'd just been dragged out of bed.

"... unconfirmed reports of hostile spacecraft attacking the city ... no official word as to the identity ... advised to remain indoors ... emergency crews responding ..."

Oliver leaped to his feet, shaking and infuriated. He ran back to the bedroom window and looked out in time to see five more explosions blossom in different parts of the city. Somewhere a siren was wailing, somewhere a laser battery opened fire. Two more SolarFighters streaked by in pair formation, locked into a hard turn as they raced from their target — or toward it. Somewhere nearby he heard men yelling, women screaming.

Barely able to breathe, he returned to the main room and stared at the holo. What the hell did he do now?

by John Bowers
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In order of publication:

A Vow to Sophia
The Fighter Queen
The Fighter King

In chronological order:

The Fighter King
A Vow to Sophia
The Fighter Queen

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by

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to Faith and the kids

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Map of Vega



Map of Vega



Prolog

Wednesday, 27 May, 0195 (Post Colonial Calendar) — Rural Missibama, Sirius 1

The tour bus lay on its side at the bottom of a small ravine, its back broken. One lift jet lay several yards away; two others appeared damaged. A blackened hole gaped out of the engine compartment. Peering down, Victoria Lincoln could clearly read the name on the side: CONFEDERATE TRAILWAYS.

"I see bodies." Tony Colombini's holocam was glued to the wreck. "Six, at least."

"You getting it all?" Victoria had her hands full to keep the car hovering; it was designed to operate above a smooth surface, and the uneven bottom of the ravine was defeating the inertial automatics.

"Getting everything. They're all girls."

Two hoversleds bobbed above the wreck, keeping Victoria alert to avoid them. Both bore official insignia, and she wondered how long before they would challenge her. Milling about the wreck were at least a dozen men, some wearing uniforms. One was pointing in her direction.

One of the hoversleds suddenly veered toward her, approaching to within fifty feet. An alarm flashed on her console, and a voice burst from her cockpit speakers.

"This is a restricted area. Yew are not authorized. Set down on the highway and prepare to be interrogated. If yew fail to comply, yew will be shot down!"

Victoria forced a smile and waved at the other vehicle, though she could see no one through its tinted cockpit windows. She banked quickly and dipped toward the highway above the ravine. Two men watched from beside an official car as she hovered and touched lightly down.

"Let me do the talking, Tony," she said breathlessly.

"I always do," Tony replied. "Should I keep recording?"

"Yes, as long as possible. But don't piss them off. If they say stop, then stop." She felt her heart flutter as she began shutting down the turbines.

A big man in a white Stetson hat was at her door before she could get it open. He glared menacingly.

"Who the hell're yew!" he demanded as she popped the clamshell door and stepped down. "Don't yew know this is a restricted area?"

Victoria smiled brightly before answering, giving him time to notice her long legs and slender waist. The desert wind filled her long hair and lifted it in a heavy brown wave.

"I'm sorry" she said, "but I don't know your name."

The big man seemed to swell.

"I as't yew a d'rect question, young lady! Who the hell are yew?"

She held out her hand, still smiling. "Victoria Lincoln," she said. "North American Holo News."

He faltered for the first time.

"North America? Yew mean — from *Terra*?"

"Yes, that's right."

"What the hell is a Yankee newsgirl doin' on Sirius?"

"I'm a foreign correspondent. Sirius is my beat." She handed him a small leather case containing her credentials. He stared at it indecisively.

"Well —" He returned the ID. "— this may be yore beat, but yew better just beat it somewhere else. This place is strictly off limits to yew."

Victoria blinked rapidly, her smile fading.

"Do you have the authority to send me away?" she asked. "Are you a police officer?"

"I'm Sheriff in this district. I reckon that gives me the authority."

"In that case, Sheriff —" She smiled again. "— maybe you can explain to me why I've never been refused permission to cover an accident scene before. What makes this one different?"

"Yew don't need to know that. Hey! Yew! Put that camera down! I said this is off limits!"

Victoria glanced around in time to see Tony lower the holocam and fade back into the vehicle. She faced the sheriff again.

"Let me get this straight," she said evenly. "A tour bus goes into a ravine. Possibly people are killed. That's news. Why can't I cover it?"

"Yew don't need to know that. Besides, why would people on Terra give a damn about a bus wreck on Sirius?"

"Come on, Sheriff. If I'd known it was off limits I wouldn't have come all the way out here. But I'm here now, and I have to justify the expense of coming this far. Can't you give me anything at all?"

"I don't think so."

"Just tell me if anyone was killed. And how many."

"No can do."

"Then tell me why you can't tell me. What's the big secret? Afraid the bus company will sue you?"

In spite of himself, the big man grinned. "Did anyone ever tell yew how impertinent yew are, Miz Lincoln?"

Her smile turned dazzling. "My daddy tells me that all the time! How about it?"

Heaving a sigh, the burly sheriff pushed his hat back an inch and scratched his fringe while gazing at the pretty brunette.

"I tell yew what, Miz Lincoln. Even if I did tell yew anything, yew couldn't use it. This here's a KK matter, and nobody kin report on

it 'less they give the go 'head. Yew see what I'm sayin'?"

Victoria's smile faded at mention of the KK. Other names for them included state police, secret police, and Gestapo. The highest law enforcement agency on the planet, the very name of the KK evoked fear in serf and citizen alike.

"That bus must have some pretty important people inside," she said quietly, "if the KK are involved."

"I cannot confirm or deny. Now the best advice I kin give yew is to git back in that hovercar and git the hell out of here before they show up. If yew don't ..."

She nodded slowly, then forced a smile.

"Thank you, Sheriff. You've been very enlightening."

"I'm happy yew think so."

"What was your name again?"

"I never tol' yew my name. Yew didn't see me and I didn't see yew. Git movin', Miz Lincoln."

With another smile and a nod, Victoria climbed back into the hovercar, fired up the turbine, and lifted off.

"What did you find out?" Tony asked as he covertly scanned the accident scene for the last time with his holocam.

"A big fat zero," Victoria said grimly, turning the car toward New Birmingham. "That sheriff was afraid to talk."

"Must be something big."

"Yeah. Big as in KK. They have jurisdiction over this one."

Tony frowned, as uneasy at the mention of the KK as Victoria had been. Named from the Greek word *kuklos* — meaning "brotherhood" — the KK was the modern incarnation of an ancient terrorist brotherhood on Terra known as the KKK.

"Tony, who do you know that's important enough for the KK to take over the investigation of a bus wreck?"

Tony frowned, his dark eyes narrowing. "President of Sirius, members of the parliament, any number of politicians ..."

"Those bodies back there were girls, Tony. Teenagers." She looked at him expectantly.

His eyes widened. "The Vegan choirgirls?"

"That's what I'm thinking. They were on their annual culture tour. Performed last night in New Birm, and they were headed for New Angeles. I bet a quick vid call to NA will confirm that they never did show."

"Jesus!"

"Not only that, but the Vegan desk reported last week that Queen Ursula expressed concern about the choir's safety. A lot of people on Vega didn't think they should make this trip."

"Looks like they were right."

"Soon as we get back, let's contact our 'unnamed sources' and find out what we can."

If we're right about this, it could be the biggest story we've ever covered."

Book One: Sirius

Chapter 1

**Thursday, 28 May, 0195 (PCC) — Rural
Texiana, Sirius 1**

In the rolling foothills of northeastern Texiana, Oliver Lincoln III stood on top of a ridge and peered through binoculars at a large animal grazing in a meadow almost two thousand yards away. A hot breeze dusted the ridge at his feet, raising eddies that made him squint. Beside him stood his friend, host, and former college roommate.

"Forget it, Ollie," Brandon Marlow said. "That buck is over a mile away. You'll never hit him with that antique."

Oliver lowered the glasses and turned to look at Brandon, his clear grey eyes challenging.

"Never tell a Lincoln 'never'," he said. "I'll get him with the first shot."

Brandon nodded at the centuries-old rifle. "With *that*?"

Oliver unslung the Springfield 03 rifle from his shoulder, gazed lovingly at it, and nodded.

"With this." It had been rebuilt, but was still an original.

"You hit him on the first shot," Brandon offered, "and I'll pay for your starship ticket home."

"Already have my ticket. What else you want to wager?"

Brandon shrugged. "I'll let you bed one of my slave girls."

"I was going to anyway. What else?"

Brandon laughed, gestured helplessly. "Okay, tell me what you want."

"Nothing. Just shut up and watch."

Oliver twisted the sling around his left wrist, pulled the rifle stock against his shoulder, and braced himself against a large boulder. At twenty-four, he was an unlikely looking marksman — five feet nine, two hundred Terra pounds, portly, paunchy, his dark blond hair already thinning.

He peered through the telescopic sight, adjusted the cross hairs for the wind and distance, located the target, and carefully took aim. His reputation was on the line.

He sighted through the scope, laid the crosshairs just behind the animal's shoulder, and took a deep breath.

He let half of it go ...

And held it.

He pulled evenly on the trigger; slow, careful, steady pressure, keeping the target locked.

The rifle slammed into his shoulder; smoke drifted away on the breeze, the roar echoed across the ridgeline. Oliver returned the scope to the buck. Beside him, Brandon Marlow also watched through glasses.

Two seconds drifted by.

Suddenly, the buck staggered, bolted, and went down. Kicked twice. And lay still.

"I'll be goddamned!" Brandon Marlow lowered his glasses in awe. "I would've bet a hundred sirios you couldn't come within ten feet of him. Not at that range."

Oliver snapped open the rifle bolt to eject the cartridge. His grin was almost a sneer.

"Been shooting since I was six," he said. "Hunted with my dad in Wyoming and North Dakota. Don't ever question a Lincoln's ability with a rifle."

"I'll be damned," Brandon repeated. "Well, for Christ sake, let's go fetch the buck! We feast on venison tonight!"

Marlow Plantation, Texiana, Sirius 1

The plantation house sat on a small rise overlooking the Texiana River. Three stories high, it covered a quarter acre, but unlike many Sirian plantation homes, didn't conform to the Sirian ideal of whitewashed antebellum architecture from Terra's Ancient South. Rather, the design was more functional, flat and layered.

Seated on the veranda, Oliver Lincoln III carefully sipped a glass of Sirian Lightning. Clear as water, it was hot as napalm and carried the kick of a rocket. His eyes watered as the fiery stuff trickled down his throat.

"So your daddy finally sprang for a trip to Sirius." Brandon Marlow was a big man, six

inches taller than Oliver and broad at the shoulders. Good looking, easy going, wide smile. A native Sirian by birth, he'd been Oliver's roommate for a year at Berkeley on Terra.

Oliver grinned. "My old man is a tight ass," he said. "He promised he'd send me on a trip when I got my degree, but when the time came he combined it with business so he could write it off. Officially I'm here to meet with the Confederate Defense Ministry about the fighter contract. 'And oh, by the way, take a week and have some fun while you're there.' So I came to see you first."

Brandon laughed. "I'm glad you did. What's it been, two years? Seems a lot longer."

"Two years," Oliver agreed. "I was starting my junior year when you came to Berkeley."

"I had a great time there. I still remember Christmas at your house. Your spacecraft factory was very impressive."

Oliver nodded.

"I have a couple of friends in the fighter fleet," Brandon continued. "They swear by Lincoln fighters. They won't fly anything else."

Sixty years earlier, Oliver's grandfather had been a partner in a major defense corporation, but split off to establish his own company. The result had been Lincoln Enterprises, which manufactured deep space combat fighters and sold them to the military.

Defense cuts by the Federation Congress had forced Lincoln to diversify; LincEnt had begun to build deep space yachts as well. A few years later, lifeboats had been added to the product line.

"So how *is* the fighter business?" Brandon asked. "You getting enough sales?"

"Thanks to your government. It's been so long since we've had a war at home that our more dovish politicians think military hardware is a waste of money. But the Confederacy has had a few fights over the years, so they like to keep their claws sharp."

Brandon smiled absently and gazed across the river toward the farmland that stretched to the horizon. His eyes seemed to glaze slightly.

"That's what happens when a society becomes complacent," he said. "They get used to good times and don't think anything can ever threaten them. We don't have that problem here. We're still a frontier world. We know what dangers are out there."

"All I know is, the Confederacy is good for business."

Brandon poured more Lightning, then eyed his friend carefully.

"How long will you be here? A week?"

"At least. I might stretch that a little. The old man can't very well stop me."

"Great! I'll give you the grand tour."

Oliver nodded. "I have to meet with the ministry tomorrow and I want to see my sister while I'm here, but I'll be back the day after that."

"Victoria is on Sirius?"

"She's based in New Birmingham."

"I didn't know that. She still gathering the news?"

"Yep. The black sheep of the family. Not interested in making money or spending it, she says. Just wants to 'make a difference', whatever the hell that means."

Brandon laughed again. "Well, when you see her, tell her to watch her step. Freedom of the press may be popular back home, but the Confederacy isn't quite so generous. Foreign correspondents make the government a little nervous."

Oliver sipped his drink, wiped his eyes, and set the glass down.

"So what's all this business going on between Sirius and Vega?" he asked. "Last I heard, sounded like a fight was brewing."

Brandon waved a hand carelessly. "Like everything else," he said. "Politics. Trade issues, mostly."

"Didn't I hear something about Vega executing Sirian criminals?"

"Where'd you hear that?"

Oliver shrugged. "I don't remember. Somewhere."

Brandon nodded. "That's also part of it. It used to be, if one of our citizens committed a crime on Vega, they handed him over to us for trial. Now they're trying our people themselves, and if they find them guilty, they execute them. We won't stand still for that."

"You think it's worth going to war?" Oliver asked.

Brandon let his breath out noisily.

"Not my decision to make," he said. "But I wouldn't be surprised."

Chapter 2

New Birmingham, Missibama, Sirius 1

North American Holo News operated out of an office building just off the Central Plaza of downtown New Birmingham, Missibama. The building was owned and managed by the Confederate government, which licensed foreign journalism and kept close tabs on its activities. Housed in the same building were six other Terran news agencies, one from Vega, and two from Alpha Centauri. Sirius offered no first-amendment rights, especially to off-worlders, and wasn't shy about placing restrictions on investigative reporters.

Victoria Lincoln waved at the unsmiling Confederate guard in the lobby as she left the building at sunset. Out on the street the sidewalks were crowded as the heat of the day dissipated. Like Christmas back home, she thought, except this was a normal workday. She saw tourists, families, but mostly men — white males from the suburbs, already in the city for the night's carnal activities.

She took a deep breath, trembling lightly from a mixture of fear and anticipation. She'd been on Sirius a year and a half, knew the risks, and the price of failure. But nothing could dissuade her from what she was about to do.

Tony Colombini had tried.

"This is crazy, Vic!" he'd told her just minutes ago. "If you get caught, don't you know ..."

"Tony." She put a finger to his lips. "Shh."

He subsided unhappily, staring at her with his dark eyes.

"You want me to go with you?"

"Are you nuts? One person they might not notice, but two people they *will* notice."

"You shouldn't do this."

She gave him a brave smile, one she didn't feel.

"My daddy told me the same thing when I became a journalist. Don't worry. I'm a big girl now."

"That's the part that scares me. If you were a man, they'd just shoot you. But with you, that'll come several weeks later."

In spite of her outward confidence in Tony's presence, she still felt queasy, almost guilty.

She strolled leisurely through the crowds on the way to the tube station. As Sirius A sank lower, the breeze whipped up, twisting down the canyon-like streets of the capital. Smells assailed her — hot shrimp and red-meat barbecue, the distinctive exhaust from hovercars, a whiff of Vegan perfume.

Victoria glanced to her right as she passed a slave shop. A sign in the window advertised a sale. A pretty serf woman stood by the door, sexy in a skimpy, shiny, too-tight dress, her face painted like a whore. She was dark

complexed, her racial mixture exotic and indefinable, her ankle shackled to an iron ring embedded in the sidewalk. Two adolescent white boys stood beside her, trading comments about her body, occasionally poking her breasts. The woman's expression remained blank.

Victoria looked away.

The tube station was crowded as usual, but Victoria wormed her way aboard a capsule and settled into a seat staring out at the tiled platform, her body rigid with a sense of destiny. Nervous tension congealed in her veins, impeding her pounding heart; in spite of her bravado with Tony, she wondered if she were making a fatal mistake.

The warning bell sounded, the recorded voice intruded on her thoughts.

"Departure in fifteen seconds. All seated, all secured. Please remain seated until the capsule stops. Departure in ten seconds."

Victoria braced herself. With a final warning, the capsule rattled and jerked, propelled toward the insertion point. She closed her eyes and swallowed. The capsule paused, a final warning was given, and with a rising hiss of compressed air the capsule trembled.

Then it fired. Victoria was thrust back into her seat as the vehicle shot into the tube and stabilized. She caught her breath again and glanced at her watch.

Traver Ranch, Missibama, Sirius 1

She left the capsule at the Traver Ranch station, ninety miles from New Birmingham. The trip had taken twelve minutes.

The tube station was deserted; not even a ticket terminal was visible, as the rare passenger from TR generally paid in advance or upon arrival at destination. Victoria climbed the starcrete steps to the surface and looked around.

Traver Ranch was a small town on the edge of cattle country, mainly a supply depot for farmers, with a few dozen homes for merchants and their families. Victoria breathed deeply of the country air, scented with cattle dust and the distinctive sage weed native to the area. It reminded her of home.

She knew she looked out of place here, dressed for the city in a full skirt and high heels, her long brown hair waving in the wind, earrings dangling from her lobes. She should have gone to her apartment and changed, but there hadn't been time. Her contact had insisted on an early meet.

Down the single street she spied a cantina, an oasis of light and noise, dusty hoversleds parked outside. The Sirian version of country music jangled from inside, accompanied by bawdy laughter. The shops along the street looked deserted; it was now fully dark. She took a moment to insert a single night-vision

contact into her left eye. It should enable her to see in the dark without blinding her from the cantina's lights.

She walked in that direction, feeling her skin crawl as she imagined unfriendly eyes peering out from behind darkened storefronts. She barely remembered to turn on her bug detector, in case any electronic surveillance modules were following her. The indicator came up negative.

She breathed a sigh of relief. One less thing to fear. The battery light was flashing, so she turned the machine off — she might need it later.

Victoria was still a block from the cantina when a hand closed around her arm, pulling her into a narrow alley between two buildings. For just an instant her heart froze with terror, her mouth sprang open to scream — then she heard the most welcome words of her life.

"Shh! It's Charley Main."

Victoria sagged against the faded building, hot and cold flashes alternating through her blood stream.

"God!" she whispered, panting with relief. "You scared the living shit out of me!"

"Sorry, Mistress." Charley Main released her arm and took a step back. His face was indistinguishable in the darkness, but Victoria had met him before. He was a serf in his late sixties, his black face weathered by years in the sun, his longish hair kinky and grey. He

wore rumpled pants and a stained shirt, rubber irrigation boots on his feet, looking as if he'd just walked out of a cotton field. Victoria could smell his dried sweat.

She got herself under control and fished in her purse, passed him an envelope containing cash. He stashed it in a pocket without counting it. She swallowed down her excess adrenaline and waited expectantly.

"It's everything you thought," he said quietly, his voice deep but barely audible. "Vegan choir girls, all of 'em missin'. 'Cept for the dead ones at the crash site. An' they all been abused."

"What's the KK doing about it?"

"Nothin'. Coverin' it up. Nobody allowed to see the crash site, no pictures released. Public don't know nothin' about it. They got the news media shut down on this one. Them that know ain't allowed to speak of it. Jis' like yew."

"The girls were scheduled to perform in New Angeles next. How can they not be missed?"

"Concert's been canceled. Story is the girls come down sick. Stomach flu. Had to send the whole passel back to Vega."

Victoria shook her head. "But — when they don't return home, what then? Vega will demand answers. It'll be an interstellar incident. Why would they deliberately provoke the Vegans?"

Charley Main looked over his shoulder, down the alley, then lowered his voice still more.

"Cause that ain't all, Mistress. That ain't nearly all."

He talked for two minutes without interruption. His words gave Victoria a chill. When he finished, she could only stare at his silhouette for long seconds. Finally she found her voice.

"How — how do you know all this? How can you possibly know?"

The old man shrugged.

"I know people, and they know people. W'ite folk don't think twice about talkin' in front of a serf; we jist furniture to them. But I never give you bad dope before, did I?"

She shook her head numbly. She'd met him in a variety of places, never the same place twice. He'd appeared in various disguises, always surprising her.

"No," she admitted. "You never did."

"That's it, Mistress," he said gently. "I gots to go now."

Victoria closed her eyes, trying hard to think. There had to be an explanation. This couldn't be true.

"Wait!" she whispered.

But he had already gone, melted into the night.

Victoria edged out to the street and looked toward the cantina again. The same bawdy

noises emitted from the place, but no one was in sight. She turned and walked quickly back toward the tube station.

* * *

In the alley where she'd met Charley Main, unseen and unheard, a small metallic insect floated ten feet above the ground. Hovering. Until Victoria was out of sight.

Then it turned and streaked off after Charley Main.

Chapter 3

Marlow Plantation, Texiana, Sirius 1

The venison was superb, charbroiled over native Sirian wood with an aroma similar to mesquite and served with vegetables from the Marlow plantation. They ate on the veranda, which offered a stunning view of the river and fields beyond. As dusk fell, night creatures began to sing, chirp, and buzz. The sky changed colors as darkness approached, turning the river that flowed endlessly past the plantation house into molten metal. An elderly black man in a liveried uniform attended the meal. As the dessert dishes were cleared away, Brandon poured brandy for each of them.

"That was incredible!" Oliver told him. "Best food I've eaten in years!"

"We aim to please." Brandon passed a glass to Oliver. Lifting his own, he offered a toast. "To success with the Ministry of Defense."

"Hear-hear." Oliver tipped his glass and savored the fruity liquor as it flowed across his palate. Leaning back in his chair, he felt a rare contentment as he admired the surroundings.

"How big a spread do you have here?" he asked, sweeping an arm at the farmland across the river.

"Just under sixty thousand acres."

"Good god!"

Brandon smiled, but shook his head.

"Not as big as it sounds. Some of the plantations in this part of the country are several times bigger than we are. But it's a living."

"What do you grow?"

"Twenty different row crops; cotton, wheat, cattle — we have something in the ground or on the land year round."

"How big a staff does it take to operate this place?"

"Several thousand, mostly serfs. I don't know all the details — it's mostly my daddy's farm. I have a piece of the action, but farming isn't my thing. When the old man goes I'll probably hire a manager to run it for me."

Oliver shook his head in wonder. In spite of Brandon's modesty, sixty thousand acres was clearly a major operation.

"Well, it's really a beautiful spot here," he said. "I could get used to it."

"Hell, I sort of liked where you live. Colorado, Rocky Mountains, mansion on a mountain top."

Oliver shrugged.

"When you get back from New Birm, I'll show you all the sights. Then we'll run into New Angeles for some night action. Maybe we'll go hunting again. I'm glad you brought that old rifle with you. I swear I didn't know

anybody could shoot like that, without laser sighting and smart ammunition."

Oliver laughed. "All that stuff just takes the fun out of it. The real thrill is when you hit the target all by yourself, without any help from modern technology."

"Remind me never to get you mad at me."

"Forget it. I'm a pacifist. I could never kill a human being. It just isn't in me."

"Sure you could. Anybody could, given the right circumstances."

Oliver shook his head. "No way," he said doggedly. "There's no justification for killing. Ever."

Brandon laughed. "A pacifist who sells military hardware! Unbelievable!"

They chatted on for a half-hour, taking the brandy down to half a bottle. Oliver's eyes grew heavy and he yawned.

"Hang on there, ol' buddy," Brandon cautioned. "You can't pass out on me yet. I got one more treat for you tonight."

Oliver sat up straight and blinked, forcing himself alert. Brandon signaled for the old man.

"Jeeter!"

The elderly serf appeared at the end of the table.

"Yes suh?"

"Bring Tascha here, will you?"

"Yes, suh."

Jeeter moved away and Oliver stirred with curiosity. Brandon was grinning wolfishly.

"I remember you at Berkeley, Ollie," he said. "Different girl every night. I think you screwed the entire female half of the student body."

Oliver laughed. "Only the gold diggers. The nice girls wouldn't even talk to me."

A young woman approached them, her long hair straying in the evening breeze. Backlit by the torches that flickered along the veranda's edge, her face was in shadow, but her figure was willowy and memorable. She stopped beside Brandon and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Ollie, this is Tascha. She's a nice girl and she doesn't even know what a gold digger is."

Oliver stared at her in awe, catching a whiff of exotic perfume.

"Good god!" he whispered. "Is she a slave?"

"Don't concern yourself with that. And before your Puritan morality kicks in, just remember — when in Rome..."

Brandon stood and slid his hand down the girl's back.

"You know where your room is, right?" he asked Oliver. "I'll see you in the morning. Have fun."

Brandon headed into the house; Oliver pulled himself to his feet and approached the girl.

She stood perfectly still, gazing into his eyes as he looked down at her. Up close, he was amazed at her exotic features. Her skin was white, or nearly so, but her face was definitely oriental. High cheekbones, full lips, straight nose. Her green eyes were almond-shaped, her waist-length hair the color of straw. Oliver gazed in awe at her beauty.

"My name is Oliver," he said at last.

"I am Tascha," she told him, her husky voice barely audible. She stood on tiptoe to kiss him, then put her arms around his neck, smiling seductively. "I will show you a good time tonight."

"Are you a slave?" he asked quietly.

"I am here willingly." She tilted her head. "Do you like me?"

He nodded drunkenly. "Yeah, I do."

"I am here for you. I wish only to please you."

She kissed him again, and whatever reservations he might have had melted away. He took Tascha by the hand and led her into the house.

Chapter 4

Friday, 29 May, 0195 (PCC) — New Birmingham, Missibama, Sirius 1

The next morning Brandon dropped Oliver off at the shuttleport in New Angeles, where he caught a rocket for New Birmingham, thirty-five hundred miles away. Ninety minutes later he stepped into a hover cab for the short hop to the Sirian Capitol Complex.

The midmorning was hot and still; Oliver was from Colorado, where the rarified air remained comparatively cool even as the sun burned the skin. Here it was oppressive, with two suns above the horizon. In a few weeks the planet would virtually shut down as Sirian Summer descended in all its blazing fury, a phenomenon caused by the planet orbiting between binary stars. Oliver had heard of it, but hoped never to experience it — he'd be long gone by then.

The Capitol Complex was magnificent. Situated on a hill overlooking the city, it consisted of massive marble structures reminiscent of Ancient Greece and Rome; the Presidential Palace to the right, the High Court to the left, and in the center the Hall of Parliament. The grounds were extensive and inspiring, acres of manicured lawns, tall trees, fountains, frescoes, statues — everything so perfect it almost looked like a model.

The Ministry of Defense was located in a subbasement of the Parliament building, and Oliver found it after only a brief search. He presented his starpass to the clerk and stated his business. Fifteen minutes later he was ushered into the office of the Minister.

"Mah name is Baker, Mr. Lincoln," the Minister said in a lazy drawl. "Ah'm awful happy to make yore acquaintance. Won't yew sit down?"

Baker was short, shriveled, sunburned, and not more than forty-five. He wore a light blue suit with a string tie, making Oliver feel as if he were back in Colorado, or perhaps Texas. They shook hands and Oliver settled into a comfortable chair in front of a wide, polished desk made from a native wood that might have been mahogany, except it was green.

"Somethin' to drink? Coffee? Juice? Maybe a shot of Lightnin'?" Baker's eyes twinkled.

"I'm fine, thanks," Oliver said, feeling unaccountably nervous. "I had coffee on the rocket coming over from Texiana."

"Well, that's good, then. Tell me, how's yore daddy? I haven't seen him in three, four year' now."

"He's doing fine, sir. Said to give you his regards."

"He's a good man. Builds a fine product, too. Yew look a lot like him. Yew enjoyin' yore stay on Sirius?"

"Yes, sir, very much. I'm staying with a friend I met at college back home. His family has a plantation near New Angeles. We've been catching up, did a little hunting, and he introduced me to Lightning."

Baker laughed. "So yew've already tried it! How'd yew like it?"

"I couldn't breathe after the first shot, then I learned how to sip. After that it was okay."

Baker laughed again, a cordial guffaw that set Oliver at ease in spite of the official surroundings.

"Sounds like yew're stayin' with the right people." He sat back then, crossed his legs, and nodded. "So, what kin Ah do for yew?"

Oliver shifted in his chair and cleared his throat, gazing at Baker's cowboy boots.

"My dad has made me liaison to the Confederacy for the fighter contract. Basically, I wanted to meet you, get a feel for what your needs are, and see if there's anything I can do for you. We value your business and want to make sure you remain a satisfied customer."

Baker nodded. "Yew came at a good time. Jist this week the Parl'ament authorized an expansion of our fighter fleet. We're gonna raise six new squadrons in the next year, and we'll be lookin' for more ships to outfit 'em. That means a hundred and twenty fighters, plus about thirty more for spares. And I 'spect we'll need at least two dozen more to beef up

our trainin' units. That's about a hundred an' seventy-five ships, plus spare parts. Think yew kin handle that?"

Oliver was stunned. He'd come on an introductory tour, had never expected an order of new ships. His old man would be ecstatic.

"You bet!" he said. "How about additional munitions?"

Baker shook his head slowly. "Naw, I don't think so. We been served quite well by a couple of local fact'ries. I don't want to export *everything* off world, but we do like yore fighter and nobody around here has ever showed us a better one. As long as yew stay ahead of the local competition, yew can keep the contract."

* * *

Oliver stood on the balcony of his hotel room just after dark, staring at the awesome sky holos that shimmered above New Birmingham. He'd seen similar sights in Tokyo and New York, but never anything like this. The Sirian holos were easily a thousand feet across, as sharp and clear as real life, the colors bright and distinct. Most were product advertisements, but a few were holovids, adventures in the sky. He watched for several minutes, wishing he could hear the sound, but he had no implants.

A chime sounded in the suite behind him, and he stepped inside in time to hear the sexy voice of the hotel AI.

"A visitor is at the door, Mr. Lincoln. It appears to be a young lady."

Oliver grinned. He punched a button near the doorway and the opaque force field turned translucent. Victoria Lincoln stood there, looking fresh and cosmopolitan in an expensive outfit.

"Door open," he said, and the force field disappeared.

His sister stepped through, looked him up and down, and threw her arms around his neck.

"Ollie!" she sighed. "It's *so* good to see you!" She kissed him on the cheek and stepped back, surveying him again.

"Come inside, why don't you," he chided. "Kick off your shoes, stay awhile."

"Hey, just because you finally got your degree doesn't mean you can go giving orders, okay?" She laughed. "You look great!"

"Bullshit. I'm getting fat and losing my hair. You're just being nice because you haven't seen me in ten years."

"It's only been two, Ollie. You always exaggerate everything."

He ordered the force field closed and escorted her into the suite; he poured her a glass of wine and sat down facing her,

drinking in the sight of her. Even as children, they'd always been close.

"How you been?" he asked.

"Busy. Just like you. You get my graduation present?"

"Yes. It arrived the night before the ceremony. You get my thank-you message?"

"Two weeks later!" She laughed again. "Procrastination, Ollie. I always warned you."

"I don't procrastinate, I just put things off."

"How are Mom and Dad?"

"Just like always. Dad's cranky and, well, you know Mom. Everyone is out to get her."

Victoria nodded, her smile fading. She knew only too well.

"So how do you like Sirius?"

"I love this place," he admitted. "Everyone is so friendly here, so down-home. It's like being in Texas or Arkansas."

"Aside from the slavery?"

He nodded soberly. "Yeah. Their attitude toward human rights just boggles my mind."

"Have you gotten laid yet?"

He blinked at her candor, then felt his cheeks flush.

"Hell, I've only been here two days!"

"It shouldn't have taken you that long."

He nodded ruefully. "On the starship they have these women, I guess they're called serfs. They look like a million terros and all they do is solicit the male passengers."

"How many solicited you?"

"All of 'em, I think. Hell, there's not much else to do on a starship for nine days, so ..."

"You came on a Confederate starship."

He nodded. "Never seen anything like it. And the food — god! I never knew barbecue could taste so good!"

"The Sirians do know how to cook."

They sat staring at each other, suddenly at a loss.

"You hungry?" he asked.

"Starving."

"Great. I spotted a restaurant this afternoon, looks like a great eating spot. Already made reservations."

Victoria hesitated, her lovely dark eyes losing their sparkle.

"Actually ... Ollie, let's order room service. I'm really beat, and I'd rather just sit here and talk to you. I hear the chef in this hotel is pretty good."

Surprised, Oliver nodded.

"Sure. I'll call down."

They enjoyed a leisurely dinner of Texiana beef, sautéed green vegetables, and wild rice, with obscenely expensive California wine imported from Terra. Oliver ate until he was stuffed, but judged that it was no better than he'd eaten the night before at Brandon's plantation.

Victoria talked in broad terms about her job, avoiding anything specific, and Oliver told her about his final two years at Berkeley.

"And Dad offered you a vice presidency?" she asked.

"Well, not quite. You know him; doesn't believe in 'shameless nepotism'. He put me in R & D, under Rod Harper. I have to prove myself before I can move up. The only concession he made was to let me liaise with the Confederacy whenever necessary. I think that's because he's tired of making the trip himself."

"Working with Harper will be good for you. You can learn a lot in his department."

"I have no problem with Harper. But some of his people seem a little stiff."

"It isn't easy working with the boss's son. Give them some space, do a good job, and they'll come to respect you on your merits and not your name."

Oliver grinned. "Damn straight, or I'll fire their asses when I take over."

"How's Henry doing?" Henry Wells was Oliver's closest friend.

"He's a congressional aide now, on his way to the big time."

"I always knew there was a politician in him somewhere." Victoria smiled. She'd dated Wells when they were both teenagers. "Politics run in his blood. I expect he'll make history some day."

"And what about Rosemary?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Gorgeous."

"Anything going on between you two?"

"No."

"When are you going make your move? I know you're smitten by her."

"Aw, Christ, Vic — that would be like making a move on you. She's almost like my sister!"

Rosemary Egler had moved into the Lincoln home seven years earlier, when her entire family was killed in a hovercar crash. Oliver Lincoln II and Johnny Egler had been best friends; Lincoln had become legal guardian for the sixteen year-old. Oliver III, aggressive and profane, had found himself at once attracted to and intimidated by the demure brunette; he'd become her big brother, never once acting on his desires.

They chatted aimlessly for another hour. Oliver found it relaxing, but gradually became aware that something wasn't right. The third time Victoria glanced at her watch, he frowned.

"Vic, is something wrong?"

She stared at him as if caught stealing cookies, her brown eyes wide and guilty.

"What do you mean?"

"You've looked at your watch five times in the last hour. You have another appointment later?"

For long seconds her eyes never wavered as she chewed the inside of her cheek. She shook her head abruptly.

"No."

Oliver waited, letting the silence stretch.

"Okay," she said. "There is something. But I'm not sure I should tell you."

"Why not?"

"It might be dangerous for you."

"Dangerous? For *me*?"

"Yes." She heaved a shaky sigh. "Have you heard of the KK?"

"Secret police?"

"They're a lot more than just a police agency. They're the deadliest organization on this planet. Everyone is afraid of them, even Sirian citizens. They have absolute autonomy over everyone, can do anything they want. I doubt if even President Adolph would dare cross them."

Oliver frowned. "Don't they work for him?"

"They were established by Lucius Clay, the Confederacy's first president. They worked for *him*, but after he died they've taken on a life of their own. They forced his son out of office in 0113, and since then every president has served at their pleasure. In a very real sense, they control the planet."

"Okay. What do they have to do with what you want to tell me?"

"What I'm about to tell you is so sensitive that you would be in grave danger if the KK ever found out you knew it."

"That logically means you're in just as much danger," he said.

"Exactly. But if you can keep your mouth shut until you get home, we'll both be a lot safer. Can you do that?"

"Of course. What is it, the story of the century?"

"That's exactly what it is."

"Are you serious?"

"As a scorpion snake. Look, the only reason I'm telling you this is because I don't trust anyone else. And if anything happens to me ..."

"Whoa! Hold it! Why don't you just come home with me? File your story from New York and the KK can't touch you."

"I can't leave yet. I don't have all the details, and I need them before I can file. In the meantime — don't interrupt! In the meantime, if the KK should catch on to me, I need to tell someone else who can sound a warning."

Oliver felt an involuntary shiver pass over him. Victoria was so spooked he was starting to believe her.

"Okay, Vic," he said quietly. "Start talking."

In less than a minute she told him about the Vegan choirgirls, the bus wreck, and the KK cover-up.

"I have a source," she continued, "an independent informant. I don't know where he gets his data, but I've used him for over a year and he's never been wrong yet. I contacted him, and in a matter of hours he was able to tell me that the tour bus was deliberately attacked by some kind of rocket launcher or energy weapon. Half a dozen girls were killed and the rest were abducted."

Oliver frowned. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Hey, little brother, this is the Sirian Confederacy. Kidnap and rape is a participation sport here. The law doesn't protect women who aren't citizens."

"But the Vegan girls are foreign nationals! Sirians can't just indiscriminately attack foreign women, can they? I mean, it would kill tourism."

"As a general rule, you're right. The average tourist is perfectly safe here. But my informant told me that the KK abducted the choirgirls and is holding them captive. That explains the cover-up about the tour bus, and the story that the girls went home because of illness."

"But if the girls don't show up on Vega, that's going to cause trouble," he said. "I hear there's already tension between Vega and Sirius."

"Yes. It's been building for several years, and within the last few months it's become

positively explosive. That's the other part of this. When the girls don't return to Vega, Queen Ursula is going to scream bloody murder."

"So the KK will have to produce the girls. Or explain what happened to them."

Victoria sighed deeply and shook her head.

"No, Ollie, they won't. Because they don't plan to give the girls back."

"What?"

"They'll probably end up in a government slave market somewhere."

"Vega will never stand for that. Will they?"

"You're not listening to me, Ollie. Shut up for a minute, will you!"

He spread his hands. "Sorry."

She stared at him for fully ten seconds, her face creased with stress.

"I don't know when," she said, "and I need to find out, because I need to break this story before it happens ..."

"Before *what* happens?"

"Some time in the next few weeks, a few months at most — the Sirian Confederacy is going to invade."

Oliver blinked stupidly. "Invade who?"

"*Vega*, goddammit! Sirius is going to attack *Vega*!"

Chapter 5

New Birmingham, Missibama, Sirius 1

Oliver sat dumbfounded. His sister's dark eyes looked tormented. She kneaded her fingers without apparently noticing it.

"Are you sure?" he asked finally.

"Yes. As I said, this particular source has never been wrong yet. Not once."

"Do you have any evidence? Anything concrete?"

"Just what he told me. I need more than that before I can file the story, but I have to treat this as if it's genuine."

"Vic, if it is, and if the KK ever finds out that you're on it ..."

"I know. That's why I needed to tell you. If anything happens to me, you can ..."

"What? Tell Dad? Who the hell else am I going to tell? Who will believe me?"

She stared at him for long seconds, then nodded slowly. "You're right. Without the evidence, it's worthless."

Oliver leaned forward.

"My advice to you is forget it. It isn't worth your life. From what you said, the KK plays for keeps."

She shook her head again. "Ollie, how can I forget it? If I can verify this, it's the biggest story I'll ever see."

"You're thinking of your *career*? Christ, Sis, I'm worried about your *life*!"

"What about the millions who will die if it's true?"

"You think you can stop it? Do you seriously think the Confederates will cancel their plans just because you filed a news story on Terra? Hell, the Solar Federation isn't going to take any action. We don't even have a military to speak of. If we did, LincEnt would be selling fighters to them. The way it is now, our Space Force couldn't stop a fucking bank robbery!"

Victoria stood and paced around the suite. Oliver watched her, waiting for her reaction. Finally she turned.

"Whatever happens, Ollie, I have to do this. I have to."

"Dad would tell you otherwise."

"Yes, I know. But he calls me the black sheep, so what does it matter."

Oliver felt a stab of pain at her words. Their father, Oliver Lincoln II, hadn't been pleased with Victoria's career choice, nor her liberal political views. Victoria was clearly aware of that.

"He loves you, Vic. He doesn't want you to get hurt."

She smiled bitterly. "I've got to go, Ollie. How long are you staying on Sirius?"

"A few more days."

"Watch your ass, okay?"

He rose and crossed the room to put his arms around her.

"It isn't my ass I'm worried about," he told her. "You don't do anything stupid, okay?"

She kissed his cheek, then laid her head on his shoulder.

"I love you, Ollie."

"I love you, too. And I'm very proud of you."

She smiled at him. "Be good, Ollie. I'll see you soon."

From a hotel room sixty yards away, an invisible laser beam kissed the window of Oliver Lincoln III's hotel suite. The sound of Victoria's departure rode the beam back to the surveillance equipment in the darkened room.

"She's movin'," the agent at the window said into his implant. "She just left subject number two."

"She on the street yet?"

"Negat."

"Did she self-incriminate?"

"Yep. Completely."

"Keep me posted."

"What about subject two? Do I take him out?"

There was a long silence. Then,

"No. We can't risk it. Right now he ain't a threat."

"She told him everything."

"It's in his best interest to do nothin'. His company sells us combat spacecraft. He met

with the Defense Ministry this mornin'. Let him go."

The agent at the window sighed, disappointed.

"Okay." He leaned forward, glasses to his eyes. "She's on the street now. Looks like she's headin' back to her own building."

"Good. I'll take it from here. You kin pack it in. Good job."

* * *

Victoria Lincoln let herself into the apartment and locked the door.

"Lights on." She turned toward the kitchen for something to drink. An oppressive dread clung to her bones; she had a lot to think about. She crossed the living room and dropped her handbag on the table.

"Evenin', Miz Lincoln."

Victoria spun so hard she almost fell down, a scream at her lips. Ice water surged through her veins.

The man was seated on the couch, slouched so low she hadn't seen him. She stared at him in horror, a hand over her heart.

"Jesus Christ!" she gasped. "Who the hell are you?"

He got slowly to his feet, never taking his eyes off her. He was slender, medium height, and blond. He wore a sport jacket and tie; a small round pin was attached to his lapel, shiny black with a lightning bolt. His eyes were the color of cobalt, his thin lips twisted

in a little sneer; he looked amused. He took a deep breath, tilted his head to the side, and raised his eyebrows.

"Don't really matter who I am, Miz Lincoln," he said in a lazy drawl. "What's important is my message."

"Message? What message?" She frowned. "Has something happened to my ..." She almost said "brother", but caught herself just in time. "Has something happened?" she amended.

His sneer relaxed into a solemn glare. "Why don't you tell me?" he suggested.

"Tell you what? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, Miz Lincoln — kin I call you Victoria? Come on, Victoria. I think you know 'zactly what I mean."

Victoria tried to think, to collect herself. He was going to play games, so she had to lose the angel-in-a-solar-flare expression and make a fight of it. The odds were he only wanted to scare her.

"Okay, look —" She forced a scowl and marched toward the door. "I want you out of here. Right now! Or I'll call the police!"

He smiled easily.

"That's good, Victoria. That's really good. I didn't know your résumé included drama trainin'."

He stretched leisurely, never breaking eye contact.

"I think you oughta drop the innocent act and sit down, Victoria. You and me, we need to have us a little talk."

She glared at him, her mind racing. For a brief instant she considered racing out the door and trying to see how far she would get. But he would have backup all over the building. And if she should by some miracle actually get away, what then? They might go after Oliver.

"Talk about what? And stop calling me Victoria."

He dipped his head in acquiescence. "All right, Miz Lincoln. If that's the way you want it. Now, suppose you sit down."

She hesitated.

"I got all night, Miz Lincoln. And it won't make no difference in the long run. You might as well sit down."

She slowly returned to the living room and settled onto the edge of a chair, keeping several feet away from him.

"Who are you?" she repeated. "What's this about?"

He gazed at her with eyes that made her skin crawl. He slowly settled onto a footstool, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You ever seen a women's prison on Sirius, Miz Lincoln?"

She gulped, hating the weakness, knowing he understood its meaning.

"Yes."

He nodded encouragingly. "That's good, Miz Lincoln. Cause then I don't need to explain to you what life is like in a women's prison. I don't need to tell you about the food, or the whuppin's, or the weekly schedule for fuckin'. I don't need to tell you that the guards in women's prisons are the lowest paid men on Sirius." He smiled cynically. "You know *why* they're the lowest paid, Miz Lincoln? It's because there is a big long line of men volunteerin' for the work. They volunteer because of all that caged pussy jist sittin' there waitin' for them. Did you know that?"

Her stomach churned, but somehow she managed to keep an angry look on her face.

"This is all very interesting," she told him. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

He smiled briefly.

"Keep it up, Miz Lincoln. A pretty girl like you will find lotsa boyfriends in lockup. Lotsa boyfriends."

"I haven't broken any laws," she said.

His eyebrows shot up.

"You sure about that? No laws at all?"

She leaned forward, fighting to keep the tremor out of her voice. "What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

He tilted his head again, insolence in his eyes.

"We have him, Miz Lincoln. We have your serf buddy."

Good god!

"What — what 'serf buddy'?"

"The old niggo you met at Traver Ranch. Code name Charlemagne."

Victoria felt her lungs seize. Charlemagne. *Charley Main.*

"I-I don't know anyone by that name."

He nodded slowly.

"I see. You don't know him. Well, then, I reckon I musta made a mistake."

He stood up, stretched lazily, and pushed his hands into his pockets.

"Then let me jis' say this, Miz Lincoln. We welcome foreign nationals as guests here on Sirius, but we take a mighty dim view when those same guests decide to shit on us."

Victoria stared up at him with bated breath.

"Be careful where you shit, Miz Lincoln. Be mighty careful where you shit."

He pinned her with his lifeless blue eyes for another moment, then turned toward the door and let himself out.

As soon as the door materialized behind him, Victoria fell back into her chair, sobbing tears of relief.

* * *

In a small control room near the top of the apartment building, a man sat staring at a lighted display screen. When his communicator beeped, he spoke into his implant.

"Wolfhound Three."

"Is everything set up?"

"Affirm. Overrides in place, bypass set. How'd it go?"

"'Bout like I expected. She acted innocent. I gave her a chance to come clean, but no go."

The man in the control room nodded. "So ..."

"You have a green light. Proceed with Plan Bravo."

"Plan Bravo. Understood." The man in the control room leaned forward and flipped a toggle switch. "Plan Bravo is active."

* * *

"You have a call, Miss Lincoln. It appears to be a young gentleman."

The AI had to repeat it twice before Victoria raised her head, still numb from her encounter with the intruder.

"Oh my god!" she gasped. "Oliver!" Had he also received a visit?

"Call connect," she said, scrambling toward the vidphone. The screen flickered to life and she peered intently at the face looking back at her. To her relief, it wasn't Oliver. To her horror, it was Tony Colombini.

His face looked like hamburger.

"Vic?" he mumbled. "Are you—"

"Tony! What happened?" She was sure she already knew.

"Someb-body..."

"Oh, Jesus, Tony!" Her tears threatened again. "How bad are you hurt?"

"I-I dunno. I think some —" He winced. "— some ribs are busted. I c-can't — see too well."

Victoria saw blood dripping from his chin.

"Stay where you are, Tony. I'm coming down. But first I'm calling you an ambulance."

"No! D-don't. They said — they ..."

"How many were there, Tony?"

"Two. Least, that's all I saw. I don't — don't know wh-who the hell they w-were."

"They were KK, Tony. One came here, too."

His one open eye reflected his concern. "Christ, Vic! Did he ..."

"No, he just tried to scare me. He succeeded, too."

"Are you sure? That he was KK?"

"Yes. He had the lapel pin."

Tony closed his good eye. "Oh, god!" he moaned. "Listen, Vic, no ambulance. Promise me."

"Why not?"

He tried to laugh, but it came out as a choking sound.

"Because they said so."

Victoria decided this argument could wait.

"Okay, no ambulance. But I'm coming down. See you in two minutes."

She disconnected before he could reply. Steeling herself to move, she headed for the door. Tony lived in the same building, two floors below. Perhaps together they could decide what to do next.

Victoria hurried into the corridor outside her apartment and headed for the anti-grav lift thirty feet away. She would take care of Tony, and then ...

What? Continue with her story? Risk a Sirian prison, or worse? How important was all this to her personally? Did she really have what it took to be a hard-nosed journalist? Was it worth her life? Maybe Oliver was right; even if she broke the story on Terra, what would it change? How many lives could she save?

She reached the lift and reached for the Down button, debating whether to call Oliver and accept his invitation to take her home. She would have to decide by morning, before he left New Birmingham.

The anti-grav opened and Victoria stepped inside. The floor shimmered blue, translucent, giving her a view of the elevator well that stretched downward to eternity.

"You are on floor one-thirty-four," the AI said casually, as if all were right in the universe. "Which floor is your destination?"

"Floor one thirty-two," Victoria said.

"Thank you."

The door materialized and Victoria waited. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She'd get through this. She'd ask Tony to go home as well. The New York office would reassign them. Or not — it didn't matter. After tonight, she didn't care if she never ...

The lights went out. Victoria opened her eyes. The lift hadn't moved. She opened her mouth to repeat the destination ...

The shimmering blue floor sparked once — and vanished. Victoria Lincoln, twenty-eight, had time for a long, drawn-out scream as she plunged one hundred thirty-four floors to her death.

Chapter 6

Saturday, 30 May, 0195 (PCC) — New Birmingham, Missibama, Sirius 1

Oliver was up early for his flight back to New Angeles. As he finished packing the only bag he'd brought with him, room service arrived with breakfast — eggs, bacon, and biscuits with gravy. A country breakfast, Confederate style.

With a glance at his watch, he sat down to eat.

Sleeping had been difficult last night. Victoria's assertions about the Sirian intention to invade the Vega system, coupled with concern for her safety, had made him restless. It did make sense, when he thought about it. Brandon's account of Vega executing Sirians, Baker's statement about expanding the Confederate fighter fleet — in the light of Victoria's information, it all seemed to fit.

He had another four days on the planet. Before he left, perhaps he could persuade his sister to leave with him. He'd give it his best shot.

"You have a call, Mr. Lincoln," the hotel AI informed him. "It appears to be a subspace call, from Oliver Lincoln II."

Oliver sat upright in surprise. His dad? What the hell?

Pushing his food away, Oliver walked over to the holoviewer and sat down in front of it. For some reason his heartbeat intensified.

"Call connect," he said.

The holo image appeared instantly, flickered, and steadied. His father's face looked out at him. Oliver Lincoln II was fifty, an inch taller than the son, and about the same weight. The two men looked very much alike, though the father had lost a lot more hair. To keep them straight, Oliver's mother had taken to calling them Oliver Two and Oliver Three.

"Dad?" Oliver instantly noticed the red in his dad's eyes, the puffiness, the sleepless look. Lights were on behind him; he was calling from his bedroom. "What's up? What time is it there?"

"I dunno," Lincoln replied. "Four-thirty, I think."

"In the *morning*?" Oliver felt a jolt of dread. Had something happened to his mother?

"Glad I caught you," Lincoln said in a hoarse voice. "I tried the Marlow plantation and they gave me this number."

"What is it, Dad? What's going on?"

The older man cleared his throat, as if with effort. He didn't answer for several seconds.

"We, uh — we got a call a little while ago. From Tony Colombini."

Oliver frowned. The name was familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"Who's that?"

"He works with Victoria. Her holocam guy."

"Okay, I remember ..." His heart froze, the blood drained out of his face. "Oh, Jesus, Dad! What's happened?"

"Son... Victoria —" His dad's voice cracked. He lowered his face into his hands. Oliver didn't need to hear the rest. It was easy enough to guess. But the elder Lincoln regained control and looked up again. "Son, Victoria is dead."

It took Oliver an hour to get moving. The shock was overwhelming, but the expected reaction didn't set in. That would come later. At the moment, he had too many things to do.

He located Tony Colombini without too much trouble. The young man peered fearfully through the force field with his one good eye. They'd met once back on Terra, and Tony recognized him. He released the door control and Oliver stepped inside the suite.

Tony's face was a mess, the left side badly swollen, the skin black and purple. He could barely speak through broken lips, and teeth seemed to be missing.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Oliver asked, wincing at the sight.

Tony shook his head. He was trembling, as if weak with fatigue. "God!" he mumbled. "This is my worst fucking nightmare!" He pronounced it "nightbare".

Oliver took him by the arm and guided him to a couch, then sat down facing him.

"My dad called," he said. "He said you looked like somebody had beaten you up. What happened?"

Tony stared at him in silence for a moment, then shook his head.

"I can't talk about it," he mumbled. "Not here."

"Was it the K —"

"Don't say it! Don't say anything! I don't trust this place."

Oliver nodded slowly. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe when we get back to Terra."

"You're going back to Terra?"

"Damn right I am! Fuck this job! I don't need this."

Oliver had a million questions to ask. He picked one that Tony might consider safe to answer.

"How did you find out? About — about Victoria?"

"Building management. They knew we worked together. They told the police. Police came to see me."

"Did the police see your face?"

Tony nodded. "I told them I fell in the shower."

"And they *believed* you?" Oliver was incredulous.

"They pretended to. That was enough."

"And you called my dad?"

"Yes. I knew you were in town, but I didn't know where. I'm really sorry about your sister. How are you doing?"

Oliver shrugged, staring at his hands. "It hasn't sunk in yet."

Tony glanced around the room, as if searching for invisible bugs. Then, breaking his own rule of silence:

"It wasn't an accident, Oliver."

Oliver nodded. "I know."

* * *

"How old was your sister?"

The police captain sat back in an old fashioned swivel chair with his legs crossed and his fingers interlocked behind his head. He was a big man, firm and fit, with greying hair cut military style. His name was Pitts.

"She was twenty-eight."

"What was she doing on Sirius?"

Oliver stirred in irritation.

"She was a journalist with the biggest holonews network on Terra. Captain, don't you already know all this? I thought your department was investigating her death."

Pitts watched him through unblinking eyes. Pokerfaced, his thoughts impossible to read.

"We're investigating the *accident*," he said evenly. "To investigate her 'death' would suggest that something illegal happened."

Oliver just looked at him.

"Is that what you think?" Pitts pressed. "That something illegal happened?"

"I don't know. Captain, I was notified that my sister died in an accident. It's quite a shock. I need to find out what happened. Anything you can tell me would help a lot."

Pitts didn't blink.

"The accident report says the anti-grav lift failed. She fell. Goddamned shame, but that's all there is to it."

He waited for Oliver's response, long seconds passing in silence.

"Do anti-grav lifts fail very often on Sirius?" Oliver asked.

"Why? You want to sue the manufacturer?"

"Should I? Would I have a case?"

"I'm not a lawyer."

"I've ridden anti-grav lifts all my life," Oliver said. "I've never heard of one failing. Have you?"

"Don't remember. Don't mean much one way or another, though. Orbital shuttles don't crash very often, either, but it does happen."

Oliver didn't know if the man was stonewalling him, but there clearly wasn't much sympathy in his attitude. Frustrated, he took a chance.

"Captain, is your department connected with the KK?"

Pitts's eyes narrowed further. "Why do you ask?"

"It's an honest question."

"No, we're not." The eyes had turned colder.

"My sister was visited by the KK just a few minutes before she died."

"So?"

"That's quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

"The question in my mind is, what did your sister do to warrant a visit from the KK? They don't usually just drop in for coffee."

"Victoria was a journalist. She probably found out something she shouldn't have."

"Like what?"

"How should I know?"

"So you think the KK killed your sister?" The eyes hadn't changed, but the voice had dropped an octave or two.

Oliver held up both hands.

"I'm not accusing anyone of anything. But it seems really odd that she would plunge to her death five minutes after the KK left her apartment."

"You're on a goose chase, boy." Pitts leaned forward. "Son, I'm sorry about your sister. But I was you, I wouldn't go around repeating anything you've told me. Nobody fucks with the KK. They're a branch off the SE. You heard of them?"

Oliver shook his head.

"Sirian Elite Guards. Military. KK is the civilian version. We don't always approve of their methods, but they are necessary. You'd

do well to forget about 'em. If your sister crossed them, then she was doing somethin' illegal, pure and simple."

"I don't believe that for a second!" Oliver retorted.

"Believe it or don't, I don't care. But you're still alive. Smart thing for you to do is, collect your sister's body, pick up a few souvenirs, and catch the first starship back where you came from. Now, I'm not gonna report your allegations to the KK —"

"They weren't allegations!"

"— even though I'm supposed to. But if you don't keep this to yourself, I won't be able to help you. Nobody will."

It was the closest thing to a threat Oliver had heard since he arrived. He stared at the officer in dismay, but Pitts didn't budge or change expression. Finally Oliver got to his feet and left without another word.

* * *

Brandon Marlow arrived just after noon. Oliver was back in his suite, staring out the window with a glass of scotch in his hand, trying to sort things out. He'd extended his reservation for another two days.

"God damn, Ollie," Brandon said as Oliver let him in, "I am so fucking sorry!"

Oliver nodded, biting his lip. Brandon embraced him fraternally and held him for nearly a minute.

"So fucking sorry!" he repeated.

"Thanks for coming," Oliver said as they took seats across from each other.

"Hey, the minute I heard what your dad had to say, I called the shuttleport and booked a flight. Nobody should have to go through this alone."

Oliver brought him up to date on what he knew, what Tony had told him.

"Brandon, have you ever heard of an anti-grav lift failing like that? I never have, not in my entire life."

Brandon shook his head. "I can't remember a case. What are you thinking?"

Oliver shrugged. "Well, I suppose it could happen, but we're talking force field technology. It isn't something that's going to fail just because a bearing wears out or a cable fractures. Those things have multiple redundancies. It seems awfully goddamned strange."

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"Like I said, it might be. But what are the odds?"

"I don't know." Brandon appeared uncomfortable. "What are you gonna do now?"

"I have to claim the body and make arrangements to get her home, and I have to collect her personal effects. I guess I won't be coming back to your place. I left some luggage there —"

"I'll ship it. Don't worry about a thing."

Oliver nodded his thanks.

"Tascha will be disappointed," Brandon added.

"What?"

"She really likes you." Brandon smiled. "She said you treated her like a real lady."

Oliver didn't know what to say to that. Tascha. A half-breed, quarter-breed — whatever the hell she was — serf girl, trapped on a world where she was valued only for her body. Treated her like a lady? He'd fucked her like a whore. What the hell had he been thinking?

He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"Tell her she *is* a real lady. I'm sorry I won't see her again."

"I'll tell her."

* * *

Victoria had been taken to New Birmingham Mortality Repository, an antiseptic name for the city morgue. Brandon accompanied Oliver to claim the body. The office was underground, as depressing as one might expect. The clerk was a pale, humorless individual who reminded Oliver of a mole.

"My condolences on your loss, Mr. Lincoln," he said. "Have you made arrangements here, or do you wish to ship the remains back to Terra?"

Oliver grimaced. *Remains?* What the hell were they talking about here, the leftover clippings from a sewing contest? Why not

"remnants", "wreckage", or "droppings"? Was his sister's body just so much garbage in a bag?

With an effort, he suppressed his irritation and answered the question.

"Back to Terra," he said. "She'll be buried at home."

"Very well, sir." The clerk reached for a stack of forms and spun them around for Oliver to see. "I'll need you to complete these documents and return them tomorrow. The fee will be twenty-four thousand sirios, payable in advance. Unless you prefer to arrange shipping yourself, whereupon you will need to provide me with —"

"Excuse me." Brandon nudged Oliver aside. "I think we can shortcut some of that."

He slipped a plastic card to the clerk, who glanced at it, then looked at Brandon with widening eyes. He scanned the card in a reader and handed it back.

"Thank you, Captain." His voice was almost a whisper. He looked at Oliver. "Everything is taken care of, Mr. Lincoln. Simply give me the address to which you'd like the remains shipped. Transit to Terra will require approximately ten days."

Oliver had been about to explode; now he just stared at the man in dismay.

"I don't know the address," he said. "Denver, Colorado, North America. Any

funeral home, and have them notify Lincoln Enterprises when the body arrives."

"Very good, sir."

Oliver glanced at Brandon, then back to the clerk. "Is there going to be an autopsy?"

The mole man shook his head. "Apparently the cause of death is quite obvious. In any case, there isn't much left to autopsy."

"What the hell did you just do in there?" Oliver asked when they were back on the street. "That credit card of yours worked like magic."

Brandon shrugged. "I just tried to expedite things."

"I'll reimburse you."

"Not necessary." Brandon hailed a hover cab.

"He called you 'captain'," Oliver said. "What the hell is going on?"

A cab settled to the street beside them. Brandon opened the door but didn't get in. He met Oliver's eyes squarely.

"All expenses will be paid, Ollie. To answer your next question, it wasn't a credit card. It was my ID card. I'm a captain in the Guards."

The numbness Oliver had been feeling all day intensified. He suddenly felt as if the universe was spinning him around with it.

"Why would the Confederate Army pay for Victoria's — transit?"

"I'm sure I'll be questioned about it," Brandon said, "but by then your sister will be home. I'll promise never to do it again and that will be that. You're my friend, Ollie. It's the least I can do."

"But ..."

"Just accept it. Okay? As a friend."

They got into the cab.

After a late lunch, Brandon accompanied Oliver back to Victoria's building. The manager took them up the security lift and let them into the suite. Oliver entered with a sense of dread, holding his emotions in check with an effort.

He half expected the place to be trashed by the KK, but everything was neat and orderly. The furnishings mostly belonged to the building, very few personal touches in evidence. Only when they entered Victoria's bedroom did Oliver sense his sister's presence: her clothing in the closet, her cosmetics, a lingering trace of perfume in the air; two holographs — one of his parents, the other of him — three portable journalism computers, a small camera.

Other than that, there were very few personal effects to be recovered. He remembered her as a pack rat, somewhat sloppy and disorganized, but saw none of that here. She'd been on Sirius a year and a half, but her room looked as if she'd just moved in.

Yet there was no sign that anything had been tampered with.

In twenty minutes he had everything packed. Brandon watched in silence.

As they stepped out of the apartment, Oliver stopped. He stared at the anti-grav lift thirty feet from Victoria's door. He felt his head throb at the sight of it. For just a moment he hesitated, then walked toward it.

The door was closed, but flashing lights indicated that it was in use. Oliver watched it for a moment, feeling his heart beat wildly.

"What's wrong?" Brandon stood beside him, watching his face.

"This is it," Oliver said. "This is where she died."

Brandon was silent, looking at the lights.

"If a piece of equipment failed at LincEnt," Oliver said, "and somebody was hurt, we'd take it offline for days until we figured out what happened and why."

"What are you getting at?"

"The lift is still running."

Sunday, 31 May, 0195 (PCC) — New Birmingham, Missibama, Sirius 1

"You sure you're going to be okay?" Brandon asked as they walked into the shuttleport terminal. "You look a little pale."

Oliver nodded. "It hasn't really hit me yet. It's all like a bad dream. But I'll handle it."

"If there's anything I can do ..."

"You've done a hell of a lot already. You don't know how grateful I am."

They crossed the main concourse toward Brandon's gate. They'd gotten shit-faced the night before, and Oliver's head still pounded.

"You're welcome to come back to my place for a few days."

"Thanks. But I need to get Victoria home. I need to see my family."

They passed a security checkpoint. The Confederate soldier on duty checked Brandon's pass, then handed it back and saluted. Brandon returned the salute as naturally as if he did it every day.

"How did he know you're in the army?" Oliver asked as they rode the slide walk through the tunnel to the gate. "You're not in uniform."

"He saw this." Brandon touched the pin on his lapel.

Oliver had seen it earlier without much interest. Now he took notice of the ebony surface, and the lightning bolt slashing across it.

His headache intensified, and he closed his eyes briefly, forgetting the pin.

"Well, this is it," Brandon said as they reached the gate. Through a broad window they could see the shuttle already loading. "Take care, Ollie. Come back and see me when you get the chance."

Oliver accepted the firm handshake and nodded.

"I will. You know where I live, too, so ..."

"I'll find a reason."

Brandon grinned at him, then embraced him briefly. Oliver watched with mixed emotions as his friend turned and walked through the gate to board the shuttle.

The following morning, Oliver went home.

Chapter 7

Wednesday, 10 June, 0195 (PCC) — Denver, CO, North America, Terra

Victoria was buried in the Lincoln family plot, a small private cemetery located a hundred yards behind the family home. It was a pristine area guarded by a jagged mountain peak several hundred feet higher than the surrounding terrain. Songbirds and Mountain Jays chased each other through tall pines surrounding the plot. It was a clear summer morning, sunny but not hot, the sky a gorgeous blue with no trace of cloud.

In addition to family and friends, several dozen LincEnt employees were present, as well as Tony Colombini and two executives from North American HoloNews. The graveside service was short and solemn, presided over by a Christian minister Oliver had never met. He hardly heard what the man was saying as he sat woodenly beside his mother, wondering when his grief would overtake him. Since Victoria's death twelve days earlier he had yet to shed a tear, but felt as if his insides were filled with fractured ice.

Beside him, his mother wept loudly, inconsolable, making everyone uncomfortable. Rosemary Egler sat on his other side, dry-eyed but biting her lip. Tall and brunette, at twenty-three she carried

herself with a grace that could only be described as regal. Her hair was the color of roasted coffee beans, and she wore it in a sweeping upward coif that made her look several years older.

Afterward Oliver stood with his dad, receiving guests who generally all said the same thing; he shook hands and muttered his thanks, hardly noticing who was talking to him.

The last man in line was Henry Wells, Oliver's best friend. Shorter than Oliver, even shorter than Rosemary, Henry was neat and impeccable, his hair blond, his eyes blue. He wore an expensive three-piece suit, dark grey with a pinstripe; his tie bore the seal of the United Solar Federation Congress.

He embraced Oliver without a word, then shook hands grimly, blinking back his tears.

"When did you get in?" Oliver asked.

"Just an hour ago. I barely got here for the service."

"How long can you stay?"

"Have to go back tomorrow."

"We need to talk. Can you stay here tonight?"

Henry nodded. "No problem."

Rosemary suddenly appeared beside them. She'd led Maxine Lincoln back to the house, but now walked up to Oliver and put her arms around his neck. She kissed him on the cheek,

then gazed into his eyes a moment, blinking back her own tears.

"Oliver, you're going to be all right," she told him in a quiet, husky voice. "I know exactly what you're going through. If you need to talk, I'll be here for you."

Oliver took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of her perfume. He nodded uncomfortably.

"Thanks. I know you will."

* * *

Guests milled about the house all day, dispersing slowly. Oliver didn't get a chance to talk to Henry until late in the afternoon. As the sun disappeared behind the mountains they settled into patio chairs. Oliver poured scotch and for a moment they drank in silence.

"How are things in Congress?" Oliver asked finally.

Henry only stared at him. "Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

Oliver took a deep breath, rotating his shot glass with his fingers.

"I want to know about Sirius and Vega," he said.

"What about them?"

Oliver met his eyes. "There's going to be a war between them. But you probably already know that."

Henry leaned forward, frowning. "Where did you hear that?"

"You've heard it, too?"

"Where did *you* hear it?"

"Victoria told me."

Henry sat back with an explosion of released breath. "Good god in heaven, how did *she* find out?"

"She was working on some story. One of her street sources told her. And the KK killed her for it."

Henry's face went pale. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"I know *exactly* what I'm saying."

"Can you prove it?"

"Of course not. They made it look like an accident. But in my entire life I've never heard of an anti-grav lift failing."

"Aside from that, what makes you think they killed her?"

"They visited Tony Colombini the night she died, and they beat the living snot out of him. Tony called Vic and she told him she also had a visit. She was on her way down to help Tony when the lift failed."

"When did Vic tell you about the Sirian invasion plans?"

"That same night. We had dinner together just an hour before her death."

"So... If the KK knew that she knew, they also know she told you."

"Probably." Oliver nodded, though he hadn't put that piece together yet.

"Why didn't they kill you?"

Oliver thought about that for a long moment, then shook his head slowly. "I don't know. Until this moment it never occurred to me." He shook his head again. "I just don't know. But right now, Henry, I want to talk about Sirius and Vega."

"You mean the possibility of war?"

"Yes. What do you know about that?"

Henry sat immobile for ten seconds, his expression strained. Finally he shook his head.

"I do have access to certain information," he admitted, "but most of it's classified. I really can't tell you much."

"Then tell me a little. It's obvious that you already knew the Sirians are going to attack Vega. You probably got that from the FIA." The Federation Intelligence Agency had replaced the CIA when the Federation was first formed.

"The FIA does keep us informed on certain matters."

"What's your take on the Sirius-Vega crisis?"

"It's been building for a long time. Sirius has been leaning on the Vegan government to sell them slaves. Obviously the Vegans refuse, and that's really the bottom line. Everything

else that's been going on is real enough, but not enough to go to war over."

"I heard it was about Vega executing Sirian criminals."

"That's just window dressing, a banner the Sirians wave for their own people, and to justify their actions to the rest of the interstellar community. The simple fact is that a significant percentage of the Sirian economy depends on the slave trade. Slave sales have been sagging in recent years and they need a new source for imports. Vega has the most exotic women in the galaxy, and Sirius wants some of them. If they can get Vegan women, they can charge exorbitant prices and that will stimulate their economy for years to come. Pure and simple."

Oliver let his breath out in a long sigh. "So it's true. Sirius is going to attack Vega."

"Looks that way."

"And they're going to use Lincoln fighters to do it."

Henry only nodded.

"Do you have any idea when?" Oliver asked. "How long before the invasion is scheduled?"

Henry shrugged. "Hard to say. It could be a few weeks away or as long as a year. Our information isn't that detailed."

"No more than a year?"

"Probably less, but I can't see the Sirians being ready for another six months at least."

Oliver poured Henry another drink, then refreshed his own.

"Tell me about the Vegans," he said. "You lived there for awhile."

"Nine years." Henry's father had been ambassador to Vega when Henry was a boy.

"Can the Vegan military fight off the Sirians?"

"Not a chance. The Vegan Guard was originally formed with the help of Sirian advisors. At first the two worlds were allies, until about ten years ago when Queen Ursula took the throne and canceled the alliance. Since then the Vegans have fallen behind in military hardware and technology. They'll fight, certainly, but they won't win. Especially with the Sirians flying Lincoln fighters — they won't stand a chance."

Oliver's eyes lost their focus for a moment. His family's fighters would be used to start a war of aggression, to subjugate a free society. Perhaps an arms manufacturer shouldn't care about such things, but he'd always assumed that Lincoln fighters were built for defense only.

"What are the Vegans like?" he asked.

"Cultured. Artistic. A gentle people. The original settlers were from Scandinavia, France, Italy, and Greece. They have a sort of national conscience, nothing like you see here. About half are members of the Cult of Sophia."

"What's that?"

"Sophia is their goddess, named after their first queen. She's the mother of life, the lawgiver — typical religious stuff. The cultists are extremely moral and very rigid in sexual matters — prohibitions against adultery, premarital sex, and sexual liberation. The nonreligious are just the opposite — sexually liberated, live and let live.

"With very few exceptions, the entire population venerates their queen. They worship beauty, they obey the law — as a civilization, I've never seen anything like them."

"What will happen to them after the Sirians invade?"

"You mean, aside from the rape and slaughter the Sirians will commit?" Henry shrugged helplessly. "That will all disappear."

Thursday, 11 June, 0195 (PCC) — Denver, CO, North America, Terra

Lincoln Enterprises was located about halfway between the Lincoln home and the city of Denver. Sprawling across forty acres of land, the complex had been built a half-century earlier by Oliver Lincoln III's grandfather. The original product had been an orbital fighter used by the UFF Space Force as a tool of law enforcement, primarily to interdict smugglers and intimidate pirates. Two more models had been sold in limited

quantities before the Federation Congress bowed to activist pressure and placed a moratorium on military expenditures.

LincEnt had then expanded its product line to build luxury space yachts and deep-space lifeboats, adding a plant in Arizona and another in Florida. The Fighter Division had languished for over a decade, until the Sirian Confederacy placed an order in 0181. Since then, the Denver facility had done a booming business.

The morning after the funeral, Oliver took a hovercar down to the plant and settled onto a parking lot a dozen yards from the Executive Tower, a slender five-story building that housed the corporate offices. At the top floor he stepped off the lift into a spacious reception area. The décor was pretty standard — small pines with holographic birds flitting among them. The ten-foot waterfall was real enough, but the room was too cramped for anything more elaborate.

Oliver stopped in front of two desks and looked at the women behind them. One was Rosemary Egler, who eyed him with cautious curiosity; the other was Mrs. Waterbury, the executive secretary.

"I'm terribly sorry about Victoria, Oliver," the older woman said, her eyes reflecting her sincerity. "And I'm glad you're home safe."

Oliver nodded solemnly. "Thanks. Is Dad busy?"

"He's always busy. But I think you can go on in."

He nodded and started toward the heavy oaken door to his father's office. Rosemary's voice stopped him.

"Are you okay, Oliver?"

He looked at her a moment, nodded weakly, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. But I'm dealing with it."

"It takes time. If you need to talk, don't be shy."

He nodded grimly, then knocked once on the door and pulled it open.

Oliver Lincoln II wasn't busy at all. He was staring out the window when his son entered. He didn't move as Oliver approached and stood beside him. Gazing out at the squat factory buildings, solar collectors, water towers, hover cranes, and runways.

"You didn't have to come in today," his dad said without looking around. "Take a few days off, as many as you'd like."

Oliver shook his head. "I can't sit around any more than you can. But I need to talk to you." Since returning home, he hadn't had five minutes alone with his dad.

Lincoln turned away from the window and settled into his office chair.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I need to go to Vega."

Lincoln's eyes narrowed. "What the hell for?"

Oliver sucked a deep breath and let it out slowly. He'd known he would meet resistance, but was ready for it.

"Victoria's death wasn't an accident," he said. "She was murdered by the Sirian KK."

"The KK? You mean the state police?"

"Yes."

"What makes you say that?"

Oliver briefly filled him in on the events of the night Victoria died. Lincoln sat immobile until he finished.

"You sure about this? How do you know she was right about Sirian invasion plans? Maybe her source was fucking her over for money."

"She told me he'd never once been wrong."

"Always a first time."

"Dad ..."

"I think it's a stretch."

"Victoria's dead!"

"Yes, because the lift failed. An accident."

"Anti-grav lifts don't fail!"

"Any technology can fail."

"I did a Solar-Net search last night. I went back fifty years, and I didn't find a single case where it ever happened."

"Did you include Sirius in your search?"

"No, but ..."

"Maybe their workmanship is substandard. They can't build a decent space fighter, maybe they can't build a decent A-G lift, either."

"Bullshit! A-G lifts *do not fail!* They have redundancies out the ass!"

"What's all this got to do with going to Vega?"

Oliver sighed in exasperation. "The Sirians are going to inv ..."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do!"

"No you don't!"

"Goddammit, Henry Wells confirmed it!"

Oliver Lincoln II blinked. "How does he know?"

"He's a congressional aide. He has access to classified stuff."

"And he's giving it to you? That would be the end of his career, even if he stayed out of prison."

"He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. I asked him point-blank and he didn't deny it. Nothing more than that."

Lincoln sat silent, staring at his son.

"Dad, they're going to use our fighters to launch an invasion against a peaceful world. I don't know how you feel about that, but it bothers the hell out of me."

"What do you want me to do? Ask the Sirians to give the fighters back? I'm sure they'll all be returned by the end of the week."

"There's nothing we can do about the fighters we've already sold them, but we can damn sure refuse to sell them any more. No more fighters, no more spare parts."

"And you were planning to make a living how?"

Oliver scowled. He hated his dad's sarcastic nature.

"I'm not worried about the distant future right now," he said. "I'm thinking we should approach the Vegan Guard and offer them a deal. Henry says ..."

"Are you out of your *mind*? If what you say is true, they're about to be invaded! If they get their ass kicked, which they probably will, we'll never make a dime on a deal like that!"

Oliver felt his face heating up. He fought his rising anger.

"Is that all that's important to you?" His voice was shaking. "Money?"

"*Somebody* has to worry about money around here!" Lincoln retorted, "if you're ever going to get an inheritance! Look, the Federation isn't giving us any business and neither is anyone else. Except for the Sirians. If I break trust with them, I might as well shut this facility down."

"We are a *defense* contractor, Dad! Have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten anything."

"And it doesn't bother you that Lincoln fighters will be used to invade another civilization?"

"I am not the moral guardian of the universe!" Lincoln said. "And neither are you. If we built hovercars, would we be responsible if someone used one of them to commit vehicular homicide? No! And I'm not

responsible for what my customer does with the fighters I build."

"What if that same customer murders your daughter? Do you have any responsibility then? Or maybe you just don't *give* a shit!"

Lincoln leaned threateningly across the desk, his grey eyes blazing. "Don't you *ever* say that to me again! Victoria was my child. I loved her as much as I love you. Don't you *ever* ..."

His voice broke, and he sat back, staring at the ceiling.

Oliver also slumped, suddenly ashamed. He gave his dad a minute, his own anger subsiding.

It took almost a minute. When he spoke again, Lincoln's voice was hoarse.

"What do you expect to accomplish on Vega?"

Oliver spread his hands. "I just want to extend the offer to buy our ships. Henry thinks we might have up to a year before the Confederacy invades. In that time they could beef up their Space Guard with a few hundred Lincoln fighters, get their pilots trained, and have at least a fighting chance to defend themselves."

"And what do I tell the Confederacy if they find out we're selling to Vega?"

"Fuck them! They can't dictate to us! We've always delivered what they paid for."

"You told me yesterday they want a couple hundred fighters, too."

Oliver shrugged. "Make them wait. Production delays. Tell them they'll get the ships, but it'll take a little longer. We have to fill the Vegan order first."

"Look, Dad, just let me explore it, okay? Maybe Vega won't even bite. Then it's a moot point."

Lincoln leaned back and stared at his desktop. "I have to run it by the board first."

"That'll take forever. They're slower than Congress. Let me go to Vega, and if I do get an order, you can tell them about it after the fact. They won't turn down the business once we have an order in hand. They like to make money as much as you do."

"I'm convinced we'll never see a dime from the Vegans."

"The board won't know that. They don't know anything about a pending invasion and you'd be a fool to tell them."

"I'll be out on my executive ass if I *don't* tell them."

"I'll try to get the money up front, or at least negotiate a cash on delivery deal. Vega is a wealthy world, and I suspect their military budget is getting what it needs right now, in view of the current crisis."

Lincoln stood up again and paced across his office. Oliver watched him with bated breath,

realizing this was the crucial moment. Finally Lincoln shook his head.

"Ollie, I can't authorize this on the spot. I need to think it over."

Oliver rolled his eyes.

"For Christ sake, what's to think over! The Sirians are about to start a war of aggression using our ships. They murdered my sister and they threatened me! All I'm asking is a chance to *talk* to the Vegans! I won't close any deals without calling you! How hard is that?"

"Give me a couple of days."

"Dad, it takes nineteen days to get to the Vegan system. That's nearly three weeks. Henry could be wrong about the timetable, but even if he's right, every day counts. If I can convince the Vegans to deal with us, we need to get things rolling. They need our fighters and time to train their pilots."

Lincoln stopped pacing and turned. "If two days is going to make a difference, then we don't have enough time anyway. You're asking me to make a radical alteration in the sales policy of this company based on speculation ..."

"It's *not* speculation!"

Lincoln raised a hand. "With all due respect to Henry and his sources, that's all it is — speculation. Nobody but the Sirians knows for sure if they're going to attack Vega."

Oliver was on his feet, his blood pressure soaring.

"Goddammit, Dad! Why do you think the Sirians are beefing up their fighter fleet? Why do you think they killed Victoria! Because of *rumors*?"

"I admit it sounds suspicious. But answer me this — what if you go to Vega and *don't* make a sale? And the Sirians find out we're pitching a contract to the Monarchy? What happens then? Maybe they cancel their order, find another supplier? Where does that leave LincEnt? I have to think of the stockholders, too."

"That won't happen. Baker told me we build the best product he's ever seen. Nobody on Sirius builds anything close to what we do."

"All they have to do is take one of our ships apart and reverse engineer it, Ollie. Might take them two or three years to get it right, but if they have to, they will."

Oliver trembled with impatience. This conversation was going in circles.

"Dad, I'm going to Vega."

"I haven't authorized the trip yet."

"I'll pay my own passage. You go ahead and make up your mind, if you ever do, and in the meantime I'll get an order from the Vegan Guard. I'll call you from Reina."

For just a moment, Oliver Lincoln II seemed at a loss for words. He shook his head, his mouth working.

"Don't do it, Ollie. Just give me a day or two to think this through."

"You're not listening, Dad! We don't have time to dick around!"

"What if the Sirian attack comes while you're there?"

"I can be off the planet a week after I arrive. A month from now I'll be on my way home with an order in hand."

"I can't let you do it."

"You can't stop me."

"I can fire you!"

"Then fire me!" Oliver started for the door.

"Goddammit, Ollie ...!"

"See you in a couple of months." Oliver went out the door before his dad could reply.

Interlude

**Tuesday, 16 June, 0195 (PCC) — Denver, CO,
North America, Terra**

At four in the morning, Denver was as quiet as it would ever get. The skytowers downtown looked like ghostly sentinels, shadowy and indistinct, only a few lights burning; the residential areas were uncannily silent. Most working people were in their beds, except those in the all-night establishments. And the cops.

And the crooks.

Jeremy Mason guided his hover cruiser smoothly along his nightly beat, his eyes peering through the windscreen above the muted glow of his instrument panel. Halfway through his watch, and little to show for it. That was fine — crime was at an all-time low, and he didn't mind that a bit.

Although he did long for a little excitement now and then.

At six feet two and two hundred four pounds, Jeremy was a big man. Muscular and

fit, he could have been a poster boy for the Denver Police Academy. Square jaw, boyish good looks, Mister Federation physique. Charming and witty. Women liked him, flocked to him. He could have his pick, and did. Hell, you only went around once, and it wouldn't last forever.

Jeremy yawned and glanced at his watch. Another pass through the area and he would stop for coffee. Keeping the peace was his job, but it could put a man to sleep.

"Unit 491 and all units in the vicinity —"

Jeremy's eyes snapped open. He was 491.

"— a 187 just occurred at the nightclub, 2977 West Gateway, multiple victims. Subject is a white male, twenty-five to thirty, medium height and weight, brown hair with a beard. Wearing dark blue pants, a white shirt, cowboy boots. Last seen running eastbound on Gateway. Armed and dangerous."

Jeremy felt his heart skip. A 187 — the penal code for murder. He activated his implant as he tilted the hovercar toward West Gateway.

"Unit 491 en route, ETA one minute." He flipped a toggle and the over-under lights began to ripple waves of blue. He streaked down a side street, skimming the rooftops, and braked to a hover above West Gateway. The street looked deserted, but just as he twisted the car on its axis to backtrack toward the nightclub, he saw motion.

"Unit 491, I have suspect in sight, running eastbound on Gateway approaching the intersection of Manila. I don't think he —"

The figure on the ground looked up, his face stark white in the cruiser's lights — except for his chin, which appeared shadowed by beard.

"— correction, he just saw me."

The figure raised an arm, Jeremy saw a flash, and something impacted the bottom of his cruiser. The control yoke shuddered in his hand.

"Suspect has opened fire. I'm taking evasive action."

Jeremy felt his heart thunder in his throat as he rolled left, then right. The suspect fired again, but missed. Then he turned and raced into the darkness down Manila, a quiet street flanked by tall apartment houses. Jeremy spun again and spurred after him, the controls feeling sluggish. He pulled up even with the suspect and lowered the car to the street. Red lights flickered on his control panel.

Another flash, another impact. Jeremy ducked, then looked up in time to see his quarry turn and race between two buildings. If he found his way into the maze of alleys, it would take an IR car to find him.

Jeremy quickly released his harness and leaped out of the car.

"Four nine one, I'm in foot pursuit!" he panted into his implant.

"Roger, 491, backup is en route."

Jeremy drew his sidearm and raced into the darkness, wishing he'd taken time to insert an IR contact. Ahead he heard a clatter as someone ran into something, then the loud, hysterical barking of what sounded like a very large dog. He stopped and pressed against the side of a building, hearing scrabbling sounds but seeing nothing. He quickly thumbed his sidearm and fired a round into the air. A second later a flare popped brilliantly and floated fifty feet above. Instantly the back yard was illuminated, and Jeremy saw a dark figure spidering up the side of an apartment house, using a drainpipe for purchase while his feet clawed at the irregular siding.

"*Police officer!*" Jeremy bellowed. "*Freeze!*"

His only answer was a wild shot that buzzed past his face. Jeremy thumbed the weapon again and quickly went into a combat crouch.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!"

The suspect was clambering onto the roof, and for an instant was perfectly silhouetted by the flare. Jeremy started to squeeze the trigger, but suddenly realized that another, taller apartment house stood behind the one he was aiming at. He saw bedroom windows, and someone was peering sleepily out of one.

Damn!

The suspect disappeared from view. Jeremy holstered his weapon and ran toward the drainpipe, grabbed hold, and hauled himself up, digging with his boots against the siding. Ten seconds later he was pulling himself onto the roof. He drew his weapon again and crouched. No one in sight. He struggled up the sloping roof toward the apex, gun in hand, panting more from fear than exertion. He reached the peak of the roof and looked around...

The flash came from his left and below. The suspect had reached the far edge of the building and started down, and now Jeremy was the one in silhouette. Jeremy never heard the shot, and almost didn't feel the impact. The gun flew from his hand as the force of the exploding bullet spun him around. He fell hard, his fingers grabbing for the tile to keep from sliding down and over the side. His left knee felt numb, something wet seeped up his pants leg.

He looked to his right, but the suspect had disappeared. He heard a noise, scraping and rattling, to his left. He looked that way, and saw it. Tumbling, skittering, sliding. End over end. Leaving a bloody trail.

Until it reached the edge of the roof and toppled toward the ground.

It was the lower half of his left leg — everything below the knee.

Book Two: Vega

Chapter 8

Monday, 6 July, 0195 (PCC) — Monarch Station, Vega 3

Oliver Lincoln III wasn't sure what to expect when he arrived on Vega 3, but was filled with anticipation. In the back of his mind was his mission, but his immediate curiosity concerned the Vegans themselves. Could the women really be as beautiful as advertised?

Nineteen days after leaving Terra orbit he stepped off *City of Moscow* onto a Vegan orbital station owned by Monarch Starlines, and was immediately confronted with the customs desk. A woman in a pale blue uniform smiled at him and asked to see his starpass. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen in his life, and he felt suddenly weak in the knees. He could hardly believe it — it was really true!

What shocked him even more was that she was at least as old as his mother.

The woman was quick and efficient. She scanned his starpass, had him place his hand inside a bio-scanner, and asked the purpose of his visit.

"Business," he said, surprised that he could speak at all.

Her smile never faltered. She glanced at a display to read the results of his bio-scan, then handed his starpass back.

"Welcome to Vega, Mr. Lincoln," she said. "Please proceed to Gate 11. Have a pleasant stay." Her accent had a musical quality, almost a mixture of Swedish, Norwegian, French, and Italian, if that were possible.

"Thank you."

Oliver stumbled away, following a series of flashing signs that directed passengers to shuttles that would take them to various cities on the planet. A festive air filled the station as hordes of people moved every which way. Exotic music played somewhere in the background, the air smelled faintly of perfume. He was carried along with the traffic, trying to absorb all the sights and sounds as he looked for Gate 11.

At least nine starships were docked at the station, some just arriving, others about to depart. Oliver saw people from several cultures, including Altair, Sirius, the Centauris, and Terra. But the most striking were the Vegans, who stood out like crystal statues among a collection of woodcarvings. The women weren't just beautiful, they were *stunning*. Even the men were painfully handsome.

"You look a little lost," said a musical voice at his elbow. "Can I help you with anything?"

Oliver twisted around and gazed into the emerald eyes of a young woman in Monarch uniform. Her smile was broad and genuine, her face a work of art. Usually confident, even arrogant, he found himself tripping over his words.

"I, uh — I'm..." He cleared his throat and looked at his starpass, as if it held the answer. "I'm looking for Gate 11," he said.

"Certainly, sir. Just follow me."

She took off toward a sign that said:

Gate 11
Reina, Sophiastad

And Oliver followed, his face burning. The girl was about his own age, he decided, even more stunning than the middle-aged woman in customs. Her hair was long and flowing, a rich chestnut color streaked with gold. The gold streaks looked natural, as if they'd grown that way. And, he realized, they probably had.

The girl stopped, turned, and smiled. "Gate 11, sir."

"Thank you."

"Thank *you*, for flying Monarch."

He hadn't flown Monarch, but didn't tell her that. She was already gone, off to help the next lost soul who needed her direction. Oliver felt almost abandoned, as if he'd found some rare and precious treasure but had lost it again.

He sighed and set down his travel bag, checked his wristwatch out of habit, and rubbed his face with both hands. *Snap out of it, Ollie! Wake up and pay attention.*

Reina, Vega 3

Barely an hour later, Oliver's shuttle touched down at Reina Spaceport. From the position of Vega in the sky, it appeared to be early afternoon, but Oliver was uncertain about the solar cycles here; it might be late morning for all he knew, depending on the rotation of the planet.

Partially recovered from his shock at seeing real Vegans for the first time, he entered the main terminal. Trying not to act so much like a tourist, he kept moving until he found a limo station, and minutes later was on the way to his hotel.

As the limo streaked across the city, Oliver tried to see as much as possible. He'd been to Sirius and Alpha Centauri, but had never seen anything to match this. Vega had been settled at roughly the same time as Sirius, yet what he saw now was much cleaner, more organized. The city sprawled for miles in every direction, but he saw no pollution, no snarling hover traffic, no congestion. Below him were broad avenues, gleaming buildings, spacious parks, and patches of forest. Reina had been designed from the ground up and

built right. The river that meandered through it looked pristine and unspoiled.

The Vegans were a marvel, he decided. No wonder Henry admired them so much.

The Sophia Hilton was a marvel as well. Fifty floors high, it was balanced on a single column of Startanium no more than ten feet across. The column only supported the center of the building — the corners rested on some sort of magnetic field that shimmered in the sunlight. Oliver had expected it to be taller, like the skytowers of Denver, but apparently there was no need. Open space wasn't lacking, and no other tall buildings stood nearby. The area around the hotel looked like a park.

It was even more unbelievable inside. A thirty-foot waterfall thundered like Niagara in the center of the lobby, and live deer-like animals grazed among slender saplings that grew around the fall. They barely glanced up as he passed within a few feet of them.

He was ushered to his suite within minutes, only to find it much larger than he'd expected. The main salon was huge, like a ballroom. The walls were decorated at tasteful intervals with the most abstract art he'd ever seen, and the bar was stocked with a wide variety of wines and spirits from every world he could think of. Exotic fresh fruits from Vegan orchards had been left on an otherwise empty buffet, and along one wall, flowers grew in fertile soil

beside a small stream, their fragrance permeating the suite.

He tipped the bellman and stood alone for several minutes after he'd gone. He was here. What the hell did he do now?

He went into the bedroom and stared out the window, drinking in the view. It was truly magnificent, a world such as he'd never imagined. From his vantage point he looked across the top of a small forest toward the river, which gleamed in the distance. Here and there a tall building poked upward, and in the near distance he saw a solar-power station. Hovercars sparkled as the sunlight reflected off them, but it all looked surreal, like an image from a fantasy vid.

"God!" he murmured. "Who could have believed it?"

Twenty minutes later, a glass of wine in hand, he put on the headset and placed a subspace call to LincEnt. It took four minutes to connect.

"Oliver Lincoln's office," said a familiar voice in his ear, "Rosemary speaking."

Oliver felt a surge of affection.

"Rosemary! It's me. Oliver!"

Her voice changed at once, a combination of pleasure and surprise.

"Ollie? Where are you?"

"Reina. I just got in. What time is it there?"

"Almost six. I was about to go home."

"Christ, why are you working so late? The old man doesn't pay you *that* well!"

"And he never will if I don't do a good job." There was no video with the call, but Oliver was sure she was smiling. "So tell me, are the women there as pretty as everyone says?"

Oliver laughed. "You have no ... idea! I haven't seen them all yet, but ..."

Rosemary laughed. "If I know you, Ollie, you'll manage it before you leave. How was your trip?"

"Boring. Nineteen days is a long damn time to be bottled up in a starship. Is the old man around?"

"No, he left early today. Some concert or something in the city. Do you want him to call you?"

"Not unless he wants to. Just tell him I got in, and tomorrow I'm going to sell some fighters."

"He was pretty mad at you, Ollie."

"So what else is new. He'll get over it."

"He already has. But for a week after you left he just stalked around here like a storm cloud. Do you really think you can pull this off?"

"Damn straight! When I turn on that Lincoln charm, they'll be helpless at my feet."

Rosemary laughed. "What charm is that, Ollie? When you growl, or when you swear?"

"You've never seen it, Rosemary. I haven't used it on you yet."

"Be still, my heart!" She laughed again.

"Well, this is costing LincEnt more than my allowance, so I'd better disconnect. Tell Dad I'll call him after I meet with the Vegan Guard. Okay?"

A brief hesitation, then Rosemary's voice again, quieter and more serious than before.

"I'll tell him. Ollie — your dad told me what this is all about. Don't stay there too long, okay?"

"Count on it. I'll be off planet in a few days."

"Be careful."

"I will. See you."

He disconnected, staring out the window. Now he had to figure out how to approach the Vegan Guard.

Chapter 9

Tuesday, 7 July, 0195 (PCC) — Reina, Vega 3

The following morning Oliver ate breakfast in one of the hotel restaurants. Feasting on smoked fish and local fruit, he gazed with awed admiration at the décor. Long vines dangled from the overhead, birds flitting among them. The dining room was bathed in bluish light from the rising sun. He worried initially that the birds might drop something unexpected into his food, then realized they were holograms.

But the waitress was not, and when she approached his table to refill his coffee cup, he drank in the sight of her.

"Is everything to your liking, sir?" she asked musically. She looked about sixteen, but was probably closer to thirty. "Can I get you anything else?"

Oliver couldn't help it. His heart-stopping disbelief of the day before had faded. "You could come up to my room for an hour or so," he suggested with a grin.

The waitress shook her head sweetly.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I am devoted to Sophia. You're not Vegan, are you?"

"No, but I wish I were."

"And you're not a Sirian."

"How do you know that?"

"Sirians are not so polite. Will there be anything else, sir?"

Oliver sighed. "No, thank you."

She hurried on to the next table, leaving Oliver to finish his meal. He turned on the holo at the edge of his table and idly watched the news as he ate. His eyes narrowed as the Top Story came on.

"The Sirian ambassador made an appeal to Queen Ursula yesterday that he said was an attempt to ease the tension between the Monarchy and the Sirian Confederacy. From Sophia's Island, Erika Sebring reports."

The info-babe who appeared next was even more stunning than the other women Oliver had seen on this planet, blonde and curvy with *silver* eyes. She was standing in front of a castle that looked like something from a fairy tale, all towers and turrets and spires.

"Sirian Ambassador Jessie Jackson made an emergency visit to Sophia's Island today with an appeal to Queen Ursula that the ambassador hopes will, in his words, 'heal the wounds of intolerance and cultural misunderstanding'. Queen Ursula declined an audience with the ambassador, but Regent Kristensen met with him for forty-five minutes. Apparently the meeting was fruitless."

The scene changed. Now Erika Sebring was interviewing Ambassador Jackson. He looked out of place in his diplomatic attire; his face

was lined and weathered, as if he'd spent most of his life working in the sun.

"In a nutshell," Jackson said in an accent that reminded Oliver of Defense Minister Harold Baker, "Sirius has agreed to drop our request for purchasin' slaves in return for clemency for Sirian citizens already sentenced to death for alleged violations of Vegan law. Unfortunately, the gover'ment of Vega chooses to ignore our request. Sixty-one Sirian citizens are still slated for execution."

"Mr. Ambassador," Sebring asked, "isn't it true that most of the men now awaiting execution have been convicted of the rape of Vegan women?"

Jackson scowled.

"The Confederacy is accustomed to policin' its own," he said. "For years Vegan law enforcement turned Sirian criminals over to us for punishment. Now they insist on doin' it all themselves, and the consequences are lethal! We resent the implication that we cannot handle our own criminal cases, and we insist that Vega stop executin' our citizens for a crime that should not be a capital offense."

"According to recent statistics," the newsgirl said boldly, "men who were turned over to Sirian justice frequently were not punished at all, especially if the crime was rape."

Jackson grimaced.

"If some men weren't punished, it was because the allegations were discovered to be false, or because there were mitigatin' circumstances."

What, Oliver wondered in amazement, would constitute "mitigatin' circumstances" for rape?

"Mr. Ambassador," Sebring continued smoothly, "last month President Adolph stated that unless the executions are discontinued, diplomatic relations between Sirius and Vega could be in jeopardy. Does that mean the Confederacy is willing to go to war over this issue?"

Jackson stared at the girl a moment, as if weighing his next words.

"War," he said carefully, "is what results when diplomacy fails. I cannot speak for President Adolph, but I do know that Sirius has made every reasonable effort to keep diplomatic channels open. What happened today, however, indicates to me that the Vegan gover'nment is no longer willin' to listen to reason."

"Does that mean ...?"

"It means that Sirius is not goin' to sit on its hands. The executions *will stop* — whatever it takes!"

With a nod of dismissal, Jackson turned and walked away.

Oliver let out his breath, realizing for the first time that he'd been holding it. "You *bastard!*" he breathed.

* * *

Unlike the Federation, which headquartered its military in the Polygon near Washington City, Vegan Guard headquarters was housed in a plain ten-floor building that, though attractive, looked very much like all the others around it. Oliver arrived by hover cab an hour after breakfast, paid his fare, and walked in the front door.

Aside from marble walls and a parquet floor, the lobby was quite ordinary, almost Spartan by modern standards, with no waterfalls or other effects. A directory told him the Space Guard was on the sixth floor, Military Procurements on the third, and all business was by appointment only. He grimaced and walked toward the security desk where a very blond young sergeant in a dazzling red uniform looked up.

"Can I help you, sir?" the sergeant inquired.

Oliver cocked his head and grinned.

"My name is Oliver Lincoln. I arrived yesterday from Terra, and I'm here to meet with whoever is in charge of purchasing combat spacecraft."

"Do you have an appointment, Mr. Lincoln?"

"I wasn't aware that one was necessary. In any case, under the ..."

"Sir, you must have an appointment. Who exactly did you wish to see?"

Oliver searched his memory. On the voyage to Vega he'd spent several hours researching the Vegan Guard on the starship's database.

"I believe his name is General Montenegro. Is he in?"

The sergeant looked at him as if he were crazy. "Mr. Lincoln, you can't just walk in off the street and see General Montenegro. He's a very busy man."

Oliver felt his temper rising.

"I'm sure he's busy, but I'm a defense contractor and I came all the way from Terra ..."

"Which defense concern do you represent?"

"Lincoln Enterprises. We build fighters and auxiliary military ..."

"I need to see your identification," the sergeant said, unimpressed.

Feeling his face flush, Oliver produced his starpass. The sergeant examined it briefly.

"So you are a Federation citizen?"

"That's right. Now, look ..."

"General Montenegro is not available until next week. I can make you an appointment to see him." The sergeant's blue eyes bored into his skull. "Is that satisfactory?"

Oliver shook his head in frustration.

"No, that is not satisfactory! This is a very urgent matter. I'm not leaving here until I see him."

The sergeant's eyes hardened. "Mr. Lincoln, I can make you an appointment to see the general, or you can walk out of here and go home. Which will it be?"

He might be young, but he was no pushover. *Fine*, Oliver thought, *neither am I*.

"I have a better idea," Oliver replied flatly. "I'm going up and introduce myself right now."

He started around the desk toward the lift, but before he had taken six steps a loud alarm began whooping from somewhere in the ceiling and he found himself staring into the Vegan sergeant's laser pistol.

"Mr. Lincoln, if you take one more step, I'm going to kill you. Now, drop your portfolio and turn to face the wall. Very slowly."

Oliver found himself trembling with sudden fear, and angry with himself because of it. How had he let a pussy Guardsman put him in this position? The kid couldn't be more than twenty years old!

"Drop the case, Mr. Lincoln! I won't tell you again."

Oliver released the portfolio case and turned slowly to his left. The Vegan kept the pistol against his head, placed a hand against his back, and shoved him roughly against the wall. A sudden thunder of running feet echoed down a corridor as others burst into the lobby. A babble of voices demanded to know what was going on. The sergeant

explained briefly and within seconds Oliver was shackled with E-cuffs. Moments later he was sitting in a basement room with two armed Guardsmen glaring at him.

Oliver glared back, his mounting anger overpowering his fear. He felt his face getting red.

"Jesus Christ!" he growled. "I come here to help you fucking people and this is how you treat me?"

The guards said nothing, but didn't take their eyes off him. In very short order an officer appeared, also looking grim.

"Are you Oliver Lincoln?" he demanded.

"Who the fuck are you?" Oliver wanted to say, but didn't. If he were ever to see Montenegro, he'd have to get control of his temper. "Yes," he said instead. "And you are ...?"

"Major Medard. Tell me what this is all about."

Medard was perhaps thirty-five, lean and athletic, and no taller than Henry Wells. His features were distinctly French, though his accent had the same musical quality as everyone else on Vega.

Oliver briefly explained his confrontation with the sergeant in the lobby. "The bottom line, Major," he concluded, "is that I need to see General Montenegro and I can't hang around a week to see him. It's extremely urgent."

Medard stared at him in silence for ten seconds.

"What exactly do you want to see the general about?" he demanded.

"I sell military hardware. I want to show him what I have."

"What's in the portfolio case?"

"Presentation materials. For the general's eyes only."

"Is that all?"

"There aren't any weapons, if that's what you're thinking. I didn't come here to assassinate anybody."

Medard pulled out a chair and sat down. He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest.

"Mr. Lincoln, I am not very busy today. I have plenty of time. You are going to tell me exactly what you were going to tell General Montenegro, and until you do, neither of us is going anywhere."

Oliver felt his temper rising again. He shook his head.

"I don't think so, Major," he said. "I don't think you're cleared that high."

Medard's eyebrows lifted. "What?"

"This stuff is top secret. If I talk to you, the general could have me shot."

Medard flushed. "If you *don't* tell me, maybe *I* will have you shot."

Oliver forced himself to smile. "Well, there you are, Major. A Mexican standoff."

Medard frowned. "'Mexican'? What is that?"

"Look, why don't you just call upstairs and get the general down here. He can settle this matter in a hurry."

"Mr. Lincoln, the general has a great deal on his mind these days. I'm sure he has all the military hardware he needs. So you have the choice of making an appointment to see him, or leaving your presentation materials for him to look at. He simply cannot afford the time to see you today."

Oliver leaned forward. "Mister, he can't afford *not* to see me today!"

Medard's eyes glinted with amusement. "No? And why is that?"

Oliver stared at him for five seconds.

"Because," he said slowly, "I build fighter ships for the Sirian Space Fleet."

General Fernando Montenegro was in his middle fifties, dark of complexion and grey at the temples. Out of uniform he might have looked like an attorney; his piercing eyes suggested he was possessed of a sharp intelligence. Montenegro was seated in a conference room when Oliver was brought in. He didn't stand or offer to shake hands.

Oliver was pushed into a chair and two armed guards stood nearby as he faced the man across from him.

"You wanted to talk to me?" The general didn't appear impressed, but Oliver knew his curiosity must have been piqued, or this meeting wouldn't be taking place.

"I represent Lincoln Enterprises of Denver, Colorado," Oliver said by way of introduction. "I assume you've heard of it?"

Montenegro nodded briefly.

"LincEnt was founded by my grandfather, and my dad is currently the president of the company. We build deep-space combat fighters and assorted other military spacecraft. For the last ten years we've been selling them to the Sirian Confederacy."

Montenegro's eyes narrowed, but he didn't speak.

"Just over a month ago," Oliver continued, "I was in New Birmingham. I met with Defense Minister Baker of the Confederacy. He placed an order for a hundred additional fighters. He said they're expanding their fighter fleet."

Montenegro's eye twitched, but still he remained silent.

But Oliver stopped talking and waited, forcing a response.

"And why are you telling me this?" the general asked finally.

"Because those fighters are going to be used against Vega," Oliver told him. "I have it on very good authority that the Confederacy is

planning to invade this planet in the near future."

Montenegro blinked twice, then glanced at the guards. With a wave of his hand he dismissed them. After the door closed behind them, Montenegro leaned forward until his face was only inches from Oliver's.

"How do you know this?"

"It's a long and complicated story, sir. But I'm convinced the information is accurate, and I think you know it, too. Don't you?"

The man only stared at him, his jaw working as if he were chewing a troublesome nut between his front teeth.

"So," he said finally, "the purpose of your visit is to inform me that Vega is about to be attacked?"

"No, sir. That was just to get your attention."

"Then why are you here?"

"To give you a fighting chance to defend yourselves. Sir, there isn't a fighter in the galaxy that can compare with what we build. According to my research, your fighter designs are at least twenty years out of date, and most of your ships are at least ten years old. If the Sirians hit you with Lincoln fighters, you won't stand a chance."

"That is not quite accurate," the general said. "We have recently purchased some fighters from a Vegan manufacturing concern."

"And which company is that?"

"NordTek. Right here in Reina."

"I've never heard of them. How long have they been in business?"

"Almost forty years."

Oliver was shocked. How had that one got by him? LincEnt kept files on every fighter manufacturer in the galaxy. Hell, there weren't more than a dozen!

"You say they've been in business for forty years — how long have they been building fighters?"

"About four years, I believe."

Oliver nodded. That explained it.

"I'm sure NordTek is very good at what they do, General, and I don't mean to impugn them in any way, but *nobody* builds a better fighter than LincEnt. I'd stake my life on that, and I think the fact that Sirius buys them from us should be evidence enough."

"I suppose you want me to buy some fighters from you, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"So you will sell fighters to both sides? No matter who wins, you will make money?"

Oliver shook his head.

"No, sir. The Sirians aren't getting any more ships from us. LincEnt sells fighters for defense, not conquest."

"Isn't that rather naïve, Mr. Lincoln? Does your contract contain a clause to that effect?"

"No, sir. It's just a matter of conscience. For me, anyway."

"Tell me, who did you possibly think the Sirians needed to defend themselves against? Their history has been one of conquest since the Confederacy was formed."

Oliver spread his hands helplessly.

"Sir, all I can tell you is that I was a teenager when LincEnt cut the first deal with Sirius. I can't answer for what we did ten years ago, but this is now, and now I'm involved. And — And ..."

He stopped, his throat suddenly constricted. Unexpectedly and uninvited, tears sprang to his eyes. Montenegro looked surprised, but not as surprised as Oliver. Why now, of all times! Horrified, he cleared his throat and wiped his eyes with the back of a hand.

"Are you all right, Mr. Lincoln?"

Oliver nodded. He coughed, forcing the emotion back down.

"I was going to say," he continued weakly, "that now it's personal. If the Sirians do attack Vega, I want you to kick their ass."

Chapter 10

Reina, Vega 3

"This is the SF-31 SolarFighter," Oliver said to the assembled group. "It's the backbone of LincEnt's line, and it's what the Sirians are going to throw against you when they attack."

General Montenegro and four of his subordinates sat along one side of the darkened room, gazing at the hologram that filled the center of the room. The SolarFighter soared and swooped, rolled and dived and fired. It seemed almost full-sized as the test pilot put it through its paces. The observers could see every seam and rivet as the ship was shown both in space and atmospheric flight. The only thing missing was sound.

"Primary armament is a dual 19mm rotating nose cannon," Oliver continued, "rate of fire four hundred rounds per minute. Secondary armament is four .56 calibre machine guns. With all guns firing, you can sustain continuous fire for nine minutes due to the extended magazines and the patented feeding mechanism.

"That's for atmospheric work. For extra-atmosphere combat, the SF carries side-by-side laser weapons in the twelve-megawatt range. That will knock out another fighter, and for larger targets, it can mount up to eight standard deep-space torpedoes, or twenty-

four Baby-Shark ship-killers. Those are only thirty-one inches long, but they have thrust capacity for up to a million miles."

General Montenegro stirred. "How powerful are they?" he asked.

"Point zero one five kilotons. They can also be used in atmosphere against ground targets."

Oliver pressed a switch and the holo changed to a design graphic, which he rotated for illustration.

"There are several power plants. For atmosphere, we mount twin tail jets with Mach 4 capability at sea level, with an auxiliary rocket for emergency boost with a two-minute burn limit. For space, we use a single Detroit-Nugent Mark IX ion drive ..."

"Warp capability?" Montenegro asked.

"No, sir. But you can slave up to eight fighters to a small tender, include them in the hyperspace envelope, and warp them that way. You can also transport them as cargo on a large freighter, several at a time."

He went on for another minute, rattling off speeds, thrust ratios, and other data of interest to fighter pilots. The officers viewing the demo sat in silence as they tried to take it all in. Oliver fell silent, letting them continue to watch the SolarFighter run through its paces.

"Lights on," Montenegro said, and the room illuminated. Oliver shut down the holo.

He smiled at the assembled officers.
"Questions?"

The Vegans seemed to be eyeing one another, as if communicating by telepathy. Montenegro cleared his throat.

"I won't toy with you, Mr. Lincoln," he said slowly. "As you indicated earlier, we are facing the likelihood of invasion. And as you correctly stated, we are almost certainly going to be outclassed in every military sense. My question to you is this: How improved will our situation be if we place an order with you? More to the point, what kind of delivery schedule can you meet, and what training curve are we looking at?"

Oliver nodded.

"Without our fighters, you don't stand a chance. With them, you might face even odds, or slightly better. The Confederacy will face the burden of supply, which you won't. And in sufficient numbers, your pilots will have an excellent chance of taking out their supply ships.

"As for delivery, the minute you give me the word, I can place a subspace call that will spin up our plant to full production. We can turn out five ships a day, and we have about two-dozen already stockpiled. In a matter of weeks I can deliver two hundred fighters, enough to equip several squadrons. After that, we'll continue to deliver until either you are fully

equipped, or the Sirians attack and we can no longer get through."

"Training?"

Oliver shrugged. "Assuming your pilots are proficient in what they're flying now, maybe a month in the SF to become proficient in that. My suggestion is that you send a contingent of pilots to Denver, we'll train them there, and they can come back here to train the rest of your men. One of the dangers in this undertaking is that the Sirians will see you upgrading your fleet and move their timetable forward. You'll need to be very careful."

"What about munitions?"

"We provide enough weapons for six sorties per ship as part of the package. We can also sell you additional stuff, but I think your best bet is to find someone here on Vega to build it for you. We can provide the specs and some sample items for quality comparison. We own or participate in the patents, so there's no proprietary conflict to worry about."

Montenegro chewed his lip and glanced at his colleagues, then back to Oliver.

"How much is all this going to cost?" he asked.

Oliver sighed, reached into his portfolio, and withdrew a contract. He placed it in front of Montenegro. The general stared at it stonily.

"That's a lot of money," he said. "To build a viable defense force will run into the tens of billions."

"This technology isn't cheap," Oliver agreed. "We're also looking at sizable transportation costs to get the fighters to Vega. I've built in a ten percent discount already, and for every terro you pay in advance, I'll discount twenty percent of that value against future orders."

"What's the current exchange ratio between the crown and the terro?"

"I haven't looked for several days, but I think it's roughly equivalent. Maybe a five percent difference, but I'll waive that."

Montenegro studied the figures in silence for thirty seconds.

"My company is taking a big risk," Oliver said presently. "If you lose the war, you won't be able to pay. By signing that contract, you bind LincEnt to the future of Vega. That's a commitment we'll take seriously. But to be honest with you, I have instructions to get as much cash in advance as you can afford."

The meeting ran the rest of the day. Accountants were called in, tentative figures were agreed upon, and when Oliver left he had a signature in his hand. As he stepped out on the street, he paused to look around and breathe deeply of the fragrant air.

"God damn!" he whispered as the reality of what he'd accomplished sank in. "God *damn!*"

Denver, CO, North America, Terra

"Good morning, Oliver Lincoln's office."

"Rosemary, it's me. Is the old man in?"

Rosemary Egler sat forward, her lips curving into a smile.

"Oliver! How's it going?"

"It's going great! I got a signed contract."

"You *did*? My gosh! For how many ships?"

"Two hundred in the initial order, plus as many as we can deliver after that until they say stop. But I gotta talk to the old man. Is he there?"

"He's out in the plant somewhere, but he should be back shortly. Is there a number where he can reach you?" Rosemary wrote it down as Oliver rattled it off. "Okay, he'll probably be back to you within the hour. You sound pretty excited."

"I am. This is more than just a business order, Rosemary. This is for Victoria."

Rosemary was silent a moment. Then she nodded.

"I thought so."

Reina, Vega 3

Oliver was staring out the window of his hotel bedroom, his left hand wrapped around a glass of brandy, when his dad called back. He took the call on the central holo in the main room.

"Ollie! Rosemary said you closed the deal. You told me you wouldn't do that without talking to me."

Oliver grinned, not sure if his dad was baiting him, but determined to keep it upbeat.

"The deal isn't final until you sign it, Dad," he said.

"So what are the specifics?"

Oliver ran through the details he'd worked out with Montenegro and the Vegan Guard staff.

"That includes spare parts for fifty ships," he concluded, "with any additional spares at full price. They're looking at farming out munitions to a local contractor, and I'll be meeting those people in a day or two. You better alert our test crews to expect about a dozen Vegan pilots for training within the month."

"How much cash did you get?" the elder Lincoln inquired skeptically. "You didn't forget, did you?"

Oliver tried to answer with a straight face, but couldn't contain the gleam in his eye.

"A hundred mil went into escrow this afternoon, with another four hundred mil to follow as soon as you approve the deal."

Even over interstellar holo, Oliver Lincoln II's face turned pale. His son laughed out loud at the look on his face.

"Did I hear you right?" Lincoln demanded.

"I don't know, Dad. I said *half a billion* terros, in cash, up front. Contingent upon your approval, of course."

"Jesus Christ on a hover board!"

"You think you can sell the board on the deal, Dad? Or shall I go back and tell the Vegans we can't afford to do business with them?"

"You're not fucking with me, are you?"

"Hell, no! That's what they agreed to. They're in the hot seat and they know it. I've offered them hope, which is more than they had yesterday."

Lincoln was sitting at his desk, and clearly couldn't find the words. He shook his head several times, and finally looked into his son's eyes.

"Well, Ollie, I don't know what to say."

You might try "Good job", Oliver thought. Aloud he said,

"Is the deal approved? Do I tell them it's a go?"

"Yes, most definitely. If the board tries to fight me on this I'll — hell, I don't know, I'll kick their ass one at a time. Subfax me the contract and I'll have it back with my signature before you see the Vegans tomorrow."

"Consider it done."

"Good. Now, when are you going to get the hell out of there? I want you back here before the shit hits the jet."

"I'm coming home Saturday. Already booked passage on *Princess Gina*."

"Four more days. Okay, not a day longer. I'll need you here to liaise with the Vegan pilots, so don't take any detours."

"You got it. Oh, and I'll be turning in an expense sheet with my starship fare on it. I suppose you're going to pay it, aren't you?"

"If I see that half a bil in the bank by the time you get back, no problem. If their check bounces, tough shit."

Oliver laughed.

"Okay, Dad. I'm gonna go send the subfax now. Don't go anywhere."

"Call me Saturday when you leave."

"Will do."

Oliver broke the connection and stood in the middle of the room, grinning foolishly. He drained his brandy and turned to retrieve the contract from the Vegan Guard. He felt good, better than he had since before Victoria's death.

The next year or so should be very, *very* interesting!

Chapter 11

Wednesday, 8 July, 0195 (PCC) — Reina, Vega 3

Oliver met with General Montenegro again the next morning. His dad's signature had arrived via subspace fax and the deal was finalized. The balance of the day was spent in meetings working out details. The first shipment of Lincoln fighters would be shipped within sixty days; in the meantime a contingent of pilots would travel to Denver for training, and LincEnt would dispatch a team of engineers to Vega to oversee the modification of maintenance facilities for the new spacecraft. A great deal of work had to be done, and time was short.

When the last meeting had been concluded, Oliver emerged from the conference room with Montenegro. Waiting for them was a young man in a casual business suit. Almost six feet tall, he was, like most Vegan men, painfully handsome. Snow-blond hair, blue eyes, wide cheekbones. He gazed at Oliver without expression.

"Mr. Lincoln," General Montenegro said, "this is Adam Pedersen. He is the managing director of NordTek Corporation."

Oliver extended his hand. "Oliver Lincoln," he said.

"Please call me Adam."

"Right. I understand you build combat fighters."

"Yes, and I understand you have taken my contract."

Oliver's eyebrows lifted, but Montenegro stepped in.

"Mr. Pedersen, without prejudice, please. Lincoln Enterprises has been building fighters much longer than you have, and we need their technical expertise."

Pedersen shifted his gaze to Montenegro. "Of course."

The three men returned to the conference room and settled in.

"Mr. Pedersen," the general said, "your contract with us is still valid. All that has changed is that it is no longer exclusive. We are placing a rather large order with Mr. Lincoln, but we still have plans for you as well."

"I see."

It took five minutes to bring Adam Pedersen up to date.

"We will need spare parts," Montenegro told him. "And we need a source of munitions, which is NordTek's specialty. Mr. Lincoln can provide you with specifications and is prepared to assist you in getting geared up if necessary. I'd like you to spend a day or two with him to make whatever arrangements you need."

Pedersen nodded, gazing at Oliver again.

"If you are free tomorrow," he said, "I can show you our facilities and we can go from there."

Oliver smiled warily, and nodded. "Tomorrow's fine."

Thursday, 9 July, 0195 (PCC) — Reina, Vega 3

NordTek was a fraction the size of LincEnt's Denver plant. It sat on the bank of the Queen River, which flowed through Reina, and was surrounded by parks. Oliver saw only one assembly line and two hangars. There wasn't even a runway; fighters were trucked to Reina Spaceport where they used the Space Guard runway.

Nevertheless, it was impressive enough. The industrial robotics were only slightly inferior to those at LincEnt, and the economy of space was particularly clever. The main part of the facility was dedicated to the manufacture of various explosives for both military and civilian use.

"We don't sell that much product to the Guard," Adam Pedersen told Oliver as they strolled an overhead catwalk. "They use some in training and we replace that, but it isn't enough to keep us open, even with the small subsidy we get from the Monarchy. So we manufacture explosives for engineering and mining as well.

"Four years ago the Guard decided to upgrade its fighter fleet, so we placed a bid

and won the contract. But now ..." He avoided looking at Oliver, but his frustration was evident.

"Mr. Pedersen ..."

"Please call me Adam."

They stopped walking and stood facing one another.

"Okay, Adam. I didn't come here to steal your meal ticket, okay? I didn't even know you were building fighters."

"But you are still selling to the Guard."

"Yes. Adam, you know what's been going on with Sirius, right?"

"Of course. There will probably be a war."

"That's right. My only concern is that Vega has a decent chance to defend itself. You've only been building fighters for four years. There's no way your ships will be any match for what the Sirians will throw against you."

"And yours will?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen any of our ships?"

"No. But I've seen what the Sirians have."

Pedersen's eyebrows rose. "Oh? And how did you manage that?"

Oliver took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Because LincEnt built them."

Pedersen's eyes flew wide. "Good goddess on the mountain! Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. Look, Adam, it's a long story, and if you want to hear it, I'll tell you. But trust me, I'm here only to give the Space

Guard a fighting chance. I personally don't care if we have to *give* the fighters away. I want Vega to win this war that's coming."

Pedersen stared at him for ten seconds.

"You're selling ships to the Sirians. Why would you want Vega to defeat them?"

Once again, Oliver was unexpectedly threatened with tears. He swallowed them back with some difficulty.

"The Sirians murdered my sister," he said.

Friday, 10 July, 0195 (PCC) — Reina, Vega 3

Pedersen was an engineer. Oliver spent the rest of that day and the next showing him holos and design specs of the various weapons the SolarFighter carried. It wasn't comprehensive, but Oliver's portfolio case contained design chips that NordTek could insert into their computers to get everything they needed. The session ended late on Friday afternoon. Both men stepped outside and stared toward the river. Pedersen's hostility had faded during their time together.

"So, Oliver," Pedersen asked, "are you also a pilot?"

"No." Oliver laughed. "I can handle a space yacht, but I don't have the reflexes for combat fighters. I don't even fly aircraft."

"You seem to know the SolarFighter very well."

"I've spent a lot of time with the engineers."

"Your father owns the factory?"

"He owns the controlling interest. We're a public corporation, but it's a family operation. My grandfather was the founder."

"The same in my family. Except that my father was the founder."

"So you're next in line to run the place?"

Pedersen shook his head.

"No. My father died five years ago. I am the president of NordTek."

"Jesus! I didn't think you'd been out of college that long!"

Pedersen smiled. "I am almost thirty. Perhaps I look younger."

"I thought you were about my age. I'm twenty-four."

The door opened behind them and both men turned. Pedersen smiled, but Oliver felt his body turn to stone. The girl who stood looking at him was about nineteen, slender and shapely, with long auburn hair trailing down over her bare shoulders. Her eyes were black as space and seemed to pierce his skull. She was the most beautiful ... well, he'd thought that about every woman he'd seen in the past few days, hadn't he?

But she was.

Pedersen laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Oliver, when I told Olga about you she wanted to meet you. Oliver Lincoln, Olga Pedersen."

Oliver felt a stab of regret, but accepted the girl's hand in greeting.

"Very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Pedersen," he said.

Olga's intense expression softened for a moment, and she almost smiled. Pedersen laughed out loud.

"Oliver, she is my sister! Not my wife!"

Oliver felt his face turn red, but with his typical bluster managed to cover it.

"Then it's my double pleasure," he said.

"I am very pleased to meet you also, Oliver," she said in a husky voice. "I very rarely have met someone from Terra." Her midnight eyes remained fixed on his face.

"Olga is fascinated by Terra men," Pedersen teased. "She thinks they are sexy."

The redhead shot her brother a dagger, but quickly returned her gaze to Oliver.

"My brother thinks he is a comedian," she said. "I apologize for his immaturity."

Oliver grinned. "No apology necessary. But if you insist, maybe we can have a drink later."

"Actually, Oliver," Pedersen said, "I was hoping you would join us for dinner. I'd like you to meet my fiancée, and of course, Olga is welcome, too."

Oliver nodded. "Look forward to it."

* * *

Pedersen had suggested that NordTek had trouble making ends meet, but he nevertheless spared no expense on dinner. As dusk thickened to darkness, the party of four

boarded a riverboat that took them several miles up the Queen River. They sat on the top deck — Oliver and Olga, Pedersen and his fiancée, a lovely blonde girl named Marie. The dinner was expensive and exotic, some kind of native shellfish, native vegetables, and a jelly-like dessert that Oliver could only guess at. The music was soft and alien, the drinks a potent liqueur called Nektar.

It was an idyllic evening as the boat cruised past darkened farms and villages; the music was punctuated by chirping insects from trees along the shore. Oliver felt relaxed and happy, much as he'd felt at Brandon Marlow's plantation, only there would be no sense of guilt after this experience.

After dinner the two couples retired to the dance floor. Adam and Marie drifted away, caught up in the music and each other, and Oliver found himself alone with Olga. She felt natural in his arms, her full breasts pressed against him as she laid her lovely head on his shoulder. He'd never considered himself a great dancer, but managed to navigate the dance floor without stepping on her.

"So why do you think Terrans are sexy?" he asked. "Compared to Vegan men, most of us are pretty ugly."

She leaned back and looked into his eyes, her expression serious.

"What you might call 'ugly' I would think of as 'rugged'. Vegan men are very handsome, but not all Vegan women like pretty men."

"Really?"

"Of course not. They are too perfect, many of them. We Vegans have taken genetic engineering one step too far, I think. It is fine for women to be beautiful, but not for men."

"So you think I'm rugged, then?"

"Yes. And a little fat ..."

"*Fat!*"

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Oliver, does that offend you? I did not mean ..."

"No, it's just that — well, I'm about twenty pounds over what I should be, but I don't think of it as 'fat'. Stocky, maybe."

"I apologize. I merely meant that I like men who are not artificial."

"So my being 'fat' doesn't bother you?"

"No, of course not."

He grinned. "Well, you know what? I think Vegan women are the most delicious things I've ever seen in my life. And you ... Olga, you are the prettiest one I've seen yet."

Her eyes smiled, if her lips didn't quite follow. She looked pleased.

"Thank you, Oliver. That is very sweet."

"Would you like to come back to my hotel tonight? We can spend the night together."

He immediately saw conflict in her eyes. A little frown wrinkled her porcelain forehead, and she compressed her full red lips.

"I am sorry, Oliver. But ..."

He winced. "Don't tell me. Are you a follower of Sophia?"

She nodded quietly. "Yes, I am. My religion is very important to me. I must remain a virgin until my marriage."

"Damn." But he grinned. "Well, if you didn't stand by your beliefs, I wouldn't respect you."

"Thank you," she said softly.

They danced in silence for some minutes.

"How long will you be on Vega?" Olga asked finally.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" She looked disappointed. "Will I ever see you again?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe not. Unless ..." He stopped dancing and took her hand in both of his. "Would you like to come to Terra with me? You could tour the planet for a few months and we could get to know each other better. No strings attached, I promise."

Again she looked tempted, but shook her head.

"I don't think I can do that. At least not right now."

"Olga, you know there's probably going to be a war here. The Sirians are very hard on women. You'd be a lot safer on Terra."

"That is why I cannot leave now," she said. "If the Sirians come, I will have to be here to help fight them."

He frowned. "What're you talking about? You'd just be in danger. Fighting is a man's job."

"Oliver, I will fight them. Along with the men."

"But ..."

"I am very good with a rifle. I am what you call a — how do you say it? A tommy boy."

His eyes widened in disbelief. "A tom-boy? You don't look like one."

"Because you have never seen me wearing anything but a dress. I am descended from Vikings. Trust me, Oliver, I am deadly with a rifle."

* * *

Pedersen drove Oliver back to his hotel. It was with some regret that the two men shook hands.

"It has been a pleasure, Oliver," Adam Pedersen said. "I hope we will have the opportunity to work together again."

"So do I, Adam," Oliver said sincerely. "With a little luck Well, I hope we're wrong about Sirius. I really hope we are."