

Chapter 4

I wanted to see the future. The desire in me was so strong that I risked every law and punishment to gain that sight. I stole guarded content. I intercepted confidential transmissions. I decrypted the most mystifying puzzles. I infiltrated any store of data. At one time, I knew all facts about commerce before any other living man could possibly assemble them.

But facts and data are not knowledge, let alone the sight of the future.

Predicting the future from all sources of the spiral arm civilization is a mind-bending effort. Imagine the near lust in my heart when I discovered that the Pressers of Frobe could see the future by simply living their destiny! In stealing the Presser gift, as I had stolen the minds of so many men, I would rest and share a flawless sight of tomorrow. I harnessed this view of the Presser future and tied myself to their flawless steps.

But here is the flaw in my thinking. Consider creatures with keen eyesight. The Oot Shaman or the hawk on Earth, for example. They can focus on fine detail at a great distance. I thought the Pressers gave me this same focus. I was wrong. Imagine that you have a hawk's sight and can see an island paradise from a remote height. The desire of landing on this island consumes your soul so completely that your eyes never leave the sandy beaches. Your gaze does not shift until you are safely there and rapturously happy.

I allowed the Pressers to show me this island, and in my endless desire, I could see nothing else. If I had only widened my view. If I had considered the horizon as completely as the island, I would have seen the coming maelstrom that wiped my utopia from history.

Damned Future: a Memoir by Darian Tobr

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Gash was no more than a sliver of light rising into the sky of Ootare, but *Quito's* surveillance drone already raced to intercept the unauthorized craft. *Gash* was a thoroughbred and equipped to run from all but the military's best; it veered sharply to aim at the Earth-bound GateWay and avoid the drone. The probe trained every sensor on *Gash* and accelerated. *Gash* reached through TobrNet data doors, hidden deep within the compromised code of the GateWay.

"Mr. Tobr, this is Zet. We have a serious issue."

"I see the probe above *Gash*, Dr. Zet," the deep voice was recreated through the implant. "Why is there a Triad probe – one bristling with surveillance – orbiting Ootare?"

"The *Quito* received no order to deploy it," Zet's virtual anger was clear. "The captain must have released it without a military flight plan! That would be captain... Bell. The dossier in our archive identifies him as unorthodox and even careless with Triad resources."

"Forget Bell. Can *Gash* make the GateWay? I want my expensive toy back."

"Mr. Tobr, please prepare to lose *Gash*," Zet was quieter and apologetic. "If the Triad captures *Gash*, they will have the keys to TobrNet. Our secret that we can fly without a GateWay manifest will be lost. The Triad may also find that we can communicate through the GateWay without detection. The advantage of seeing commodity shipments as they reach GateWays will cripple our trading."

"I see. That I cannot allow," the voice was a growl. "Is self-destruct is the best option?"

"I would suggest another option," Zet paused before continuing. "The *Quito* probe has just used a military override to lock both GateWay rings. We are stuck in orbit, and a self-

deconstruct will still leave a large portion of the hull intact. Since the probe is recording every possible high resolution image and listening to our encryption, the Triad has a wealth of clues already. So far, TobrNet's controls in the GateWay software are suppressing any data transmissions back to Triad command, but I can only do this for a short time. We cannot let the probe's on-board databank survive, because the Triad just may use the hull and the telemetry to march right to your door."

"*Gash* is a runner, not a fighter, doctor," the boss said. "Do you expect her to ram that probe?"

"In a way, Mr. Tobr, yes. The probes have no offensive weapon, but they do have significant defensive capabilities. If the probe believes that it could be captured itself, it will respond with a self-destruct of its own sensitive electronics. That includes any on-board data stores. The device has a powerful broad-spectrum EMP that is intended to disable the attacker as well. *Gash's* memory would be wiped clean as well."

"That does sound better," Tobr admitted, "with the exception that *Gash* will be in one piece and could be just as damning to us."

"Agreed," Zet was quick to continue. "So *Gash* must be traveling at orbital escape velocity when it tries this fake attack."

"Ahhhh," in seconds, Darian had seen his escape from the Triad. "Once the probe is incapable of recording and all memory of *Gash* is erased, *Gash* will continue out of Ootare's orbit and quickly mix with the dark matter of their solar system."

"Indeed," Zet was never surprised how quickly the boss assembled the facts. "The Ootare system is littered with asteroids, and farther out, a web of billions and billions of proto-comets. If the engines continue to fire, *Gash* will approach light speed, and the Triad could never catch it – even if it was spotted."

"I will observe you and remain silent, doctor," Tobr concluded. "Do not miss this attempt."

The Triad had many classes of surveillance probe, and each had a particular strength. *Quito*, a light picket ship, was assigned a complex assembly of sensors on a probe called the Freshman. Since its strength was recording *everything*, and least of all to think, the Freshman class was aptly named. It did have a light version of the OpsLogic system that aimed all recording devices. However, this empty data bank and single-minded recording directive left little in the realm of either strategy or adaptability. As *Gash* banked in a completely unpredictable ellipse to forgo the GateWay, it accelerated at in a wild charge at the probe. The Freshman behaved predictably: it recorded data even more quickly.

"OpsLogic Freshman log entry," it enjoyed recording its own thoughts too. "Unidentified craft accelerating (see graph) and bearing directly into the path of this probe. Sensors predict near collision in 3 minutes."

The Freshman was clearly over its head. Normally, the heavily-armed capitol ships that ranged near the probe handled any tactical decisions. But there was no Tactical OpsLogic nearby. Even the constant feedback from Triad command through the GateWay was strangely silent. For nearly 2 minutes, the Freshman poured over the incoming flood of data and images to identify the correct action to insure survival and deliver its hard-won facts to the Triad. Finally, the deadline of the collision with the silver ship was near, and the tactical decision was selected. If a human technician had been able to read the mind of the Freshman, the human would have seen the simple thought.

"???!!!"

Without tactical actions, the Freshman activated both EMP and physical self destruct payloads and waited without a hint of imagination. A split second before collision, the Freshman started the mechanical trigger for the physical detonator and tripped the EMP.

Just as the EMP wave began, *Gash* turned slightly to miss the Freshman by meters. With very little mind left, *Gash* continued to accelerate and outpace the shock of the explosion from the Freshman. *Gash* tore away from the gravity well of Ootare.

“Very good, Dr. Zet,” Darian’s voice was breathless, but clearly relieved. “Is there anything left of *Gash*?”

“It is on an excellent trajectory to be lost forever,” Zet accepted a brief status from the ship. “It can respond to us and even make a small adjustment or two, but it is hardly useful any more. At 80% of light speed, I will tell it to go dark. The message traveling at light speed from the GateWay will reach *Gash* as it hits 70% of light speed. *Gash* will be quite permanently lost.”

“Ah – so long as the Triad never sees *Gash* again,” Darian permitted himself a small chuckle, “After ferrying those Oot, perhaps the trade-in value of *Gash* was not very good.”

“Dr. Zet,” Darian Tobr’s chair ground across the gymnasium floor to the slim man as he looked through the moleglass at his prized Pressers. “An update on your progress, if you please.”

“We are on schedule and plan to begin our tests of the Presser’s ability to predict the commodities market,” Zet’s distant eyes did not quite focus as his data implant transferred many specifics to Tobr’s own alter-intelligence. “Faction/Jaron is ready. The Pressers have received implants, and I believe that we can map some sensations of taste and touch to Faction.”

“May I remind you,” the boss lifted a toneless arm and let it fall with an equally toneless flop, “that our competition has all but erased the advantages of TobrNet. Yesterday, I was the third major trader to cash in on the move in giga-hogs. I am the sole authority on the hog markets, and my traders were only able to salvage half of my profits. My good doctor, I detest second as much as missing a fine meal. You can only guess my impatience at being third.”

“My apologies, Mr. Tobr,” Zet’s quick hand pushed red curls away from his brow. “Our pirated ship manifests from the gateway communications system are now only minutes ahead of the legal means of our competition. The contents of arriving ships are distributed evenly to everyone. TobrNet is more direct, but Triad manifests now move quite quickly. If your Pressers will communicate with us, TobrNet will be an albatross. For now, the albatross still flies.”

“Albatrosses land badly, Dr. Zet,” Darian growled.

Tobr looked through the glass at Thad Jaron. The young man stood in the very center of the Frobe exhibit, hands at his side and back slightly slumped. The meter-tall Pressers milled about in a slow walk with an endless trail of 3-toed tracks in their wake.

“Does this march appear to have any purpose?” Tobr shook his head in wonder at the waste of effort.

“As I understand it,” Zet started and paused as he saw the beautiful and dangerous green eyes float from behind the bulky chair. “The Pressers are a nomadic creature and will walk many miles with their habitats in tow. As you can see, they still walk, but they realize that there was no need to tear down the flimsy hut and take it with them.”

“But there is also no need to walk, my friend,” the boss’ frown added another jowl to each side of his face. “Their new meal will appear right next to them.”

“I can’t explain all of their actions until Faction/Jaron begins to communicate with them,” the doctor saw the distant eyes of the GenAim bodyguard disappear and her hot breath suddenly sting his right cheek. *Damnably MirrorSkin! She’s been impossible since she received it!*

An instant later, she was gone, but the airlock to the Frobe world slid open.

“Now this is interesting,” Tobr chuckled, his data implant showing him Rezina’s every

movement. "She is a wonderful bodyguard but far too mischievous."

Suddenly, Thad pitched to his left and fell to mere inches from the ground. With a sparkle of color, Rezina became visible and threw back her head to let out a musical laugh.

"Rezina!" both Zet and Tobr were quick to yell, but both stopped as the Visionary's arms locked across the slimmest part of her waist.

As quickly as she had appeared, Rezina disappeared in a snarl and pushed Thad away. Before Thad could get to his feet and look for Rezina, the three other Pressers had surrounded her and were struggling to hold the now invisible, whipping form. With bulging shoulders, arms and thighs, the Visionary hugged the middle of the howling creature and fell to drag Rezina down. The two females used the leverage their weight to hold the bladed hands and snare her legs with theirs. The GenAid fighter nearly broke free before the young male braced his legs into her ribs. Rezina suddenly realized the power inside muscles bred to high gravity.

"Master..." the long shriek was sent through the air and all of the audio channels of her implant.

Zet was inside of the airlock as the male Presser's stout arm looped around Rezina's throat and choked off another scream. Looking into the green eyes now, Argo saw only the thirst for the blackest of murder. Resisting the desire to back away from Rezina's rampage that would follow, the doctor bent down to tug at the tight grip as Rezina worked to tilt her neck just enough to bury her teeth in the enemy. The open mouth and the eyes were the only visible parts without the covering of the MirrorSkin.

"Jaron," Zet was amazed that he couldn't even work his fingers between Presser biceps and her throat, "get in here and help me before they choke her."

Both men froze with the rising rumble that throbbed in their implants. The very floors seemed to shake with Darian Tobr's heaving laugh.

"My good doctor," tears began to wind through the valleys and folds of Tobr's cheeks, "what would happen if you are successful in freeing Rezina."

Zet stood to face Tobr. "She would try to kill them, obviously."

"Indeed, she would kill them all and perhaps add Jaron and you for additional vengeance," Tobr's fat slapped against the sides of the chair with the next laugh. "I still believe that the Pressers can see the future. Do you, my friend?"

"Well..."

"Good!" Tobr's voice lowered. "You now are beginning to doubt your prejudice. Let's assume that you fully believe in that ability as I do. If the Pressers were destined to die today, you would succeed in freeing Rezina. I can only assume that they hold her so tightly because they will expect some miracle to save them when Rezina gets free. If she were destined to kill them, they would let her go and await the slaughter, just as they do before the charge of the Frobedozer."

"And what miracle might save them?" Zet looked back to the aliens holding the Chesire Cat. He recalled that GenAim fighters could stay conscious at least 10 minutes without taking a breath. Rezina's thrashing had not abated but was not showing results either.

"Only two things, that I can see," Tobr continued. "One, they could try to kill Rezina themselves, but they must know that I would never permit that. She cost far too much to discard in a misguided belief in fate. In the same way, they know I can't permit my investment in the Pressers to go awry."

"Then do we leave them like this?" Zet waved a hand at the mass of bodies.

"The second way to avoid the carnage is to convince Rezina not to kill them," Tobr saw the doctor's patience wearing thin. "Rezina, I order you not to harm the Pressers, Dr. Zet or Thad when you are released."

The wild eyes flashed at Tobr with a demon's fire, and the boss heard her rebellious laugh within the implant.

"I believe the implant discipline is in order doctor," Tobr waved his fingers without lifting his wrist. With those words, the four Pressers released Rezina.

Bounding away from the aliens, Rezina's scream followed each gasping breath. She became fully visible, and the blades along her fingers locked into place. Awaiting her certain charge, the Pressers stood motionless in a tight group. Thad fell to the ground directly behind them as Zet's eyes glazed with his mind's inner focus. Rezina crouched low to pounce, but instead of leaping, she fell to the ground with a whimper.

"Not just the muscles, Dr. Zet," Tobr called out. "All of it. Rezina must know that I can't be disobeyed."

Zet built the torturous image for Rezina's implant and projected it directly into her consciousness.

Rezina watched her long fingers become gnarled with arthritis and the gleaming blades rust away. With a crush of age that was greater than Frobe's gravity, her back curled as firm muscles withered. The dancer's legs withered to mere skin across femur. Finally, the sharp eyes dimmed with cataracts and her feeble mind could no longer see the slender beauty that she had been.

"You will obey me, Rezina," Tobr's voice and electronic reinforcement was an echo to mind and ear. "You know that only I control the hormones that keep you young. Without me and my favor, my dear servant, you change from lioness to withered husk: a loss to us both. Heed my command, girl."

Thad normally depended on Faction to spur him on, but an unexpected pity welled up within him. He rushed to stand next to Rezina and placed a trembling hand on her shoulder. Rezina reached to grab onto Thad's arm with both hands and accepted his help to climb back to her feet.

Zet took Tobr's cue to release Rezina from the paralysis, but kept the physical image. Slowly, Rezina leaned on Thad to reach the airlock. She sobbed with the pains from each move of her ancient body.

"Dr. Zet," Tobr nodded to Rezina, "you see how important your implant has been to working with the GenAim design of this bodyguard. Her beauty is so linked to her happiness and her very fighting instincts that the illusion of losing beauty is crippling. The real threat of the change in the hormones would leave her with no physical strength in two months. She would be death in three."

Zet's eyes widened as Rezina finally made her way to Tobr's chair. With tears streaming down her face from closed eyes, she let go of Thad and climbed into the great chair. She curled around Daran's great bulk. After hugging the boss for a moment, Tobr's implant commanded Zet. The doctor slowly released Rezina from the projection.

"You will leave us for now, Rezina," Darian commanded. "I know sleep is a luxury for your kind, but I think it is order for today. Go and rest."

Upon opening her eyes, Rezina once again saw her slim, athletic body. Hopping out of the chair, she ran to the elevator and slipped inside. As the doors closed, Thad saw that she made sure only he could see her. Her eyes were on him again, but instead of the predator's fire, Thad thought he saw something else.

"If you please, doctor," Tobr rumbled, "return to my side. Your counsel is in order."

"Certainly," Zet walked away from Jaron and instructed Faction to have Thad stand up.

"Let's watch the results of this unexpected excitement," Tobr watched the Pressers as Zet left the airlock and stood beside him. "Quite fascinating that the Pressers came to Jaron's aid."

"We had thought that the Pressers nearly always acted with individual insight and wouldn't join forces," Argo nodded. "Yet they were able to beat a GenAim fighter."

"Only because Rezina didn't believe they were a threat," the boss looked up to the

doctor. "They knew they couldn't have beaten my cautious Oot. I helped weaken Rezina's opinion of them by treating them lightly once they arrived on Earth. I'll not make that mistake again - as I imagine Rezina will be on guard."

"Look!" Zet's eyes focused on a Presser, and Tobr's implant highlighted the area to draw his attention. "Blood on the large male. Rezina's teeth did get him."

"Jaron/Faction," Zet used the implant channel rather than speak. "Get the medical kit from your hut. One of the Pressers is wounded."

With a flash of panic becoming Faction's electronic calm, Thad ran the twenty meters to his hut. After grabbing the kit and stepping out of the door of the hut, Jaron came face to face with the injured Presser.

Faction was instantly in his mind. *The gloves are in this pocket. A mental highlight guided Thad's shaking hands. Good. Use the large sterile cloth to dab away the blood. More. Get a very close look. Good. There is no serious damage to the Presser equivalent of the pectoral, so you should be able to use a neutral synthetic patch. You'll find it in the compartment on the left. Far left. Yes. Place it directly over the wound and leave your hand pressed tightly over the wound until I tell you to remove it.*

"Dr. Zet," Tobr pursed his lips so heavily that the top one touched the end of his nose. "How close are you to activating the link between Faction and the Pressers?"

"I have run diagnostics at the highest level," Argo smiled. "As I predicted, the Pressers are intelligent and have solid parallels to our brain impulses. Their implants are working and Faction can receive and convert these to Jaron's consciousness. The Visionary's thoughts are much clearer and easier to interpret. The Triad scientists were able to map the Visionary mind in great detail, and they are the ones who predict the more distant future."

"Could this link harm Jaron?" Tobr asked.

"*Can I get a good price for this giga-hog?*" held the same amount of concern as this question, Zet thought. "I do not see any more harm that could come to Jaron's mind. He is so dependent on Faction that his entire consciousness can be altered and controlled by the implant. This made him perfect for the experiment. He can receive massive amounts of information directly from the Presser's implant and Faction can monitor his reactions to the stimuli. Faction/Jaron is truly one being, as neither could function without the aid of the other. Faction will not allow Jaron to come to harm as a very form of self-preservation. While the whole experiment has been incredibly expensive in programming hours and processing time, I consider this to be the only way we could have communicated with the Pressers."

"Inform Faction to complete work on the wound and open the link to the Visionary," Darian's low voice contrasted the higher whine of the chair motors as they lifted him to a nearly sitting position. "I need to know if this is a waste of time or not."

Zet closed his eyes and reached to the many technicians that would monitor the single link between Faction and the Presser. With all of his assistants participating, with real time implants and with every diagnostic recording at maximum detail, Argo believed that he was ready to begin the test. He opened his eyes and lost his train of thought for an instant. Thad was standing ready with a stricken look in his eyes.

"Faction, open all communications with the Visionary Presser," Zet commanded. "Transmit all sensations to the recording device on TobrNet."

Thad felt a gradual sleepiness disconnecting his own senses.

Relax Thad, Faction seemed to be wrapping every thought in a heavy mental sedative. Dr. Zet is about to connect your mind to a Presser. You need to observe the Presser's senses.

"That sounds marvelous," Thad felt every sensation from his fingertips to his heart fade to nothingness. Without the fear in his own mind, Thad believed he was suddenly in paradise. "The silence is beautiful."

You're ready for me to open the link, Faction's voice came from a place beyond Thad's

mind. *Keep communicating with me as you phase into the Presser's mind.*

From the place of greatest peace grew a sensation. Thad was accustomed to accepting Faction's calming influence, and Faction impressed his senses from all sides. The approaching feelings were an intense, narrow beam of consciousness. Slowly, Thad felt his muscles build into thick bands and shoulders thin down to connect directly to his neck. Weight shifted to a low center of gravity. No hint of light, sound or smell met his senses, but an odd, bland taste built on his tongue. A slow rock from a stiff hip area moved first left, then right. Tufts of grass crumpled beneath his three toe pads. With sharpening awareness, Thad felt a gnawing in his digestive area.

"I just started walking, I think," Thad thought he spoke, but lacking ears, he did not hear himself. "Hungry, too."

Excellent, Faction's words were felt, not heard. *Keep observing. Dr. Zet is configuring this translation. You are right! The Visionary began walking a moment ago.*

"Well, doctor?" Tobr's chair threatened to spill him onto the floor as he leaned.

"Thad does feel the Presser's senses of touch and taste," Zet grinned at the telemetry within his implant. "I am convinced that Faction/Jaron is the only creature that could make this work."

"The next step, my good man?" Darian puffed from the exertion of sitting up.

"TobrNet recorded the scientific research from the Triad report on Frobe," Dr. Argo was merging this in as he spoke. "The scientists on Frobe believed that they located a portion of the Presser's mind that held frames of the future. It is not too different from the storage of memories in our mind. Rather than a memory, it is a sensation of prediction. Visionaries can see the farthest futures, while the least intelligent among the Pressers can see barely a few minutes ahead."

"You are sounding like an evangelist now, Argo," Tobr said. "Are you a believer?"

"I choose to test the Triad theory," Zet sniffed. "The Triad team could get only one frame, because their ability to interrogate a mind is limited. This is where we have the advantage. Our implants are built on superior and, my I remind you, illegal technologies to see thoughts and replace them. Faction/Jaron is the highest form of our success in integrating thoughts. Jaron can become nearly disembodied and be haunted by another mind. Faction is so quick to translate into Thad's mind, I propose sending the frames of the Presser's future mind to Faction. Faction would attempt to make a real-time sensation in Thad by overlaying the Triad frames in rapid succession. We can then listen to his description of the sensation as it happens."

"Then do this, my friend," Darian eased back in the chair to ease his breathing. "Concentrate only on taste and go through the future sensations to find the next meal."

"Just taste?" Zet turned.

"Trust me," a low laugh came from the boss. "My palm itches, and I trust my instinct."

Argo Zet commanded the Visionary implant to move into the future memory.

Concentrate on taste, Faction called from the farthest reaches of Thad's mind. *We must find out what you can taste.*

"Bland, stale," Thad felt the lower jawbone at rest. "Nothing, nothing... wait!"

Tell us, a voice lower than Faction's washed over him.

Do not override the link, Mr. Tobr, Thad guessed this was Zet, *only Faction can interact.*

Continue then, with my apologies, good doctor, Thad felt the weighty voice retreat.

Again, Faction returned and eased Thad back to Presser's thoughts.

"I taste... I taste..." Thad struggled to get closer to the clamping jaw and rolling tongue. Suddenly, an avalanche of taste poured through. "Oh, it's horrible! Awful! Sweet beyond sweet. Sugar with honey with syrup with jam with fudge with frosting... ugh!"

"Dr. Zet," Tobr envied Thad thoughts of food. "Can I assume this is the Presser's next

meal.”

“If the Triad scientists have mapped the Pressers mind properly,” Argo waved a hand, “but we would never feed them sweet slop like that. Our translation is not working yet. This is only a mental equivalent of taste regions in the mind between the Visionary and Thad. But I have an idea. Faction, listen closely.”

I am going to give you a series of taste sensations, Faction’s voice brought Jaron away from the taste reverie. We recorded them in the past few days in real time from all the Pressers. The sensations are from their recent meals. We put small amounts of commodity foods within their normal feed. When you taste each one describe it to me. Tell me if you find a match to the sweet one.

“Yes,” Thad replied. “I can feel it. Softer to chew with a slight tang to it. Much better to eat than the first one.”

That is soybeans, Faction recorded. Try this one.

“Almost can taste it,” Thad felt the Presser teeth. “A solid crunch. Refreshing. Almost like an apple but dryer.”

That is oats. Try again.

“The taste came almost immediately,” Thad felt his host body chewing enthusiastically. “Wonderful. Wonderful. I love pastas with mild spices.”

Wheat. Here’s another.

“I’m just getting a bit of this one, but it’s terrible!” Thad complained.

Like the first one?

“No. Here it comes with full force,” Jaron felt a gag in his Presser’s throat. “It was a little sweet at first, but now it’s closer to a sour. Lemon sour but stronger. I might as well be bathing in lemon.”

Orange extract. And this one.

“Aagh! It’s the sweet one,” the Presser fought to swallow. “Enough, enough. Send me back to the wheat memory!”

Corn, Mr. Tobr! The first one was corn.

“Dr. Zet,” Darian’s nod to the doctor was as close as a bow as the boss could come. “I need your personal assurance that the corn that Thad tasted was from the predictive part of the Visionary’s mind.”

“If the Triad report was true,” Zet set his jaw. “I have transferred the taste of a future meal within Faction/Jaron.”

“And when is their next feeding?” Darian rubbed his itchy palm on his leg.

“This evening, sir” Zet puzzled at the question.

“I must have your most solemn promise on your great reputation that the Pressers will receive nothing to eat until their meal this evening.” Tobr’s voice was low and conspiring. “And that meal must be the one flavored with corn.”

“You have my assurance,” Argo had no trouble keeping pace with Darian’s chair as it rolled from the Frobe chamber. “I need to make a thorough analysis of this test.”

“As do !” Tobr’s voice came from the closing elevator. “The markets open shortly!”

“Evening feeding,” Zet pointed to his assistant. “Select the corn filler. Double check it.” Zet’s implant told him of the boss’s approach. His chair moved on the top floor to the elevator at its maximum speed. The doctor moved to the elevator and awaited its arrival.

“Congratulations, Dr. Zet,” Darian’s chair banged the fleeing elevator door. Rezina, eyes focused on the floor and mirrorskin off walked silently behind him.

“I have done nothing of importance yet,” Argo shook a fist at the second bin and the munching Pressers. The doctor swore he could see wincing in the faces of the Pressers as they ate their meal with dashes of corn. “I believe Thad did correctly detect the future meal. All

recordings of the event and the additional mapping of the Visionary brain shows me..."

"Yes, yes, I will hear of your techniques later," Darian turned and moved close to the moleglass. "But I have a better and simpler story. One that involves a successful trading day."

"You made a trade based on today's test?" Argo held a hand to his forehead. "I do not suggest that with as little as I know."

"It was a small speculation," Tobr chuckled. "I purchased 700 corn contracts in the morning, just after Thad told us of the corn feed for the Visionary. And I know what you're thinking Dr. Zet! What possessed me to do make a purchase like that?"

"I am curious," Zet's eyes were focused on the boss. His inner mind was much less interesting at the moment.

"I am following a simple rule that will let me test the Presser predictions," Darian grinned, enjoying the doctor's perplexed look. "I ordered you to feed the Pressers the corn meal. They are eating it, just as the Visionary saw in his mind and Thad told us."

"And the rule is?" Zet tapped a foot.

"We will feed the Pressers the food commodity that increases the most in price in a day," Tobr waved a hand at the bin, "and I am not surprised that today, the most successful commodity in terms of price was corn. My 700 contracts increased 35 credits. My profit was a mere 90,000 credits."

"Wait," the doctor's eyes were wider. "Thad predicted corn feed based on the link to the Visionary, not on our decision based on price."

"But it is my order that you will follow, and we will only feed them the commodity with the largest price jump," Tobr countered. "If I command that they be fed only the profitable commodity each day, then Thad will predict this taste each morning. I trade accordingly, and you will feed them the most profitable commodity. It must also be the one that Thad predicted."

"What if today was a coincidence?" Zet's voice rose. "You may as well flip a 1 credit coin."

"Allow me to test this theory my way," Darian poked a finger deep into his chest. "Continue your work to verify the prediction of mealtime, and feed them only the food in the prediction."

"Isn't that somewhat self-fulfilling?" Zet continued. "The prediction causes the feeding, not the market."

"It would be self-fulfilling if the market heard the Visionary's prediction and everyone bought corn," the boss rolled to the glass. "But this is our secret. This is not an artificial inflation of price. It is a true prediction. I plan to test this gradually. TobrNet predicted the moves in corn as well. But my lead time was barely 30 seconds before the market realized the reduced corn manifests in shipments. Because my position was hours old, I stood back and watched the action. I sold off before the close so I cannot be burnt by an overnight change."

Zet frowned as Darian moved back to the window. Rezina idly scratched one blade on the glass and stared without a blink at Thad. Thad stayed within his hut and peered back at her from the shadows.

"My boy, get out from under that cot and come to me!" Darian commanded and smiled as Faction spurred the man to his feet. "I am quite proud of you."

"Thank you, Mr. Tobr," Thad reached the glass and watched Rezina's blade swirl. "Is my time here almost done?"

"I propose that you live with the Pressers for 2 weeks," Tobr told him. "Rezina will remain here on the outside to keep from distracting your work."

"How can I help?" Thad's breathing slowed as he heard of the vacation from Rezina.

"We will continue to connect Faction to the Visionary, and you will tell us about their next meal," Tobr smiled. "Simple as that. Just from today's trade, the good doctor and you will have a bonus of 5,000 credits each."

“5,000!”

“Indeed, my boy. At your age, I would have been very pleased with such a windfall,” Tobr paused to think of his youth- the time before the chair. “After the two weeks of success, I hope that you will only need to visit Dr. Zet and the Pressers when it is time to predict the daily meal. I will see you in the morning.”

Rezina stopped the idle scratching of the moleglass, and spun to follow Darian's chair. Thad saw an odd set of etchings left in the glass by her blades. He moved closer and read two words. *Kiss you.*

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“12 consecutive accurate trades, my good doctor,” Tobr belly-laughed with a considerable belly. “The Visionary has been perfect in showing us the commodity that has increased in value the fastest in a single day. What say you now, Dr. Zet?”

“I have little explanation for a series of coincidences this size, but I am not convinced this is fool-proof,” Zet conceded. “The Visionary does have some sense of the future, it would seem. But fallible humans are in the process. We’ve placed a lot of trust in the translation in Faction/Jaron’s mind.”

Argo folded bony arms and looked into the Presser zoo. While, the three-foot aliens continued their circular pilgrimage to nowhere, Faction/Jaron stood with his nose nearly touching the moleglass. Faction was spending too much processing power keeping Jaron’s mind in a calm state. Soon, Faction might lose the ability to block all of the rising stresses in Jaron’s mind.

“I would not bet on this streak continuing,” Zet nodded to Thad. “His mind is in terrible turmoil. If Faction cannot clear the mind of this unhealthy noise, Thad will not be able to host the Visionary’s thoughts.”

“It was your recommendation to have Thad in there in the first place,” Darian’s voice rose. “I do not wish to endanger my prize employee. What do you suggest?”

“I considered it a better test to isolate Jaron from the distractions of this place,” Zet felt something standing very close to his left hand. A wave of heat and a small distortion of light was the only evidence of Rezina. With a swing of his datapad in his left hand, he hoped to hit the invisible target, but he only succeeded in wrenching his shoulder. “In particular your gene-devil of a bodyguard.”

“I see,” Tobr nodded. “Thad my boy, you have done as you promised. Your bonus has grown to 25,000 credits and you will be moving to the executive suites near the good doctor and me. You only need to come here to complete your daily predictions. I will talk to Rezina about proper treatment of officers of Tobr Commodities. Pack your bags.”

Thad beamed at the news and turned to run up the hill to the huts.

Faction was there before he could take a step. *Just go to the access hatch, Thad. You don’t have any bags.*

“And Rezina, my dear,” Tobr spoke to a seemingly bare stretch of the wall. “You will not show one hint of a blade or sharpened tooth to my friend, Mr. Jaron. Make him comfortable and welcome. Shower him with kindness or you will face my ire.”

“Nothing pleases me more,” the wall hummed in reply.

“May I ask, Mr. Tobr, what is Rezina’s attraction to Faction/Jaron?” the doctor puzzled at the man trying to figure out the handle on the door to the exhibit.

“She was designed to find fear in an employee and seek it out,” Tobr smiled at the thought. “She is always in my presence, correct? If an employee is not doing well or, perhaps, doing something dishonest, the employee will be quite nervous when I am near. This taste of fear draws her to that person, and she was encouraged to create more stress. I have gotten a confession or two when Rezina appears – without asking any questions at all. Some respond to a show of blades, and some men are placed at ease by her beauty. Thad, the poor boy, is a

red herring, I'm afraid: a lightning rod for all of her attention. I know in his case that he is not guilty of anything, because I can converse with Faction at any time. I have trouble turning off Rezina's appetite for his fears, particularly because he is afraid of her personally. Perhaps if I encourage her friendlier attention, it will make him more at ease."

"Well," Zet frowned at the long sigh and hum from the wall. "I might suggest..."

"And a shower for you to rid you of the Presser scent, my boy," wrinkles rolled back on the boss's nose as Thad arrived and stood next to the chair. "As soon as this morning's prediction is done."

"It is time," Zet checked the schedule within his mind. "Ready yourself Faction/Jaron."

Thad stood still with eyes closed to feel Faction clearing the way within his mind. The comforting silence moved away doubts, fears and imagination until the pinpoint of the Visionary taste and touch grew.

"My hands are filling with food," Thad felt the pellets rolling from his palms. "Bringing it to my mouth. I'm very hungry today. A good mouthful. I'm chewing, chewing. Oh, delicious. This is wheat for certain. More, more..."

Suddenly, Thad pitched forward and gagged deep with his throat. Before Zet could move, Rezina was visible and caught Thad before his knees hit the floor. She set him back on his feet and continued to steady him. Zet noticed that her grip was more of an embrace.

"Faction/Jaron, explain this," Zet demanded.

Unknown. Faction's response through TobrNet was immediate. *None of the commodity foodstuffs have had this reaction.*

"As soon as I began to swallow," Thad came out of the trance, "my stomach churned. I gagged and spit out the feed."

"Is the Visionary ill, Dr. Zet?" Darian asked, "or will he be ill?"

"I have no indication of that," Zet snorted, "but I cannot predict the future. Certainly, we have only limited knowledge of Presser medical care."

"Then answer this," Darian paused to rub a hand. "Could we make them wretch like that, if we wanted too?"

"Undoubtedly," Zet tapped the datapad and sent a query through his implant as well. "Hundreds of foods in our diet would be completely revolting to these creatures."

"The markets open," Darian looked at his mind's link to the Triad Board of Trade, "and I will sell 9,000 contracts of wheat, I think. The 620 credit contract price is a bit high for this time of year."

"Why?" Zet was nearly on his toes; the red curls on top seemed to straighten as if shocked.

"Done!" Darian nodded to confirm the trade. "Dr. Zet, it has been my plan all along to send messages to myself from the future so that I know how to trade. I tell you now to lace their feed today with a tasteless substance that will make them gag. Something very important will happen today. This is something so important that I needed to make my precious Pressers ill for a moment to send this message."

"But what if it *is* a simple illness?" Zet pressed.

"I will only risk my winnings from the past 12 trades, Argo, be at ease," Darian waved.

There goes my bonus, Zet shut off his implant feed before muttering the thought.

"I want any news about wheat to be top priority from TobrNet and sent directly to my implant without delay," Darian sent the directive through his implant to TobrNet as well. "We will liquidate quickly if I am wrong. The message that I see from Thad's gagging is this: wheat will be the worst thing to buy today. I will want to be a seller of wheat today so that a sudden drop in price will lock the buyer into my high price. When I commit a buy to cancel out my sell order, I keep the difference as profit. If you would, Dr. Zet, explain the TobrNet communications to Thad. I will watch the market from here."

"I'll give you the simplified version, new executive Jaron," Zet sniff returned. "Follow my lead Faction."

Thad was suddenly in darkness even greater than that of the Presser's mind. The ground faded away from his feet and pins of red and white grew in the pitch. Finally, a glow of milk spread far above him. Dr. Zet, complete with datapad and white coat drifted next to him.

"Do you see the object?" Zet pointed to the two metal rings materializing before the starfield.

"A transit gateway for ships," Thad saw no stars within the rings, only a shiver of blue static. "The gateway will let a ship jump to another solar system."

"Yes, it is the basis of WormPipes, our manufactured transportation system between star systems," Zet folded arms again. "This ring sends traffic to the Flora-12 system, while the second ring receives from Flora-12. At Flora-12, there is a second gateway that sends and receives with the New Gaelic worlds. These systems are linked in long chains, from one star to another, each more distant from Earth. The Earth serves as the central transit hub. All ships come to Earth before traveling out another chain of gateways. The Earth is the central trade point for all of human civilization, particularly Mr. Tobr's food commodities. All roads lead to Rome, you see? Do you realize how the Triad communicates with the far-flung empire?"

"No."

"The WormPipes transmit matter well, but radiation used for communications is a different... matter." Zet continued after realizing Jaron missed the humor. "The gateways have a rotating coil of flexible data media to carry messages. The coil goes into the sending ring and appears at the receiving ring. The distant receiving ring turns the coil through it's own send ring so that the coil returns to the originator. Join the ends of the coil and you have a rotating piece of matter that exists in both star systems. The sending gateway writes data on the coil, and the receiving gateway reads the messages as the coil rotates through the gateways. The message can then be moved throughout the long chain of gateways to the most distant star systems and back again. We can communicate almost instantly across the expanse of human existence. With me?"

I will fill in the gaps later, Faction advised.

"I am grateful," Zet moved Jaron close to the sending ring of the gateway. "We have been sending gateway kits at near light speed for 215 years. It works like this: the Triad sends a Prospector ship to the end of a chain of gateways. It chooses a nearby system that has evidence of habitable planets and accelerates to near light speed. Once the Prospector reaches the new system, it uses a gateway kit to begin construction of the gateway in orbit around the most interesting planet. Since the Prospector carries no resources, it must gather before construction begins. The whole process takes a year or more, based on the availability of the materials. In addition, the Prospector begins to gather scientific data about the star system. If there is a habitable world, the Prospector can begin settlement construction, agricultural terraforming, or mining. Of course, if there is a significant amount of life already on the planet, the Prospector merely observes until the gateway is open. We don't want to upset the natural order of a planet by introducing our crops and technologies. Are you keeping up?"

"I believe so," Thad scratched an ear.

"Our empire expands at a crawl, because the travel times to the star systems takes years," Zet pointed to hundreds of flashing circles in the arch of the star field. "After 240 years of Prospector ships and gateway creation, this is all we have to show. We have a mere 1,800 gateway combinations and 145 settled worlds with a friendly climate and atmosphere. Frobe is a very recent addition to the longest current chain of WormPipes. Frobe is at the end of the Livingston WormPipe, correct?"

"Livingston, yes," Thad took a quick look at his feet and felt his head spin at the depths beneath him.

“With 60 Prospector ships unaccounted for, we never know when a new world will open to us,” Zet snapped fingers to bring Jaron back. “TobrNet is built to see the traffic through the gateway, particularly in the case of a new world being opened. Ten years ago, I found the key to breaking the manifest list for all shipping that goes through the WormPipe gateways. I can tell the contents of every ship in the empire and relay this to Mr. Tobr. Our competition had to watch the formal (and legal) channel of communication while we watched the contents of ships while they were in transit. TobrNet consists of systems that accumulate and decode the manifests so that we know what will arrive at the Earth Triad Board of Trade for delivery. Over time, our competition has gotten better at reacting to the legal flow of information. This has erased much of our advantage. Rather than having days of lead time, our manifest system is only minutes ahead of other online information services. Still, we are in the best position to trade on...”

“Dr. Zet?” Thad took a turn at snapping fingers at Argo. “Are you feeling well?”

The doctor blinked constantly but did not speak. With a sudden jerk through the gateway next to him, Thad was dragged after the doctor’s image from gateway to gateway. After 13 unsettling jumps, the pair floated over an unfamiliar world. Thad saw Zet’s eyes widen and lips silently counting key points on the blue and gold planet. Seconds later, Darian’s virtual shape floated past them. Even without his chair, his girth threatened to block Thad’s view of the strange world. Faction moved Thad to the side of the boss to prevent a full eclipse.

“Look at this new world!” Darian thundered through Faction. “The first new world to contact us in more than 5 years. This is the end of the Magellan chain – we thought the chain broken! Four times, Prospectors have been sent to add to this chain and failed. My boy, what do you see in this new world?”

“Some clouds – storms and lightning,” Thad looked to the flashes on the darkened side of the disk. “A large sea on the West of a major continent. Lots of ice at the poles. The brown strips are mountains? Look at the golden color striped across the middle!”

“Yes, the gold. Precisely,” Darian spun a complete orbit about the other men in glee, “A Prospector ship reached this place nearly a year ago, and started construction with a gateway kit. At the same time, an agricultural kit was dropped to the surface to determine the possibility of farming. It found a perfect temperate climate with two long seasons and gentle winds. My good Dr. Zet, what crop do you think was planted?”

“It is most definitely wheat,” Argo’s implant-voice transmitted a gasp. “This major continent is 70% filled with solid wheat! Nearly the entire temperate band of the world is perfect for the crop. The price will collapse as soon as the Triad Board of Trade sees the images.”

“And so! The price falls already,” Tobr placed the wheat bid over the center of the golden continent. “620 credits is now 120 in the unlimited near contract. There are no buyers yet, but the commercial speculators are desperate to sell – but too late! All other wheat contracts for future months are locked at the limit down and poised to go down for a month. And I hold 9,000 front contracts at 620 credits. I am at 50,000,000 credits of profit and climbing. The next time my Pressers eat wheat, I will know it is time to liquidate my contracts.”

“By all the mysteries of space!” Zet squeaked. “How many harvesters will this take?”

“1,200. Ships are being marshaled as we speak. The delivery is scheduled within this near contract in 16 days,” Darian drew back from the planet and dragged his men with him as if his personal gravity was greater than that of the new world. The three returned to the reality next to the Frobe exhibit.

“You’re hyperventilating,” Zet warned the boss as Rezina vainly massaged one shoulder and arm.

“Yes, yes,” breaths came in arching gasps. “A moment, if you please.”

“What does this mean, Dr. Zet?” Thad wondered.

“Your bonus may now be ridiculous in size,” Zet twitched a smile at the thought of his

bonus. "We will have some explaining to do to the Triad Board of Trade."

"And their investigation will find nothing amiss," the boss was puffing slower. "As usual. Remember to spike the Presser feed this afternoon. We will make sure they eat well in the days to follow."

Thad felt the smallest tickle from Faction's direction. It was the itch of fear, but a sadder feeling: the feeling of a deepening hunger and disappointment. For an instant, he was within the Visionary – and returned just as quickly. The sadness would not fade.

Prepare for today's meal prediction, Faction began to dim Thad's vision and dull his hearing.

Thad was started back into his own mind by a rumbling voice.

The fleet transit from the Golden World begins today, my boy, a very big day! 1,200 ships loaded with wheat.

Mr. Tobr, please, Argo managed to keep adequate respect in his voice.

My apologies, Thad, I'm as excited as a schoolboy about taking my profits. Will it be wheat today, my boy?

Let's begin again, Faction returned with a nudge.

Thad felt the Visionary's mind approach and fill the smallest points of his mind. The hands reached down to gather up a helping of feed. Hungrily, Visionary/Jaron munched and sought for the first tastes. Thad was pleased by the tingle that passed for Presser salivary flow.

"Wheat, wheat!" Thad called aloud and heard a meaty clap that could have only come from the boss's hands.

I will liquidate immediately, the boss's was distant as if he already turned away to the trading floor.

"May I stay for this meal," Thad loved the simplicity and peace of the Presser's meals. And wheat was such a wonderful taste. He could almost feel the Presser equivalent of pleasure.

Dr. Zet? Faction relayed Jaron question.

I see no harm in it, Faction/Jaron, Argo abruptly moved away from Thad's mind as well.

With the Presser's calm filling him as the wheat slowly did, Thad sighed and allowed his anxiety to wash away. He could see no fault in these simple creatures. The Pressers acted from the future script and needed no imagination to role-play possible evils. They existed and experienced without the doubt – that paralyzing doubt of the future and the terror it holds. The frames of the future were a blessing because they could hold no phantoms or ghosts. Life would happen according to plan and not be fraught with a tangle of possibilities.

As the meal ended, Thad felt his mind drift until he walked with the Visionary. The Presser's steady small steps, taught by a life in high gravity, paced off the times until the next meal.

You are in the present with the Visionary, Faction was at the limit of hearing. *When did you learn to transition from the mind's future area?*

Thad ignored the question as an odd sensation built in his mind. The presser's right arm lifted and bent at an impossible angle until Thad believed that he would feel the pain of bones breaking. When no pain came, he moved with the three, padded fingertips through his Presser-skull and crept past the inner mind to the very edges of a barrier. Hadn't this been the place Faction held back Thad's true mind?

Thad? What is happening? Faction sounded odd, as if the Visionary/Jaron's fingers pried at Faction's mouth as it spoke. *I have to keep you in the Visionary's mind until I can handle a technical problem. Merging your own thoughts back does not seem to work until...*

Thad had already added his own strength to the arm and felt a barrier break under his grip. Rather than finding his own fears and worries behind the barrier, there was only the inner

surface of a firm sphere. Thad found that the Presser's hand probed holes in the surface of the sphere. With a three-fingered walk, the hand moved from hole to hole until squeezing into one with a long stretch of forearm. When the hand stopped once more, it was free of the tunnel and taking grip on a cold, metal object. Again, Jaron combined his strength as he felt the desire of the Visionary rise. The fingers twisted the object and pushed it at great speed. With the forearm telescoping again, it made several twists of the flexible Presser wrist before letting the object float away. Finally, the three fingers tore through some glassy material. Not once but twice.

"Faction/Jaron, what is this about?" Thad felt hands on human shoulders and an odd snaking of his own neck. With his eyes opening, he saw the front of Argo's coat, his face and the ceiling light. This vision repeated until Thad realized that he was being shaken by the doctor.

"He's awake, let him go," Rezina put her body between the two men and pushed Zet back with a shoulder. Just as quickly, her arms were under Thad's shoulders as his knees buckled. She didn't disguise her enjoyment of the hug as she slid with him to the floor.

Thad's mind returned with the force of an imprisoned djinni, carrying only thoughts of despair, pain and humiliation. Faction was gone.

"Dr. Zet," Darian had rolled near when his connection to Thad went dark. "What is wrong?"

Zet rubbed a wrist that had been twisted away from Thad by Rezina. "Faction's barriers within Thad's mind were breached from the inside. Faction is designed to shut down in this kind of security breach, but was only partially successful. All connections to TobrNet were left on without a filter to Jaron's chaotic mind.

"In English, Zet," Tobr drowned out Rezina's satisfied hum.

"I need to restore Faction and fix this security problem. It will take hours," Zet waved to an assistant, a needless habit when commands flowed through his implant. "Sedate Jaron immediately."

A woman approached and slapped a sedative patch on Jaron before backing away quickly. Rezina had given her a view of serrated teeth and a warning growl.

"Take care of him, Rezina," Darian leaned over the arm of the chair as she eased him to the ground and rested his head on her lap. "He's earned us over 60 million credits in the wheat trades."

"You lifted me when I needed you," she sang softly in his ear as Thad's eyes closed. "I will not let anyone harm you."

"Liquidated the wheat positions then?" Zet leaned over the prone man.

"Completely," Darian was still preoccupied with Thad and did not look at the doctor. "We can await word from TobrNet on the price of the wheat when it arrives from the Golden World. Make sure the Pressers have their fill of wheat tonight."

Both men froze as the highest priority alert came through TobrNet.

Golden World gateway transmission. Ship manifest for 1,200 freighters expected. No ships passed through gateway. Preliminary telemetry: all freighters accelerating to a projected near-light speed. They are not responding to Prospector control ship commands. Unless acceleration can be halted in the next 6 hours, the entire fleet and wheat harvest could be lost.

Zet shivered and looked at the Visionary, still pacing his circle around the exhibit.

"Wheat prices are about to explode," Darian's heavy arm pulled at Zet's white coat, nearly pulling him into Tobr's chair. "Get Faction working immediately."

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The *Oslo* was the first manned vessel to reach the Golden World. As a military craft, it had acceleration that could not be matched by commercial ships. However, acceleration would be useless in this case. The convoy of harvesters had accelerated to a maximum cruise

velocity: 99.8% of light speed. Military ships could go no faster unless there was a gateway at the destination.

“Oslo commander Biate,” Sharon transmitted a response to the nearby gateway. She knew hundreds of Triad commanders and politicians hung on her every word. “I have reached the Golden World at the end of the Magellan chain. There are no harvesters in orbit or on the surface. As reported by the Prospector class ship, the harvest was completed, there are no mature wheat fields left on the surface. We have repaired the failed communication media in the gateway.”

“Triad Central, Oslo. We are receiving from the gateway again – good work. Can we confirm the position of the harvesters?”

Biate shook her head at the three-second lag in transmissions back to Earth. 1 second of the delay was the Oslo’s light-speed distance from the gateway. The entire distance through 16 hops back through the network took a paltry 0.4 seconds. The last lag of 1.5 seconds was within the Earth communications – down to the bottom of the old gravity well. From 185 light years from Earth to Kale’s conference room: three seconds!

“We are approaching the Prospector and will dock within 3 minutes,” Biate glanced over her pilot’s shoulder and then at the growing form of the robot Prospector. “We will try to find the problem with the communications there as well.”

“Gateways and Prospectors have too many redundant systems to lose communications at the same time. It must be sabotage,” a distant Triad voice complained. “Prospectors are designed to travel 15 light years between systems and operate independently until the gateway is running. Failures don’t happen!”

“Precisely the reason for military command of this investigation,” a dry, firm voice quieted a rising murmur. “Silence! All of you!”

Sharon shut the external link off and spoke to her crew of five. “That was Admiral Kale. Yes, the Admiral Kale from *Redemption*. Watch what you say and do everything by the numbers. This must be damn important.”

“Commander Biate, are you docked?” the Triad side was morgue quiet.

“We have capture on the dock pylon,” Sharon saw the thumb’s up from the pilot. “Mission specialists are reviewing. Piping telemetry of Prospector ship to Triad Central through the Golden World gateway.”

“Receiving. Carry on,” the first voice from Triad Central returned.

“The problem is identical to the one on the gateway,” Tice’s voice came from the chamber near the dock. He wrestled robotic arms across the gap to unplug the communication module. “The encryption and decryption sections of the communication unit are physically ruined. The media looks burnt. Unusual. Both copies of the code are burn right off of the storage!”

Sharon heard the report from specialist Tice. She hoped that joker would keep it serious for a bit longer. Great troubleshooters were odd people, often born not taught. Sadly, they were born weird as well as talented.

“This does explain why we lost communication with the gateway and Prospector after the harvesters left orbit,” Tice continued. “Without the ability to understand remote commands or make the right format for the reply, they fell silent.”

“Oslo, confirmed,” Triad central replied after a long pause. “Technicians are nodding here. That feature in the encryption is over 100 years old but was not seen as significant. The Prospector and gateway kit were manufactured in 2441. In case of a military threat, the communication modules would burn out the encryption/decryption keys. It keeps outsiders from gaining access to our communications.”

“Sounds more like a bug than a feature,” Tice grunted under his breath. “When you pay trillions, it’s a feature.”

Sharon cringed because he had been caught on the external feed. She cut the line momentarily. "Tice, you're going to paint the entire *Oslo* hull with a toothbrush when we get back. Will you watch what you're saying?"

"Sorry Cap," Tice said. "Both the gateway and Prospector saw the losing of these ships as a military threat? Cap, Triad Central must think this was a hijacking!"

"That would explain the admiral's interest," Sharon was forced to agree.

"To work, Commander Biate," Kale returned to the fore. "Dump the Prospector observations through the gateway once the communications module is installed."

"Ready," Tice's grunt signaled the start of the feed.

Sharon watched the Prospector's view of the events and knew that the Triad saw it three seconds later. The telemetry began with the lift of the ships from the surface of the Golden World (now a muddy color after the harvest). There were 1,200 glows of flame lifting in unison from the surface. With heavy cargoes, the harvesters were ungainly things in the atmosphere. Even the light winds of the Golden World made them bob and weave as bees burdened with nectar. The armada grew to hundreds of silver streaks as they attained low orbit beneath the Prospector.

"Something odd here," Tice slowed the feed. "Look at the bandwidth on the communications channels of the Prospector. It is doing some heavy talking with the lead ship in the convoy."

"Do we know what the communiqué contained, Biate?" Kale again.

"Specialist Tice?" Sharon prompted.

"No, sir," Tice was already tearing apart the ruined communication module from the prospector. "It appears the content of the message was burned away as well."

"Biate, tell your mission specialist that the feature is a damn bug," Kale's anger rose as his voice quieted. "Technicians here say we won't see any messages in the Prospector, just the evidence of the transmission. Resume the telemetry at normal speed."

"The transmission between the Prospector and the convoy lead is over now," Tice pointed out.

The 1,200 gathered in orbit on the left of the tactical view and disappeared as a group in orbit behind the far side of Golden World. Tice moved ahead to the appearance of the harvesters on the opposite side. Immediately, any space traveler would have noticed a problem in the harvesters.

"Look at the pace of the harvesters!" Tice pointed out the obvious. "Nearing 150 kilometers per second already! That has to be near their design tolerance for acceleration. They aren't heading for the WormPipe, they are leaving orbit!"

The ships shot past the Prospector as a blur of needles into the night. In minutes, receding pins of light were all that was left of the fruits of the Golden World.

"The gateway sent its notice of the missing harvesters here. The Prospector and gateway burn out the communications two minutes later," Tice said. "The telemetry records that the harvesters continued the boost to near light speed for slightly more than 4 days. After that, they went dark. We can only assume they are continuing along the last known path."

"What is the nearest WormPipe chain to that heading?" Kale was no longer speaking to *Oslo*.

"Polo Chain, sir," a moment later a young woman's voice responded.

"How close to an intercept from the Polo chain?"

A full minute passed. "Sir, the closest Polo gateway would be 78 light years from this path. But the harvesters would not cross this closest point for 97 years. The best intercept to physically dock with the lead harvester would be nearly 88 years."

"These harvesters are lost," was Kale's bitter whisper. "*Oslo*, burn your encryption/decryption unit and return to the Gnome gateway in communications silence. Leave

the gateway and Prospector operational, but do not communicate with them further. I will have instructions for you at the Gnome gateway. Kale and Triad out.”

“He said burn it?” Tice was the first on *Oslo* to speak.

“Triad Central must believe that any ship could be hijacked,” Sharon shook her head.

“Even military. Burn it!”

“Cap, one more thought.”

“What is it Tice?” Sharon watched the pilot prepare for a silent passage through the gateway.

“If the Prospector commanded the harvesters to divert,” he said slowly as if he double-checked every word, “then someone passed the commands through our own encrypted channels. The message could have come from any world in any chain along the WormPipe system. One of the 900 billion souls has broken the gateway encryption. If we don’t find the culprit, how can we direct any ship safely?”

“Get accustomed to a silent jump,” Sharon told her pilot. “Manned flights are about to become the only way to fly. At least for a while.”