

Chapter 1

Butterbar

The pair of orbital mirrors cast wintry light on the company's base. The physical fitness facility's walls of woodland camouflage rose above berms capped with sandbags. A curtain wall about two-and-a-half meters high hid the PT facility's entrance from a casual glance. Tomas approached, boots squeaking on the snow, when a voice came from someone standing behind the curtain wall, out of sight.

"We should let Papa Romeo have this bloody planet."

Tomas stopped. A moment to place the voice. The Scotiaman in the scout squad... Connor? Campbell.

The scout's voice continued. "It snows every tenth day and the terrain's uglier than that one Daughter of Astarte on Kahlenberg—"

"And the locals all talk like poofs," another scout said. This one put on an Ardenese accent. "*Forsooth*, let Papa have this *whoreson* planet."

The Scotiaman laughed, and the second scout chuckled at his own joke.

A third voice spoke up, belonging to Cpl. Nilsson, one of the scout squad's fireteam leaders. His voice lacked humor. "Papa can take the butterbar while he's at it."

The chill air bit the lining of Tomas' nose. He narrowed his eyes and angled his ear toward the front of the PT facility. Nilsson's records portrayed a better soldier than the one Tomas had seen while commanding the scout squad cross-posted to his armored grenadier platoon.

"Lt. Neumann's not that bad an officer," said the second scout. Tomas placed the voice. Gorthi, from Satyayuga. He even got the pronunciation right, *Noy-mun*. "For an armored grenadier."

Campbell said, "He's not a paper tiger."

"You think Academy grads are bad?" Nilsson said. "He's worse."

The others muttered words inaudible with distance. Tomas shuffled closer.

"Hear me out," Nilsson said. "Paper tigers got to the Ground Force Academy on family connections. They saw it as a shrewd career move before the war. But when the war broke out, they wanted to lie low, so they can go home to run for election or take over the family business. If they lie low, the better the chances we can lie low. Especially now, that the war's over and we lost."

He went on. "Now look at OCS grads. They survive battle and then volunteer for more. They believe the buncombe about truth, justice, and the Confederated Worlds way. They want us to believe it too. Even if it means we all get killed for nothing."

Only the faint crackling of cigarettes—a vile habit common among scouts—sounded for a moment. Tomas reached for his collar, glanced down. The chameleon cloth showed a yellow bar, signifier of his rank, clean and pressed in yesterday's laundry. He brushed away non-existent dirt from his yellow bar, then put on a stern face and strode around the corner toward the PT facility entrance.

Gorthi saw him first. "Ten-hut," the scout muttered to his peers. He straightened his back and pulled his hand from his

pocket. A flick of his other hand sent his cigarette two meters against the wall of the building. Campbell dropped his cigarette and pivoted to face Tomas. Under their saluting hands, both scouts showed nervous faces, like boys expecting a scolding.

Nilsson leaned against the curtain wall. He eased to an upright position, dropped his cigarette. The cigarette sent up a plume of smoke and steam for a moment before Nilsson ground it into the snow. Although he saluted by the book, his hooded upper lids gave his pale blue eyes an impression of cool regard.

Tomas saluted back. His expression matched Nilsson's. "At. Ease."

Campbell and Gorthi relaxed. Nilsson's demeanor showed no change.

"Does your sergeant know you're lounging around?" Tomas asked. He scowled at each of them in turn.

"We're officially on PT for another eight minutes, sir," Gorthi said. His bulbous nose contrasted with the lines of his face, sharpened by training and action. "The company kinesiologist checked off our workout as being intense enough about ten minutes ago."

"What did you bribe her with?"

Campbell's eyelids fluttered. "Instead of catching our breath after a set, we start right away into a different lift, sir."

Tomas' scowl hardened. "You finished your workout, fine, but it sounds like some of you think our brigade's mission here on Arden is for nothing."

"Just letting off steam, sir," Campbell said.

"There's no steam to let off. It doesn't matter that Shirley Foxtrot couldn't keep the Progressive Republic space force from reaching Challenger. It doesn't matter the politicians on Challenger gave away half a dozen solar systems in the peace treaty. The only thing that matters is, our superiors ordered us to suppress pro-PR irregular military action before Arden

votes to stay in the Confederated Worlds. That means there's another month left in our war—" A sports metaphor from one of the OCS instructors came to mind. "—and we're going to play till the whistle. Do you hear me?" He scowled at Campbell and Gorthi.

The two scouts nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Tomas turned to Nilsson. The scout corporal gave Tomas the same flat stare he'd held throughout the encounter. "As you say. Sir."

Nilsson's attitude made it easy for Tomas to remain brusque. "I don't know how you ever made corporal. I've seen better men than you die." Memories from his tour as an enlisted man on New Liberty stirred in his subconscious.

Gorthi and Campbell looked shocked. Nilsson's expression remained unchanged.

Tomas turned up his glower. "Listen to me, Nilsson. You've got thirty-two days in the field until we leave Arden. I will be watching you every one of those days. If you malingers, or spread defeatism, or commit anything else colorable as an offense under the code of military justice, you'll be staring down a court-martial and facing years in a terraforming battalion before you get home to Midgard."

The flat stare buckled for a moment—a plea in the eyes, a petulant quirk of the mouth. Nilsson apparently hailed from Österbotter *and you should know those things about your men* and if Nilsson wanted to be treated with dignity he should view his superiors with respect—

The attitudes Tomas had taken in from his OCS instructors and skills imps clashed with his recollections of being a grunt and serving under officers, good and bad. *You aren't officer material*, part of him thought for the hundredth time.

Anxiety squeezed him, inside, where the men couldn't see. *What choice do I have now?*

Tomas inhaled the crisp air and refocused on Nilsson. "Do you understand me?"

“Yes, sir,” Nilsson said. Then his gaze turned to the sky over Tomas’ shoulder and a haggard look formed around his eyes.

Tomas turned. Arden’s primary, a gas giant named Prospero, covered five degrees of the sky near the zenith. It looked like a child’s ball held at arm’s length, a round bruise in the cloudless blue sky. The weak rays of the system’s red dwarf star, Sun of York, now turned half of Prospero’s visible face into a purple and blue hemisphere, barely brighter than the shaded hemisphere of the gas giant’s night.

He’d grown up on a gas giant’s terraformed moon, and seen pictures of the rings of Saturn in far-off Sol System, but Tomas had never seen anything like the Ariel Band. Formed from zettatons of water and methane ice melted on Arden’s surface and expelled at high velocity from the top of the space elevator during the terraforming process, the Ariel Band ringed Prospero far more densely, widely, and thickly than the rings of Saturn. In the distant future, long after the war had become a footnote in history texts, some of the ice might coalesce into another moon of the gas giant. For now, the trillion trillion chunks of ice masked Prospero’s midsection, and glittered in the thin light of Sun of York like the diamonds of a wedding ring.

As it always did, the sight reminded him of Lissa.

I want to get home in one piece, same as all of you, part of him wanted to tell Nilsson and the other scouts. But an officer couldn’t show such weakness to his men.

Especially now, given the unnatural features showing in Arden’s sky. Not the two arrays of mirrors, tens of thousands of kilometers across, attending the planet at the gravitationally-stable L4 and L5 points formed by Prospero and Arden, gathering and focusing the wan sunlight onto Arden’s surface. Instead, descending through the indigo sky under the now-edge-on L4 mirror, came six fuzzy glows of light, falling down the sky like lighted marbles in some clear but viscous liquid.

Either they descended very slowly, or they aimed for landing points hundreds of kilometers away.

Why bother setting the buildings' chameleonskin to camouflage? The only ships in orbit are the Progressive Republic's. They have the coordinates of every structure on base to within a meter, and all the camouflage in the Confederated Worlds won't help us if they support their allies on the ground with orbital fires.

"Och, I've never seen Papa land so many in one go," Campbell said. *Papa*, from Papa Romeo, the phonetic alphabet letters for the initials of the Progressive Republic.

Six ships. Officially, the Progressive Republic denied it ever landed ships on Arden, let alone ships loaded with weapons, matériel, or combat advisors for the pro-PR insurrection active in the wild lands recently seeded with terrestrial life by Arden's ecological engineers. But under the terms of the treaty, Papa's ships held orbit over Arden, and the nearest units of the Confederated Worlds Space Force remained in dock in the Nuova Toscana system, two artificial wormholes and twelve light years away.

Six ships, and only one overstretched Ground Force battalion to deny them operational freedom over a million square kilometers of the planet.

Tomas turned to the three scouts. "You might have ten minutes more relief before the order comes for us to saddle up. Use them wisely. We'll be cooped up in our rides for a long time."

"Yes, sir," Campbell said. He and Gorthi shared a look, then went through the gap in the curtain wall toward their bivouac. Their cigarettes remained, brown shades of tobacco and filters littering the slushy snow.

Nilsson stood for a moment, fixing a thousand-yard stare on the distant points of the descending fusion drives. Tomas had seen that look on many a face. You could take a man's body out of combat, but part of his mind would always be there.

Nilsson took a breath, shook his head. With crisp, economical motions, taken without regard for Tomas' presence, he squatted near his dropped cigarette, and scooped it up with a handful of boot-dented snow.

A habit of security—leaving no spoor for a foe to trail him. Nilsson was a diligent soldier. Why was he so surly? Which side of him would come out on their next mission?



Amid cheap plastic chairs, next to a table perched on spindly carbon nanotube legs, Captain Bao waited in the conference room of company headquarters. An unrolled display, one meter by a meter and a half, lay on the tabletop, its corners glued down by blobs of reversible adhesive. Captain Bao's chin slumped against his hand while his gaze flicked from spot to spot on the display.

Tomas stopped inside the doorway. "Lt. Neumann reporting, sir."

Captain Bao looked up. "Come on in."

A step, a glance around. "Where's everyone else?"

"You're early, Neumann." Captain Bao turned back to the display. "Take a look."

Tomas approached the display. Earth tones and mottled greens mapped a million and a half square kilometers of Arden. In common with most of the territory of most freshly terraformed worlds, this region of Arden held scattered settlements of artisan farmers, ecological engineers, or followers of heretical branches of the local religion. Rumor had it some dabbled in quasi-intelligent computer code and other immoral practices shunned by worlds that remembered the causes of virtual fugue on Heinlein's World and Earth.

Thin black lines showed the roads linking the settlements to one another, the company's home base, and, via the one broad highway entering the region from the southeast, to Bel-

mont, the planet's capital city. Thinner gray lines marked the wired communication net the Ground Force relied on during the times Papa Romeo's ships in orbit "accidentally" jammed radio communications.

A bright green line marked off a quarter of an annulus—like the last bites of a giant doughnut with Belmont in the hole. Inside the quarter-annulus lay the company's sector. A vast stretch, a thousand kilometers from the inner edge to the outer. Impossible to patrol even if the full battalion, or even the entire brigade, devoted itself to the task.

The company had help, at least on paper-thin graphical display. Each of the settlements had a powder blue icon representing a unit of the Arden Volunteer Constabulary. Icon size and a badge in traffic-light colors showed each unit's notional effectiveness. The same powder blue tinged the terrain around the settlements and sent arms down the roads. If the map could be believed, the Constabulary patrolled every stretch of road every day.

From the rawest privates to the officers on Captain Bao's staff, few of the company's personnel believed it. They spoke the nickname of the Constabulary, *ArChars*, with the contempt all line soldiers felt for local militias. Tomas held back from that judgment. The Constabulary existed to deny the settlements and roads to the pro-PR insurrection, and sometimes fix the rebels with observation and fires until the Ground Force could deliver the knockout blow. That's all they could ask of men with families and careers.

Staying home gave no guarantee war would leave you alone.

One other color rounded out the map's palette. Six gold spots marked Papa Romeo's approximate landing sites. Five of them formed a wavering line, roughly northeast to southwest, about four hundred kilometers from the company's base. Tomas looked for landmarks. The towns of Sempronius and Verona to the northeast. The Sycorax Hills. Another town,

Eltham. The bright green of their sector boundary bisected the wavering line before its final point, near a town called Eastcheap, south of them in Bravo Company's sector.

The sixth landing site lay three hundred kilometers further to the west of the others. Only a single ecological engineering camp, abandoned since the start of the insurrection, showed anywhere nearby.

Footsteps and a conversation flowed into the room. Tomas turned to see the three members of Captain Bao's staff, the executive officer, the supply and support officer, and the first sergeant. The conversation dried up. All three looked weary.

"You look like I feel," Captain Bao said. "But we're going to get through this. Thirty-two days. We can sleep the whole way back to Challenger." He looked past the new arrivals to the entryway. "Lieutenant Landon, Staff Sergeant Khudobin, come in."

The last two, the company's platoon commanders other than Tomas, had little in common. Lt. Landon had an Academy degree and chiseled cheekbones. On the warm days of Arden's weather cycle, he wore short sleeves that showed lean yet muscular arms. Though commissioned after Tomas, Lt. Landon showed only confidence verging into arrogance.

Khudobin, in contrast, exuded a grunt's fatalism. His stubbled chin, at odds with his soft face, showed an expectation that anything that could go wrong would, at the worst possible time. He commanded a platoon because his superior, Lt. Kalus, lay in a medical tank in the hospital in Belmont after taking a sniper round through the head.

The crowd gathered near the table. Bao cleared his throat. "You all know why we're here. Six Papa ships came down jacob's ladder half an hour ago. Lt. Neumann is going to tell us his plan for dealing with them."

Tomas' head jerked up. "Sir?"

Capt. Bao raised an eyebrow. "You've studied the map more than anyone else, haven't you?"

Tomas blinked. Words failed him. Bao usually started a conversation and built a consensus from his platoon leaders. Why was he singling Tomas out this time?

"Come on, Newman," added Lt. Landon. "OCS intake knows what it's doing. Most of the time."

The others stayed quiet, but their faces lacked sympathy. Tomas dropped his gaze to the map and breathed deep into his belly.

"Landon and I split up these four sites." He pointed to the middle of the map. "My platoon will scout the sites near..." *Doesn't matter which. Pick two.* "Sycorax Hills and Eltham, his will take the ones near Sempronius and Verona. Khudobin will stay in reserve to give his platoon more time to recover from its recent action."

The staff sergeant let out a barely-audible breath.

Tomas pointed at the distant landing site near the ecological engineering camp. "This one is too far, at least until we scout the nearer sites. We tell the Constabulary units nearest to this site to do more aggressive patrolling in their immediate regions. If one can spare the men and vehicles to scout the landing site, so much the better—"

"ArChars?" asked Lt. Landon. "They aren't even scouts, for chrissake." With Kalus in the hospital, only armored grenadiers led the company's combat platoons.

Another deep breath, held for a two-count. "Perhaps I expect too much," Tomas said. He glanced up at the company's SSC officer, a blond Midgarder with soft brown eyes. "Lt. Haraldsdottir, can you spare a few fab cycles for a piece of equipment a Constabulary unit might want?"

She squinted. "Let me think."

Capt. Bao spoke up. "You want to offer the ArChars a carrot for reconnoitering that landing site?"

"If Lt. Haraldsdottir says she can spare the fab cycles, then, yes."

Lt. Haraldsdottir nodded. "They're always asking for better

trace metal extractors than civilian fabs in their towns are allowed. We can squeeze one into the schedule over the next four or five days."

"No," Lt. Landon said. "Quite the bad idea. Don't you agree, Captain?"

Capt. Bao gave him an impassive look. "Give me more info and maybe I will."

Lt. Landon's face showed a certainty the captain would come to agree with him. "It's a point the Academy instructors hammered into us in counterinsurgency class. We have to assume at least some ArChars are rebel agents. If we give the ArChars equipment to make better vehicle parts or whatever, there's a chance they'll give it to the rebels."

Tomas frowned. "With these landings, Papa Romeo might be giving the rebels much more and better matériel than one metal extractor. Six ships could land two companies of tanks."

With a nod, Khudobin said, "Even if the rebels take a metal extractor, they couldn't fab enough stronger alloys in the next month to make a difference."

"I've heard the pros and cons regarding the site near the ecological engineering camp." Capt. Bao peered at the last spot on the map. "What about this one, near Eastcheap?"

"We alert the Constabulary units on our side of the sector boundary. And after Bravo Company steps on its own—" Tomas rarely used salty language, and especially not with a lady present. "—tail, whichever of Landon or I finishes our part of the mission first can help it."

Capt. Bao and the executive officer chuckled. The mood of the others lightened. Even Lt. Landon's usual smirk changed, to include Tomas within its circle.

A sad fact about human nature, that a strong way to build camaraderie among one's team lay in denigrating another.

After his chuckle faded, Capt. Bao rubbed his chin while his gaze roved over the map. "Good plan, Neumann."

"Sir? Thank you."

Capt. Bao looked up, taking in Tomas and Landon. "Now it's time to execute. I want to see your platoons roll out the gate within an hour."

Chapter 2

Sycorax Hills

The platoon's main column rolled into a town named Navarre. Past a few outlying cottages, the road climbed the eastern slope of a low hill toward the bulk of the town. The snow of recent days had mostly melted, showing the dull green of hardy grass, except on the western sides of buildings and swales in the ground. Though the weather had warmed, they drove toward an indigo sky. Above the town, the L4 mirror showed a mere crescent of light under the dull red ball of Sun of York.

The cameras on the hull of Tomas' Badger sent to the video displays in the turret live footage of a few civilians working in cottage gardens. Many kept digging into the rocky soil, ignoring the machines rumbling by. A few looked up with unreadable expressions until the vehicles passed.

One of the platoon's two Weasels, the scouts' lighter infantry fighting vehicles, waited in Navarre's paved central square. Its turret's open hatch jugged up, and its rear ramp pressed into the living asphalt. Cpl. Nilsson and the men of his fireteam stood near their Weasel, in proper mode for dealing with friendly civilians: cee-skin set to an urban camouflage pattern, helmet faceplates up.

Tomas wished the other scout vehicle, commanded by

Sergeant Hoch, had been the lead outrider when entering the town. Not simply to have a higher ranking NCO be the first to meet with the locals. The defeatism expressed by Nilsson and his men—Campbell and Gorthi stood together near the back of the fireteam formation, leaning toward one another in some private conversation—might leak out. Yet Tomas had realized too late which Weasel would be the first into Navarre. Nilsson would have known why, had he changed the column order for entry into the town. Tomas would have appeared even weaker to Nilsson and the others if he'd changed the order then.

In the square also waited a handful of Constabulary men in plain khaki uniforms and powder blue berets, standing in a loose semicircle around a few civilians. Most of the civilians wore typical dress, cargo trousers and multipocketed jackets. One in the front and middle of the crowd augmented his attire with a white wig and a purple sash over one shoulder, marking him as the mayor. Next to him stood a clerk holding a thick tablet computer.

Tomas' mouth scrunched. Civilians didn't need tablets stuffed with so many computer parts, regardless of Ardenite cultural attitudes.

The masses of both Earth and Heinlein's World had used even bigger computers than the clerk's, before they succumbed to virtual fugue.

Tomas ordered the platoon's vehicles to halt. The reactors quieted, and the infantry riding in the passenger compartments prepared to dismount. After the rear hatches clanged to the pavement and the last echoes of tramping boots faded from the interior of his Badger, Tomas pressed the button to open his turret hatch, and he and his gunner, Clayworth, a New Zionite—from the Mormon planet, not the Jewish one—climbed out.

The mayor stepped forward to meet him. "Leftenant Neumann, honoréd are the folk of our humble town that you of such renown have come to us."

"Thank you, Mayor—" The platoon's networked computers whispered the name to a speaker in his helmet. "Brown. The Confederated Worlds Ground Force is grateful for your welcome." Maybe that sounded lofty enough to Ardenite ears. "What can you and Constable—Urbanowicz tell us about Papa's landing in the Sycorax Hills?"

The town constable stepped forward. A slender man, he had a long nose and narrow eyes. "I tell you, sir, every eye in town noted yon cullion's landing. His fusion exhaust rendered incarnadine two-tenths the sky."

Ground Force encouraged its officers to respect local officials, even ones stating the obvious. "No doubt. From our observations at company headquarters, and your unit's initial report, we placed the landing at about thirty kilometers west-northwest of here. Do you have updated intelligence?"

"My brave and happy few have scouted the approaches toward Navarre from yon Sycorax Hills. We have not yet seen the vessel our enemy hath landed."

The Constabulary unit had avoided the landing site. As expected. Nearby, Cpl. Nilsson rolled his eyes.

Tomas said, "We'll operate on the assumption the initial location estimate is accurate. Tell us about the terrain near there."

Constable Urbanowicz frowned. "No doubt, your maps are accurate. I know not what I could add to them."

"Despite our maps," Tomas said, "your unit knows more about the Sycorax Hills than you could ever transmit to company headquarters."

"You speak more to the shortcomings of our wingéd spirits of the air and their wiréd cousins," Constable Urbanowicz said, "than to the strengths of mine unit, with only such augmentations of its organs of sense as the civilian fab can provide."

The constable angled for more hardware. Tomas eyed him coolly. "Go on."

"Hear, then, as I speak of yon Sycorax Hills." Constable Urbanowicz flourished his arm toward the west. "Their main ridge runs three score kilometers, the spine of a dragon-queen buried under two megameters of ice for half the universe's age, their foothills attending her like drones of her hive interred with their queen in the funerary custom of a barbarous people. Their lower hills have been touchéd by our acolytes of Demeter, our *johnny appleseeds* as those whose given tongue is Confed betimes name them, seeded with grass and brush and shrub, offering hearth and home to deer and bear alike. Their higher, further hills, though, remain near as deserted and clad in stone as the day we flung their covering waters to freeze in Prospero orbit. Yon cullion landed in that unconceivéd nursery."

Back in the *lycée*, Madame Martin's literature classes had studied texts from ancient France, not ancient England. Tomas shut his eyes while translating the constable's Elizabethan speech into standard Confed. The hills' extent, the fact that ecological engineering hadn't yet induced ecosystems at higher elevations, some detail about Papa Romeo's estimated landing site.

"Constable, I told you, we know all that." Tomas wrestled his voice into a warmer tone. "What we seek is detail finer than the standard maps. How much does the ground roll between the contour lines? What tricks of the terrain could an enemy use to his advantage?"

Constable Urbanowicz looked both hurt and graciously forgiving. "Sir, you needed only have askéd to be gifted with all my expounding. Most every grade in yon hills slopes gently from crest to vale. Marzanna's long eon of icy dominion wore down their sharper lines no less than those of Arden's every other district. Trees and brush lie thick upon the lower slopes. We prune them back to ten meters of the roadside, the furthest extent the chancellor of ecological engineering in Belmont hath permitted us. The ground providing root for Flora's

bounty hath been turned for decades by worm and vole and fusion-powered auger, and will yield readily to the spade."

Limited visibility while driving through terrain suitable for entrenchment. Tomas raised his hand to pause the constable, then murmured into the microphone inside his helmet. "Drivers, gunners, vehicle commanders, we'll be moving through prime ambush territory at lower elevations." In his mind's eye, he saw a map, while the constable's description of the hills' higher elevations echoed in his memory. "After that, our chameleonskin better be working properly, because we'll have stark silhouettes otherwise." He turned back to the constable. "Thank you. Mayor Brown, I have some questions for you."

"Me?" Mayor Brown asked. "Bellona's bridegroom, I am not."

Speak Confed for once, would you? Tomas blinked his eyes wider. "I must ask you about the political situation here in Navarre. How loyal are the people to the Confederated Worlds?"

Mayor Brown's eyes widened and his head lurched back. After a moment, he recovered, leaning forward, wiping the air with his hands, shaking his head so fast the ends of his white wig arced away from his ears. "Sir, I assure you, every Navarrene is friend to this ground, and liegeman to the Constitution of the Confederated Worlds."

"Then why would Papa land so near?"

"Sir?" Despite the inflection in his voice, alarm in Mayor Brown's eyes showed he knew the answer to Tomas' rhetorical question. "Zounds, I lack all knowledge of our enemy's plans."

"As do I, yet I can still predict his intentions. Were Navarre as loyal as you say, Papa would not land here. The people would reject his attempts to foment rebellion and—" The city government and the Constabulary unit would be free of rebel subversion. Best not to say that without proof. "—he would miss opportunities to work mischief elsewhere."

Tomas swept his gaze around the square. Wary civilians

huddled in doorways. They wanted this war to be over, no less than he did.

Yet they could want the war to end by voting to join the Progressive Republic.

He set the thought aside. "On the other hand," he said to Mayor Brown, "if the rebels dominated Navarre, then Papa would gain nothing by landing here. He would gain more by showing his strength near a town still up for grabs. How many Navarrenes are rebel sympathizers? How many have quit the town to serve with rebel formations in those thick forests in the Sycorax Hills?"

Mayor Brown swallowed thickly. "Sir, I assure you, none of our citizens would give any aid and comfort to our enemy."

Tomas set his fists on his hips and peered at the mayor. He lowered his voice. "They've threatened—you? your family?—to not cooperate with Ground Force?"

Mayor Brown's face froze.

"Even if you do as the rebels ask, if they win the plebiscite, at best you'll lose your job. At best. At worst, I don't have to tell you. Against a pack of armed men in a vacuum of legal authority, with Papa turning a blind eye to their excesses, you and your family wouldn't stand a chance."

Constable Urbanowicz puffed out his thin chest. "We're not such whippéd curs as you mind us to be, sir."

"Beaten dogs or not, I don't care. All I ask is you think hard about which side gives you the best chance of keeping you and your loved ones in one piece. Here's a hint, it's us. Here's another hint. The better you cooperate with us, the better your chances."

The mayor studied a seam in the living asphalt for a time, before a slow inhalation lifted his head. "Twenty to twenty-five young men have abandonéd the town for the ungovernéd wilds in the past ten tendays." He whispered. Tomas kept himself from looking around the square to gauge if any of those seemingly wary civilians in truth spied for the rebels.

Mayor Brown kept whispering. "Each of those young men has some sense, but too little for admission to the university in Belmont. Instead they waited in Navarre, tinkering with computers or working as freelances for ecological engineering, yet in their own minds, naught more than caged beasts pacing the rounds of their captivity. When they tuned their wireless sets to the broadcasts of our enemy in orbit, 'twas like the siren's song beckoning an Odysseus from the mast of a ship whose sailors tied slip-shod knots."

Tomas turned to Constable Urbanowicz. "Twenty-five young men, from this town. Do your patrols encounter them?"

"Most oft we find only their spoor," the constable replied. "Betimes they harass us with rifle fire failing even to prick our vehicles' armor or our own. Marry, they have harmed some of the loyal residents of our western outskirts, with crops put to flame, livestock put to flight, vehicles wrecked, or assaults perpetrated upon our kith."

"They have entered the town, as well?"

Constable Urbanowicz put on a bluff face. "They've never undertaken a clash of arms against us. We may be few, and ill-equipped and trained compared to the likes of Ground Force, but we would outfight that scurvy lot and they know it."

"Twenty-five from Navarre have joined the rebels. Overtly, at least. How many from others, from other towns, are out there?"

After scratching his head, Constable Urbanowicz said, "We estimate at least a hundred are scattered among the length and breadth of the Sycorax Hills."

Tomas turned to Mayor Brown. "How many rebels are in Navarre?"

"Sir? Marry, none, as the constable hath already answered."

"No, the constable only said the rebels active in the wilds have never tested the town's defenses. My question is different. How many rebels live inside the town?"

Mayor Brown gulped. Despite the chill air, sweat beaded on his forehead. "Sir, I..."

Tomas leaned toward him. "Enough to render credible the threat you feel. You have given me answer enough." He swept his gaze over the assembled town officials and Constabulary men. "And now, each one of you will tell me if Mayor Brown and Constable Urbanowicz have spoken truthfully."

The mayor's clerk shifted his tablet computer, seemingly subconsciously, to shield his groin. "Each of us, sir? Gadzooks, if two or three corroborate the words already spoken, what need any other raise his voice?"

"If any one if you happens to be a rebel agent—" Tomas raised his eyebrow at the clerk. "—we need that you must answer to your masters for providing Ground Force good intel."

"My innocence of the crime of rebel service is as visible as the glittering ice boulders girdling brooding Prospero," the clerk said, voice huffy. "But should the plebiscite go our enemy's way, our innocence would avail us naught, when the rebel compels us to answer for our service to you."

Tomas shrugged. "To paraphrase one of the ancient presidents, if you don't hang together, then you will hang separately." He fixed his gaze on the clerk.

After a moment, the clerk bowed his head. "The mayor and constable tell you true."

"Thank you. What say you?" Tomas asked one of the Constabulary men. The man gave the same answer as the clerk. Tomas worked his way around the group, and got the same answer from each person in turn.

After that, Tomas stretched his hand toward the mayor. He shook the mayor's hand, then the constable's. "Gentlemen, thank you for the hospitality of the town, but now we must go."

Tomas went toward his Badger while the men remounted their vehicles. Before he climbed up the ladder, Tomas muttered a query to his helmet. Soon he had a voice link with Cpl.

Yarborough, the platoon medic.

"Doc, I need a pain pill."

"Sir?" Cpl. Yarborough had the terse accent of one of the hardscrabble worlds settled by the last refugee wave from Heinlein's. "What's wrong?"

"Having to understand Ardenese gives me a headache."

A pause, then a chuckle. "Better you than me, sir, no disrespect. I'll be there in a moment."

While Tomas waited, Nilsson, Campbell, and Gorthi trudged up the ramp of their fireteam's Weasel. Maybe Nilsson would show some fighting spirit when they encountered Papa Romeo and the rebels. Riding around in a big moving target would bring a firefight to him whether he wanted it or not, and there might be a good enough soldier left in him to see that.

"Lieutenant," said Sgt. Hoch over the platoon's radio net, from the passenger compartment of the other Weasel.

With thoughts on Nilsson, Tomas said, "Yes?"

"You may recall, we're still on our road carriages."

Tomas took a moment to redirect his thoughts. For better speed and gentler wear on pavement, the vehicles had driven from company headquarters on road carriages. These were low, wide metal frames with two axles of run-flat tires reaching chest-height on a man. Power and control for a road carriage's steering and drivetrain came from hookups to the Badger or Weasel they carried.

The road carriages enabled high speeds in rear areas, but made the vehicles less maneuverable and easier to spot when in or near enemy contact.

"We'll disconnect just outside of town," Tomas said. "There's a refit station at the next intersection."

"According to the map."

"The town constable would have too much to answer for, if he let the rebels destroy it."

Sgt. Hoch drew in a breath. "You've got a lot of faith in the

ArChars.”

The best-remembered piece of advice Tomas had gotten on officership while still an infantryman had independently come from two sources, his squad sergeant and his platoon commander. *Listen to your sergeants. They give you advice because they want you to be an officer worth following.* “Even if I didn’t, the rebels have spies in town. If they see us roll out on our road carriages, their friends in the hills may expect us to still be riding them when we make contact.”

Sgt. Hoch took a moment. “Not a bad idea, lieutenant.”

High praise coming from an old non-com. Tomas hustled into his Badger’s turret. Moments later, the fusion reactor under the crew compartment rumbled to generate more power. Its peers in the other vehicles grew louder, and the microphones on the outside of the Badger fed into Tomas’ helmet echoes from the brick faces of timber-framed buildings ringing the square.

The vehicles pulled out in column—Sgt. Hoch’s Weasel, then Tomas’ Badger, the other Badger, and the Buffalo. The Weasel carrying Nilsson’s fireteam would bring up the rear. First into town, last out. Lucky and lazy.

The jagged vee-shape of a St. Martin’s cloak painted on the side of the Buffalo marked it as an armored, but weaponless, vehicle belonging to Supply and Support Corps, SSC. The Buffalo rode near the back of the column for safety—it held the only military-grade fab for three hundred kilometers. Without it, the platoon’s ability to remain in the field would be limited by the stocks of ammunition and self-cooking meals carried in the infantry fighting vehicles.

The column rolled out of the square down a wide street leading to the west. The watchers from doorways and windows shrank back, and pedestrians on the sidewalks stopped and faced the street. The impassive faces of the Navarrenes hid the degree of their loyalty.

“Jumping cuesticks,” said Clayworth, the gunner. His head

swiveled to watch the video feeds from the side-mounted cameras, showing passing sidewalks and buildings. The view of the western outskirts of town in the main display in front of Clayworth silhouetted his long, narrow nose. "Every one of those jackholes is a Papa spy. I feel it in my bones."

"We don't know that," Tomas replied. The video feeds showed more wary townsfolk. One teen boy nodded from vehicle to vehicle, then lifted his shoulders and widened his eyes at the St. Martin's cloak on the Buffalo. "But quite likely there's at least one."

The column rolled on. After the last few cottages, barbed wire to the right of the road fenced off a sheep paddock. The barbed wire made a poor quality obstacle, for a soldier: four strands parallel to each other and the ground, with a total height of about one-meter-fifty. It must suffice for the sheep. The blues and reds of their genetically-engineered wool contrasted with the deep green grass.

To the left, they passed an ecological engineering yard showing rows of potted juvenile pines and firs. Like the grass, their needles showed a deep green, nearing black, to better catch the reflected red-tinted light of Sun of York. The Ardenites would plant them come peacetime, in some sparse landscape liberated within living memory from two thousand kilometers of ice. Come peacetime, regardless whether Arden voted for the Confederated Worlds or the Progressive Republic.

What difference did one world make? Did this young world justify the cost of towing a wormhole to it, and maintaining ground and space forces to defend it? Would it be so bad if the locals voted to join the Progressive Republic? To some politicians on Challenger, yes, but to the Ground Force personnel being asked to fight and die here?

Tomas pushed the thoughts from his mind. He had an assignment, and whether wise or foolish, he lacked standing to question it. Nor did it matter. For the next month, he had his

platoon's effort to direct as wisely as he could. Forty people's lives to spend as dearly as possible. He returned his attention to the video displays, the maps, and the vehicle and telemetry data crowding the inner surfaces of the turret.

In the forward view, the Sycorax Hills appeared as a green fringe at the horizon.

At four thousand meters from Navarre's last cottage, the column came to a crossroads. At one corner of the intersection, five-meter-tall poles held up a thick sheet of chameleonskin. Twenty meters by thirty, the chameleonskin covered a space secured against foes more wily than sheep. Thick taut strands of electrified wire, not barbed but razor spiked, formed a double fence around the perimeter. A slab of reinforced concrete secured fenceposts and floored the enclosure. More coils of razor wire ringed the poles to dissuade sappers from climbing. With the coils of wire, cameras and microphones shared the poles. Wired and wireless relays would alert the Navarre Constabulary if anyone tried to cross the fence.

All this would secure the enclosure, if the Constabulary could be trusted.

The gate opened in response to the IFF transponder on Sgt. Hoch's Weasel. The gate telemetered its security log to Tomas' Badger as the rest of the column rolled in. Since the last Ground Force entry, no attempts to force the gate or the fence. According to the log, Constabulary personnel on patrol had verified the enclosure's security twice a day. By the book.

"Have some dismounts confirm the all-clear," Tomas told Sgt. Hoch.

The Weasel's rear hatch dropped. Sgt. Hoch's fireteam hustled out, chameleonskin dialed to transparent. The cee-skin wasn't perfect. The men could be glimpsed in distortions of the background, and motion blurred the outlines of their figures. Their terse words came through the platoon net. Ground undisturbed, latrine and kitchenette unoccupied and free of booby traps.

"All clear from visual inspection," Sgt. Hoch said. "Agrees with logged data."

"We are all clear," Tomas said. "Dismounts, you have twenty minutes for comfort breaks. Crews and commanders, we're leaving our road carriages here and checking our rides' chameleonskin before you can hit the buckets."

The passenger compartment's hatch in Tomas' ride, Badger One, clanged to the concrete. Out tromped a dozen boots. The soldiers spoke among themselves with guarded humor, mostly about hot meals and the nearest Daughters of Astarte facility, far off in Belmont. Part of Tomas longed for that camaraderie again, but he was the only officer within three hundred kilometers. He had no comrades here. Only subordinates he had to lead.

Get back to work. He climbed out of his Badger and oversaw the disconnecting of vehicles from their carriages, the flipping down of carriage ramps, the churning of tracks. Once all five vehicles stood on the concrete, the crews ran diagnostics on the vehicles' cee-skin panels and set them to transparent. Up close, anyone could identify their outlines, from distortions at angles and edges, but it would be far tougher from across a thousand meters of battlefield. Or from orbit.

Tomas circled the vehicles, verifying each panel, and climbed up the sides to check the cee-skins on the turrets and decks. "Looks good. Take ten."

The vehicle crews headed toward the latrine. Tomas' gut churned, but he waited for everyone else to queue up first. As he approached the end of the line, he noticed Nilsson nearby, leaning against the track of his Weasel, his eyes closed.

"This is the last crapper for a while," Tomas said. "Better go here than think you can dig a cathole."

Nilsson cast a hooded gaze at Tomas. "I'm fine. My insides aren't wired that way."

Minutes later, a chain of bioreactors under the concrete turning his shit into sugar, Tomas called together the sergeants

and vehicle crews. "Faceplates down," he told them. He pulled his tablet from a zip pocket of his uniform, and soon projected a map to their helmet displays.

"Here's where we're going." Using the tablet, he highlighted a golden smear in the treeless higher land twenty-five kilometers away. "We have three routes to get there. Left, right, or straight ahead." A backlight effect haloed parts of the road net. From the intersection, the crossroad was paved all the way to the next towns to north and south. Within ten kilometers either direction on the crossroad, narrower, gravel roads ran from the pavement up into the forested lower elevations. The road they'd taken from Navarre remained paved for two kilometers past the intersection, then turned to gravel at the edge of the forest. Tomas recalled the minor country roads around his home town on Joséphine. The gravel roads probably turned to rutted dirt shortly after the forest cover started.

"Papa in orbit saw us come to here. With our cee-skin to transparent, we can probably make it unseen to the edge of the pavement. Once we're on the gravel, though, we'll be kicking up enough dust for Papa to see from orbit—or rebels to see from the forest."

Cameras inside the helmets of the men around him provided visuals of their faces, which his display superimposed over the locations of their helmeted and cee-skinned heads. The sergeants looked glum, as usual. *Is my leadership that poor?*

Advice from an OCS instructor came to him. *Fake it till you make it.* "Still, if we move quickly enough down a path the rebels aren't expecting, we'll reach the Papa landing site before the rebels can take action against us."

The driver of Nilsson's Weasel worked the air with his jaw. "Sir, we'd expose our rear to any rebels in the forest if we drove balls-out."

"We'll chance it. It would take too long to clear the rebels from the forest before we scout the landing site. And even if the rebels tried blocking our exit from the hills, let them. We

could fight through them on the way back here before Papa could focus against us whatever forces he might have brought down Jacob's ladder. The rebels around here haven't faced Ground Force yet. We'd give them more of a fight than the Constabulary ever has. Got it?"

The driver shrugged. "Whatever you say, ell-tee."

Tomas widened his stance to take in all the men. "Our only risk is driving into an ambush on the way. Which route would the rebels expect us to take? Straight out from Navarre gives the shortest route to the landing site, so we'll take another."

"Sir," Sgt. Hoch said, "they could set up multiple ambushes."

Tomas peered at the sergeant. Did he have a point? *Again, fake it till you make it.* "That's unlikely. They have a hundred poorly-trained men armed only with whatever rifles they can cobble together from civilian fabs."

"Probably. But Papa Romeo might have given them anti-armor weapons. Or they might have improvised something more effective than rifles."

"If they've split up to cover each of the roads, all the more reason to pick one and drive to the hoop." Tomas put on a stern face for the benefit of the cameras inside his helmet. The expression clashed with a sudden burst of self-doubt. *Even if you assayed the situation correctly, sports clichés make you sound like some paper tiger.*

If the personnel around him saw his doubts, none let on. Relieved, Tomas spoke. "Here's the plan. We turn right at the crossroads, then left onto that gravel road into the hills. If we don't make contact on the way, we dismount the infantry and switch to line here." More swipes on the tablet, and a check-point appeared on the map at about three thousand meters from Papa's estimated landing site.

"Final thing. We're rearranging the column. Weasels remain at point and tail, and in the middle, it will be Badger Two, then the Buffalo, then me in Badger One. Now saddle up.

We roll out in five minutes. Move!”

Some of the sergeants and crews shared questioning glances, yet all went to their vehicles without complaint.

The column sped northward on the paved road and made the left turn on schedule. At the gravel road, according to the mission schedule, the Weasels swapped positions, with the one carrying Cpl. Nilsson’s fireteam taking point.

The vehicles slowed. Their tracks creased the gray basaltic gravel and flung crushed pebbles behind them. The rear-view display showed a thin smudge of dust rising behind them, and an analysis of the microphone data feed estimated the sound of their passage as audible for hundreds of meters into the dense forest at either hand.

Constable Urbanowicz had spoken truthfully about the terrain. Ten meters separated roadside drainage ditches from the treelines. Dense undergrowth covered the ground under the canopies of firs and pines. A few patches of snow remained at the bases of the shrubs near the forest’s edges. Tomas worked the lidar—laser rangefinder—in search of human shapes amid the undergrowth. The tangle of shrubs returned only noisy data.

The terrain undulated as they drove higher into the Sycorax Hills. The metal detectors and the real-time video analysis modules in the lead Weasel showed only undisturbed gravel and rocky soil. No buried land mines, then. But Tomas refused to trust the machines. When the lead Weasel topped each undulation, Tomas checked the forward camera view it transmitted. His eyes told him the same story. No sign of rebel activity.

Did I guess right about the enemy only setting up an ambush on the straight path?

Around a bend, the road ahead still looked clear, and the lidar still failed to give conclusive data. The horizon showed a flattened gray elevation ahead. Almost through the forest, into terrain where no one could hide—

A crump rumbled through the ground. The video feed

from the lead Weasel slewed, then pitched forward. "They opened a ditch under us!" yelled its driver over the platoon net.

"Ambush!" Tomas shouted. "Full stop! Infantry dismount! Gunners, cover your side! Prep anti-missile chaff!"

The column erupted with motion. The rear hatch of Tomas' Badger clanked to the ground while he slewed the turret to the right. Cpl. Meriwether, the infantry fireteam leader in his Badger, shouted at his men to get moving. The displays from other vehicles, combined with data feeds from men's shillings, showed the first man from the other Badger's fireteam running toward the drainage ditch to the left of the road.

"Missile, three o'clock!" someone called.

"Everyone, chaff!" Tomas ordered.

Voices shouted over the radio. Among them, his Badger's driver, Edelstein. "Chaff up!"

Out of habit impinged into his head during vehicle command training, Tomas looked to the display showing the missile. Despite the glittering haze of reflective chaff, the missile appeared as a narrow, finned dart. That slender package had enough high explosive, precisely arrayed, to have a fair chance of penetrating a Badger's reactive armor. High above the trees, the missile seemed to hang for a moment, yawing like a sniffing dog, its lidar seeking out its target.

It stopped yawing when its nose pointed at Tomas' Badger.

"Corporal, get your men out now!"

Meriwether shouted again. The infantrymen nearest the hatch started out. A burst of machine gun fire from the woods to the right chewed up the gravel road a few meters away. The nearest men lurched back against their teammates coming out of the second row of seats.

"Goddammit, you got to move your asses!" shouted Meriwether.

The missile drew closer, falling ever faster. "Fire on the MG, both tubes!" Tomas said to Clayworth.

"But the anti-missile laser—"

"Never hits anyway! Chaff's up! Fire both!"

A moment of utter silence. Behind a thick steel mesh near Tomas' head, the barrel of Badger One's main gun jerked back. One round fired, its sound suppressed by the noise-canceling hardware in his helmet. The entire Badger rocked with the recoil. Near Tomas' hip, the autoloader clanked, carrying an anti-personnel round from the magazine to the main gun's breech. Another sound, like a thousand hornets stoked into rage, came from a long burst from Badger One's thirteen millimeter machine gun.

In the display, the missile wavered, its lidar presumably scrambled by chaff, then refixed itself on the Badger—

"Move your asses!" Meriwether shouted again. Boots stomped, men shouted—

The reactive armor on the side of the Badger roared. A moment later came a sharp ping, followed by shouts and screams both over the radio and from the crew compartment.

For a moment, everything seemed unreal, as if he held his breath and floated. Tomas couldn't think. *We're hit am I hit I don't feel anything—*

His impeded skills pushed their way out of his subconscious and into his arms, voice, and senses. They dragged his conscious mind with them.

Badger One's diagnostic displays showed yellows and reds for hull integrity and the right-side drive wheels and track. Smells of scorched plastic hit Tomas' nose. The ruffling sound of automated fire extinguishers followed. The fusion reactor, the magazine, and both weapons remained functional.

Medical data telemetered from the men's shillings showed two infantrymen had been hit. More screams sounded through the vehicle.

You never got used to wounded men screaming. The echoes inside Badger One made the sound even more plaintive.

"Doc, crew compartment, Badger One!" Tomas said over the radio.

"Roger," Cpl. Yarborough said. His voice wavered. "Coming asap."

Tomas felt as if he wore blinders on all his senses. Impped habits worked through his arms and voice before his consciousness could second guess them. "Edelstein, status?"

"I don't know if she'll drive, sir."

"Clayworth?"

"We can shoot."

"Meriwether?"

"We in the ditch on the right side of the road. Who they get? Lemieux, Chen. Shit. Thought the reac knocked down that dart." More machine gun fire chattered from the woods, panging off the gravel. "We need cover fire to go anywhere."

"We'll suppress the rebel MG with both barrels," Tomas said. "Weasel Two, target the missile launch site."

No reply from the forward Weasel.

Lemieux screamed in barely-coherent Nouvelle-Quebeçois profanity, a stream of *maudits* and *ciarges*. Chen whimpered. His vitals showed the onset of shock.

"Where's doc?" Focus. "Suppress the MG!" Tomas said to Clayworth. The enraged-hornet sound buzzed, and another shell clanked up from the magazine. Still no reply from the lead scout vehicle. "Weasel Two, put your autocannon on the missile launch site!"

"I can't do it!" replied its gunner. "We're ass-up in this goddam trap and I can't traverse the autocannon for shit!"

Tomas found Weasel Two's video feed on one display, and a remote view of it from the Buffalo in another. Weasel Two's rear third showed above the lip of the tank trap. It wasn't going anywhere, and the thin armor on its exposed undercarriage made a prime target for the rebels. Not this moment's problem. At least Weasel Two's ramp had opened. Telemetered data showed Cpl. Nilsson and the rest of his fireteam in the

tank trap, near an end that opened to the drainage ditch on the right side of the road. "Nilsson, go after that missile launcher!"

"Sir, there's an MG in the woods—"

Clayworth fired another burst from the thirteen into the forest, followed by an anti-personnel round from the main gun. The round detonated somewhere amid the pines and firs. The microphones picked up falling trees. Judging from the gunner's scowl and a minced oath at a pop-up window on his display, the round had struck short of the MG. Still, his work had some effect; the MG stayed quiet as Meriwether's team crawled toward the treeline.

"You think I don't know that?" Tomas shouted at Nilsson. "I'm the only doing something about it!"

"Where there's one, there might be two."

"Get moving! Or do you want to hoof back to Navarre with nothing but your rifles for company and rebels chasing you every step?"

A moment of silence followed. "Understood," Nilsson said. His tone made clear his understanding came without approval. Even so, he followed up with orders to his fireteam.

"Badger One, on my way!" shouted someone. Yarborough. From the output of his shilling, Tomas' displays showed the medic ran at a crouch from the Buffalo's open rear hatch.

A microphone picked up another woosh from deep in the woods to the column's right. One of the displays showed another missile approaching the top of its arc.

"More chaff!" Tomas ordered. The hazes above the vehicles thickened. "Buffalo, shut your hatch! Clayworth, keep suppressing the MG! Someone, put fires on that missile site!"

The missile seemed to hover again, yawing as it sniffed for a target. It swept through a wider arc, from Tomas' Badger to the Buffalo. Unlike the first missile, though, it kept yawing as it started down its arc.

"Badger One, this is Badger Two. No sign of hostiles on our

left. We have ordnance to spare for the missile site.”

“*Baptiser le tabernac!*” screamed Lemieux.

Footsteps clanged on the ramp. “I’m here, I’ve got you,” said Yarborough, followed by the muttered words, “Jesus God.”

“Badger Two, go!” Tomas tensed as the missile flexed its fins toward his Badger. Getting closer—

The missile’s fins spasmed. It tumbled in mid-air and detonated twenty meters away. Its armor-piercing projectile launched, leaving a streak across the display as it sailed into the woods to the column’s left.

Small arms fire rattled in the woods to the right. He checked the infantry. Nilsson’s team went toward the treeline in cautious bounds. No sign of rebels in front of them. The small arms fire came from Meriwether’s men, fifty meters into the undergrowth. The rebel MG returned fire, joined by the trilling bursts of rifles fabbed according to Papa Romeo blueprints.

Badger Two slewed off the road to the left and straddled the drainage ditch, the front of its tracks on the gravel, higher than its rear. Its turret traversed to point its main gun in the direction of the missile launches. The barrel of the main gun angled upward, and Badger Two’s slanted orientation gave it an even steeper angle, an even shorter range. Its gunner would try to drop antipersonnel rounds onto the missile launcher from above, not through, the woods.

Badger Two’s gun boomed. The recoil rocked the vehicle and kicked up dust from the road. The barrel made an adjustment and out roared another shell.

“B-one, we need more cover fire,” said Meriwether. “You got the MG coords?”

“Roger,” said Clayworth. “Telemetered in.”

The view beneath the forest canopy had already thinned from thirteen millimeter rounds and antipersonnel shrapnel. Clayworth fired a burst from the thirteen and another shell

from the main gun. A second later, Badger Two fired its main gun at the missile launch site.

"*Criss mange l'os!—tiii...*" Painkiller thickened Lemieux's voice.

The medic apparently forgot his microphone fed into the platoon net. "You'll live, you'll live, now, other man, Jesus God, where do I start?"

Meriwether whooped. "Good shooting, B-one! I make rebel MG operator dead or wounded. The other motherfuckers are pulling away!"

"Prisoners if you can get them!" Tomas said.

"Roger, ell-tee. Come on, team, we going to fuck them up!"

Tomas checked the displays. In front of Nilsson, the display showed flickering probabilities of cee-skinned rebels in the undergrowth. "Rebels are falling back," Nilsson said.

Nilsson's tone of voice had to be insubordinate. Tomas knew it, even if he couldn't hear it. "Bag some prisoners."

"Forgot my net, lieutenant."

"Then use your bare hands! Don't let them slip away!"

Nothing from Nilsson for a moment. Then his voice sounded distant, like he spoke to a man nearby and forgot his microphone fed into the platoon net. No. Nilsson knew. He wanted Tomas to overhear. "They're already taking their lethe capsules. But butterbar says to capture them." He spoke the last sentence in a goofy voice, mocking the order as he relayed it to his men. "Ahead careful. Watch for traps and trip wires." Then he cut the microphone feed.

You insubordinate—but Nilsson had a good point. The rebels might fall back as a ruse to get the infantrymen to hurry forward and blunder into booby traps or preregistered fires. As if to validate Nilsson, bursts of rifle fire came from deep in the woods. The men of Nilsson's fireteam went prone in the undergrowth. A few returned fire in sluggish bursts.

"Something airborne!" called the commander of Badger Two.

Tomas flinched. "Missile? No." He checked his displays. A pillar of light over the horizon to the northwest. "The Papa lander is going back up to orbit."

"What? No, sir, look closer!"

Another display showed probability curves flickering over beating wings. A cee-skinned shape rose from a clearing three hundred meters behind the last missile site. "Unidentified aircraft. Clayworth, the thirteen. Clayworth!"

"Sir?" the gunner said with a flinch. He looked up from the display showing the view ahead of the main gun to another with a wider field of view. "What the hades?" He aimed the thirteen millimeter and fired a few bursts as the unidentified ornithopter darted through the air on pumping wings. He checked the telemetry from the rounds. "Missed."

The unidentified thopter grew smaller. "Keep an eye up," Tomas said to the platoon, "in case that bird comes back."

The unidentified thopter kept going. It shrank to a small dot, then faded out of sight to the south, in the direction of Eastcheap.