


THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF "QUEEN MAB COURTESY"

BRUCE DAVIS

That Which is Human

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Novel of
the Year



War isn't about meaning. It's about nasty little fights where men get killed and all that matters is who survives



That Which is Human

Bruce C Davis



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The characters and incidents of this book are entirely fictitious creations of the author.

THAT WHICH IS HUMAN

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"In the face of battle, that which is human must stand aside so that the business of killing can commence unencumbered by remorse."

Joshua Chamberlain
Colonel, 20th Maine Vol.
July 4, 1863

PROLOGUE

Official Document-Not For Public Release

Briefing for New Officers, 4th Marine Orbital Attack Squadron, II Marine Expeditionary Force

1.a Current Status: The current front is centered around Epsilon Eridani with its eight jump points. UN forces currently control three jump points but have been unable to exploit this foothold due to heavy resistance from Rilz installations on the fourth planet (known as Kondrogor, its Rilz designation). Capture or neutralization of Kondrogor and consolidation of control over the Epsilon Eridani jump points will severely restrict Rilz lines of communication both within human space and also within the Rilz Imperium. Communicating jump points to the Epsilon Eridani system are currently under commercial restriction and all non-military

transit is prohibited. This includes the Hibernia, K56 and Delta Pavonis systems.

1.b 4th MOAS is currently attached to the II Marine Expeditionary Force involved in police actions on Hibernia. An independent colony, Hibernia has attempted to negotiate a separate peace with the Rilz using its two jump points for leverage. The Hibernia System is considered strategically vital to the war effort as the only practical staging area for the eventual invasion of the Rilz Empire.

1.c Objectives: 1) Replace the current Hibernia Governing Council and neutralize further Hibernian armed resistance. 2) Minimize damage to infrastructure and defense installations. 3) Limit collateral civilian casualties.

Part 1

HIBERNIA: THE SHARP END

The A-20 Intruder hung in its launch bay tethered by intercom and power cables as fuel handlers completed the charging of its plasma bottles. In the no-weight hub of the *Normandy*, the deck crew in their colored jump suits flitted like mutant butterflies across the squat body and blunt nose of the orbital attack craft. From the cockpit, Lt. "Mac" McAllister watched the pre-launch preparations impassively. The routine was comfortable, predictable. It helped him to focus and calm the excitement he still felt at the start of a mission. The missions might vary, but pre-launch never did.

He adjusted his helmet seals as he ran down the pre-launch checklist displayed on the datalink stuck to the thigh of his flight suit. The helmet was new and the inner padding still chaffed a bit around the scar behind his right ear where his radio link had been implanted. The scar was still sensitive despite being six years old. Scuttlebutt said that the radio implants were to be upgraded soon. He made a mental note to ask the medics if they could do something about the scar at the same time.

Mac completed the checklist and closed the datalink as he leaned back into the

acceleration seat. He sighed deeply. The cockpit air was stale. The life support system had not completely purged itself after the last mission. It carried faint odors of hydraulic fluid, warm plastics and stale sweat; the familiar smells of pre-launch waiting. Mac opened the cockpit vents wider and felt cool air wash over his face.

The purple suited fuel handlers completed their work, disconnected the bulky magnetic collars from the plasma bottles and then locked down the access ports. They were quickly replaced by red suited ordnance men who checked and armed the missiles and defensive systems slung under the Intruder's stubby wings. The wing control surfaces were fully retracted for reentry, the lift pods that allowed vertical takeoff and landing tucked into recesses in the upper part of the under slung hull. Ordnance hard points on the exposed portions of the wings carried armaments for a close air support mission.

The Intruder lacked the slim, elegant lines of a fighter. It was squat and blunt in the nose, like a club rather than an edged weapon. Designed to carry Marines and equipment into hostile territory and then remain on station for close air support, it was eighteen meters long from nose to forked tail. The main hull was a nine by three meter ovoid cylinder slung under a retractable wing unit. Its troop bay could hold a dozen Marines in

fighting suits. Above the main hull, the twin booms of the tail extended back from the stubby wings to end in a bulging central nacelle that housed the main engine. The rear stabilizers formed a distinct V atop the engine housing. The space between the booms formed the carry bay for an Armored Personnel Carrier. Electromagnetic couplers held the heavily armored hovercraft snugly against the rear troop bay of the main hull during orbital and reentry maneuvers.

As the ordnance handlers loaded the long belts of depleted uranium slugs into the magazines of the nose and dorsal turret guns, Mac absently touched a small holocube picture attached to the command console with a small glob of hull repair cement. This was a pre-launch ritual as well. He and Linda had been together for only nine months in the four years of their marriage. The holocube was as close as they were likely to get until the war was over.

Finally the red suits drifted off into the airlocks. Left hovering over the Intruder's nose was the yellow suited launch inspector. He swept a practiced eye over the Intruder seeking flaws in its heat ablative surface. The ceramic foam that protected the craft during reentry covered the hull to a thickness of several centimeters. It was flat gray, with no telltale gleam of copper reactive armor or silver hull metal. Applied as a spray just hours

before launch, the foam hardened to a solid coat within minutes. Irregularities in the hull around ordnance hard points were sometimes incompletely covered and the launch inspector surveyed these areas carefully. Satisfied, the inspector snapped Mac a brisk salute. Mac returned the salute absently as he activated the intercom link to the launch captain perched in a command bubble high above the bay.

"Apache Mission, this is *Normandy* Control. Prepare for umbilical separation," the launch captain said as the inspector exited the bay.

"Roger *Normandy*," Mac answered. He looked down and to his left where Lt. Arkady "Ivan" Ivchenko sat hunched over his own pre-launch checklist. "Ivan, switch to internal power." Ivan nudged the Intruder's main engine to life and activated his launch and navigational systems. As the Weapons and Electronics Officer, he was responsible for navigation and targeting.

"Green Board," Ivan said. "Clear for umbilical sep."

"*Normandy*, this is Apache mission. Clear for umbilical sep. I am tactical at 1310 ship's time," Mac keyed the separation code into his command console and the Intruder freed itself from its last links to the launch bay. Mac looked up through the cockpit canopy, gave a 'thumbs up' sign and saluted, the

traditional ready to launch signal. The launch captain returned the salute and held both fists above his head, indicating the start of depressurization. The signals evolved on flight decks for over 100 years made launch procedures independent of computers or radio links. Even with heavy battle damage to her main systems, *Normandy* could still launch her strike force. Mac adjusted the Intruder's trim with a touch of the attitude control thrusters whenever the craft drifted in the slight air currents created by out gassing.

The launch captain rotated his fists as depressurization was completed and the huge launch bay doors began to open. The doors folded slowly into the bulkheads to reveal the blue, green and brown of the planet surface far below. The launch captain clasped both hands over his head as the doors locked open. He dropped one hand to the launch console and held the other up with fingers spread.

"Five seconds, Ivan," said Mac.

The launch captain dropped his hand and punched the launch key. The Intruder slid rapidly through the open doors under the impulse of the *Normandy's* electromagnets. Mac advanced the throttles adding thrust from the main engine. The Intruder shot into brilliant sunlight and began its long elliptical fall toward the planet's surface. Mac squinted but did not opaque his helmet visor as bright daylight flooded the cockpit. Ivan hunched

over his console, slightly below and forward of Mac's command seat, fingers walking swiftly over the keyboard as he ran through the navigation and weapons systems checks. Mac tapped gently on Ivan's helmet.

"Terminator, Ivan," said Mac. Ivan grunted and continued working through his checklist.

"IP coming up," Mac continued. "Are you ready to take the plunge? I think there's an air sickness bag in the glove box."

"If you don't shut up and tend to driving this bus, none of us will have to worry about puking," grumbled Ivan with a shrug of his narrow shoulders. "Now let me finish."

Mac laughed as the Intruder crossed the terminator into planetary night. Ivan was always grouchy before a drop. Mac knew how much the WEO hated the reentry and teased his friend about it unmercifully.

The inviting green and blue panorama disappeared with the sun as they crossed the terminator. The planet below was dark with no visible features here on the night side. The major city, Port Jefferson, was under blackout and none of the other settlements were large enough to be visible from orbit without light amplifiers.

Mac opened the comm link to the APC slung in the Intruder's carry bay. A grainy image appeared to the right of his heads-up cockpit display and solidified into a miniature

Marine strapped into a command seat similar to his own.

"Gunny, this is McAllister. We just crossed the terminator. Deorbital burn in-- " Mac glanced at Ivan who held up three fingers "Three minutes."

"Roger, Mr. Mac," replied Gunnery Sgt. Wilson Turner. "Hear the man, girls?" he bellowed to the Marines behind him in the APC's troop bay. "Dirtside in three."

Mac suppressed the image on his display but left the link open so that Gunny Turner could monitor the reentry.

"Course correction," said Ivan, scanning the navigational plot. "Lateral burn, three seconds and roll 45 degrees port."

Mac executed the maneuver smoothly. As the Intruder rolled, a cluster of lights swam into view. Mac could pick out one or two individual ships of the Second Marine Expeditionary Force. The *Tarawa*, *Normandy's* sister ship, stood out, dwarfing her smaller consorts. Huge rotating cylinders over a kilometer in length, the Orbital Attack Carriers were the largest ships in the fleet.

"II MEF Barrage Squadron to port," noted Mac.

"No shit," said Ivan. "Deorbital burn on my mark. 5-4-3-2-1, Mark!"

The Intruder's main engine roared to life, slowing the craft's rapid fall around the planet and pitching its nose forward. As the heat

shields slammed shut across the canopy, Mac glimpsed a sheet of fire erupting from the cluster of lights to port. The barrage had begun. To conceal the Intruder's fall through the atmosphere it would be covered by a barrage of missiles, all armed with high explosive warheads and all aimed in the Intruder's general direction. Ivan shuddered as he watched the targeting display. Hundreds of deadly pinpoints of light approached, then enveloped the Intruder. They rolled and pitched as the craft entered denser atmosphere.

Ivan closed his eyes and crossed himself from right to left in the Russian Orthodox fashion before gripping the edge of his seat. Mac grinned in amusement, singing softly as he wrestled with the controls. Ivan forced his eyes open to check his console but did not relax his grip. Mac eased the control surfaces on the wings outward but quickly retracted them again as his airspeed dropped. Too soon, he thought watching the altimeter.

For the time being, the Intruder was just one of hundreds of targets to any ground-based sensors. Once Mac extended the wings and went "on stick", their non-ballistic flight path would make the Intruder stand out like a wolf among the sheep. His job this mission was to deliver the Marine Recon team in the APC without attracting attention. This was their third Recon-in-Force mission in the last

two weeks and Mac hoped it would be the last for a while.

The low altitude alarm sounded in his helmet earphones. Mac extended the wings. The Intruder shuddered and bucked. Mac hauled back sharply on the controls and slammed the throttles full open. G-forces pushed him deep into the seat as his vision blurred red. Mac howled as the Intruder struggled to level off. Then suddenly the pressure released him. Ivan sighed loudly. The canopy shields retracted and Mac could see the ground rushing past them. The Intruder screamed across a grassy plain at less than 20 meters. Ivan hunched over his sensors.

"Clear sweep," he reported. "No targets."

Mac grunted and eased back on the throttles. He allowed the Intruder to rise to 50 meters as they cleared the edge of the grassland and the terrain became more broken and forested.

"Heading?" he asked.

"Bring her around to one two zero local," answered Ivan. "APC separation in five mikes."

"Hear that, Gunny?" Mac asked.

"Five mikes, aye," replied Turner. He turned and addressed his squad. "Party starts in five minutes. Check your secondaries. Lock and load!"

Mac bled off more speed but held the Intruder as close to the treetops as possible.

"APC sep on my mark," called Ivan. "5-4-3-2-1, Mark!"

The magnetic couplings of the carry harness reversed polarity and the APC fell away. The Intruder rose sharply, suddenly free of the extra weight. Mac rolled them into a banking turn and dropped again to treetop level. The APC hovered for a second then slipped smoothly beneath the forest canopy.

"Company?" asked Mac.

"Clear sweep," answered Ivan. "No targets."

"What do you say to setting down for a while, then. Gunny Turner and his boys will be gone for a few hours. As long as we're close enough for dustoff, orders are to use discretion and keep below sensor range."

"There's a clearing about two clicks southeast," said Ivan. "Give me a slow circle around it so I can scan before we set down."

"Right," said Mac as a heading appeared on his heads-up display. The clearing was about 300 meters across and almost circular with a few scrubby trees around the edges. The pine and aspen hybrids that had been imported early in the colonial settlement days had nearly replaced the more primitive native species throughout this part of the northern continent. The setting reminded Mac of the mountain meadows he had seen in the high

country above Denver where Linda's parents had a summer cabin. Mac hovered at 20 meters, slowly circling as Ivan scanned the forest. Ivan signaled all clear. Mac set them down near the center of the clearing.

Mac popped the canopy a few centimeters and removed his helmet. He clenched his teeth to activate the remote radio receiver implanted in his right mastoid, setting the helmet on the console in front of him. He unbuckled his harness and stretched in his seat.

Cold moist air washed over his face, carrying the thick scent of vegetation. The stars were hard and bright above him. Hibernia had no moon, but the starlight was surprisingly bright. Ivan sighed deeply and slumped in his seat. Mac looked at his WEO's face, the profile sharply outlined in the starlight.

Ivan inhaled deeply. "This is good country," he said, more to himself than to Mac. "I can see why people would want to settle here. It might be worth a look when this is over, getting a small place here."

Mac snorted derisively, "You? The Mad Russian, a potato farmer? That'll be the day."

Ivan said nothing, not even rising to Mac's teasing. After a few seconds he said, "I've just been thinking about settling down, that's all. I got a letter from my mother in the last message buoy. She's moving to Petrograd to

live with my sister. Irena is marrying some curator at the Hermitage and they have more room than the apartment in Moscow. The wedding is next month."

"Is that what's been eating you lately? Hell, the next mail buoy goes out in a couple of days. Pick out a nice gift and have it delivered from the Navy Exchange in Vilnius. Your sister will understand why you can't be there."

"Already done," said Ivan.

"Well, you have to admit, you've been awfully quiet lately, partner," he said. "What's got you all in a funk?"

Ivan didn't answer for a while. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked up at the pilot. "I had planned to wait until after this mission, but I guess I should tell you," he said. "This is my last drop. I've resigned my commission. As soon as II MEF can clear me, I'm gone."

"Right," said Mac sarcastically. "And I'm the next squadron commander." He laughed, then noticed the WEO's expression. Ivan's thin features looked more drawn and solemn than usual.

"You're serious," Mac said quietly.

"Damn straight," said Ivan, turning away to look out of his side of the canopy.

"Why?" said Mac.

"I'm just tired," said Ivan. "Tired of the drops, tired of worrying about eating dirt at Mach 3, tired of you hot-sticking it around with my ass in your pocket," Ivan stopped,

then muttered bitterly, "Tired of killing my own kind."

"Oh, here we go again," groaned Mac.

"Just shut up," said Ivan. "I signed up to fight the Rilz, not humans!"

"Well, if the good people of Hibernia hadn't tried to break with the UN and cut their own deal with the Lizards, then we wouldn't be here."

"They only did that after the Security Council denied their request for more development zones and slapped them with sanctions for the ones they'd already opened." answered Ivan.

"They violated a Council order! Look around you!"

"It's their planet!"

They stared angrily at each other for a few seconds, then Ivan looked away. "Look, Mac," he said. "It's nothing personal, OK. I just can't do this anymore."

"If you're burned out, fine," said Mac. "Get some R&R and I'll get me a WEO who can take the heat. Just don't hand me this chicken shit political crap. You want out? Go! I'll find somebody else to fly with."

Ivan said nothing, staring out into the night. Mac slumped angrily in his seat.

The silence stretched for minutes, then an hour. Mac fingered the controls; Ivan leaned against the canopy, eyes closed. Just as Mac opened his mouth to break the silence, to

make it up somehow, the receiver in his mastoid crackled. "Dustoff, this is Apache. Require immediate fire mission and dustoff. We are under heavy small arms fire. APC is down."

"Apache, this is Dustoff," said Mac, the implant picking up his voice and activating the Intruders transmitter. "On our way. Transmit coordinates and recognition code."

Mac closed the canopy and picked up his helmet. He looked at Ivan. "You OK?" he asked.

Ivan nodded as the Intruder's engine powered up. The craft lifted above the trees and Mac fed power to the main engine.

"Heading to LZ is three two zero, local bearing," said Ivan. "Green board, weapons free and hot."

Mac grunted and advanced the throttles. The Intruder roared across the treetops, blackening the uppermost branches.

"Dustoff, this is Apache," Gunny Turner's voice was tight but controlled. "We're taking heavy small arms fire from buildings to the north and east of our position. LZ will be hot. We'll pop green smoke as soon as you make your first pass. Say again, Apache will be green smoke."

Mac keyed his transmitter twice but said nothing. The two clicks would tell Turner that his message had been understood. The forest gave way to cultivated fields and occasional

farm buildings. Ahead, a line of low rocky hills rose from the flat countryside. A column of black smoke rising from behind the hills was visible as a blot on the starry sky. Mac eased the Intruder's nose up to follow the contour of the hills. The rocky slope swept under them, just meters below the landing skids. Then suddenly they were over the top, angling down into the valley beyond.

Mac could see a cluster of low buildings ranged around a circular concrete pad. The APC lay on its side near the center of the pad, burning. Tracer fire arched from the buildings toward a cluster of rocks south of the pad. A plume of green smoke appeared from the rocks. Then they were past the buildings and into the night. Mac swung around in a gut-wrenching turn.

"What have you got, Ivan?" he asked. "I figure the bad guys are in the buildings and Turner and his boys are in the rocks."

"The buildings are shielded," said Ivan. "Why put shielded buildings way out here?"

"Never mind," said Mac. "Give me a heading."

"Give me a slow pass behind the buildings at twenty meters," said Ivan, crouching over his weapons console and activating his helmet fire control system. Targeting information was fed directly to an eyepiece in the helmet. Ivan could select, aim and fire the Intruder's weapons by simply moving his head and eyes.

The Intruder started its pass at parade ground pace. Mac flew by instinct, the stick and controls extensions of his hands as fire erupted around them. The Intruder bucked and heaved as exploding ordnance bracketed the wings. Reactive armor countered the hits, adding to the din and confusion.

Ivan fired back, launching cluster grenades at the buildings and manipulating the nose and turret guns. Mac couldn't tell if he was firing at targets or at random, but the insistent rattle of the reactive armor slackened as Ivan's rate of fire increased. Smoke billowed out of one of the buildings and across Mac's canopy, obscuring his view. Then suddenly they were beyond the building and the night sky was clear above.

"Another pass?" Mac asked, checking the status board to the left of his seat. Several of the starboard hull integrity indicators were showing a yellow tinge where repeated hits had thinned the armor.

"Negative," said Ivan. "I've got two targets on long range scan - 500 klicks out and closing fast. Fighters, I'll bet. Time to beat feet."

"Right. Crack the rear deck and get ready for dustoff. I'll try to bring us in behind the APC. Maybe the smoke will help some."

"Rear bay is open," said Ivan. "I'll drop the ramp when we're on the LZ. Try to keep nose

on to the buildings. I'm going to try to take out the shield with a couple of Raptors."

"At 50 meters?" Mac shook his head as he swung the Intruder's nose around and added thrust to the main engine.

"Targeting sensors," shouted Ivan. "We're being scanned. I'm jamming." A warbling tone sounded in Mac's ear. A steady tone would mean that someone had them in a weapons lock. Ivan increased the jam and the tone faded.

"We've got maybe a minute and a half and then we've got trouble," said Ivan.

Mac swept across the concrete pad, the landing skids less than a meter above the surface. The Intruder pivoted like a wild animal seeking its prey. Sheets of tracer fire exploded from the nearest building. The Intruder staggered as a cluster grenade detonated under the port wing. Hull integrity lights flashed red on Mac's status board. He pivoted slightly to present more of the starboard side and protect the wing. He was rewarded with more yellow lights from the starboard indicators. Ivan cursed as his fingers flew over the weapons board. A steady ratcheting sound filled the cockpit as grenade after grenade launched from the starboard tubes. Tracers from the nose gun formed a solid line that swept back and forth across the building.

"Nose on! Nose on!" shouted Ivan.

Mac held his breath and pivoted to starboard. More red lights flashed from the port wing sensors, then smoke and flame engulfed the Intruder as Ivan launched Raptors from both wing pods. The large missiles homed in on the discontinuity between the building's sensor shield and the adjacent solid ground. Mac's visor went opaque a millisecond after a blinding flash exploded in front of them. When it recycled to transparent a second later, the building was gone. Mac looked left and right, momentarily stunned by the concussion. Rather absently, he noted the smoking remains of a reinforced concrete wall where the building had stood. Beyond it, the glowing vapor trail of an unexploded Raptor coursed back and forth as the missile sought a target.

"Set us down, Mac!" shouted Ivan.

Mac shook his head and eased the Intruder to the ground.

"Ramp down," said Ivan. "High speed targets at 220 kilometers and still closing. I'm still jamming."

Mac reached out and activated the rear gun camera. Dark figures approached the Intruder, leapfrogging past one another to provide covering fire. The last two walked back-to-back, turning in slow circles. As the first Marine reached the ramp, there was a dull thump over the Intruder's tail section. Secondary explosions rippled around the

Marines as the submunitions of the cluster grenade struck the ground.

Ivan cursed again. He swung the nose gun in long sweeping arcs across the remaining buildings. Tracers poured in from all sides. The rattle of the reactive armor deafened them. Red overload lights flashed on Mac's status board. Hull integrity alarms squealed as holes appeared in the port wing. Half of the Marines were down, being dragged toward the ramp by the others. Mac darkened his visor to keep from being blinded by the brilliant tracers and explosions around the Intruder.

Ivan swung the guns back and forth, picking targets when he could, trying to avoid hitting the Marines. Mac watched the loading ramp by traversing the gun camera around. The last two Marines stood back to back at the base of the ramp, firing steadily into the darkness as one of their wounded comrades was dragged up. Then, they too dashed up and the ramp began to close. Mac poured power to the lifters and the Intruder rose from the concrete surface. The intercom from the troop bay chimed and Mac slapped it off.

"Not now, Gunny!" he shouted. "We gotta fly."

"There are Marines back there!" Turner shouted back. "Four wounded, in the rocks."

"Shit!" cursed Mac. "Ivan, where are those fighters?"

"Fifty clicks and closing. They're burning through the jam."

Mac cursed again as the warbling tone returned in his ear. He pivoted to present the Intruder's marginally less damaged starboard side to the withering fire coming from the buildings. A part of his mind wondered why one of the buildings was changing shape and opening toward them like some strange mechanical flower.

Then the warbling in his ear became a steady high-pitched squeal. "Weapons lock," shouted Ivan. Mac looked away from the strange building seeking a flat spot in the jumbled hillside where he could set down, or at least hover. Suddenly, a red light bathed the interior of the cockpit. Ivan screamed and clawed at his eyes, jerking the eyepiece away from his face. Mac reacted without thought. He slammed the cockpit heat shield shut and poured plasma to both the lifters and the main engine. Hull breach alarms screamed at him. He overrode them as the Intruder struggled skyward. Mac fought to bring the nose up to vertical but the Intruder began to corkscrew as he lost all control in the port wing. Desperately he cut power to the lifters and pulled the jettison ring. Explosive bolts fired, separating the wings from the fuselage. The Intruder shot upward, a ballistic missile controlled only by the tail fins and attitude control thrusters.

Over the intercom, Mac could hear Gunny Turner screaming at him. The words refused to register but the fury behind them was unmistakable. Mac ignored him as he tried to keep the Intruder together. His status board was a solid wall of red lights. He continued slapping off overload alarms, making Turner's stream of curses seem all the louder. A depressurization alarm sounded.

"Suit up!" shouted Mac. "Depressurization emergency." He sealed his helmet, then turned to Ivan. Ivan had managed to seal his own helmet, but was otherwise unresponsive. His eyelids were blistered and swollen shut. Thin trickles of bloody fluid trailed down his cheeks. Sounds from the intercom faded as the troop bay depressurized. Mac hoped they had heard the alarm and had been able to get into survival bubbles.

"*Normandy* Control, this is Apache Mission," Mac said into his suit microphone. "I am declaring an emergency. Request clear deck and grapple for immediate recovery. I have wounded aboard."

"Apache Mission, this is *Normandy*. You have clear deck. What is your damage? Can you make a powered recovery?"

"Negative *Normandy*. I have extensive hull damage. Wing unit has been jettisoned and my port plasma bottle is becoming unstable."

"Roger, Apache. Clear deck and grapple."

The Intruder rolled sharply as the plasma bottle destabilized and was automatically jettisoned. Mac fought the spin and brought it under control. Ivan's limp hand drifted upward and Mac realized that they were in free fall. Two minutes later the proximity alarm sounded. Mac saw the grapple tug rising from low orbit to meet them.

The tug matched orbits smoothly. Grapples along its port side opened, embracing the Intruder's battered starboard hull. Mac felt a gentle thump as the magnetic couplers latched on to the hard points on the forward and aft staging collars.

"Apache Mission, this is Grapple 3. We have you locked and ready to roll. Shut down your guidance computer and leave the driving to us."

"Roger, Grapple 3. This is an emergency. Let's cut the chatter and dock this ship ASAP"

"Hey, easy buddy. We've got you. You're home now. Lock down and prepare for maneuver."

Thirty minutes later, they cleared the main lock and were berthed in the forward hangar deck. Mac hovered over Ivan as the medics bound him to a spine board and eased him out of the cockpit. The medics shooed Mac away, then guided Ivan on to a stretcher and pushed off toward the drop shaft. They guided the stretcher smoothly into the open shaft.

The hatch closed, leaving Mac clinging to a stanchion.

Mac hung there for a moment watching the rest of the Marines disembark and glide across the no-weight hangar toward the drop shafts. The deck crew moved forward with cleaning servos and a pallet of dark plastic body bags. Mac counted only two full bags as they were pushed out of the troop bay and collected by Casualty Registration clerks. The cleaning servos began to hum loudly, scrubbing down the Intruder's interior.

He began to shake, first his hands, then his arms, then his whole body. He cursed himself for being weak, but the shakes continued. He closed his eyes but could still see Ivan's blistered face streaked with bloody tears as he was lifted from the cockpit. Mac had been in combat before, had watched impassively as dead and wounded men had been tended by the medics in this same hangar. This was different. Ivan wasn't supposed to get hurt. Ivan was supposed to be there watching Mac's back, keeping him sane when he got too wild, doing the thinking while Mac did the flying. The war had suddenly gotten very personal. He clung to the stanchion gasping for breath. The tremors passed after a while leaving him drained and slightly nauseated. He swallowed hard and pushed off toward the 'down' ladder. As he caught it and hauled himself to a stop, he caught sight of the armorer's window on

the far side of the hangar. The Marines from Apache Mission were turning in their weapons. Word was obviously spreading. The armorer's stare was hard as hullmetal and just as cold.

Mac swung his legs toward the outer decks and pushed himself 'down' the ladder. The spin induced sensation of weight increased as he pushed himself along toward the next deck. By the time he reached the berthing level, two decks away from the hangar, he could hook his feet around the outer edges of the ladder and slide 'down' the last meter to the deck. He started aft down the antispin passageway toward his quarters. The passageways ran fore and aft and were designated spin or antispin based on their position relative to the quarterdeck. The half of the ship counterclockwise relative to the quarterdeck was the antispin side and its passageways were odd numbered. The even numbered passages were along the opposite half of the ship. More arbitrary was the division of the berthing spaces along service lines- Navy to the antispin side, Marines to spinward. The separation was informal, but the tradition was strong. Marines were rarely seen in Navy country except on official business and vice versa. Mac slid into the flow of traffic in the narrow passage, comfortable in the mob of Navy uniforms and away from the hard looks of the Marines.

Two hours later, Mac stood outside the door marked "Commander C.G. Wlodowski, Commander, Air Group". The passageway here near the quarterdeck was empty and quiet. Mac leaned against the bulkhead and struggled to control his fatigue. He had requested to see the CAG as soon as he had reached his quarters. The CAG had given him two hours to clean up, change uniforms and report to the command level for debriefing.

Turner had wasted no time in reporting to II MEF that Marines had been abandoned dirtside. Mac had been bumped and jostled in the *Normandy's* narrow passageways more in the last hour than in the last year. No one spoke to him, which was worse than Turner's shouting. Marines did not abandon their wounded. Mac felt a sharp stab of guilt in the pit of his stomach. Guilt at having left the Marines and the more secret guilt at his own relief that he was not the one lying on a stretcher with burned out eyes.

Mac reached out, knocked, then entered the CAG's stateroom. "Lt. McAllister, sir," he said, saluting.

"At ease, Mac," said Cdr. Wlodowski, known to the squadron simply as CAG. He was a large man for an Intruder pilot, nearly two meters tall and heavily built. It was said that he didn't fly an Intruder, he wore it. His

thinning blond hair was cropped close to the scalp making him appear almost bald. He clasped his hands behind his neck and leaned back in the leather chair behind his small desk. Even relaxed, he dominated the small compartment.

"I'll get the details from your after action report," he said. "But just for the record, that was a Redeye that was hidden in that building. Gun camera analysis shows that the targeting laser acquired you just before you lifted. Another half second and the main laser would have smoked you. You did good, son."

Mac grimaced, then stared at the bulkhead over CAG's right shoulder. "Sir, I want to request a transfer to a non-flying billet," he said stiffly. "I thought about it on the way up and... I...well, I just think it would be best, sir."

Wlodowski sighed and pushed back in his chair. "So you've thought about this, have you?"

"Yes sir. I don't think I can work effectively with the Corps any longer."

"Bullshit!" exploded Wlodowski, sitting upright in his chair. "You're the hottest stick in this whole damned squadron, second to me. You're effective until I say you're not! Now, try again. Why should I ship you out?"

"I no longer have confidence in the orders issued by my superiors, sir," said Mac through gritted teeth.

"Again - bullshit! You're not going to stand there and tell me you have no confidence in my orders, are you? Be careful. You're one mouthful away from an insubordination charge."

"What do you want me to say?" shouted Mac. "Ivan's blind, I left four Marines dirtside and saw two more smeared all over the troop bay by explosive decompression and for what? The Redeye is still there, the Lizards are light-years away and we're shooting up our own people over some petty dispute about where to plant potatoes! And what idiot in Command ordered an unsupported Recon team and a single Intruder to assault a Redeye? I agree. It's all bullshit!"

Wlodowski sighed and answered quietly, "You didn't blind Ivan. The targeting laser of a Redeye planetary defense laser did that. Do you figure you owe him something? Well, you don't. Ivan resigned for his own reasons and what happened had nothing to do with that or with you." Wlodowski held up his hand as Mac opened his mouth to interrupt. "Shut up. Do you think you're the first shit-hot pilot to stand there and bitch about Command incompetence because he lost a friend or got the pants scared off him? 'For what' you ask. Well, I'll let you in on a little secret, Mac. II MEF didn't care if you got smoked. Apache was bait to flush out the Redeye so the targeting pukers could pinpoint it for some

future mission. So you see, it didn't mean shit!" Wlodowski sighed, "Don't look for meaning in this, Mac. War isn't about meaning. It's about nasty little fights where men get killed and nothing much matters except who survives."

CAG stood and walked over to Mac, forcing him to make eye contact. "Go talk to Ivan. Then get ten hours of sleep and a hot meal. Then come see me again. If you still want out, I'll transmit your request. Because if you can't take the loss, if you can't take the sharp end of the job like a professional, then I don't want you. Anger doesn't belong dirtside. It gets men killed."

Mac said nothing.

"All right," said Wlodowski. "Get out of here." Mac turned to leave.

"Mac," Wlodowski stopped him. "Don't worry about the Marines. You had no choice. You got your ship and most of the squad back and that counts for a lot. Now, get some sleep and see me on the first watch."

Mac left the stateroom, squared his shoulders and walked down the passageway toward the berthing area.

Part 2

HIBERNIA: FINEST TRADITIONS

Mac slumped against the bulkhead outside sickbay. He had slept for 12 hours straight and awakened feeling groggy. The bunk had been soaked with sweat and he felt anything but rested. He dreaded seeing Ivan, dreaded sickbay under any circumstances. He had showered and stopped by the wardroom for a late breakfast and had generally delayed coming up to the medical deck for as long as he could. Now he felt rushed. He had been instructed over the message net to report to the CAG at 0930, which left only about a half hour to talk to Ivan.

He wasn't sure what to say. He had fallen asleep full of resolve to turn in his wings and follow Ivan into some vague civilian future, or at least to avoid flying again. Now it seemed much less clear. Ideas formed in the stress and fatigue of the night seemed jumbled and contradictory, whirling in his head until he shook it violently and declared a mental truce.

Mac took a deep breath and stood up straight. He turned and walked through the hatch into the sick call assembly space. It was large enough to accommodate several data stations and corpsmen to operate them, as well as a number of patients. It was nearly

deserted at this time of the ship's day. Long narrow benches in the waiting area sat empty. A bored looking Corpsman and a young Marine were at the only operating data station. Another corpsman, a Second Class Petty Officer, possibly the section leader, sat at a data link near the aft bulkhead and looked up as Mac entered.

"May I help you, sir?" he said as Mac entered.

Mac glanced at his nameplate, then said, "Yes, Petty Officer Reynolds. I'd like to see Lt. Ivchenko."

"Visiting hours are 1100 to 1400, sir. Unless this is official squadron business?"

Mac hesitated a second then said, "It's squadron business. I'd like to talk with him without a lot of casual bystanders, if possible."

Reynolds looked at him skeptically but did not challenge his statement. He led Mac around a partition in the spinward end of the sick call area and into the inpatient ward. Stark white biotanks lined the bulkheads, each with a bank of monitors above the head. Corpsmen moved among the tanks, checking the monitors and doing arcane things with hand held instruments. Mac shivered, knowing the men in the tanks were under sleep inducers but dreading the idea of being confined like that.

Ivan lay near the back on a narrow bed surrounded by electronic monitors. His face

above the upper lip was encased in a modular biohood, a smaller version of the whole body tanks that accelerated wound healing and controlled the construction of biosynthetic prostheses. Mac approached him slowly, not sure if he was conscious and secretly hoping he was not.

"Who's there?" Ivan asked quietly as he heard Mac approach.

Mac took Ivan's hand. "It's me, Ivan," he said. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, just ducky," said Ivan sarcastically. "Three hots and a cot. What more could I want? Of course, I can't see or smell what they're feeding me, so for all I know the food is no better than it is in the wardroom." Ivan laughed harshly but gripped Mac's hand tightly. Mac said nothing.

"Actually, other than feeling sorry for myself, I'm doing OK. Reynolds watches out for me and tells me dirty jokes when I get a bit stir crazy under this hood. And I hear the docs talking. It looks like they're going to ship me Earthside to San Diego for some optical implants once the burns heal."

"That's good!" said Mac. "At least there's something they can do before you process out." He looked away and lapsed into silence thinking how lame he sounded, trying to reassure a blind man.

"What's on your mind, Mac?" said Ivan after a while. "I don't think you came up here just to hold hands."

Mac was silent for a moment. Wariness ingrained by years of growing up in a succession of foster homes took over. Words would not come. He could feel the chill that he imposed on any strong emotion begin to take hold. He shook his head, forcing himself to feel his own regret, at least this once. He took a deep breath and said in a rush, "Ivan, I'm sorry. I should have.... I saw that building open up. I should have warned you or gotten us out of there quicker. I feel like this is my fault."

"Oh, no you don't," said Ivan. "You're not going to lay this on me. Don't start with that 'fault' crap. I saw the same thing you did. I was there too, remember."

"But I was mission commander," said Mac. "It was my responsibility."

"And you got us out of there. Are you sorry we're not dead?"

"I should have done something," Mac insisted.

"Of all the self centered.... This isn't about you. I'm the one stuck here under this hood. Do you think you owe me something? Get on line, pal. If you want to feel sorry for yourself, fine. If you want to apologize to the Marines, go ahead. See how far it gets you. I won't have you trying to take responsibility for me."

"Why do you have to make this hard?" asked Mac. "I just wanted to tell you that I was sorry and that I was going to turn in my wings and request a non-flying billet."

"What? Why would you do a stupid thing like that?"

"It wasn't stupid when you did it!"

Ivan groaned, exasperated. "That was my choice. I had myself worked up into such a moral snit over Hibernia that I couldn't see any other way out. It doesn't much matter now, anyway. That was never your problem. You never cared about who we were fighting as long as the flying was good."

"The flying doesn't seem that important right now. I'm not sure I can do this anymore," said Mac.

Ivan sighed. "Mac, you're the best pilot I've ever seen. No bullshit, just fact. If you want to quit for your own reasons, fine. That's your decision to make. Just don't use me to justify it."

Mac opened his mouth to retort but could think of nothing to say. He looked away and saw Petty Officer Reynolds approaching.

"Excuse me sir," he said. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave now. It's time to recharge Mr. Ivchenko's hood."

Mac hesitated. Reynolds said softly, "We'll take good care of him, sir. But he needs to rest now."

Mac nodded and said, "I've got to go, Ivan. Gotta see the CAG at 0930." He turned and started toward the passageway.

"Mac," Ivan called after him. "If you really have something to prove, then take out that laser. Just don't get your ass fried doing it."

Mac hurried forward along the passageway after leaving the medical spaces. He was late. He slid 'down' the forward ladder to the command deck and continued forward into admin country. The CAG's office was in a cluster of four others just aft of the bridge. Off of the same passageway were offices for the CGF, Commander Ground Forces; the Flag Captain who commanded the *Normandy*; and the II MEF Liaison office. The Commanding General had his offices, quarters and ready room further forward, adjacent to the bridge.

CAG's door was open. Mac knocked and entered, standing at attention in front of the desk. "Lt. McAllister reporting, sir," he said.

"At ease, Mac," Wlodowski said without looking up from the monitor screen set in the desktop. After a moment he closed the link and leaned back in his chair. "Did you see Ivan? How's he doing?"

"He's OK, sir. Petty Officer Reynolds is looking out for him," said Mac. After a moment he added, "I'd like to reconsider my request to withdraw from flight status, sir."

"Good," said Wlodowski. "You better be certain of that, because you'll be defending it

in front a Board of Inquiry. I'm sorry to spring it on you like this, but Lt Col. Nicholson has requested a Board to investigate the abandonment of Marines at Monroe Crossroads. It's his right as CGF, although I never thought he'd push it. I'll be there to back you up, but I need to know that you want to stay on flight status, that you don't have any doubts about that. We may have to go head to head with the green side and I won't expend that kind of political capital if you're still not certain."

Mac was surprised at the anger that welled up within him, a cold fury at the thought of anyone questioning his fitness. "I'm certain, sir," he said evenly.

"Good," said Wlodowski. "The board convenes at 1400. You have a right to counsel, but that will delay things considerably and by regs I have to down check you until this is resolved."

"I'll take my chances on my own, sir, unless you advise against it."

"I can't advise you directly, Mac. I'll be sitting on the board. I will do what I can to support you, but can't give you direct advice once this process starts."

"I understand, sir."

CAG dismissed him and Mac left the office. As he turned left toward the command level, he noticed Turner standing in the CGF's office. The Marine looked him in the eye, then

turned slowly and deliberately away from him before closing the door to the office.

Mac went forward to the quarterdeck and checked the duty board. He found that he was not only removed from flight status, but had also been relieved of all other duties pending the outcome of the Board. He slammed the flat of his palm against the bulkhead in anger and frustration, drawing a sharp look from the JOOD on the quarterdeck. Mac nodded in apology and left the command area quickly.

With no assigned duties, he wandered slowly back to officers quarters in a black mood. He changed into shorts and running shoes and made his way aft to the running track. The track was actually a circular void between the forward and aft segments of the ship. It could be sealed to prevent a rupture in the forward or aft hull from depressurizing the entire ship. Since it ran circumferentially around the outer hull, it made a perfect exercise track for Physical Training. Mac ran hard for about three kilometers until he had exhausted the worst of his rage. He continued at an easy pace for another kilometer or so before he ceded the track to a Marine squad running in formation.

Mac returned to his quarters to shower and change. As he entered, the mail light on his com screen blinked at him. He keyed in his ID number and password and the screen lit up with a video from Linda. He dropped onto his

bunk to watch the video letter, all thoughts of a shower or the Board forgotten. Linda was at the Dolphin Research Institute in La Jolla, dressed in a gill suit, her wet hair clinging to her shoulders as she smiled at the camera and talked. Mac was only peripherally aware of her words as she described her work and introduced her dolphins. He was captivated by her face, her body, as she moved across the screen or swam smoothly with the dolphins. He felt the familiar ache in the pit of his stomach, an ache of longing and loneliness that only her presence could fill. The scene changed. Linda sat dry and comfortable in the spare bedroom of their apartment in Oceanside. The bedroom had been made into an office, ostensibly for the both of them, but he was so seldom home that Linda's presence dominated the room. She looked straight into the camera and told him how she was missing him and loved him and wished he could come home. He heard the words but somehow felt less connected to her now than when he saw her swimming or moving about at the Institute. That seemed more like the real Linda.

He had first seen her rising from the water at a small strip of beach near La Jolla. She wore a sky blue gill suit. Her dark hair was bound into a tight braid that clung to her back as she walked up the sand toward him. He had been surfing some modest breakers that

were funneled toward the narrow beach between a pair of rocky promontories. A fresh sea breeze was pushing the water into an ideal set, a short-lived series of swells that he had seen by chance as he drove south along the shore. He stood knee deep in the waves, his board grounded in the sand, watching her approach. She had the type of self-assured beauty that he usually found intimidating. She walked up to him and politely but with a firmness that brooked no argument asked him to take his board elsewhere. He was disturbing the white side dolphins at the head of the inlet and skewing her data. He agreed, on the condition that she meet him for dinner that evening. He had said it jokingly, but to his amazement she had given him a long hard look and nodded her head. Then she had walked into the water and dived beneath those perfect waves.

The chronometer chimed as he finished the video letter. It was 1300. No time to tape a reply. He showered quickly and put on his Class-A uniform. As he made his way forward, the rage returned. It was bad enough that he felt guilty about Ivan. To have a toad like Nicholson question his courage and competence when the whole fiasco of the Redeye assault had probably been planned by the CGF's staff in the first place was intolerable.

The board convened in the General's Ready Room. The space was large, almost a quarter section on the outer hull of the flagship. It could be configured as a conference room, a reception area for VIP visitors or, as in this case, as a courtroom. The Board members sat behind a long table at the rear bulkhead. The table was bare gleaming wood, not the green baize of a formal court martial. A folder in front of each board member held printouts of the after action reports and particulars of the investigation. There was a large holoscreen to the left of the table and several chairs for witnesses in front of it.

Seated at the long table were the CAG, Lt. Col. Nicholson, the CGF; and Colonel Hanford, Commanding Officer of the 4th MOAS and president of the board of inquiry. Hanford and CAG were talking quietly as Mac was admitted and directed to a chair. Nicholson sat apart. He wore his dress uniform, the sky blue and green of the high-necked jacket a sharp contrast to the others who wore simple Class-A blues. To the right was a smaller table where the II MEF liaison sat. Commander Nelson, the liaison, was there only as an observer, since this was not a formal court martial and therefore an internal squadron matter. Mac walked stiffly forward and sat in a hard chair front and center before the Board. There was a Second Class Data Technician next to the holoscreen to operate

the sound and holographic recorders that would follow the proceedings and retrieve any needed data from the ship's computer. He looked bored as he adjusted his equipment.

Colonel Hanford banged a gavel on the table and began, "This Board of Inquiry is now open under section 24 of the United Nations Armed Forces Code. I am Colonel L. C. Hanford, Commanding Officer, 4th MOAS, presiding. To my right is Commander C. G. Wlodowski, Commander Air Group, 4th MOAS. To my left is Lt. Colonel M. A. Nicholson, Commander Ground Forces, 4th MOAS. Commander G. D. Nelson is present as II MEF Liaison Officer, observing. This Board has been constituted at the request of Lt. Col. Nicholson to inquire into the circumstances surrounding mission R2-a4 of 24 July, designated Apache Mission. This mission resulted in the loss of an A-20 Intruder orbital attack craft, the combat related deaths of three 4th MOAS Marines and the abandonment on the planetary surface of an additional four MOAS personnel. Lt A. McAllister was mission commander and pilot of the Intruder involved and his conduct is the subject of this inquiry."

"Participants are cautioned that this is a Board of Inquiry, not a Court Martial. Judicial rules of evidence do not apply here. However, any testimony developed as a result of this Inquiry may be admissible in a subsequent

Court Martial, subject to challenge and judicial review by the Judge of the Court. All participants and witnesses are entitled to counsel and may so request at any time.

"Lt. McAllister, as the principal focus of this Inquiry, I must ask you if you have been informed of your right to counsel."

"I have, sir."

"And do you waive that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You may at any time request counsel and these proceedings will halt until such counsel is provided." Hanford paused a moment, then went on, "In the interest of time, I would like to suggest that we stipulate as to the accuracy of the after action reports filed by Lt. McAllister and the ground forces mission commander, Gunnery Sgt. Wilson Turner. Is that acceptable to the Board?"

Both Nicholson and Wlodowski nodded their assent. Mac wasn't sure why this seemed important but noted it in his datalink, also making a note to review Turner's report and kicking himself for not having done so already.

"I will open the questioning myself and then ask the Board members to proceed with any questions they may wish to ask," said Hanford. He glanced at the folder in front of him, then continued, "Lt. McAllister, you state in your report that you were unaware of any Marines, wounded or otherwise, still in the

squad's defensive position at the time you initially lifted off from the LZ. When did you become aware that there were still Marines in the rocks?"

"As soon as we lifted off and began to transition for our orbital boost, the troop bay intercom chimed. I told Gunny Turner that we were lifting and he informed me that there were still four wounded in the defensive redoubt in the rocks."

"And what action did you take?"

"I immediately returned to hover mode and began a slide to the right, toward the rocks, looking for a place to set down or hover for a recovery."

"At what point did you change your mind and initiate an emergency boost?"

"Well, sir, as we slid toward the rocks I asked my WEO about the status of a group of fighters we had on long range scan. He informed me that they were within 50 kilometers and were burning through our sensor jam. Just as the fighters got weapons lock on us, everything sort of happened at once. I was looking to starboard for a place to land. Ivan, that is Lt. Ivchenko, caught a blast from the Redeye's targeting laser in the eyes and was out of commission because of the burns, the heat shields slammed shut and I hit the boost command."

"You had already been locked by the fighters when you started your slide toward the rocks?" asked Hanford.

"Yes, sir. We had a solid warning tone from the detectors."

"What prompted you to initiate the emergency boost?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Looking back, it must have been the red light that flooded the cockpit just before the heat shield closed. But I don't recall recognizing that it was a targeting laser at the time. I just had a feeling that we needed to get out of there fast."

"So, in summary, it was the targeting laser and not the fighters or the ground fire that prompted your actions?"

Mac thought a moment. "Yes, sir. I'd have to say that's what did it."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Hanford turned to Nicholson. "Lt. Col. Nicholson, as requesting officer, do you have further questions for Lt. McAllister?"

"Yes, sir." said Nicholson. "Lieutenant, I'd like to go back a bit to Gunnery Sgt. Turner's initial request for a fire mission and extraction. Where were you at the time the request came in?"

"We had set down in a small clearing about 20 kilometers from the mission objective. Gunny Turner's request came over the encrypted frequency assigned for the mission.

We immediately lifted off and proceeded at high speed to the LZ."

"And did Gunnery Sgt. Turner give you coordinates for both the LZ and the fire mission?"

Mac was suddenly wary, not sure where Nicholson was going. "No, sir. Just one set of coordinates which I assumed covered both the LZ and the fire mission, since he said they were under fire."

"Did Turner indicate any recognition signal or marker would be deployed to mark the LZ?"

Mac now saw what Nicholson was driving at and was concerned. "Yes, sir. He said he'd pop a green smoker as we made our first pass. I assumed he meant to mark his position so we would know where the enemy position was in relation to it. I thought he was trying to avoid confusion and possibly being hit by friendly fire."

"Didn't it occur to you that he might be marking the LZ? He said, quote, 'We'll pop green smoke as you make your first pass. Say again, Apache will be green smoke'. According to Gunnery Sgt. Turner's report, he received a double click on the transmitter indicating your understanding of that message."

Mac was speechless for a moment, suddenly understanding Turner's fury at him on the way up from the surface. All of the rage he had felt toward Nicholson and the Board

evaporated in an instant, replaced by a cold doubt in the pit of his stomach. He cleared his throat, his voice now thick. The words threatened to stick to the roof of his mouth. "Sir, I assumed that the smoker was to mark the landing party's position, since the APC was down and they were under cover."

Wlodowski broke in at that point, "Lt. McAllister, describe the terrain around the Redeye installation."

"We approached from the south southwest, local bearing. We came over a series of low rocky hills into a valley. The installation consisted of three buildings clustered to the north of a circular concrete pad about 50 meters in diameter. The APC was down and burning near the center of the pad. To the southwest was a jumble of rocks like an extension of the hills. That's where the landing party had taken cover from the fire coming from the buildings."

Wlodowski went on, "Did you see the landing party as you approached the LZ?"

"No, sir. Just the green smoke plume."

"Did you see an obvious landing zone in the rocks?"

"No, sir."

"Did Gunnery Sgt. Turner at any time specify a landing zone?"

"No, sir. Not specifically. The only flat place I could see between the buildings and the

landing party's position was the concrete pad."

Nicholson interrupted, "How long have you been with this squadron, LT. McAllister?"

"Three years and a few months, sir."

"Did you go through Marine orientation when you were assigned to this squadron?"

"No, sir. I had served with the 6th MOAS as a landing craft pilot prior to this duty. I went through orientation there."

"Did that orientation include standard air support coordination training?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why were you not aware that smokers are usually used to mark an LZ while flares are used to identify friendly positions?"

"I don't know, sir. I have had units use smokers for both purposes in combat and assumed that in this case Gunny Turner intended to mark only his position. He didn't specify an LZ."

Nicholson turned to Commander Nelson, "I'd like notation made of this testimony for II MEF action. Clearly, training has broken down somewhere. This situation would not arise if we had our own Marine air assets. This training would be doctrine and these mistakes wouldn't happen."

"That's enough, Lt. Col. Nicholson." said Hanford. "We lost that battle 20 years ago when the Navy assumed command of all

space borne air forces. This is not the time or the forum to resurrect that old fight."

"But Colonel," said Nicholson, "this goes to the heart of Corps tradition and training. Marines were abandoned ashore because of an error in communication between ground and air forces. It's one of our finest traditions. Marines don't abandon their wounded, even if it costs the lives of the entire unit. A Marine pilot would instinctively follow that directive."

"And the entire landing party would now be dead." said Hanford. "Don't lecture me about Corps doctrine. I was raised in the same school as you." Hanford lowered his tone.

"Look, Matt, I know how you feel about regaining our own air assets. I've read your recommendations to the IG's office. But in this case, the decision to boost out of the way of that Redeye was the right one. Both Turner and McAllister made costly assumptions, but in the end the choice of LZ is the discretion of the pilot. Turner should have been clearer in his communication. And I don't think we want to open the question of why Turner chose to leave his wounded in the rocks when he saw that the LZ had changed."

Nicholson glared at Mac, but asked no further questions.

"As president of this Board, I am exercising my prerogative to direct a finding at this time. Serious objections on the part of any Board member may be lodged in writing with the II

MEF Liaison Officer for higher command action." said Hanford. He looked at Nicholson before continuing. "It is the finding of this Board that the loss of Apache Mission personnel was a result of overwhelming enemy forces. Lt McAllister's actions in this matter were consistent with sound flying skill and good judgment and do not reflect a failure of duty or courage. It should be noted that despite extensive damage to his Intruder and sensor indications of imminent weapons lock by enemy aircraft, he continued to attempt to retrieve all landing party personnel. It was only after being targeted by a planetary defense laser and the grave wounding of his Weapons and Electronics Officer that he initiated the orbital boost sequence. He is hereby returned to flight status without prejudice. These proceedings are now closed."

"Excuse me, sir, but that's not right," said Mac without thinking.

Hanford looked hard at him. "Lt. McAllister, do you have something to add?"

"Yes, sir." said Mac. He had spoken impulsively, but now knew what he had to do. For Ivan and the Marines, for himself. "With all due respect to the board, sir, I was mission commander. It was my responsibility to bring everyone out. If I had clarified the signals with Gunny Turner before the fire mission, I could have landed on the planned LZ and

maybe have evacuated all the Marines. Something needs to be said about that."

"Do you realize what you may be doing to your career, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir." said Mac, taking a deep breath. "It was my responsibility sir."

Hanford regarded him for a long moment, then looked at the CAG, who nodded. "Very well," he said. "A letter of concern regarding signals management in combat will be appended to Lt. McAllister's service record. This Board is now adjourned."

Mac stood as the Board members left the Ready Room. Nicholson had a sour but satisfied look on his face. Wlodowski motioned for Mac to follow him. They returned to the CAG's office. Mac stood at attention, expecting a storm.

Wlodowski sighed, shaking his head as he sat behind the desk. "I hope you know what you're doing, Mac."

"I do, sir. But somebody had to say something. It was my mistake," said Mac.

"Well, it's done," said Wlodowski, waving a hand. "I'll do what I can to limit the damage to your service record. In the future, though, give me some warning if you're going to have another fit of conscience."

"May I ask a question, sir?" Mac asked after a second's hesitation.

"You may," said Wlodowski. "What's on your mind?"

"What is the plan for the Redeye?"

"Targeting has the location," Wlodowski shrugged. "I imagine it will be taken out with the advance barrage before the main assault begins. Why?"

"I'd like to request permission to propose an assault to take the installation intact, sir."

Wlodowski exhaled slowly, considering. "Why?"

"Well, if the Lizards push us out of Epsilon Eridani, we may be fighting here next. I figure that a Redeye may be a valuable asset in a defensive fight in this system."

"A good, sound tactical answer," said Wlodowski. "Now what's the real reason?"

Mac paused, then plunged a head in a rush of words. "I need to do something to make this all worthwhile. Ivan, the Marines, the Board, it's all bullshit if we're just going to blast the installation to hell. Targeting could have done that without Apache Mission. I know you said I shouldn't look for meaning in this, but if I don't find some purpose, some justification then I might as well have let Nicholson have my wings."

The CAG was silent for a long while. Then he nodded and said, "OK. Work up a planning document and I'll take it up to II MEF."

"Aye, sir," Mac saluted and left the office.

The passageway was empty, the ship's day sliding toward evening. He made his way slowly back to his quarters. He found that he

was surprisingly unconcerned about the effect the Board might have on his career. As Ivan had said, he didn't much care about anything as long as the flying was good and the Board had restored his flight status. He was more concerned about Turner and the Marines. He would need to work closely with the ground forces if he was going to come up with a workable plan to take the Redeye intact. He doubted that an apology would carry much weight with Turner. More likely it would be seen as yet another sign of weakness.

Mac spent the evening considering his options. He used the data terminal in his quarters to access the gun camera recordings of their approach and the action on the LZ. He found this to be less helpful than he had expected. The view was limited and the picture was frequently obscured by smoke or tracer fire. He was able to confirm some of his impressions of the approach and a plan for a limited assault on the installation began to take shape. He lay back on the narrow bunk and stared at the overhead. The rivets in the dull metal of the air duct over his bunk faded in and out of focus as he ran through the approach again and again looking for details he may have missed. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of Linda. He felt a momentary stab of guilt at not having taped a reply to the letter, but figured it wouldn't matter tonight.

The mail buoy wouldn't go out for a few days. He had plenty of time.

By 1400 the next day he had what he thought was a workable plan roughed out. He would need support from both the Marines and the II MEF barrage squadron to pull it off, and they would have to retrofit an APC with a concussion cannon for the main assault, but he figured it would be worth the effort if the assault succeeded. He presented the rough to CAG just before watch change that evening.

Wlodowski reviewed his figures and request for assets and grunted, "And whose TOA do you plan to rob for all of this stuff?"

The TOA was the Table of Allowances each squadron maintained, a list of standard gear, hardware, weapons and spacecraft that was assigned to the unit on a regular basis. The squadron was expected to operate within the TOA for all but the most extraordinary missions. Mac was asking for gear and equipment outside of the normal list.

"Well, sir," he said. "The drones would be part of the barrage anyway; all I'm asking for is a modification in the targeting software so they don't fall on our heads down there. The APC's are assigned to us. The only extra request is the concussion cannon and I know that the 4th Mobile Infantry has some they took off of their LAV's when they converted them to mobile command posts."

"Have you factored in the maintenance time to retrofit an APC?"

"Yes, sir. That's on page three. Chief Garcia figures they can swap out a 20 mm for a concussion cannon in about three hours, not counting reprogramming of the fire control computer. But that will be done as a matter of course during final preflight. All programming is updated automatically before the APC is brought on line in the combat net."

Wlodowski considered for a moment. "This will require a lot of close coordination between the ground team and II MEF fire control."

"Actually, sir, if they reprogram the drones to simulate a standard strike and then either self-destruct or veer off at 1000 meters, we can probably take our cue from the Redeye itself as long as we're in position before the barrage begins. We'll start the assault as soon as the main laser deploys but before the firing sequence begins. If we can be in position behind the hills by that time, we can neutralize the laser before it powers up."

"We?" snorted Wlodowski. "You're planning on leading this assault?"

Mac straightened his back to attention. "Yes, sir. Aside from Gunny Turner, I'm the only one with actual ground time near the target. It makes sense, sir."

Wlodowski laughed. "You've got nerve, I'll say that for you. After Nicholson's reaction at

the Board, I'll be surprised if they let you drive a bus for the Corps any time soon. But you're right, it makes tactical sense and the plan is sound, if a little complicated. Are you sure you can get the concussion cannon from the 4th MI?"

Mac smiled. "Chief Garcia gave me his word on it and said I didn't want to know too many of the details."

"Ok," said Wlodowski. "Get me a smooth file on it by 0600 and I'll take it to the Command Brief in the morning. And give some thought to an alternate team leader, in case the Marines aren't willing to sign on with you in charge." CAG held up a hand as Mac opened his mouth to protest. "Not now, Mac. Your stock is low enough without trying to push this down Nicholson's throat if he has any objections."

Mac saluted and left the CAG's office, relieved but also angry at the idea that someone else might carry out his plan.

To both Mac and Wlodowski's surprise, Nicholson approved the plan without objection, even with the understanding that Mac would be mission commander. Mac was elated, but the CAG suspected that Nicholson had something in mind and encouraged caution.

Retrofitting the concussion cannon to one of the APC's took longer than Chief Garcia had expected. The cannon was a sonic

generator. It used a shaped charge to create a shock wave that was then focused through a series of dampening fields into a tight sonic 'beam'. The wave front of the beam had limited range but could pulverize or stun living tissue at its focal point, the end effect determined by the intensity of the charge and the range. It had limited effect on structures and so was ideal for immobilizing personnel without damaging buildings or equipment. Its main drawback was a limited effective range and the need for heavy recoil protection for the crew that served the weapon. Garcia had some difficulty fitting the recoil dampers into the limited space of the APC. In the end, he had to sacrifice two of the APC's twelve acceleration seats.

By 24 hours prior to the assault, Mac had all his preparations complete. The retrofit was finished, the reprogramming of the target drones was debugged and the timing and recognition signals were finalized. The ground forces were committed - two augmented squads of Marines from the squadron and a heavy weapons team from the 4th MI. The ground forces mission leader had not been assigned and that had Mac mildly concerned. He wanted some time to go over the coordination of the assault and the assignment of objectives for each squad.

He still had not answered Linda's video. He tried every evening but found no words that seemed right. Expressions of love or longing paled next to his actual feelings and yet his words seemed forced and unnatural. He wanted to tell her about Ivan and the Board of Inquiry but could not get by the feeling that those things were not a part of her world, were not something she should be burdened with. In the end he taped a quick reply and promised to write later.

That evening, he received a call to report to the CAG's office for a briefing with the ground forces. He arrived to find Wlodowski and Lt. Col Nicholson seated at the CAG's desk. Also present, standing stiffly to one side, was Gunny Turner. Mac saluted the senior officers who returned the salute and motioned him to a chair. Mac nodded to Turner who remained standing, expressionless.

"Lt. McAllister, would you outline the assault plan for your ground team leader?" said Nicholson, preempting Wlodowski and indicating Turner with a nod of his head.

Mac glanced at the CAG who shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, sir," said Mac. "The plan is to insert three Intruders with two APC's and a communications equipped Assault Command Vehicle as part of a larger operation against Port Washington. The assault team will break off and travel below sensor level about 150

kilometers northeast to the Redeye at Monroe Crossroad. Once there, the team will approach behind the hills to the south of the installation and await a simulated attack on the Redeye by the II MEF Barrage Squadron. The target drones will be programmed to veer off at 1000 meters, which should be low enough to convince the Hibernians they need to deploy the laser or get smoked. Once the laser deploys but before the firing sequence begins the concussion cannon will stun the personnel in the laser building while the other APC and the Intruders take out the remaining building. The Marine squads will attack across the concrete pad and secure the laser building, then mop up any resistance in the other parts of the installation."

Nicholson nodded. "Gunny, do you have any questions for Lt. McAllister?"

"No, sir. I have the file on the assault plan. We'll be ready." Turner did not look at Mac, remaining at attention.

"That's all, then," said Nicholson.
"Dismissed."

Turner saluted and turned to leave. He caught Mac's eye briefly, but said nothing more. Mac was unable to read the look or the Marine's expression.

Nicholson spoke again, this time to Wlodowski. "I wanted Turner here so there would be no misunderstanding about the plan or the chain of command. He also knows the

terrain around the installation and has ground combat experience."

"Your point?" said Wlodowski sarcastically.

"I want a combat tested ground commander on the scene." said Nicholson, his tone bordering on contempt. "Marines will look after our own."

"McAllister is mission commander. Make sure Turner understands that," said Wlodowski evenly.

"Of course," smiled Nicholson. He stood and turned toward the door. "And, Mr. McAllister, understand that there will be no missed signals this time."

"So much for Navy - Marine Corps teamwork," said Wlodowski wryly after Nicholson was gone. "Watch your ass down there Mac."

"Aye, sir." said Mac.

The assault team mustered in the zero G hangar deck at 0600. Embarkation to the APC's and ACV was slow but routine. Mac and Turner clung to straps on opposite sides of the loading bay watching the troops pull themselves through the hatches of the three assault craft. The Marines wore light body armor rather than heavy fighting suits. Hibernia's climate and atmosphere were well within the comfort zone.

The Assault Command Vehicle was a larger version of the APC. Three meters longer and almost the same amount wider, it could carry

twenty Marines as well as a command team. Its smooth almond shape matched the smaller APC's but was broken by a dorsal cupola just to port of the midline. The cupola housed the command seat and the view port for the driver. Just forward of the cupola were large clamshell doors that opened the entire forward end of the craft to allow rapid deployment of the Marines.

Mac studied the Gunnery Sergeant as he assigned his Marines to each of the APC's. Turner's expression was as blank and professional as ever. Mac sensed indifference in the Marine, not the anger of the previous few days. Mac kicked off and glided across the bay as the last of the heavy weapons team boarded and began their checkout of the concussion cannon. Turner remained impassive as Mac caught a stanchion and hauled himself to a stop at Turner's right side.

"Ready to go, Gunny?" he asked.

"Aye, sir," said Turner flatly.

"Are we square for this mission, Gunny? I need to ask you to stand down if you have any reservations about me."

Turner faced him, his nostrils flared but his voice calm and flat, "You are mission commander, sir. My orders are clear and I will carry them out to the best of my ability. My personal feelings are irrelevant."

"Fair enough," said Mac.

"Permission to board, sir."

"Board when ready, Gunny."

Turner saluted and pushed off toward the nearest APC. As he caught the edge of the hatch and swung himself into the interior of the craft, he said over his shoulder, "The Board was right."

Mac wondered what he had meant, right about clearing him for flight status or right about the letter of concern. He pushed off across the bay and swung into the ACV. He pulled himself forward along the twin rows of acceleration seats filled with Marines and strapped into the command seat in the cupola. He activated the command link and checked the status of the other landing craft.

"*Normandy* Control, this is Coyote Lead. Landing team is embarked, ready for staging."

"Roger, Coyote. Stand by for landing craft staging."

Each landing craft slid forward along magnetic guides stopping beneath the carry harness of an Intruder. Electromagnetic couplers reached out and linked to the hard points on the tops of the APC's and under the belly of the ACV. Mac's intercom chimed and he opened the link to the Intruder that now embraced his landing craft.

"Morning, Frostbite," he said. "Hope you slept well. I'm expecting a smooth ride this morning."

"Aye, aye, sir." answered the Intruder pilot sarcastically. "Just relax and leave the driving

to us. And please keep your hands and arms inside the vehicle at all times."

Mac laughed. "Honker," he said, addressing the Intruder's WEO, "How do you stand this guy."

"Oh, his flying is better than his sense of humor. And besides, I owe him money."

Mac laughed again. He left the link open to monitor pre-launch and reentry communications but otherwise did not interfere with the pilots as they went about their work.

The drop was more difficult for him. He found himself reaching for nonexistent controls as the ACV bucked and heaved in the turbulence of reentry. They seemed to be free falling for an eternity. His heart raced and he gripped the command seat with white knuckles until the G-forces of their transition to level flight pushed him into the padding and his vision blurred red. He understood Ivan's dislike of combat drops and vowed never again to ride as a passenger.

Their break from the rest of the assault and low flight to the IP was uneventful. The APC's and ACV separated smoothly from the Intruders and dropped even lower to move up behind the cover of the hills surrounding the Redeye. The Intruders fell back several kilometers staying well below sensor range and waited for Mac's signal to attack.

Mac launched a surveillance cam. The tiny remote controlled aircraft was no bigger than the palm of a man's hand. It hovered silently just above the last of the rocky hills with a clear view of the Redeye building. It beamed a jerky but clear image back to Mac's tactical display through a tight laser link to the ACV's optical sensors. The installation was quiet with only a few guards around the perimeter of the concrete pad to indicate that it was anything other than a rural agribusiness.

Mac opened laser links to the other landing craft. "Coyote Lead to all units," he said. "We're go for main assault on my signal." Clicks over the comm link confirmed his message.

Time crawled by. They were in position and on schedule, but Mac still fretted and fidgeted in his seat. He double and triple checked the tactical readouts, watched the surveillance cam and looked at the clock every minute or so. Finally, as the time for the barrage launch came and passed, he noticed activity around the Redeye. The guards stopped their rounds and stood for a moment talking into their radios. They moved quickly but purposefully across the pad to the smaller building. Then all was quiet, no movement anywhere.

"Stand by, all units," said Mac.

Slowly the roof of the larger building retracted. The wall closest to the concrete pad began to fold down toward the ground as the

top of the laser projector rose above the roofline.

Mac opened the tactical radio net, secrecy no longer required, "Coyote Lead to all units. GO! GO! GO!"

The ACV lurched forward weaving slightly as air spilled from beneath its ground effect skirt. The first APC was already crossing the pad as the larger troop carrier recovered stability and raced toward the still unfolding laser. The lead APC opened up on the smaller building with its 20mm gun just as the first of the Intruders swept in from the east and bracketed the building with cluster grenades. Mac watched the tactical display as the second APC moved up next to his position. The screen clouded over, obscured by smoke from the battle. The concussion cannon fired twice, a dull thumping sound that Mac felt in the pit of his stomach as much as heard. The forward hatch of the ACV slammed open. Marines rushed forward spreading out across the pad. There was no movement from the large laser building. A few muzzle flashes could be seen from the smaller building but fire seemed to be directed toward the Intruders and the lead APC. A second Intruder swept in to join the assault, blanketing the building with tracer fire.

The first of the Marines entered the laser building. More quickly followed. One by one the squad leaders reported secure objectives.

Resistance inside the laser building was virtually nonexistent, most of the laser personnel stunned by the concussion cannon. The second building fell silent a few minutes later as the Marines began to move across toward it from the laser.

"Coyote Lead, this is Ground One, objective secured."

"Roger Ground One. Casualties?"

"One down. We'll need Medevac."

"Roger, Ground One. Break. Coyote Lead to Air Three. LZ is secure. Medevac requested."

"We're on it, Mac," said Frostbite. "Air Three approaching LZ now."

Mac pushed away from the console and stood up, stooping slightly in the low overhead. As he stepped down on to the concrete through the forward hatch, a runner approached from the far side of the pad.

"Lt. McAllister, could you come over to the APC, sir. It's Gunny Turner, sir. He's been hit."

Mac followed the Marine at a trot. Turner lay in the shadow of the lead APC, a Corpsman hovering over him with hypospray and a bag of blood substitute. At first Mac did not see any wound. Turner was pale and still, breathing shallowly. He opened his eyes as Mac approached. He attempted to speak but only a hoarse whisper emerged from his mouth. It was then that Mac saw the biobrane dressing on Turner's neck and the blood

saturating the front of his body armor. A stray round had entered Turners neck above the collar of the armor vest, slashing downward into his chest. Mac knelt at his side.

"Quiet, Gunny. Medevac's on the way."

Turner shook his head and coughed up some red foam. He took a ragged deep breath. His face contorted with effort. "Board was right," he whispered. "My fault. I should have brought the wounded out to you."

"Gunny, this isn't important now. Just take it easy. We'll talk about it back on the *Normandy*."

Turner shook his head, bringing on a spasm of pain. "You stepped up. That letter... not right."

"Shut up, Gunny. That's an order."

Turner looked him in the eye for a long minute. Then he nodded slightly. Further talk was impossible as the whine of an Intruder's lifters drowned out all other sounds. Turner was lifted on to a stretcher and rushed off toward the waiting aircraft.

Mac stood and watched the Intruder lift off and pitch upward as it began its boost sequence. He turned toward the still open laser and watched the Marines leading the Hibernian prisoners out of the building. He thought briefly about Ivan, remembering the last time he had looked across this pad at the open laser. He nodded with a fleeting sense of

satisfaction, then started to walk slowly back to the ACV to supervise mopping up.

Turner died on the way up.

**Excerpt: After Action Report,
CDR C.G. Wlodowski, Commander Air Group,
4th MOAS**

In addition to supporting the main assaults on Port Jefferson and Hibernia City, 4th MOAS was tasked with the capture of the Redeye planetary defense laser at Monroe Crossroad. The landing party assigned to the assault, led by Lt. A. McAllister, accomplished their mission with speed and efficiency. Lt. McAllister used his first hand knowledge of conditions on the ground to plan and lead the assault. His meticulous preparation and vigorous prosecution of the assault were directly responsible for the success of the mission. It is hereby recommended that he receive the Navy Commendation Medal with battle V for actions in the finest tradition of the Naval-Marine Corps Services.

Part 3

KONDROGOR: AFTERBURN

Official Document- Not for Public Release
4th MOAS, II MEF

Pilot's Advisory: Kondrogor Operating
Theater

1.a Planetary Survey- Kondrogor is a volcanically active world massing .73 standard, about midway between Earth and Mars in diameter. Gravity, due to a large nickel-iron core is higher than expected at approximately .75 standard. Atmosphere: Nitrogen-methane with significant concentrations of sulfuric acid, hydrogen sulfide and hydrogen cyanide; Average ground level pressure: 450MB decreasing rapidly to less than 100MB at 2000 meters. Average surface temperature: -34 degrees centigrade (Highs of 15 degrees at equatorial latitudes, Nighttime lows of -125 degrees at higher latitudes). Winds are due to Coriolis forces and may reach sustained speeds of 385 kph in extreme conditions. Topography: Rugged shield volcano mountain ranges separated by broad lava flow plains. There is no evidence of liquid water or methane erosion and little dust. Particulates are locally heavy around areas of active volcanism but are in the 500-micron range and settle rapidly in the low air density conditions planet wide.

1.b Tactical considerations: 1) Low atmospheric density results in less effective air flow over in-flight control surfaces and more prolonged braking on orbital transition maneuvers. Decreased gas density across intakes also results in higher plasma consumption, as less substrate is available for superheating in engine reaction chambers. At altitude, this may result in plasma consumption approaching that seen in pure space borne maneuvering. Aircraft assigned extensive close air support or air combat roles will therefore be outfitted with auxiliary reaction mass tanks to extend their operational envelopes. 2) Afterburn. Afterburn events are brief but intense flash fires that result when nitrogen-methane atmospheres are combined with oxygen in a closed space. This may result from a cockpit or suit breach in the presence of any ignition source. Aircrews are cautioned to overpressure any potentially breached compartment with 100% nitrogen before allowing release of oxygen into the compartment. 3) Munitions. Standard small arms and aircraft projectile weapons are not dependent on atmospheric oxygen for propellant ignition and therefore will function normally in the Kondrogor theater. Incendiary munitions are of limited utility and will not be issued as standard combat loads. HE and penetrator rounds will function

but the resultant zone of effectiveness will be limited by lower atmospheric overpressures and the lack of fires or secondary ignitions (Except in afterburn events; see above 1.b.2) Kinetic kills of armor and hardened targets will therefore be required.

2. Combined Arms Operations: Due to heavy EM sensor shielding little is known about the disposition of Rilz forces on the planet's surface. This will hamper fire control and pretargeting of anti-aircraft projectile and energy weapons. Coordination of fire missions during landing operations will depend heavily on Air/Naval Gunfire Liaison Companies (ANGLICO's) and the intelligence they develop just prior to H-hour. Beachmasters will direct routine fire missions but priority will be given to ANGLICO requests for fire support.

The chronometer chimed softly- 0600. Mac opened his eyes and reached out to shut off the alarm. He had not really been asleep.

"Lights" he said to the walls. Soft lighting brightened and became Ships Standard Daylight illumination. Mac stood and his bunk folded silently into the bulkhead. He rubbed at a small fresh scar behind his right ear and stretched. He had a headache again. He thought about reporting for sick call but

dismissed the idea. The headache was probably due to the new mastoid implant and wasn't that bad anyway. No sense in risking a down check over nothing.

"Schedule." he said as he ran a shaver over his stubble.

The implant answered, feeding data directly into his inner ear, "There is an all officers briefing in the ready room at 0800.

Maintenance briefing at 1030. Medevac Shuttle departure at 1300. Your division E-4 fitness reports are due by 1730 today. Do you wish visuals?"

"Negative." said Mac a little too quickly. He still disliked the new visual interface that allowed the implant to project images before his eyes by direct stimulation of his visual cortex. He had no choice but to use it in combat. The system replaced the cockpit heads-up display in his A-20 and provided him with all targeting and navigational data in flight. He saw no need to use it outside of the cockpit.

He activated the intercom by biting down hard on his rear molars. "McAllister to sickbay"

"Sickbay, HM2 Reynolds, how may we assist you?"

"Hi, Reynolds. How's it going?"

"Not bad, Mr. Mac. You calling about Mr. Ivchenko?"

"Yep. How's he doing?"

"Fine, sir. He's on the manifest for today's medevac. Scuttlebutt says he's scheduled to get his implants as soon as he gets to San Diego."

"Can I talk to him?"

"Well, he's still asleep, sir. Why don't you stop by after sick call? You'll catch him before the medevac starts boarding. "

"OK, thanks Reynolds."

Mac dressed in khakis and left the 2.5 by 2 meter 'stateroom' that was a middle grade officer's quarters. He turned aft and headed down the passageway to the wardroom.

The compartment was empty. There were a few plates on the long dining table that the cleaning servos had not yet removed. Along the antispin bulkhead were the dispensers for food items and the coffee urns that were perpetually refreshed by the galley servos. He could hear a few of the other pilots talking in the Ready Room just on the other side of the spinward bulkhead. He lifted his coffee mug from the pegboard against the aft bulkhead, paused, then took down Ivan's mug also, making a mental note to drop it off at sickbay to be packed with the rest of Ivan's personal gear. He drew himself a cup of coffee, noted the time and stepped through the hatch in the spinward bulkhead that led to the Ready Room.

The Ready Room smelled of leather and lube-oil, stale smoke and fresh coffee. Rows of

oversized armchairs covered in honest leather faced a slightly raised dais backed by a large holotank. Mac slumped in his chair sipping coffee as the other squadron officers filtered in and took their places. The usual banter was subdued and was cut off abruptly by a shout of "Attention on deck!" as the CAG entered.

"As you were." said Cdr. Wlodowski, waving the pilots back to their seats. "Gentlemen," he went on after all were seated, "We're going into action. II MEF will launch an assault on Kondrogor to begin at 0600 -that's 22 hours from now. Our previous efforts to assault Kondrogor have been hampered by heavy Rilz EM shielding that prevented accurate localization of targets and defensive energy weapons. As of 0400 this morning, that shielding is down. A covert operation by a select ANGLICO team has managed to take out the shield generators. We now have sufficient sensor data to risk a full scale assault."

The CAG called up a holographic display of the planet. He used a small light pointer to indicate features on the display as he talked. "4th MOAS has been assigned to the second wave. 6th MOAS will form the first wave and will punch breaches here and here in the Lizard's environmental domes. 4th and 7th MOAS will then exploit these breaches and press on to objectives here at the main drop shafts and here at the reactor control

building. Once these objectives are secured, the drop shafts will be destroyed cutting off access to the surface and preventing any remaining Rilz units from being reinforced. The reactor will be destroyed with shaped charges on the fusion housing and coolant pumps. Needless to say, we want all our people out of there before the reactor overloads and takes out the rest of the base."

"Why not just take out the whole place with nukes, CAG. Seems like a lot of trouble for small piece of real estate," asked the XO.

"The dome must be taken intact because G-2 wants to look for the command center. We know very little about the Lizard's command and control systems. Special Ops will be sending teams in with the second wave to look for the central computer in the command center. They need 20 minutes to find and remove the computer before we blow the reactor. Our job is to give them those 20 minutes. Orders are: conventional munitions only. Not even tactical nukes in our combat loads. Like it or not, gentlemen, we have been handed the sharp end of the stick once again.

"We will drop in alpha formation- flankers providing fighter support, combat teams to the center. I'll need one Intruder from each echelon outfitted for immediate close air support for the LZ's so the combat teams can be set down. That will be Stretch and J.D.,

Mac and.... Honker, you're now flying with Mac."

"Aye, sir," said Ltjg. Henry "Honker" Boucher. He nodded to Mac and winked.

Wlodowski went on, "Known Redeye installations are here and here, outside the projected glide path. That leads me to believe that the Lizards will have some nasty surprises for us on the LZ's. Remember, Lizard EM projection technology is ahead of ours. Their energy weapons are more mobile and much harder to detect. I expect heavy Landing Zone counter fire, so you close air support Intruders will have your hands full."

Stretch raised a hand. "What about fighters, CAG?"

"We'll be augmented by VSF-4 flying CAP cover. They figure to have air superiority over the LZ's by 0530, but we'll outfit the flankers in each echelon for air combat maneuvers just in case."

Mac raised his hand. "Any word on the ANGLICO's?"

"Missing, I'm afraid," said Wlodowski. "They went in under radio silence and accomplished their mission. They missed their dustoff and haven't checked in since. Presumed lost." Wlodowski paused. "Any more questions? Right. IP and LZ coordinates have been downloaded to your implants. Recall times and assignments as well as boost vectors will be transmitted to your onboard

computers before launch. Read the Pilot's Advisories carefully. Kondrogor has an atmosphere but it's toxic as hell and the coriolis winds can be fierce. We suit up at 0430, launch at 0515. Dismissed!"

The officers stood as the CAG left the room. Mac was checking the Initiation Point and Landing Zone coordinates through his implant when Honker tapped him on the shoulder.

"How's your tennis game, Mac?" Honker asked with a grin. He stood back and swung an imaginary tennis racquet through an exaggerated overhead serve. He and Mac had played regularly back in flight training developing a fierce but friendly rivalry.

"Getting rustier all the time," said Mac. "You may even be able to beat me when we get back to Pendleton."

"I can already do that. Now it's a question of overkill."

"In your dreams," laughed Mac. "Say, what happened to Frostbite? I thought you were his WEO."

"He got himself down checked. Something about vertigo in hi-G maneuvers. So I'm without a ride and you're short a WEO. I was real sorry to hear about Ivan. How's he doing?"

"Pretty good, considering. He's up for medevac today and I hear he's getting optical

implants Earthside. I'm going down to sickbay to see him. Want to come?" said Mac.

"No thanks," said Honker, rubbing the large beaked nose that had earned him his call sign. "Too much of a reality check for me. Tell him I said 'Hi' and that I'll do my best to keep your sorry ass out of trouble."

"And who's gonna watch yours?" laughed Mac. "OK, I'll meet you on the hangar deck after chow tonight for preflight, deal?"

"Deal." said Honker. He gave Mac a thumbs up and left through the antispin side passageway.

Mac drained the last of his coffee, now cold, walked back into the wardroom and replaced the mug on its peg. He stuffed Ivan's mug into a pocket and left the wardroom.

The passageway heading forward was becoming crowded, mainly with Navy personnel on this level. Most nodded to him or said their good mornings as he passed. The occasional Marine who passed him pointedly ignored him. He was still something of a pariah as far as the Corps was concerned, even though the official Board of Inquiry had cleared him of any wrongdoing on Hibernia. Marines had their own code of conduct and considered him untrustworthy no matter what was said in the official version of events.

Mac reached the forward access tube and climbed 'up' to the medical deck. Here, one deck closer to the weightless hub around