

The King's
Pawn

© 2010 by Derek Gurr

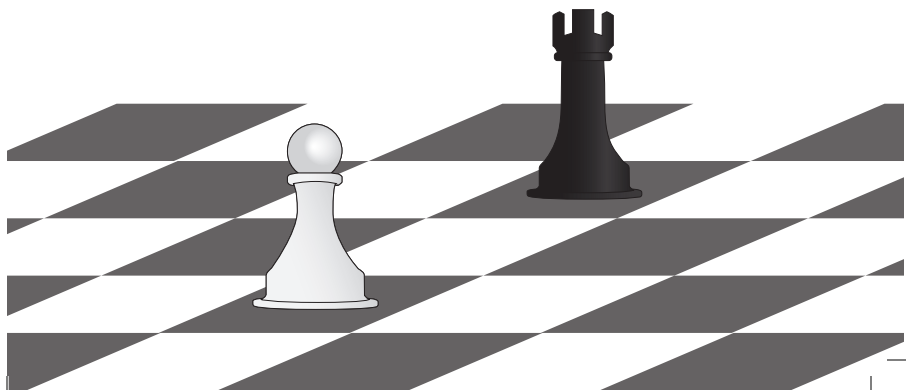
I reserve all rights to this book.

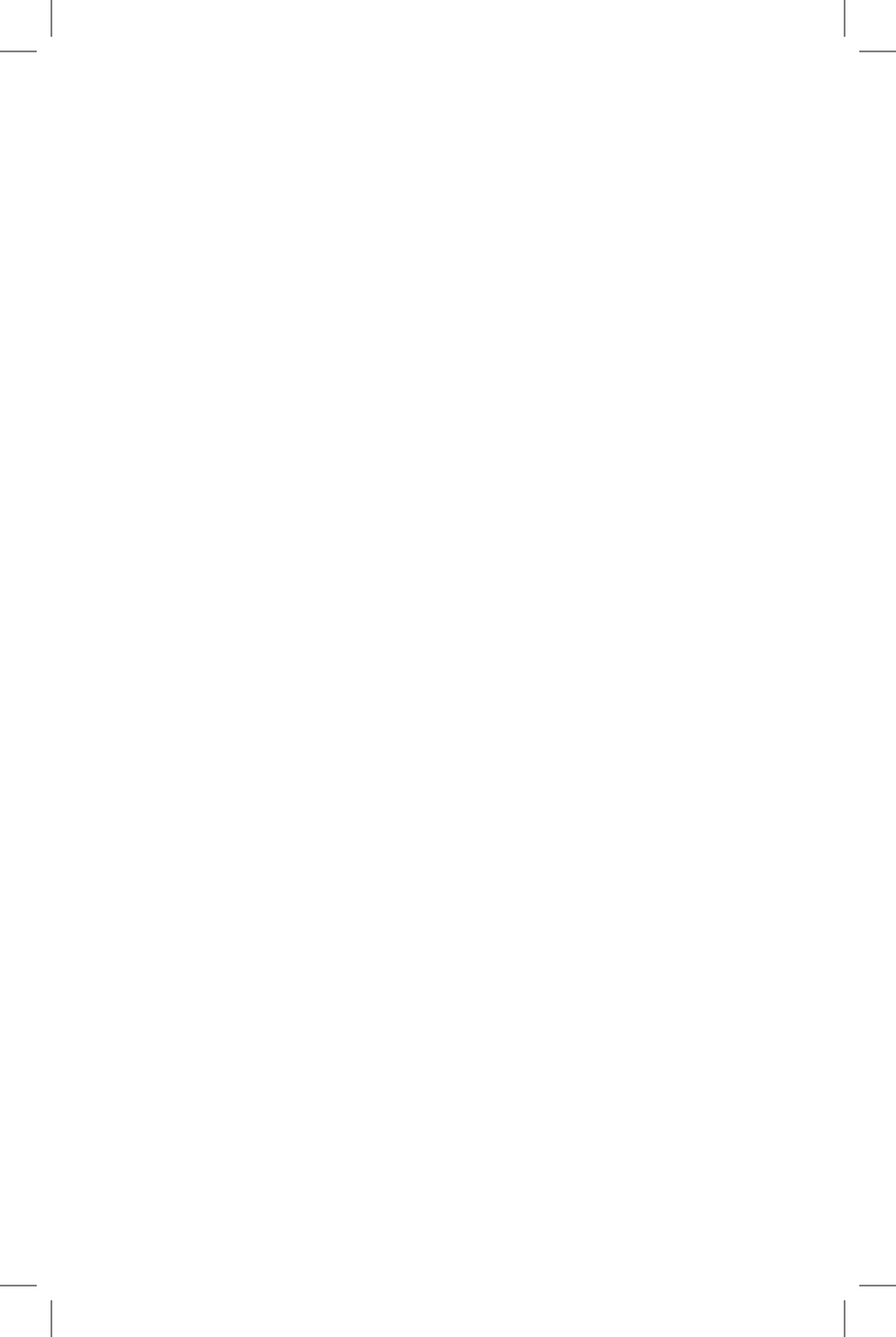
Any and all that try to steal my work shall be subjected to one or more of the following punishments: being kicked, shoved, their noses broken, their eye brows and lashes yanked out, their fingernails pulled off, their arm hair as well, their mouth shall be filled up with soap, and their legs and arms will be stretched to beyond limitation. And I will base my next stupid, nose-picking, pimple-faced, Jar-Jar-Binks-like character on you.

Or I'll just sue you. I think that would be worse.

The King's Pawn

Derek Gurr





Contents

Issues	1
Interactions	15
Interrogations	33
Insights	51
Instruction	72
Intimates	93
Intoxication	112
Inquiries	128
Inspirations	139
Imperials	153
Impediments	173
Intellectual	185
Information	195
Inflammation	209
Intelligence	226
Interest	241
Inhalant	253
Infiltration	270
Inflictions	289
Images	298



For Jason,
whose faith never faltered.



Issues

Wednesday, September 16, 2009
Sugar City, Idaho, Earth, Falvayah

Come on, Gene!" Gwen said. Gene looked up from where he had been staring into his punch. Hands on hips, his twin sister stalked towards him. "We call them 'dances' for a reason. The wall can stand without you holding it up."

Well, it certainly hadn't been *his* idea to come. School dances were not his thing. "How much longer are we staying?" He asked.

"We just got here ten minutes ago!" Gwen exclaimed. "We're not leaving for at least another couple hours, or maybe until the dance is over!"

"When's that?" Gene asked.

"Midnight!" Gwen said. "Now go find a nice girl and ask her to dance with you. You're not completely hopeless looking, you know! Everybody says we look alike which should count in your favor."

"And what do I do if one doesn't want to?"

“Look for another one!” Gwen said, exasperated. “Girls aren’t a minority group. And if someone *does* say no, I’ll deck her.”

“Thanks a lot,” Gene said sarcastically. Gwen turned to her left and walked up to a boy. Soon the two were dancing. Gene watched his sister, envying her courage.

Gene was short and skinny. He had turned fifteen last February and was enduring the uncomfortable stage at which boys mature to become men. This kind of situation made him feel awkward. He disliked the limelight which made his ability to be overlooked a great advantage.

In the middle of the gym, a floating holographic pad portrayed a popular band called “Almost Sane.” A group of screaming girls danced below them, following the moving pad as it glided around the gym.

After standing through two more dances, Gene was surprised to feel a light tap on his shoulder. When he turned around, there was a pretty girl he didn’t recognize standing before him.

“Would you like to dance with me?” the girl asked.

Why would she ask him? He almost felt inclined to politely refuse—declare he was exhausted, or that his leg was broken or perhaps his lung was wet and he had contracted a rare Karchian disease or something. Then again, she might feel bad if he did so. Gene also feared the wrath of his sister if he said no. She had the almost supernatural ability of finding out about everything he did.

The year before, a girl named Jamie had sat at his side at lunch. The two were friends and in one moment, Jamie reached over to admire the ring on Gene’s hand. Gene had almost jumped off his seat, being extremely startled. The situation was highly embarrassing in and of itself but it had become even more so when Gwen found out. Within

the hour, she had located him and reprimanded him for not having taken advantage of the situation.

But that didn't do much to improve his current problem. With no other solution presenting itself, Gene reluctantly consented, "Sure."

The girl was polite. Gene found out her name was Adriane and she lived a little north of him. She spent her time talking at him while Gene spent his time trying to think of things to talk about—that, and hoping she couldn't feel the sweat on his hand. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries resulted from the dance and when the song was over, he said thanks and she walked away.

Feeling a little better that he could now say that he had danced that evening, he turned to retreat again to the snack table. But to his slight disappointment, he felt another tap on his right shoulder, making him jump. Vera was a little less polite, only saying, "Let's dance." She then grabbed Gene's other hand and began leading him back onto the dance floor. The second dance passed about the same as the first. Suspecting this would be his last dance for the evening, he also said goodbye to Vera.

After Vera came Jane, Lisa, Brittney, Leah, and Sandra.

Finally, following a short dance with Ruth, a wiry blond girl, Gene darted towards the snack table, picked up a cookie and another glass of punch. Adopting the best "I'm-eating-don't-bother-me" expression he could muster, he walked towards the chairs sitting around the edge of the auditorium. Although the punch seemed to be nothing more than water mixed with food coloring, he was grateful for whatever he could get his hands on.

Sitting down in a chair, he noticed Ruth was talking to

his sister who was standing nearby. Gwen shoved what looked like a couple bills into her hand. Gene moved closer to listen. “. . . just a really, really quiet guy,” Ruth was saying. “If I were you, I’d be worried about him.”

“Why do you think I brought him here?” She said. “He never talks to anyone anymore. Ever since what happened he has been so shut up. I was hoping he’d open up a bit but he seems even worse than normal.”

“I sit two seats behind him in math, and we also have current issues together but I don’t think he recognized me!” Ruth said. “I hardly ever see him talk.”

That’s not really fair, Gene thought. I was pretty sure she looked familiar. . . .

“Do you know anyone else?” Gwen asked. “I don’t want him to sit there at the—where’d he go?” Gwen gazed about the dimly lit gym. Gene ducked out of sight as Gwen said, “Probably taking another trip to the bathroom.”

Gene was forced to wait a moment at the door while a girl said viciously to her boyfriend how much she felt neglected by him when he went to Anna’s house to work on their biology homework together. He responded that his teacher had put them together in a homework group. Gene happened to know that the groups had been chosen by the students themselves (he was a member of the same class), but apart from this had no interest in their soap opera. He cleared his throat loudly and they made room for him to sneak by. After jumping the table which served as a blockade, he made a beeline to the orchestra classroom.

As usual, it had been left unlocked. Barbara Giles, the student TA, often brought her boyfriends in to have a make-out session. He made his way into one of the small practice

rooms and closed the door. Somehow the orchestra teacher had managed to cram a piano into each of the tiny practice rooms. The room was cramped. The piano was likely over fifty years old, if not more than a hundred. Gene began to play.

Ten years ago, his mother had lined Gene and his sister up with their neighbor to receive piano lessons. The poor woman had labored long over the two of them. Finally, two years ago, something had clicked with Gene. Where as before, he had rarely touched the piano, suddenly he found he couldn't live without it. As far as Gene knew, it couldn't be explained. Not only had he begun to love music, but the thought of not being able to produce it on the piano frightened him. Ever since, he had hungered for more.

The music he played wasn't perfect. He couldn't sight-read a piece flawlessly on his first try like Gwen. Gene wasn't sure that he would want to do that. Gene would work at a song for three months, striving with each note and phrase to manipulate it into a sound that pleased him. Still, he could only *almost* get it perfect. That was the best that he'd known. Others that he knew could pick up the same piece and play it technically perfect on their first try. Yet Gene preferred working at it.

Whether it was minutes or hours that he played, he didn't know. But he felt more at ease, more *peaceful* than he had been for a while. Playing made him feel as though he were creating a world where he could be understood. Checking his watch, he saw that it was almost approaching ten o'clock. Wondering how the time had passed so swiftly, he made his way back to the gym and the dance. Poking his head through the door, he was soon able to spot Gwen at

the other end of the gym. Judging by the smile on her face, he concluded that she hadn't missed him. Gene turned, not knowing where he'd go. Maybe he'd walk home. It wasn't more than a mile and he could use the exercise. By the door he saw a peculiar man in an orange suit was trying to get into the dance. His red hair was long and braided.

"I've just got to find my boy and take him home," the man was saying.

"Sorry bud, you need to pay for the ticket and show me student ID," the girl at the ticket table said.

"Take the money, I just want to get in!"

"No student ID, no entry," the girl said, chewing her gum with even more commitment. After the man groaned, she said, "Dude, I don't make the rules."

Gene stumbled out into the night. A short burst of wind made him wish he'd followed his mother's counsel to bring a jacket. Pausing for a moment, he gazed up into the sky. Compared to all of the stars that hung in the universe above him, Gene Lee was small and insignificant. Perfectly content to be a nobody in the middle of nowhere, with no significance to anybody, Gene stuffed his hands in his pockets and began the walk home.

Thursday, September 17, 2009

Gene dipped his hands into the wet paint added another splotch of red to the canvas. Mrs. Turner had announced with great satisfaction that today's advanced art class would be a trip back to kindergarten. There would be no brushes, knives, or rags, only paint, fingers and hands.

"Don't paint anything reasonable," Mrs. Turner had told

them. "I want you to paint the world from the eyes of a five year old!"

At his left, a Brittany Butters had painted a yellow smiley face and was adding bright reds, pinks, greens, and yellows as a background. To his right, Clint Vandernaker was painting something unrecognizable. Gene was trying to paint his family. He had already painted his sister, himself, and his mother, but hesitated as he considered adding his father. Dad had been his best friend for a long time, but could he paint him into the family now?

"Gene, that's awesome!" Clint exclaimed, leaning over to look at his painting. "Who are your two girlfriends?"

"It's my sister and Mom," Gene replied without energy.

"That's cool. Do you like mine?"

"What is it?"

"Story time. So, when I was in second grade, I always had dreams about dogs that ate people food. My teacher taught our class one day that stuff about how dreams come true if we want them to. Well, my birthday had just gone by and my Dad gave me like 15 bucks. So I convinced my Dad to take me out and I bought one of those super size pizzas with *all* the toppings on them. When we got home, I guess my Dad thought I was going to share it with them. He left the kitchen for a moment and I gave it to the dog. Pro'bly the best meal he ever ate! Mom wasn't so happy about that though. . . ."

"So, that's a dog eating a pizza?" Gene asked, wondering why he couldn't have just said that.

"Basically," Clint said.

"That's nice," Gene said and turned back to his own canvas. He sized it up critically. It was ugly. The colors

meshed together badly, it was unrealistic, the proportions were wrong, their faces didn't look anything like their real-life counterparts—except perhaps Gwen who looked like an oversized lollipop.

The morning had been slow. Gene had woken up early to get away from home before Gwen woke up and had pretended to be asleep when she got home just after midnight. He hoped that he had either averted his sister's inevitable rebuke completely or at least staved off the brunt of it.

Mrs. Turner was making rounds to look at the students' work. Although he knew she was coming, Gene started when she came up from behind and said, "I like your family portrait, Gene."

"That makes one of us."

"Why do you think I gave this assignment?"

"I dunno."

"Time to start cleaning up!" she announced to the rest of the class. She motioned for him to stay where he was as other students noisily started washing their hands and cleaning up the area around their canvases. "Gene, I want to tell you something. When I was a little girl, maybe seven or eight years old, I loved flowers. I pressed the soft petals up to my cheek and stuck my nose inside of every one of them. I helped my grandmother garden her yard every day.

"One day I was smelling a flower, and a bee came out and stung me. I guess I'm allergic to bee stings so I won a trip to the hospital that day. I couldn't show my face in public for a couple weeks, I was so embarrassed by the way my face looked. After that, I couldn't stand to look at flowers again much less touch them for years. I developed a mortal fear of

flowers of all things.”

“What does that have to do with the assignment?”

“How long has it been since you stopped loving to paint?” Mrs. Turner asked. “And is it the canvas’s fault?”

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with finger-painting,” Gene said.

“I’ll leave that one for you,” Mrs. Turner said. She turned as Alicia Hillstop tapped lightly on her shoulder and became absorbed in other things.

Gene quickly cleaned up his mess and finished just as the bell rang. As the students flew out the door to the lunch lines, Mrs. Turner called out, “See you all on Monday!”

Gene walked out into the bustling school hallway of Desert Crown High School. Most of it was fairly new. Construction on the school had begun several weeks before the Weechoo delegation had visited Earth over thirty years ago. When Weekeechee made their intentions for war known, construction on the school immediately ceased while Earth focused its efforts on building a fleet to contest the mighty Weechoo Empire. Five years ago, construction had resumed on the school and it had been completed a year later.

Lunch break was never enjoyable for Gene. *The greater the number of people, Gene thought, the lower the collective I.Q.* Gene stood ten minutes in the lunch line. As he went to sit down, a man walked into him, their lunches spilling across the floor. Gene muttered an apology as the two quickly gathered the spilled food and loaded it onto their trays. Feeling a little annoyed now, Gene moved towards a small table in the corner of the cafeteria.

Just as he sat down and pulled out a book, Gene heard his name being called. “GENE!”

Glancing up, he saw Clint approaching him. *Why can't people just let me eat in peace?* He asked himself, concentrating on his food and pretending he hadn't heard him. To Gene's disappointment, Clint plopped down in the seat across from him. "Hi Gene!"

"Oh, hi Clint."

"Have you done your homework for current issues?"

"Not yet."

"Can you believe it!" Clint exclaimed. "Five pages on the AFP! The guy is such a jerk."

"Yeah, he is."

A curiously long silence followed. Clint finally broke it by saying, "Nice weather we've been having. Mid-eighties in September!"

"Yeah, weird," Gene answered.

For a minute or two, Clint sat and played with the corn with his spoon, taking a bite or two.

"Do you want your apple sauce?" Clint asked quite suddenly.

Gene shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll give you my cookie for the apple sauce."

"You can have it," Gene said, standing up and dropping the apple sauce onto his tray. "I'm not that hungry." Gene left the cafeteria feeling a measure of shame. After all, Clint had never given Gene a reason to dislike him. He just felt like being alone.

"Anything interesting happen at school today?" Mom asked when Gene and Gwen entered the kitchen. She placed a half dozen carrots into the laser slicer which left them in nicely-shaped, half-inch cubes. A projection pad sitting in front of her displayed a holographic, three-dimensional

image of a man giving the news.

"No," Gene answered, sitting down at the kitchen table and pulling out his math.

Gwen apparently had a more interesting day. "Lydia told me her math teacher, Mrs. Gooch went into labor in her class period. Luckily, her husband was in the classroom. Bringing her flowers, actually—isn't that *sweet?! So he took her to the hospital. Also, Milo Collister asked me out.*"

"And what did you tell him," Mom asked, somewhat sternly.

"Dih, *no!*" Gwen answered.

Mom beamed. "Very good"

"He has serious acne issues. It wasn't even a temptation this time." Mom scowled, apparently wishing her motivation had been a bit different. Gwen went on. "Last period, Clint Vandernaker just up and collapsed while giving his book report."

"Clint fainted?" Gene asked, perking up slightly.

"Yeah, the teacher thought it was just stress, but an ambulance ended up coming for him. Oh, we got the results of our math test back. I got a 'B.'"

"Nice job," Mom said. "Have you got yours back yet Gene?"

"Yeah, it was only an 'A-.'" Gene said, sounding dejected.

"Oh, come on!" Gwen exclaimed. "You were the second-best in the class. Mr. Wheeler told me so."

"Mr. Wheeler just up and told you my grades?" Gene asked, sounding slightly put out. The "second-best" status didn't surprise him though.

"Of course not, I asked, duh. . . ."

"My grades are none of your business!"

“Gene, are you packed for Friday’s camp with the scouts?” Mom interrupted.

“Yeah,” Gene replied. “I did it yesterday afternoon.”

“Very good. . . .” Gene and his sister fell silent as their mother’s attention had become very suddenly focused on Mitch Bradford, the national news anchor. The man had dark brown hair, chemically white teeth, and ebony suit. What annoyed Gene more than his “too-clean” appearance was his tendency to smile no matter what he was talking about. Though the smile wasn’t a problem when talking about a crippled child regaining the use of his legs, flashing all of your teeth when describing an armed robbery was just dumb. Gene couldn’t help listening he worked on his calculus homework.

“. . . Ashley Hendenhauser heads the negotiating team and feels optimistic that a peaceful solution will be reached soon,” Bradford was saying.

A curly red-haired woman appeared on the pad with thick black rimmed glasses and a pink and orange striped suit. Next to him, Gene heard Gwen giggle at the color combination. “I’m confident that Monday’s conference went very well. Great strides were made towards increasing the understanding between our two very diverse cultures. We are making preparations for another peace conference in Lagenna in a couple weeks.”

“Gene, is that over-grown hippie still giving you problems?” Mom asked him. Gwen giggled again.

“No, Mr. Wayne treats me just like the other kids,” Gene lied.

“I might pull you from that class anyway,” Mom mumbled. “He didn’t treat me very professionally.”

"You didn't either Mom," Gwen pointed out.

Mom smiled, "Yes, but I wasn't being a professional in that moment, just a worried parent."

Gwen rolled her eyes as Mitch Bradford flickered back onto the pad. "However, fleet generals seem to be pessimistic about the conferences. In a public statement made this morning, they said, 'Nilats, President of Imperial Karch, has not given us any reason to deem him trustworthy,' and that citizens should, 'be prepared for war.'

"Meanwhile, since President Hoffman's surprise turnabout announcement last Wednesday, many of his Traditionalist supporters have backlashed. Due to his strict stance on other Traditionalist positions, he hasn't gained the respect nor support of the Modernist base to counter it. . . ." Bradford said.

"Politicians," Mom muttered, annoyed. "They can never keep a straight position. At least that overgrown hippie is consistently wrong on everything."

"Most teachers are," Gwen added.

"Gwen, Gene," Mom said quite suddenly. "You're hardly getting any of your homework done. Move to a spot where you won't be distracted."

Gene moved his math to his bedroom, but his mind was far away from his work. When the Falvayahn Independence War began in 2077, President O'Hara had reinstated the draft. If war came again, Gene would be old enough for the draft in three years. Gene wasn't particularly eager to enter the military, but he'd do it. His mother had encouraged her two children to consider the military ever since they were little children, but had lately seemed to give up on the idea not sensing any interest in either of them.

What truly frightened Gene was the scary fact that Earth was less than a day's journey from what could very well be the front line. If the front lines fell, Falvayah would be in grave danger.

Interactions

Friday, September 18, 2009

Gene crawled out of the dark hallway into the uncomfortably bright bedroom. The small E-gun in his pocket seemed to be growing increasingly heavy as he went. Why he had retrieved it from the gun cabinet he didn't know, but he felt like he needed it. *What am I doing?* Gene thought, scared. The drunk man was yelling angrily at another person on the Projectorphone, brandishing threats.

Not sparing so much as a glance at the man's face, Gene crept past him toward the bed at the other end of the room. Placing a violently trembling hand into the brown paper bag, he pulled out a reddish-tinged bottle and replaced it with a different bottle. Hopefully the drunk man wouldn't notice. Turning silently around, he began crawling across the room again. Suddenly a hand grabbed his right upper arm and jerked him violently around. "What do you think you're doing?"

Gene attempted to break free, but the man's grip was too strong. "You've already had four bottles of—"

"Give it to me, NOW!" the man pulled out a knife.

"Dad, it's me, your son!" Gene almost sobbed.

"NOW!"

"In the other," Gene croaked. "—other bottle there's something that c-can help cure you of your addiction."

Frank Bordeaux, Gene's father, turned around, grabbed the bottle on the bed, and smashed it against Gene's leg. Gene cried out in pain. Blood dampened his jeans as Bordeaux lifted him by his shirt. Brandishing the knife he said. "*Give it to me!*"

To his father's surprise, a fiery look of defiance lit Gene's eyes. Gene kicked his father where he knew it would hurt the most. Bordeaux dropped Gene to the floor. Unfortunately, Gene drew the E-gun too late. A moment later his father's knife flashed and Gene braced himself as he watched the knife slicing the air as though in slow motion.

Gene felt a stinging jab of pain in his abdomen as he sat bolt upright in bed, his body drenched in sweat. It was the nightmare again. He had relived the awful dream repeatedly since it had happened that cold night in February. For several minutes, Gene sat, too scared to make another attempt at sleeping. Thankfully, he was able to wake himself up before experiencing the end. The trauma was permanently etched into his memory.

Gene glanced at the clock which read 2:13 a.m. Seeing that he wouldn't sleep again that night, Gene moved to his desk to finish up his essay. When he sat down, though, he didn't immediately pick up his tablet, but instead spent several moments looking around the room.

There were three large paintings hanging upon his walls—all painted by himself. Gene had at one time loved to paint, but had stopped after the night he had just dreamed about. He had even taken down the family portrait his father had painted two years ago. To see his father's smiling face looking down at him, mocking him, was too much for him to bear. Frank Bordeaux was now in prison where he belonged.

Looking back down at his desk, he realized his essay was waiting. The tablet was soon in his hands as he began to write his essay. He tried to be careful to keep his opinion neutral. If it was biased to Wayne's liking, when his mother read it she would be displeased. On the other hand, if Wayne didn't like it, he would likely fail the assignment.

Gene Lee

Mr. Wayne

Current Issues

18 Sept. 2099

The Alliance of Free Powers

The Alliance of Free Powers was formed in 2084. Its founding members (Erus, Yevrus and Earth) wanted to formalize their allegiance to each other. The Three-Month War had awakened the three nations' awareness of the dangers in the universe. The Kingdom of Rotser and Imperial Karch were both considered threats that could strike at any time.

The idea of forming an alliance was presented to leaders of Falvayah, Nos Noj, Erus, Yevrus, Lagenna, Lenoserp, and Desnirus directly after the war with Weekeechee. Earth, Erus, and Yevrus had fought so successfully against Weekeechee and Rotser that a more permanent bond was suggested.

A year after the end of the Weechoo War, Karch declared war against the three. Hence the Three-Month

War took place. Karch backed out of the war because of how little progress it had made. The month that the war ended, Earth, Erus and Yevrus created the AFP. Three years after its formation, Desnirus joined in order to gain its protection and in return contributes most of the resources used by the AFP (O'Donnell, 222).

Lagenna associates closely with Erus, but declined the opportunity to join the AFP, preferring to remain sovereign

A piercing scream filled the air before Gene could complete the sentence. Gene recognized it immediately as his sister's voice. A moment later, a klaxon-like wail sounded through the home's speaker system: The burglar alarm.

Gene instantly ran out of his room and down the hall to his sister's room. Gene's mother arrived at the same instant, an E-gun in her hand. Quickly she flung open the door to Gwen's room and assessed the situation. Gwen was sitting unharmed in her bed but a figure was sitting on her window sill preparing to jump. Mom raised her weapon as the man dropped to the ground.

Mom sprinted to the window but by the time she stuck her head out of it, the man had rounded the corner of the house and was gone. Mom walked back into the room and addressed the house computer system, "Allan, contact the police and report burglary. Send an officer."

A few hours later, Commander Lee excused the police out the front door. The police thoroughly questioned all three Lees. Mom indicated for Gene and Gwen to follow her into the living room once more. Gene chose a seat in the wooden chair sitting in the northwest corner of the room

while his sister plopped down in the sofa. Mom remained standing. "Gwen, are you sure that he was on his way *in*?"

"I've already told the police that half a dozen times!" Gwen exclaimed, exasperated. "The man was walking straight at the door!"

"Isn't it possible he was walking towards *you*?" Mom questioned. "Your bed is right next to the door."

"I really doubt it," Gwen answered. "Right when I screamed, he looked at me. He looked surprised. I don't think he noticed I was there."

Not willing to give up on her theory, Mom pressed further. "I don't buy that. Wasn't your purse sitting on the desk right below the window?"

"I did wonder about that," Gwen admitted. "Not like I have any money after last. . . ." Gwen's voice trailed off as she realized what she was saying. "Week," she finished awkwardly. Gene suspected she was referring to her paying girls to come and dance with him the previous night.

"Maybe he was looking for something specific," Gene suggested, speaking for the first time. "Like drugs from the medicine cabinet."

"Doubtful," Mom said. "If you wanted drugs, you'd go to an elderly home. Ms. Harris next door probably has more pain reliever in her medicine cabinet than the pharmacist. Are you sure you didn't find anything missing?"

"Mom, I'm almost sure he was on his way in," Gwen said.

"I would've heard or seen him if he had come past my room," Gene said.

"What were you doing up?" Mom asked testily.

"I was working on my report for Current Issues," Gene responded instantly.

“But I saw you go to bed earlier this evening,” Gwen charged.

“Well, I woke up,” Gene said simply.

Mom thought for a moment then said, “You two had best make the most of the nighttime you have left.”

“Mom, since both Gene and I are so psychologically stressed, perhaps we should stay home from—”

“*Goodnight Gwen,*” Mom said curtly. Gwen took the hint and started upstairs with Gene but Mom stayed standing stoically in the living room, her face serious.

“Weekeechee was a dictatorship under the brutal leadership of Shah Kishal,” Mr. Wayne, Gene’s Current Issues teacher, was explaining to his class. “The nations of Falvayah, Erus and Yevrus (which incidentally were the founding members of the Alliance of Free Powers) found it a difficult to put down Kishal because of the overwhelming grip he had on both his military and the people of his nation.”

In front of him, Wilbur Bruin snored loudly. Mr. Wayne didn’t seem to notice this as he continued on with his lecture. As usual, Gene remained silent, listening but not participating. Mr. Wayne was a very intense teacher. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up and the class could see the veins bulging on his ancient arms. Wayne’s fellow teachers were constantly worried he’d break a blood vessel while attacking the ethics of the draft. His name was a familiar sight in the *Sugar City Daily*, frequently writing letters to the editor. The wall behind him was devoted to a political map of the known universe at Earth level. The wall

to Gene's right had large maps of Falvayah, the Moon, Mars, and several other planets in Falvayah. Other than that the classroom was rather plain.

Wayne had been adamant about his support for peace in the impending war. For the past three months, Karch had been threatening to invade Lagenna, a nation not a member of the Alliance of Free Powers but closely related to Erus. While Erus had declared that it would defend Lagenna at all costs, they had informed Falvayah's leaders on Earth that they needn't be involved. Up until the previous Wednesday, Ralph Hoffman, President of Falvayah, had stood staunchly by Erus in its commitment to keep Lagenna free. However, Wednesday afternoon, Hoffman apparently caved in under political pressure and withdrew his support.

Gene's mother had been enraged by this. To her, standing idly by while watching Falvayah's allies go to war was betrayal of a friend.

Unfortunately for Gene, parent-teacher conference had been the next afternoon. When it was Mom's turn to see Mr. Wayne, the other parents witnessed a better debate than any they had ever seen on the news. Gwen had eventually become so tired of listening to the debate that she had walked home. Since then, Wayne had seemed to take more notice of the scrawny boy that sat quietly three rows from the front. Gene had seriously hoped that Wayne wouldn't deduct points for the sparks that had passed between himself and Gene's mother.

"Mr. Bordeaux," Mr. Wayne said, looking up from his roll at Gene. "Tell me why Weekeechee desired to use Earth as a base?"

"Sir, it's Lee," Gene said. "My surname changed in July."

“Well?” Mr. Wayne asked impatiently, not listening to what Gene said.

“Weekeechee formed an alliance with Karch. Weekeechee was supposed to assist in the battle against Lagenna.”

“LAHgenna, not LUHgenna,” Wayne corrected, not hiding the disappointment in his voice. “But President O’Hara wouldn’t allow Kishal to build a base on Earth, so war commenced. By virtue of luck, we pulled through. By luck we now control not only our solar system, but everything that was once the empire of Weekeechee. We even managed to preserve a third of his mighty fleet, making Falvayah a more formidable foe.

“Who can tell me the origins of the sycophantic name of our nation, Falvayah?” However, the bell rang before anyone could fail to answer. Wayne struggled to finish his last sentence above the sounds of people packing up. “Next time your reports on the Alliance of Free Powers are due. If I find that any of you have misspelled Erus or Yevrus I’ll mark your papers down twenty points.”

School was slow again that day, but Gene managed to survive. Before he knew it, he found himself excitedly pulling on his scout shirt. At the same moment, Gene heard a knock on his bedroom door and let his mom in. She sat down on his bed. “Gene, I’m having second thoughts about this trip. I want you to stay home.”

Gene was devastated. “Mom, I’ve been looking forward to this trip for weeks! It’s the first I’ve been on since winter!”

“Yes, but I’d like you to stay home this time. For your

safety.” Mom tried to make her tone sound natural, but Gene almost detected a hint of fear.

“Is this about the break-in this morning?” Gene questioned immediately. “Mom, no one is going to rob us up in the canyon.”

“Gene,” Mom said slowly. “This morning I was informed that your father escaped from prison. I’m concerned for your safety.”

“There’s no need to be,” Gene insisted.

Mom grimaced. “Gene, you’re old enough to make your own decisions. If you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

Gene thought for a moment before saying, “Mom, I *really* want to go. I promise I’ll be safe.”

Mom seemed slightly disappointed, making Gene feel guilty. “Fine. Follow me then.” Gene pulled on his large camping backpack and slipped out the door behind his mother. Commander Lee led him to a cabinet where she opened a drawer and pulled out an E-gun.

“No, Mom,” Gene insisted, knowing what his mother wanted. “I’m not touching one ever again.”

“Listen to me Gene,” Commander Lee said. “If you’re going to go, you need to take this.”

“You said—”

“No, Gene. This is the condition.”

“No—”

“If you’re in danger, I comma. . . .” Mom stopped herself from reverting back to the language she used as a first officer in the military. “Gene, if you ever find yourself in a dangerous situation, use this for your defense. Keep it in your pocket at *all* times. Right now it has the safety lock on so it won’t blast your leg off in the car.”

Gene took the weapon with a look of utmost revulsion on his face. He pocketed it as his mother followed him outside where his Scoutmaster was waiting in his skycar. As Gene climbed into the vehicle, Mom called out, “Gene, tuck in your shirt. You’re a boy *scout* not a boy slouch.”

Gene heard laughter in the car about this comment but grudgingly obeyed. The back of the skycar was like a small circular room, with seats and windows around the sides. An opening in the front allowed entry into a smaller room known as the “Pit” where the driver and navigator supervised the controls. Tom, Curtis, and Fredrick (or “Freddy” if you didn’t want your nose smashed back between your ears) were sitting on Gene’s left as he walked through the door in back. On his right were Andrew and Don.

Tom, Curtis, and Freddy tended to be louder than the other two occupants of the car, so Gene took a seat next to Andrew. In the Pit, Gene’s scoutmasters, David Lewis and Robert Valentine, sat waiting for Gene who hastily pulled on his seatbelt. Once he had finished, Mr. Valentine called out, “Everyone in? Excellent!”

Mr. Lewis then spoke to the computer, “Navigation, destination Granite Flattes, Utah!”

“Freddy, where were yuh after school today,” Tom was asking. “Thought we were goin’ t’see *The Advance*. Was fifteen minutes late waitin’ for yuh to meet me.”

“Johnson gave me after-school detention,” Freddy said through gritted teeth. “An hour of scrapin’ gum off the desks.”

“What did you do to get detention?” Gene wondered aloud, not realizing he was speaking.

"Why, Lee?" Freddy sneered. "D'you want one? I do have connections."

"Bet Lee's never had detention before," Curtis joined in. "Suck-up."

Gene felt something hot shoot down his spine, but let the comment pass. Andrew and Don glanced at them for a moment but didn't say anything. Gene swivelled his chair around so he could look out the window, losing track of the conversations going on around him.

Within an hour, the small skycar was speeding through a tunnel of tall green pines. Gene wished Mr. Lewis would slow down so the trees wouldn't whiz by so swiftly. Another five minutes passed as Gene stared out at what he believed to be among the most beautiful scenes on earth. Up where nothing mattered. School was far away. The threatening war was almost as distant.

The sky car came to a jerking stop.

"We're here!" Mr. Valentine said quite unnecessarily after getting off. Raising his cane like a sword, he started giving directions. "Unpack the car and set up the tents! Those three over there in between those trees. The other one can go closer to the fire. The one by the fire will be for us old folks."

"Mr. Lewis, can't me, Curtis and Tom be in the same tent?" Freddy asked.

"Nope," Mr. Lewis answered stubbornly. "Two people per tent. Everyone's going to have half the job building the tent."

"Please!" Tom begged.

"No!" Mr. Lewis said unwaveringly.

Gene instantly realized the problem. No doubt Andrew and Don would be sharing a tent, but whoever was left out

of the second tent would be forced to share with Gene. After refusing several bribes and pleas, Curtis, Freddy, and Tom seemed to register defeat and give up. Obviously they hadn't learned as Gene had that the more Mr. Lewis was pushed, the more he pushed back. They held an arm wrestling tournament. The loser (who turned out to be Curtis) would have to share a tent with Gene. As a result, Curtis was very grumpy for the remainder of the evening, with Gene especially. Mr. Valentine aggravated the situation when he chastised Curtis for not having helped Gene set up the tent.

Dinner was, in typical camping fashion, composed of hotdogs, soft drinks, and potato chips. The campers ran out of hotdogs surprisingly fast. Part of the problem was attributed to the fact that Mr. Valentine had forgotten to bring his half of the hotdogs. However, Mr. Valentine couldn't take all of the blame. Andrew lost three hotdogs to the fire when Don tripped over his roasting stick.

They spent the evening learning knots. Knot-tying was about the only thing Gene could do with confidence. Having passed off all of the knots he was supposed to learn for the evening, he began to watch the others. Curtis was struggling with the clove hitch. Finally he threw down the rope in frustration and exclaimed "Why would I ever want to tie up a stinkin' horse?"

"It's a knot that all Boy Scouts should know!" Mr. Valentine snapped indignantly who, up to this point, had been trying to help. Then he turned to Freddy who was trying to demonstrate the bow line.

"Curtis," Gene said. Maybe if he helped him, Curtis would try to tolerate Gene. "Just make two loops in the rope

and put the right one on top of the other, like this.” Gene showed him, then placed the loops over the end of a pole. Predictably, Curtis pretended to ignore him. Gene gave up, wondering why he had tried so hard to come. Five minutes later, however, Gene looked back and saw Curtis fumbling with two loops. Even though he was doing it wrong, Gene thought it wise not to try to correct him.

It was nearing midnight when Mr. Lewis and Mr. Valentine seemed to realize the time. It took an additional fifteen minutes to get all six boys in their tents. Gene’s disappointment was two-fold. For one, he’d have to go share a tent with Curtis. Second, he’d managed to sneak away from the rest of the group and was lying on a table in a nearby camp, stargazing. The height of the mountains and the distance from the brightly lit cities provided a spectacular view. The Milky Way seemed especially brilliant tonight. With heavy reluctance, Gene retired to his tent.

Several minutes later, Curtis entered the tent in a cold fury having argued with his scoutmasters once more about the tent arrangements. Acting like he hadn’t heard the fire-breathing menace enter behind him, Gene quietly unrolled his sleeping bag and began to change into his pajamas. As he was folding his pants, however, the E-gun slid out of the pocket hiding it. Gene tried to swipe it back and stuff it in his backpack but Curtis had seen and snatched it.

“Whutchou doin’ with a gun?” he demanded. “You bin carryin’ this ‘round school?”

“No,” Gene said quickly, his mind spinning circles inside his head. He did *not* want Curtis to know why he had

brought it.

“D’you know how powerful this is?” Curtis asked, attempting to conceal the awe in his voice.

“No,” Gene said abruptly.

“Pansy,” he said, a hint of challenge in his voice. When Gene was silent, Curtis continued. “Course you’re familiar with using it, ain’t you?”

“D-don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gene replied slowly. “These were once my cousin’s pants. He must’ve stuck it in his pocket while he was hunting.”

Curtis went on as though Gene hadn’t said anything. “I’ve never shot anyone before. What’s it like?” For the first time Curtis looked at Gene. Gene’s entire frame was quivering.

“D-don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Gene mumbled again. He kept his eyes on the wall of the tent.

“Course you do,” Curtis sneered. “Shootin’ yer drunk dad. Never heard of anyone sink so low. Where you goin’?”

Gene had stood up, still trembling. As he unzipped the tent, he said, “I hear *nature* calling.”

Seconds later, he was outside. Just as he was a few feet away, something hard knocked him in his shoulder.

Turning around, he saw Curtis poking his head out of the tent. The gun lay at Gene’s feet where it had fallen after Curtis threw it. Curtis called out, “Best take that. You might meet a drunk.” Snickering, Curtis zipped the tent back up. Gene snatched up the gun. After checking to make sure the safety lock was still on, he put it in the back pocket of his pajamas.

As he moved farther away from the dying fire, the cold of the night bit him with its piercing teeth. He found a dark

trail, and wandered along it for several minutes. He didn't want to travel too far from camp, just give Curtis a chance to fall asleep. The trees were very still around him. Gene sensed that the air around him was steeling itself for a storm. Looking up, he didn't see any clouds, but that morning the forecast had predicted rain showers for the morning.

Feeling tired, Gene sat down on a log. Absentmindedly, he watched as a skycar cut through the night. Above him Earth's many satellites were gliding across the sky with their peculiar grace. Gene had been in space only once before. He had visited his mother on the *Endeavor*, a destroyer. On the same trip, he was able to tour some of the earliest space vehicles man had made. Looking at some of them, Gene wondered how humans had made it as far as they did. The technology on board was quaint and the conditions extreme. The men that traveled in them must have been brave.

During that same trip, a disaster had happened. A small transport ship was taking passengers from the moon to Mars. According to reports, a terrorist had boarded and set off a bomb on one of the upper levels. The explosion had blasted a hole in the wall. Five people were sucked out into space before the emergency systems could close off the area. Though not frightened of space, Gene had determined to himself that he would probably try to limit his future ventures to solid Earth.

As he pondered, he noticed that the skycar he had first seen moments earlier was landing rather near Gene's camp. *They must be pretty determined campers to arrive this late,* Gene thought. Even though Curtis was surely asleep by now, Gene wished to stay underneath the starlit ceiling.

Nevertheless, he started walking back.

As he was almost back to camp, he heard voices talking to Mr. Lewis. "Uh, Gene's in that tent over there," Mr. Lewis was saying.

Gene heard unzipping sounds and moved to see what was going on. There was a strange woman unzipping his tent. "Gene?" she asked Curtis who looked up groggily from his sleeping bag.

"Gene went to use a tree," Curtis answered back.

Gene walked into camp. "I'm back."

"Gene, your aunt Katy came to see you," Mr. Lewis told him.

"Hi Gene, how are you doing?" the lady said, turning around to him with a warm smile.

"Who are you?" Gene asked. Neither his mother nor his father had a sister named Katy.

"I'm your aunt Katy, darling," Katy answered. "You're such a joker!"

"I don't have an aunt Katy," Gene responded, turning to Mr. Lewis. "I don't know who she is, but she's not my relative."

"Don't be silly," the woman cooed. "Your mother called me to come get you."

"If you're not his aunt, who are you and what are you doing here?" Lewis demanded.

"I'm your aunt!" she cried. "You know me!"

"I've never seen you in my life and I think I would know that better than you," Gene said, completely bewildered.

"Why don't we just call your mother, Gene. Maybe she's your great-aunt or something."

"Grandma's a single-child," Gene said.

"What's going on?" Mr. Valentine asked, crawling from his tent.

"Bob, go give Gene's mom a call," Mr. Lewis told him.

"No Bob, crawl out of your tent with your hands in the air," the woman said, holding an e-gun up to Gene's head. He froze as he felt the tip of the cold weapon touch his cheek.

"What the heck are you doing?" Mr. Lewis demanded. "Curtis, call the police!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the woman said. Gene glanced around and realized that half a dozen armed men had materialized out of no where. "If each and every member of the camp does not come out right now, I will see to it that my soldiers kill all of you. No one will know until tomorrow evening. I'll wait for all five boys to come out from their tents. You come along as well, Bob."

Curtis and Mr. Valentine slowly began to comply. Several men began harassing the tents of the other boys, ordering them to come out.

Gene could hardly think. *What was going on? Was this a joke?* Finally, he managed to splutter one word, "Why?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis, Mr. Brains," the woman replied. "Tie all of them up then take this one to the ship."

Two large men approached him, one of them holding two pairs of ancient handcuffs. One of them cuffed his hands together and the other cuffed his feet. Gene would have screamed, but there was nobody near enough to hear. And even if there were somebody, he doubted they would

just happen to be armed. The two began dragging him to a large skycar. They took him inside and set him on a chair. “What do you want with me,” Gene asked the man who dragged him.

“I want you to shut your trap!” the man snapped back.

“I haven’t done anything to anyone!”

“Listen to the poor widdow boy whine,” the other man mocked.

“If he makes another sound, knock him out,” Gene heard the woman call from behind them.

Gene decided that further attempts to extract information from the men would be futile. They reached the skycar opened a side hatch. Inside was a large box. The two picked him up and dropped him in.

“Please, don’t hurt me!” Gene begged.

“Hey Leonard, that was another sound!” the larger said.

“That’s right!”

The first one punched him in the face and all went dark.

Interrogations

Saturday, September 19, 2009

Gene awoke, hot and frightened. Everything was dark around him. *How could I have been so stupid?* His knees were just inches away from his chin, his body still stuffed inside of a wooden crate.

Where was he being taken too? What did they want with him? Was his family safe? Both scared and sweating, Gene almost resigned himself to a sense of helplessness.

The crate jolted as someone or something picked it up. Gene slid up against the other side of the box. In between his feet, Gene heard a dull thunk as something slid out of his back pocket. It was the E-gun! The object that he loathed with such a passion was now his only hope for freedom. With great difficulty, Gene probed the bottom of the crate with his hands until they felt the small cold object. Grasping it firmly, he tried to remember which button would unlock the safety and allow him to use it.

Just as he was about to push the first button, it felt as though his crate was dropped to the floor. Gene's head, already in pain, was knocked hard against the top of the box. Nearly crying out, Gene was barely able to hold onto the gun. He felt his hands punch a button as he struggled to keep hold of it. The gun gave a small beep: The safety was off. Outside the box, Gene heard footsteps walk away and a door open and shut. He sensed no other movement in the room.

Waiting for what he thought was a full minute, he decided to attempt using the weapon. Aiming the gun as best he could, his fingers tightened on the trigger and he heard a blast. The wooden box made a cracking noise as a hole was burned into the side. Gene could tell without looking that it wasn't large enough.

For half a minute, Gene sat quiet, listening for someone to come running, perhaps to silence him. To his surprise his surroundings were completely silent. Trying to aim the pistol, he squeezed the trigger once more and again the blast echoed around the room. After listening a while longer and still hearing no one, Gene repeated the procedure again and again.

Finally he was able to break the side of the box with his back. Joints snapping and creaking, Gene kicked the box away with both feet and attempted to stand up. This proved unsuccessful due to the cuffs binding his ankles. Praying he wouldn't hit his feet, he sat himself as best he could and pointed the gun toward his feet and fired at the cuffs restraining his ankles. On his first try, he missed and the blast hit the floor in front of him. Seeing that the shot didn't penetrate the floor, Gene guessed that the gun was

on its lowest setting.

Pointing the gun a little lower this time he shot again. Immediately he felt something hot rush past his exposed foot. However, his second shot had hit its mark and he was able to pull his feet away from each other. Gene stood up and looked around. The room was tiny and dark like a cellar. There were large boxes stacked up against one of the walls. The floor where he had been sitting was dented and black where Gene's gunshot had hit it.

The wall opposite of the boxes seemed to have a door. Gene instinctively walked towards it fumbled with the controls. After a few moments, Gene managed to open the door. Light poured into the dark room.

His hands were still bound.

Gene examined the settings on his gun, then sat down on one of the crates still in the room. He activated the voice control with the push of a button then stuck the gun tip up between his legs. Quietly, he commanded computer, "Prepare continuous burst."

"Intensity?"

Gene thought for a moment, then said, "Four."

"Beam length?"

"Eight inches."

The gun beeped quietly for five seconds, then said, "Ready."

"Go ahead."

A green beam leaped out of the gun. His hands trembling, he stretched out the chain and lowered it over the beam. The beam sliced the chain in half. Gene took the gun and carefully cut the cuffs off of his hands and feet. He switched the e-gun back to its normal mode, stood up and walked

out once more.

For some reason, Gene suddenly felt extremely self-conscious. He was standing bare-footed in his pajamas in a brightly-lit hallway. Hours in a hot wooden box had resulted in his clothes becoming damp with sweat and his hair becoming matted. Almost wanting to climb back into the box, Gene decided to grit his teeth and try to find some way out of the building.

As he started walking up the corridor, he began to ponder his circumstances. *Why would anyone want me?* Tom's father owned a small fortune. Why hadn't the note been to him? The Lees lived a fairly comfortable life, but nothing extravagant. One hundred years ago the conditions they lived in would be relative luxury, but now it was the norm.

The corridor came to a juncture a short way ahead. Gene could either turn left or right. Just as he was about to poke his head out into the corridor, Gene heard some footsteps from the right. Not knowing what or who the people were, Gene flattened himself against the wall. Both were talking in a language Gene didn't understand—was it Dutch? To his surprise, the two walked straight past without glancing at him.

Gene noticed with a sense of foreboding that both wore an E-gun on their belts. The buckle on the black belt was one of the strangest he'd ever seen. There was an oval ring with a horizontal bar crossing near the top of it. Then about halfway in between the top and bottom of the ring there were two bars jutting out from the left and right side, then two more poking up from the bottom. Perhaps even more interesting was the position of the belt. On one man, it was

wrapped around his suit coat at about the waistline and on the other it was wrapped around his T-shirt. *If these are guards*, Gene thought. *They sure have nerdy outfits.*

Being far more bold than he thought he ought to be, Gene poked his head out into the corridor and checked both ways. Seeing no one but the two guards to his left, Gene rounded the corner and began to follow. After walking for a while, they turned right up some stairs, then into another corridor. For five more minutes he followed the guards. The building was very odd in design. The walls weren't quite flat but looking down a corridor they appeared to be hexagonal. The layout of the corridors didn't seem to have a pattern to it.

Gene followed the guards down some steps, still a good distance behind them. The stairway turned to the right and continued down leading into a large room. Gene poked his head into the room and was shocked at what he found. It was a control room. This wasn't a building but a ship. About twenty people were scattered around the room performing certain tasks, almost all of them wearing the dweeby belt over their clothes.

In the center of the room was a large, square projector pad displaying what Gene had only seen once before—the ship was breaking free of Earth's atmosphere into space.

To his right, there was a stairway leading up to a higher platform where two men stood, one issuing commands. The man next to him was translating what sounded like several different languages to one that the commander could understand.

"When will we get payed?" someone asked to his left. Gene jumped and looked to a lower platform on his left. A

man with a dragon tattooed to his right cheek stood next to a woman Gene recognized—the woman who had abducted him. He quickly pulled back around the corner.

“We’ll be payed once the boy is safely in Karch’s hands,” the man said with a high, nasally voice. “A good chunk of that will be yours. It might be enough for me to retire.”

“You take too much pleasure out of this business to retire,” the woman cooed.

“That, and my blasted wife spends all of it on clothes to stretch onto herself.”

“You could get divorced you know. . . .”

Gene had better things to do than listen to this. Peeking back at the commander, his jaw dropped. He had seen the man only days earlier. The commander was wearing an orange suit and had long, red, braided hair. It was the man from the dance.

The man in the orange suit waved his hand in what looked to be some kind of assenting gesture. A young, brown-haired woman in an SBN uniform materialized on a large projector pad in front of the screen. “Good evening Mr. Sanders, I’m Lieutenant Jeffery. We have received reason to believe that someone has smuggled goods aboard your vessel.”

“Smuggled goods?” the man in the orange suit (apparently Captain Sanders) questioned. His voice had a heavy accent but was otherwise perfectly clear. “Your people ran everything I brought on board through scanners. I thought you were thorough.”

“We have just received a tip-off that someone saw your ship approached by what seems to have been an unregistered skycar,” the lieutenant said in a “we-mean-

business” tone. “We’d like to search your ship. The items smuggled aboard your ship may be dangerous to your life and the lives of those on board. Shut down your engines. SBN ships will arrive shortly and teams will board your ship. We’ll try to carry out the search as quickly as possible.” Below him, Gene felt a low rumble that felt like engines.

Quiet as the night, Gene slowly moved back around the corner. There was little else he could learn here; lingering wouldn’t find him an escape. But at that precise moment, a man rounded the corridor behind him. He paused for five seconds then began shouting.

In one fluid motion, Gene pulled the gun out of his pocket and fired at the man. Out of pure luck, Gene’s shot hit the man in the chest and he fell to the ground. However, the blast from the gun had definitely been heard in the control room. A loud alarm screamed as Gene fled back down the stairs. Gene slapped his hand onto the control panel for the bridge door. It came sliding quickly down from above.

Where could he run? Knowing he was helpless, he started back up the stairs. He thought he could hear the sound of footfall behind him. He took a right down an intersecting corridor only to find a single soldier running away from him into another corridor. Gene raised his weapon and fired five times, finally catching the man on his last shot. As he ran, he glanced over his shoulder to see if anybody was in pursuit. A squad of men burst out of a hallway.

Gene had reached the end of the corridor and was about to turn into another when he tripped over the man he’d just barely taken out. His gun went flying as Gene smashed into the floor. A shot grazed his neck as he grabbed his gun and

tried to continue forward. However, the soldiers caught up just as he crossed the threshold into the next corridor. One of them held up his gun in a threatening manner, indicating that he should not move. Gene dropped his gun in submission, causing the other soldiers to put down their weapons. The man spoke something that sounded like French to another soldier who said, “What’s your name, boy?”

Panting for a moment, he said, “Gene.” It was at that moment that he glanced up and noticed a door panel to his left. Without thinking, he slammed the man’s arm into panel. Immediately a door came sliding out of the ceiling, knocking the man’s arm down and sealing off the passageway he was in. Gene pushed another button that looked like it would lock the door. Then he picked up his gun once more and continued his escape.

The next corridor was extremely strange in appearance. Twenty ladders climbed up the sides of the walls towards what looked like ten different attic doors. This was his chance to throw them off! He climbed up the third ladder on his right and pushed a button to open the door. Climbing up the ladder further, he found himself in the cockpit of a small ship. Gene couldn’t have planned it better himself.

The window in front of him revealed a large ship bay with what looked like ten to twenty different ships—all small and compact. In front of him, a large bay door was open, inviting Gene’s escape. Guessing this was some sort of escape pod, Gene shut the hatch below him and hurriedly looked for a control to start the ship. Though many of the controls had labels, they were all in different languages. He found a switch labeled “Latches,” which he flipped causing

several loud sounds below him. Not knowing what to do next, he tried several different buttons. After pushing a bright green one, the engines came to life beneath him.

Two sticks sat on either side of him. Each had a button at the end Gene tried pushing the button on his right and the ship rocked forward and went left. Gene looked up out the window and saw a ship entering through the bay doors. In a bit of a panic, Gene pushed the button on his left. This time it spun to his right. Pushing both of them at the same time, the ship leapt wildly around the bay. Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to get the blasted ship to go straight.

Finally Gene got it pointed towards the beckoning door. To his horror, he discovered that it was closing rapidly. He pushed both buttons and the ship sped forward towards it. He couldn't judge whether he'd make it or not.

The doors closed.

Gene's ship went smashing into the door, but didn't penetrate it. The impact was so great that Gene went unconscious.

Gene awoke a second time, leaning against something that felt like a rock. Again his surroundings were completely dark—however this time his body hurt considerably more. Both Gene's arms and legs were both free but he suspected his arms were bruised from the crash. His left arm was especially tender near his wrist. The fact that he wasn't in a box this time did little to comfort him. In fact, he thought he had felt safer in the box. Now there was nothing surrounding him but an empty void. There were no windows, no lights, nor sources of light; Gene couldn't see

his hand in front of him. He could almost feel the darkness that held him bound. Apparently the cords that tied him earlier were unnecessary.

Slowly he became aware of a light dripping. Though he could barely comprehend distance, it seemed to be coming first from a few feet to his right. He reached out his hand yet felt nothing. Barely moments later, he heard more dripping start in front of him. Then more to his left. The noise was deafening yet obnoxiously quiet. After a while, it seemed certain to him that the rhythm had quickened.

Whether he waited there for two minutes, two days, or two weeks, Gene couldn't say. However at one point a high-pitched, obnoxious voice emerged from the darkness—mocking him. He recognized it as the same voice he'd heard in the control room earlier. "So Lee, enjoying your stay?" Gene responded by not saying anything. Whoever it was continued. "You were a tough fish to net, Lee. You did your mother proud. They tried at the dance, but you somehow escaped. The very next day you evaded them yet again. If only you ate all of your lunch instead of sharing half of it with another kid. They had an ambulance waiting ready to pick you up."

It took a moment for Gene to realize that the man was referring to what had happened to Clint. That was right, he had shared his apple sauce with him. Gwen told him how Clint ended up fainting later that day.

"What'd you do with him!" Gene demanded, breaking his vow to silence.

"You would sure like to know that, wouldn't you? The next evening another tried breaking into your home. The security system was easy for him to override. Unfortunately

our intelligence on your home was faulty and your sister's squeals made up for the alarm."

Intelligence on my house? Gene thought. *What's going on?*

"Then they alerted *me*. I was almost able to go on your camp out as a leader, but that didn't work out. I sent Natalya with a team." Again, Gene stayed silent. The man continued once more, "I know what you're asking yourself, your asking, 'how did they know it was me?' Let's just say your dad has a loud mouth."

"Briggs, leave," a harsh voice commanded.

"When do I get my pay?"

"When we are safe in Karch, LEAVE." There was a noise and Gene assumed the man named Briggs had left. The second voice softened and said, "You have something I need."

Gene was surprised; what could *he* have that was so valuable? Trying to act brave he said. "Is that right?"

"Oh, I think you know the answer to that. First, I need to know everything about space tunnels, tell me."

"Space what?" Gene asked, perplexed.

"What is the mind transmission lock code?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Where is the lab where all of the chips were created?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't play games with me, Gene Samuel Lee." His tone was neither angry nor loud, but the danger in his voice was evident. "Do you think I picked you *randomly* out of the other three-hundred? I am General Plesh from Karch. I've interrogated many people and I know when my subjects are lying. It's your choice, Gene. You can choose the easy way out of this or the hard way. In the end I'm going have the

information I need anyway.”

Gene glared into the darkness and said, “I don’t know anything you want.”

“Very well, so be it,” Plesh said. “From this point on, you won’t eat. You’ll only have water—a great deal of water.” Whether the general left or simply fell silent, Gene didn’t know. However, the dripping became noticeably faster a few moments later. Though he hadn’t been hungry seconds before this comment, Plesh had ignited a desire for food like a match on kerosene.

An almost alien smell met his nose which he identified as roast beef. This was soon accompanied by loud chewing as if ten people were feasting elsewhere in the area. Gene wanted to go towards it, but didn’t dare leave the rock he was anchored to. He doubted he could find the source of the smell even if he did venture away from his position.

Something poked him in the ribs making him jump away from his rock. His bare feet landed into a puddle of water, moistening his pajama pants. He reached out blindly for the rock for several minutes. After fumbling around, he found it and sat back up against it. No sooner than he’d resettled himself, he felt another poke from another direction. Then another from a third direction. He used his feet to kick out but met no one. Something poked him in the back. He again swung his arm in an attempt to hit the annoyance, but only hit his hand on the rock. Crying out in pain, the noises around him suddenly stopped, as though his enemy was contemplating their next move.

Then the voice of General Plesh said calmly, “Gene, all you have to do is tell me what I want to know, and you will be protected from pain.”

"I don't know anything that you want to know!" Gene cried out into the darkness, panting heavily from fear.

"Very well," Plesh said. Gene heard the groaning of machinery around him.

Then a huge roar sounded and suddenly it seemed like a full-fledged water fall had begun all around him. Water touched his toes again, making Gene jump. Gene stood up and smashed his head into the ceiling. Hunched over, he felt the water reach his ankles. He rolled up his pants a little bit, but he knew it was futile. Water was now up to his knees. Plesh was killing him!

"I don't know!" Gene screamed. "I *don't know!*" No one was listening. He had to make something up. "Space tunnels are—" but he couldn't think. "Space tunnels are a—"

Water was creeping up his chest towards his shoulders. His feet slipped and his head went underwater. Choking from the water he'd inhaled, he broke the surface of the water, hitting his head once more. Gene tipped his head back to make use of the last of his remaining oxygen and screamed "I DON'T KNOW!"

With barely two inches left between the water and the ceiling, the water stopped. Out of the darkness came the terrible voice once more. "You really don't know, do you?"

"No! Wait!"

"Those dogs didn't interrogate Admiral Green thoroughly enough before he died. They will pay for bringing me the wrong boy."

"WAIT!"

"I have no reason to keep you alive. Die in peace, *mayvin.*"

"NO!" Gene screamed once more.

Nothing happened. Gene waited for the man to turn on

the water once again, but there was silence. His legs were slowly growing weaker as he struggled to keep his head above water. His neck hurt incredibly. Again, the passage of time felt like a short eternity. Why was he here? What had he done to deserve such hatred? The water splashed around him. What was the purpose of prolonging his own agony? Gene was bound to die anyway.

He would sit down—give up. . . . after a few more breaths.
Just a few more. . . .

Then the machinery groaned into life once more. The water line began to recede. When the water reached his chest, he kneeled down on the rock that remained yet behind his feet and stretched out his neck. Maybe his captors thought that he was dead.

Then the room was suddenly lit with light—bright and blinding light. Gene was forced to shut his eyes. The water was now down to his knees. Gene's arms were grabbed by two people and he was dragged through the remaining water and up some steps. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw that he was under the escort of eight soldiers with Plesh leading. Had the general turned suddenly compassionate? Very doubtful.

He heard the general mutter something in Karch. Then Gene figured it out. That whole thing was a ploy to get Gene to talk. Plesh wouldn't kill him until he had obtained what he wanted. The guy still thought he had valuable information! Gene was unsure whether he should attempt to dispel this theory or not, but he doubted he could convince Plesh of the truth.

"It would've been better for you if you had talked during the first phase." Plesh said threateningly.

Sopping wet and exhausted, the guards dragged him through the confusing corridors of the ship. Now that he was in the light, he could see himself better. As he had guessed earlier, his arms were both bruised. The wrist on his left arm was swollen and seemed to be in greater pain than ever. Mercifully, the guards had grabbed higher up on his arms. He tried to walk a couple times but the guards behind him kicked his calves in punishment each time. The last time he did it, the dark-haired soldier holding his left arm gave him a sharp glare. Apparently they were determined to drag him.

In the midst of all his other pains, he noticed something was scratching into his right arm. He glanced at it and with a slight degree of annoyance and realized the soldier holding him was wearing a ring with a small diamond. The soldier shifted the position in which he was holding Gene. However, Gene couldn't stop staring at the ring. It was strangely familiar. Then it hit him that his ring looked exactly like his mother's wedding ring. Or rather, *her* ring. Looking at her more closely, he realized it was a woman that resembled—*Mom?*

His mother looked to her left to the dark-haired soldier dragging Gene and nodded. Gene was dropped to the ground with a loud thud. He grunted as he landed on his injured wrist. His mom turned around and kicked the soldier behind her causing him to crumple. The dark-haired soldier had drawn his weapon and was aiming at one of the soldiers in front of him. However, that was about all that Gene saw as he was immediately tackled by a soldier behind him.

Several shots were fired but Gene couldn't tell who was

winning. The least he could do was try to take the man tackling him out of commission. He gave the guy several good kicks. The guy rolled off of him, having been hit in a particularly painful area. Looking up, he could see that Plesh was the only other enemy left, trying to flee around the corner. The soldier next to his mother fired two rapid shots to his legs, causing him to fall to the ground.

Gene continued kicking at his soldier, determined to keep his mother and other rescuer safe. Finally, the soldier yelled, "Lee, get your—make him—"

"Gene, stop!" his mother yelled. Startled, he quit kicking the poor man. "Are you all right?"

"My wrist really hurts," Gene replied.

"We'll have to look at it later," his mother said. "Gene, this is Commander Rogers, and Lieutenant-Commander Niels." She said, pointing to the man Gene had been kicking, then the dark-haired soldier. "We need to leave. Rogers, detonate the charges in the engine room."

Rogers pulled out a small tablet and pushed two or three buttons, resulting in an explosion that rattled the ship. "What about him?" Rogers asked, indicating Plesh.

"There's no time to take him with us," Lee said. "Spike him and we'll leave." Niels knocked Plesh on the head with his weapon. Gene took great satisfaction in watching the madman collapse unconscious. "Niels, grab Gene. Let's go."

"Mom! I ca—" but Niels had picked him up and thrown him over his shoulder. Honestly, Gene would've preferred the larger and stronger-looking Rogers, but Niels had a firm hold. Besides, Rogers was nursing a bloodied nose and didn't seem very friendly at the moment. The three started running. Gene tried again, "Mom, I can run without—"

“Gene, shut-up.”

Slightly indignant, Gene complied. After several minutes, an alarm sounded causing the three to quicken their pace significantly. Underneath him, Niels was panting slightly. Up ahead of them, he saw a set of stairs. Wondering whether the man could keep up this pace or not, Gene was suddenly distracted by a weapon shot hitting the wall next to them. They heard another blast and suddenly Gene felt a burst of extreme pain in his left leg. “GAH!”

After another barrage of shots, Niels grunted himself and leaned to the side. Gene slipped out of his arms and was falling slowly towards the ground. His already-injured leg twisted as he hit the stairway and slid down the stairs. The pain immediately rushed to his head, causing him to swallow a scream.

Despite Gene falling, Niels himself stayed on his feet. He slid an e-gun out of his pocket and fired off seven red shots in rapid succession which were accompanied by five thuds. His mother leaned down to Gene and said, “That’s why we bring Niels along for this type of thing.”

This time it was Rogers who picked Gene up and placed him on his back. Gene didn’t complain at all this time as his left leg was exploding with pain from the fall.

They continued their flight towards a strange hole in the wall that didn’t look like it should be there. Niels ran up and went through as Rogers lowered Gene from his shoulder. Rogers passed Gene to Niels who was inside a small shuttle. A white-clad doctor appeared out of nowhere and began treating his wounds.

Mom shut the door and sat down in front. She herself was sporting a wound on her right shoulder. Niels sat down

next to her. She quickly touched several buttons on her console. "Lee to *Crescent*, you may commence."

"Acknowledged Commander," a deep voice said with a strong Irish accent.

There was a grating of metal as the shuttle separated from the other ship. They moved swiftly away. The ship turned and began firing missiles towards the shuttle.

"Rogers, I thought you deactivated their torpedo cannons!"

"I did!" Rogers responded. "Something must have gone wrong."

"Dephasing ship," Niels said, his fingers moving rapidly.

"Leave a false trail for those missiles," Mom told him.

"On it," Rogers said, taking a seat next to her.

There was a back window where Gene saw a missile come close, only to get obliterated by a blue ball of energy. Gene turned his head towards the front window to see that a host of bright blue bursts were propelling into view from nowhere. These shots dodged the small shuttle and streaked towards the enemy ship and strike various locations. Almost immediately after, eight SBN ships appeared out of nowhere, raining fire down upon the much smaller enemy ship.

Mom turned to him and smiled, saying, "We don't mess around in Falvayah. They're already sending out a surrender signal. Take us in to dock Niels."

Insights

FMC Crescent: Monday September 21, 2099

“Hello. . .” someone called. “Gene. . .”

Who is calling my name? Gene thought, annoyed. *Leave me alone!* But no matter how many times Gene thought this, the person kept calling his name. Finally Gene opened his eyes, only to shut them quickly again. The light was murder to his eyes. “Where?” he asked confused. He had meant to say “Where am I” but the last half didn’t survive the long journey from mind to mouth.

“The *Crescent*,” someone said. *Was it Mom?* It was definitely a female voice. Squinting, his eyes slowly adapted to the light. The person spoke again, “The government decided to transfer you here to keep you safe. At least, safe for the time-being.”

Definitely not Mom, the voice was too deep. Opening his eyes completely, Gene looked around. He was lying on a bed in a small, brightly lit room. The same African

American doctor who had given him a sedative after the action earlier stood over him and pulled a gray band off his arm. The band appeared to be a medical instrument having a small screen and buttons on it. His left hand had a small cast on it. “The government?” he asked confused. Gene saw a clock on the wall. 1800? *Crescent*. Mom’s ship? Military vessels ran by military time, obviously. 1800 was . . . 4:00 pm? No, 6:00.

While he was thinking, the door opened admitting two figures. “I’ll let your mother explain,” the woman said. Gene recognized the taller figure as his mother but didn’t immediately recognize the shorter woman to her side. Her hair was black and her eyes were a familiar shade of blue.

“How is he Kate?” Mom asked the woman.

“He just came around,” the woman, apparently Kate, answered. “I’ve been keepin’ an eye on him.”

“Thanks Kate,” Gene’s mom said. Kate left the three individuals alone. “Well, Gene. You gave us quite the scare.”

“Sorry,” Gene replied automatically.

“Guilt complex,” the shorter girl said, smiling and rolling her eyes. “Nasty habit you’ve developed.”

“Gwen?” Gene stared at his sister, perplexed. Then turned on his mother. “You let her dye her hair?”

“Considering the circumstances, I figured that it might be wise,” Mom answered.

“But I’m a proud blonde at heart,” Gwen added.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“I imagine you’re a bit disturbed,” Mom said evasively.

“Really?” Gene asked, feeling his temper rising swiftly. “Well, considering in the last twenty-four hours I’ve been knocked out, stuffed in a small box, shot at, interrogated,

dragged around a weird ship, and nearly drowned . . . Yeah, disturbed might be somewhere on the right track.”

“Actually, ninety-six hours is a little more like it,” Gwen interjected, factually. “Or maybe we should just round up to one-hundred, just to be safe.”

Mom looked slightly pained, but continued. “Here is the situation in a nutshell. Apparently I made some enemies during the war. They decided to take out their anger with me on you.”

“Wait,” Gene responded incredulously. “Remember the robber? they said that he was looking specifically for *me*. Otherwise, he could have easily taken Gwen.”

Mom paused for a moment, then seemed to remember something. “In Karch the firstborn son is equated to the parent. If a man commits a crime in Karch and dies before he can be punished, his oldest son will pay the consequences.”

“But you’re not dead,” Gwen pointed out.

“And why was I interrogated?” Gene asked. “He seemed to think I knew some very specific information. Something about chips, ‘space tunnels,’ and something else.”

“Space tunnels?” Mom repeated. “Perhaps he thought *I* told you something about them.”

“Do you know what they are?”

“No.”

“A pretty drastic attempt for the slightest sliver of hope that I might know something,” Gene said. “He expected me to know what he wanted.”

“I can’t explain why he interrogated you,” Mom answered. “I don’t understand what is going on either. What I can tell you is that your life is in grave danger—that’s why Admiral

Dean let you come here. That way I can work without worrying about you two, and you will be safe.

“Mom doesn’t think our teachers would care for you walking around with an armed guard tailing you 24/7.” Gwen chipped in. “Might disrupt the public school system. Besides, have you seen how Wayne acts around soldiers? My friends and I think he was one of those peace teens way back in the fifties.”

“Anyway, you have two options,” Mom continued. “We can basically lock you in a room until the threat is gone—”

“Are you kidding? No way!”

“I somehow guessed you might feel that way,” Mom said with a smile. “The other option is a little more complex. About a dozen people know that we are keeping minors on an SBN vessel. If word leaks out that you onboard it would mean terrible trouble in lawsuits. Please realize the importance of this. *No one*, aside from the people who we’ve told, can know that minors are living on board.”

“What’s the second option?” Gene questioned impatiently.

“We’d mask your identity and make you part of the crew here,” Mom said. “You’d have to pretend you’re a few years older and take on a small job in the communications department.”

“That’s mad!”

“That’s what I told her,” Gwen said. “I personally think that this is her way of getting us into the military like she’s always wanted.”

Gene frowned but nodded. “Well it beats solitary confinement.”

"That's what your sister chose as well," Mom replied. "She'll have a job in the sensor's department. We allowed her to dye her hair so you two don't look quite so much alike."

"Admit it Mom," Gwen said. "Blake made you give permission."

"*Captain Blake*," Mom corrected.

"Where are my clothes?" Gene asked

"Not today, Gene," Mom said. "Your leg was pretty bad when we got you back. You broke it in your fall not to mention the gun shot wound. You're going to need a couple more days here."

"My leg doesn't hurt," Gene said. In fact, he found that his leg felt pretty good. Then he tried to raise his left leg and move his toes.

"Believe me, your leg isn't in any condition to walk," Mom told him.

"I can't feel it at all," Gene exclaimed with horror. "I can't move!"

"Fraid not," his mother replied.

"I personally like it better this way," Gwen said. "This way everybody wins. You get your nap, Mom won't lose track of you *again*, and I get to dye my hair!" Mom glared at her.

"Who else knows who we really are?" Gene asked.

"Ka-Dr. Kate Peters," Mom corrected herself. "One of her nurses, Judy Merrill; Matt Rogers, Second officer; Gary Ward, Third Officer; Cameron Niels, my security chief; Breanne Taylor, communications chief; Dr. Bertha Grills, ships' psychiatrist; the captain, and obviously the three of us. So eleven total."

"Something I've been meaning to ask you," Gwen

started, her voice suddenly sly. "As we're both supposed to be older than sixteen now. . . ."

"No," Mom responded immediately. "You certainly *won't* date until after you are sixteen."

"Are we really going to be here that long," Gene asked quietly.

"I'm afraid so," Mom said. "Until the threat is over."

"How will we know that?"

"I'll know," Mom said confidently. Her voice clearly indicated that the conversation was over. "Read this." Commander Lee handed him a tablet. "I've downloaded the introductory communications textbook on there from military school. And even more importantly, I've downloaded the military rules and regulations book. Read it like scripture."

"Gene, we'll be all right," Gwen said, her mood suddenly serious. "Mom'll work it out. She always does."

The group was interrupted by two knocks, a pause, then two more knocks. "Come in," Mom called.

A short man with graying hair entered. Gene had seen the captain before, but he had never shown much interest in Gene. When he spoke, a strong Irish accent colored his words. "Joan, Gene, Gwen. I hope I'm not disturbing anything."

"No, Captain, we were just leaving. I'll come for you tomorrow, Gene." The two left, leaving Gene and the captain alone.

Blake took a seat next to the bed. For a moment, the captain was quiet, simply staring into Gene's eyes. Finally he said, "I bet this is a huge emotional roller coaster for you. You've been through a lot of pain in the last year and yet,

here you are sitting calmly before me. Thank you.”

Gene was honestly flattered. This was the man that his mother told glorious stories about. All he could think to say was, “Thanks.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not all I came for. My name is Captain Blake as you might have guessed. I need you to recount your experiences since you were kidnapped Friday evening.”

Gene heaved a sigh, he wasn’t sure he could remember it all. Though it had only been a few days, it felt like it had happened years ago. “It all started with a woman coming to our camp that night. She said she was my aunt or my great grandmother or something. . . .” Gene struggled to find the name in his very blurred memory. I think she was working for another guy. Finally it popped up out of nowhere. “Briggs. That was his last name I think.”

“Interesting,” Blake mused. “I wonder if it might be the same Briggs that is wanted for slave trading. Excuse me, please continue.”

“They knocked me out, which is where I got this one,” Gene continued, pointing high on the left side of his head. “I woke up in a box and using the gun Mom gave me. . . .” As fast as he could, Gene went through his story. At certain points, Blake would nod or look confused, but he didn’t say anything else until Gene was finished.

“Describe for me their uniforms, please.”

“Uniforms? Not really any were wearing uniforms. I guess there were a half dozen Karch wearing uniforms.”

“No identifying marks?” Blake probed.

“Not that I ca—” Gene stopped. “They all had this belt that they wore over all their other clothes.”

“Thank-you, Gene. That’s what I needed.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means nothing that I’m allowed to tell you.”

This sparked Gene’s anger, but he didn’t say anything. Blake seemed to sense this and said, “You deserve an explanation more than anyone else does, Gene. But you’ve already learned life isn’t fair. The information I keep from you isn’t to keep you ignorant, but to keep you safe. However, there is some information I can and must give. Did your mother explain to you your options?”

“You mean more imprisonment or putting on the biggest acting show of my life? Yeah.”

“And I assume you chose the latter.”

“Yeah.”

“Then I will indeed need to explain very much to you. Your name is now Gene Haton. We let you keep your first name because I want you to have at least one name that you respond naturally to. However, we can’t have two, small, carbon copies of your mother running around with her same surname and expect people to ignore that. It’s going to be suspicious enough as it is as neither of you has completely developed into full-grown adults. I guarantee you that your roommates will be shaving daily.”

Gene hadn’t even considered that. He was about to ask a question, but Blake raised a finger. “I’ll answer your questions once I have finished. You must know who Gene Haton is before you try to be him. As Mr. Haton, you are seventeen years old. You graduated from high school a year early. Your family has a history in the service. Naturally, you wanted to maintain tradition, so upon graduating high

school you signed up. The government is trying to build up our military, so they put you on an accelerated-training program so here you are. Do you understand all that?"

"Um," Gene mumbled. "I think so."

"You are the third boy and youngest child in your family. Your older sisters are twins. Your father is Louis Haton, first officer of the *Félicité* which was blown down after a valiant fight in the battle of Shaw. Your mother also served during the same war but retired when she became pregnant with your older sisters. Your sisters are named Hope and Peace. Do you have any questions?"

Gene was sure that he did, but he couldn't think of any at the moment, nor remember the one he intended to ask earlier. He shook his head.

"Ah, but you will," Blake pulled out a tablet. "I've only given you an overview. That's why I brought this. Is that your tablet? I'm going to load more information onto it. Read it. You will be assigned to Lieutenant Taylor. She's the best of the best."

"Sir, how am I supposed to do this?" Gene asked.

"Don't doubt yourself. Rely on faith. Faith and doubt don't eat around the same table. Faith will make Gene Lee into Gene Haton." Blake rose. "I'm truly sorry that you have to go through this. Keep faith."

Blake left the room, leaving Gene alone.

In the two hours that followed, Gene diligently devoured the first two chapters of the textbook. The reading was dull but Gene had very little trouble understanding the information. When he first glanced through the table of

contents, he was tempted to skip to Chapter 27: 'Message Decryption and Code Detection.' As cool as it sounded, Gene stuck to the schedule his mother had given him.

After reading the last few sentences of Chapter 6 (Interpersonal Communication) he heard his door-chime ring. For a moment, he wasn't quite sure what to do. His mother hadn't told him what to do if someone came to call. It could be someone that wasn't supposed to know who he was. A voice then shouted, "Gene, it's Kate. Someone's here to visit you!"

"Come in," Gene called weakly. The door slid easily open and a slightly abdominous woman with curly gray hair walked in, carrying a couple of Tablets. "Walked" didn't do her form of transportation justice. There was an evident bounce to her step, as though she had just been married that morning.

"Gene L-Haton!" the woman said, simply beaming. "I've wanted to meet you and your sister ever since I found out the Commander had kids!"

"People know about me?" Gene asked slightly alarmed.

"Of course," she said. "I've never been able to coax pictures out of the commander, though, so I think your identity's safe."

Gene nodded.

"Forgive me!" the woman suddenly exclaimed. "I failed to introduce myself. I am Brynn Taylor, Lieutenant Brynn Taylor, head of the Communications Department."

"I thought your name was Breanne," Gene said. "Ms," he added on hastily.

"You must've heard that from your mother! Too many syllables, dear boy!" Taylor responded immediately.

"Now I doubt you know where the CC is, right? The communications center?"

Gene shook his head. "No, Lieutenant."

"Well it so happens that this tablet has a map with the best routes to your post listed out for you," Taylor said. "You'll have to decide which you like best. It all depends on who you want to see. Me, personally, I like to take a different way each day! So many more people to see."

"What do I do in Communications?"

"By the time I'm through with you, you'll be doing just about everything," Taylor handed him the tablet. "Also on that tablet is the course textbook from military school and the Communications Handbook. Both very important."

"Mom gave me the textbook," Gene stated.

"Excellent," Taylor replied, sending the files to his tablet. "Your mother's always on the ball. But I doubt she gave you the meal schedule and social calendar."

Gene opened the social calendar file. "Am I required to attend all of them?"

"I'd surely be disappointed if you didn't!" Taylor answered sounding mockingly scandalized. "I organize them, after all." To Gene's relief, Taylor smiled and giggled. "You're cute—just like your mother! Report at 0600, Wednesday morning. You have an eight-hour shift. See you then!" As quickly as she had appeared, Taylor vanished leaving Gene feeling as though he'd just landed after hang-gliding.

Tuesday, September 22, 2099

The next twenty or so hours after the Lieutenant's visit were lonely. At about 9:00 (or 2100 according to the clock),

Gene began to regain the feeling in his leg. Regrettably, with the return of feeling came the onset of pain. However, pain wasn't something new to Gene. He'd experienced worse before. Unable to sleep, Gene decided to read more of the regulations manual. Somewhere around 11:30, Kate walked in to check on him. Upon discovering him reading, Gene received a short rebuke and a sleeping pill. Gene took the sleeping pill gratefully and within seconds of swallowing it was swallowed up by unconsciousness.

The next day was a longer version of the previous evening. Gene found he could walk slowly with some pain in his leg. Kate came in at about 1:30 p.m. and treated his leg with some sort of small football-shaped device. His leg felt immediate yet momentary relief following the treatment. Afterwards, he didn't feel quite as much pain when walking. Kate informed him that he would have to come in each day to receive such treatment for about a week.

At fifteen minutes past six that evening, Gene's door slid open and his mother walked in. She handed him a white military jumpsuit and walked out while he got dressed. Upon returning to the room, she quickly ushered him out the door.

"All right," she began, walking briskly with Gene limping at her heels, his leg throbbing. "The crew is in mission briefing in the main conference hall. I'm taking you to your quarters. You will be rooming with three other men in the communications department. They are a little strange, but they're okay."

As she finished, a man with light brown hair turned the corner and started walking briskly towards them. Lee greeted him. "Good evening, Mr. Rogers. Gene, I don't

believe you've had a good chance to meet Commander Rogers. Mr. Rogers is Second Officer and one of the top computer specialists in the fleet." Rogers acknowledged him with a nod and a smile before he continued quickly on his way. Gene noticed with guilt that his nose had a bandage on it from being kicked in the face.

"What's the meeting about?" Gene asked. "I should probably have a pretty good grasp of what we're going to be doing."

"It's just to explain our new mission," Mom replied vaguely. "*Crescent* is being reassigned to the Falcon Task Force."

"Falcon?" Gene questioned, hobbling on behind her. "But I thought that task forces were given numbers."

"Falcon Task Force was just created yesterday," Mom said.

"Oh," Gene said. "Why's it different?"

"Enough questions, Gene," Mom cut in. "I've got some important information you need to understand. You need to know some of the etiquette used in the navy. First of all, never show up to your duty shift without your uniform. You might as well turn up naked. Along with that, take your name card along with you wherever you go. You can't get into any level three areas or above without that card.

"Next, never call your senior officers by their first name not even Lieutenant Taylor. In addition to that, don't call your colleagues by their first name unless they give you permission. With most of them it's okay, but some are rather particular about how they're called. Just go with the flow. This isn't acting that you're doing—you *can't* slip. Not only would your life be in danger if

you did so, but our mission. Here we are.”

Gene was relieved as Mom stopped in front of a closed door. “I won’t be able to contact you much. It’s just how it goes with officers and crewmen. It would look a little suspicious if we saw each other too much.”

64

“Can I do whatever I want when I’m done with my shift?” Gene asked.

“No,” Lee responded. “I’m glad you asked that. At 1430 on weekdays, you have a personal self-defense session with Lieutenant Niels. He’s the best marksman I know of.”

“Do I have to go?” Gene asked.

“Did you hit everything you were aiming at Saturday?” Lee countered. Seeing Gene’s face she continued, “I thought not. Yes, you have to go. It’s essential that you be able to defend yourself. At 1600 you have a personal communications class with Lieutenant Taylor. That lasts until 1730. You’re to do everything she says with exactness. Understood?”

“Yeah,” Gene responded.

“One more thing, *never* call me ‘Mom.’ At least, not until we’re out of this mess.”

“Yes, Commander.”

It was the strangest thing to watch. The corners of Commander Lee’s mouth twitched and her eyes blinked. But a moment later she had turned on her heel and was entering the lift at the other end of the corridor.

Gene opened the door and walked into his quarters. There wasn’t much to see. Two bunk beds jutted out from the wall to his left. Crammed between four dressers was a small desk with papers littering the surface. On one of the dressers he found a card with his photo and name on it. This must be the card his mother was talking

about. In the dresser he found eight white jumpsuits with blue lining and some of his normal clothes from home. Gene settled himself at a small round table with four chairs sitting around it and immersed himself in his textbook once more.

Half an hour later, the door opened again and three men walked in. The first man was poorly shaven, wore the name "Crewman Paul" on his uniform and seemed to be in an argument with the third person who walked in (Crewman Duncan). Gene couldn't see the second person's name tag but he had copper skin and jet black hair. He was both thinner and younger than the other two, probably only eighteen or nineteen years old. The man apparently named Duncan looked to be in between the other two in age, probably his late-twenties or so. He, like the first man, didn't seem to have shaven properly for a while.

"Bosh!" Duncan was saying. "Erus is trying to suck us into another one of their wars."

"Duncan, Karch is attacking their ally. *OUR* ally," the oldest man shot back.

"Lagenna never joined the Alliance!" the man named Duncan snapped. "They don't even recognize us as a nation yet."

Gene simply read his book in the corner, apparently unnoticed by the three other men. The second man had sat down at the desk and was trying to write something. The other two ranted on for several minutes.

"And what about the Karch problem? They certainly aren't disappearing on their own."

"Who says that they're a problem?"

“Give it a break!” the youngest man suddenly asked. “Have you even noticed we have a new roommate?”

Surprised that he’d been noticed, Gene looked up from his tablet.

Immediately Duncan sneered, “So they’ve begun drafting twelve-year-olds have they? This the new recruit they’ve been promising us?”

“What is your name?” the younger man asked, with a slight Spanish accent.

“Gene, and yours?”

“I’m Brad.”

“Paul to you,” the older man growled at Gene. Turning to Brad, he said, “And don’t you mean *Bradley*? Or do you want to be Pedro again? Or maybe you want to go by a new one?”

“How about Flagorium?” Duncan suggested.

Brad looked unabashed, “My real name is Pedro Alejandro Fuentes Garcia, but I have a lot of nicknames. Most people call me Brad.”

“He comes up with a new one every week or so. And what do you think of the war?” Duncan probed Gene.

“Introduce yourself you moron!” Paul snapped.

“I’m Duncan,” the man said. “Did you fall victim to the draft dodger police or did you sign up like the other two?”

“I don’t know, I guess I was sort of drafted.”

Paul looked highly disappointed, as though he’d lost a potential ally. “What’s your name again, kid?” he asked quickly.

“Gene, uh,” he looked down at the name badge that was sitting on the table next to him. “Haton.”

“Havin’ trouble remembrin’ your name?” Paul chuckled.

"No, sir."

"Hope not," Paul responded. "S'just what we need. 'Nuther runt running about thinkin' he owns the place." After saying this, he glared meaningfully at Duncan. "How old are you boy?" Paul asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" Gene answered immediately. A surprisingly good question it was. What age *was* he supposed to be? He was pretty sure that Blake had brought it up, but his memory was currently blank.

"Obviously you look like you could be my son," Paul said.

Gene was saved by Duncan who said, "*Captain Blake* looks like he could be your son, Paul." Duncan and Brad both laughed as Paul scowled. "C'mon, Paul," Duncan said. "It's time to go."

"Right," Brad said. "How many dates do you have lined up for tonight?"

"It's our shift time. See ya," Duncan said, ignoring him as Paul followed him out the door.

"So where are you from?" Brad asked curiously.

"Sugar City, Idaho," Gene responded automatically, realizing he was actually supposed to be from Denver.

"Idaho is in the mountains, isn't it?" Brad pursued.

"Yeah," Gene said.

Apparently seeing as the conversation wasn't going anywhere, Brad switched gears. "How about I show you the cafeteria. You're probably starving."

"Okay," Gene responded and followed Brad out the door.

"The food is nothing amazing," Brad was saying as he led Gene into the cafeteria. "But don't tell Nick I said that. He does all of his cutting with real knives." Brad indicated a beefy man hacking carrots with a vigor that Gene had seldom seen before. Chuckling, Brad scooped some potatoes onto his plate and chose a seat near the door. Gene sat down across from him.

"What'd they tell you in mission briefing?" Gene asked. "I didn't get here in time to make it."

"Just that we were being reassigned to Falcon Group," he said. "We're supposed to be guarding a ship on its way to Lagenna."

"*Lagenna!* What do we need to go there for?"

"Diplomats," Brad answered. "We are taking them to a peace conference. If Karch attacks Lagenna, Erus will declare war on Karch. If Erus gets involved, Falvayah might too."

"Where in Lagenna are we going?" Gene pressed.

Brad pulled out his tablet and changed the display to a map. "The conference is at Lagenna's capital, a week away from Earth. But first we're going to dock at Independence Base for a couple of days.

"Oh man, you totally missed this awesome battle on Monday!" Brad said. "There was an emergency and they called us and seven other ships to go take on another one."

"Really?" Gene said, trying to sound impressed. "How come?"

"I don't know but..." Brad looked around conspiratorially then said, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah."

"I have a friend in the sensors department named Ella.

She's," Brad let out a low doggy whistle and held up his fingers in the OK sign, "Okay. Anyway, she told me that her sensors picked up an SBN shuttle leaving the other ship quickly when we got there. They came and docked with us. I just happened to be on the bridge that day and I noticed that Taylor ordered everybody out of the shuttle bay. Do you know what that means?"

Gene shook his head.

"We think that whoever it was kidnapped someone," Brad said excitedly. "It must've been somebody important too, because they're doing their best to cover it all up!"

For several seconds, Gene felt very flattered. Then the door to Gene's right slid open and Gwen strode into the cafeteria. Seeing Gene, she widened her smile for a moment in acknowledgment and continued towards the food. Presently, Brad looked to see what Gene was gazing at. When he saw Gwen, his jaw dropped and Gene heard him mutter, "*Que linda. . .*"

Staring at her for several moments more, he hurriedly turned back to his food when he saw Gene watching him. His Spanish accent was much more pronounced as he stuffed a carrot into his mouth and said, "Who's dat?"

"No idea," Gene lied with a stab of guilt. "I just got here today."

Brad looked up again as Gwen sat down at a table full of chatting women. The group immediately greeted her with the same enthusiasm she'd always received at school. Trying to sound disinterested, Brad continued, "She's kind of pretty."

"Do you think so?" Gene asked, not liking at all where this conversation was headed.

"How do you ask a girl like that out?" Brad asked, drinking some of his water.

"How should I know, I've never been out on a date," Gene said solemnly.

Brad choked on his water, making Gene realize his mistake. "What?"

"I've never been out late," Gene tried quickly. "We'd better hurry."

"Nice try," Brad interrupted. "I heard you the first time. Wait 'till Duncan hears this! He'll go crazy! I know about ten nice girls you can try."

"That's okay, I can find my own—"

"Anyone who's gone this long without dating needs professional assistance," Brad cut in with pompous air.

By the end of the evening, Gene was beginning to wonder how long in advance he could schedule all of his evenings out. Brad was definitely persistent about the idea and had started naming girls who he thought would make Gene a good match. Gene didn't know what to say. His mother would be furious if she found out he'd disobeyed the not-until-you're-sixteen rule.

The time was only 9:00, but Gene wanted to get to bed early. So he bade a disappointed Brad goodnight, changed into his pajamas, and climbed into the upper bunk which he'd been assigned. The cushion was stiff and the blanket thin. When compared to his own bed. . . well, there wasn't really a comparison. Only memory. *Always* memory.

Blinking back tears, as he'd done so often in the past, Gene wondered if he'd ever have something stable he could cling to. Dad had deserted him. Mom had been in and out all throughout his life. Gwen had her own life. Gene had never

King's Pawn

had any good friends to confide in. That's why he loved the piano so much; it had always been there. Now even that was gone. Staring out the window at the stars, Gene felt almost more alone than he had in the small wooden crate.

Instruction

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Gene woke up to a trumpet sounding over the speakers. The clock on the wall told him it was 5 a.m. The obnoxious noise tapered off a minute later, leaving his ears ringing. Both Paul and Duncan had covered their ears with their pillows to try to drown out the noise.

The two quickly and quietly pulled on their white jumpsuits, trying not to disturb their roommates. Breakfast in the cafeteria was a different affair than it had been the previous evening. Whereas last night the room had been loud and vibrant, this morning it was quiet and rather subdued. Before he knew it, breakfast was over and he was following Brad into a lift. "Deck B," Brad said. The lift groaned into motion. After the door of the lift slid to the side letting them out, Brad led him down a long corridor. At the end of the corridor sat a desk with two security guards sitting behind it. Brad ran his card under a scanner and the

door opened. Imitating him, the door slid aside a second time, allowing Gene entrance into the room.

His first impression of the room was that it was rather loud. A dozen workers were talking to different people over communications links. The room wasn't incredibly large, but not small by any account. There were two long desks each with half a dozen people sitting behind them. In front there was a large projector pad which showed *Crescent* docked at *Atlantis*, the name of the station they were at presently. Each station on the two desks had a small projector pad, which depicted someone talking to the crewmen working there. The front desk had a sign indicating that it was Verbal Communications while the sign on the back row suggested that it was Written Communications. Brad nudged Gene's left arm. "Which do you want to take?" he asked, referring to the front or back row.

Gene shrugged so Brad led him to a seat on the back row and tapped a curly brown-haired woman on the shoulder. She vacated the place for Brad and left the room. Gene did the same to a remarkably small woman sitting to Brad's left and seated himself in her chair. It was this point that Gene had been dreading since Monday. He had no clue how to work any of the equipment!

"Hello all!" Gene heard a cry behind him. Lieutenant Taylor half-walked and half-glided into the room. Several people returned the greeting cheerfully, others simply nodded at her, busy talking to someone on the line.

"Lieutenant Taylor never takes the morning shift!" Brad whispered. To Brad's surprise, she sat down to Gene's left. Before he could say anything else, Brad became absorbed in a job with an elderly couple with a Texan accent.

“Just watch me,” Taylor muttered to him. Gene watched her carefully as she selected a name on the screen in the upper left of her station, pushed a button marked “Add,” followed by a blue button in the bottom right hand corner of her station then tapped a green button marked “Connect.” A man in his late forties appeared on Taylor’s projector pad.

“FMC *Crescent*, I’m Lieutenant Taylor. How may I help?”

“I need to talk to my son, Ensign Peters,” the man said.

“Ensign Peters is on patrol right now with his security unit,” Taylor responded immediately. “Would you like to speak to him now on his tablet or wait till he can reach a projector phone after his shift?”

“It’s urgent,” the man said, his voice shaking slightly for the first time. “About his mother,” he clarified.

“Have they transferred her back to the hospital?” Taylor asked, forgetting Gene and becoming immersed in the conversation. When the man nodded, she continued. “I’ll get him right away.” Taylor tapped a second screen and said very clearly, “Peters, Alvin J.” The screen she had touched displayed a picture of Peters, some of his records, and indicated that he was on Deck F. She tapped “Add” then pushed the blue followed by the “Connect” buttons.

Roughly ten seconds later, Ensign Peters’ face appeared on her screen. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Your father is on the line, can you take a call?”

“Yeah, I’m not busy.”

“I’ll put him on.” Taylor made a series of movements, touching Mr. Peter’s name on the first screen and “add.” Then she pushed Peter’s name and “add” followed by the “connect” button. “It’s as easy as that,” Taylor said enthusiastically. “Your turn.”

Gene slowly moved his hand to the first screen and touched the name marked "Dean, Admiral F." Swallowing though his mouth was completely dry, Gene pushed "add" followed immediately by the "connect" button. A gray-haired old man in an officer's white uniform appeared on the projector pad. "FMC *Crescent*, Crewman . . . Haton speaking," Gene said quietly.

"Speak up, boy," the man grumbled. "Can't barely hear people two feet away without you whispering like that. Where's Captain Blake?"

Gene typed BLAKE, onto the second screen. The window that came up indicated that Captain Blake was on duty. "He's on duty on the bridge."

"Have him meet me in his office, immediately," Dean said. "Transfer me there."

"Yes, sir," Gene answered. Gene contacted Blake.

"Captain Blake?"

"Yes?" came Blake's crisp reply over the speakers as his face appeared on the screen.

"Admiral Dean wishes to speak with you in your office," Gene informed him.

"I'll head down there then. Thank you, young man." The communication ended. Gene suddenly realized that he needed to put Admiral Dean in the captain's office. For thirty seconds, Gene messed with the buttons. Finally, when Gene was sure he had got it right, he pushed "Connect." At that same instant, Taylor leaned over and pushed a couple buttons on Gene's consol. "Did I mess up?" he asked, sounding dejected.

"Actually, you did pretty good for your first time," Taylor answered enthusiastically. "I didn't expect you to be

able to figure out how to send it to a room like that. The only problem was that you sent him to the laundry room instead of the captain's office. But that's okay, once I sent a person to the cafeteria and it took me five minutes to realize I'd made a mistake. Incidentally, it happened to be a girl calling to break up with crewman MacArthur, poor fellow. Never quite got over that one, I think. He has shown some improvement lately, though. Started dating again which is always a step in the right direction. . . ." Taylor's voice trailed off, seemingly realizing that she had branched off.

The lieutenant turned back to her work, leaving Gene to wonder how he'd ever survive these next eight hours. Before his shift was over, he'd talked to worried parents and wives, several different SBN officers, a representative from the Ambassador's office, and a merchant who had a severe German accent. With each call, he became a little more comfortable at the controls. Though not a natural per se, by the end of the day he had worked himself into a fairly reliable status.

Taylor helped him when he had questions. A couple of times he worried Brad would overhear. To avoid this, Taylor wrote up his answers by typing them up and sending it to a portion of his screen. To her credit, she was generally able to handle both the person she was dealing with and Gene at the same time. Brad, thankfully, didn't seem to notice any of this going on right next to him. Both Gene and Brad left the room exhausted later that afternoon.

"I thought that shift would never end!" Brad exclaimed, sitting down in the cafeteria across from Duncan and Paul.

"Busiest I've ever seen the place!"

"There's always a rush right before launch," Paul agreed. "So tell us, Haton, what's the story behind your limp? Battle wound? Infectious disease?"

"You have a disease?" Duncan said, turning pale and dropping the corn husk in his hand. Paul smiled.

To this point, Gene had been trying to hide the fact that he was limping. This wasn't easy due to the fact that he felt pain every time he put pressure on his injured foot. "I think one of my shoes has a thicker sole than the other." Gene responded. This wasn't completely false, either. One of his legs was longer than the other.

Paul looked at him suspiciously. "Are you sure?" Paul gave Gene's injured foot a light kick causing him to wince.

"Let's hear the story," Brad said as Gene thought desperately.

"I fractured my leg."

"How?" Duncan asked. "They still let you come aboard?"

"Someone tripped me down some stairs," Gene invented. "It happened right when I got here."

"Who tripped you?" Brad asked.

"Um, a crewman named Bill—I think it was an accident."

"What did he look like?" Duncan questioned immediately.

"He was a big guy with blond hair," Gene made up again.

"It's Bill Snyders," Duncan told Brad.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"He's one of the ship's engineers," Duncan said. "I bet you he did it on purpose. He's Agemian."

"Seriously?" Brad asked.

"No, I don't think he did," Gene said, wondering where

his story had taken him. "I think it was another Bill."

"Gene, there are only so many Bills aboard this ship," Duncan told him.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't—"

"Hey, you checked with the doctor to make sure you don't have something, right?" Duncan asked, backing off.

"Have something?" Gene asked, confused.

"You sure you're not infected with something? Berger's disease always hits the legs first before spreading up to the torso. Once it reaches the waist, it's unstoppable!"

"I'm pretty sure it's just because I fell down the stairs."

The doors to the cafeteria slid apart again and Gwen walked in, just like last night. At first, Gene thought Brad hadn't noticed. Later, however, Gene saw Brad glancing nervously in her direction. Obviously he was going to create a problem. But Gene didn't realize how soon until Brad made his next comment. "Guess what this kid told me last night? He told me he's never been on a date!"

Duncan reacted exactly the same as Brad had, except he gagged on his spaghetti instead of water. "What?"

To Gene's surprise, Paul shook his hand. "Congrats. Usually it takes guys years to figure out that we're better off alone."

"It's not that. I just don't feel—" Gene began but was cut off.

"You're shy, aren't you?" Duncan concluded. "Well, we'll take care of this issue before you grow old, ugly, and lonely like. . . ." Duncan glared at Paul. "Other people we're both acquainted with."

"Trust me kid," Paul confided. "I've been living twice as long as you—"

"No need to be conservative," Duncan snorted.

"We're better off alone," Paul finished.

"Seriously, I just don't thi—"

"Don't listen to Paul, kid," Duncan interrupted again. Gene rolled his eyes in exasperation; partly due to being interrupted again, but also because of the third reference in the last five minutes to Gene as a 'kid.' Duncan went on in a conspiratorial whisper. "Paul's had a bad love life. Wait here for a moment."

Duncan slid off his seat and disappeared. Just as Gene was about to ask Brad where he'd run off to, he spotted him at the other end of the room. In his arm he was escorting a pretty girl with auburn hair in Gene's direction. "S'cuse me, I've got to go," Gene told Brad and Paul, then slipped out the door.

According to his schedule, Gene was to meet Lieutenant Niels at 2:30 in the range on the Rec. Deck. That was in ten minutes. Gene limped to the nearest lift, entered and said, "Recreation deck." In an instant, Gene found himself in a enormous hall. On the opposite side of the room a few were taking a dip in a swimming pool and hot tub. A thin track wound its way around the outside of the room. On the walls to both his left and right were several doors. Getting a little closer, Gene read the labels on the doors: weight room, racquetball court, basketball court, target practice.

Bingo, Gene thought to himself and opened the door to the room. To his surprise, there weren't any targets set up like there had been at scout camp. Gene had never passed the shooting merit badge. He couldn't keep his hands steady enough to shoot. The floors and walls were empty and black. The entire room looked like one giant projector

pad.

“Let’s begin,” a voice said quietly from behind him. Gene jumped, surprised there was someone else in the room. He was again struck by how scrawny Niels was, with jet black hair and brown eyes. He was not in uniform but had a dark black t-shirt and levis. “Gene Lee, I am Lieutenant Niels.”

“Yes, sir,” Gene answered swiftly. “But you’re supposed to call me Haton.”

“This room is a room of lies,” Niels interrupted. His voice was neither loud nor harsh, but piercing. “Your life is a life of lies. However, between us, we will maintain a standard of truth. In this room, you will be known by your real name. You will address me as Lieutenant Niels or simply ‘sir.’ Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Gene repeated.

“Other than you and I, everything else you see in this room, everything else you hear and touch is an illusion.” Niels handed Gene an E-gun. “This is a simulation pistol. It is designed to behave like a normal electronic pulse gun, with the exception that you can’t hurt anything with it.” He drew a remote out of his back pocket and pushed a button. The image of a target appeared at the other end of the room. “Fire at the target, Mr. Lee.”

Gene raised his pistol with both hands and fired at the target, his shot hit two feet above the target and several inches to the right of the outer most ring. He was about to fire again, but Niels stopped him. “Never dual-wield. You only need one hand to hold the gun, do you not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Grasping the gun with both hands limits your ability to squeeze the trigger quickly,” Niels continued softly. “Try

again." Just as Gene was about to fire again, Niels said, "Don't move. Why are you holding your gun up to your eye?"

"To aim," Gene replied simply.

"When in combat, what's the most dangerous weapon you possess?"

"My gun?"

"Ideally, that's what they'll think," Niels said. "However, if they do think that, they are usually wrong. Your brain is your greatest weapon. Man created guns; God created your mind. Hold your arm straight. Fire away from yourself, not next to your face. Try again." Gene held the gun as he was instructed and was about to fire but Niels grabbed his wrist again. "Why are you closing your eye? Keep both of your eyes open while targeting. Try again."

Gene lifted his gun several more times before actually taking his next shot. Each time Niels told him something different. "Don't hold your breath. Shoot while exhaling," or "Keep your feet spread further apart, and roll your shoulders back onto the shelf." *If I ever am in a combat position again*, Gene thought to himself. *It's going to take me ten minutes just to get my posture right*. His next shot, however, was a good six inches closer to his target.

After an hour of practice, Niels finally checked his watch and said, "That's enough. I'll meet you tomorrow afternoon at the same time." Niels disappeared out the door. Gene followed after him a minute later. Checking his schedule, he saw that he was to meet Lieutenant Taylor in her office. Looking at the map loaded onto his tablet, he saw that her office was located on Deck E, seven decks up. When he boarded the lift however, his tablet beeped and he saw that

Lieutenant Taylor was calling him.

"Yes Ma'am?" he asked, opening the link.

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to postpone our first lesson until tomorrow evening," She began, apologetically. "*Crescent* will launch in twenty minutes and all senior officers are required to be at their post on the bridge. By the way, you did great today! See you tomorrow." Taylor cut the communication as the door to the lift slid aside. Gene decided to get an early start on dinner. He hadn't eaten much at lunch due to the fact that he was forced to evacuate the premises so swiftly. Hopefully the room would be quieter.

The room was packed, but no one was eating and few were talking. The whole crowd seemed to be gazing out the huge windows which graced the far end of the room. Gene stood up on a chair to see what they were looking at. When he did, their awe was no mystery. Having never seen Earth from space before, Gene was unprepared for what he saw. Its beauty surpassed anything he had seen before.

Crescent passed over Gene's beautiful home with graceful ease. However, Gene knew that he'd always be tied to that planet, that he'd never completely leave. It was hard to think that men wanted to take Earth and its inhabitants like a prize, a possession. When would the Earth finally have peace?

In the front window, Gene saw eight particularly bright blips of light. Slowly they grew larger and brighter until it was clear to see that they were the engines of six other ships. This must be the rest of the Falcons. Two of the ships were especially large. Having seen this type of ship on the News before, he immediately recognized them as destroyers.

There were three other ships identical to *Crescent* in appearance, but the other three he wasn't sure about. Two of them were obviously of the same class, but the third looked as though its builder was drunk when designing it. The scheme was totally different from that of the other eight ships in the fleet.

"What's that one?" Gene heard someone ask, pointing at the odd-looking ship.

"It's that government ship," another answered. "The ones we're taking all the way to Karch and back again."

"Gene Haton!" someone yelled. "Haton, over here!"

Gene glanced towards the source of the sound and saw Duncan at the other end of the room. Seeing him with the auburn-haired girl he was with earlier, Gene moved as quickly as he could out into the corridor. Immediately upon entering his room, he climbed upon his bunk and sprawled out on his bed, exhausted. Just as he got semi-comfortable, he heard his tablet beeping, indicating that someone was trying to call him. Praying that it was *not* Duncan, he unwillingly dropped down from his bed and picked the tablet off the table where he set it seconds earlier. The name displayed was not Duncan, but "Mo-Commander," he started.

"It's okay, I'm alone," Mom said. "How was your first day at work?"

"Fine," Gene responded simply.

"Gene, I just had a lady in my office named Dr. Grills," she began hesitantly.

"She is the ship's psychiatrist, isn't she?" Gene asked.

"Right. It's her wish to have a session with you tomorrow."

"Mom, I don't need to see a psychiatrist," Gene said. This

wasn't the first time they had been through this.

"I know Gene, and until now I've respected your wishes," Lee answered. "But Bertha Grills has been on my case to have you see a psychiatrist ever since the incident in February."

"Well, tell her I don't need help," Gene retorted defiantly. "I'm okay."

"You are a member of this crew now and Dr. Grills has the right to interview anyone she pleases from the captain to the head laundress. I'm surprised she consulted me at all."

"But—"

"Sorry, Gene. You will report to her office at 1700 tomorrow. I've informed Lieutenant Taylor you'll be missing her lesson tomorrow."

Gene grimaced but nodded.

"Gene, I am sorry," Lee finished and closed the communication.

Gene was about to chuck the tablet, then thought better of it. So he settled for throwing the pillow. This didn't turn out so well as the instant Gene threw it, the doors to his room slid open and the pillow hit Brad in the face. A little startled, Brad turned up to learn the identity of the culprit. "What was that for?"

"Sorry, I wasn't aiming for you."

"I was told to bring this message to you," Brad handed him an envelope. "From the looks of it, it's from Dr. Grills."

"How'd you know?" Gene grumbled, tearing the letter open. Indeed it was from the ship's psychiatrist. The letter basically confirmed what Mom had just told him.

"Grills is the only officer who still uses paper," Brad explained. "Kind of a waste if you ask me, but maybe she

has her reasons. What does she want?"

"A personal interview," Gene mumbled.

"Why?" he asked when Gene didn't elaborate.

"No clue," Gene answered.

Brad Fuentes paused a moment contemplatively before venturing his next comment. "You're a really pathetic liar, Gene."

"What?" Gene's senses were brought onto full alert.

"You always look down when you lie. Oh, and you start fidgeting," Brad added, causing Gene to drop the letter he'd been twisting back and forth between his hands. Brad continued, "Want to tell me what's wrong?"

For perhaps the first time, Gene looked straight into Brad's eyes, searching for sincerity. Could Gene trust this man? Brad looked straight back at him, his attention completely devoted to Gene. For a moment, Gene didn't know what to say. No one was trustworthy, Dad had proven that. He picked up the letter and began twisting it again. Brad immediately caught on, "You're fidgeting again."

At that moment, the door slid to the side and Paul lumbered in. Upon seeing Gene, he said, "Hey kid, Duncan's lookin' for you."

"Thanks," Gene mumbled and made a hasty retreat, leaving Brad looking disappointed. Gene shook it off. After all, Gene concluded, Brad was just another person eager for gossip. Certainly, Gene didn't want to be the center of anyone's attention. He had enough attention as it was.

Thursday, September 24, 2099

Gene arrived five minutes early to the office of Bertha

Grills. The day had gone largely as yesterday had except with one major change: Rumors had begun to spread. Upon first walking the corridors that morning, he had overheard several under-breath conversations. Most of them seemed to be about *him*. When he was walking to lunch, he had distinctly heard someone refer to him as being the brilliant grandson of Commodore Haton of the eighth fleet. Another person referred to Gene as one of the kids that had been subject to failed youth-preserving genetic tests done twenty years ago. Though silently amused, Gene outwardly tried not to acknowledge any of the rumors.

Seeing as he would have to wait a few minutes, he read the notebook attached to the wall. The tablet had Bertha Grill's afternoon scheduled listed on it. To his surprise, he saw that Gwen was having a session at that very moment. Just as he finished reading, Gwen walked out of the office. "Hi Gene, you're next." Conspiratorially, she whispered, "The answers are yes, no yes, no, eight hours on most days, yes, no, sometimes, yes." Gwen noticed the schedule and glanced at it. "A whole hour?" she questioned. "Why does she need you that long?"

Gene shrugged his shoulders, though he thought he might know. "By the way, I'll meet you in the racquetball court right when this is over! I haven't played for several weeks. See ya!" she exclaimed. Gwen turned to the elevator and walked towards it at a brisk pace. Gene watched the elevator doors slide closed.

At that moment, he felt cold, plump, fingers wrap around his arm and turn him around. Gene immediately jumped back a step, glancing up to see who had startled him. A plump woman with a unibrow and shoulder-length, curly

hair dwarfed him. Dwarfed him, that is, in body mass—she was actually about the same height as Gene.

“So you’re Gene Haton,” the woman said from behind him.

Gene seriously considered denying it, but after a brief hesitation, quickly nodded his head. “Yes.”

“I’ve been wanting to see you for a while now,” she said. “Come in and lie down on the couch.” Gene followed her inside her office and took a seat on the couch. The room was warm and humid. Next to the couch was a desk with a tiny armchair behind it. Shelves lined the outside of her office, each with a variety of plants on them. Wooden sculptures of bugs on little stands stared at him from a variety of different angles. Grills further encouraged him to lie down, but he refused the offer.

“No thanks,” Gene said. “I feel more comfortable sitting.”

“Very well,” Bertha replied. “Have it your own way. I am Dr. Bertha Grills. Now do you know why you’re here?”

“I hope not,” Gene muttered. Bertha didn’t hear him so he said, “No.”

“Now, I’m not like most psychiatrists you’ve met,” Grills began proudly.

“How many do you think I’ve met?” Gene asked, but again Grills didn’t seem to be listening.

“You see, I believe some of the best approaches of the art have long been abandoned by those that consider themselves professional psychiatrists. My father is one of these, yet he was open-minded to new techniques, or should I say, revived techniques.” Grills chuckled to herself. “The mind is a fascinating object you know. Of course it is imperfect like all living things, but if tempered and refined

it can be turned into something great. But, as I mentioned, the mind is extremely flawed and subject to problems just like any other part of the body. And it's nothing to be ashamed of, for heaven's sake.

"But let's not beat around the bush for long, Gene. I'm told that you had an incident with your father," Bertha said, squeezing her body into the poor chair behind the desk.

"Yeah, I had a lot of incidents with Dad," Gene replied steadily.

"Many incidents?"

"Of course, don't most kids?" Gene asked.

"No, Gene. When I said 'incidents' I was referring to a problem. Tell me about the problem with your father."

At that instant, Gene realized that Grills was dying to know his story firsthand. Gene intended to deny her that pleasure. "What kind of a problem?"

"Well, a . . ." her voice trailed off. "A physical problem."

"I agree," he said.

"Agree?"

"Yes, Dad did have a problem," Gene said. "Maybe you should call him in." Gene started to rise but Grills frantically motioned at him to sit back down. Biting his tongue, Gene sat back down on the green couch.

"Would you like to take it from the top?" she asked.

"Not particularly," Gene answered.

"Why not? A burden shared is a burden halved."

"I wouldn't want to burden you," Gene said.

"Gene, I'm used to hearing this sort of thing," Grills answered in sympathetic tones. "You can trust me." Not daring to trust her for a moment, Gene shifted in his seat. "Fine, we'll get to that later." Then as though reading from a

list, she asked, "Would you care to tell me about your love life?"

"I'm fifteen-years-old!" Gene declared indignantly. "I don't *have* a 'love life.'"

"Oh, certainly you must," Grills said, eagerly scribbling something on her paper.

"Mom doesn't allow us to date until we're sixteen, and then only—"

"So it's been secret?" Grills interrupted.

"*It*' hasn't been anything," Gene blurted. "I obey my mom."

"I'll be having a talk with her about that. . . ." Grills muttered. Then she mumbled something like, "These things ought not be discouraged." To Gene's surprise, Grills changed subject at lightning speed. "Have you had any peculiar dreams lately?"

"Yes, actually," he answered. After all, answering 'No' hadn't gotten him anywhere.

"Would you care to tell me about it?" she asked.

Gene glanced at the clock, trying to imagine up a dream he might have had recently. "Well, my sister had invited her friends over to our house on Earth."

"How many?" she asked.

"Uh, I can't remember. Four or five. Anyway, I was bored so I sat outside my sister's room, eavesdropping. She and her friends were plotting to take over the world."

"How did she plan to do that?" Grills questioned.

"Rubber ducks," he replied absentmindedly. "They were plotting to conquer the earth with rubber ducks."

Grills looked strangely interested and began writing stuff feverishly in her notepad. Gene looked at the clock

again. Fifty-five more minutes.

Gene appeared in the racquetball court an hour and a half later, thoroughly annoyed. Gwen sensed this and asked him why.

90
“I’ve just spent a whole *hour* making up dreams to tell Grills about,” Gene replied. “She thinks I am psychologically ill or something.”

“D’you know Lieutenant Jacobson?” Gwen asked. Gene shook his head, no. “She’s the helm officer on the bridge. Anyway, I was talking to her about my visit, and she says that Grills is dying to treat someone for being mentally ill.”

“Yeah, well she must have found a good patient in me,” Gene said. “She wants me to visit her every Thursday at 19:00 for counseling sessions. Either I need to find some way out of it or I need to start sleeping and having ten different dreams a night.”

“Jacobson told me that Grills is real big on the ‘sleep’ issue,” Gwen stated. “Once, when Mom was stressed out, she wrote a prescription or something for her to get eight hours of sleep before she could work again. Jacobson said it made Mom furious to be bossed around like that.”

Gene picked a ball out of the white duffel bag that Gwen had brought to the court and picked up his racquet. “I did get something interesting out of it, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Grills left the room for a moment so I . . .” Gene stooped over his backpack and pulled out a tablet. “. . . scanned her notebook onto my tablet. I was afraid she’d catch me, but I got a good thirty seconds to myself which was plenty of

time.”

“You didn’t!” Gwen said excitedly. “What did she say about me?” Gwen asked.

“I don’t know,” Gene said. “I didn’t have time to read it before she came back.”

Gwen snatched the tablet out of Gene’s hand. She began playing with buttons for a minute before she started to read aloud. “Gwen Renee Lee. Boring girl—barely a brain between her ears’ So that’s what she thought of me.” Gwen laughed as Gene stared.

“You don’t care?” he asked.

“What a waste of my time!” Gwen laughed harder. “Let’s see what she had to say about *you!*” She pushed several more buttons. “Gene Samuel Lee. Seriously disturbed individual with very little confidence in those around him. Obviously has severe social issues. . . .” her voice faded out as she read the report to herself. “You said you told her about dreams? Gene, what did you tell her?”

“I don’t know,” Gene responded. “I just made up stuff. Something ridiculous that she couldn’t make anything out of.”

“Well she thinks that you’re afraid of the future, that you feel excluded . . . she really thinks you’re messed up! How funny!”

Gene tossed the ball into the air and began bouncing it off of his racquet. “Well I’m not going Thursday. I have much better things to do with my time. I’ll just have to figure out before then what those are.”

“Maybe you should ask Mom to get you out of it,” Gwen suggested.

“She can’t,” Gene said. “Besides, Mom has been trying

to get me to go to a psychiatrist for months. She probably thinks I'm sick too."

"Oh, come on! Get a grip. Of course she doesn't think that!" Gwen said. Then tenderly she added, "But what do *you* think?"

Gene's ball bounced off his racquet and onto the ground. "I'm still having nightmares about Dad," Gene admitted, staring at the ball as it rolled away from him on the floor. "Of me shooting him. . . ."

"Gene, you can't blame yourself," Gwen comforted. "You were defending yourself. Anyone would have done what you did."

"I shot a mostly helpless man, Gwen! I shot my dad! He was drunk and—"

"And he gave you this Gene!" Gwen lifted Gene's shirt four inches to reveal a long scar on his stomach.

"He wasn't in his right mind," Gene said.

"Obviously not, but you—"

"I'm not really in the mood to play right now, Gwen. Maybe I'll go run the track."

Just as he was about to exit, Gwen called out to him and he paused. "Gene, *his* wounds were healed within a couple weeks at the hospital. *Your* wound is still festering." Gene left the court.

Intimates

Friday, September 25, 2009

“Where’s Gene Haton?” someone shouted angrily from the other side of the mess hall. Gene looked up and saw Duncan pointing a big blond man towards him.

“He’s over there!” Duncan said. The man started stalking towards Brad, Paul, and Gene, looking extremely angry.

“It’s Bill Snyders!” Brad exclaimed. He then turned to Gene and said, “Remember he’s Agemian. Ya’ gotta insult him to get his respect.”

“What?”

“Just insult him. Believe me, they like it!”

“You’re Haton?” the man shouted at him.

“Uh huh.”

“You’ve been lying about me behind my back!”

“What?”

“You’re too stupid to play stupid so don’t even try!”

“I wasn’t talking about—”

”How many Bill Snyders do you think live on this ship?” he hollered.

”I never said–”

”Don’t you tell me what you did or didn’t say! That guy right there told me all about it!” Snyders pointed at Duncan. Duncan turned red, muttered that he needed to do something and fled. Snyders didn’t seem to notice. ”Do you think you can get away with it?!”

”*Yeah . . . Um . . . No,*” Gene said.

Brad kicked him and mouthed, ”Insult him!”

”. . . you twerp,” Gene added half-heartedly, unable to make eye contact with the man.

”What did you call me?”

”Uh . . . you heard me you. . . .” Gene strained for another insult. ”Lunkhead.”

The man grabbed him by his uniform and hoisted him out of his seat. ”If you don’t watch your tongue, you’ll get it yanked out.”

A little scared now, Gene wondered if he should continue his roommates’ tactic. Brad made a motion for him to keep it up. ”Yeah right.”

Snyder punched him in the mouth and shoved him back into his chair. Immediately, Brad’s encouraging smile vanished and he leapt to his feet. ”*Oye*, hold on!”

”Watch your mouth or I won’t be so nice next time!” Snyders sneered at Gene.

”Apologize or I won’t be so nice this time!” Brad shouted.

”And what are you going to do about it, scrawny?”

Brad threw a punch at him which he deflected before taking a swing of his own. Brad was knocked back onto the table only to jump back and smack the guy in the head with

his hands clenched together. Gene lost track of fists as the two continued brawling, knocking over a table next to the one where Gene and Paul sat watching.

"Mr. Snyder, Mr. Fuentes, stop!" a voice commanded. Brad and Snyders immediately stopped and looked up to see a very displeased Commander Lee looking down on them.

"I can't believe you allowed that to happen!" Gene's mother shouted at him. "You drew attention to yourself unnecessarily. Do you have any idea what problems could have been caused?"

After waiting outside his mother's office through both Brad and Snyder's reprimand, it was now Gene's turn to receive his mother's rebuke.

"But Commander, I didn't start it!"

"Fights don't start themselves!"

"Mo-Commander, when have I ever done anything like this—ever?"

Mom breathed in and let out her breath slowly. "I know. But why were you insulting him in the first place?"

"They told me Agemians like to be insulted."

There was a brief pause and then, to Gene's surprise, his mother started laughing. "Gene, Snyder's not Agemian! He's from New Zealand."

"What?!"

"Didn't the name clue you in at all? Bill is a very English name."

"But Duncan was sure he was from Agemio!"

"And even so, Agemians don't like to be insulted. That's

the kind of misunderstanding that caused us to have such terrible relations with that particular planet. Their culture frowns on people with a weak character—that's far from liking to be insulted."

"Mom, I'm not sure if I can do this," Gene told her, unsettled.

"Gene, I'm afraid you must. There's no turning back now." Mom looked at him and said, "Ask any crewman on board—the worst weeks are always the first. After that, everything will start to seem normal to you. I'm afraid I will have to give you a punishment though—if not it will arouse attention."

"I understand," Gene said dejectedly.

"I'll consult with the captain and let all three of you know," Lee said standing. "You'll feel better after a hot shower and a good meal. You're dismissed, Crewman Haton."

Gene got up and walked to the door which opened for him.

"Gene," his mother said. "I am proud of you. You're doing fine."

"Thanks Mom," Gene said before allowing the door to close.

"What was that all about?" Brad asked, startling him.

"What?" Gene asked.

"Did you just call her Mom?"

"Of course not!" Gene answered.

Brad looked really confused for a moment before apparently shrugging it off.

"She told me that Snyders isn't Agemian."

Brad rolled his eyes. "Great."

"By the way," Gene started somewhat awkwardly. "Thanks."

"Oye, Gene, you don't have to thank me. You're my amigo."

Gene was taken aback. "Thanks," he said, unable to think of anything else to say.

Brad smiled. "Where'd you say you were from?"

"Idaho."

"Aren't there any good girls in Idaho?"

Now Gene smiled—back to the girls subject again, "There's plenty. I'll go find myself a nice girl in a couple years. I just don't want to do it now."

"Fair enough," Brad said as they entered a lift. "Meanwhile, if Duncan finds one you take a liking to, don't be shy."

"Where you from?" Gene asked to change the subject.

"Peru!" Brad answered with zealous pride.

"Do you speak Spanish then?"

"Por supuesto!" The lift doors opened and they continued towards their quarters.

"Right," Gene said, not understanding what he said. "What's it like in Peru?"

"Brad! Gene!" someone called. They both turned to see Duncan waving at them. "Guess what—I just found out that Snyders isn't from Agemio. He's from Sobiem!"

Neither Gene nor Brad felt too friendly towards Duncan the rest of that day.

Gene arrived for his first communications class slightly late. Lieutenant Niels had ended his defense class precisely

on time, but Gene had chosen to stay for some extra practice. He was starting to get to the point where he could hit the target dead on about 25 percent of the time. Definite improvement though he doubted any real life targets would be holding still with a target plastered to their chest.

His tardiness was of no ill consequence, however. Lieutenant Taylor arrived about two minutes after him, smiling as though there was nowhere else in the universe she'd rather be. "Sorry, Mr. Haton," she said hastily. "I was carried away in a conversation with Ms. Maxfield. Seems her husband on earth has caught a nasty case of the flu.

"Now, you wanted to have a flyby course in Communications, correct?" Gene just about shook his head no, but thought better of it. Quite frankly, there was a host of other things he'd rather be doing. After a momentary pause, Gene inclined his head in assent. "Excellent, I can teach you everything you need to know. First of all, let's see what we have to work with. I want you to imagine I am a civ wanting to speak to someone aboard." She paused expectantly.

"What?" Gene asked, confused.

"I am a civilian wanting to talk to someone. You've just opened a link with me, show me what you're going to do."

"Uh," Gene began lamely. "FMC *Crescent*, Crewmen Haton speaking."

"No, no, no, Mr. Haton," Taylor sighed shaking her head. "Do you want to be a great communications officer?" Again this was a place where Gene felt like saying, "No, actually I'd rather go to high school like ordinary people," but settled on a nod of his head. Taylor continued energetically, "If you want to be a good communications officer, you have to smile at the person, show some humanity towards them."

"What does it matter?" Gene complained. "It's not like we're ever going to speak to them again."

"Perhaps not, but you can either leave a good impression with the person or you can leave them feeling like they've talked with a machine," Taylor countered. "Now show me a smile."

Gene tried weakly to grin. His attempt earned him a giggle from Taylor.

"Your first homework assignment, Mr. Haton, is to smile at every person you talk to. Understood?"

Gene nodded his head, submissively. "But isn't it more important that I know how to use the computers and know the policies than just a bunch of etiquette stuff?"

"Being able to communicate effectively is the basic skill of the job, Mr. Haton. You must learn the basics before you apply them. Remember, these are people you are talking to, not machines. You need to speak with confidence without sounding arrogant. You must know when to listen and when to speak. In all things there is a balance."

"Why can't we just use normal phones?" Gene interjected quickly.

"Actually, we're supposed to be a deterrent to pranksters." Taylor began. "What's more, Captain Blake has recently warned . . . well just have your wits about you when you answer. Try again Mr. Haton. More cheerful this time."

Half a moment before he started, his eyes unexpectedly sparked. "FMC *Crescent*, I'm Crewman Haton." Then imitating Gwen, Gene exaggerated every single word of his next sentence. "Which of *Crescent's* charming crew members would you like to speak to today? I am all ears."

"Bravo," Lieutenant Taylor musically laughed, clapping

her hands. “I never thought you had it in you.”

Having gone extremely red, Gene mumbled, “Yeah, well, I figured it’d be easier to tell me where to back off instead of telling me where to increase.”

“I want you to use that same energy on everyone you talk to from now on,” Taylor said. “Just subtract the sarcasm and the cheesiness and you should be fine. That’s enough of the communication aspect. For your sake we’ll switch to the technical aspect of communications.

The rest of the lesson was spent on teaching Gene to use the equipment for the outgoing communications. Gene was a lot more subdued for the rest of the lesson, having felt he had disclosed too much earlier. However, he found that he enjoyed being with Taylor, no matter how extroverted she seemed to be.

Saturday, September 26, 2099

“Ensign Meyers?” Gene asked, typing the name into his computer and glancing up at the clock. Two more hours left! After reading the report on the screen, Gene said, “She is actually working on the bridge right now.”

“Then transfer me there!” the young man, Trent Howers, demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Gene said. “Only the commanding officers are allowed to take personal calls while on the bridge.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Howers scoffed. “Let me see her!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Gene repeated in as patient a voice as he could manage. “You have to wait until her shift ends in two hours.”

"This is outrageous! Let me talk to her now or I'll talk to your superior," the man snapped pretentiously.

"I can't let you see her now, sir," Gene said.

"All you military people are the same! If you don't get her for me right now, I can give all of you a bunch of trouble."

"Listen, *mister*," Brad interrupted before Gene could respond. "Treat my friend with respect or I'll disconnect you myself. If I were him I'd have cut the line already."

"This is outrageous," Howers repeated. "I demand to talk to your superior!"

"You've got her!" A new voice contested from behind the two. Lieutenant Taylor's normally cheerful voice was icy.

"A woman? That explains a lot," the man said. "I demand to talk to Ensign Meyers!"

"You are not in any position to demand *anything* mister! My two crewmen are doing their jobs as they've been trained. I have—"

"You'll let me talk to her or—"

"Interrupt me again and you won't be allowed to talk to her or anyone else on—"

Howers swore at her. Immediately Taylor pushed a button on Gene's console causing the man to disappear. "What was that man's name, Mr. Haton?"

"Trent Howers," Gene answered.

Turning to the rest of the room, she announced, "Until further notice, Trent Howers has been unofficially black-listed. None of you will accept audio or visual communications from him or his household. I'll make the formal request as soon as possible." Turning to Gene and Brad, she said, "Mr. Haton, Mr. Fuentes, you can have the rest of the day off. Also, Mr. Fuentes, let Mr. Haton handle

his own problems.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Brad said.

Taylor continued. “Mr. Haton, you don’t have to take that filth from anyone. Next time someone treats you like that, go ahead and cut him off.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Gene mumbled before following Brad out the door. The two walked out of the CC and entered a lift.

After a few moments, Brad said, “You don’t have to let anyone do that to you. He had no right to go at you like that. Next time just cut the line.”

“But he might’ve sued us or something,” Gene started.

“They can’t sue you for that!”

“Oh.” Gene said, hoping to end discussion on the subject. The lift came to a stop on the level where their living quarters were located.

“Have anything planned for tonight?” Brad asked, as though to end the silence.

“That depends,” Gene began carefully.

“Depends? On what?”

“Will you tell Duncan my answer?”

“I dunno, maybe,” Brad said.

“Then I’m going to be completely and inexcusably busy tonight.” Brad laughed, but stopped short. “What?” Gene asked. Brad pointed towards the corridor which crossed a distance in front of them. Two men in officer’s uniforms were strolling together. Gene recognized one of them as Captain Blake. Brad helped him identify the other.

“That’s Commodore Pardoe!” Brad muttered excitedly. “That’s the guy who commands the fleet! What do you think he’s doing here?”

“No clue,” Gene responded.

King's Pawn

It was one of the strangest phenomenons that Gene had ever seen. Brad's face suddenly lit up, his eyes widening with excitement. "Gene, let's follow them!" he exclaimed and quickened his pace in an attempt to match that of the two officers.

Gene looked back at him as though he were mad. "Brad, they're *officers*. That's stalking!"

"I know, but do you have anything better planned?" Brad asked him hopefully.

But Gene had stopped listening. He had distinctly heard the name "Mr. Lee" mentioned by the two older men whose conversation was now within ear shot. Making his voice sound as reluctant as possible, he said, "Fine."

". . . confident that he's safe," Blake was saying. "All of the cafeteria food is constantly scanned for poisons, and as I will show you in a minute, his quarters are more secure than yours. I don't think we need to have him tailed by security."

"But the threat is growing, captain," the commodore countered.

"Aye, it is," Captain Blake agreed. "My suspicions are growing that we have a traitor on board. The sooner we get Gene to the Mind Hospital the better."

Brad looked right at Gene with a startled expression. Gene turned pale but ignored him for the present.

"I think you place too much trust in your first," Pardoe suggested, almost timidly.

"I trust no one more than I do Commander Lee, Sir," Blake said defiantly. The two turned a corner into the hallway with Gene's quarters. "Except my wife."

"Exactly," the commodore chimed. "Too much trust in one person almost always leads to catastrophe."

“Sir, he’s her son.”

“People will do many things if the price is right. Be wary, captain,” the younger officer said.

“This is it,” Captain Blake indicated to him.

“You’re sure that no one will walk in on us?” Pardoe asked.

“He’s on duty, and his other roommates have violated several hygiene protocols so I set them to work scrubbing energy conduits on deck H.”

Pardoe grinned, “You have an evil streak to you, captain.”

Blake also smiled, “To begin the tour, anyone who enters this room is automatically identified by the computer and the name is sent to my security head.” The captain followed him inside, leaving Brad looking clueless and Gene stunned.

“Wait, Gene, explain that again,” Brad said, waving his hands. “So the Commander is your *Mom*?”

“Yes,” Gene confirmed patiently. “They told me that she had some enemies out to get me.”

“Well it fits,” Brad mused, taking a seat on the lounge sofa. “Karch does go after the first born of the guilty in a family. At least, when the guilty person isn’t available. But don’t you think that this is all a little extreme?”

“Yeah, I never wanted to do it in the first place.” Gene said. “If I hadn’t been abducted, I would—”

“Abducted?”

Gene sighed, then explained the story to him as briefly as necessary details would permit. When he was finished, Brad was quiet for a bit. “Something doesn’t fit with that.”

“Well *I* figured that out,” Gene said. “Do you know

anything about a mind hospital?"

"All I know is that Falvayah just opened their first mind hospital in about fifteen years on Independence Base. Duncan and Paul were debating it."

"Debating it?"

"Yeah, Duncan's for it, Paul's against it. About fifteen years ago, mind study was banned because it became immorally advanced."

"Oh yeah, Mom was telling me about that," Gene recalled. "Something about some mad guy that tried to control a bunch of people's minds. So why do they want me at a mind hospital?" Gene asked.

"I dunno," Brad paused again before saying. "You aren't sick with anything are you?"

"Not that I know of," Gene said. "But do mentally sick people know they're sick?"

"You're not ill," Brad concluded. "It must be something else. Maybe they have something else at the mind hospital for you. So it was your little brother that your Dad beat up?"

Gene was taken off guard. Should he tell Brad the truth? He knew almost everything else. "No, it was me."

"But I heard the kid was younger."

"He was," Gene said.

It took all of two seconds for the two pieces of information to come together for Brad. "You mean you're sixteen?"

"Fifteen," Gene corrected. "That's why I can't date. I'm not allowed to until I'm a year older."

"Gee," Brad intoned. "I thought my life was bad as a teenager."

"Whose life?" Duncan popped out of nowhere, a girl in

arm.

“Never mind,” Brad piped. “Where have you been? And who’s this?”

Duncan scowled. “Captain Blake just randomly walked up to Paul and I this morning and sent us to clean energy conduits.”

“How come?” Brad asked, laughing.

“Because we didn’t shave this morning,” Duncan mumbled.

“Hey, I heard that beards can carry some diseases,” Brad told him.

Duncan’s eyes widened for a moment then he said, “We’ll discuss that later. But Gene Haton, I’d like you to meet Cassie Herod.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Gene stammered.

Cassie looked at him sympathetically. “Duncan’s told me so much about you.”

“Great,” Gene murmured inaudibly.

“Anyway, Haton, I was thinking maybe you’d like to join me for an evening of fun-filled frivolity.”

“I’m sorry,” Gene answered, wondering what possible excuse he could use to get out of this one.

“Sorry?” Cassie repeated.

“I, uh,” Gene began lamely.

“Gene’s joined our Lirpa team,” Brad said over him. “He’s going to be busy practicing with us tonight.”

Cassie looked slightly disappointed while Duncan looked as though he might verbally rip Brad to shreds once they were alone. “Well, I have to get to work,” Cassie said awkwardly and left.

“But I thought you were going to ask Rasmussen to

King's Pawn

cover the empty spot," Duncan said exasperated.

"I guess I changed my mind," Brad said.

"But the tournament is in less than a week! He won't have time to train! Then after that the tournament might go on for weeks!"

"I know," Brad said. "I know."

Brad plugged his nose and reached again into the dark hole. Commander Rogers stood a short distance away, supervising the cleaning of each human waste pipe. Gene highly doubted the chore even needed to be done but nevertheless, his mother had informed them late the previous evening that they would be spending the next afternoon removing the pipes, wiping them clean, then placing them back in the wall. This was the promised punishment for yesterday's brawl. Gene had his own five-foot long stretch of pipe and was pulling a brownish-yellow colored rag out of it, covered with a small layer of darkHave it your own way. you get the idea.

"Once those two pipes are back in their places, we'll call it good," Commander Rogers said.

"How does a 40-second long fight justify a four-hour clean-up job?" Brad muttered under his breath to Gene.

"Do you want to keep going Fuentes?"

"No sir."

"Good, I'm sick of it too," Rogers muttered.

Gene held a flashlight up to the pipe and peered inside. It looked clean enough to him. He slid it into place and turned it clockwise, locking it. Brad also looked his pipe over and replaced it in the wall. Gene then put the wall

panel back into place, concealing the different pipes and electrical panels made up the veins and nervous system of the Crescent.

“May we go now?” Brad asked.

“You may.”

Rogers accompanied them to the end of the corridor where he entered the lift on the right while Brad and Gene took the lift to the left. The two boarded and took it up to the recreation deck. The Lirpa Court was about the size of a basketball court. The corner near him and the opposite corner were colored blue while the other set was red. In the middle a white diamond shape was painted. The rest of the floor was wood-colored. Brad was waiting for him with a blue jersey.

“Stick this on,” he said handing him the heavily padded jersey. “Now the rules are really simple. It comes from Erus which means the rules are less complicated. They don’t try to make a rule for every possible thing that might happen in a game. Your goal is to score more points than the other team before two hours are up. We take a fifteen minute break in the middle of the game to grab a drink and rest. It’s like halftime in football.”

“How do you score points?” Gene asked.

“By a single person holding the ball in your score-zone for ten seconds,” Brad responded. “The zones for us are the two blue corners. For the other team they’re the red corners. You can’t hold the ball for more than five seconds except when you’re in the zone.”

“So how do you move the ball around the court?”

“You can move the ball any way you want as long as you don’t let the ball go beneath four feet. If you hold the ball

underneath the four foot line, the computer will beep you and we have to turn over the ball.”

“So if I stand in the zone for twenty seconds do I score twice?”

“No, after you score you have to pass it to someone else and they have to take it to the other zone to score.”

“So a person can't score twice in a row?” Gene questioned.

“Nope,” Brad answered. “If you tackle someone on the other team, it's a forced turnover. You can only tackle a ball-holder. So avoid getting tackled.”

“Kay,” Gene consented. “I'll do my best.”

“I think that's it for the rules. Do you know Adam Fleshings?” he asked as the door to the court slid open revealing about three guys in padded red jerseys.

“No,” Gene said.

“I've asked him to play us tonight for practice,” Brad said. “I've told him this is your first game with us and you needed some practice. So we'll be starting in about ten minutes, as soon as everyone gets here. It's going to be nice having a full team again.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, seven other men meandered in. Three more wore red jerseys while the other four wore blue. Brad introduced the players wearing blue as Bruce, Eric, Aaron, and Ape. Bruce was probably in his late forties, but seemed fit just the same. Eric was about six feet tall with brown hair. Aaron was about the same age as Eric but about four inches shorter. Ape was definitely the largest of the team, making his nickname obvious. Once everyone was ready, the man named Adam Fleshings said, “Are we playing a whole game?”

“No, I figure we’d better start with just an hour,” Brad said. Calling out to the voice system, he said, “Computer, hour-long game with three time-outs per team.” The call for time-outs seemed to draw complaints from both teams but Brad held firm. The teams gathered in their zones three players per zone and Fleshings placed the ball in the center diamond.

At the shout of go, by instinct the two teams sprinted for the ball. Gene followed their example, unsure of how to go about the game. A huge blond from the red team immediately grabbed the ball and passed it to someone in his zone. The computer immediately began counting down from ten. The counting was halted as Aaron knocked the ball out of his hands and tossed it to Gene who was in one of the blue corners. Gene was immediately smashed to the ground by the large blond from the other team. The computer announced “Team Blue mandatory turnover to Team Red.”

The blond man snatched up the ball which was already rolling towards one of the corners as Brad helped Gene up. Feeling lightheaded and remembering why he hated sports, Gene took a moment to regain his balance before getting back into the game. The big blond had passed it to Fleshings who in turn passed it to a black-haired man. This man held the ball in his red zone for the first score while his teammates blocked for him. But as he was throwing it to the blond, Brad intercepted it and passed it to Aaron. Aaron caught in and held it for another score, tying the game. Then he passed it to Ape who passed it to Gene. Gene passed it to Bruce who was tackled by the black-haired man. For the second time, the computer said, “Team Blue mandatory

King's Pawn

turnover to Team Red.”

The black-haired man took the ball from Bruce. Gene rushed the man, grabbing his legs. But the man barely regained his balance. The man was a lot larger than Gene and began dragging him to his own zone. After a couple seconds of holding on, the man passed it away to Fleshings and Gene let go. Pulling himself to his feet, he ran towards the Red Zone where the blond man stood waiting for the ball to be tossed to him. Fleshings tossed the ball his way but Gene leapt up and caught it before the blond man could get it. However, when Gene came down, he let his arm with the ball drop below his waist. The computer repeated its call.

An hour and a half later, the men exited the court. The red team had won, 47-37. Gene didn't score. Though Brad fed him positive reinforcement all the way back to their quarters, knowing that the team had won five of the last seven matches against that team didn't help to raise his spirits. Duncan and Paul had yet to arrive back to their quarters but both Brad and Gene felt utterly exhausted. The two collapsed upon their beds. The last thought that floated through Gene's head as he drifted off was, "I hate sports." Then he was gone.

Intoxication

Monday, September 28, 2009

At about 3:00 Monday morning, the ship's speaker system blared that the ship had reached Independence Base. Normally this announcement might have filled Gene with excitement, but at three o'clock in the morning there was very little that could accomplish that. What *did* excite him was the announcement that he heard later that morning. They were allowed two days of shore leave before going back to space. That meant that the ship would function on a skeleton crew for the time they were there. Gene and Brad's shift wouldn't be until 20:00 that evening and it would only be two hours long. However, two of their roommates didn't seem to share their enthusiasm.

"I think they could allow us more than two days of shore leave," Duncan was whining as the four were eating in the cafeteria. "I mean come on. It's not like the diplomats are going anywhere."

King's Pawn

"You just had a month of shore leave two weeks ago, Duncan," Paul snapped. "I don't see why we have to stop at all. Get the job over with, that's what I say."

Brad and Gene glanced at each other. Then Brad whispered something to him as Duncan rebuffed, "You just want to start fighting."

Suddenly Brad said boisterously, "How about those Yankees? I think they're going to win the Championship this year, don't you Paul?"

"Of course they are!" Paul snapped then turned back to Duncan. "Are you implying that I want to fight?"

"Why else would you be supporting—"

"No, I think the Red Sox are going to win the NFL," Gene said very loudly over the end of Duncan's retort. All three men turned to look at Gene, who immediately tried to correct himself. "I mean, the NBA."

"You think that the Red Sox, the best baseball team in North America, is going to be the champion of the National *Basketball* Association?" Duncan asked incredulously.

"Dimwit, the Red Sox couldn't beat a little league team," Paul snapped back at him. Brad and Gene left the cafeteria as Duncan and Paul began a new and equally vehement argument about sports.

"The NBA?" Brad asked skeptically as the door slid closed behind them.

"Sports aren't my thing," Gene mumbled. "What do I care if Billy from Brunswick can throw a ball into a little hoop on a stick from a line twenty feet back?"

"Because its stinkin' veridical, that's why," Brad answered back.

"It's just another excuse for people to expect others to

worship them,” Gene replied.

“Don’t you think that’s a little harsh?”

“I guess so,” Gene said distractedly. “Have any plans for today?”

“I thought about taking out an SRV,” Brad said. “Wanna come?”

“What’s an SRV?” Gene asked curiously.

“A Short-range Vessel,” Brad answered. “They use them mostly to get people from ship to ship. Though they’re used for battle once in a while. But on shore leave they can be used for fun. The computer navigates until we are far enough away from any ships. We just have to get to a place where we won’t be in danger of hitting anything.”

“Sounds okay,” Gene said,

The two promptly made their way down to one of the SRV bays. Brad flirted with the young woman sitting in the security booth who let them take out a sleek black SRV.

Brad drove first to demonstrate how to pilot the ship. Though Brad wasn’t by any account an amazing driver, it was the most fun Gene could remember having in a while. When Gene took command of the helm, it was with a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and nausea. After a few minutes, however, the latter two emotions had melted away to be overcome by the first.

“Do they let citizens do this?” Gene asked.

“I think so,” Brad said. “If not, nobody told my brother. Either that or he didn’t care.”

“Your brother?”

“Santiago. He used to take me out when I was twelve,” Brad said with nostalgia. “He raised me you know”

“What about your parents?” Gene probed, turning hard

to the right.

"My Dad died in the war and Mom died giving birth to me," Brad said, his face falling slightly. "I lived in her father's house, but my grandfather and I weren't good friends. He hates me."

"She died in child birth?" Gene questioned, looking away from the controls; death in childbirth never happened.

"The doctor's can't explain it," Brad sighed. "I've come to terms with it, though."

"How?"

"I'm not worth anything more or less than my Mom," Brad answered simply. "I feel sad when I think about it, but my father said she wanted me to live. I fulfilled her last life's wish. Now I want to live my life to re-Gene *lookout!*" Gene narrowly missed hitting another SRV which suddenly appeared then disappeared in front of him.

"Idiot," Brad muttered. "People shouldn't run under screen out here."

"Screen?"

"It blocks the ship from sensors, but usually SRVs don't have them."

A second later, a light started blinking on the dashboard accompanied by a familiar beeping noise. Someone was trying to call them. Brad punched the button. A man appeared on the projector in front of him. "SRV T97029; all Short Range Vessels are required to return to base."

"Why-?"

"Your unit chief has been informed of the situation and will explain," the man answered irritated. The man abruptly severed the communication.

Brad called the *Crescent* and was met by Duncan's face

on the projector. “Duncan, why are we turning back in?”

“They think they saw a pack of raiders. There have been a lot of them around here lately.”

“Can we go to Independence instead of *Crescent*?”

“Yeah, as long as you’re back at your post for duty tonight.”

“Thanks, Fuentes out,” Brad said. “Want to go explore Independence?”

“Sure,” Gene replied. “It’s not like I have anything better to do.” As soon as they got within a kilometer of Independence, the computer took over and safely navigated them to a port.

Independence Base was huge. The level they docked on was like a large mall; despite the impending war, busy shops lined the corridors and “courtyards”. There were stations orbiting Earth that were twice as large, but the clash of contrasting cultures made Independence unique. All of the signs included both Earth and Erus scripts. Soldiers from Erus strutted about the corridors proudly in their Gold tunics, black slacks and sash.

Though neither of them had enough money to buy souvenirs, they enjoyed seeing the interesting products from other cultures. They followed a weary-looking Commander Rogers and Dr. Grills (Gene maintained a cautious distance behind the latter) into a restaurant. Apparently, the bar was a popular haunt for members of *Crescent*’s crew. Sitting with another lady they saw Lieutenant Taylor happily chatting. Brad greeted several friends with a cheerful wave as they looked for seats. They found Paul sitting at a table and as they sat down next to him, he hid something quickly under the table. Not fooled, Brad asked what it was.

King's Pawn

"None of your business," Paul snapped angrily.

"Just asking," Brad said. "Don't freak out."

"Can I get you anything?" a young waitress asked kindly.

"I'd like a coffee," Brad said.

"Could I have a Root Beer?" Gene asked.

"Uh, yeah," the waitress said, writing both orders down.

"Haven't gotten an order for one of those for a long time."

"Thanks," Gene muttered as the waitress walked away.

At a near table, he saw that Grills had taken a seat next to Rogers and was now trying to interrogate him. With slight amusement, he pointed them out to the other two guys at his table.

"I'm fine, really I am," Rogers was saying impatiently.

"You always look *so* tired, Commander," Grills replied.

"How long did you spend sleeping last night?"

"I get enough sleep."

"Has a near relative died recently?" Grills pestered, pulling a familiar notebook and pen out of her large orange bag.

"My family's in good health, I assure you." Rogers said grumpily.

"Or perhaps it was a pet that died? Was it a dog or a cat? Or maybe a loyal fish?"

Brad and Gene snorted with laughter. Unfortunately Grills must have heard them and abandoned the annoyed second officer to his drink. Just as she was about half-way to their table, someone else bounced up and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Bertha! I haven't been in to see you for ages! I suppose that could be considered good though." Lieutenant Taylor laughed jovially.

"Afternoon Brynn," Grills said stiffly. "I thought you had your duty shift right now."

"Ah, normally I would but they're running on skeleton crew right now so I thought I'd skip along down here," Taylor responded.

"Wonderful," Grills replied, sounding slightly exasperated.

"Did you lose weight?" Taylor suddenly asked.

"Funny you should ask that," Grills said, her voice suddenly losing all trace of coldness. "As a matter of fact, I have been on that new Ray Bends weight program for a whole week!"

"Your clothes look so baggy!" Taylor exclaimed impressed, apparently not noticing that half of Grill's buttons were dangerously close to popping. Gene could have sworn that Taylor flashed the two of them a mischievous smile as Grills went into a colorful explanation of the program she was on.

Paul turned grumpily back around. When a different waitress came back several minutes later with the drinks, Paul complained about the "foolish" civilians who yet remained at Independence, despite the advised evacuation. Brad was spared some of the mumbling when he received a call from home and left to find a quieter place to take it.

Paul, evidently bored, got up to leave and said, "Haton, do you want my drink?"

"Nah, I'm fine with this," Gene said.

Paul left Gene alone in search of entertainment. Watching Paul leave, Gene noticed someone sitting alone in a corner, reading a tablet and sipping from a small mug. Gene was astonished how Mr. Niels could not be seen when

he wished to be left alone. Gene envied that sort of talent.

Feeling really tired, he gulped down the rest of his root beer and pulled out his tablet. Ever since he had begun duty, he hadn't made much headway on reading his textbook. So he selected Chapter 13: Replying to Distress and began reading. He was finding it extremely difficult to comprehend this chapter. The noise around him seemed to be steadily increasing in his ears.

Finally, the sounds around Gene grew so loud, that he looked up from his tablet. Around him, everyone seemed to be running. Red lights were flashing all about the room. *What do the red lights mean?* He wondered as loud noises rocked the station. Slowly the answer came to him. *It means we're under attack. What should I do?* After a little bit, he remembered from somewhere that he was supposed to go to his battle station. That was back on his ship. Stumbling to his feet, he staggered across the floor to the door.

It was then that he heard a deafening screeching noise. Gene walked forward, bumping into people, trying to escape the noise. *The noise must be taking me to my battle station,* he thought. Gene swaggered down the hall, against the flow of traffic. Everything in his vision started blending together. Desperate to escape the noise and get to his battle station, Gene continued walking, bumping into people as he went.

"Gene," someone shouted, grabbing his arm. "Gene, are you alright? Gene!"

The noise began dying down.

"Bathel Stashin," he stammered, biting his tongue. As suddenly as it had come, the noise began dying down. Someone slapped him on the cheeks. His vision came into

focus for a few moments and he saw a man, but maybe he was more of a boy. *What was his name? Oh, it was Brad.*

“Haton, are you drunk?” asked another voice sternly.

“Mom, bathel stashin,” Gene replied to his mother who was glaring acutely at him. They didn’t understand, Gene had to tell them where he was going.

“Commander, he was just drinking Root Beer!”

“Help me, Fuentes,” his mother said quickly. Someone grabbed his arms and started dragging him back the way he came.

“Tha way, Mom” he demanded, pointing with his finger which had become astonishingly heavy. The people didn’t understand, they were taking him the wrong way. After struggling for a few minutes, he found it increasingly difficult to get his arms to do what he wanted them to. He needed to tell them to let him go. He needed to speak, but he found himself unable. Finally, his body went completely limp. It seemed he could still hear voices, but he could no longer understand what they were saying.

Gene’s eyes fluttered open. He heard his mother say, “Gene, can you understand me?” Gene nodded causing a dam of pain to break free in his forehead. Around his bed stood his mother, Brad, Rogers, and Dr. Peters. “What’s going on?”

“You were poisoned, we don’t know who or how, but it caused your brain to lose control,” his mother said.

“Wait, what?” Gene demanded in a weak, yet, outraged voice. “Someone got me drunk?”

“Kate, you explain.”

King's Pawn

Kate held up a small metallic object between tweezers. "Somebody dropped this probe and a drug into your drink," Dr. Peters told him. "The drug dulled your senses and your reason."

"There was this awful noise," Gene recalled.

"Whoever it was also stuck a pitch amplifier in both of your ears," Peters explained.

"Huh?"

"Do you know those whistles that only dogs can hear?" Peters asked. Gene nodded. "With those amplifiers in your ears, your attacker could make a noise only *you* could hear. A noise that was driving you to wherever he wanted you to go."

"Or she," Gene's mother pointed out. "We have no idea who it was that assailed you.

"And where was I being taken?"

"We assume he was taking you to a shuttle. We've ordered a search of every ship docked at Independence but I suspect they're far away from the scene of the crime."

"What I don't understand is why we can't just go back into the security records to find out who did it," Peters said. "Aren't all rooms in military installations monitored in 3D?"

Rogers was quick to reply, "Not all rooms are monitored, just places where key operations are carried out, like the command center and engine room. Besides, the restaurant is privately owned. We can't require them to put up security cameras."

Not understanding any of that, Gene tried to ask his mother another question but she shushed him. "I've told Fuentes about the situation and he will explain further as he escorts you to your station."

“My station!” Gene exclaimed, alarmed.

“Your duty starts in half an hour.”

“Commander, can’t we say he was sick or injured or something?” Brad asked weakly.

“CMIA is inspecting the ship as we speak,” Lee said. “We can’t give them a chance to suspect anything. They are some of the most nauseatingly thorough people in the universe.”

“You expect me to go like this?” he asked, pointing to his throbbing head.

Lee handed her son a pain reliever to swallow. “Sorry, crewman. That’s all I can give you.”

It looked like Brad was about to argue more, but Gene had put his feet on the ground. With great effort, he pulled himself to his feet and headed towards the door. His head pounding, he strode out into the corridor, Brad right behind him. After about thirty seconds of walking, Gene said, “Well?”

“Well what?”

“She said you’d explain. Who attacked us?”

“Raider ships from Karch. They’ve been looting AFP merchant ships for months now. Sometimes they’ll attack a small patrol and attempt to steal a ship. But they’ve never attacked Independence before, and they’ve never come in such numbers. Usually it’s just four or five. I think they overestimated their strength, though. It only took about a half hour to ward them off. When they thought I wasn’t listening, Rogers told Lee that he thinks that they’re bounty hunters after you.”

“How many were there?”

“Thirteen.”

“He thinks that thirteen ships were after *me*?” Gene

asked incredulously.

"I don't buy their excuse," Brad told him. "I can't imagine anything your Mom could've done to get someone this mad at you. Why would they put a probe in your head if they just wanted revenge?"

"So after I went out what happened? Was anyone hurt?"

"Well, we took you immediately to the mind hospital here on the station," Brad continued. "Mom immediately sent for Dr. Peters. It's lucky we have her, they said she's one of the few people that actually specialized in the mind before that kind of research was closed. Signed on with us just a couple days before you came. They worked on you for about four hours."

"Was anyone hurt?" Gene repeated again.

"Not aboard the *Crescent*. Other ships got hit harder but on *Crescent* there were just a few bumps and bruises.

Gene looked slightly relieved. "What's CMIA?"

"It's the Civilian Military Inspection Agency," Brad explained.

"The what?"

"Well you know how the government is supposed to have those things to make sure it does its job right?"

"You mean checks and balances?" Gene suggested, sliding his card under a scanner to get aboard the shuttle.

"Yeah, those. Anyway, two years ago, a bunch of civs got together and decided they wanted to keep the military in check. Somehow they got government approval and now have free reign to inspect us and make sure we're not violating civilian rights. They've become the military's worst enemy, aside from Karch."

"So they just up and search anywhere they feel like?"

Gene questioned.

“Pretty much. So if we don’t brush our teeth right, it’s all over the news. The truth is, they don’t have any *real* power by themselves except to watch what we’re doing. But the media is always waiting for CMIA to drop them a line. I can’t believe they’re coming right after a battle though.”

Finding this all very hard to comprehend at the moment, Gene fell into silence. His curiosity was gnawing at him all of the trip back to *Crescent*, but his headache overrode his desire to ask any more questions. He didn’t know how it was that a headache could be affected by his walking, but with every step he felt pain ripple through his head. The pain reliever barely took the edge off the pain. Trying desperately not to let Brad or anyone else for that matter notice, he gritted his teeth and continued on.

Finally they made it back to the ship and exited the lift. To Gene’s great surprise, the communications center was busier than he’d ever seen it before. Although the day had started with only a skeleton crew, it seemed that everyone in the department was on duty and were busily responding that no one had been seriously injured on board. The second they walked in, Taylor pointed them towards the written communications station where they began filling out injury reports to send to headquarters on Earth. There were over forty-five that needed to be filled out.

After an hour, Taylor slowly started allowing those that wouldn’t normally be on duty to leave. A half hour later, only seven other people were working aside from Gene and Brad. By then, Gene’s migraine had lost its edge and became tolerable. It was at that point that Brad tapped Gene smartly on the shoulder.

King's Pawn

"Gene!" Brad exclaimed excitedly.

"What?" Gene asked, slightly peeved.

"I found out her name!"

"Whose name?" Gene asked.

"Remember that girl I asked you about? Well, it looks like she twisted her wrist in the battle," Brad said. "Anyway, her name is Gwen Harris and she works in the sensors department."

Upon hearing this, Gene decided he'd better break the news to him. "Uh, Brad?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you know Commander Lee's son had a twin sister?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, um . . ."

Suddenly a very wily voice said from behind them, "Working hard, are we boys?" Somehow, a woman had materialized behind them without being noticed. Her dark hair was cut just below the shoulders. Wearing a black suit with a white shirt, tie and dressy shoes, she almost looked more masculine than feminine. Yet there was a peculiar beauty about her. On her chest there was a pin which read "CMIA."

Her voice was distinctively deep and conveyed a sense of her self-confidence and intelligence. "Or maybe we were doing something else." She glanced at the injury report on Brad's screen with the picture of Gwen. "Peeping perhaps? I'll be sure to inform Ms . . ." she looked at the screen again. "Harris."

"Well if that will make you feel better go right on ahead." Brad tried to say confidently.

"Oh it would. Give me your cards," she said suddenly to

both of them. “Now.”

Brad handed her his card and Gene did the same. The lady scanned Brad’s under her tablet. “So, Pedro Fuentes, what have we been doing today? Driving an SRV for an hour? I hope you got authorization.”

“Yes, yes we did.” Brad responded a little nervously.

“I’ll be checking on that. Then you boarded Independence and nothing else is recorded for another two hours. What on Earth might you have been doing for two hours I wonder?”

“We were looking around,” Gene said impatiently.

“I see,” the woman said delicately. “Then you apparently paid a visit to the Mind hospital for *four hours*.” the woman looked up with interest. “What was that all about?”

“We were just visiting with some of the patients there.” Brad said.

“And you didn’t report to your battle station?”

“You expect us to load into an SRV and head to our ship in the middle of a battle?” Brad asked. “Transport SRVs are a bit vulnerable you know.”

“So you hid your faces in the hospital throughout the battle. That’s so much better.” She scanned Gene’s card under her tablet like she had Brad’s. “Well, it looks like you two have had pretty much the same day. I’ll be inquiring into your visit at the hospital, of course. The doctors hate to be bothered by military personnel.”

The woman, having never given her name, left them alone while she walked about questioning others. She checked the schedules of a few more people. Once Gene paused from his work to massage his forehead and a moment later found her breathing down his neck once again, chastising

him for being lazy. A minute after she turned around, Brad leaned over to him and whispered, "Try pinching the skin in between your thumb and index finger. It helps with headaches."

Gene tried this and found that it helped a little. Whenever he was sure the woman wasn't looking, he took a break and pinched some relief up to his head. Minutes before his shift was over, he was relieved when the woman thanked them all for their cooperation and left the room.

A few minutes later, Brad and Gene were allowed to leave as well. On the way to their quarters, Brad turned to Gene. "I think I might have an idea on how we can narrow down who it was that put the poison in your drink."

"How's that?"

"Well, the restaurant may not have been monitored, but the hallways might have been. We could see who entered the restaurant that day."

Gene thought about this for a moment. "But there were over fifty people in the room with us."

"Probably not *that* many, but there were a lot," Brad conceded. "But we could at least narrow down our options. We should check with Commander Lee."

"Niels was there!" Gene said. "I wonder if he saw anything."

"We can't trust Mr. Niels," Brad said. Then with sad reluctance added, "You can't even trust me. But I give you my word that I wouldn't ever do anything to hurt you."

Gene pondered that for a moment as the two walked in silence. Finally he said, "I believe you." After that he didn't need to say anything more.

Inquiries

128

Tuesday, September 29, 2099

The announcement came late Monday night that the Falcons would be departing Tuesday at noon. All shifts were reverted back to normal and Gene found himself waking up for duty at 5:00 again. His headache was mostly gone and he found himself starting out the day in a pleasant mood. However, when Brad and Gene were exiting the lift towards the communications center, Brad said, “I’m not going to be working with you today.”

“Why not?” Gene asked curiously.

“Crewmen serve bridge duty about once a month,” Brad explained. “You basically help the communications officer on duty do whatever the other officers want you to do. It’s actually kinda fun.”

“Will they let me do it?”

“They should,” Brad answered. “Check your duty schedule on your tablet. It should say it there. And . . .” Brad

leaned over conspiratorially and whispered, "I'm going to try to get those records from Independence. You know, the ones of the corridors."

"You can do that?"

"When I was a kid, I always hacked into my school's computer system to change my grades before my parents saw them."

"*You* did that?"

"Well, actually it was one of my friends—but I think I saw how he did it."

"Don't get into trouble," Gene said in a concerned voice.

"Don't worry, I won't," Brad said confidently—too confidently for Gene's nerves. But before Gene could say anything more, Brad had taken a right turn into a different corridor.

Throughout Gene's shift he worried about Brad. If he did get into trouble, it'd be all Gene's fault; after all, it was Gene's case that he was investigating. The hours passed like snails through grass. What if he did get caught? Would Brad be punished?

Gene didn't allow himself to believe that Brad might actually be successful. This wasn't high school—important records and files surely were impenetrable.

Crescent and the rest of the task force pulled away from Independence without much fanfare. Fairly soon, the large projector pad in front of the room showed the nine ships of their small fleet speeding through the dark space.

Finally, fifteen minutes before his shift ended he received a holographic thumbs up from Brad. After enduring several long minutes of work, someone finally tapped Gene on the shoulder to relieve him.

Gene rushed out the door immediately afterwards. Brad was waiting out in the corridor for him to come out and the two hurried to the cafeteria. After sitting down at a table, Brad pulled out his tablet. “You won’t believe what I got. I didn’t think that it would be that easy.”

“Easy?” Gene asked incredulously.

“Well, I can’t say it was easy, it was really hard at first, but at one point information just started flowing. Anyway, here’s the list.” Brad handed him the tablet.

Gene absorbed the list with interest. “I think we can narrow it down to members of *Crescent’s* crew.”

Brad nodded. “It’s not completely sound, but it’s a start. They would put someone where they have easy access to you. *Crescent* would be the obvious place.” Brad took the tablet and pushed a couple buttons. “Here’s all the people that were in the bar from *Crescent*.”

Gene read the names off. “Harold Anderson, Brad Fuentes, Vera Corey, Bertha Grills, Gene Haton, Laura Hendricks, Whitney Jacobson, Rudy Jenkins, Cameron Niels, Ed Parks, Christopher Paul, Joanna Proctor, Matt Rogers, and Brynn Taylor. Great. Only twelve people to eliminate.”

“What about . . .” Brad suddenly said. “Yep, I think it’s the Yankees.”

“The who?”

“Mr. Fuentes, Mr. Haton, so good to see you again.”

“I thought you stayed with Independence,” Brad said coldly.

The lady from CMIA smiled, dropping her bag to the floor. “I was given permission to do an extended investigation of *Crescent*.”

"Why?" Brad demanded.

"I was given a tip-off that something odd was going on," the woman answered, and as she did she glanced fleetingly at Gene. Gene panicked at first, wondering just what the woman had found out when she said, "And I desired to inquire as to your malady, Mr. Haton."

"Malady?" Gene questioned.

"I did some further investigating into your visit to the hospital and found that you were checked in for feeling ill."

"That is what most hospitals are for," Gene remarked as he felt something bump against his knee. Brad was passing him a tablet under the table. He glanced at what it said, his eyebrows rising slightly, then cleared the message and passed it back.

"Well?" the woman asked sweetly.

Crossing his fingers, he said, "You don't have any right to investigate us while we're not on duty."

Brad picked up his drink and put it to his lips. The woman continued on, "Sad but true." At that moment, Brad began coughing, his eyes watering. Gene recognized the signal and, while her head was turned, reached down inside her bag, pulling the lady's tablet out and placing it on his lap. The tablet was turned already turned on and Ingrid was logged on.

"That was way too hot," Brad sputtered, putting down his mug.

"That's why they call it *hot* chocolate," Gene told him, pulling out his own tablet. He turned on his own tablet under the table and quietly started downloading the information off of the lady's.

The woman gave the two a disapproving glare as she

said, “Withholding such information could lead me to the conclusion that you have something to hide.”

“Or maybe to the conclusion that I don’t give out personal information to perfect strangers,” Gene said, quietly patting the tablet as though urging it to go faster. “You haven’t even given us your name.”

“A name is a very valuable thing, Mr. *Haton*,” the lady said, giving Gene a very piercing stare. To his relief, the tablet chirped quietly: the download was complete.

“It is also the basis of trust,” Brad said, emphasizing the last word as she had done. “It is what relationships are formed on—” Gene dropped the tablet in the bag “—and relationships are what friendships are based on. And if you don’t have friends, it’s hard to form a good support group. If you don’t have a good support group, it’s hard to pass your classes. If you don’t pass classes, you can’t graduate. If you don’t graduate, no job. No job, no money. If you don’t have money, no girls. No girls and you can never be happy. It all starts with a name.”

“So you joined the military, thank you for recounting your life history for us all, Mr. Fuentes,” the lady said. “I’ll be sure to keep an eye on the both of you from now on.”

The lady turned on her heels and marched out of the cafeteria. Gene half wanted to laugh at her seriousness, and half wanted to cry for the same reason. “The tablet,” Brad reminded him.

“Why did you want it?” Gene asked, but Brad remained silent as he looked through the files on the tablet.

After a minute or so more of searching, he said, “There! Remember how she scanned our cards? What if she scanned the cards of any of our targets?”

Gene immediately became interested. Brad handed him the tablet and Gene shortly found the names of eight of the people on their list. He singled them out and organized them into a table, then handed the tablet back to Brad. Brad had barely glanced at it when Duncan and Paul walked in, sitting down across from them.

"We're trying to do something—" Brad started but Duncan interrupted him.

"Don't worry," Duncan said. "We've decided we're not going to argue for a full twenty-four hours."

"No politics, sports talk, nuthin'," Paul confirmed. "Pass the salt, Duncan."

"Gladly, Paul," Duncan said with false enthusiasm.

"I've got to go anyway," Gene said. Gene made sure to give Brad a copy of the file before he left for his Defense class. He had half-expected Duncan and Paul to be arguing before he left the room but to his surprise when he exited, they were still treating each other with the same, false civility.

Gene's progress had been slow but sure. He shot dead center seventy percent of the time now. Any day now, Gene expected Mr. Niels to declare him good and end his lessons. As Gene found out minutes after his arrival, this would not be the case for quite a while.

"You want me to shoot *moving* targets?" Gene asked incredulously.

Mr. Niels gave him a look that had "Duh," written all over it. "Mr. Lee, I'm afraid to break it to you, but your enemy won't be standing still at a distance of precisely twenty-five feet in front of you. And usually he won't be without a weapon."

“You mean it’s going to be shooting at *me*?”

“Not all weapons are guns, Mr. Lee, but yes it *will* be ‘shooting’ at you. Begin simulation.”

Before Gene could object, a small red light appeared twenty feet to his right. Before he could aim his weapon, the blip emitted a ball of bright, white, light which surged towards him. He dove to the left and shot back but the ball of light hit his shoulder. To his surprise, it was hot. It didn’t hurt him but gave him a measure of discomfort. His shot ended up missing, but he followed it up with another. This time his shot hit its mark and the light disappeared.

“Right now, your enemy is limited to two-dimensional movement,” Niels shouted. “It can move anywhere but will maintain a distance of 25 feet from your body. Each time you succeed in hitting your target, it will disappear for five seconds. After five seconds it will return and move more swiftly.”

As Niels spoke, the light resurrected itself in front of him. Gene was more prepared this time. He immediately stepped to the right, dodging its volley and fired back. Niels continued speaking but Gene was only half listening, waiting for it to appear again. “You must be constantly ready for attack, Mr. Lee. You never know when it will come or from where.”

In confirmation of his last statement, Gene suddenly felt a stinging surge of heat hit him dead in the back. He wheeled around on his heel as the ball of light moved gracefully to his right. Gene aimed another shot at it and missed. In return it fired back, hitting Gene in the same shoulder as before. As Gene readied to fire again, it spit out a shot which hit his gun hand. Gene was sure he detected

a smile on the face of Mr. Niels as he went into a speech about bearing pain. Aiming again, Gene fired another shot at the obnoxious target.

For some reason, an odd thought struck Gene. What had it been that Paul had hidden so quickly when Gene and Brad approached the previous day in the restaurant? He was sitting right there next to him the *whole* time. Was it possible that he had slipped something into Gene's drink? Was the object that was "none of your business" really a poison?

Sore, sweaty, exhausted, and with a lot on his mind, he left the range over an hour later. As he exited the lift on the deck with the Command Offices, he was surprised to find Gwen walking out of one of the rooms. When she saw him, she said, "Hi Gene!"

"Hi," Gene responded back. "What are you doing up here?"

"I'm taking lessons on how to use the sensors and stuff," Gwen answered cheerfully. "What's your story?"

"Lessons with Lieutenant Taylor," Gene replied.

"No, I mean what happened yesterday at around 3:00 in the afternoon?"

"Someone drugged me," Gene said.

"Any clue who did it?"

"I've got about as much idea as you do at the moment."

"You're going to a class like that?" she said, suddenly assessing Gene's appearance. Gene looked down at his drenched jumpsuit. Gwen continued, "Taylor's gonna think you took a bath in it. What've you been up to?"

"Mom's having me take self-defense classes with Niels. I just got a little sweaty."

“*Lieutenant Niels?*” Gwen questioned.

“Uh, yeah, I think that’s what he was,” Gene answered.

Gwen giggled, “I have a friend who has a crush on him. I, personally, think he’s creepy. Have you heard him talk?”

“Well, yeah, he does tend to do that during our classes,” Gene said.

“He’s *so* severe! Anyhow, you’d do good to change, and for heaven’s sake, put some deodorant on!”

Gene blushed as Gwen walked behind him into the lift. Determined to ignore her advice, he marched up to the door. As he was about to knock, however, he sniffed the air and immediately decided to turn back to his quarters. Not because Gwen suggested it but for Lieutenant Taylor’s sake. Besides, Taylor was probably running, as she called it, “fashionably late.”

Gene sat down exhausted next to Duncan at dinner just as he was finishing off the food on his plate. Brad seemed strangely excited and frustrated at the same time. As he picked up his fork, Paul questioned, “Tell us, Haton, why do you mysteriously disappear each day from about lunch to dinner?”

Gene glanced up at him. “Beg your pardon?”

“Where do you go after lunch?”

Trying his best not to look at the floor, he said, “Well, I don’t do the same thing everyday you see. I like running the track at the rec deck, and studying in the library for example.”

“Oh yeah! I saw you and a brunette, celery stick walk into the racquetball courts last week,” Duncan exclaimed.

"Don't go on dates! Yeah right!"

"It *wasn't* a date!" Gene said indignantly. "I wanted a partner to play racquetball with and I guess she likes it to!"

"Did you hold her hand?" Duncan asked. "Did you kiss?"

"No! She's my—it's not like she's my girlfriend or something," Gene corrected himself.

"Call it what you will, but it was a date," Duncan concluded fervently. Gene rolled his eyes in frustration.

"Speaking of games, are you ready for the game tonight Gene?" Brad asked, changing the subject.

"There's a game tonight?" Gene asked nauseously.

"Yeah, the tournament begins tonight," Brad said.

"Are you sure it's tonight?" Duncan asked.

"Yeah."

"Pete said that his team'd never beat you so bad before—" Paul started but Brad cut him off.

"Gene was playing on a bad leg last Friday," Brad defended.

"Now I'm playing on a bad head," Gene mumbled.

"What?" Duncan asked.

"Gene has a migraine," Brad explained

"When does the game start?" Gene asked.

"19:00," Brad answered. "We'd better go get ready. C'mon, Gene."

When they got out of the crowded cafeteria, Gene turned to Brad. "I thought the first game wasn't until Friday."

"It isn't, but I have something I wanted to show you. While you were gone, I looked at the list." Brad thrust his tablet into Gene's hands. "Do you notice anything?"

Gene noticed it immediately. "Our schedule is almost exactly the same as Niels."

“Exactly,” Brad confirmed. “Coincidence? Or was he following us, waiting for you to become vulnerable?”

“But what about Paul?” Gene asked. “Remember, he hid something under the table right when we walked in.”

“Paul’s always been secretive,” Brad said. “Always very private, but can you really imagine him conspiring with Karch? He hates them!”

“Niels does look a little more suspicious, but I’ve had all those lessons with him and he hasn’t tried anything before.”

“Gene,” Brad reasoned. “The range is like a big projector pad. Every movement you make in that room is monitored in three dimensions by computer. Do you really expect him to try something when his guilt would be assured?”

“I guess not,” Gene responded. “But I’m not going to feel safe with any of ‘em until I have more information.”

However, no more information presented itself that week. The most interesting thing that happened was when Crescent crossed the border into Lagenna. Even that wasn’t extremely thrilling due to the fact that the universe looked just as dark in Lagenna as it had in Falvayah.

When he updated his schedule on Wednesday, he discovered that the following Tuesday he was assigned a duty shift on the bridge. What excited him more was that it corresponded directly with Crescent arriving at the planet Lagenna. Tuesday morning, he would find himself at the home planet of the oldest known culture in the universe.

Inspirations

Thursday, October 8, 2099

How that morning had passed by so quickly Gene could only guess. At 6:00 Thursday morning, he found himself giving ID to the three security guards, then walking through the opening to the bridge. Like the communications center, there was large projection pad at the front depicting the Falcons traveling through space. However, it was much larger spanning the length of the front of the room and about three yards wide.

A small chair with two computer consoles on either side of it sat elevated at the rear of the bridge with Commander Rogers seated in it. A console with four chairs sat just behind the Pad at the front of the room and two similar consoles lay on the right and left side of the bridge. Gene noticed that only two people sat at the three consoles, leaving the other seats vacant.

Ready to work, he walked up to the crewman in the white

uniform with blue lining and tapped her shoulder. The young lady looked relieved and left the bridge with haste as Gene took her place. The communications officer sitting next to him was an older man with a head that appeared would be bare within a matter of months. Gene recognized him as Leonard Olaf, a Lieutenant-Junior Grade. He had met him once before and had the impression that Olaf felt the need to condescend to his level in order to speak to him.

The two worked in silence, barely making a sound as they did their work. Gene's duty could have been described as "Sorting the mail and listening to air." His job was to sort the personal communications and the guidance communications and monitor the airwaves. Most of it was, "Commander Rogers, a message coming in from the *Sitius*." then projecting it on the Pad in front.

Finally at about ten O'clock, Rogers asked, "Helm, ETA to Lagenna?"

"Two minutes, sir," the lieutenant answered, sounding bored.

"Haton, command the senior officers to the bridge for the approach to Lagenna," Rogers said.

"Yes, sir," Gene said, a little nervous. *How did Taylor say I should do it?* Then he remembered ORR—*order, reason, repeat*. Seconds later, his voice echoed across the ship, "Senior officers to the bridge, we are approaching Lagenna. Senior officers to the bridge." It was kind of freaky to hear his voice so loud, but it was a tad exciting as well.

"Sir, we're receiving a fleet communication from the *Lincoln*, Commodore Pardoe," Olaf said, looking slightly offended that it hadn't been him making the announcement over the ship intercom.

King's Pawn

“Put it on the front screens,” Rogers commanded.

Immediately the image of Commodore Pardoe appeared on one of the windows situated at the front of the room along with all of the other captains in the fleet. Only one of the people on the screen wasn't wearing a SBN uniform. Instead he was wearing a dark blue suit. *That must be the ambassador*, Gene thought. The commodore jumped quickly to business. “Reduce your speed to two Sean and move into Tau-2 formation. *Infiltrator*, take the lower left flank; *Cougar*, take the right. . .”

Captain Blake emerged on the bridge seconds later along with Commander Lee. Gene's mother took a seat at the port tactical station, and Rogers gave up the captain's seat to go stand by the sensors station at the back of the bridge.

“Approaching Laven Perimeter,” the Helm officer, Whitney Jacobson, said from up front. On the projector pad appeared Lagenna's enormous fleet of ships.

The ships had a look of determination. It was as though they knew the foe they faced was threatening their existence, yet refused to succumb to it. For some reason, Gene found that he could relate to them. He did not have any particular strength and he wasn't incredibly smart, but because of circumstances beyond his control he was being put through a battle. Except Gene's enemy was faceless and hidden.

Just as Taylor took a seat in between Olaf and himself, Gene's console beeped a couple of times, indicating an incoming transmission. “Captain, there's an incoming transmission from the Laven Government.”

“They appear to be sending the same communication to the delegation from Karch,” Olaf said from right next to

him.

“Route Lagenna to Pad One please, and the Karch Commanders to the left screens,” Captain Blake commanded. His tone was polite yet firm. Gene had always enjoyed listening to Captain Blake speak; it was rich and deep, inspiring confidence. One couldn’t listen to that voice and not trust Blake immediately. Gene quickly obeyed, making his fingers move as fast as they could.

On the black pad on the left side of the bridge appeared a woman in a sleeveless top and what looked like long shorts. Gene noticed on her left hand she wore two rings and on the right three rings. He remembered hearing once that this represented something to the Lavenyen, that it showed progression through life or something. The woman waited a few moments until the other ships in the fleet were listening. Then she held up her pointer fingers and thumbs in a triangle shape with her palms facing towards them. When the various captains of the fleet and Commodore Pardoe copied the gesture, she put her hands down and began. “Peluth ter Lakenna, Yahffuhyen kahn Earthken. Welcome to Lakenna, Commanders of Earth. I am Flohelyuh of the kin of Kohleyuh. We are pleased by your early arrival. If you are agreeable, we’d like to begin negotiations now.”

“Now?” Commodore Pardoe asked.

“If it is agreeable to both parties,” the lady clarified. “The delegation from Erus has already agreed.”

“That’s acceptable,” the man in the dark blue suit answered. “I can depart now.” The man hastily disappeared off the screen.

“Ko,” said one of the men from Karch, speaking in his native tongue, Karch. “Saynellen bronione ogre fyen ko

shay sukug?" *No, how we know there will be no a trap?* For some reason, Gene understood what he was saying. Was there some kind of translator running?

Instantly everyone looked at Captain Blake. Commodore Pardoe gave him a nod. Blake looked up at the man and in Karch said, "Something wrong with English, Admiral Beddek? I thought that was the language that was settled on for the conference." Again, Gene understood every foreign word that Blake spoke.

It was almost hard to tell he was speaking a different language. He had taken a year of the Erus language in high school, but had never learned any Karch before that he could remember. How was it possible? Gene saw that Olaf was running a Translator program so that he could understand what was being said. Several other crewmen were doing the same thing.

In Karch, the woman from Lagenna said, "Your people have spent the last three days securing the compound."

"Nevertheless, I disapprove of a change in schedule." Beddek replied.

"Changing our schedule at the last moment would actually work to the disadvantage of anyone that would plan to harm you," Blake countered.

Someone handed the man on the screen a note. He read it, then in English said, "We shall begin now." The screen he was on went momentarily black then reverted to looking like a window in the wall.

"What was that all about?" Pardoe asked.

"He just wants to let us know he thinks he's in charge," Blake said simply.

"I see," Commodore Pardoe turned towards Flohelyuh.

Taylor turned and whispered to Gene, “Captain Blake is the only C.O. in the fleet who can speak Karch.”

Gene became distracted as he noticed a text communication had just come in. Most Earth messages contained a message and recipient line so that the people in communications would know who to send it to. This one had neither. Gene opened the message to look for a name but was surprised by the contents of the letter. The document was comprised of columns of hundreds of tiny dots. For some reason, Gene looked automatically to the right column of the paper, but Taylor noticed what he was looking at and tapped him. “That’s a code from Karch. All you have to do on those is send them directly to Commander Lee or Commander Rogers.”

“Can I keep a copy of it? It’s cool.”

“I don’t mind,” Taylor replied. “It’s not like our ‘master decoders’ have made any progress decrypting it. All they can find are numbers.”

Gene hastily scanned it to his tablet before sending it to his Mom.

“. . . I’m not trying to be pessimistic,” Commodore Pardoe was saying. “But I don’t think any conference will stop Karch.”

“The information they gave you is secure, is it not?” Flohelyuh asked.

“Not yet, that will be our next task,” Pardoe said.

“Commodore,” Blake said quietly but with a hint of warning to his voice. “Careful. This transmission might not be secure.”

A look of what Gene perceived to be fear crossed Pardoe’s face before he continued. Flohelyuh said, “Don’t

worry, it is secure.”

“Where are these negotiations to be held?” Pardoe asked, changing the subject.

“In Flohkenelyuh of Kohken,” Flohelyuh replied. “In Lakenna, we believe that diplomacy should be conducted without outside influence. For a week they are locked inside the Nerethperelyuh. They are not allowed to contact or be contacted by anyone. The building is completely secure. They will be taken care of, I assure you.”

Pardoe raised his eyebrows for a moment but said, “Very well.”

“Captain, Ambassador Corey reports that he has arrived on Lagenna,” Taylor said. “They are locking him away now.”

“Tell Corey our prayers go with him,” Blake said. Taylor complied right as Pardoe bid Flohelyuh farewell and closed the fleet transmission. Blake said, “Commander Lee, I believe it’s your shift. Senior officers are excused.”

Figuring he had seen all of the action for that day, Gene started to ponder over what he’d heard. *How is it possible that I understand the language of Karch? Gene asked himself. I’ve barely even heard it before!* Second, what was all that junk about the “information?” Pardoe looked extremely worried about having mentioned that small bit of information.

About three hours later, Gene was still dwelling on similar thoughts when his console began beeping again. However, this beeping seemed more urgent than he could remember it being before.

“What is it Mr. Haton?” Commander Lee asked.

“It’s a general communication to the whole fleet.” Gene answered.

“Read it.”

Gene adjusted the earpiece in his ear, his expression growing more somber. Slowly he repeated what he heard. “It’s a message from the military of Lagenna on the border. Karch has invaded Lagenna . . . Lagenna can’t hold the lines much longer . . . They’re calling for reinforcements . . . Don’t begin negotiations!”

“Olaf, call Captain Blake to the bridge. Haton, I want Commodore Pardoe on projector pad immediately along with Flohelyuh.”

Just as Gene was beginning the desperate motions, his station began beeping again with a communication from the flagship, *Lincoln*. “Commander, they’re calling us.”

“Projector 3, Haton,” his mom answered back. Gene moved his hands as quickly as possible, not wanting to be the cause of a delay. Seconds later, the visages of other captains of the fleet and Flohelyuh were standing on the black platform. “Flohelyuh, you must stop the negotiations. Lagenna is under attack!” Pardoe was saying as Captain Blake entered the Bridge.

“Impossible, Commodore,” Flohelyuh responded.

“It’s true, we just received the communication just barely.”

“No, I mean it’s impossible to contact them while they’re in negotiation. They can send information out, but we can’t contact them while they’re in the negotiation complex. The only way to get in would be by doing harm to the building. Never in six hundred years has anyone attempted to halt negotiations while in progress. And it won’t happen today.

“But Lagenna is *under attack!*” Pardoe repeated.

“We’ll just have to have faith in the abilities of our ambassadors to create a peaceful solution.” Flohelyuh

responded.

“Commodore,” the captain from *Fortius* exclaimed. “The contingent from Erus has changed to an attack formation and is moving towards the ships from Karch.”

“Olaf, get all hands to battle stations,” Blake said. “Crewman Haton, move the communications to the screens and give me a battle map on the pad. Lee, ready the turrets. Jacobson, prepare to move into formation Pi-1 if my guess is correct.”

“All ships, formation Pi-1,” Pardoe commanded. “Move in between the two fleets.”

Gene’s adrenaline was pumping as Pardoe cut the transmission. Thirty seconds later, Olaf said, “Captain, Pardoe wants you to contact him in a private room.”

Without saying a word, Blake exited the bridge. Commander Lee, however, didn’t move from her seat at the tactical station. “How long until the two fleets are in firing range?”

Lieutenant Jacobson checked her equipment. “Five minutes. We’ll be in position in four.”

Gene watched on the Pad as the small fleet from Earth moved swiftly through space. Soon two other fleets came into view, looking both larger and more intimidating than the small contingent from Earth. The ships from Erus were flat and broad while those from Karch seemed to resemble a falcon diving. Gene counted as fast as he could; Erus had fifteen ships and Karch seventeen. Rogers informed them that a large Laven fleet of sixty-two was approaching as well. The role they would play was as yet unknown, but if Pardoe hoped to prevent a fight on his own, he was certainly low on numbers.

“We are in position,” Jacobson said just a few minutes later.

Lee nodded toward the Starboard gunner. “Prepare to target their gun turrets. Be ready to fire all available cannons.”

“At who?”

“We’ll find out when the captain gets back.” Commander Lee shot a quick glance to where her son sat, nearly trembling. Gene caught her gaze and looked back, searching for reassurance. Lee couldn’t provide it, and Gene realized that. Both of them knew that he shouldn’t be in a combat situation. Gene was too young, too *weak* to participate in a battle.

148

Then in a flash of a second, Lee’s look changed from worry to confidence and pride. Without speaking, Gene’s mom said, “I know you can do this.” The effect was instant. Gene took courage and sat up straight. His fear was far from gone, but he felt that he had strength enough to deal with it. Though Gene didn’t know what would happen, he refused to face it like a rodent, hiding in its hole at the first sign of danger. Gene would face it like a man. Like his mother always had.

“Both fleets are in firing range,” Jacobson announced, interrupting Gene’s thoughts. “They’re stopping.”

One could almost hear the air around them breathing. For a little over twenty minutes, barely a person spoke a word, simply waiting for the first shot to be fired. Gene wondered if this was how the British and Americans felt before the “shot heard round the world.”

Finally, Rogers said, “Ships in both fleets are powering down their weapons.”

King's Pawn

The officers and crewmen on the bridge breathed a collective sigh of relief. Two minutes later, Blake emerged on the bridge looking exhausted. "All hands may stand down from alert."

"What happened?" Rogers asked.

"They stopped," Blake said, obviously not ready to give further details. "Keep all cannons ready. I don't want to be taken by surprise when these conferences fail." That being said, Blake left the bridge. The fear that had gripped the bridge officers moments earlier was still present. Blake had done little to assuage that fear.

This time Commander Lee did take Blake's seat at the rear of the bridge. She quietly dismissed the excess officers and crewmen that had come to the bridge as their battle station. Nothing eventful happened for the next thirty minutes, this time the action truly was over.

Gene found that he had become very popular to his roommates over the course of his eight-hour shift on the bridge. He was, after all, a witness to the events of that afternoon. Rumors had of course been flying and Gene had to explain multiple times that Blake had not been challenged to a one-on-one duel with Admiral Beddek of Karch.

After Brad left to receive a transmission from his grandfather, Gene remembered that he had somehow understood Karch. He couldn't help being a little prideful of his mysterious skill. However, both Duncan and Paul doubted him until Paul finally pulled out his tablet and said, "Fine, I've got a translator. Say that flying pigs slaughtered a

herd of sharks last Thursday.”

“I don’t think they have a word for sharks or pigs,” Gene said.

“Then say the rest of it.”

“I could say animals and fish,” Gene offered.

“Look, he’s stalling,” Duncan said. “Did you notice that Paul? He’s stalling, you can tell a mile away!”

Gene thought for a moment. Seconds later, the words came to him as though he had always known them. “Sodreketh teln neluv noratam shin shay pourg rue senorubith plin sevej sayorn.”

“That didn’t sound like a real language!” Duncan exclaimed. “I know when someone’s making up words and that’s—”

“It’s right!” Paul exclaimed.

“What?” Duncan asked. “I’ll bet you spent four years of college learning it.”

Brad returned and took a chair next to Duncan as Gene laughed and said, “I don’t think I’ve heard it before today.”

“I hear it’s not that hard a language to pick up,” Duncan said. “A child’s language really.”

“That’s impossible,” Paul said. “Someone must have taught you.”

“Or perhaps not,” Duncan said sarcastically. “Maybe he was one of those freak experiments on those babies twenty years ago! Remember when they were trying to give babies a college education? I was only ten but it was an exciting idea at the time. All you would have to do is get the download and—”

“And thankfully they made laws banning such immoral experimentation on babies!” Paul interrupted.

"They're going to learn the stuff sooner or later, why not at birth?"

"You actually want kids to be aware of what's going on around them when they're born?"

"How can you be sure that they'll know what's going on?" Duncan challenged.

Gene looked at Brad to ask him if he wanted to leave the two bickering men and find something to eat, but he noticed that Brad was very pale. He sent a signal and Brad acknowledged, standing up.

Brad was strangely and ponderously quiet during their walk to the cafeteria. Finally Gene asked, "What's wrong?"

"Just family problems," Brad said.

"Anything I can help with?" Gene asked.

Brad was quiet for a few moments then said, "No, it's something you should just keep away from."

That statement surprised Gene. "Can you tell me about it?"

"No."

The two walked on in silence. Gene decided to change the subject. "I can understand Karch."

"What?"

"I found out this morning. I have no idea why."

Brad looked pensive for a moment. "Can you read their alphabet?"

"I dunno. What's it like?"

"It looks like a bunch of dots."

"Oh yeah, I saw that in the code thing we intercepted today." Gene pulled up the file on his tablet. Automatically, he looked in the top right hand corner at the dots and started looking down the tiny columns. Finally he said, "Believe it

or not, it seems like I do know what the characters mean. They're all numbers."

"Numbers? Are you sure?"

"No, at least no more sure than I was about calling Paul ugly a couple minutes ago. But I think this one's a 537, and this one's a 4, this one's a 57. . . ."

"Look up one—see if you're right," Brad said without emotion. Sure enough, Gene was correct.

"I just remembered something," Gene exclaimed. "When I was on that Karch ship a couple weeks ago, I was hearing Karch all over the place but I couldn't understand a word."

"So somehow between now and a couple weeks ago you became an expert on Karch," Brad said, pondering. "That's strange. Is Karch the only language you know?"

"Well, I took a year learning the language of Erus, but I didn't do very well."

"No, I mean, do you know any other languages without studying them?"

"Well, the one lady today said a couple sentences in Laven that I didn't understand."

It's strange that you happen to know the language of the people who are trying to hunt you."

"Why do they want to hunt me. Me of all people?"

Brad's eyes looked strangely distant. "I have no idea."

Imperials

Thursday, October 15, 2009

“What do you see in it?” Grills asked Gene sweetly, prompting him to look again at the sheet of paper with the ink blotches on it. They had played this game two weeks ago, during his last session. Thankfully, Grills had cancelled the previous week’s appointment. “Is it a bear again?”

“No, I think it looks more like a sun this time,” Gene answered distractedly. There was no way she could make something negative out of that.

Grills immediately started scribbling something on her paper. One annoying habit that Gene had picked up on was that she tended to mouth her words as she wrote them. *Can't make up his mind, shifts position from week to week depending on mood. . . .*

Gene resisted rolling his eyes.

“I think we can move on to the next exercise, now,” Grills said, pulling out a briefcase. She opened it and pulled out

a tuning fork and a book entitled, *Revived Psychotherapy*. “When I strike this against my desk, tell me the first word that comes to your mind.”

Gene rolled his eyes. This exercise was a new one, but equally obnoxious. She struck the fork once. “Pen,” he muttered. She recorded the results, consulted her book then made some notes.

Over the previous week, Karch’s invasion had been going frighteningly well, Lagenna reporting hundreds of lost ships. The day after Karch invaded Lagenna, Falvayah’s legislature had passed a declaration of war on Karch. To the surprise of the nation, however, President Hoffman, Falvayah’s executive officer, had vetoed the action. A movement was already in the legislature to overpower Hoffman’s veto, but there were doubts as to whether it would pass or not.

Although it was reported that the delegates had been consistently feeding information out, it wasn’t being released by the Laven government. Last night Gene had finished going through the entire Karch code and writing the numbers that they corresponded with. Nevertheless, it didn’t give him any instant inspiration and he hadn’t expected it to. He still was clueless as to what to do with all of the numbers.

The fork sounded again. “Numbers,” he responded. The numbers were of no help to him. They had appeared in the form of some sort of matrix when translated. His Algebra teacher had taught him how matrices were often used for codes. He had also learned that numbers created digital images of some kind but these seemed too simple to be anything more than a message. Perhaps the numbers were multiples of the corresponding letter. But then, what was

King's Pawn

the first letter in the Karch alphabet? Did it start with an “A” like Gene’s did or was it something totally different. Then, without explanation, a table materialized in his mind:

2 \	4 ●	6 ●	8 ●	0 ●
1 /	3 ●	5 ●	7 ●	9 ●

Where it had come from he didn’t know, but. . . . The fork rang out a third time but Gene wasn’t paying attention. So would 460 represent ● ● ●? But that didn’t represent any letters. However, two numbers would, stacked on top of each other. Grills struck the fork several more times before Gene said, “Uh, code.”

Grills raised an eyebrow looking slightly perplexed. After a moment’s pause she made a particularly long entry in her notes but Gene didn’t watch her mouth. For some reason, the table that had appeared in his mind just seemed right. Where it had come from he definitely couldn’t explain, but just like the Karch he had spoken earlier, he knew it was correct. At that moment his tablet beeped. Gene picked it up and answered the communication. “Mr. Haton,” Taylor’s voice sang over the tablet and an image appeared on the screen.

“Yes, Ms?” Gene said as seriously as possible.

“I need you to run up here, right now!”

“What is it, Haton?” Grills asked.

“Lieutenant Taylor needs me,” Gene answered back.

“Miss Taylor,” Grills addressed the tablet. “I am having a session with the boy right now and I can’t afford to be interrupted every few minutes!”

“So what you’re doing is far more important than the, er well-being of *Crescent*? In that case. . . .”

“Well, I suppose not, but—”

“Then I expect to see him up here in two minutes, Taylor out!”

Gene winked at Brad, who was using a voice synthesizer to imitate Taylor, before shutting the tablet off and setting it on the couch next to him. Gene looked up at Grills, trying not to appear too hopeful or pleased. “Well?”

“Well what?” Grills snapped. “I obviously have *no* authority on this ship compared to the *Lieutenant*. What are you waiting for? GO!” With that Gene immediately got up and left the room.

Brad was waiting for him by the lift, “It worked then?”

“Like a charm.” Gene said. “Let’s go.”

Despite the state of alert aboard the *Crescent*, Captain Blake had begrudgingly given permission to visit the planet below in small groups. Brad and Gene had signed up for this time to take a tour of the Laven capital. Their trip would last a total of four hours before they were forced to return to the ship. Twenty minutes of that would be spent in transit between the ship and the surface.

Gene was excited to see Lagenna. The planet was renowned for its beauty. Though not the first home world of the Lavenyen, it had been their home for over six hundred years. Tohgenpoe was their original abode, but it was at the center of the treacherous nebula, Refliskiwhuk. The nebula was so treacherous that it was hard for the Lavenyen to penetrate it with ships. Vessels that tried to navigate through the nebula didn’t last much longer than fifteen minutes before the ship’s hull started to deteriorate at an accelerated rate. Finally the planet’s top scientists devised a series of “gates” that allowed them to pass through safely. Tohgenpoe wasn’t abandoned, but the greater portion of its

residents left.

When the Lavenyen found Lagenna, it was like a haven to them. They determined as a culture that they would try to retain the beauty that their previous home had lost over centuries. That decision resulted in dwellings that attempted to blend with nature, which was the basis of Laven architecture from that point on.

The SRV they climbed aboard was larger than the one he'd piloted earlier. It had two rooms: A cockpit and a passenger section. Brad took the window seat and Gene sat next to him. Paul and Duncan were also a couple rows back, bickering as usual. After they boarded the ship, Brad poked him, "Gene it's her!" He pointed energetically at Gwen who looked like she was about to follow inside after them. "I wonder if she's coming with us."

"Brad, before you do anything stupid, I've got to tell you something," Gene said solemnly. *This time I'll really tell him*, he thought to himself. However, Brad groaned next to him unexpectedly. An announcement outside commanded all those in the bay to leave for decompression. Rogers, who had been standing at the door, tapped Gwen on the shoulder and turned her around. She appeared to be protesting but it was to no avail.

"I guess she's too late," Brad sighed.

"Brad, she's my sister, my twin sister," Gene blurted.

"Hmm?" he asked, but then his face changed. "She what? You told me that you'd never met her before!"

"That was before I could tell you," Gene whispered, so that none of the other eight passengers could hear. "Remember? Back when you didn't know who I was."

"So you can introduce me!" Brad said exuberantly, but

then his face fell. “Your *twin* sister? Meaning she’s fifteen too?”

“Yep.”

“And she’s not allowed to date either,” Brad stated.

“Nope.”

“And you’re allowed when you’re how old?”

“Sixteen.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“February 11,” Gene said.

“So I have to wait *five months*?” Brad said, marking the date on his tablet.

“‘Fraid s–My tablet!”

“What about it?”

“I-I left it in Grill’s office!” Gene panicked.

“You won’t need it on the trip. I can take pictures of plenty for the both of us.”

“Yeah, but what if she–”

”Oh she wouldn’t–”

”Oh yes she would–”

”You’re sure?” Brad asked skeptically.

“Positive.”

“You’re saying Grills is dorky enough to read your tablet? That’s personal!”

“But . . . hang on a sec,” Brad picked up his tablet which had started beeping. “It’s the commander,” he said, pushing a few buttons.

The minute he activated the communication, Commander Lee said, “Fuentes, I need to speak to Crewman Haton.” Bewildered, Brad handed the tablet to Gene. “Haton, I need to see you right now. Has the SRV left *Crescent* yet?”

"No sir."

"Good, you will meet me in my office in five minutes. Lee out."

After saying a quick farewell to Brad, Gene arose and hurried out the door. The driver objected at first but obliged when Gene informed him that it was on the Commander's orders. Gene didn't waste any time making it up to the office. The commander had said five minutes which gave him little time to spare. When he found the door with the label "Lee, Commander Joan Rose," he took a moment to catch his breath then rang the door chime.

As if she had been awaiting his arrival, Gene's mother opened the door and ushered Gene into a seat. "I'm sorry Gene, but we can't risk sending you on a tour to Lagenna."

When he said nothing, Mom continued, "I hope you understand, Gene, that it's just too dangerous to send you away unprotected into an unknown environment like that."

"Gwen said she was allowed to go," Gene finally said.

"I know, but it isn't Gwen that they want," Mom said. "It's you."

"So why isn't it *you* they want?" Gene asked. "Why me?"

"I'm a woman," Mom replied. "In Karch, vengeance isn't carried out on females. Believe it or not it would be considered 'uncivilized.' Like I told you earlier, it is carried out on the firstborn son."

Gene asked. "If it was vengeance than why didn't they just kill me while they had me? They've nearly caught me several times, succeeded once, and had me drugged. I think this is more than just vengeance."

"Killing you wouldn't be enough for them."

"I'd stay with the group," Gene said.

“I’m—”

”I’ll even take a gun.”

“NO, Gene. I’m sorry, you *can’t* go.”

Gene left the room, depressed. With nothing else to do for the next four hours, he decided to pick up his tablet from Grills office. Just as he arrived at her office, a woman left the room looking positively flustered. Grills followed her out the door.

“Make sure you sniff those herbs I gave you five times a day,” Grills reminded the lady. “Every meal, then before and after slee—Mr. Haton! Back to finish your session I see.”

“Actually I’m just here to pick up my tablet,” Gene said. “I left it here earlier today.”

“Yes, I know,” Grills said, following Gene into her office. “So what drastically important task did Taylor need you for? Filing papers? Or filing her nails perhaps?” Grills laughed hysterically at her own joke.

Gene felt a little anger at that accusation but tried to hide it as he said, “Where’s my tablet?”

“Perhaps you’d like to take a seat?”

“I actually have somewhere I need to go.” It wasn’t quite a lie, he would have to go to dinner at 6:00. So what if that was four hours away . . . Looking around, he found his tablet on Grills desk. A little disturbed at finding it on, he decided that he’d put a password on it as soon as he left. Just as he was picking it up, Grills grabbed his right arm to try to prompt him over to the couch.

The effect was immediate. Gene started shivering as though a thick cloud of ice had formulated around him.

“What are you doing!” His father shouted at him.

“You’ve already had four bottles of—”

King's Pawn

"Give it to me NOW!" Bordeaux shouted, pulling out his knife.

"Haton, Haton?" someone shouted, but Gene could barely hear them. Finally the voice said, "*Gene*."

Shivering still, Gene said, "Yeah?"

Grills looked scared. A little winded, she said, "Take a seat."

Breathless himself, Gene shook head and said, "I've gotta, I gotta be going."

Gene wandered out, but the penetrating cold didn't leave. Not paying any attention to where his feet were taking him, Gene wandered about the corridors for what seemed like days. He couldn't cry, Gene knew that. Soldiers never cried. Finally he found himself in the cafeteria, sitting alone in one of the corners with a mug of hot chocolate sitting untouched in front of him. Presently, he became aware of someone sitting next to him. How she had come to be there Gene didn't know, but when he looked up he saw the old and kind face of Brynn Taylor staring back at him. Gene jumped when he first saw her and exclaimed, "Lieutenant Taylor!"

"So what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Gene mumbled.

Ms. Taylor gave him an I-know-you-better-than-that look even though Gene didn't think she did. Then she said delicately, "Your hands tell a different story."

Gene quickly removed his trembling hands from the table and attempted to hide them underneath it. "I had anoth—I had a flashback."

"About your father?" Taylor asked. Gene nodded. "Have you seen your mother about it?"

“I can’t just go see her anytime I want, she has duties to do,” Gene responded.

“Believe me, I know your mom,” Taylor said. “She would never let anything come before you kids.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think she cares.”

“Your mom has trouble expressing her emotions, but if you saw her when she came to rescue you a month ago, you’d think differently. Do you know what happened?”

“No.”

“They tried to make her stay home,” Taylor said. “But she insisted upon joining them or else she’d resign her commission. Your mom is one of the captain’s finest officers. He didn’t want to lose her so he pulled some strings and sent her on the team. She didn’t want to lose you.”

“Really?” Gene asked.

“Yes, and she meant it,” Taylor continued. “Your mother loves her nation, and values her service more than her life. But even above that, she loves you more. Talk to her, she can help.”

“I can’t interfere with her duties,” Gene said stubbornly.

“Then go see your sister,” Taylor suggested. “I doubt she’d complain.”

“She has a life,” Gene replied.

“Which makes her all the more likely to listen,” Taylor said. “I have to go, but consider what I’ve told you.” Taylor stood up and as she left, said, “Don’t beat on yourself. You’ll be fine.”

Gene felt better having talked to Taylor. He still felt the pain from the experience that afternoon, but it felt as though his pain had subsided a small degree.

King's Pawn

Instead of going to visit his sister, Gene returned to his room and took a seat at the small desk. Then he pulled out his tablet and opened up the code. He had already translated all of the characters into numbers. There were well over three-hundred of them all in a matrix-like table. It took him but half a moment to recall the little key he'd figured out in Grills office.

For two hours, Gene set himself to deciphering the numbers. Not even bothering to check and see if his work was producing any good, Gene plowed through the whole thing. He didn't know how it was possible that he knew how to decode the paper, but it seemed as though it were a distant memory returning to him. Two hours later, Gene found himself holding a sheet littered once more with dots. This time, however, the characters were now letters.

But still there weren't any words. He looked at the code as a whole for two minutes straight, wondering if he had made any progress at all. Again, he suddenly realized that he should be eliminating every other letter and turning the code backwards. He immediately did that and the letters turned into words. He then eliminated all but every fourth, seventh, and tenth word in a set of twelve.

Now he could make sense of the words. They were in Karch, but he could read them almost as well as he could English:

BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS NOW. AFTER THEY
HAVE COMMENCED WE ATTACK ALGENNER.
IF A BATTLE ENSUES, DO NOT FIRE ON
CRESCENT, THE KNOWLEDGE IS ON BOARD.

GIVE THE HUMAN A REMINDER. MAY YOU
FIND FAVOR IN THE EYES OF HAR NILATS.

That was all? Gene thought, surprised. *I worked two weeks to get five freakin' sentences!* However, it seemed as though it must be right. None of the words were complete nonsense. Then Gene began thinking about the implications. If he had only been able to decipher the code upon its arrival, they might've given Lagenna some warning. Immediately Gene walked up to the communications center in search of Taylor. He knew she wouldn't completely disregard his work.

Taylor wasn't in the communications center, however and Gene was greeted by Lieutenant Olaf. Well, Olaf was worth a try. "Lieutenant Olaf?" Gene asked.

"What is it Haton?" Olaf responded, he sounded as though he were in a rotten mood.

"I think I've translated a Karch code," Gene told him solemnly.

"Right," Olaf said sarcastically. "And did you just happen to come up with a cure for the common cold too?"

"But I'm certain, I've been working on it for over a week!"

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" a deep voice asked, causing them to jump.

"Sir!" Olaf exclaimed as they turned to find Captain Blake behind them at the door. "What are you. . ."

"I came to find Mr. Haton." Blake asked. "Well? What seems to be the trouble?"

"Haton claims he's found the solution to one of Karch's codes."

"Sir, I know it sounds weird but believe me!"

"Mr. Haton, I need to see you in my office right now. We can discuss this there. Follow me." Blake turned around leaving a dumbfounded Olaf behind. Gene followed in his wake, feeling awkward to be walking right behind the most powerful man on board. Finally they reached an office right next to Gene's mom's. Once inside Blake offered Gene a seat and then took one himself behind a large oak desk.

"We have fifteen minutes and then we must depart for Lagenna," Blake said.

"Okay," Gene said. Then, realizing what Blake had said, exclaimed, "*Lagenna!*"

"You've been invited to join me and several other captains on a trip to Flohkenelyuh, capital of Lagenna. Don't ask me why. Please explain this code."

"But Mom just told me this afternoon that I couldn't go."

"Mr. Haton, please explain the code," Blake said impatiently.

"Well, the other week, we intercepted a code from Karch. I kept a copy of it because . . . well . . . because I thought it looked kinda cool." Gene suddenly wondered if this was bad. Pausing for a moment, he continued hastily, "Anyway, that same day, I found that I could understand everything the Karch guy was saying even when he was speaking his own language."

"And you've never taken lessons?" Blake asked in Karch, but Gene didn't notice.

"No sir, never," Gene said.

Blake seemed silently impressed, but said only, "How odd."

"Anyway, I got to looking at the code and found out it was all numbers."

“I assume this means you’ve learned how to read the Karch alphabet then.”

“Well, not learned,” Gene said.

“It was another subconscious skill?”

“Yes, sir. Anyway, so I started looking at that code and the answers just kinda came to me. It was as if I were remembering something I’d forgotten.”

“Show me what the code says,” Blake said.

Gene showed him the code. Blake read it quickly and nodded. “That makes sense,” he said. “But we can’t stay and discuss it more. We need to depart for Lagenna. Follow me.”

Blake walked swiftly, not giving Gene the chance to ask him any more questions. He followed the captain to the SRV port where they were met by two other captains of the fleet and Commodore Pardoe, Gwen and Gene’s mom. While giving her offspring stern warnings to be courteous and a quick summary of Laven customs, she attempted to flatten some hair on Gene’s forehead. “You can talk freely among these men, they all know who you are,” she said, referring to the several captains and the commodore that were already boarding. “Enjoy your trip!”

“You’re not coming?”

“No, I’ve business to attend to here, good luck! And don’t communicate with anybody on board or otherwise until you’re back!”

In five minutes, the SRV pulled out of the dock. Gene was feeling extremely awkward among so many high-ranking individuals. Gwen, on the other hand, seemed quite at ease, chatting with Gene conversationally throughout the trip.

“I hadn’t noticed the way he was looking at me,” Gwen was saying. “But then Joanne poked me and pointed him

out. So I turned back to her and said, 'Dih! No!' Freaky huh? I mean the guy was like twenty-three or somethin'. So I turned, walked straight up to him and said, 'Sorry you turkey, you better find another pecking partner. I'm not your hen.'

"Harsh," Gene remarked.

"Nah, he deserved it," Gwen said. "You should've seen the way he was goggling. You'd 've thought I was Mary Kelley or somethin'! And I've been getting sick of it anyway. He's the third one I've told off since we came on board. Testosterone! Jeez, all you guys are so full of it!"

"So why are we tagging along?" Gene asked her, changing the subject. He just hoped that one of those refusals hadn't been Brad.

"Dunno," Gwen replied. "There I was in the lounge, and then suddenly I'm here. I told Mom, 'dih, I was going to visit Ella tonight.' So she said, 'Fine, if you don't want to visit the queen of Lagenna.' Okay, so she didn't say it like that, but how could I refuse? And Ella was fine with it so here I am. I think Mom felt guilty about you not getting to go earlier. I guess she just changed her mind."

"All hands prepare for landing," the helmsman said from up front. It was night where the SRV landed on Lagenna. Next to it landed five assault SRVs which had been assigned to guard them.

As they were exiting, one of the captains identified the city as Flohkenelyuh, capital of Lagenna. To the west Gene saw a fleet of gigantic passenger carriers preparing to depart. Four security guards emerged from each of the five assault SRVs and walked with them along a stone path. Blake told them they'd meet the queen of Lagenna in Judgment Hall,

the largest of the five government buildings. It wasn't long before it came into sight.

Judgment Hall was gigantic with stone walls and huge wooden pillars. The layout of the building was octagonal with three horizontal wooden pillars jutting out on either side of the front entrance. Spraying out of each of these pillars were jets of water which flowed into two swiftly-moving rivers on either side of the path then off the edge of the cliff.

Even Gwen was quiet as they walked up the long stone pathway to the doors. The stars above them framed Judgment Hall, giving it an eerie sense of timeless sanctity. It took them five minutes to simply walk up the long walk to the entrance. As they were walking, Blake explained to them in a low voice what they were seeing. "Judgment Hall is where the legislature and the judiciary council meets. See how the pillars appear to be wooden and the sides are of stone?" The two Lees nodded. "The stones represent consistency and the need to return to our roots for wisdom. The wooden pillars represent trees and the need to grow and keep an open mind. Both are symbols of strength and solidity. You'll find that life requires both."

The group reached the entrance. Eight sentries stood guard and allowed them to enter. Inside the building was like a small basketball stadium with seats all around the sides. The floor was wooden with a small stone section in the middle upon which an old woman was standing.

She was old, with long, snowy, and oddly straight hair. When they entered she didn't immediately look at them, her gray eyes seemingly distant and hazy. Abruptly, her eyes came into focus and became fixed momentarily on Gene.

From behind them a woman's voice announced, "From the kin of Pardoe, the commodore Eric. From the kin of Dubinsky, the captain Vladimira. From the kin of Blake, the captain William. From the kin of Dominguez, the captain Maria. From the kin of Lee, the son Gene, and daughter Gwen."

These last words echoed hollow through the empty hall leaving Gene feeling a little uneasy at hearing his real name declared so loudly. Feeling like a misfit more than ever, he turned away from the source of the sound and back to the old woman.

Finally the woman raised her aged fingers in the triangular salute that Flohelyuh had demonstrated earlier and began to speak, her voice surprisingly free of accent. "Welcome to Lakenna. I am of the kin Kohfen, Queen Senethfrin."

"Queen Senethfrin, we are honored by your summoning. We also bear you the deepest sympathies of President Hoffman on the loss of your husband."

The woman looked deeply into his eyes. "I accept your sympathies, Commodore. Lagenna has reclaimed what was rightfully hers. I greatly miss him."

"How are the negotiations going?" Commodore Pardoe asked.

"You are not meant to know," the queen said slowly. "However, I trust you more than the generals from Erus and Yevrus. For about the eighth day in a row the negotiations nearly came to an end. An end would most likely result in war."

"Why don't they end them then?" Captain Dominguez asked.

Senethfrin looked at her. “The Karch delegation continues to prolong the negotiations. Yesterday one of the presidents of Erus himself approached me and demanded that the negotiations be ended at once. I informed him, though, that the only way of stopping the negotiations would be to destroy the building. Communications can come out, but they can’t go in.”

“Then it’s going to be war,” Captain Dubinsky said, giving the word a sort of evil reverence.

“I’m afraid to say it, but yes,” the queen said. “To say otherwise would be a lie. But it’s unfortunately from war that we learn of love.” The elderly queen looked among the men until her eyes fell on Gene. To the commodore she said, “Is that him?” Pardoe nodded. Gwen gave Gene a bewildered look which he promptly returned, indicating he had no idea what they were talking about. When Gene looked back at the queen, she was still looking at him.

Finally, Gwen said in a slightly peeved voice, “It’s rude to stare you know.” At that remark, the four captains and Commodore Pardoe wheeled around to look at her. Gene was split between wanting to laugh and wanting to wring her neck. Gwen didn’t seem to notice the reactions of those around her but was looking fixedly at the old queen. Out of the corner of her eye, Gene was sure he caught Blake smiling and to his relief, so was the queen.

“I’m guessing you’re his bodyguard,” Senethfrin said.

“Actually I’m his sister, much more effective at doing the job don’t you think?” Gwen said.

“I have called you here to receive the blessing of Lagenna’s high priest.”

A white-bearded and equally ancient, green-robed man

materialized behind Gene. He raised his hands into the Laven hand gesture and placed his thumbs touching his neck and his index fingers touching the back of his head. Despite his frail appearance, the man had a strong voice. The man began to chant and sing in a language Gene didn't understand.

Although he knew he should feel really honored, he couldn't help but exchange a momentary glance of bewilderment with Gwen, however, Gwen herself had been approached by another green-robed priest. He imitated the gestures of his older counterpart and began to chant as well. Looking in the other direction, he saw that Captain Blake and Commodore Pardoe also had priests behind them. He could also hear two other priests, apparently giving the same treatment to Captain Dubinsky and Captain Dominguez.

The chanting and singing continued for several minutes until finally only Gene and Gwens' priests were still chanting. The man behind Gene stopped moments before the man behind Gwen.

The woman raised her left hand and cupped it over Commodore Pardoe's right ear. She did the same to Captain Blake. Then she touched her right hand to Gene and Gwen's left ears. She repeated the action to the other captains.

Senethfrin turned to both of them and said, "When the negotiations end, do not linger long." Then raising her hand one last time in the Laven gesture, she said, "Our hopes go with you. May your beards grow straight."

Gene felt sorry for her. Billions of people depended on her to do something that she couldn't accomplish: saving them from Karch. With her outdated military it was a nearly impossible task. Blake explained to them that the

passenger carriers they'd seen earlier were full of citizens escaping Lagenna. More than ever, Gene hoped that the peace process would be successful.

Impediments

Friday, October 16, 2009

The night had been a long one, Gene was experiencing another wave of nightmares about his father. Eventually he'd given up on sleeping, gotten out a book to calm his nerves and had retreated to the crewmen's lounge. When it was finally time for work, Gene was exhausted. He and Brad didn't talk as they got ready and headed up to the CC. Finally as they were about to enter, Gene asked him "How'd your trip go?"

"Good," Brad muttered.

"You seem exhausted."

"Couldn't sleep last night," Brad said, not looking at him. As the door to the CC opened, Brad said, "You seem tired yourself. Where were you when I got back from Lagenna?"

"I'll tell you later," Gene said, noting the omnipresent Olaf glaring at them. He quickly took a seat at a station monitoring text communications. To his surprise, Brad

didn't take the seat next to him but sat a row behind him. Gene looked at him bewildered but Brad either didn't see him or was ignoring him.

An hour later, the ship's intercom was activated and the crew heard the voice of Captain Blake booming over the sound system. "Attention all hands, I have an announcement to make concerning fleet communications. By order of Commodore Pardoe and with the approval of the Military Department, all of the messages sent to and from the Falcons will be read and the video communications monitored by our communications staff.

"Everyone that tries to send us a message using those mediums will be forewarned of monitoring by our communications staff. If you have concerns please inform your department head and they will deal with them." Blake paused for a moment before continuing. "I regret that this has become a needed precaution and I realize that this is a great infringement upon your rights."

"Not to mention a lot more work for us," the woman seated next to Gene muttered.

"I assure you this is to be a temporary change," Blake continued. "Thank-you and again, I apologize."

Immediately following the closing of the message, Lieutenant Taylor, who had just barely entered, said, "Not if *I* have anything to say about that!" She promptly told Olaf that he was to take charge again and stormed out of the room.

Twenty-five minutes later, Taylor entered the communications center again, her face red. "Listen up, crew, here's the deal. Pardoe suspects that there is a traitor among us. From now on, each of you and a companion

King's Pawn

will monitor every communication that we intercept. If it is a letter you and your companion will read it. For visual communications, *always* be sure to notify both parties that they are under surveillance. That shouldn't be much of a problem as we are out of range of most visual communications.

"If you see a message written in a foreign alphabet or language, you are to immediately forward the message to me, Mr. Olaf or one of the other communications officers *and* to each of the command officers. If you see or read anything mutinous, rebellious, or even something that sounds strange, again, you are to forward it to a communications officer and the command officers. Questions?"

"How long is this going to last?" a lady on the front row asked.

"I don't know and neither does the captain. But I would say at least two months." Several of the crewmen groaned. Taylor held up her hand for silence. "Our hope is that whoever it is will either be too scared to send out further communications, or will reveal themselves by doing so. Any other questions?" No one else spoke. "Then you can begin your new duties." Taylor went ahead and started making out assignments. Gene was paired up with a woman named Roberta Coffey. Taylor assigned them to monitor outgoing mail.

As Earth was out of direct communication range of the Falcons, all of the visual communications they received were either from nearby planets or other ships in the Falcons. This placed a greater priority on mail to *Crescent's* crew. Gene enjoyed a freedom from this addiction having no one he cared to talk to at home. However, his roommates

were a different story entirely. Brad and Duncan practically checked their mail by the hour. Paul was a little less aggressive with this habit, but when he did get a letter, he often booted his roommates out to read it in privacy.

“So we just read it?” Gene asked.

“Yes, those are our instructions,” Roberta responded, looking at the first letter. It was addressed to a woman named Helga Wilkinson from Lieutenant Connie Wilkinson.

Helga,

Like I’ve told you time and time again, there’s no way you can get me to tell him. If you really want to tell Wayne that you like him, I can’t help you with that. Besides, it really should be done in person. Sorry, sis—you’ll just have to tell him yourself. There are some things that are not the place of the older sister to do and expressing love is certainly one of them.

Other than that, my assignment is going well. Since last week there haven’t been any disturbances. . . .

Roberta quickly became enraptured in the letter as it got juicier. Connie was apparently going out with a ship’s engineer who had recently been engaged to a woman back on Earth. Apparently the other woman had ceased writing him thus opening up the possibility of searching for true love elsewhere.

Gene looked at Roberta when she finished reading it twenty seconds after him. “Isn’t it exciting?” she exclaimed. “It’s like the grape vine but we get paid for it!”

Gene didn’t think her comment merited a response and thus said nothing. She apparently didn’t hear his silence as she continued gabbing for several seconds. Gene’s eyes drifted towards Brad who was busy monitoring a

communication between three people. For a moment their eyes met but Brad looked away quickly, not conveying any information.

"Who's next?" Roberta asked excitedly. "To Charlie Tanner From Ella Harris. Looks exciting!"

Reading mail became boring to her after about the fourth or fifth letter they read. Apparently none of the other letters were nearly as interesting as the first. In fact, very few of them were as long as the first, most being quick memos.

Finally, after scanning through a letter from Al Smith, someone tapped him on his shoulder to relieve him. Brad had already disappeared a few moments before. Guessing that he had gone to the cafeteria, Gene started making his way down there. Unfortunately, Brad was nowhere to be seen. Gene silently took a seat next to Paul and Duncan.

"Freedom of speech has been a sacred right to humanity for centuries," Duncan said.

"Try telling me that when your head's been blown off at the hands of some traitor," Paul told him calmly.

"Better to die free than die a slave." Duncan fired back.

"Fine. Die free then. Just don't take me with you."

Gene didn't listen. He couldn't understand Brad's behavior. He had thought they were friends—had Gene offended him somehow? Did this have to do with Gwen? He couldn't understand it.

He ate in silence until Paul interrupted him by saying, "It's almost 1430, Haton. Isn't it time for you to disappear?"

Gene scowled at him. "If you want me to than I will!" He left quickly, not wanting to be late. The classes had grown increasingly rigorous, the annoying red light that he was targeting had become faster and the past week switched to

three-dimensional movement.

Today the new element added to the mix was a second red light. For now the two lights remained close together but Gene doubted that would be the case forever. Despite his significant improvement, Niels demanded perfection.

“You’re too slow, Mr. Lee,” Niels told him after Gene took a roll and blasted his two opponents. “Do you expect your enemy to accommodate you in battle?”

“Quite frankly, sir, I don’t think that I will be in battle again.”

“Did you think that you would be kidnapped.”

“Well—”

“Did you think you would be drugged?”

“No—”

“Then I suggest you improve your thinking and be prepared to expect the worst.” The blips appeared again as he said these last words. Giving him a glare, Gene dodged the initial blasts and fired back, catching the first and missing the second. As he was about to fire again at the second however, the ship’s intercom system was activated and the voice of Lieutenant Olaf sounded across the whole ship. “All hands to battle stations! All hands to battle stations!”

When Gene turned around again, Niels had disappeared from sight, the doors sliding silently together after him. The remaining red blip had fired several shots in his direction, hitting him in the chest. Firing one last shot at it, Gene eliminated the nuisance and followed Niels out the door.

As he was about to enter the CC, he heard someone call his name from behind him. “Gene!”

Gene waited as Brad caught up to him. He indicated Gene should enter an intersecting corridor. Bewildered,

Gene complied. Brad looked left and right before telling him, "Gene, I need you to know something."

"What?"

"No matter what happens, I am your friend."

"Okay, I guess I am yours too," Gene said.

"That's all," Brad left and headed towards the CC.

"What the heck is going on?" Gene asked as he followed him.

"We're about to find out," Brad said.

The two rounded the corner and entered the packed communications center. Whispers polluted the air as Brad and Gene took seats next to Duncan and Paul. Lieutenant Melvin sat in back of the room, conversing with Lieutenant North. Obviously Lieutenants Taylor and Olaf were on the bridge. With no reliable source of information, Gene began listening to a couple of women sitting next to them.

"The delegations failed?" one whispered.

"Yeah, I heard our ambassador was pretty angry about that," the other responded.

"A minute before you got here, Lieutenant Taylor announced that we can't transmit any non fleet-related messages until further notice."

Gene was distracted by the image on the projector pad. "Look," Gene told Brad, pointing to it. Two large fleets from Erus and Lagenna were grouping around the Falcons. "What are they doing?"

"It looks like they're guarding us," Brad remarked.

"But why?" Gene asked.

"I dunno," Brad muttered. "Oh, did you hear we've just been commanded not to send any more communications not specifically fleet-related until further notice."

“Why?”

“They haven’t told us.”

Twenty minutes later, Taylor’s voice sang out over the ship’s speaker system announcing that they were allowed to stand down from battle stations. This was immediately accompanied by an order to gather in the assembly hall.

By the time they all packed into the enormous theater, several rumors had already been started as to what had happened during those tense twenty or so minutes. Some said that there had indeed been a battle in which the fleets from Erus and Karch had destroyed each other. There were also some that said the fleet from Karch had run bombing raids over Lagenna, destroying many of the cities before they could be stopped. Gene had trouble believing this rumor. They were in middle of a gigantic fleet of Laven ships which Gene was pretty sure could easily prevent such an atrocity.

The hall became quieter when a young ensign stood up behind a podium at the front of the room. Without pausing for quiet, the young woman announced, “Attention all hands, this meeting will now come to order. Commander Rogers. . . .”

Commander Rogers stepped up to the podium and proceeded to read from a tablet. “The captain has asked me to give a brief summary of what has happened this afternoon. Earlier today, the legislature voted to overturn President Hoffman’s veto to their declaration of war. At approximately the same time as we received word of this, the delegation was released on Lagenna, where no compromise was made.

“The fleet from Karch was given the opportunity to

safely leave for Karch's borders. However, they decided to take the opportunity to open fire on one of the bases orbiting the planet. A battle commenced and is still going on as we speak. At last report the Laven fleet has that battle well under control and they expect it to soon be over."

Unexpectedly, Rogers turned to his left and said, "Ensign, deactivate all recorders and monitors." He paused for a moment before continuing. "The following orders are classified and sharing information regarding them beyond the crew of *Crescent* or those serving in the Falcons is strictly prohibited.

"A half-hour ago, the fleet was instructed to not transmit any messages from the Falcons to non-SBN personnel. Until further notice, our location is strictly classified. Under orders from Earth, we've been commanded to proceed to Erus where our assistance has been requested. Joining us will be the contingent from Erus and a fleet from Lagenna. Our destination is Empelrus, where we will be further strengthening their forces there." Turning back to his left, he said, "Ensign, continue the recording. Captain Blake will now speak."

Everyone in the room stood respectfully as the captain stepped up to the podium and commanded them to sit with a wave of his hand. The room around them was quieter than a funeral. The captain paused for a moment, allowing the silence to settle upon them like a quilt on a bed. Then, for the second time that day, the captain addressed the *Crescent's* crew.

"My friends, I regret to inform you that the nation you have all sworn to protect is now at war. Technologically, Falvayah is no match for Karch. I have fought them before,

this is no myth. Our ships may be faster, but theirs are more enduring. Their weapons are stronger and pack more punch. They fire more rapidly than ours do, with the ability to fire five volleys to every one of ours. Our technology cannot and will not save us.

“Demographically we are no match for Karch. They have ten soldiers to our citizen. Their soldiers are elite and well trained. They are experts in the field of battle. If any here know history, then know this. These men make Blitzkrieg look like kindergarten kids raiding a cookie jar. They’ve already conquered a sixth of Lagenna with more undoubtedly to follow. Our numbers cannot and will not save us.

“Our leadership is no match for Karch. Their government is of one mind; the mind of Har Nilats. Ours has already proven itself divided in purpose. The legislature seeks to stand by our allies. Our President believes in the power of peace. Our leaders cannot and will not save us.

“But we have something more powerful than all of that. And it is because of this that we shall beat them. They may capture Sobiem, they may take Ger or Shaw. They may even take Earth. But each of you has the will, the right, and a cause ten times greater and nobler than that of any from Karch. And that, in the end, will win you this war.”

Blake looked out across the faces, as though assessing damage that had not occurred yet. Gene felt as though he spent an extra long time staring at him in particular, before finally saying, “Look at your neighbor and remember the face well. Misery lies ahead. But I want you to remember the face you see, because the face you see now will be different from the face you see in five years. That is the curse of war.

King's Pawn

You will never be the same afterwards. How you deal with it is your decision, your choice.”

After another pause, he ended abruptly by saying. “Thank-you, you are dismissed.”

The rest of the day was rather subdued, many of the conversations were hushed and quiet. As Paul and Duncan left for their duty shift that evening, Gene again noticed a peculiar sadness lingering around Brad. A month ago he would never have noticed it but he knew Brad too well now for it to simply pass his attention. “Brad, no kidding around, what’s wrong?”

“You heard the captain, we’re at war.”

“We all knew a war was likely to start, you were acting weird even before that. What’s up?”

Brad picked up his tablet, turned it on and handed it to him. “Read it,” he said. Gene looked down at the letter:

Dear Pedro,

This is your grandfather. It appears your idiot brother Santiago has been in an accident while out in the mountains. Santiago was cutting down a tree and it fell the wrong way, hitting him in the back. He was paralyzed.

Enclosed is the medical bill. I can’t pay it. I’m sure you’ll come up with a solution.

–Esteban Garcia Herca

“Out cutting wood?” Gene questioned.

“He makes furniture out of wood,” Brad said sullenly. “Or made.”

“Why is your grandpa so. . .”

“Stupid? He blames me for my mom’s death. He has enough money to help, but doesn’t want to.”

“Can’t you take a leave of absence or something? Your brother needs you.”

“You know I can’t, not after what we heard today! Besides, even if I could leave, he needs my money which I can’t earn out there. I don’t have a college degree or anything. Dropped out after my first semester. Barely passed High School.”

“You don’t necessarily need school.”

“No, but it sure helps. My best bet is here on *Crescent*. My wages aren’t that pretty but at least I’m guaranteed pay.”

“I don’t know if I’m getting wages, but if I am you can certainly have all of mine.” Gene said. “It’s not like I’m going to be buying anything with it while we’re out in the middle of nowhere.”

“No, I can’t ask you to do that. Save it and put it into savings for school. I learned my lesson.”

“Brad, you need the money more than I do.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is my problem.”

“Your problems *are* my problems.”

“The thing is, if we’re not allowed to contact home, I don’t know how I can send him money or anything.”

“We’ll find a way. I promise you.” These words felt rather absurd leaving his lips but he meant them as much as he had ever meant anything else in his life. It felt good to help. Gene had been so self-absorbed for the past eight months that he had forgotten what it was like to care for someone enough to give your all to helping them. And now that he had begun doing so, he didn’t care to stop.

Intellectual

Tuesday, October 20, 2009

For their lesson on Tuesday, Taylor decided to move to the ship's lounge. The only reason she gave was that she felt her office was far too quiet.

Gene was tired after another long training session with Niels. After he lapsed in and out of attention several times, trying to think of a way to earn money, Taylor looked straight at him, "Mr. Haton, I do believe you're distracted again."

"What? No, you were just talking about setting aside preconceptions."

"Fifteen minutes ago, yes." Taylor said. "But I've switched topics three times since then. Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

"Well, not really," Gene replied. He knew he had been very distracted.

"Say it."

Gene hesitated for a moment. Was it private to Brad? He had been somewhat reluctant to share the story with Gene. “I’m just afraid it might be private.”

“Is it about Mr. Fuentes’s brother?”

Gene was slightly shocked. “How did you know?”

“I was the one who screened his letter Friday.” Taylor responded. “We had a sudden influx of letters and we were short-handed so I lent a hand to the crewmen on duty.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to think about how we can help him to earn money for his brother,” Gene mentioned. “The bill is pretty big.”

“Hmm, I suppose the first thing to do is to determine your strengths. What are you good at?”

“Reading.”

Taylor frowned slightly. “Let me rephrase that question. What are your ‘marketable skills.’”

“I don’t have any.”

Taylor glared at him.

“I can tie knots, and I can kinda shoot guns now.”

“Geney!” Gene groaned as Gwen popped out of nowhere. “What’s up?”

“Ms. Harris, what marketable skills does Mr. Haton have?” Taylor asked her briskly.

Gwen looked at him. Gene slowly shook his head as she exclaimed, “Gene is a born artist.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” she turned to Taylor. “Yes, he is. Here, let me prove it to you.” Gwen dug inside a small bag hanging to her side and pulled out a tablet. After fiddling with it for several seconds, she handed it to Taylor. “This is a scan of one of his paintings.”

King's Pawn

"My, my, Gene, this is excellent." Taylor stated. The painting showed a child's hand reaching into the pages of an open book and pulling a world out of it.

"He did it for the library—they have it hanging up in the lobby," Gwen told her.

"I won't—" Gene rubbed his forehead. "I don't do it anymore."

"Why not? Gene your talent is extraordinary."

"I just don't do it anymore," Gene said stubbornly.

"This is about Dad, isn't it?" Gwen remarked, glancing around to make sure no one was listening in.

"What does your artwork have to do with Mr. Bordeaux?" Taylor questioned.

"Dad was a painter," Gwen whispered but Gene overheard.

"That's not it at all. I just can't have time." he finished lamely.

"Fine, don't paint any more. But couldn't you just sell some of your old stuff?" Gwen asked.

"No, it's personal."

"Gene, if it's not personal it's not art."

"If Mr. Haton doesn't wish to sell his pieces, we'll just have to come up with another way for him to make money for his friend."

"This is for a friend then?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah." Gene answered. "One of my roommates has a brother that had a tree fall on top of him. He was paralyzed from the neck down."

"I see," Gwen sighed. "And you wanted to sell paintings to help raise money for him?"

"No, you wanted me to sell paintings," Gene said. "I

never would've mentioned it myself."

"Yes, heaven forbid that you leave your comfort zone to help a friend."

"Ms. Harris, do you realize how much Mr. Haton's smile has improved since our first lesson?" Taylor said suddenly, obviously changing the subject.

"Do you think so? Maybe his counseling sessions have been helping," Gwen said, looking at Gene with a weird expression on her face. Gene turned slightly pink from the two women staring at his face so intently. "Hmm, his first lesson was just about a month ago wasn't it?"

"Well that was less than a week after I had been abducted and all." Gene defended. "Of course I was miserable."

"Yes, that's true," Taylor said. "I imagine that was frightening."

"Not as frightening as . . . well I can't remember the whole thing," Gene stammered. "I'm still kinda confused about it."

"What confuses you?"

"Plesh, the guy who abducted me, brought up all of this stuff that I'd never heard before when he was interrogating me. For one, he kept going on about how he had picked me specifically out of the other three-hundred or something like that."

"He said what?" Taylor exclaimed, grasping the arm on her chair. "The other three hundred?"

"Yeah, then he kept asking me about space tunnels and all. . . ."

"Yes, that's interesting. I guess I had better be going, I have someone I need to meet with." Taylor said, somewhat diffidently.

"Oh, okay," Gene said, bewildered. Taylor hastily exited the lounge. "That was weird."

King's Pawn

"She knows something, Gene," Gwen said smartly.

"Knows something?"

"Oh come on, Gene, you don't still buy that whole hoax that this is all spurred on by a vengeance-driven lunatic."

"No, but I think she did until now."

"Did you see the look on her face? I've never seen her look so disturbed."

"And how do you know her so well?"

"Don't change the subject. She knew something and you know it," Gwen said.

"What could she know?"

"She's been in the military a long time, certainly longer than Mom has," Gwen noted.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Gene!" Brad said in greeting, walking up to him and glancing at Gwen. On his face was a grin that was reminiscent of Mitch Bradford on the news: Wide and artificial. If he wanted to make a good impression on her he was going about it the wrong way.

"Gwen, this is my roommate," Gene said.

"What's your name?" Gwen questioned.

"Bra- Bradley, er Brad Fuentes," he said.

"Oh? Well, Brabradleyerbrad Fuentes, it's a pleasure to meet you," Gwen said. "And let me say, I've never heard of a more peculiar name!"

Gene leaned in closer to her and said, "He found out about who we really are."

"How?" Gwen asked.

"He accidentally overheard a conversation from the captain and Commodore Pardoe." Gene answered.

"Does Mom know?" Gene and Brad glanced at each

other. Reading the signs, Gwen said, “Good idea, she’d flip out.” After pausing for a minute, she added, “Well, you’ve introduced him to me, are you going to introduce me to him?”

“Oh, he already . . . Brad this is my twin sister, Gwen L—”
 “Harris,” Gwen reminded him, impatiently.

“Er, Gwen Harris,” Gene stammered. “Uh, he’s the one whose brother I was telling you about.”

“Oh! The guy who was maimed by a tree!” Gwen said. “I remember hearing about you! But Gene never mentioned your brother’s name. Gene stinks at details.”

“Santiago. Santiago was his name. He was my older brother,” Brad said uncomfortably.

“Ah, Santiago,” Gwen replied. “Not as interesting as Brabradleyerbrad, I guess your parents got creative *after* him. Well it’s a pleasure to meet you Mr. Fuentes. I hope your whiskers grow forever long or whatever that lady said. See you both!” Gwen got up and glided away.

“Whiskers?” Brad asked him.

“I think that’s some kind of Laven saying she picked up the day before yesterday.”

“Oh, right,” Brad said, rubbing the area below his nose. “Ready for the Lirpa game tomorrow?”

Gene sighed. “You know we’re going to lose if I play.”

“We’ve beaten four teams since you came on, remember?”

“Out of, let’s see, eight games?” Gene said. “Fifty percent I think is an ‘F’ if I recall.”

“In sports, four outta eight is one game away from a winning season. . . .”

“Let’s face it, I’m not an athlete,” Gene said sullenly. “Oh, and watch out. Here comes our friend from CMIA.”

King's Pawn

Indeed, the lady who had still not given them a name was approaching them. This time, however, she was wearing a name tag that identified her as "Ingrid Vextra." Gene was half-afraid that Brad would say something like, "If I had that name I wouldn't tell any one either." But to Gene's relief, Brad looked up at her and after reading her name said sweetly, "Miss Vextra, pleasure to meet you again. I was almost afraid you'd gotten lost, er, gotten off at Lagenna."

"Mr. Fuentes, so good to see you in a more amiable mood than at our last encounter," Ingrid replied. "Mr. Haton, I donned a name tag for your commendation. Does it find your approbation?"

"Sure, though it's usually less trouble to introduce yourself," Gene answered.

She seemed slightly disturbed that he had understood her, but continued unfazed. "You find it an onerous chore to read my name tag? I think it to be a more sophisticated way of introduction."

"Heaven forbid we be simple," Gene said. Glancing at Brad he saw that he was scratching the back of his head in confusion. This seemed to give Ingrid great satisfaction. "Is there a reason you're visiting us?" he continued.

"Do I need a warrant?" She asked.

Finally seeming to understand something Ingrid said, Brad tried to cut in, "Well, actually—"

"I thought not," she said.

"You do realize that we likely won't hit another place for you to get off for upwards of a month, don't you?" Brad asked.

"Which is a good reason for me to make some acquaintances." Gene wanted to thank her for

condescending to their level but Ingrid continued. “An arduous task in the military.”

Trying to sound confident, he said, “Military people are—” but Gene’s voice gave a teenage-boy-crack, “some of the best people I know.”

“Mr. Haton, you seem young yet so I will give you some counsel. Don’t make friends with men whose sole objective is to kill the other side.”

“That *isn’t* our sole objective!” Gene defended.

“The narratives illustrating cruel atrocities committed by SBN soldiers are as endless as Mr. Fuentes’ vocabulary is small.”

“Really? Name one,” Brad challenged. Gene knew at once this was a bad idea.

“Where to begin? Perhaps with this small sampling. On Earth a soldier used his ‘military authority’ to search a house of an unwed lady with a small family. Apparently that warrant included the seizure of questionable property such as upwards of four thousand vavens of goods. I, thankfully, was able to apprehend him for breaking-and-entering then robbery.”

“That’s *one* soldier,” Brad said. “You’re judging the entire military based on the acts of one man.”

“Fine. Not your generation but over a decade ago, the military altered the minds of several hundred babies. They never gave a reason and somehow were exempted from punishment.”

“You’re saying that the military harmed these babies?” Brad asked.

“No, thankfully after monitoring these young ones they seem to have turned out normal,” she responded. “But they

might have programmed them to become over zealously patriotic or give them the innate desire to join the military.”

“And how many of those kids did that?”

“It’s impossible to tell as none of them are yet of age. There were many who had this mind alteration performed as well. Most of them were from Agemio, which was one of the hardest planets for Earth to conquer. Even now Agemio is known for being rebellious.”

Gene turned to Brad, “Don’t we have practice to get to, Brad?”

“Yeah, it was nice seeing ya, Ingrid.”

“Our meeting gave me satisfaction too, Mr. Fuentes.”

Gene and Brad walked away towards the Lirpa courts. As they got on the lift, Brad said, “Don’t you listen to a thing she says, Gene.”

“I wasn’t—“

”Listen, Miss Ingrid Vextra has spent her whole life searching for flaws in the military. And she’s discovered what she was looking for. But she doesn’t take it right. She looks at things from She’s just a big . . . a big . . .”

“Prevaricator?” Gene offered, grinning.

“Yeah, prevecator.”

At that moment, the lift stopped at E-deck and Lieutenant Taylor boarded, red in the face. After waiting a few seconds, tentatively Brad asked, “Lieutenant?”

“Is there a problem Mr. Fuentes?” Taylor asked gruffly.

“Uh, no sir, but I was about to ask you the same thing.”

Taylor’s face softened. “I’ve just lost almost all of my confidence in our government. That’s all.” Before she could say more, the lift stopped and she hastily exited.

“She’s acting strangely today, it must be her. . . .” Brad

seemed to again realize he was with Gene and hastily changed the end of his sentence. “. . .it must be stress.”

Gene, knowing very well what he was about to say, said, “She’s been that way since our lesson, before you came in and met my sister and me.” Gene explained what had happened earlier that day.

“And your sister figures Taylor knows something?” Brad asked after Gene was finished. “She’s probably right.”

“Are you saying that because you think so or because it’s Gwen’s suggestion?” Gene asked smiling.

“Oh shush.”

“I hate to admit it,” Gene continued. “But I think she’s right. I played stupid in front of her to try to get her to explain what she thinks but she never did explain anything else.”

“But how do we get that out of Taylor?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think she’d be persuaded very easily,” Gene sighed. They had reached the court and they could see through the window in the door that part of the team was already warming up.

“We’ll talk ‘bout it later,” Brad concluded.

Gene endured another long and taxing Lirpa practice, but did somehow get the impression that he was improving. Through the increased vigor of his sessions with Lieutenant Niels and his Lirpa practices Gene was growing increasingly more fit. He had never been badly out of shape, but hadn’t ever been the high school jock either. Although he certainly wasn’t a jock, he couldn’t help but cheerfully take note of a woman glancing at him for a long time on his way back to his quarters. Life wasn’t too bad for him on the *Crescent*.

Information

Thursday, October 22, 2099

Gene's team won their first tournament game Wednesday night, despite his dire predictions. Gene was surprised to find himself pleased about the outcome. Originally he had been hoping to lose so the season would be over but he had scored five goals for the team and had surprisingly had some fun. Even if they did make it to the finals, there were only a maximum of three more games he'd have to play.

That morning Taylor had complimented him on his game while he was on his shift (she'd heard about it from her good friend Louise, who was on the other team). To let him celebrate she informed him that he could skip their lesson that day. Gene was disappointed because he wanted to see if he could wheedle any information out of her.

Since Monday he and Brad hadn't found out anything new from her or from anybody else. In fact, Gene didn't

see Taylor half as much as he had the previous week. As all “frivolous” messages had been stopped completely, it was no longer required for the communications department to have a full staff operating around the clock.

Niels seemed to have no knowledge of the Lirpa victory and if he had, Gene doubted that he'd care. “Today we shall be testing your skills, Mr. Lee,” he told him as he arrived. “Once you get hit ten times you're dead. For the next half hour the targets will be getting progressively more difficult and more numerous. Let's see how you do. Begin test.”

As usual a red dot appeared at the opposite end of the room. Gene immediately fired and eliminated it. Seconds later two more appeared to his right. Again Gene shot at the two and eradicated them instantly. After ten more minutes, Gene found himself having been shot only twice but already exhausted from jumping around the room.

Three of the red dots flew menacingly around him. He shot the nearest one, dodged shots from the next two and fired again. Four reappeared in front of him. Gene surprised himself by taking care of them within five seconds. He glanced over to Lieutenant Niels. For a moment his face seemed to wear a small smile of approval. A second later Gene was sure he had imagined it as several more appeared.

Gene lasted a further ten minutes. By the end he was dead tired but satisfied with his performance. Even Niels was impressed. “Very good, Haton. That will be all for today.”

Glad that lessons were over, Gene returned to his quarters. The clock read 15:45 which meant he had almost three hours straight of free time. He briefly considered taking a nap but instead decided to turn on his tablet.

King's Pawn

Quickly he opened up one of his files with his paintings stored in it.

He hadn't opened the file for almost a year, and it had been slightly longer since he'd picked up his brush. The first painting he pulled up was one of his earlier pieces. It was a simple landscape depicting a storm on the horizon.

Gene had at one time been obsessed with painting. When he was younger, he had watched his father paint. Finally one day his father had set him down in front of a canvas and given him some oils.

"What?" Gene remembered asking him.

"Paint something," his father had said, sitting next to him on a stool.

Young Gene had looked up at him in confusion. "What?" he repeated.

"Whatever you feel like painting. Whatever lies at the core of your heart." Then he patted Gene on the leg (the same leg he would shatter a bottle against seven years later) and walked away.

At the time Gene had thought the idea corny. He hadn't said this of course, but felt it nonetheless. The first thing that came to mind was a mountain. His father had always taken him camping instilling in Gene a love of the mountains. Nevertheless, Gene's heart hadn't really been into the project and he had finished the painting in less than a half hour. Bordeaux, after seeing his son's crude work, complimented him on it and then proceeded to teach him ways to refine his technique.

Gene put the tablet down, overwhelmed by emotions, memories, and questions. His father's betrayal still didn't make any sense to him. How could he have changed so

rapidly? What had he done to earn his father's hatred?

Quietly, Gene closed the file on his tablet and walked out of the room. Feeling weak from the training session, he decided he would go relax in the lounge. When he got there, he found Duncan playing ping pong with a girl he had never met before. Neither of them were very good and Gene noted several distinct rules that were being broken. Duncan was wearing spurs, jeans, an old button-up shirt, and a cowboy hat. Aside from wondering the reason he was attired in such a way, Gene was mildly curious as to where Duncan had obtained them so far away from Earth. Ignoring these questions, Gene decided at once to leave the couple alone. Unfortunately, before he could make a complete 180 degree turn, "Gene!"

Sighing, Gene turned around and tried to smile. "Oh, hi Duncan."

"Gene, I'd like you to meet Ella," Duncan picked the ball up off of the ground and served it. "Ella Harris."

"It's a pleasure," Gene replied. "Do you know a girl named Gwen?"

"No, she's not my sister or cousin," Ella said as though she'd been asked that several times before. "It's just a coincidence that we have the same last name. But I do know her. She's my roommate."

"Congrats on the game yesterday," Duncan said as he swatted the ball back to Ella.

"Thanks, we'll probably lose the next game," Gene said.

"No need to be so pessimistic," Duncan said. Then to Ella he said, "I hate pessimists. They think the world is going to end whenever anything goes wrong."

"It's so sad!" Ella exclaimed, letting the ball fly past her

paddle. "I wish there were no sad people, then everybody would be happy."

"Yet if no one was ever sad, how would anyone know when they were happy?" Gene questioned.

Ella's face contained a blank expression while Duncan scowled. "So you're opposed to people being happy?" Gene found the question ridiculous. Obviously, Duncan hadn't listened to a word he had said. While Gene hesitated, Duncan continued. "That's what I thought. Never speak without thinking, Haton. Don't you hate it when people do that?" he added, turning back to Ella.

Ella nodded vigorously in response before exclaiming, "Brad!"

Brad had snuck up behind the group and caused Gene to jump by patting his arm. "What are you guys up to?"

"Me and Ella are on a date and Gene just walked into us."

"Yeah, I don't want to disturb you so I think I'll—" Gene began but he was cut off.

"You're not bothering us," Duncan said jovially. "Let's all take a seat!"

"Seriously, I don't want to intrude so—"

"Sit!" Duncan said forcefully, and Gene complied. "So Brad, I heard about your brother. . . ."

Brad flashed an annoyed look at Gene who shrugged. "I didn't tell him anything," Gene mouthed.

Duncan seemed to notice this interaction and continued quickly, ". . . or so Ella tells me."

Smiling serenely, Ella asked, "So how are you going to get money?"

"The black market, of course," Gene muttered.

"Working," Brad answered simply. Looking up, he

noticed Ingrid Vextra on the other side of the room. For a moment he bowed his head slightly so as not to be noticed. However, his eyes fell upon Gene and his eyebrows raised. Looking back and forth between Gene and Ingrid for a moment, Brad quite abruptly stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where ya going?” Duncan asked him but Brad was by that time too far away to hear (or was pretending to be so). “He’s been so flighty since the news came, poor guy.”

“He is such a carrot!” Ella said. “I think he has a crush on Ingrid, don’t you Duncan?”

“Ella, how did you find out about Brad’s brother?” Gene asked, watching in confusion as Brad tapped Ingrid on the shoulder.

“Santiago? I had it from Meredith, Meredith Edwards. She’s such a smart girl, do you know her? If you knew her you’d know what a smart girl she was. Highly intelligent. Don’t you think she’s intelligent Duncan?”

“Yeah,” Duncan said. “Brilliant. Would you like me to introduce you to her, Gene?”

“Uh huh, whatever,” Gene answered distractedly, his eyes fixed on Brad. Duncan continued on some tangent. Finally, about ten minutes later, Ingrid pulled something out of her bag and handed it to Brad, who seemed to accept it with reluctance. Brad’s eyes met his and he motioned for him to follow him out of the room. Saying as firmly as he could that he had somewhere he needed to be, he met Brad outside. “What’s up?” he asked him. His hand clutched something tightly. It appeared to be some kind of badge. “What’s that?”

“Uh, nothing. I have something to tell you.”

“Go ahead,” Gene said, curious.

King's Pawn

"Let's go somewhere where we can't be overheard."

Brad led him into a lift then down a corridor and through some doors into a room with enormous windows that faced the rear of the ship. The room seemed to be completely empty except for a couple groups of chairs. The only lighting in the room came from the stars and the ships behind them. Behind the *Crescent* they saw the *Cougar* and the *Sitius* racing along as well as the contingent from Lagenna. Again Gene was struck by their peculiar beauty and dignity. How a ship could have dignity he didn't know but these ships possessed it.

"Duncan told me about this room," Brad said as Gene marveled at the sight. "Brought one of his dates up here and, ahem, 'enjoyed the stars.' Anyway, on to business. So I had a really weird idea occur to me," Brad started. "First of all, do you know anything about the Battle of Agemio?"

"I know my mom fought in it even though she was pregnant with Gwen and me," Gene said. "But that's about all."

Brad nodded and continued, "That makes even more sense. Agemio is a star that lies very close to the border between Falvayah and Karch. The Battle of Agemio was Karch's last desperate go at invading Falvayah. Six large fleets attacked Falvayan fleets at Agemio. Unfortunately for them they had overestimated the time it took for our reinforcements to come in. They were soon surrounded and outnumbered two to one.

"Karch ships fight almost to the death, but the admiral of the Karch fleet had been injured and was unconscious. The second-in-command wasn't afraid to surrender. This put in motion the events that lead to the Treaty of Agemio which

more or less ended the war.

“It was at approximately that time that the military ordered what Vextra calls the ‘alteration’ of the minds of several hundred infants. In fact, I was able to get an exact number out of her, just barely. There were three hundred. It was all before they were born.”

Gene’s wheels were turning. “In other words. . .”

“In other words, I think when he said you were one of the ‘three hundred,’ he was referring to the babies that had their minds altered,” Brad finished.

“So my mind was worked on by the government?” Gene said, slightly disturbed.

“Do you feel unnaturally patriotic?” Brad asked, grinning.

Gene shot him a stern glance. “What would they want with my mind?”

“Well, you’re pretty smart,” Brad noted. “Maybe they just gave you extra brains.”

“Not really,” Gene contradicted. “I’ve never been an amazing student or anything. And my pathetic performance at shooting rules out the chance of me being some kind of super-soldier or anything like that.”

“I thought you were getting pretty good at it,” Brad said.

“I can hold my own, but I’m not like really good or anything.”

“Anyway, the question is, what makes you unique out of the rest of these three hundred kids?”

“That and what the heck they put in my head.”

“I think that’s pretty obvious, you can decipher their codes.” Brad said.

“I can decipher *one* of their codes,” Gene corrected. “I’m

not naive enough to pretend I can do all of them. Besides, if that were the case, why would the guy be asking about me about space tunnels?”

“Maybe you’re some kind of database,” Brad suggested.

“If I were a database, I would probably know a whole lot more about Karch than I do now.”

“Not exactly,” Brad countered. “You had no clue that you could decode their messages until right after we got to Lagenna. You didn’t realize you could speak the language until your bridge shift. Do you think that’s why they’re all guarding our fleet?”

“That’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

The ship’s intercom system suddenly activated and Olaf’s voice filled the room. “Attention all hands, attention. The Falcons are passing into an area of Lagenna under the control of Imperial Karch. We are now at elevated alert, I repeat we are at elevated alert.”

“See, if I am some kind of important person, why would they be dragging me out in middle of a war zone.”

“Well, it was ‘safe’ like a week ago,” Brad started, then looked at him. “There must be something important about Empeland or whatever the place is called.”

“Hmmm,” Gene said, pulling out his tablet. “Give me just a sec.” Within seconds, Gene was reading aloud an article about Empelrus from the ship’s database. “Empelrus: Habitable planet in Erus located near its border with Osur—”

“Don’t read the whole article, just look for the main points,” Brad said impatiently. “Why are we going there?”

“Well, it’s widely known for having the fewest births per capita in all AFP nations.”

“Doubt that would have anything to do with it.

Continue.”

“Has a variety of flying birds twice as large as an eagle, it’s the second highest producer of steel in Erus, and . . . Bingo!”

“What is it?”

Gene read, “Empelrus is the site of what is considered the best and largest Mind Hospital in the AFP. Remember when Blake and Pardoe were talking? They said something like the sooner they get me to the mind hospital the better. Remember?”

“So they’re probably taking you there to get all of the information out of you.”

“Well, why would they keep anything in me in the first place? It makes no sense.”

“I don’t know,” Brad said.

Looking further down in the article, Gene continued reading, “There are three Mind Hospitals in the AFP. The other two are at Independence Base in Erus and Nemelrus in Desnirus. So why couldn’t we have gone to the one at Independence Base?”

“It’s so new, it was just barely opened in September. Remember all that controversy about it on the news? Duncan and Paul, of course, were well versed in the subject. Anyway, I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t have the facilities having just opened.”

“That makes sense,” Gene said, glancing at his watch. “I guess I need to be going.”

“Oh yeah, you get to go visit dear Dr. Grills,” Brad said.

“I think I’ve come up with more questions than answers,” Gene said. “Speaking of which, what was that thing Ingrid handed you?”

“Well, she gave me a badge to wear around.”

"A badge?"

"Yeah, let me just show you." Brad lead Gene back out into the extremely bright corridor and showed him the bright Red, Yellow and Blue badge. Gene snorted as he read it.

I have been Enlightened!

CMIA

Civilian Military Inspection Agency

"So you're officially a CMIA convert now?" Gene asked, chuckling.

"It was the only way I could get any answers outta her," Brad explained. "I promised her I'd wear it for a full day."

"Well then, why aren't you wearing it now?"

"She didn't tell me I had wear it *today*, just that I'd have to wear it for a full day. I figure I'll find a day when I'm not going to be seen by a lot of people."

"Here," Gene said, taking the badge. "Let me show you what to do." Folding Brad's sleeve up, Gene pinned it underneath where it wouldn't be seen and put the sleeve back down.

"Brilliant," Brad exclaimed.

"You keep your promise, and your pride," Gene said. "I had better hurry off, Grills might get worried that I'm having some kinda panic attack or something. See ya!" Gene took off down a different corridor towards his appointment.

After an hour and a half, Grills let Gene leave. Surprisingly enough, he could barely remember a thing that had gone on during his elongated session. He had been extremely inattentive, which caused Grills to get angry. Finally she had

exclaimed, “I’ve been working long hours trying to help you overcome your psychological barriers! The *least* you could do is keep your eyes open when I’m talking to you!”

In response to his drowsiness, she’d given him the assignment to go to bed promptly at 21:00. Even if he did this, Gene doubted he’d have been able to go to sleep so early, as overwhelmed with information as he was.

However, Gene felt strangely compelled to obey and prepared to turn in on time. As he was about to climb up into bed, though, his tablet began beeping obnoxiously. Gene turned around and picked it up off of the desk. Apparently Taylor was calling. There were also five written messages waiting for him to open.

“Lieutenant,” Gene started as her face lit the screen.

“Mr. Haton, I’m sorry to bother you so late but I have an assignment for you from the captain,” Taylor began in a more somber mood than Gene was used to seeing her.

“What is it?”

“He wants you to decode this message that I’m sending you now,” Taylor said. “To make sure that I give you the correct message the captain and your mom will also be sending you a copy. You are to compare them and make sure they are all correct and then proceed to decipher them. If any of the three are incorrect you are to report it immediately to me or them. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Gene said.

“They want it decoded as soon as possible so start quickly,” Taylor said. “Goodnight!”

Gene checked the messages on his tablet. Sure enough, there were three new messages waiting for him, each with a code attached to them. The captain and his mother sent

him one message that pretty much restated what Taylor had told him, explaining what he was assigned to do. The code was three pages long.

Getting back up into bed, Gene opened up the codes and took a look at them. Again the pages were littered with dots in odd patterns. However, this time they didn't appear to be numbers but instead letters in apparently no logical order. Immediately he had his tablet run a comparison on the three documents. All three were exactly the same as he had expected.

Looking at it again, Gene noticed that the characters on each page formed a square of sixty by sixty characters. It struck him that they seemed to be arranged into square groups of nines. What seemed to stick out just as much was the fact that the top left hand corner of each of these sets of nine often carried the characters that made the "aw," "ch," "K," and "R," sounds. Gene realized that if rearranged, these letters formed the word Karch. Gene decided to eliminate all of the other sets of nine and focus on the ones with those letters in the top corners.

Gene copied these sets into a new document and rearranged the sets until, reading the top right corner, they formed the word Karch over and over again. This all seemed to make sense to him but he wasn't sure where to go after that. For a further ten minutes he tried various ideas but none of them felt right.

Finally he looked at the middle symbols in each set and said, "Bingo!" The center letter of each set was a letter in the code. When he got rid of the excess letters and added spaces, he was shocked by what he found.

13 - Information

PREPARE THE NOOSE TONIGHT AT 2100 THE
FLEET WILL ATTACK AT APPROXIMATELY
0200 THE ROPE IS IN SUPPLY BAY SEVEN ON
LINCOLN BAD MILK CRATE DISPOSE OF IT
QUICKLY LEAVE NO TRACE MAY YOU FIND
FAVOR IN THE EYES OF HAR NILATS

Inflammation

Thursday, October 22, 2099

Within fifteen minutes, Gene found himself sitting once again in Captain Blake's office in front of a wide oak desk. Mom had immediately sent him there before she called Blake to warn him. When he arrived the office was empty but a note on the door instructed him to go inside and take a seat. Seconds after he sat down in the empty office, a voice sounded over the intercom that the ship was in lock-down and warned *Crescent's* crew not to eat or drink. It was as yet unknown who the assassin's targets were but it seemed obvious to Gene that it would be a high-ranking official.

While he was waiting, he decided to explore the vacant office around him. He hadn't really had a chance to explore it in detail before. It was small with a doorway that led to the captain's living quarters. A wall opposite of the desk was covered in clippings from newspapers—old thin sheets

that earlier people on Earth had used to get the news. These had since been mostly replaced by a more efficient means of information which Gene's grandparents had always called "glorified e-mail." Gene didn't know what e-mail was but he liked the new way of getting news compared to rifling through multiple large sheets of paper like his grandparents still did.

So, apparently, did Captain Blake as many of the newspaper dates were rather recent. The biggest paper headline he saw had the simple headline "V2" large and bolded. His grandfather had told him years earlier that V2 was what they called the day the Western Forces had achieved victory over the Eastern Forces in World War III. Gene recalled his mother telling him that Captain Blake had fought in the war for Britain.

What really caught his attention, however, was a different newspaper that covered the end of the Three-month War. One of the headlines on that article read, "Treaty signed at Agemio." Instantly curious, Gene read further on the article:

Wednesday, September 22, 2083

KOLSPAK, AGEMIO Karch and Allied leaders at Agemio signed a treaty Tuesday ending what is now being called the Three-month War.

After a terrific battle, leaders of the Allies and Karch reached an agreement to cease hostilities against each other. Admiral Dean, leader of Falvayhn forces was present at the treaty.

"Their attack at Agemio poorly planned and poorly executed," Dean said. "They won't be invading anyone

for some time.”

While many of the specifics of the treaty are classified, leaders have said that a prisoner exchange was part of the negotiations.

While celebrations have been widespread, many have speculated that the peace will be short-lived. Senator Frank Clark (T) of Idaho is among those.

“Karch is like an injury,” Clark said. “The longer we leave it untreated, the more likely it is to infect and spread. We need to go in and remove Nilats from

See Treaty A3

Unfortunately, Gene neither had access to page A3 nor did he have time as Captain Blake entered the room seconds later. His face was very somber. “I’m afraid to say that Commodore Pardoe and Admiral Del Sherul of Erus have been poisoned to death. They were both in conference aboard the *Fortius* along with Admiral Dorea of Lagenna. Dorea was also poisoned but we got to him just in time. He’s badly sick but he’ll make it.”

“How’d it happen?”

“All of the visual records over the last twenty-four have been deleted,” Blake said.

“Which means the person must have been a higher-ranking official,” Gene speculated.

“Or a good hacker,” Blake countered. “Even I can’t simply delete files. We’re looking for DNA, fingerprints, hair, anything that might give us a name. Unfortunately we haven’t found anything yet.”

“What about the fleet?”

“Because of my experience, I’ve been appointed to lead the Falcons,” Blake said. “I will meet with the leaders of the other fleets in several minutes to discuss a plan of action.”

“How was he able to get the message when no one was allowed to receive personal communications?”

“Again we have no way of knowing,” Captain Blake said. “Every single scrap of food on board is being checked for poison as we speak. I’m hoping we can stop our traitor in his tracks but my guess is that he’s found his intended victims and destroyed the evidence.

Gene was silent for a moment before asking, “Sir, who are the three hundred?”

Blake looked at him long and hard before saying, “Are you sure that’s the question you want to be asking?” For a moment Gene was confused. Then Blake continued, “I believe you already know the answer to that question.”

Gene was about to ask how, but then reconsidered and said, “Why am I important to Karch and Falvayah?”

“Gene, what you’re asking has been kept secret from you for your whole life to protect you,” Blake began. “Do you remember the men that kidnapped you?”

“Yeah,” Gene said, nearly snorting.

“We believe that they were taking you to a facility where they would try to extract information from your brain,” Blake said. “However, they didn’t expect us to catch on to their scheme as quickly as we did. SBN ships gave pursuit immediately and they were forced to alter their plan. Knowing they wouldn’t make it past the border before they were caught, they tried to force information out of you orally. They interrogated you, correct?”

“Yeah,” Gene repeated.

King's Pawn

"Again, this doesn't surprise me," Blake said. "That's why Falvayah's leaders didn't want you to know anything about what you are. We can't help it if they want to extract information out of you biologically, but we can limit what they can extract orally by limiting what *you* know.

"However, things are different now. I lead our forces and it is my choice as to what you do or don't know. Besides, you've already found out a lot more than we intended you to."

"How did you know?"

"Mr. Duncan and his girlfriends aren't the only ones who know about the Star-view Lounge. Back to the subject, things are different now. I believe that what you don't know *is* hurting you as I explained to Taylor last week when *she* found out what you are. She and your mother are the only two crewmen that are still my associates after that battle. I believe you are familiar now with the Battle of Agemio? I assume that's the article you were reading when I walked in?" Gene nodded. "Very good. But I still have some background I need to give you. First of all I need to tell you about the eight Layheeyeth."

"The eight servants?" Gene asked, translating the word to English.

"That's what they were named, but that title came simply because they serve Har Nilats, leader of Karch. They are in reality generals, the highest ranking of the admirals of Karch. Each of these generals has a small device placed on their brain—a device barely the size of a thumbnail. This device was inserted at birth and was intended to stay with them until their death. How the Karch knew that these men would be among the greatest military masterminds Earth

has ever known I don't know.

"But what makes this group so efficient and so deadly is the mind link they have with each other. Because of the device, when one learns something, the others automatically learn it as well. It is impossible for one to rise up in rebellion because Nilats would immediately know of it. This is, in part, what causes their attacks to be so well coordinated and effective.

"With these eight men and Nilats leading it, it was hard to form a defense. Now you know what I say when I say that their leadership is of 'one mind.' This makes them a very tough foe. Not to mention the fact that the device is tied into the Karch database giving them instant access to a vast store of knowledge."

"Yes, but. . ."

"I'm coming to you right now, Mr. Lee." Blake said, raising his hand to silence Gene. "Sixteen years ago we settled the Battle of Agemio and infiltrated the lead ship. Upon finding the admiral of the fleet seriously injured and unconscious, our leaders decided that he should be treated and given a trial. While they were treating him however, they found one of these devices implanted in his brain. Before that time, the knowledge of their devices was purely speculative. This easily proved that theory. In order to more closely examine the device, our doctors conducted a very careful operation to extract it. Although they did their best to put him back together, unfortunately Admiral Flil died and we were unable to hold a trial.

"The device without a brain to operate it turned out to be no more useful than an empty bell. The very design is fascinating. It is powered by the body itself. Apparently the transmitter is sufficiently powerful to send and receive information instantaneously over incredibly great distances.

“So in order to use it, we had to implant it into a brain. It had become obvious that we couldn't implant it into an adult brain because by the time a baby leaves the womb the brain is too mature, it would be impossible for the device to incorporate itself into the nervous system correctly.”

“So they resorted to infants,” Gene said, understanding. “But where did the other three hundred come from?”

“They were decoys,” Blake responded. “We gained the permission of three-hundred mothers and implanted a harmless blank mechanism. You were chosen randomly out of the rest of the babies to have the device inserted. Not even your mother knew until recently that you were the one with the real information inside.

“When Nilats found out we had it, he immediately began negotiations for a treaty between us. He offered us all of our prisoners back and an agreement of no hostilities between our two peoples in exchange for our word of honor that we would not use the information inside of you. However, in attempting to kidnap you they broke their agreement and the information inside of you is free game.”

“So why don't I know everything the others know?”

“Apparently your body didn't completely accept the device. The output portion of the device is not working (for which we are greatly thankful) and the information is obviously not accessible to your conscious mind. We are hoping that when we get to Empelrus, the doctors there will be able to extract all of the information and convert it to something we can understand without you as an interface. The doctors there believe that they have developed a method which will do exactly such.

“Why didn't they just take the stuff they needed with

them to 'download' the information in my brain?"

"The equipment used for altering or 'reading' the mind is extremely expensive and delicate," Blake replied. "Governments don't install it on ships because they're too fragile to stand the rigors of space travel."

"So how am I able to translate codes?" Gene asked. "If it's inaccessible to my conscious mind. . . ."

"I believe when the doctors were tinkering with your mind last month they gave the device a, er, prompting if you will. It sort of prompted your memory to create a way to remember that certain kind of information. Now when you see it on paper, your mind has a pathway that leads to many different methods of decoding and you can figure out the message, or at least how to decipher it. And with that the language just came naturally."

"Captain Blake," Taylor's voice interrupted over the intercom. "The security teams have completed their searching and have found nothing. Also, a communication is coming in from Commodore Veracula of the Laven fleet."

"Thank-you, send the security report to my tablet and route the communication here in one minute. Tell Lieutenant Niels and Commander Rogers I want their report as soon as possible." Terminating the communication, he said, "Gene, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I will see to it that the doors will open for you when you make it back to your room. Remember you are not to eat nor drink. You are a target, Gene, and need to keep an eye on yourself—not only for your own good, but for the rest of Falvayah as well."

Blake opened the door and Gene left.

King's Pawn

Friday, October 23, 2009

The next morning after the ship was released from lockdown. Morale took a turn for the worse as the news of their leaders' deaths was announced. This was all accompanied by the fleet shifting to high alert which had its own potent effect on the nerves.

The crew readied themselves for battle. All hands were required to carry an e-gun at all times in case of infiltration. Gene even saw Ingrid reluctantly accepting a gun from a security officer. Different departments ran different drills. Niels was frequently seen running at the head of squads to different parts of the ship. The communications staff was heavily trained in equipment maintenance. Both Niels and Taylor called to inform him that until further notice his lessons with them were cancelled. The tactical department was responsible for prepping the ship for battle, loading the torpedo cannons and honing their targeting skills.

Surprisingly, Gene felt pretty good. He knew the truth, and no one was holding back from him any longer. That morning, his mother had called and apologized for having withheld the truth for so long. Gene thought that this was rather unnecessary but he appreciated the thought anyway. After all, his mother had taken several seconds from her already limited time just to say sorry.

Apart from escape drills and maintenance training, the communications department hadn't been given any special assignments. Gene's duty shift consisted entirely of listening to blank or empty comm channels in hopes of hearing a signal from the ghost-like enemy ships. During the shift, Gene told Brad what the captain had explained to him the previous evening. When he was finished, Brad simply nodded and said,

“So Karch wants you dead then?”

“No, I don’t think so. That’s probably part of the plan in the end,” Gene said, feeling odd discussing his own death in such a way. “If they had wanted me dead immediately, I think I’d be a goner already. I mean, they had me alone on their ship for a couple days. In fact, they probably could’ve easily hired a hit man to do me in back home. I was at high school—It’s not like I was heavily defended. They wanted some kind of information out of me.”

“But wouldn’t the other seven guys already know any information you have in your head?”

Gene considered this for a few moments before saying, “The captain said the output portion of the device wasn’t working. Maybe that happened before the guy died.”

“So you’re saying he learned whatever it is they want while he was deployed and couldn’t zap the info to the others. But would—” Brad suddenly began listening intently to his earpiece. Immediately he called Olaf over. “Sir, I’m starting to pick up communications babble.”

“Triangulate it immediately.” Olaf opened a channel to the bridge. “Bridge, this is the CC, my team has picked up a large signal heading this way.”

“Got it sir,” Brad said.

“I’m sending the coordinates to you right now,” Olaf said.

It was a matter of seconds before all hands were called to battle stations. Olaf zoomed out the front projector pad to depict the battle scene. A fleet was approaching them from about ten o’clock. The Falcons and the contingents from Erus and Lagenna continued straight forward as though they hadn’t noticed the coming Karch fleet. Slowly the two fleets moved closer to each other, apparently on a collision

course.

Then, to the surprise of those in the communications center, *Crescent* and the rest of the fleet leapt forward at incredible speed, leaving the Karch fleet far back. Even as the Karch fleet faded out of view, Gene wondered how long it would take them to catch up to the Laven ships which were renowned for being rather slow. Indeed, ten minutes later the Karch fleet was tailing them, several taking pot shots at the allied fleet.

However, again the fleet changed velocity at lightning speed, slowing down and causing the Karch fleet to pass them up. As they passed, both fleets fired at each other, but the shots from the allied fleet were focused on six of the larger ships while the shots from Karch were widely dispersed. The Karch ships that the allies hit were immediately lost from sight.

Gene had expected battle to be deafening, like what he'd seen in shows. To the contrary, the shots were hauntingly quiet. It was then that Gene remembered sound doesn't travel through space. Not willing to take the harassment, the Karch fleet swiftly switched direction towards the allies. Again the Karch shots were dispersed and the allies' shots were focused on several specific ships. *Crescent* shuddered as it was hit by a stray shot. During this pass, a couple of the Laven ships were lost from view along with several more of the Karch ships.

Taking count, Gene saw that Karch had lost over a quarter of their ships in the battle. When they regrouped behind the allies again, they were much less frightening than they had been. It suddenly occurred to Gene that they hadn't begun with a large force to begin with. Someone had mentioned counting about fifty at the beginning. Fifty

definitely was no small fleet, but it might have been more efficient to send more numbers to contend with the allied fleet of forty-two.

Now it was thirty-nine against thirty-five giving the allies the upper hand. The Karch vessels appeared to be frustrated and confused, seeming even more random and less focused than they had been before. Wounded, their enemy regrouped for a minute or two before coming at them again. When they returned, the fleet fired a barrage focused on one ship: *Crescent*.

The communications staff stiffened and grabbed for something to brace themselves. The ships around *Crescent* immediately swooped in between the shots and *Crescent*, dispersing the blows. Unfortunately, they couldn't take all of *Crescent's* hits. The ship shivered and the lights dimmed for a few minutes. *Crescent* didn't stop, but it did seem to slow slightly. The Allies continued their pattern of targeting the larger ships. Gene wondered if it wouldn't be wiser to take out some of the smaller, faster ships. But the allies were rewarded as another ship fell behind.

The Karch came around yet again, more determined than ever. Though their shots were equally menacing, even fewer made it through the allied defense to hit *Crescent*. Gene thought the battle was going fairly well, but then *Crescent's* engines started sputtering under the apparent strain. *Crescent's* engines were out! The whole fleet slowed with it until they were at a complete stop. All weapon exchange ceased as Karch slid to a stop in front of the Allies.

"Look!" Paul suddenly shouted, pointing at *Crescent* on the projector pad. Nine scars marked where their ship had been hit, but that wasn't what Paul was looking at. A large SRV pulled away from her port and set a course for

King's Pawn

a large Karch vessel. After passing the outermost Allied ship, several of the smaller Karch ships surrounded it and guarded it on its way to its destination. *Is it a negotiating team? Gene wondered. Or maybe Blake himself is going to discuss things with the Karch general.*

At that instant, Gene's tablet began beeping frantically. For about 30 seconds, he let it sit, not wanting to miss any of the action. After receiving a couple harsh glares, he picked it up and answered it. Gwen's face lit the screen. "GENE! What are you doing?"

"Huh?"

"You know what I'm talking about!" Gwen snapped.

"Gwen, I'm around—"

"Gene, you can't just throw your life away like this!"

"WHAT?"

"I *know* what you're doing! I work in the sensors office you know!"

"I'm trying to see what's going on, Gwen! Can't this wait?"

To Gene's surprise, he saw that Gwen's eyes were tearing. "Gene, I—"

"Mr. Haton! Put that tablet away!" Olaf was incensed. "We are at battle stations! You've been trained better than this!"

"Sorry, Gwen, I've got to go! Call me later!" Gene closed the line before Gwen could say anything more. He turned back to reply to Olaf, but his attention was once more devoted to the projector pad and the small ship that was about to enter into one of the ship's large bays. A large door slid across the entrance to the bay, concealing the SRV.

It wasn't twenty seconds after that when the crewmen

in the CC witnessed a gigantic explosion in the ship. The eruption was then hammered by more than thirty volleys from the allied vessels. The vessel turned, trying to escape. In doing so, they exposed their engines. After another spread of shots hit the engines, the entire vessel transformed into a fiery ball of energy, then exploded.

“Man, that was their lead ship,” someone mumbled.

The crew of the CC was silent but the allied weapons weren't. Volley after volley pounded the enemy lines as about half of the enemy ships turned about and fled. Allied shots disabled many of the others. Finally after about a half hour more, the remaining Karch fleet wheeled around and turned the other way. Many of the crewmen in the CC jumped and gave a whoop. *Crescent* had made it through safely. It occurred to Gene that *Crescent* had been at the center of the pack, well defended from the attackers. Were they really defending *him*?

The call came for *Crescent* to stand down from battle stations. Even though they had won the battle, spirits on board were little improved from that morning. Commander Lee held a remembrance service in honor of Commodore Pardoe and those lost in battle that afternoon.

Gene, Brad and Paul had attended the service, but Duncan was nowhere to be found. After the ceremony, Paul reported despondently that Duncan was upset over the loss of Pardoe and Del Sherul. Upon hearing this, Brad immediately left to go find him. As he left, Paul told Gene, “I tried to comfort him, I really did.”

“He probably just needs to be alone for a little while,” Gene suggested but Paul shook his head.

“When a man's in sorrow is the worst time to leave him alone with his own thoughts,” he said in a haunting voice.

"Weird ideas spring to your head; thoughts you'd never've had otherwise. Duncan was pretty low."

"At least you tried."

Paul snorted, "Tryin' means nothin'. I've seen men go down pretty far in a fit of despair—even saw one commit suicide. I don't think Duncan's quite there yet but as I said, weird ideas. . . ."

The last phrase struck a chord with Gene. He remembered the awful feeling when, for a few moments, he'd contemplated suicide as a Karch prisoner a month ago. It would have been simply a matter of giving up and allowing himself to drown. He recalled that the idea seemed so appealing then: No more sitting alone at lunch; no more being a social outcast; no more memories of his father. The odd thing was that today he would never consider it; what was once too much pain to bear was now seemingly far in the past.

Now, a month later, Gene was faced with that awful feeling of not knowing what to say. Paul needed comfort almost as much as Duncan did. How was he supposed to go about doing that? A compliment maybe? But what could Gene compliment Paul about? Telling him he looked handsome wasn't what he needed, nor did Gene think it was very true. Finally, Gene came up with, "I'm sure what you told him helped. You're always so good at being honest with people." *That sounded extremely lame*, Gene thought to himself.

"That's the thing, I didn't tell him anything. I didn't know what to say."

"I know how you feel," Gene said sullenly as they

approached their quarters.

When they walked inside, they found Brad and Duncan sitting on one of the bunks. They could see that Duncan wasn't openly weeping, but instead was deathly silent. Brad was patting him on the back and saying, "It's okay, he's at rest now."

Duncan glared at him, refusing to be comforted. Behind where Gene and Paul stood helplessly watching, they heard the doors slide apart. A deep voice said, "Adam." The four crewmen immediately jumped to attention, Brad hitting his head on the top bunk as he rose.

"At ease, gentlemen," Captain Blake said. "I am here to talk to Crewman Pardoe. The rest of you are excused."

Mumbling, "Yes, sir," under their breath, they left the room and walked to the crewmen's lounge. As they took a seat, Gene asked, "Why's he taking this so bad? Why'd the captain call him Pardoe?"

In a low voice, Brad answered, "Pardoe was his father. When he was seventeen, they quarreled and Duncan left home. Apparently, Pardoe wanted him to join the military and Duncan refused. They haven't spoken since. tDuncan was then called by the draft to the military. He dodged the draft in Mutnep, but the government caught up with him. He was offered three choices: prison, a hefty fine, or serving six years in the military."

Gene's heart skipped a beat. *Seventeen?* That was barely two years older than he was. "So is his real name Duncan?"

King's Pawn

"Duncan is his middle name. He just told everybody he was Adam Duncan and everybody believed it. I mean, how many people have you ever met (other than Ingrid) that check your records to make sure you're telling the truth?"

"I don't know," Paul joked. "I had to check Haton's to make sure he was really 17."

Gene gave a small courtesy laugh, "And did I pass?"

"Nope, the computer said you were fifteen but don't worry—I won't tell!" Paul burst out laughing and Gene and Brad joined him reluctantly. Finally, Paul said, "I'm just kidding, kid."

"Yeah," Gene said, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt.

"Give Dunc . . . I mean, Par . . . give Adam some space," Brad cautioned, getting up.

"Where are you going?" Gene questioned.

"I'm taking his duty shift tonight," was all Brad said, then left.

When Gene returned to the room two hours later, the captain was gone. Duncan had a broken look on his face, as though he'd been firmly chastised. Contrary to his appearance, there was strange sense of contentment in his voice as he mumbled, "I never knew." Gene didn't ask what Duncan hadn't known. He didn't question him about his past, but simply allowed Duncan to start snoring peacefully below him on the bottom bunk. Gene, on the other hand, stared out the window at the passing stars, wondering how long it would take his mind to settle so he could retreat into a slumbering haven.

Intelligence

Friday, October 30, 2099

There was no sign of pursuit as the fleet continued to move through the Karch's new territory. Thirty-one people from Lagenna, twelve from Erus and four from Falvayah were killed during the battle. Nearly six-hundred were wounded in the battle but few of these were from *Crescent*. It had remained fairly near the center of the fleet making it a difficult target to hit. It hit him that all forty-seven of the people that had died were killed for his sake. If Gene Lee had not existed, these people might still be living.

226

The mood on board had been predictably somber as a result of the casualties. Lieutenant Taylor seemed to think it her personal responsibility and obligation to raise the spirits of the crew. As Halloween was approaching, she had proposed a ship-wide social to celebrate the holiday. After receiving approval for the event, there was barely a moment gone by in her presence in which those present didn't get a

running narrative of her plans.

After work, Taylor had approached Gene and said, "Mr. Haton, you got a haircut! It looks quite dashing. We shall be starting our lessons back up next Monday! Did you hear about tomorrow afternoon's social? I hope you and your roommates are coming."

"Well, I actually. . . ." Gene started but Taylor had given him such a look that he quickly changed his mind and finished, "was planning on it, yeah."

"Excellent, I wanted to make it a costume party but dear Ms. Jacobson reminded me that most people on board don't have an outfit they could wear. So we had planned on masks but the captain absolutely refused in light of the. . . . let's just say he refused outright. Finally I had to settle for the fact that it would simply be a casual social, like I had proposed in the first place."

"Shame," Gene remarked.

"I *knew* I wasn't the only one who thought so," Taylor had exclaimed, pleased and obviously missing Gene's sarcasm. "That's what I told Mr. Oliver when I was asking about food arrangements for the event. He said that we shouldn't use our food so wastefully. I had to remind him that *Crescent* carried a food supply on board that would last us a whole year before it ran dry. Eventually I convinced him to cater the event. You know, I don't think you can have a good party without good food."

After "heartily" agreeing to this last statement, Gene informed her that he had to go visit his sister. Taylor gave him a nice big hug, causing his face to ripen like an apple. Wondering if any of the other heads of department gave their crewmen hugs, Gene hurried off to the racquetball

courts where he really had planned to meet her—in another twenty minutes.

As he waited for his sister to arrive, he practiced hitting the ball around the court. He loved the hollow sound the ball made as it popped off the walls of the room. Knocking it backward, Gene was surprised when he didn't hear it make a sound ricocheting off the door wall. Turning around he saw that his mother had slipped inside and caught the ball with her left hand. "Hi Gene," she said, indicating that he should move out of the view of the window and take a seat. When they were sitting up against the wall, she asked, "How are you doing?"

"Okay," Gene said.

"I understand your lessons with Taylor have been going well."

"Yeah, well she would call just about anything I do an accomplishment."

Mom chuckled. "I haven't heard anything from Niels about you but I've peeked in on you practicing a couple times. I'm impressed."

"I'm not that good."

"So tell me, why didn't you tell me that Brad found out about you?" she asked.

Gene sighed. "Well as Gwen said, I was afraid that you'd 'freak.'"

Mom rolled her eyes. "Gene, how did he find out?"

"We overheard the captain talking with the Commodore."

"So it was an accident?"

"I guess," Gene said.

"How am I supposed to punish you for that?"

"I dunno," Gene sighed again.

King's Pawn

“Gene, even though I want you to call me ‘Commander’, I want you to consider me your mother. *Talk* to me, son. That being said, your sister tells me that you’ve been having another one of your ‘maniacally-overdone-and-dramatically-prolonged-guilt-trips’, since we’re so keen on using her language today. What’s going on?”

Sighing for a third and final time, Gene said, “It’s because of me, Mom.”

“What is?”

“All those people that died, they died ‘cause of me.”

“Oh Gene,” Mom said. “If it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else. Remember what life is made of?” she asked.

“Things we can’t and can control,” Gene responded. She had discussed it with him when he had come home from the hospital after being treated for the wounds inflicted by his father.

“And what can we do about the first?”

“Nothing.”

“It wasn’t your choice that got you here. It wasn’t your choice to get a bunch of stuff crammed into your brain. It wasn’t your choice to have your name put on every ‘most wanted’ list in Karch. It wasn’t your choice that forty-seven brave men and women died for a cause they believed in. These are all beyond your control. But what is your choice?”

“How I deal with it.”

“That’s right. If you’re going to deal with it by having ‘maniacally-overdone-and-dramatically-prolonged-guilt-trips’, so be it.” Mom stood up and walked to the door. “But that would be one dramatic disappointment when compared with Gene Samuel Lee’s potential.”

Mom left Gene sitting alone in the racquetball court, pondering. However, before he could think too long, Gwen walked in and interrupted his silence. “Hey slowpoke, are you going to sit around on your keister or are we going to play?”

“So, Gwen, come up with any good ideas to help my friend?” Gene asked, standing up.

“In fact, yes I did.”

“I mean, other than the first one.”

“He *is* your friend.”

“Good observation,” Gene said sarcastically.

“Didn’t you promise him you’d help?”

“Yes,” Gene admitted. “But even if I did paint, where’d I get the supplies?”

“Don’t worry about supplies, just sell what you’ve already done.”

“To who? There’s not many on board who have a lot of money and we’re not allowed to communicate with anyone outside the fleet.”

Gwen considered this for a moment. “Fine, forget selling them individually. Do an art show and make tickets a couple dollars or something.”

“No one would come, would you?” Gene questioned.

“There’s really not much to do on this ship art-wise, I’m sure people would die to come.”

“I don’t have enough artwork to make a show, though.”

“I think you do, and if you don’t,” Gwen added. “I have a bunch of Dad’s loaded on my tablet.”

“No. I’m *not* using Dad’s!” Gene said indignantly.

“I’m sure we can find some other stuff.”

“Fine, I’ll talk to Taylor about it, but I’m going to make

King's Pawn

it all anonymous. And I don't want Brad knowing that it's me."

"Whatever you want, it's your art show," Gwen said, dropping the ball to the floor and swatting it with her racquet. Gene rolled his eyes and smacked the ball back.

"Hey, what was all that about a week ago?" Gene asked.

"What?" Gwen responded after taking a swipe at the ball.

Gene spiked the ball back. Gwen sprinted to the other side of the court but didn't reach the ball before it bounced a second time. "Point!"

"Not fair!"

"What?"

"You distracted me!"

"So what were you talking about when you called me during that battle?"

"Oh . . . that," Gwen said. "Commander Rogers ordered continual scans of ships in the fleet. I scanned that SRV which blew up in that huge Karch ship and I found out that there was someone aboard who the computer identified as Gene Haton."

"What?!"

"That's not all. It said that Captain Blake was aboard as well."

"But, I was in the communications center all the time," Gene said.

"I know that now," Gwen replied. "But when I saw that, I got scared. I thought you'd decide to throw in the towel and give yourself up for whatever it is they want to do to you . . . and I couldn't bear the thought."

Gene was truly touched by the emotion he heard in his

sister's voice. His insides instantly began to burn with a love for his twin. "Thanks, Sis. I don't think I could stand losing you either."

"Let's make a deal," Gwen said. "No matter what happens over the next few years, we will make it out alive. Agreed?" She extended her hand.

"Agreed," Gene said, taking it and giving it a shake.

"Now despite your questionable first point, I am a big girl and am confident that my winning streak will continue unaltered."

"Your winning streak of one?"

"Two. I won the last game by forfeit."

"Right. . . ." Gene threw the ball high in the air and hit it towards the wall.

Saturday, October 31, 2099

Gene had never been to the officer's lounge before but he could tell it wasn't much different than it usually was. It was smaller than the crewmen's lounge, and a good deal nicer. Six giant windows at the front of the lounge framed a breathtaking star field. Seven large canvas paintings hung on the walls behind the bar depicting the seven modern wonders of the world. As Taylor had explained to him the previous day, there simply weren't enough supplies on board to provide for "adequate" decorations.

Several projector pads displayed large three-dimensional pumpkins that threw out cat-calls to people that passed by. When Gene stood next to one of these, it called out, "Looks like Haton needs to watch his equator! Fruits and vegetables, my dear lad, fruits and vegetables!" Gene had

blushed slightly but the pumpkin threw out the exact same comment in reference to a very bony ensign from the security department.

Beforehand, Gene had decided he would make himself known to Taylor, perhaps eat some food and then leave. Just in case departure became a problem, he had loaded a novel onto his tablet to read. Feeling prepared, he collected cake and ice cream from the buffet and joined Brad and Duncan. They had attempted to find a table but it was impossible in the huge crowd. So the three settled for a portion of the wall and Gene pulled out his tablet to read. No sooner had he pulled it out than Taylor materialized at his side.

"Mr. Haton, a minute please. Oh no you don't!" She said, noticing the tablet in his hand.

"Hmm?"

"Hand that thing over and come with me for a minute." Gene reluctantly surrendered the tablet to her hands and followed her away from where Duncan and Brad were talking. "This is far enough. Gene, I was so pleased when your sister gave me the good news! Most extremely impressed, I have to hand it to you."

"Wha—" Gene asked, confused.

"The art show! I would never have thought of it myself! This ship—this fleet, is so drab. If there is one thing it needs it's a little color, a little music—you have planned music for this thing, haven't you?"

"Uh, I hadn't gotten quite that far yet," Gene muttered.

"When your sister told me there was to be a price and that all the money was to go to young Mr. Fuentes . . . how much are you charging anyway?"

"Probably just a couple bucks, otherwise I don't think

anyone would come.”

“Oh, no, dear. Charge at least five.” Taylor said kindly.

“Five?”

“Mr. Haton, you have the potential of making five hundred dollars with this—or two hundred. Which would you choose?” Before Gene could answer, Taylor continued, “There must be refreshments as well as music. Coordinate with Nick, the chef, and he’ll get you covered.

“As for music, Whitney Jacobson plays the flute, and Connie Wilkinson the trumpet. You are writing this all down, aren’t you? Good! Also, I know Percival Wendell has a saxophone so you may wish to ask him. Of course he had a nasty fall last week, poor guy. Unfortunately Kate was aboard *Lincoln* so they had to take him there to be treated, he *insisted* on being helped by her. Nearly didn’t get back before the incident with the poison. . . .”

This last comment instantly caught Gene’s attention, “Dr. Peters was on *Lincoln* that night?”

“I know what you’re thinking Mr. Haton, and I can assure you that she has nothing to do with the Karch.”

“But how can we be sure—“

“When she wasn’t treating poor Mr. Reynolds she was receiving disaster training from Captain Dubinsky who had all of the head physicians in a seminar. They’ve already cleared her name. And besides, *I trust her.*” She added, as if that proved the fact beyond any shadow of a doubt. “Oh, but I dearly wanted him to play saxophone, have you ever heard him? He’s so good. Maybe you can get Mr. Niels on his trombone or Commander Lee on the piano. . . .”

Taylor quoted plans at Gene for a further twenty minutes before saying, “I think you’ve got a pretty good

start, Mr. Haton. Be sure to keep me posted on any updates! I'll arrange with the captain for a room. When shall we say this bash is?"

Gene was about to correct her and say that it was only supposed to be an exhibit but she continued, "November 7 perhaps? Surely you can finish preparing for this thing in a week."

"Uh, fine. Yeah. A week is good."

"All right! See you tomorrow!"

Looking at his watch, he saw that his meeting with Taylor had swallowed up half an hour. It looked as though Brad and Duncan had finally managed to commandeer a table at which they sat, playing cards. When Gene took a seat next to them, Brad said, "You just missed Paul. He didn't want to stay long. Always seems to get a little nervous in gatherings."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Duncan exclaimed. "Be right back!" Duncan darted away.

"Where's he going?"

"He says you want to meet Meredith," Brad said. "He's probably running to get her."

"I didn't—huh?"

"He's going to grab a girl to introduce to you."

"He never gives up, does he? Well, if he's going to try to set us up, I'd better hide."

"It wouldn't hurt you to just *meet* a girl," Brad commented.

"Yeah, but I think Duncan has more than meeting in mind, and I can't be busy *every* night this week. Especially since we lost last Thursday's game."

"Okay, well go now, here he comes!"

Gene ducked under a recently-abandoned table in the corner. Peeking out from underneath the tablecloth, Gene

saw Duncan and a girl who must be Meredith approach Brad. Unfortunately for Gene, instead of going away upon finding his absence, Duncan and Meredith took a seat. Gene was about to crawl out and find a more comfortable hiding place but two pairs of feet appeared in front of the table he was crouched under. Scowling, Gene sat up against the wall to avoid their feet. Maybe he could squeeze out the side unnoticed. But then the two people above him began talking.

“Time is growing short, we need a plan,” a male voice said. Gene dodged his foot as he placed it on his knee. “The longer we wait, the closer the boy gets to Empelrus.”

A woman’s voice responded. “Yes, but I think you should let me handle that aspect. Your last, what are we up to now, three? Yes, your last three plans have failed.”

“But this one won’t,” the man said. He muttered something that Gene couldn’t hear.

A minute later, she said, “How do you know she’ll comply?”

“We do it before it starts, the rat will comply.” The man’s foot reeked.

“Blake would give his life for Earth, you know that.”

Gene considered calling out, but they might be armed. If he yelled out, he wouldn’t likely live long. He was of no use to Falvayah dead. Next he tried to find some identifying mark on their shoes and legs, but both were wearing their nearly identical uniforms.

“Blake’s old and smart, but he’s not—” the man began but the woman cut him off.

“Blake’s cunning. You’ll have to time it perfectly.”

“Not me, Karch will. I won’t be the one they blame this

time, it will be them.”

Gene only caught one word of the woman's reply: kill.

“I can't be in two places at once—we need one more person.”

“If you're suggesting we trust—”

“I haven't suggested anything,” the woman snapped. “I confirmed that there is a bounty hunter on board. We must keep our options open.”

The man stood up, but Gene didn't dare glance out from under the tablecloth to identify him. The woman also stood up and the two walked away. Gene quickly rolled out from under the table and looked around, but the two had disappeared into the mass of cheerful people.

Gene ignored Duncan hailing him to sit by him and headed straight up to Deck E and his mother's office. When he reached her door, he immediately knocked. There was no answer. Gene was about to knock again when he realized how stupid he was being. He could just locate her on his tablet. However, he remembered that his tablet was on the table in the Officer's lounge. As he walked to a nearby wall console, he was relieved to see Blake and Rogers walking up the corridor.

“Captain,” he said urgently. “Do you know where Commander Lee is? I need to speak with her.”

“What is it, Mr. Haton?” Blake asked.

“I just overheard something, sir. Two people talking about me.”

Detecting the desperation in his eyes, Blake said, “Call Joan for him, Matt.”

“Sir, if it's a matter of ship's security, he should tell you or Mr. Niels first—”

“Rogers, just get Joan.”

“Aye, sir.” Rogers pushed buttons frantically on his tablet for several seconds before saying, “She doesn’t have her tablet with her, sir.”

“Where is she?” Blake asked as Gene felt his heart drop below his stomach. It was a rare thing when Mom didn’t have her tablet with her. What if something had happened to her? *Don’t let her be dead*, he half thought, half prayed. *Please.*

“She’s in the engine room.” Gene sighed deeply in relief. He had jumped too quickly to conclusions.

“Send a message to the C.C. and have Olaf page her. Haton, wait in her office. I don’t want anything or anyone to distract you from saying what you need to say.” Blake opened the door and Gene walked in and took a seat at her desk.

Her office was quite different from Blake’s, and comparatively boring. On her desk sat a picture of Gene and Gwen together when they were younger. Gene couldn’t stand how he looked in the old photograph. He looked foolishly and naively happy.

Gene was happy when Mom showed up, relieving him of his thoughts. “What is it, Gene? Tell me immediately.”

Gene related the tale of being caught underneath the table and the conversation he overheard. Lee listened attentively, holding her questions until Gene finished. Immediately she reached for a button on her desk, “Lieutenant Niels, I need the security records from the Officer’s Lounge on my desk right now! Lee out! Gene, describe their voices, were they deep or high?”

“I couldn’t really tell, they were talking so low it was almost hard to tell that one was a man and the other a

woman.”

“Commander Lee,” Niels steady voice started over the intercom. “All of the records from the Officer’s Lounge over the last hour have been deleted except for the last fourteen minutes.”

Gene expected his mother to be enraged but she wasn’t. “Thank-you, Lieutenant. Lee out.” Lee sighed. “Once again, our adversary proves his skill on the computer and with our security records.”

“Mom...” Gene said, suddenly remembering something. “I have—“

”I suppose you’re about to suggest trying the hallway records to see who went in or out?”

“Well, yeah—how’d you know?”

Lee smiled for the first time since she had entered the office. “Do you really think Mr. Fuentes has the skills to hack into the security computers unassisted?”

“Well, uh, I did find it rather remarkable. . . .”

“Mr. Niels was working on the bridge at the same time Fuentes was and happened to pass by while he was trying to get a hold of the records from Independence. When he noticed him struggling, he lent him a bit of a hand. Needless to say, from Mr. Fuentes’s miserable attempt at hacking into the security computers, he and I have been able to at least rule *him* out from being the same spy.”

“Well, we’ve worked up a bit of a list of likely candidates. . . .” Gene said.

“Yes, Niels actually liked your idea and did the same thing. That can help with one of the traitors but we’ve no guarantee that the other was there at the same time.”

“Mom, they said that this was the third attempt, I assume since I came aboard. I can only remember one, though. Oh,

and he said all three failures were his fault.”

Mom considered this for a moment. “I don’t know, Gene. There was the attempt with the drug, obviously.” She thought for a few more seconds. “Maybe they were referring to the battle, but I don’t see how it’s failure could be his fault.”

Gene was quiet for a minute before pointing at his brain and asking, “Mom, will this all be over when I have this thing removed?”

“Oh, Gene, I hope so. But I think they’ll at least let you go back home.”

“I hope so,” Gene said, looking at the picture behind Mom’s desk.

Gene sat through further questioning, but he ended up glad that he’d told his mother first. It had given him a boost of confidence that Blake couldn’t provide as well. Blake, Niels, and Rogers were all present for the questioning, and his mother sat at his side. When they were finished, Gene didn’t know that they were any closer to finding a solution, but he felt better about it.

Interest

Wednesday, November 4, 2099

Gene couldn't help but wonder if the information that he shared had helped at all. Blake had whispered a few hushed orders to Niels but that was the greatest portion of the action he had seen. They, predictably, asked him to speak nothing of the matter to anyone but Brad or Gwen. Of course, Gene wasn't sure that telling Gwen would allow for a very good secret to be kept, but at least she gave pretty sound advice.

The next four days were comparatively dull. Gene had read adventure books and thrillers where each day was packed with new and exciting events. He rather doubted the past month or two could be classified as an adventure worthy of a book, but it might be a conversation piece for his children (if he ever made it back to Earth). He mentioned the idea to Gwen about passing the story along to posterity when he was older, but she was more amused by it than impressed. "Dear Gene, you won't ask anybody

to dance with you. How do you expect yourself to get up the guts to ask someone to *marry* you. And stop being so morose! ‘*If we make it back to Earth!*’”

“Oh no, it’s not like we’re behind enemy lines, crossing through dangerous territory or anything,” Gene had countered, sarcastically.

“We’ve scared ‘em off for a while at least.”

“Not for long, I’ll bet.”

But Gwen seemed to have been right. There had been no sign of enemy ships for just over a week and a half. Whether Karch was biding its time or licking its wounds was a constant debate among crewmen (especially Paul and Duncan). Paul was of the belief that the Karch lines were stretched thin and they couldn’t or didn’t want to deal with an insignificant fleet passing through their territory on a path that didn’t lead to any major systems.

“Bosh,” Duncan said when he heard this. “They’re just waiting for us to walk right into their hands. Why can’t we just turn out of Lagenna and go round’ through Erus?”

“They need reinforcements *now*, Duncan,” Paul retorted. “They can’t wait the extra two or three weeks it would take us to go back around. Plus, it’s just about the same distance now.”

“We’re not of any use to them, dead.”

“If we can’t get there in time, we’re not any use to them alive are we?”

Gene thought both of the arguments were rather ridiculous—neither of them knew the real reason why they were going through. Brad and Gene had discussed it themselves and found no logical reason for it, other than Falvayah wanting the information safe that Karch

desperately desired. Gene didn't know why they didn't send him there in the first place instead of messing around, shipping him to Independence and Lagenna. They might have reached it two weeks sooner.

"Hey, Gene," Duncan said, interrupting his thoughts. "I'd like you to meet Meredith. Meredith, this is Gene Haton."

To Gene's dismay, he had somehow disappeared and reappeared with a girl next to him. However, looking up at her, Gene realized that he must not have seen her properly the previous Saturday. She was quite a vegetable! "Pleased to meet you," she said in a gentle yet clear voice. She gave her head a nod causing her rich, brown hair to ripple ever so slightly.

"Anyway, Gene, I was wondering if you'd like to join me on a date this Friday evening. Due to a mixup, I accidentally promised both Meredith and Ella a date that night."

Meredith glanced at Duncan but said nothing. Was Gene staring at her pure face too much? *I need to look at something else*, Gene told himself. *I wonder what time it is?* Gene glanced at the clock for what he felt was ridiculously long time. After getting bored of looking at the clock for so long, he turned away and stared for a moment at a mousy lady in a security outfit before turning back to Meredith. Finally, Brad said, "Gene, isn't that the day you have that appointment with the Doctor?"

"Uh," Gene stammered, turning red. It looked like Paul might laugh at him. Having half a mind to tell the truth, he finished. "Yeah, it's that night."

"What about tomorrow?" Duncan asked.

Glancing away from Gene, Meredith said, "I've got a tennis game with a friend tomorrow."

“How about—“

“I’m sorry, Adam,” she said to Duncan. “I’ve got to go. Perhaps we could plan this some other time.”

“Oh, see ya,” Duncan said dejectedly. Meredith turned gracefully out the door as Gene found himself glancing up at the clock again. Turning back to Gene, Duncan asked, “Would you switch me shifts tonight? I’m in a bind.”

“When does yours start again?” Gene asked.

“At ten, and it goes ‘till six the next morning. Okay?”

“You’re not going on *another* date?” Brad asked.

“Yup.”

“I guess,” Gene responded. He didn’t particularly care for the idea but he wanted Duncan to be able to go on his date. “Just for tonight, right?”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Gene said. “I gotta go. See y’all.” Following Meredith’s footsteps, Gene left for his lesson with Niels.

After drawing his weapon, ready for the first simulation, Gene was surprised when Niels indicated that he should put down his weapon. “Mr. Lee,” he started. “For the past month or so, we have been using a simulation that uses small red beam as a target. This is extremely effective as it helps you hone your skill to targeting a very small point.

“However, it is time we moved up to the next level. In the next series of simulations, we will be giving you a scenario that seems lifelike. Though your targets will appear to be real Karch soldiers, I don’t want you to think about what you’re shooting. These targets will be easier to hit, but I don’t want you to lower your effort.

“Also, when I say shoot to kill, I want you to aim always at the heart. The Karch consider it very unchivalrous to aim

King's Pawn

for any other vital organ on the body—especially the head. Though this is not your personal belief, I want you to learn chivalry in battle. In a real life situation, do whatever you can to protect yourself, but in this room you will exercise proper respect. Do you remember what I told you at the beginning of our lessons, Mr. Lee?”

“You mean about everything in here being an illusion? Yeah.”

“Very good. But, though it is impossible to physically touch any of the objects that will appear momentarily in this room, I want you to treat them as if they are authentic. Today you will simply be shooting to kill, but tomorrow you will learn to disarm your opponent. The key skill at the beginning is to assess your situation and find cover. Begin simulation.”

The room around him melted away and a forest appeared around him. A sunny brook flowed peacefully on his right. It looked real enough but when he reached down to touch it he felt only the cold, hard, floor of the simulator room. When he straightened back up again, however, a fiery, bright, ball of light flew past right where his head had been. Looking up, he saw a soldier duck behind a rock.

Darting behind a tree himself, Gene felt shabbily defended against his faceless enemy. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another figure poke his ugly head out from some bushes. Gene fired his weapon at the bush causing a figure to drop out of the bushes onto the ground and disappear. The sight of this slightly bugged Gene, despite Niels instructions. But he didn't have time to dwell on it long as a shot hit him in the shoulder and he was forced to get behind the tree again.

“Mr. Lee, find better cover,” Niels said calmly. “Your right shoulder is exposed.” As if by prophecy, two shots came out from behind the rock and hit Gene in the shoulder. Another four shots hit the tree causing it to splinter and catch flame. Gene ran to a nearby rock, dodging shots as best he could, but getting caught in the leg nonetheless. After diving into position, Gene attempted to lean on the rock but was greeted with the cold, hard ground of the Simulator Room.

“Nothing in here is real, Mr. Lee,” Niels reminded him.

“Really?” Gene asked sarcastically as he climbed back behind the rock. Poking his head above the rock, he aimed a shot at the soldier which hit its mark. In the background, Gene could see more enemy soldiers heading his way. Gene raised his weapon and took three of them out in three shots.

By the end of the simulation, Gene found that it was almost easy to take them out if he could do it before they took cover. In fact, he was silently surprised by his own skill. Into the back of his mind he formulated titles for himself, picturing Duncan introducing him to Meredith again. “Meredith, this is the expert marksman, Gene Lee.” Then Brad would go into a detailed explanation of who he *really* was and the adventures he’d already had. Gene would respond humbly, “He’s exaggerating, Brad always does.”

Perhaps his adventure was good enough for a novel after all. . . .

Without warning, he walked straight into someone. “Mr. Haton, you *do* look dazed! Formulating plans for this Saturday no doubt!” He had run smack into Taylor on the lift.

“Saturday?” he asked stupidly. Then he remembered. “Oh! The exhibit!”

King's Pawn

"Speaking of which, I've been rather disappointed in your progress! I have not seen one notice about the event in all of the four days since we discussed it at the Halloween party." Gene exited the lift with Taylor on her way to her office for their lesson.

"I've been a bit preoccupied since Saturday," Gene said.

"Well I haven't! Here's your approval for the party, signed and everything by Commander Lee."

"I thought that you had to get approval from the captain," Gene remarked.

"Blake has transferred over to the *Lincoln*, the lead ship, so he can better command the fleet. Commander Lee is currently in command—weren't you listening last night at 2300 when I made the announcement?"

"I think I might have been sleeping."

"Back to the point, do you want anyone to come to this or not?"

"N—yes I do," Gene said, trying to remove from his mind the vision of Meredith showing up at the exhibit from his mind.

"Then you must *advertise* for heaven's sake, young man! Oh, by the way, I've got a couple friends on three other ships who want to do the same thing. I told them if they did, they had to give all the money to young Mr. Fuentes, and they agreed."

"Three other ships?" Gene was a little dazed. He had been nervous enough about showing his work on *one* ship, much less four.

"Don't complain!"

"How am I supposed to host this without Brad knowing who's putting it on, anyway?"

“I guess I don’t know . . . well I have a shift in the morning but I’ll do it after 1300. You’ll just have to manage the five hours before that.”

Gene and Taylor spent their lesson creating flyers to be posted around the ship on various bulletins. “After all,” Taylor had muttered to herself while making the ads, “This is a necessary form of communication.” When the ads were finished, she dictated a letter to be sent to the cook. Gene decided that he would just play music over the speakers and not bother about making it live. When Gene left the room he felt he was ready for Saturday.

Friday, November 6, 2099

Following his lesson with Taylor, Gene decided he’d better pull out his tablet and pick out which paintings to use. After a little thought, Gene decided he’d better use all twelve of them. For obvious reasons he didn’t want to use any of the self-portraits. He seriously considered keeping one back that he had titled *The Tear*. It was the latest one he had painted having finished it directly after the incident with his father. Then he had stopped painting all together. The piece depicted a single, enlarged tear with blurred images out of his memory. It bugged him to look at it, but it was also one of his better ones so he kept it in.

With a chuckle to himself, he realized that some of his earlier works would probably be mistaken for abstract art. His first piece, for example, was barely discernable as a mountain, being a giant gray blob above a green one and with weak attempts at snow caps on the top.

Taylor had sent him more paintings from various

King's Pawn

members of the Falcons. Nick had sent him a letter promising to cater the event if he was allowed to contribute two of his own pieces. Gene was surprised but eagerly agreed. When he gathered all of the paintings together, he had a total of twenty-nine.

Taylor had advised that he set up the exhibit that night. So after getting everything together, Gene walked to the Officer's Lounge and located the cabinet where the projector pads were kept. Using the key that Taylor gave him, Gene opened a cabinet and pulled out twenty-nine of the thin glass-like pads then arranged them throughout the room. It took him a while to create an easel on them that he liked, but he was pleased with what he found in the end.

All of the other artists in the exhibit had sent their own explanations of their artwork. As Gene had never shown his art before, he had never needed to do this. But if his exhibit was to be anything close to professional, he realized he'd have to create brief summaries for each of them. As quickly as he could he dictated something to his tablet—a little blurb about each piece.

After the tedious process of setting each of them up, Gene finally got a chance to see some of the artwork that he had collected. A lot of it was pretty good. He wasn't sure he would've paid a good five bucks to see it on a normal occasion, but he knew where the money was going so he bought two tickets anyway. For the finishing touch, Gene pulled out another projector pad and posted a sign that said, "Art Exhibit" near the front door.

Satisfied with the decor of the lounge, Gene walked back to his room and went to bed, slightly excited. Normally Gene would sleep in on weekends, due to the fact that they

were the only days of the week where he never had work. Brad once in a while would switch someone for a weekday but Gene always tried to avoid making such agreements. However, as the exhibit started at eight, Gene decided he would have to wake up earlier than he was accustomed to on a Saturday.

To his great relief everything seemed to run smoothly during his watch. Nick hadn't arranged to bring refreshments in until two so Gene didn't have to worry about that. He was surprised how many people asked the identity of G.L., the initials with which many of them were signed. Commander Rogers actually gave Gene a small reprimand for risking self-exposure. Gene simply told visitors, "I would say but the artist wants to stay secret."

"Ooh, anonymous painters! How refreshing!" Ingrid Vextra said to him after overhearing him tell Ella Harris. "It seems most painters are just out to sell, rake in the bucks."

"Good morning to you, too, Miss Vextra," Gene said.

"Was it you who was given the astronomical task of putting this all together?"

"Yes, with the help of others."

"I especially like the one over there, who did that one?"

"It's mi—my friends."

"Careful there, Haton," Ingrid said. "It almost sounded as though you were going to take credit for it yourself. Your anonymous friend would've been most disappointed with you. See you 'round!"

By the time Taylor came to relieve him, Gene was feeling rather sick of art. Not wanting to look at another painting for a whole month, Gene headed back to his quarters. When he arrived he found Brad, Duncan, and Paul playing cards.

King's Pawn

"Where've you been, Haton?" Paul asked after he walked in.

"Yeah, I didn't even see you walk in last night," Duncan added.

"Well, I think I fell asleep in the lounge last night." *It was only a partial lie*, Gene told himself. *I did doze off for a moment last night when I was setting up the room.* "Having fun here?" he asked.

"No, this is our tenth game," Brad said annoyed.

"Just because you've lost each of them."

"There's an art exhibit in the Officer's Lounge today," Duncan said. "Maybe we can go see that."

Inwardly, Gene protested this, but he said, "Here I bought a couple tickets—you can have them." Gene handed them to Paul and Brad. "Nah, I don't wanna go to no art exhibit," Paul said, handing his ticket back.

"Do you want it, Duncan?" Gene asked.

"Sure," he said, then said. "Wait, why don't you give Meredith a call and—"

"Just take 'em," Gene said.

"Gene, if you didn't want to go, why'd you buy tickets?" Brad asked.

"I've heard it's for a good cause."

"Okay," Brad said, obviously bewildered.

That day they recorded eighty-seven people that came to the show on *Crescent*. Though shabbier than Taylor had been hoping for, it exceeded Gene's prediction of fifty, and seemed to be generally well-accepted by those that attended. Brad had even met a young security officer. The only negative comment he heard was from Duncan, "I've seen better, you didn't miss anything, Gene."

Gene was surprised to discover that even more had

attended on the other three ships. Each of them had attendance of over one hundred. Four hundred and twenty-one was the total from the entire fleet which would've resulted in \$2,105.00 but almost half of the money off of *Sitius* mysteriously disappeared. This took the total down to about \$1,800.00, but Gene thought it was still a fairly considerable sum.

Whether or not this was enough to corrode the sharp knife of Brad's medical bills, Gene didn't know. Brad hadn't been too keen to tell him how much it had amounted to at that point. With great pride, Gene picked up the money from the financial office on *Crescent*, then left the check in an envelope on Brad's pillow. Exhausted, Gene climbed up into his bunk, only to be woken up by Brad an hour later. "Gene!"

"Huh?" Gene asked groggily. When he realized what Brad was waving in his face, he smiled. "Where'd that come from? How much?"

"As if you didn't know!" Brad said. Looking down at the check he exclaimed, "Eighteen hundred dollars!"

"Congratulations," Gene said, yawning and turning back over in bed. "That's..." but Gene fell asleep before he could finish his sentence.

Inhalant

Thursday, November 12, 2099

Thursday afternoon once again found Gene bored and exhausted in Dr. Grill's office. They were doing the color card test again—a test in which Gene found himself picking the card with the color he liked best then setting them in a row. Grills would then turn the cards over to reveal numbers and record them in her notebook.

Gene had memorized the order which he wanted the cards to be in so that each time it came up the same. It was his hope that Grills would either get bored of the exercise and quit administering it, or determine that the sessions weren't helping at all and end them. If he ever wanted to make the session more interesting, all he had to do was momentarily pretend that he was about to pick the cards out of order. Immediately, Dr. Grills would rock to the edge of her seat, eyes wide. Then Gene would seem to reconsider, picking the card he had been accustomed to picking.

Sick of using this as a form of amusement, Gene decided to actually change the order of the cards, see if anything interesting happened. So instead of placing the cards down Blue, Black, Gray, Green, Brown, Yellow, Violet, Red, Gene switched the red and blue around. For a moment Dr. Grill's face remained blank, unaware of the change. Then, all of sudden, she sat up in her seat and pulled out her notebook. "Mr. Haton, are you sure you want to put that card first?"

"I kinda put it where I wanted it," Gene replied.

"Of course, of course," Grills mumbled, licking her trunk-like fingers and flipping through a textbook eagerly. "Let's see, Lund, Lupley, ah. . . ." Grills read something on the page, then closed the book with a look of triumph on her face. "Are you feeling belligerent right now? Or perhaps hostile and rebellious?"

"Well, not particularly. . . ."

"But you want to be aggressive, do you not? Inside of you is swelling that competitive beast that desires victory and dominion over all things?"

Gene was almost completely bewildered, but amused at the same time. "Am I supposed to be?"

Grills looked scandalized, as if she wanted to say, "Of course you should!" Instead, she said, "Gene, no need to hide these emotions! I've studied cases like yours for years. Please, feel free to divulge any emotions you are feeling right now to me."

"I am kinda tired," Gene confessed. He figured it would be rather rude to blatantly profess boredom.

For a few seconds, Grills simply bit her tongue. Then, to Gene's surprise, she started writing furiously. As usual, she gave Gene an unintentional running narration of what she

King's Pawn

was writing. *Rush of adrenaline causing body to wear down, cannot contain his anger.* Looking up at Gene, she said, "Please continue."

"Believe it or not, I'm feeling a keen desire for food," Gene said, half in hope that she'd allow him to go eat. After all, it'd been a long day and he hadn't had dinner yet.

"Meat? Vegetables? Sweets?" Grills asked.

"Uh, meat," Gene said. "I wouldn't mind a good roast."

Again this set Grills furiously writing. Unfortunately, Gene couldn't tell what she was writing this time. Finally, she turned the page, and started writing again as she said, "Gene, I'm—ten—giving you this—hours—prescription for the next seven—minimum—nights."

"Huh?"

Grills tore the page off of her notebook. "I'm giving you this prescription for the next seven nights. You are to boil a leaf of these herbs—" she pulled a jar out from under her desk—"and let the scent *fill* the room for at least ten minutes before going to bed and sleeping for a minimum—I said minimum mind you—of ten hours.

"Oh, and I want you to start wearing this 24/7 so I can monitor your body's status more closely. Hold out your arm." Grills pushed up his left sleeve a little and clapped a circular thing around his arm. Then she dropped the sleeve over it, mumbling to herself, "Yes, that will do quite nicely."

Grills explained to Gene that if he didn't get the amount of sleep he was assigned, that she'd know. After giving Gene the page she'd torn out of the notebook, a small heater, a pot and the jar of herbs, he was ushered out of the room, regretting that he'd altered the status quo. As he left the room, she called out, "Be sure to boil those herbs, Haton!

I'll know if you don't!" On the bright side, she'd let him out a half hour earlier than normal.

Brad laughed when he heard the story and after Gene showed him the device on his arm. After he finished, he asked, "So do you think you could just take it off and stick it on Duncan or Paul when you have your shift? One of them would sleep another at least six hours which would give you fourteen. Extra credit, eh?"

"I would, but you need a key to get it off, and I don't have it." Gene said, dejectedly.

"I 'spose that'd defeat the point of monitoring you if you could just take it off whenever you felt like it." Brad noted. "Oh, by the way, Lieutenant Niels came by, he wants to cancel your lessons until Tuesday of next week."

"How come?" Gene asked.

"I don't know," Brad said. "Speaking of Niels, though, has he given any clue about. . . ." Brad dropped his voice as Duncan meandered into the room and lay down on his bed, fiddling with his tablet. ". . . about, er, you know."

"Do I think that he's *the* guy?"

"Yeah, that," Brad said.

Gene sighed, "I really don't think it's him. At least, that's what my—I don't know! My instinct? I guess that's what my instinct tells me." As Gene finished this comment, Duncan burst out laughing. Both Brad and Gene turned around, startled and looked at him.

"Nah, it's not you guys, it's this girl!" Duncan said, when he noticed that their attention had become suddenly focused upon himself. "Me and her are totally alike."

Annoyed, Gene corrected, "*She and I.*" Duncan, however, appeared not to hear as he turned back to his conversation

on his tablet. "He just seems to be okay. And I've totally ruled out Paul."

"How come?"

"Well, the way he talked to me last week and after he—" Gene nodded towards Duncan. "—went into mourning . . . I just don't think it's him. Don't ask me why."

"Are you sure? I guess you recognize the voices best that you heard, though," Brad concluded. "Does your Mom have any ideas?"

"If she does she didn't tell me," Gene answered him. "They told me they have access to the list you and I made."

"How?" Brad asked, curiously.

Gene explained to him how Niels had helped him get the list in the first place.

"Really?" Brad said, sounding slightly disappointed. "Should've known it was—wait! If he got me the list, that means he could've altered it so he wasn't in suspicion!"

"But he *was* on the list, remember?" Gene reminded him.

"Oh yeah, but maybe he didn't think you'd suspect him," Brad said back. "I mean, he's the security officer and all."

"What are you two talking about?" Duncan asked, coming over to join them. "You look like your discussing a funeral."

"It's nothing," Brad said quickly. "What were *you* two talking about?"

"Oh, that was just Laura, met her just today. Incidentally, I was wondering if I could ask you a favor, Gene."

"Yeah?"

"Well, the only time she and I can get together next week is late Tuesday night. I was wondering if you could take my shift for that night?"

“Uh, okay,” Gene said. This was developing into a very bad habit.

“Great, thanks!”

“Just this once, right?”

“Yeah. Oh! And it’s a bridge shift,” Duncan added as he slipped outside.

“Why doesn’t he ever ask you?” Gene asked.

“He did, but I have to get my physical that night.”

At that moment, Gene’s tablet began beeping. Gene walked over to his bed and picked it up. The caption indicated that it was Taylor calling him. As soon as her face lit the screen, she exclaimed, “Mr. Haton, good news!”

“What?”

“Remember how three hundred dollars were stolen off of *Sitius*?” Taylor asked.

“Yeah,” Gene answered.

“I’m new to this,” Brad said.

“Oh good, you’re here too, Fuentes,” Taylor said. “Well, someone just found the stolen money. I had it transferred to your account for you, Mr. Fuentes.”

“Who had it?” Gene asked.

“We don’t know, the money turned up in an envelope in front of the quarters of my dear friend Thelma. She thought someone was simply sending her money. Immediately she called me up to tell me about it. You see, she felt so terribly guilty about losing your money, Mr. Fuentes, that she was simply going to give it to you anyway. But then she discovered that it was the missing three hundred dollars that someone had stolen! She was so excited when she found out! Squealed like a little piglet!”

“So do they know who took it?” Gene asked.

King's Pawn

"No, but I bet that once they found out that the money was for a good cause and gave it back."

"Sure," Gene said, very much doubting this analysis.

"Anyhow, I sent the money to your account immediately, Mr. Fuentes," Taylor said.

"Thanks," Brad responded, gratefully.

"Don't mention it," Taylor replied. "Ciao!"

"I guess I'd better start 'preparing' my medication." Doing his best to imitate Grill's voice, Gene said, "'Be sure to boil those herbs, Haton! I'll know if you don't!'"

Monday, November 16, 2009

The herbs, whatever they were, reeked like sweat. It did make him quickly fall asleep, however. As for the device around his arm, it proved to be terribly uncomfortable to sleep with.

Immediately after walking in and sniffing the air, Paul and Duncan objected to the repugnant smell produced by the herbs. He informed him that there wasn't much choice in the matter as Grills seemed to be monitoring him closely. Half to his dismay and half to his relief, Sunday morning found the herbs missing from where he had set them the night before. All three of his roommates denied any knowledge of the whereabouts of the herbs or who the culprit was.

The very next morning, Grills had called him on his tablet. "Mr. Haton, why did you not boil your herbs last night?"

"Sorry, Doctor, I think I lost them."

"What? That's impossible in such a small room. Have

you asked your roommates?”

“Well,” Gene began. “I was planning on it but I was afraid of the stress it would cause me. You see, I’m trying to avoid arousing those desires for domination that I was feeling Thursday.”

“I see, very well,” Grills said, sounding concerned. “I’m afraid Commander Rogers confiscated the rest of my supply until he can make sure there are no other harmful ‘side effects.’ The moron thinks I don’t know my practice. I’ll be sure to send you another prescription as soon as I get the supplies. But I’m afraid that won’t be until the end of this week, when we reach Empelrus.”

“We reach Empelrus this week?”

“We’re scheduled to get there Friday. I’ll be able to get you some more then. Please find it, this is your health! Just try not to exert yourself or do anything strenuous from now until then and you should be fine. Good day.” Grills cut the communication.

“Gee whiz, Gene,” Brad said, overhearing the conversation. “I hope you can make it ‘till Friday!”

“I don’t know, it’ll be tough,” Gene said. “Especially with these violent spasms I keep having.”

Brad chuckled. “Perhaps you ought to ask Taylor to have you excused from work this week, you certainly don’t want to do anything over-exerting.”

Contrary to Grill’s instructions, Gene taught Brad how to play racquetball that afternoon. Though the game wasn’t as physical as his games with Gwen usually were, Gene did work up a sweat which might have been what caused Grills to call him up and give him a firm chastisement. After that, they ended their game prematurely so as not to annoy

King's Pawn

Grills further.

With physical activity out of the question, Gene and Brad found themselves in the lounge with Duncan and Paul. For the first half hour they were content with playing a Laven game that Duncan had acquired somewhere. When they decided to quit, Paul said, "It looks like we're in for another battle this week."

"What are you talking about?" Gene asked.

"We're gonna go into Erus aren't we? Do you think Karch is stupid enough to leave their border unguarded?"

Gene was ashamed not to have thought of this before. "Oh yeah."

"I hear two big fleets are waiting for us at the border, and Erus is right behind them, waiting for the action. I figure this time Wednesday, we'll be in it deep."

Feeling suddenly sick at the idea of being on the bridge that night, Gene contemplated renegeing on his promise to take Duncan's bridge shift but he doubted that Duncan would let him. Trying to think positively, he told himself that maybe the bridge was the safest, most well-defended place to be during an attack. Nevertheless, the wall of glass in front of the bridge didn't inspire much confidence in him.

Tuesday, November 17, 2099

Something was wrong. He felt his arms squeeze together behind his back as tight cords constricted around them. His eyes popped open in alarm. When he looked up, he was startled by who he saw.

"Brad!"

Brad was silent as he grabbed Gene's face, opened his

mouth, and stuffed some cloth into it. Gene tried to scream but he couldn't. He tried kicking but his feet were bound.

"Stop struggling," Brad commanded.

Gene continued squirming as Brad lifted him off his bed and set him down inside of a large anti-gravity garbage bin. He covered him with garbage, degravitized the bin and pushed it out of the room. The cart glided down the corridor as Gene struggled helplessly inside. He tried to shake the bin, but it didn't budge to the left or the right.

He heard doors open and close, felt the movement of a lift, and could hear Brad casually greet people as he moved through the corridors.

"Show your authorization please," Gene heard a computer demand. After a brief pause, it said, "Authorization accepted."

A few minutes later, Brad pulled him out of the garbage bin and carried him to a combat SRV. Gene squirmed as Brad carried him through an open door and dropped him into a seat. He fired up the engines and hovered near a large wall, apparently waiting for something. After three minutes, the wall slid into the ceiling and the contents of the bay were sucked into the darkness of space. Gene could see the *Fortius* tailing them.

Brad maneuvered the SRV out of the bay, penetrating the ebony expanse. As soon as it exited, the other ships disappeared, still moving at incredible speeds. The SRV lurched forward as Brad hit the accelerator. From the navigation list, he selected a nearby planet and plotted a course. The computer's automatic navigation system took over and Brad sat back in his seat and relaxed.

Brad took the cloth out of his mouth.

King's Pawn

"Listen Gene, I'm sorry it had to be this way."

Gene couldn't speak. First his father, then Brad. Feeling more betrayed than ever, he determined he would never trust anybody again. Anybody could be bought if the price was right. He began to wonder if even his mother and sister were incorruptible.

"I don't want to do this, but I have to."

In his belligerent state, he thought of hundreds of different responses but was so angry that he couldn't bring himself to use any of them.

Brad was saved from the awkward moment as a console began beeping right in front of him. "We've got company," he said as he activated a holographic tactical scene. A fleet of fifteen attack SRVs were approaching rapidly from behind them. Soon, all fifteen were firing.

Brad wildly maneuvered the SRV in a large arc, dodging several shots. Brad tried firing off several shots of his own from the rear cannon hitting two of their assailants. Gene jumped up and body-slammed Brad, knocking him out of his chair. Brad easily pushed Gene into the back of the cockpit, but the moment was just enough for the SRV to get pounded by the relentless torpedoes launched by the Falvayahn force. Gene and wall had some bonding time as he was rocked into it by the pounding the small vessel took.

It suddenly occurred to Gene that their attackers might have instructions to simply destroy them. Perhaps this was the end.

The whole cabin jolted again and Gene could hear something collide with the underbelly of the SRV. The floor rumbled and shook as it was hit with a multiple shots directly under him. Brad ran and pushed Gene away from

where he was sitting. The floor exploded where Gene had been seconds earlier. Mom's head popped through the hole followed immediately by an arm bearing an e-gun. She wasted no time shooting Brad square in the chest who crumpled to the floor. Despite his betrayal, Gene felt a great sadness in seeing his former friend unconscious on the floor.

Mom climbed up into the ship's cabin and leaned down over Brad, putting her fingers to his neck.

"Is he—"

"He's alive," Mom said. "And he's very lucky I showed some restraint. Niels, inform *Crescent* that the situation is secure. All ships may return to the dock."

The whole ship was soon very "knowledgeable" about Brad's attempted escape. Various incarnations of the truth found their way around *Crescent's* corridors. Although several of them mentioned abduction scenarios, none of them mentioned Gene's involvement. The only common thread in each story was the labeling of Brad as a traitor. Each time Gene heard his name, he felt stung to his center.

The next morning, Gene woke up, got dressed, went to breakfast, went to work and all of the other customary daily chores all without Brad's company. Life—which had seemed so full the day before, became suddenly very empty. Having a friend and then losing him was a lot worse than being alone to begin with. In this battle, there were not allies.

Taylor had spoken with him, offering several words of comfort but nothing could help ease the pain of yet another

betrayal. His mother told him that she believed Brad was hired as a bounty hunter a month earlier. The only thing Gene could ask himself was that infamous three-letter word: why? Did Brad need more money for his brother?

Not able to believe that even such a noble cause could provoke such a desperate measure. Though sometimes a little hot-headed, Brad had never struck Gene as cruel or even greedy. The guy hadn't had an enemy alive aboard.

That afternoon, Gene had determined not to sit by his roommates at lunch. He made a beeline to a small table in the corner of the busy room. His emotions had been frighteningly close to the surface all morning long. He almost wanted to go to the brig, grab the guy by the shirt, hold him up against the wall and demand to know how he could do such a thing.

Half an hour later, his food sat cold in front of him. He was startled when his brooding was interrupted by a sly voice saying, "I told you so."

Gene glared back up at Ingrid but said nothing.

"Everyone in the military is about the same—they're trained killers. It's not too late to get out. You can just step right off the ship. That's what I did when I found out what goes on aboard these ships."

Not even the revelation that Ingrid had once been part of the SBN didn't pull him out of his silence. Instead, someone else spoke. "Don't you have some noses to pick on Deck H?"

"No, Commander Rogers," Ingrid said, standing up. "I'm afraid if I chipped away all of the snot there wouldn't be anything left to the people."

She stalked off. Rogers looked at Gene and said, "Don't

worry, Fuentes will get what he deserves. I'll make sure of that.”

Gene maintained his silence. That was exactly what he was afraid of.

Gene trooped up to his duty station at ten that evening. The communications officer who was serving with him he didn't recognize—he probably only worked the night shift. The name on his uniform told Gene that his surname was North. He seemed friendly and the two chatted for a couple minutes at about midnight about SRVs, but other than that, it was quiet the rest of the evening.

The large sensors map on the wall showed that the fleet was indeed becoming extremely near to crossing the border to Erus. Near the boundary there were five fleets—two of them were from Erus and three from Karch. In confirmation to Paul's theories, the two fleets from Karch appeared to be right next to where the allied fleet was. It was hard to believe that people on board were sleeping when danger appeared to be so close.

It was about 4:00 the next morning when North's station started beeping. Gene had dozed off for just a moment and was startled by the sound. “Commander Lee,” North said. “A fleet-wide communication from the head ship of Lagenna.”

“Put it on the front screen,” Lee commanded.

To their surprise, the screen displayed a face that Gene had only seen on the news. Gene had the tendency to think of Har Nilats as an ugly old man, but to the contrary he was rather handsome for his age. His long red hair was pulled

back into a ponytail. His eyes were blue and appeared innocent, but with a slight droop to them as though they had been deprived of sleep. In his history class, Gene had learned that Nilats had taken power in about 2082 while Earth was first struggling for its freedom. What Gene found most shocking was that Nilats was only sixteen when he had done it.

At the same period of life that Gene was struggling to pass calculus, Nilats was struggling to lead a rebellion against his government. While Gene was learning to get up the guts to fire at a computer generated character in a simulation room, young Nilats had been learning how to torture. While on Earth Gene was trying to find a minimum wage job, sixteen-year-old Nilats had been building luxurious palaces to hold his riches. Before Gene had even been on a date, Nilats had several wives and concubines.

There he was, right in front of them. Then Gene realized where he was standing—he'd been standing in the same place almost a month earlier. Nilats was standing in the center of the Hall of Judgment on Lagenna. There was a kind smile on his face as he announced, "A new era has begun for Lagenna, an improved era. For centuries, Lagenna has stood as a foe to all that was wicked, all that was evil. But Lagenna is old, and like a loyal pet, tired Lagenna needs to be put to a respectful rest.

"I explained this to Queen Senethfrin a month ago but unfortunately the two of us didn't seem to agree—"

"North, can you get a translator on that please?" Lee asked impatiently. It was then that Gene realized that he was speaking in Karch.

"Sorry sir," North replied. "My controls are responding

slowly.”

“Crewman Haton, call a techy in here,” Lee said.

“I can translate, commander,” Gene said.

“Then *do*,” Lee answered back impatiently. “Lieutenant North, you call the technician.”

Feeling extremely weird, Gene looked up at the obscene smile of Har Nilats and began translating, “in a surprising act of stubborn cowardice, Queen Senethfrin has fled into the Refliskiwhuk nebula and trapped her people within. Though I was shocked by her crime, I’m sorry to say that I was not surprised. The Kohfen line has always been reckless.

“I thank the generous people of Lagenna for their hospitality as we prepare to integrate our two great societies. The technology we bring will greatly enhance the Laven way of life. We hope the rich heritage of Lagenna will similarly enrich Karch as we add them to our great nation.

“In fact, in order that we may do this better, we are moving the government of Karch here to Lagenna. This great hall in which many great men and women have given and taken counsel will continue to be the focal point of government and civic meetings of a great nation. Only, now the nation it governs will be much larger.

“The sun of the old Lagenna has set, and the new sun, the sun of a new Lagenna, is rising. Follow me, I will lead you to greatness.” Gene’s voice sounded harsh and cruel compared to the silky tones produced by Nilats, but *Crescent’s* bridge crew could not mistake the intent of the words.

Gene looked at his mom who was gripping the edge of the seat and glaring with such fury that he flinched. A moment after the communication ended, the admiral

King's Pawn

from Lagenna appeared on the screen. “We just received that message from home, I’m afraid to say that most of the real information he offered seems to be true—Karch has overrun Lagenna. We can only hope that Lagenna can be preserved until we can take it back.” Somberly, the admiral from Lagenna ended his communication.

Commander Lee picked up her tablet and began speaking with someone on it. Then she turned to look at Gene. “Crewman Haton, get Rogers up here right now. I need him to take his shift early. Lieutenant Jacobson, until he gets here, you’re in charge.”

Lee left the room and Jacobson moved from the helm, taking her seat at the back. A few minutes later, Rogers appeared on the bridge. He looked pretty tired—Gene guessed he had just barely woken up. The moment he took a seat a beeping started from the opposite side of the room. “What is it?” he asked in a tired voice.

The young woman in front of the sensors station turned to him, alarmed. “Sir, I’m reading a fleet coming in fast! It’s from Karch!”

Infiltration

“Left Flank, target ships 27, 32 and 48. Right Flank, ships 38, 53 and 42. Center, target 12 to 16. All ships prepare to veer to—” The Laven Admiral’s voice over the communications line was interrupted by static. He repeated, “Veer port.”

“Communications, I don’t care what Commander Lee’s doing, get her to the bridge right *now*,” Rogers yelled at Gene and North. “Helm, veer port twenty degrees. Tactical, target the engines.”

“Commander Lee, come in,” Gene called, but there was no reply. “Commander Lee, come in! You’re needed on the bridge.” The console in front of him didn’t seem to be working properly, though. “Commander, my console isn’t working.”

“Sir, internal communications seem to be offline,” North clarified.

Rogers slammed his hand on his armrest. “Sensors, run

King's Pawn

a scan for Lee.”

“She’s on Deck U, outside Engine Room II.”

Looking around again, Rogers said, “Haton, I need you to run down to Deck U and get him. Run!”

Surprised, Gene jogged out into the corridor and toward the nearest lift. As he ran, the ship jolted to one side and Gene was smashed up against the wall. When he finally entered the lift he said, “Deck U.” The tiny compartment immediately began sliding down on its long path toward Deck U. U was the second-lowest deck on *Crescent*, and the deck below had only food storage. The ship again rocked to one side as Gene stumbled out of the lift. Looking to his right, a sign indicated that Engine Room II was at the very rear of the ship.

To his surprise, down here the sirens that were sounding up above were absent. Gene had half-expected his mother to be on her way to the Bridge by now; the rumblings of the ship should’ve at least alerted her to that much. That was when Gene noticed an open compartment in the wall. Gene was about to close it when his foot touched a form sprawled out on the ground. Turning it over, he was dismayed to discover it was his mom.

To his horror, he found he was beginning to feel rather tired. Involuntarily, his knees sunk to the ground. Up above him, he saw that the compartment Commander Lee was under was stocked with gas masks. Gene’s eyes became heavy and his breathing strained as he made a wild grab for one. After two attempts, his fingers enclosed over the small mask. Slipping it over his mouth and nose then flipping a small switch on the side, he took a gulp of the air it offered. Unfortunately, after two breaths, Gene found he had no

power to keep his eyes open any longer.

Gene was awakened by nearby explosions which caused sparks to fly. He heard someone collapse to his right with a faint cry. It took him only a couple moments to regain his memory. He was still sprawled across the corridor but his surroundings were almost completely dark. A few feet away from him, his mother still lay unconscious. Down at the other end of the corridor he heard footsteps. Strapping the gas mask more firmly around his head, Gene reached over and probed her waist for her weapon's holster.

Because he still wasn't sure who the armed people at the end of the corridor were, he moved the setting on his mother's E-gun to stun. Raising the gun, he fired into the darkness, causing the hallway to be temporarily illuminated. Three Karch soldiers stood at the end of the corridor, walking straight at him. That was all he needed. Rolling to his side, he fired three quick shots into the darkness each of which hit their targets.

Immediately he felt the ground for his mother. He struggled for a moment to find her neck in the darkness. To his great relief, he still felt a pulse drumming beneath his fingers. Slowly he felt his way to the other person he heard drop to the ground. Unfortunately, the man was dead. It was as though a brick had been dropped in Gene's stomach. In his arms was a corpse—perhaps the first death in a ship-wide invasion or maybe the thirty-first. How was he to know?

Desperately he asked himself, *What should I do? Crescent has been invaded! Is the whole ship under Karch's control?*

King's Pawn

Should I surrender to them? Duh! No! Stupid question. Isn't this what my training has been for? Gene changed the setting on his E-gun to "kill." Though he loathed the idea, he couldn't afford to have soldiers come back alive on him if the ship was indeed overrun by Karch. Gene very much doubted that he alone could reclaim the deck much less the ship, but he would have to try.

Praying that the Karch soldiers were confined to Deck U, he started dragging his mother as fast as he could towards the lift. After reaching it, he grimaced. *Whoever the dead person is needs to be moved too*, he decided. Quickly he hurried back in the direction he had just come from. He nearly tripped over the body, but saw the white uniform just in time.

Even though he only dragged the man several yards, it felt more like several miles. The man was small and probably young. *What if it's someone I know?* The thought caused a shiver to run down his spine. After what seemed like forever, Gene reached the doors that would hopefully take him to safety. To his alarm, the door refused to open. An emergency hatch next to the door also refused to open, the battery-powered access panel reporting he didn't have security clearance. Turning back to the normal door, he tried all of the buttons, pounded it, tried calling someone over the communication line, but nothing worked. Either *Crescent* was floating powerless through space or Security had chosen to shut everything down on Deck U to protect the rest of the ship.

Then he heard loud footsteps. Looking around for cover, he dragged his mother and the other man into another corridor. Looking out into the main hallway, he saw four

soldiers walk out of a corridor fifty yards down, all wearing gas masks similar to Gene's and carrying flashlights. Steadying his trembling hands, Gene picked up his weapon and took aim. They were easy to down, apparently unaware that there was anything left conscious on the deck and for a moment there was silence again.

Five more soldiers ran out of the very same corridor, but this time, Gene wasn't so lucky. He shot two of them but took a hit to his left arm as he darted back into cover. As if from far away, Gene heard the quiet and piercing voice of Lieutenant Niels speak to him from his memory. *You're too tense, Mr. Lee. Relax your muscles and you'll be more agile.* He was right, Gene was too tense. Taking five deep breaths, Gene steadied himself and prepared to fire again.

The soldiers were firing shots in his direction already, but the frequency was too fast for any accuracy—Gene could tell they were more to keep Gene where he was than to try to hit anything in particular. This was very similar to a training scenario Niels put him through in which two of them were firing while the third crept up to try to take him out.

Instead of waiting to find out whether his suspicions were correct, Gene ran down the corridor he was in. Because he was unfamiliar with the deck, he accidentally slammed into the dark wall at the end. Taking a left at the first juncture, Gene soon found himself looking at the two soldiers. They appeared to still be firing in Gene's direction. Gene took these two down quickly then ran to the corridor he had just barely been in.

As Gene had predicted, the third soldier was just barely jumping in front of the corridor Gene had just escaped,

King's Pawn

firing his weapon. When he found no one there, the soldier spun around, shining his powerful light in Gene's direction. Appalled at the look of horror on the soldier's face, Gene aimed his weapon and fired. The soldier collapsed and his gun dropped to the ground.

After stealing one of the soldiers' flashlights, Gene ran back to his mother, determined to protect her unconscious body. It was at that time that he remembered that his left arm had been wounded. Until that point, he hadn't even noticed the pain. Now it came to him like a charging rhinoceros. Dropping his gun, he took off his shoes and socks. Gene did his best to tie the dark black socks around the wound but it was difficult with only one hand. He wasn't sure how long it would hold, but it stopped him from getting blood everywhere. With a pang of guilt, he pointed the light at the ground and realized he'd left a small trail of blood that would stain the floor if left too long.

Then he heard the sound of the hatch next to the lift opening. Light spilled into the dark corridor. Relieved that help had finally come, Gene poked his head around the corner and saw Commander Rogers cautiously making his way out into the corridor, flashlight in hand.

"Commander Rogers, they're coming from that way," Gene panted, pointing towards the front of the ship. Picking his gun up off the ground and putting it back in its holster, he turned around the corner and took hold of his mother. As quickly as he could, Gene used his good arm to drag her towards the open hatch. "Do you know how we can revive her?" Gene asked. Rogers didn't move, but stood stoically watching Gene drag his mother and then the other man closer to the hatch. Frustrated, Gene yelled, "C'mon! We

need security down here now!”

Then, in one fluid movement, Rogers grabbed Gene by the arm and took the gun from his holster. Gene made a small attempt at resisting, but soon he felt Rogers clapping handcuffs onto his wrists. Gene winced as Rogers grabbed his arm right above the gunshot wound and shoved him forward in the direction the Karch soldiers had come from.

“Well, Lee, I expected you to be unconscious like your dear mother,” Rogers said.

“Coward,” Gene muttered.

“What was that, *Lee*?” Rogers asked. “You have no idea how long I’ve been wanting to do that.”

“You’re a coward,” Gene repeated deliberately. However, it gave him strange relief to hear his real name spoken at last. “Just like my father.”

Rogers kicked him. “Careful, Lee, it’s your head I need, the rest of you could rot for all I care.” Before rounding a corridor, Rogers called out, “*Menelya!*”

“A coward and a traitor.”

“I don’t answer to you,” Rogers said coolly as several Karch soldiers passed. “After today, the only one I answer to is Har Nilats, himself. Not even Hendricks can deny that.”

“Hendricks?” Gene asked. *Where have I heard that name before?*

“Laura Hendricks, you had her name on your clever little list this whole time,” Rogers said. “She was the waitress that brought you your drink on Independence Station. That made it rather simple for her to slip a pill into your Root Beer. Unfortunately, I didn’t believe anyone would check the hall records after I told the captain that they weren’t monitored. Not that it mattered anyway. *Menelya!*” They

King's Pawn

turned another corner and passed another pack of Karch guards.

“And Brad was behind me all of the time, making that high-pitched noise.”

“We didn’t know Mr. Fuentes was a bounty hunter until a few weeks ago. All he accomplished was reveal the SRV we had stowed in the garbage bay. By the way, we just freed your friend from the brig and he was happy to help us allow the Karch onboard. He then went up to Deck A to distract the security teams while Karch boarded the ship. It was easy to bribe him with a third of the prize in exchange for his freedom. I’ll kill him long before that point.”

“Then why did you help me escape three months ago?”

“Have *you* ever seen Niels use a gun? Not to mention the fists that hold it.”

“Coward,” Gene repeated a fourth time. He expected Rogers to kick him again, but Gene only heard him swallow. A satisfied smile played at the edges of his lips.

They walked on in silence before Rogers commanded him to stop at a door with four Karch sentries guarding it. In the light from Roger’s flashlight, Gene saw that it was the “Engineering II Office.” Rogers knocked five times causing the door to slide open.

The room was larger than Gene had expected. Four red lamps gave the room an eerie atmosphere. A large map of the *Crescent* lay on a table in the center of the room with two men standing behind it. The man on the right had long red hair and a beard while the man on the left had gray hair and a beard. The grey-bearded man pointed to two guards and then pointed to Gene. The two immediately grabbed Gene’s arms and dragged him to the side of the

room. Another soldier was apparently making a report to the two bearded men, “. . .most of this deck is secure, but we’re still trying to quash the resistance in the engine room, apparently they weren’t put to sleep like the rest of the deck was.” The soldier shot a glare at Rogers.

“The engine room is a level five secure area,” Rogers snapped back, taking off his gas mask. “There are too many restrictions in place to simply add a toxin into the air. Hendricks could only get *this* deck.”

“Did we assign the poor little Falvayahns too much?” the soldier mocked.

“Hold your peace, Vulem,” the man with the gray hair growled. “His service to Karch is greatly valued and will be rewarded accordingly. After securing this level, proceed to the next one up. The one below has nothing of consequence.” The news that this was the only deck with Karch on it relieved Gene slightly.

They heard five more knocks from outside. One of the two guards on their side of the door looked at his tablet and nodded at the other one. The door slid open a second time and another Karch guard walked in.

“Generals,” the man yelled. “Nine of my men are dead!”

“Deaths in battle aren’t uncommon, Captain Tamrof,” the man with gray hair said. “This surprises you?”

Tamrof strode up to Gene, grabbed his arm and ran a strange device over his wound. “The blood we found near the dead matches this boy’s blood.” The man held a weapon up to Gene’s head. Gene braced himself for death but it never came. The shot that came impacted close to his head but it was Tamrof’s gun being blasted away, not Gene’s brains. Unsure whether to sigh in relief or moan, Gene

King's Pawn

decided it was best to keep silent altogether.

"This boy's life, *Captain*, is worth more than yours and those nine other men," the man with the red beard snapped, lowering his weapon. "Not even he is fully aware of what he possesses."

"Blake explained it to him, General of Generals," Rogers said reverently to the red-haired man.

General of Generals? Couldn't they be a little more creative than that? "Blake knows nothing, once the fleet surrenders, I'll execute him myself."

"He's not dead then," Gene sighed.

"Oh no, I'm counting on his help a little longer. Unfortunately, it might be a little harder to catch him than you as we don't have any operatives aboard his ship."

"Maybe not as hard as you think," someone said. Gene whirled around to find Brad holding Captain Blake at gunpoint. The captain's hands were bound with a set of handcuffs.

Rogers' jaw dropped. "But, I thought you were on the *Lincoln!*"

"That's exactly what I wanted you to think," Blake said with all of the strength and authority his voice usually carried.

"I found him on my way up to Deck A," Brad said. "I overpowered him and brought him here."

"You shall be rewarded greatly for your service," the grey-haired man said.

"General of Generals?" Rogers meekly addressed the man.

"What?" he snapped.

"What of our agreement? I was promised certain—"

”Did you really think you’d be made an officer?”

”It was a–”

”Gull!” the man mocked. ”You don’t bear the mark! You wouldn’t even be considered for entry into the league of officers.”

”I could make my–”

”However,” the general interrupted a second time. ”You have served Har Nilats well, and will be rewarded for your actions. We shall discuss it later, for now we have a guest who must be attended to.” He glared menacingly at Gene. The redheaded general paused as if thinking for a moment. Then nodded and murmured something that Gene couldn’t hear. Then the man looked up at Rogers. ”Rogers, how long until we have clean air in the corridors?”

”It should clear within five minutes,” Rogers said, glaring at the general.

”Good. How long will it take *Crescent’s* crew to restore primary power?”

”They shouldn’t be able to discover the mistake for several hours.”

”Nepha, I want an invading force of 800 on this ship within half an hour. 200 will proceed from the upper decks and head down. 200 will proceed from here and head up. The other 400 will split at the center. You will lead them.”

”Yes sir, I will issue the command immediately.”

”I’ve already issued the command old man,” Nosirev said angrily. ”You will only lead them.”

”Nosirev,” Blake said, addressing the ”General of Generals”. ”As master of this vessel, I command you to depart immediately or face the consequences.”

”Master no longer, I’m afraid,” the gray-haired general

said wryly.

“You’ve conquered all of *Crescent*?”

Gene shook his head as the red-haired admiral spoke to him. “Don’t you recognize me, Blake? Do you know who you’re dealing with?”

“Your ability to communicate with your ship’s computer and with six other imbeciles doesn’t prove you capable of taking over my ship.”

It was then that Gene realized that this was one of those seven infamous generals that had a virtual copy of his same chip somewhere in his head.

Nosirev took a knife out of his belt and walked up to the captain. “If you had any idea who you were talking to—”

Gene was shocked when Blake spat in his face. “I would’ve spit on you that much sooner,” Blake finished. “Unfortunately I’m old and my memory’s not what it used to be.”

Nosirev raised his knife and just about delivered the captain a fatal blow before he grasped his head with both hands. “You are very fortunate Har Nilats has other plans for you.”

“Am I to understand I have the ‘great one’s’ attention myself?” Captain Blake asked sarcastically. “If you had told me earlier I would’ve spit that much harder.”

“Enough conversation!” Nosirev shouted. “You will give me the codes for the data encryption device now.”

If he expected the captain to flinch, he would’ve been sorely disappointed. To the contrary, Blake laughed harshly.

“Data encryption device?” Gene questioned, surprised to hear himself talk.

“While we were at Independence, I took the liberty of

ordering Dr. Peters to install a data encryption device. That device has two effects: one, it blocks the chip from being accessed by outside sources without my code. Attempts to decrypt it will be met by destruction of the chip. Two, if you are taken more than a designated distance away from Falvayahn vessels without my code, the chip will also be rendered useless.”

“I said, *enough conversation!*” Nosirev hollered. He pointed to the two guards on either side of Gene and made a gesture. One of them grabbed Gene’s hand and started bending back his small finger until Gene was in extreme pain. He tried to pull his hand away but the guard was too strong. “We will play a game,” Nosirev said. “For every 30 seconds that I don’t have what I need to access that chip, one of the boy’s fingers will break. Every finger broken scores you a point. If you give in, I win. If we run out of fingers, I can get creative and find other interesting motives. So do you wish to win this game?”

Gene was scared of the pain he knew he would feel within moments. Nevertheless, from an unknown fountain he drew the courage to shout, “Don’t give him anything!”

“You’re not part of this game, boy. Speak again and you will win your captain a point. What do you say, William? You’re down to ten seconds.”

Blake looked with a pained expression at the teenager. Gene counted down the seconds in his head. *Five, four, three...*

The group jumped when the lights came back on, accompanied by an explosion. Captain Blake suddenly and quite shockingly pulled apart the handcuffs binding him, accepted an e-gun from Brad and shot the soldier that was

King's Pawn

trying to break Gene's finger. Brad drew his own weapon and shot the other soldier.

Wait, is Brad . . . on our side?! Gene thought.

He had no time to ponder the question as immediately all heard another large explosion. Gene whirled around to see where the explosion had come from only to see Niels entering through a gargantuan hole in the wall with a security team at his tail. Gene turned immediately back to Nosirev whose eyes were wide. The Karch rallied at one end of the room while the Falvayahns poured through the hole in the other side. White flares cut through the room from two sides. Another explosion jolted the room, knocking many to the ground including Gene.

When Gene looked up, he saw that Blake was still alive and getting back up onto his feet. Gene was about to do the same but a hand grasped his ankle and started dragging him through debris across the room. Looking up, Gene saw that it was Rogers. Gene kicked him in the stomach with his free foot but it didn't do any good. Above them, shots were being passed in between a squad of SBN security officers and the Karch soldiers. Gene was gratified to see that Blake had joined in the fighting. Nosirev escaped the fighting by blowing his own hole into the wall and crawling out.

Gene aimed another kick at Rogers. Unlike months ago when Rogers had been rescuing him, this time he didn't feel guilty about causing the man pain. Rogers released his legs and grabbed his bound hands and continued to drag him. Intense pain shot through Gene's arm where he had been shot. Within a minute, Rogers had hauled Gene through the same hole Nosirev had escaped by minutes before. Putting his gun to Gene's head, Rogers said, "Walk; I'll take

you to Nilats myself. He'll give me what I was promised."

Gene walked slowly, frustrating Rogers who seemed rushed. Several Karch soldiers ran past them towards the room they'd just escaped. A moment later, they were joined by a woman. "Hendricks, go up above to Deck T and ready an SRV for launch."

"Those are only survey—"

"We don't have a choice! There won't be any combat SRV's left!"

Hendricks ran ahead without saying a word. Gene desperately tried to think of a way to escape. Moments later, they were at a lift. Immediately after entering, Gene wheeled around and knocked the gun out of his hands. Both men dived onto it and grabbed it at the same time. However, Gene's hands were bound and his left arm was in terrible pain. He struggled as long as he could but Rogers was too strong for him and soon was ordering him to stand up again.

The door slid open once more, revealing Deck T. Rogers led Gene to the docking bay near the rear of the deck. Inside, Hendricks was already waiting for them next to an open door of an odd-looking SRV. Unlike the sleek ship Brad had introduced him to, this one had odd-looking equipment around the top and sides and was perhaps five times larger with two decks. "This is the fastest here," Hendricks said sarcastically. "It can almost reach ten times light speed."

"You fool! The clamps are still locked—"

"FOOL?" Hendricks nearly screamed. If they were trying to be discreet they were failing miserably. "Fool? The moment we exit those doors, one of the two sides is going to destroy us!"

King's Pawn

"I know the codes for both sides!"

"The journey will take years! And you think Nosirev is simply going to let you waltz to Lagenna and claim the glory for yourself?"

"If we *hurry*, we may be able to escape before he reaches his ship. Now remove the clamps Hendricks!"

An idea suddenly struck Gene. If he could stall them long enough, they might be discovered by another SBN officer. "Do you *honestly* think that your ship can outrun both Karch and the Allies? Falvayah isn't just going to sit back and watch one of their best assets get hauled over to their enemies. And Nosirev is going to be furious with you if you try to escape. He's going to be shamed enough as it is."

"He won't dare approach if I've got a gun to your head."

"He has six other brilliant minds and the Karch database tied in to his brain. Do you really think that you can defeat such a man in such a," Gene laughed as cruelly as he could. "Swift and powerful ship like this?"

Rogers kicked him again, and pushed him up the ramp. "They know that I'd sooner kill you than let them lay their hands on you before I've accomplished my task."

"And Nilats will certainly be pleased to have been forced to wait a few extra years before getting his prize. I wonder how the war will be going at that point." After receiving what seemed to be Roger's favorite punishment (a kick in his shins), Gene was commanded to walk up some stairs and into the cockpit. Gene didn't struggle as Rogers shoved him into a chair then began starting up the ship. *Is it time to make another escape attempt?* Gene wondered. *I may be able to just run for it without him noticing.* Gene vetoed this idea. Rogers was vulnerable but Hendricks might not be.

Standing up as quietly as he could, Gene raised his handcuffed hands over his head and brought them down as hard as he could on Rogers' head. The man cried out in pain, turned, and grabbed him by the throat. Gene hadn't had time to draw breath. As Gene struggled for breath, Rogers grunted, "You're not worth it." Trying to summon more strength, Gene was surprised when Rogers threw him on the ground. "But I don't have a choice anymore."

Rogers turned back to what he was doing, expecting Gene to remain where he was. With a cry, Gene sprang up and began swinging wildly with his bound hands at Rogers' head once more. This time, Rogers was unable to turn around and defend himself. He took hit after hit to his face before finally grunting and falling to the ground. With satisfaction, Gene kicked him three times in the shins like Rogers had done to him.

Not wasting any time, Gene turned and hurried down the stairs. As he touched the last stair, he heard footsteps climbing up the ramp—Hendricks was coming! Gene quickly stood up against the wall by the door. Hendricks ran right past him and started up the stairs. As Gene ran down the ramp, he saw none other than Brad Fuentes run into the room. "GENE!" he yelled.

"Brad!" but to his surprise, Brad raised his weapon and pointed it in his direction.

"Gene, behind you!"

It was too late. Hendrick's icy hand slid over his mouth and he felt the cold tip of an E-gun against his neck.

Brad strode towards him, took aim and said, "Let him go!"

"Come one step closer and I'll kill him!" Hendricks

King's Pawn

seethed. Brad stopped obediently. "Now put your gun on the ground," Hendricks continued.

Brad looked as though he were about to comply when Hendricks cried out in pain. Gene was biting her hand as hard as he could. Dropping the gun, she immediately shoved Gene to the ground. Brad picked his gun right back up and took a couple shots, hitting her in the shoulder. Hendricks collapsed unconscious to the ground. Brad looked at Gene, concerned.

To their surprise, the ramp slid up into the ship. A sign lit up, indicating that the room was about to decompress. Rogers must have regained consciousness! Gene made for the door then remembered Hendricks. He paused in consideration. Noticing what Gene was looking back at, Brad said, "Gene, she wanted to kill you! Let her go!"

"I've . . . seen too much death for one day," Gene huffed. After running back to her injured form, he started dragging her towards the door. Reluctantly, Brad joined in and the three barely made it back in time before the doors closed. With slight regret, they watched through the windows as the SRV launched and disappeared into the void.

"How'd . . . you . . . find . . . me?" Gene panted after a few minutes.

"You won't believe me when I tell you."

"What?"

Brad leaned over and lifted up Gene's sleeve to reveal the device that Dr. Grills had stuck around his arm. "Grills saved your life, Gene," Brad said, smiling.

Gene spat on the floor as Brad fired a shot at his handcuffs to unbind him. "That . . . has got to be . . . the grossest thing . . . I've ever . . . stuck in my mouth!"

18 – Infiltration

Seconds after he said this, Taylor’s voice was heard over the ship’s intercom, announcing, “Attention, attention, security teams rally on Deck T, security teams rally on Deck T!”

Inflictions

Seconds after this announcement, they heard the lift doors around the corner slide open. Instinctively, the two hid themselves. However, they found that there was no need for this as the man leading this new squad was none other than Captain Blake. The group looked ragged, downtrodden. A woman in a medical uniform was busily wandering among them, trying to attend to all of the wounded. Blake looked to Niels. "Take a head count."

"We've lost Denver, Winters, Stephens, and Crawford," Niels answered back without looking.

"I saw Rogers drag a man through a hole in a wall," one of the men offered.

"Yes, Mr. Turner, I know," Blake responded lugubriously.

Brad and Gene thought this an excellent opportunity to introduce themselves to the group. "Rogers escaped," Gene said. "But left Hendricks and me behind."

Blake turned to them in shock. Again Gene saw that

faint glimmer of smile appear momentarily on Niel's face. A panel on the wall began beeping frantically. "I'll deal with you in a minute," Blake said and walked to the beeping panel. He activated it and had a short conversation with someone on it. When he walked back to the group, he had a smile on his face. "Two large fleets from Erus have just arrived and are fighting back Karch. Also, the ship that latched onto *Crescent* escaped with Nosirev aboard.

"Sensors show that there are still 18 Karch aboard. Other ships will transfer security personnel here to assist with the recapture of Deck U. Meanwhile, we'll send Ms. Ellsworth's and Mr. Mill's teams to fight. Niels, I'm ordering your team to the Med. Bay immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"Captain?" Gene asked. "Where's—"

"Commander Lee is on the bridge," he said shortly. "Ms. Langley, cuff Hendricks and take her up to a security cell. Let's get to work."

Gene arrived at the lift and pushed the button before he remembered that they had been shut down. Blake ran his card through a slot at the side of the door. After thirty seconds, the lift doors slid open, however, it already had an occupant.

The first thing Gene saw were his deep brown eyes, scared, desperate, and piercing. Next he saw the e-gun in his hands, aimed directly at Gene's chest. Before Gene had a chance to react, he found himself being shoved to the side, he heard a weapon's blast and he heard the large thump of a body hitting the ground next to him. Gene aimed his own weapon at the man and fired. The man in the Karch uniform crumpled to the ground. Gene then looked to see

King's Pawn

who had saved him.

Captain Blake lay breathing heavily on the ground. A splotch of red blood stained his uniform and was quickly darkening the previously white fabric. "My," he spluttered as one of the medics rushed to his side, accompanied by Gene. He grabbed Gene's hand and said, "I . . . get a last word. . ."

"Don't worry, sir," the medic said. "We'll get you up to the Med. Bay and have you taken care of."

"Tell Grace . . . I love her." A faint smile spread across his face as he sighed, "Grace. . ."

The hero of four different wars lay dead before Gene. The man who had been a friend and mentor to Gene's mother for over sixteen years was gone. Along with him went the mass of knowledge and memories he had acquired over his nearly seventy years of life. It occurred to Gene that the man should've retired years ago, but because of his passion for defending liberty, he had remained where he could serve it best.

Then Gene noticed that Blake had passed him a tiny chip. Looking more closely at the captain's hand, he saw that he had somehow popped the chip out of his fingernail and into Gene's hand before he died. The medic put her arm around Gene's shoulder and coaxed him away, saying, "We need to get you up to the Med. Bay too."

Gene held on to the chip as he left his captain behind. What followed was a confusing collage of light and movement. Gene came to his senses that night in the med. bay. There hadn't been enough beds for all of the wounded so Gene and Brad found themselves on the floor, lying up against the wall with thin blankets covering them. Next to

him Brad was also awake and hauntingly silent. Finally, after lying awake for several hours, Brad said, “Gene?”

“Yeah?”

“Do ya think they’ll—they’ll ever go away?”

Gene didn’t have to ask what he meant when Brad said, “they.” Turning his head slightly on the pillow, he said, “I dunno. After a while, I think the memories might mesh in with the rest of them, but I don’t think we’ll ever lose them.”

“I just hate—”

“Are you two boys havin’ trouble gettin’ yourselves to sleep?” interrupted Dr. Peter’s deep yet comforting voice.

“Yeah,” Brad said.

“Here, take this.” She bent down and gave them each a pill to swallow. “Don’t dwell on what you’ve seen. Allow yourselves to be distracted by other. . . .” But Gene found it very hard to concentrate after that point and gave up trying after several attempts.

Wednesday, November 18, 2099

Brad and Gene were given permission to leave the next morning. Brad was walking with a limp due to the gun shot he’d taken to his hip. The last of the Karch invaders were either killed or captured that morning. Casualties from *Crescent* included eighteen dead and thirty-two wounded.

They received word late that afternoon that the battle between the Karch and Erus fleets had ended in a standoff. Both sides had suffered heavy losses. Though crippled, the fleet was still expected to make it out of Karch-owned Lagenna at roughly midnight.

Mom had been given command of *Crescent* and Captain

King's Pawn

Maria Dominguez of the *Fortius* had assumed control of the fleet. Gene suspected that if it had been four hundred years earlier on one of Earth's sailing vessels, there would be talk of the mission being cursed or such. As low as morale had been on board when Commodore Pardoe had been killed, it sank that much lower when the crew learned of their beloved captain's death.

On his arm he wore a bandage to cover the wound. Compared to many of the others that he saw, Gene's wound was fairly minor. One woman had even lost an arm. There wasn't a person on board who didn't have a friend or a friend of a friend that was injured or dead.

Not long after the two were released from the Med. Bay, both Brad and Gene were called to Mom's office. After inviting the two to sit, the commander immediately said, "I have a few things to clear up with both of you—particularly you, Mr. Fuentes."

"Commander, I'd like to apologize for my behavior," Brad said.

"I read Captain Blake's log and he did indeed mention that you are to be held blameless. However, he didn't explain what orders he gave you."

"My grandfather contacted me over a month ago. He basically ordered me to abduct Gene or face his consequences. I don't know what he had in mind, but I think he somehow caused the accident related to my brother.

"I immediately contacted Captain Blake. He told me that I should tell him I would comply with his wishes. It was his hope that by coordinating with my grandfather, we could expose those on board working for Karch."

"But that didn't happen," Mom deduced.

“No, it didn’t,” Brad admitted. “The captain believed that if Gene wasn’t in Karch hands by the time we reached Empelrus, he would be killed by the operatives on board. When Gene overheard them talking, they said that they needed one more person. We decided to make me that one other person.”

“So you kidnapped Gene,” Mom said.

“It was the only way to ensure their absolute confidence in me.”

“How did you know there was an SRV in the garbage bay?” Gene asked.

“A crewman noticed it and reported it to Blake and a few other officers,” Brad said. “Blake kept a security camera on the SRV but no one approached it. Time was running out, so he told me to use it to escape with you, Gene. At the very least, that gave them one less asset to work with.”

“So that was a ploy to draw the real traitor out,” Gene said.

“Exactly,” Brad said. “And Captain Blake rigged it so it would be almost impossible for me to get away with it.”

“All of the fighter pilots were training in the docking bay that day,” Mom breathed. “It was the captain’s last order before supposedly transferring over to the Lincoln.”

“That’s not all,” Brad said. “*You* and Lieutenant Niels were there, observing as he had suggested. And it worked—Rogers took the bait. Blake was waiting in an empty cell when Hendricks came and set me free. He followed from a distance and when Hendricks broke off to go to the air control station, he and I coordinated a ship-wide power shutdown to make it look like I did exactly what I was supposed to do.”

King's Pawn

"But why didn't you just expose the traitors right then?"

"Hendricks was careful not to reveal her identity to me, nor the identity of her accomplice. Captain Blake recognized Hendricks, but that didn't clue us in to who Rogers was."

"So you went through with the plan," Gene said.

"Exactly. I brought the 'captive' Captain Blake to Nosirev armed and ready to free Gene who we, unfortunately, weren't able to warn in time."

"That's when you revived me near the hatch . . . I know the rest from then on," Mom told him.

"Well I don't," Gene said. "What happened?"

"Well, the ship that latched on brought a boarding party of about fifty soldiers," Mom explained. "Blake gave me instructions to go send security teams down to your deck and to activate the power when they were in position. That would be his signal to do whatever needed to be done to get you out of there. Engineering would be in charge of getting our engines back online after Rogers carelessly navigated us into the thickest portion of the battle. With primary power back online *Crescent* sped through the Karch ships that had surrounded us when main power was taken offline."

"Okay, one more question," Gene started. "How did Hendrick's get a hold of that stuff to put in the air?"

"Didn't you notice the stench?" Brad asked, grinning. "Rogers got that stuff from Grills. It's the very same stuff she gave you!"

"Which is one less reason to like her," Mom grumbled. "Now Gene, you were present when the captain died, correct?"

"Yeah," Gene said, not cherishing the memory.

“Did the captain tell you anything special?”

“No.”

“He didn’t give you any special instructions?”

“No,” he repeated.

“Then I suppose the information in your mind is lost.”

“How come?” Brad asked.

“No one has the codes to deactivate the encryption device,” Mom said. “If we try to do anything to it, it will destroy the chip, and that could damage your memory.”

“After all we went through?!” Gene exclaimed.

“He didn’t leave the codes with anybody?” Brad asked.

“Wait,” Gene said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the chip the captain had given him. “Is *this* it?”

Mom took it from his hand. “He gave this to you?”

“Yeah, right before he died.”

Mom set it upon her tablet. “Gene, say your full name and birth date.”

“Gene Samuel Lee, February 11, 2084.”

“Put your left hand on my tablet.”

“Identity confirmed. What are your instructions, Gene?”

“Do you have the code for the chip in my head?”

“Yes,” the computer said. “Would you like me to tell you?”

Gene looked at his mother who shook her head. “No,” he told it.

“Very well. What are your next instructions?”

“Nothing else. Shut down.”

“Thank you,” the tablet said and the screen went blank.

“We’re in business,” Commander Lee announced, smiling. “Get ready because we’ll start taking that information out of you tomorrow morning.”

King's Pawn

Gene counted the hours until the ship would reach Empelrus and he could have all of the information extracted. He hoped that he could keep his ability to speak Karch as it had come in handy several times. In fact, he hoped he could continue to decipher codes as well—the government would probably pay him well to continue doing that.

Late that evening, Lieutenant Olaf's voice drawled over the intercom that they had crossed the border into Erus. It was as though a burden was lifted from *Crescent's* crew. They weren't completely safe by any means but they were in friendly territory once more. The prospect Gene liked better, however, was that by this time Friday, he would be free of the knowledge he had unknowingly carried for his entire life.

Images

Friday, November 19, 2099

“Gene!” Someone whispered loudly while shaking Gene roughly. “Gene, wake up!” The person proceeded to shake Gene even more violently.

“I’m awake, I’m awake!” Gene murmured, annoyed. “Jeez!”

“Get into some civilian clothes, Gwen’s going to meet us at the port. We’ve got to go!”

With some effort, Gene opened his eyes. To his surprise he noticed that it was his mother that was shaking him. “I see you haven’t improved at all since I used to wake you up for school. Don’t wake Crewman Fuentes.”

“Too late, what’s going on?” Brad asked groggily from his bunk, turning on a lamp. *He probably woke up when he heard Gwen’s name*, Gene thought to himself.

“We’ve arrived at Empelrus,” Mom said. “It’s time to take Gene to the hospital.”

King's Pawn

"Commander Lee?" Brad asked.

"What is it, Fuentes?"

"Can I come with you?"

"No." Lee said firmly. Then she paused for a moment. "Actually, yes you may."

The clock on the wall told him it was 22:02. Gene and Brad hurriedly dressed in some casual clothes before joining Lee outside. When they entered the lift, Lee commanded it to go to Deck L. After they boarded, Gene asked, "What ever happened to Hendricks?"

"She was interrogated yesterday and confessed," Mom said.

"What's her story?"

"She was the waitress that served you your drink at Independence Base," Mom started. "We thought they might have tried to actually pull some information out there as it was."

"That's what we guessed too," Brad said.

"But she didn't know how you somehow came out of that encounter with the ability to translate codes and speak Karch. We need to wait before we continue," she added as the lift stopped and the three exited the lift. Lee stopped talking while they were walking through the corridors.

When they entered the bay area, there was an SRV waiting for them. After being checked by security, they boarded the vessel. Gwen was already strapped in a seat. Brad was the first to enter the vehicle, giving him the option to sit down next to Gwen if he desired. He looked awkward, but when she saw him, Gwen exclaimed, "Why it's Brabradleyerbrad Fuentes! Come sit next to me, Brabradleyerbrad!"

Blushing profusely, Brad awkwardly took a seat next to

her. Mom gave her a stern glance as she sat down on the other side of her. Gwen merely grinned back and continued chatting happily. The vessel around them started vibrating slightly as the engines powered up. The doors in front of them split open and the SRV soared out into the void of space, towards a small planet.

It took a good ten minutes before Gwen settled down enough to allow for sensible conversation to be held. Mom picked up right where she left off after the discussion on the lift. “So when we arrived at Lagenna, apparently Rogers allowed you to register for shore leave without our knowledge. I was talking to Gwen that morning and she mentioned you’d be going down to the surface so I sent her immediately to stop you.”

“When I got there, he stopped me from getting on,” Gwen interjected. “I thought he just couldn’t hear me when I was talking to him. He just kept repeating that it was too late for me to get on board and that I had to leave the bay right away before it lost air. The moron. . . .”

“Hendricks said a ship was waiting to intercept the SRV once it was far enough away. The Karch ship would’ve latched onto your vessel and dragged you to Karch at its best speed. I don’t know how they expected to make it past Lagenna’s defenses, but maybe they planned for that as well.”

“They had a fleet right there,” Gene said. “They might’ve attempted to guard it on its way out.”

“I was opposed to you going that night,” Mom said. “But the Laven queen insisted and Pardoe buckled. I don’t even know how it is that the only people you seem to be a secret from is our own people.”

King's Pawn

"Did she have anything to say about when Pardoe was poisoned?" Gwen asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Mom said. "They used that same SRV in the garbage bay to sneak off to the *Lincoln*. He was able to return before you warned us about the poison and was about to sabotage the primary power systems. The Karch fleet sent after us wasn't meant to attack us, but simply pick up the *Crescent* when our engines suddenly stopped working. We don't know why but he couldn't do that."

"What about Monday?" Brad asked.

"I believe one of your roommates, Crewman Duncan, had a date that night?" Mom said.

"Yeah, that's why I was . . . Oh. . . ." Gene said, realizing what had happened.

"Hendricks was nearby when you switched shifts with Duncan earlier and figured he'd go to you again if he had to," Commander Lee told him.

"But I'm afraid that Hendricks stood poor Crewman Duncan up Monday evening. It was mostly her work that caused most of Deck U to be filled with a gas that puts all that inhale it to sleep. Rogers stayed busy as well, though, sabotaging the internal communications. Deck U didn't even realize that the ship was at High Alert. Then Rogers arranged for me to be called to Deck U. This gave Rogers an excuse to take control of the bridge where he navigated us into about the worst part of the battle and could reasonably send you, Gene, down to fetch me."

"Then, when the entire fleet was commanded to swerve to the right, Rogers was able to edit the communication so that *Crescent* was told to go left. It's a miracle that none of

the other ships in the fleet were hit. But it left *Crescent* out in the open. Karch surrounded us and invaded. Deck U was an easy target with no one left conscious except in the Engine Room where they were basically oblivious to what was going on.”

“Did he just leave the bridge without anyone commanding it?” Brad asked.

“Not completely. He left the third officer, Lieutenant Ward, in charge,” Lee said. “He must’ve thought it odd to be left commanding during battle though.”

“All hands,” the ship’s intercom called. “Prepare for landing.”

Gene’s attention became focused on the windows to his right where he suddenly noticed that the black space had been replaced by a bright, blue, sky. The vessel was swiftly descending towards a large cube like building. The structure was an ugly grayish color with no windows on the outside reminding him of an old basketball arena, except much larger.

The SRV landed on the roof where there was a group of Erus security officers waiting. Mom led the party out to meet the guards. A large man with a moustache greeted them in a voice deeper than Gene had ever heard before, then, in broken English, said, “We is assigned move you Mr. Lee hospital cell.”

Hospital cell? Gene thought alarmed. Gene and Brad glanced at each other before following the man who seemed to be the head guard down into the building. The hospital didn’t seem much different on the inside than it did from the outside. The hospital here seemed to be designed for functionality rather than human comfort.

King's Pawn

Gene was taken to a large operation room. In the middle there were two reclining chairs similar to ones that might be found in a dentist's office. Several doctors in large orange smocks approached him and one put a device around his neck, similar to the one Grills had put around his arm (Dr. Peters had removed the device the day he was treated for his wound, muttering, "Idiot woman, no authority whatsoever. . ."). One of the doctors took a seat in the chair next to Gene's with a similar collar on. Another doctor connected the two collars with a multicolored wire. Then a nurse approached Gene with a frighteningly long needle.

"Wait," Commander Lee said, stopping the nurse. "I would like you to explain the procedure." The nurse looked confused and Gene realized she probably didn't speak English. Lee continued, trying to use hand gestures, "Tell—" Mom pointed to her mouth, "us—" she pointed to the group "what you are going to do—" she made some odd gestures above Gene's stomach then pointed at him and finished, "to him."

The nurse muttered something to an associate and the other walked out of the room. The nurse set down the long needle making Gene breathe a sigh of relief. The man that had left returned with a small device in his fist. He dropped it into Mom's hand. Commander Lee held it up to her mouth and said, "I want you to explain the procedure to us before doing anything to him. And you can start with giving us your name."

The translator in Mom's hand repeated the words in the Erus tongue as she said it. One of the doctors rolled his eyes before taking the device from Mom. "You're not in Falvayah anymore. I don't know what the custom is there, but here

we do the job. . . .” Mom gave him a look that didn’t require a translator for him to interpret what she was thinking. “. . .but as you’re guests here, I shall oblige.”

“Thanks,” Mom said curtly.

“First of all—”

”First of all, you will give me your name please, your *hebechi*.”

The doctor looked even more harassed but said, “Dr. Goekle. First, we will place a device on his hippocampus. Its job is to, uh, ‘dig’ (for lack of a better word) through his memories to find what was placed there. Dr. Evkleki will have a direct link with his conscious thoughts. When he finds what he needs, he will signal us and we shall disconnect him from your son. Then we will put him asleep for the surgery and attempt to translate his memories into a language that can be understood by computer. What is it, Commander?”

Mom was already shaking her head. Taking the translator back, she said, “He is *not* to be conscious while you are ‘digging’ through his memories. And I don’t care to have him understanding every single little thought that floats through my son’s head.” She handed the translator to the doctor once more.

“Dr. Evkleki is a trained professional,” Goekle said. “He’s done this type of thing before. His conscious thoughts will help us to reference the information in his mind. We shall ask him to try to remember his earliest memories and that will give us a starting point for finding the information we need. It could take us days to find the information otherwise.”

“Mom,” Gene said quietly. Mom looked at him and he

King's Pawn

continued, "I just want it out, I don't care what they have to do."

Mom looked as though she didn't care to back down, but finally she took the translator and said, "You may proceed."

Dr. Goekle took the translator back and said, "I'd like you to think of your earliest memories, as a child or baby. But remember that Dr. Evkleki is there trying to experience the same thing."

The nurse with the long needle once again approached him and bent his head forward. Gene grunted as he felt the sharp point of the needle poking the back of his neck.

The effect was immediate. His own thoughts seemed to be more pronounced as though everything else had become subdued. If he really concentrated, he could see the faces in front of him but it was much easier to experience his own amplified thoughts.

But there was someone else there as well, experiencing the same thing as Gene. Not caring at all for this intruder, Gene tried his best to ignore him. Then he remembered what the doctor had told him: "think of your earliest memories. . . ."

Gene was just conjuring something up when he felt another sharp prick in his neck. As though he had been soaked by a bucket of multi-colored paint, Gene's vision came quickly back and his thoughts went back to normal. To his surprise, Dr. Evkleki and Dr. Goekle were bickering, the former seeming rather angry. Finally they stopped, Evkleki went back to his chair and Goekle approached Gene. "Boy, you can't block Dr. Evkleki from your thoughts. Allow him in."

"I wuzn't blukink him," Gene said, finding it hard to

speak well. Focusing all of his efforts, he continued, “I wuz just abut to think of one of thuts you told mih abut und you woke me up.”

“Gene, you were sitting there for half an hour and you didn’t begin thinking of anything yet?” Gwen said, who was sitting a little bit away from his chair next to Brad. “Jeez! We’re going to be here all day!”

“Where’s mom?” Gene asked in a clearer voice.

“She has to go back to *Crescent* to take her shift. Apparently they’ve been running low on commanding officers this past week.”

“Boy, you have to realize Evkleki’s there or else we won’t get anything done.”

“I did nuh he wuz there, I was just ignoring him.”

“Well don’t.”

Gene felt his head being tipped forward once again and the sharp neck bite. Again it was as though he had fallen asleep and his thoughts had become magnified. However this time, when he noticed Dr. Evkleki, he did his best to keep him on his mind while he thought back to his childhood.

The first memory that came to his mind involved Gwen pouring a cup of milk on his forehead. They were both roughly three years old at the time. Gene had responded by throwing his bowl of cereal at her. The memory came alive and Gene remembered the pleasure he had taken at that experience, the feeling of the cold milk running down his face. Another figure came into view. It was Gene’s father, looking amused and exasperated at the same time. However, the sight of his father brought another memory up, this one more recent.

King's Pawn

Gene found himself crawling on a cold carpet, dragging a paper bag in his hand. The liquid in the bottle inside splashed, but his father didn't hear, he was busy yelling at the man on the projector-phone. Gene was screaming at his former self to watch out, to turn back before his father caught him, but it was a memory and his past self couldn't hear him any better than the bag he was carrying.

Several seconds later, Gene's voice was crying, "In the other-other bottle there's something that c-can help heal you of your addiction."

Right on cue, Bordeaux slammed the bottle against Gene's leg. The pain came back as truly as he had remembered it last February. Blood moistened his leg as Bordeaux shouted, "*Give it to me!*"

Gene kicked him and moments later felt the knife slicing through his stomach, then being yanked out again. Barely able to see for the pain, Gene raised the gun and blindly shot into the dark. His father crumpled to the ground. With one last heave of energy, Gene pulled the bottle out of the paper bag and tossed it towards the open window across the room. To his surprise, it flew right through and he heard it crash on the ground fifteen feet below.

Gene lost consciousness until he felt a fourth prick in the back of his neck. To his surprise, instead of causing a sting, this time it relieved him of the blinding pain in his leg and stomach. By his side, Dr. Evkleki sat, crying. Gene had a tear leaking from his eye himself and was breathing in deep yet strained heaves. Gwen was immediately at his side, holding his arm. "Gene what's going on?"

Gene coughed a couple times before panting, "I-I saw Dad- Dad stabbing me."

“Oh Gene,” Gwen said, patting his arm. “It’s okay, it wasn’t real.”

“It was real, Gwen,” Gene told her. “I felt the knife in my side and– and the bottle in my leg . . . and everything!” Gwen looked at Brad who was right next to her.

Goekle pushed them away towards their seats before turning back to Gene and saying, “Listen, boy, if we’re ever going to make any progress here, you *have* to control where your mind goes. I can’t make you think anything and neither can Dr. Evkleki. You *must* show control! If you find an early memory, use the mind in that space to remember what happened the day before, and allow that mind to take over. Do you understand me?”

It was confusing but Gene nodded and the doctor turned to his nurse and muttered something to her. Evkleki was reluctant to return, but, though traumatized, took his seat once more at Gene’s left. For a third time, the nurse bent his head forward and stung him with the needle.

Starting where he had last time, Gene thought back to Gwen throwing her milk at him. Before the toddler Gene could throw his cereal, Gene remembered tripping and falling on the pavement the previous day. Immediately his mind leaped upon that memory and he saw his own small leg below him with a scrape. Compared to what he had just experienced, it was barely noticeable but little Gene was bawling his eyes out.

The older Gene experiencing the memory found the noise his own mouth was making extremely obnoxious but continued his task, remembering his mother holding Gwen and him in her lap while attempting to roast a hot dog over a mountain fire. Gene didn’t want to leave this memory but

King's Pawn

reluctantly continued back.

Memory after memory passed but after an eternity, he found himself in the pitch dark, cold and cramped. Then he felt a sixth prickle in his neck and the room around him came into view. To his right he saw Gwen, sleeping in her chair while Brad sat next to her, fiddling with his tablet. Upon seeing him awake, he greeted, "Hey, Gene!"

"Hi," Gene said, weakly. "How long was I like that?"

"Not long, just about. . . ." Brad checked his watch. "I'd say we came here sixteen hours ago."

"And you've been here all this time?"

"Well, no," Brad answered guiltily. "I admit they took the two of us out and gave us a tour of the city about eight hours ago, that was right after you woke up the second time."

"We've localized the area of your Limbic System where your earliest memories are kept," Dr. Goekle told him. "Now all that is left is to convert it into something the computers can understand. For this portion we'll put you to sleep."

"Uh, could I eat first?" Gene asked, feeling extremely hungry.

It looked as though the doctor might say no but Brad chimed in, "Good idea, that way Commander Lee would know you were taking good care of her son."

Through gritted teeth, the doctor said, "That can be arranged."

Gene was given a large enough meal that he could easily share with Gwen and Brad. The other doctors let them eat in peace while the three chatted. Brad was saying, "At first, the doctors wanted to take you to this small closet-like room and let you sit there for several hours while you worked on getting new memories. But Commander Lee

got really mad and started yelling at them that you would be staying precisely where you were and that Goekle had to personally keep an eye on you for the whole time.”

“And it’s a good thing too,” Gwen said. “Because five minutes after she left to go back up to *Crescent*, Dr. What’s-his-name signaled for the connection to be broken between you two. He was *so* angry! It was funny to watch. . . .”

Despite having never tasted most of the food before, it was delicious to Gene’s hungry mouth. Unfortunately, fifteen minutes later the doctors once again entered the room. With them they brought a cart with several ugly looking tools including a small knife and scissors. Upon seeing these, Gene motioned for Brad to come nearer. “Take Gwen out of the room, I don’t want her to see any, um, anything gross and stuff.”

“Okay,” Brad said. Gene suddenly wondered what he’d thought about spending the entire day with his crush. Gene was surprised when he found the nurse once more above him, stuffing a large pill beneath his tongue. After swallowing the huge thing, Gene began to drift out of consciousness. Not minding this in the slightest, Gene allowed his body to fall asleep. One last thought entered his mind as he felt himself drifting away: What would Rogers say if he saw him now? A smile crept to his lips then Gene was gone.

Tuesday, November 24, 2099

Blurry images lit Gene’s sight as he willed his eyes to open. His head and neck were burning with pain. There was something on his forehead that was terribly itchy. He tried

King's Pawn

to scratch it, but he found his arm to be practically dead. Beginning with his fingers, he tried twitching until he could open and close them. He then proceeded to do the same with his wrist and the rest of his arm until he had enough blood flowing to reach up and scratch his forehead.

He was surprised to feel a soft cloth on his forehead—obviously the source of the itch. Then he realized he was wearing a turban. It also felt as though there was a long bandage stretching down his back. Instantly his memory came racing back and a smile spread across his face. Everything was gone; Gene was free.

With great effort, he turned his head around to look for any other sign of life in the room. Mom was standing with a group of doctors with a hand on her forehead. Gene wondered how long he'd been out and how long she'd been waiting for him to wake up. "Mom?"

The group of doctors jumped and his mother turned to look at him. Then he noticed the look on her face. Mom's face bore a mixture of guilt, helplessness, and worry. "You weren't able to extract the information, were you?" Gene said. It was a statement, not a question.

"No, Gene," Mom said as the group around her dispersed, leaving the two alone. "They've been trying for almost a week but they can't translate the data into something that the computers can comprehend."

"There's no way?" Gene asked, devastated.

"I'm afraid not—not right now," Mom said. Then, for the first time in his life, Gene saw a tear appear in his mother's eye. Despite the tear, her voice was quite steady. "Forgive me, Gene. I thought it was safe, fifteen years ago. I was given a choice. There were three hundred others, so I thought

there was no chance you would be the one. And something about it felt right, but it was foolish of me. I regret that day more than any other.”

Gene’s heart went out to his mother, instantly forgiving her. Shedding a tear himself, he said, “Mom, if it hadn’t been me, it would’ve been someone else. Remember, two kinds of things life is made of? It’s okay, I can deal with it.” Upon saying that, Mom embraced her son. Gene could barely move, but somehow managed to heave his arm up and put it around her back.

In a universe full of variables, Gene had discovered constants. Three months ago, he never would’ve dreamed of finding himself halfway across the known galaxy from his home. Three months ago he never would’ve guessed he was wanted by a foreign government. Three Months ago, he never expected to find friends he could count on.

Although several of the doctors desired to continue trying, unfortunately Karch wasn’t willing to allow them to continue. Intelligence showed that a huge fleet had amassed on the border next to Empelrus. It was unknown when they would strike, but it was all too obvious where. They soon received the command to depart with the rest of Falcon Fleet. Their destination was the Erus homeworld.

King's Pawn