

VESTINIA

Ward Ricker, July 2025

“What was that?” Captain Siriot barked out.

“Something hit us,” Banok responded.

“Yes, something hit us, Banok. I think that was clear. But what? Was there something in our path?”

“I can’t tell you yet. You know most of our sensors were already down.”

“Erogon, scan for obstacles in the area,” the captain addressed his helmsman.

“I am trying, but like Banok said, we don’t have many sensors working.”

“I am getting some readings from the aft sensor array,” Banok said.

“What do you see?”

“Here. I will put it up on the screen.”

The captain viewed the image of an explosion. “Well, indeed it looks like something hit us. Can you tell what it was?”

Banok stared at her instruments. After a few moments she responded, “It looks like an explosive impact, sir. I believe we have been shot at.”

“Can you tell from where?”

Banok stared a moment longer. “It appears to come from the aft port quarter.”

“Erogon!”

“Scanning, sir.” After another moment, “I can’t see anything, sir. Those sensors are down.”

“Sir,” Chuzok interrupted. “I am detecting a craft coming up on our starboard side.”

“Can we get visual?”

“I’ll try, sir.”

After a moment an image came up on the screen.

“Can you enhance it?”

“I’ll try, sir.”

The image got clearer, and the captain could clearly make out the form of a ship.

“Verzog, send out a message on all frequencies: ‘We come in peace. We need your help. We mean you no harm.’”

“Yes, Captain.”

Verzog fiddled with the instruments. “Message sent,” she announced.

“Chuzok, can you target that vessel?”

“Sir, you just sent them a message that we came in peace.”

“Do they look like they are interested in peace?” the captain barked in response.

After another moment, “Sorry, sir. I can’t get a lock with the sensors malfunctioning.”

“Keep trying.”

“Yes, sir.”

The captain watched the image grow larger on the screen. It was a configuration unfamiliar to him, but that was to be expected, since they were in an unexplored region of space.

“Captain, another ship approaching from the port side,” Chuzok announced.

“Visual?”

“I’ll keep trying, sir.”

Meanwhile the image on the screen came alongside the ship and matched its speed.

“Any response, Verzog?” the captain asked.

“I am getting some communication, but it seems to be garbled. Can’t make it out.”

“Keep trying!”

“Chuzok, the other ship?”

“As best I can tell, it is pulling up beside us like the other one. Here, I think I have it.”

The captain saw an image appear on the screen of a ship similar to the first.

“Well, they don’t seem to be trying to shoot at us,” the captain said.

“They appear to be escorting us,” Banok observed.

“Well, unless somebody has a better idea, I guess we had better follow them.”

“What were you doing in Sambalian space?” the magistrate asked gruffly.

“We encountered an anomaly a half light-year away, and our ship was damaged. We were able to detect an inhabited planet ahead and came to see if we might land and perhaps get some assistance making repairs. Why did you shoot at us?”

“We didn’t shoot at you.”

“My helmsman clearly detected an explosive impact on our port side. It was clearly some sort of missile or weapon.”

“It was our enemy,” the magistrate announced. “We are at war. Our enemy is a ruthless race who will shoot at anything. They must have seen your approach and opened fire without even knowing who you were. So you are not working with the Marandins?”

“The who?”

“Are you trying to play dumb?”

“No, sir. We are not from this part of space. We are from a planet around a star about forty-seven light-years away from here, that is, assuming your years are similar in length to ours. This is our first time exploring this region of space. We are not familiar with the species that live here.”

“We have been at war with the Marandins for over 50 years. They frequently try to smuggle in weapons or other resources to reinforce their war efforts. Are you carrying any weapons aboard your ship?”

“Only those necessary for the defense of the ship.”

“We will inspect your ship to verify what you claim.”

“Under the circumstances, it would seem that we have no choice but to comply. I assure you, though, we have nothing to hide. We are only explorers who met with an unfortunate accident.”

“And why are you exploring in our part of space? What are you hoping to find?”

“We are not looking for anything in particular. We are out here to discover whatever is out here. We also wish to make contact with any intelligent species we might encounter, although generally under a little better circumstances.”

“And have you made contact with other species in this region?”

“No, sir. You are the first.”

“So you have never met a Marandin?”

“No, sir.”

“Or a Smythian?”

“No, sir.”

“And those in your own region of space?”

“There are at least fifteen other planets with intelligent life in the Versigian cluster. We have relations with most of them—in general, very peaceful relations, I might add.”

“For instance?”

“Well, there are Zirconians, a very amiable race. And the Amarithians....”

“Enough! I have never heard of any of them. How do I know that you were not sent by the Arylac. They are close allies with the Marandins and have been known to attack us.”

“You intend to search our ship. You will find no evidence of any contact with any other species in your sector.

“Of that we shall see.”

“Thank you for your help, Yanikov,” the captain said. He was going to say, “Now that your magistrate has finally given up his quest to show that we are working with the Marandins,” but thought it best to hold his tongue.

As if reading his thoughts, Yanikov responded, “The magistrate has to be careful. If he let you slip through, and then it turned out that you were working with the enemy, he would lose the faith of his supporters.”

“Such as you?” the captain asked.

“Yes,” Yanikov responded. “I support the magistrate. He has a tough job. He has to be very wary. If you found him to be overly confrontational, you have to understand the situation. The enemy is always trying to find ways to infiltrate and weaken us.”

“I see,” the captain responded as he adjusted the settings on his instruments. After working them for a minute, he said, “This diagnoser isn’t working properly. I need the diodic microscanner.”

Yanikov looked at him questioningly.

“The large blue and yellow box over there,” the captain clarified, pointing to the opposite side of the cabin.

“Buron, bring that box over here, will you,” Yanikov called to his companion.

The tall, lanky man responded, bringing the device to the two men.

“Hold this here, if you would please,” the captain instructed Yanikov and then proceeded to probe and make adjustments to this equipment.

“I see the problem,” the captain announced. “I will get Yesilo to fix it.” The captain called to his chief engineer over the communication system. “Yesilo, I have something for you to fix.”

Promptly Yesilo entered the cabin, and the captain showed him the problem. Yesilo went to the other side of the cabin and brought over another device.

“What’s that?” Yanikov questioned.

“It’s a tritonic automator.”

Yanikov gave a questioning look.

“It helps us calibrate the multiphasic sequencers.”

“You have some sophisticated equipment,” Yanikov observed.

“Captain!” Banok’s voice broke over the com system. “I just finished an analysis of the fuel system. It seems that that missile strike damaged a fuel junction, and triambulum has been slowly leaking out of the system. It looks like we may not have enough left to get home.”

“Triambulum?” Yanikov inquired.

“That’s what we use for fuel,” the captain responded. “We synthesize it from myrocite, a rather rare mineral that occurs on our planet and only a couple of others that we have discovered.”

“Oh, myrocite,” Yanikov responded.

“You are familiar with mytrocite?” the captain inquired.

“Oh yes. It is quite common on Vestinia. We used to make a lubricant from it for use in our submatrix converters. I had no idea it could be used as a fuel.”

“Well, the process for synthesizing it is rather tricky, but if you could spare a modest amount of mytrocite, it would be immensely helpful to us. We do have the equipment to synthesize the triambulum on board.”

“I’m not aware of any readily available. As I said, we used to use it. I haven’t heard of anyone using mytrocite for anything in probably twenty years, but I will ask the magistrate. Perhaps some could be procured.”

The captain relayed the information to Banok.

“If we can get you some, do you think you could show us how to synthesize triambulum?” Yanikov asked.

“Well, as I said, it is quite complicated, and it can be quite tricky. One wrong step and it could mean...”

An explosion interrupted the conversation. The tremor almost caused Yesilo to drop the automator. Yanikov grabbed his communicator and snapped, “What was that about?”

“Sir, an enemy missile just got past our defenses. It struck just a few sarpecs from your position.”

“How did it get through?” Yanikov barked. “The Marandins don’t have missiles that can get past our interceptors.”

“I don’t know, sir,” the answer came. “But we did hear a rumor about them receiving some upgraded weapons.”

“Damn it!” Yanikov responded. “If that is true, it will undermine the ***occupation. Keep me posted!”

“Yes, sir.”

“The ***occupation?” the captain inquired.

A bit flustered, Yanikov responded, “Yes. It’s how we refer to the areas where we have had to station our defenses from Marandin aggression.”

“I see,” the captain responded and turned to observe Yesilo removing a piece of the triaxial discriminator housing.

“I have found the problem, sir,” Yesilo informed him.

No sooner had Yesilo made his announcement when a voice came through Yanikov’s communicator again, “Sir, we have detected at least six more missiles headed for us.”

“If they get through like that last one,” Yanikov cried, “we are in Vorga’s gunge.”

“Vorga’s gunge?” the captain mouthed as he listened.

“I think he means ‘deep shit’,” Yesilo whispered.

The captain nodded and continued listening.

“What are the magistrate and the force commander doing about it?” Yanikov asked.

“I’m not sure,” the voice rejoined. “I heard the magistrate say something about high alert, but what can they do? Those missiles may be here in less than a terpak.”

“A terpak?” the captain questioned, looking at Yanikov.

“Yes. Ahh, a terpak is a fortieth of a korpin.”

The captain looked at him blankly.

“About the amount of time it would take for you run from here to the edge of the tarmac over there.”

“So what you’re saying is that we are sitting ducks?”

“Sitting ducks?” Yanikov inquired.

“Unprotected,” the captain explained. “Likely to be blown to smithereens.”

Without having to ask for a definition of “smithereens”, Yanikov understood and responded, “Yes. That is about what the situation is.”

“Yesilo,” the captain turned to his chief engineer, “Do we have the force field?”

“Aye, captain.”

“Reaching the intercom, the captain barked, “Banok, we need the force field up immediately.”

“Captain, we are sitting in the middle of someone else’s war, and we don’t even know what it is about. Do you think it is wise to be using our defenses to assist one side when we don’t even know...”

“Yes, Banok,” the captain shouted. “I think it is wise. Right now there are at least a half dozen bombs streaming toward us, and I think it would be very wise!”

“Yes, Captain,” Banok replied, and without further discussion the captain heard her say, “Chuzok, we need the force field up now.”

“And extend it to its maximum range,” the captain added.

Banok repeated the command to Chuzok. A moment later they heard some faint explosions a distance away, but no temors this time.

“Captain,” Banok’s voice came through again.

“I take it that meant we were successful in getting it up in time,” the captain interrupted her.

“Affirmative, Captain,” Banok responded. “The force field stopped them before they could do any damage.”

“There are ample deposits of mytrocite on the planet, and we would be happy to procure all you need.” The magistrate was much more amiable in this negotiation. The captain presumed it was due to the fact that his ship had technology that would greatly help them in their conflict. “The problem is that most of the deposits are in enemy territory, so we cannot safely reach them.” After a brief pause, he added, “There is one area that has deposits, though, that is not controlled by the Marandins, but that area is close to the border between their territory and ours, and we would be too close to safely mine the deposits.”

“You don’t have the defenses to protect you?” the captain added.

“Well, as I said, this is very close to their territory, so it is much harder to defend, and it seems that the enemy has upgraded their weapons.” Letting that sink in, he then added, “But if we had that force field of yours, we could obtain all the mytrocite that you need without danger.”

“Tell me about this enemy of yours. Who are they?”

“They are an inferior and unscrupulous race who know nothing but violence and mayhem.”

“Did they invade your planet?”

The magistrate hesitated, but then said, “No, they were already here. They were just uncivilized.”

“So they are the original inhabitants of the planet?”

“No, Captain. Oh, it is a long and complicated story. Our people lived here eight hundred years ago. We were a thriving and prosperous civilization, but then the Archonaens invaded. They killed many of us and took most of the remainder of us away to other planets to provide labor.”

“The Archonaens?”

“They were from a star system six light-years away. They were a powerful and violent people, set on conquest.”

“Were? Are they no longer?”

“Their descendants are still around, scattered on various planets in our region, but their power declined over the next few hundred years, so they are no longer a threat.”

“So you were the original inhabitants of the planet?”

Again the magistrate hesitated before he spoke. “No. It is believed that my people migrated here from a planet called Typan, about nine light-years away. There were a race of people called Naacans that lived here before us.”

“And your people lived with the Naacans?”

Looking even more uncomfortable, the magistrate responded, “Well, there are no reliable records from that far back, so it is difficult to know what became of the Naacans, but our people, over the next few hundred years, established a great civilization that ruled the whole planet. It was a peaceful and prosperous world for four hundred years, until the Archonaens invaded.”

“So the Archonaens scattered you over this region of space?”

“Yes, but we started coming back about a hundred years ago. At first we settled in and lived in relative peace with the Marandins who were then living here, but after a few decades their animosity increased, and they started persecuting us and attacking our settlements.”

“They just attacked you for no reason?”

“They are kontrasambalites!” the magistrate snapped. “Oh yes, there were some disputes over land boundaries and other resources, but what it boiled down to is that they hate Sambalites. They are so aggressive, and there are so many of them that we are constantly under threat, even though we have more advanced weapons. We never know when they will launch another attack.”

“So they are the majority on the planet?”

“Well, there aren’t as many as there used to be, but, yes, they are the majority.”

“What happened to the rest of them?”

“There are others of their kind in nearby star systems. They have taken them in.”

“Why did they leave?”

“I told you, they are kontrasambalic. They hate us and can’t stand to be with us—most of them that is.”

“So they just up and left their homes behind for you to have because they are kontrasambalic? That was convenient of them to do that. Would they really just up and turn it all over to you?”

“There are a few of their kind that still live in our territory. As long as they don’t incite violence or hatred, they are tolerated.”

“Tolerated?”

“Yes, they are tolerated. They live much better lives than their counterparts in the other half of the planet.”

“Other half?”

“Yes, we control just a little over half of the planet. They have the other half.”

“So they have less land, even though there are more of them.”

Showing frustration, the magistrate barked, “Listen, they don’t even know how to take care of what they have. We have created verdant farmlands and gardens from the dust. Their lands are practically wastelands. They are a lazy people, except when it comes to warfare.”

“So they not only have less land, but also the poorest land.”

“What we control is far less than the whole planet that our ancestors controlled. We are being generous by letting them live here at all.”

“I suspect that they see it differently.”

Yesilo inspected the amphoteric assembly again. “I should have it working within the hour, Captain.”

“Thank you, Yesilo,” the captain responded.

“I can help,” Yanikov volunteered.

“As you wish,” Yesilo responded.

Before the two left, the captain spoke to Yanikov. “I would like to meet some of the Marandins that are living among you. Do you think you could arrange a meeting?”

The captain noticed a nervous shifting by Buron as he monitored the baryometric indicator.

“I don’t know,” Yanikov responded. “We are pretty busy.”

“The repairs are coming along well,” the captain responded. “After you and Yesilo get that assembly working, do you think you could take Banok and I to meet one or two of them?”

“Well, it would be a bit of a process,”

“Just any that might be living nearby. No need to make a big process out of it.”

“Well, there aren’t really any nearby.”

“I thought you said they lived among you.”

“Yes, but not here in the capitol.”

“There are none living in this city?”

“No. They are not allowed in the capitol. We do have to have some restrictions.”

“What other restrictions are there?”

“Only those necessary to keep the peace.”

The captain turned to the multiphotonic translocator after the two men walked out. After disconnecting the device, he called Buron to help him lift it out.

“If you could hold the translocator, I will adjust the microdioidic contacts,” the captain instructed.

“Does this device really allow you to see things that are outside of your line of site?”

“Yes,” the captain responded as he set to work removing a small panel. He made some adjustments and then said, “Would you hold the panel while I reattach it?”

The panel reattached, the captain said, “So according to the magistrate, your people lived here peacefully until the Marandins started attacking your settlements.”

Buron looked a little uncomfortable and then admitted, “Well, yes, that is the official version of events.”

“The official version?”

Buron looked around as if worried someone may be coming. “There are other versions.”

“Yes?”

Again, Buron looked afraid.

“Is something wrong?” the captain asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t set very well if someone were to hear me say that there might be an alternative to the official version of the story. I would not want to lose my job.”

“Anything you say will just be between you and I, Buron.”

“Well, if you were to ask a Marandin, he or she would tell you that it was the Sambalis who started attacking the Marandins.”

“So the Sambalis made it difficult for the Marandins so that they left?”

“Some claim that they drove them out.”

“So which version is correct?”

“Well, anybody still alive today who was alive at that time was just a small child. I don’t think anybody really knows for sure just how it all started.”

“I sure wish I could talk to one of the Marandins.”

“I think that is unlikely. Our people don’t even like to talk to them. As the magistrate said, they are considered to be inferior. Also, there is constant suspicion that they might be working with the rebels. I never spoke to a Marandin growing up, and I don’t remember that anyone else that I knew did, either. Only the police dealt with them.”

“I fear that we are getting involved in a dispute that is none of our business and may just drag us further into trouble.” Banok was the first to speak up after their meeting with the magistrate. “Besides, we don’t really know anything more about this war than the little bit that one side has been willing to share. We have no idea who is on the right side or the wrong side, or even if there is a right side or a wrong side. If we share technology that helps one side in a war that we know practically nothing about, we may be making the situation much worse. We could be assisting the violent repression and subjugation of an innocent people to an imperialist or repressive power.”

“I understand the need to be careful, Banok,” the captain responded.

“But we do need that mytrocite, sir,” Chuzok spoke up. “That leak was even worse than I first thought, and using our force field has drained it even more. As it is, we would be lucky to make it to two or three more star systems before we ran out of fuel, and then would just be left drifting into empty space.”

“Not the way I had hoped to die,” Erogon added.

“And there is no way we can get the mytrocite ourselves?” the captain asked.

“We have equipment to process the mytrocite once we have it,” Banok explained, “but we don’t have equipment for extracting it. It would take us months with the machinery that we have on board.”

Turning to Yesilo, the captain asked, “And you are able to adapt the force field to their ships?”

“Yes, sir,” Yesilo responded. “I examined the specifications for their ships, and I am sure I can make the necessary adaptations.”

“Yes, sir. The system is working properly,” Yesilo relayed back to the captain. Captain Siriot had made his decision, even in the light of Banok’s considerations, and the force field had been installed on the Sambali ship carrying the equipment to the mining site. “Everything is working within normal parameters. I told you there was nothing to worry about. I stand by my work, Captain.”

“Yes, I know you do, and now you’re standing inside it,” the captain responded with a snicker. “Hopefully you’ll still be standing if the Marandins launch one of their newest missiles at you.”

Yesilo continued monitoring the screens as they approached the mining area. As they were about to begin their descent, one of the Sambalis called out to the ship's captain, "Sir, there is a vessel approaching."

"What is it?" the ship's captain asked. "Can you determine where it is from?"

"Not sure," the man answered. "There are two of them. I imagine they are sustenance provisions ships."

"Sustenance provisions, my buchos!" the captain snarled. "Target the nearest ship!"

Yesilo bolted to attention. His instructions had been to monitor the shield system and not to otherwise get involved in operations, but he couldn't stand quiet while a seemingly innocuous ship was being destroyed.

"Sir," he called out. "Forgive me for intruding in your affairs, but are you going to shoot at a vessel that has shown no hostile intentions?"

"No hostile intentions?" the captain snapped back at him. "They use these ships to smuggle in weapons under the guise of 'sustenance provisions'. They don't care about any sustenance provisions; they just want to deliver weapons of destruction to our enemy—likely some more of those advanced missiles that we already had to contend with. You don't think those are hostile intentions?" Turning to his arms officer, the captain ordered, "Fire!"

Before he could say anything more, Yesilo watched the screen as he saw a missile leave the ship and a moment later the alien ship blowing to pieces.

"Be ready to fire on the second one if it doesn't turn around," the captain ordered.

Yesilo watched as the second alien ship came to a stop. "Captain, I thought the magistrate said it was your enemy that fired on ships without knowing what they were about."

Before the captain could respond, the helmsman shouted, "Captain!"

On the screen something shot out of the alien ship.

"Engage the force field!" the captain ordered.

The helmsman followed the captain's instructions, and an explosion showed on the screen a safe distance from the ship.

"Destroy it!" the captain ordered, and a moment later the second ship disintegrated on the screen.

With an air of satisfaction, the captain looked over at Yesilo. "Your force field works great!" he announced.

"We installed that force field so that you could protect yourself if attacked," Captain Siriot was telling the magistrate. "We didn't give it to you so that you could blithely fire on a ship that wasn't threatening you. Just who was it that actually fired on *us* when we approached your planet, anyway?"

Ignoring the last half of the question, the magistrate defended, "But they did fire on us."

"Only after you attacked," the captain responded.

"You have been here less than three days," the magistrate explained. "We have been at war for decades. We are familiar with the enemy's tactics, and you are not. Please don't try to tell us how to fight our war. This enemy is deceitful. They cheat. They lie. Instead of facing us openly, they hide behind innocent civilians and take advantage of other planets' good graces in order to continue their duplicitous terror."

"And we are just supposed to accept that that gives you the right to destroy a ship and kill probably dozens of people who were just trying to provide food to people?"

“As I believe my captain explained, those ships, if they carry any food or sustenance provisions at all, only do it as a cover so they can smuggle in their weapons to further terrorize us. We were only acting in self-defense. Who knows how many Sambali lives were saved by Captain Chorak’s actions.”

“Nevertheless, we cannot allow our weapons or defensive systems to be used in a war that we know practically nothing about other than some claims from one side. We will take back the force field, and we will accompany your ships to the mining site, providing defense as is necessary.”

Turning to Banok, the captain asked, “Is the ship ready to fly yet?”

“Yesilo says there are a few more adjustments to be made, but it will be ready within a few hours.”

“We had an agreement,” the magistrate interrupted. “You said you would provide us with the force field in exchange for the myrocite ore.”

“Our agreement did not include using our technology to help you destroy ships and people who were not attacking or threatening you. I will send Yesilo to remove the force field matrix from your ship, and we will provide the defense for the rest of the operation.”

“Captain, there will be no operation if you go back on your agreement. No force field—no myrocite!”

“Then we will leave without the ore and take our chances on finding more elsewhere.”

“If that is your decision, Captain,” the magistrate responded.

The captain and Banok left the conference room and headed back to the ship. As they arrived at its location, they were approached by four armed Sambali soldiers. “You will have to come with us,” the soldiers announced.

“Why? What is this?” the captain asked. “We just came from talking to your magistrate. Everything has been decided. We are going back to our ship to leave. We will bother you no more.”

“All I know is our orders, sir. You will have to come with us,” the lead soldier replied.

Following the soldiers, they were led to a concrete building about a half sarpec away. “If you would wait in here, sir,” the soldier said.

After entering the building and being shown to a room, the soldiers left, and the captain heard a bolt being locked on the door. Trying the door, it would not open. “What are you doing?” the captain cried out. “You cannot hold us captive?”

There was no response.

The captain grabbed his communicator and called for Yesilo. “Yesilo!” There was no response. He tried again and still received no response.

He called Chuzok, who picked up. “I’m sorry, Captain, but there are five soldiers here, and they are not looking very friendly.”

“Let me talk to them!” the captain ordered.

“We are sorry, Captain,” an unfamiliar voice came back. “We are just following the orders sent down from the magistrate. We know nothing more. We just have to follow our orders.”

No sooner had that brief conversation ended, when the door bolt rattled, the door opened, and Yesilo was ushered in to join them.

“What is going on?” the captain repeated to the accompanying soldiers. “Are you holding us hostage?”

The soldiers offered no response and left. However, a few minutes later the door rattled again, and the magistrate entered.

“What is the meaning of this?” the captain asked him.

“The meaning is that our enemy has new weaponry that could destroy us, and you have the only defense we know of against it. We cannot let you take back the force field. It would likely be suicidal on our part.”

“We offered to provide defense with our ship,” the captain responded.

“Until the ore is mined and you leave. Then we would be defenseless.”

“So you are going to hold us here until you finish mining the ore? How long will that take?”

“I’m not sure. We have other priorities. We are following evidence of where they may be holding their new weapons. We may need your force field technology to get through to neutralize the new threat.”

“You mean, to carry out an attack.”

“You may call it as you see it.”

“You are planning on carrying out an aggressive attack using our technology to allow you to do so, and we still have little knowledge about what your war is all about or who this enemy really is. That is how I see it.”

“As I said, you may call it as you see it. We will get the ore for you as soon as we are able to do so, so that you may leave our planet.”

The magistrate left, and the three stood and looked at each other, no one having any suggestion as to what to do next. The captain then paced back and forth, thinking. Banok sat down to meditate, while Yesilo scowled and muttered unintelligibly.

About ten minutes passed, and the door rattled and then opened again. Buron entered the room.

“Buron, what are you doing here?” the captain asked.

“Captain, you should know what is going on.”

“Yes?”

“There is no evidence of any advanced weaponry,” Buron continued. “We hear such rumors all the time. That missile strike was just a lucky hit. Our defense system is not perfect. The magistrate is ordering a new offensive against the Marandins. With your force field technology to defend our ships, he thinks they can successfully drive them back to the far side of the planet and then finally annihilate them.”

“Annihilate them?”

“Yes, sir. Either kill them or remove them all from the planet.”

“But he only has one force field generator for one ship.”

“There are technicians on board your ship now trying to figure out how to remove the generator from your ship.”

“Yesilo,” the captain turned to his engineer, “Will they be able to do that?”

The engineer paused and thought for a minute and responded. “I’m not sure, captain. As sophisticated as the system is, it is not that difficult to disconnect and reinstall it. They wouldn’t be able to do it in a couple of hours like yours truly, but if given a day or two to work on it....”

“Is there anything you can do to prevent that?”

“Not from in here, Captain.”

“Thank you, Buron. We appreciate your help, but are you trying to help the Marandins? If the magistrate finds out, he may label you ‘contrasambalic’”.

“Anyone who expresses any viewpoint that differs from the official stance is labelled ‘contrasambalic’,” Buron responded.

Sounds of shouting and a scuffle suddenly came from outside the door. The door then flung open, and Chuzok appeared with a couple of the ship’s security officers.

“Chuzok!” the captain proclaimed. “How did you manage to get here?”

“The soldiers were so concentrated on guarding the men working on the field generator that we were able to surprise them and get the upper hand. We ran as fast as we could to get here, but there were others who saw us. We had better run if we’re going to make it back to the ship before their reinforcements arrive.”

The guards Chuzok had taken down were still unconscious on the floor as they ran out. “Hurry, Captain!” Chuzok shouted, and the three men followed Chuzok and his mates at full speed back to the ship.

“Is the ship still functional?” the captain asked as they entered the ship.

“Yes, sir,” Chuzok responded. “They were too interested in the field generator to bother anything else.”

“Yesilo, check on that generator!” the captain commanded.

“Aye, sir!”

Announcing over the com, the captain commanded, “Everyone to your stations. Prepare to take off!”

Everyone immediately fell into place.

“Captain!” Banok called out. The viewer screen engaged, and the captain saw a group of soldiers running toward the ship.

“We need engines now,” he called out.

“Firing up,” Erogon responded.

Feeling the hum of the engines, the captain said, “Lift off as soon as you can get her up!”

A few moments later the ship began to lift as the soldiers reached the ship and started firing their weapons at it.

“Minor weapons, Captain,” Erogon announced. “No danger.”

“Well, I imagine we are about to encounter some bigger ones very soon,” the captain responded. “Yesilo, what’s the status of that force field generator?”

“I’m just looking at it now, sir. It doesn’t look good.”

The captain waited a few moments longer as the ship gained elevation, then Yesilo’s voice came through again. “I’m afraid it is quite a mess. Those Sambalis did quite a butcher job. They would never have gotten the thing working the way they hacked it up.”

“Can you get it working, Yesilo?”

“Sorry, Captain. Not in the time that you need it. It will probably take an hour or ...”

“We don’t have an hour or so, Mr. Yesilo.”

“I’m sorry, sir. There is no quick fix to the mess they made.”

“Damn it!” the captain cried. “Do we have any defenses at all?”

“We still have the secondary defenses, sir. But they will be of minimal help against any significant firepower.”

“Get them online!”

Turning to Chuzok, the captain asked, “Can you tell where the Sambali ship with the force field is?”

Chuzok played with his instruments for a moment and then responded, “It’s dead ahead, sir.”

“Alter course to port,” the captain commanded. “Ninety degrees. Increase elevation angle forty degrees, and then be ready initiate protocol Alpha B2 if necessary.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The ship turned, and a minute later Erogon announced, “The Sambali ship has spotted us and is in pursuit.”

“Initiate protocol!” the captain commanded.

The ship lurched.

“We need to engage the main drive and get out of here,” the captain announced.

“Not until we are out of the atmosphere, sir,” Erogon responded.

“Then get us out of the atmosphere!”

As soon as he had spoken, Chuzok announced, “Sir, I have detected two more ships.”

“Just what we need!” the captain responded. “Sambali?”

“Scanning, sir.” After a moment he responded, “Their configuration is different. I don’t think they are Sambali.”

“Marandin?”

“That would be my guess, sir. Whoever they are, they are also headed for us.”

“Engage secondary defenses,” the captain commanded.

“How long before we clear the atmosphere, Banok?”

“At least another two minutes.”

The ship lurched again, and an explosion and tremor was felt.

“What happened?” the captain asked.

“They fired at us,” Erogon responded. “I veered the ship, and the secondary defenses were sufficient to prevent any significant damage. Just a scrape, sir.”

“Who fired at us?” the captain asked.

“The shot seems to have come from the direction of the Sambali ship,” Erogon responded.

“Our friendly hosts,” the captain groaned. “Return fire!”

The captain watched as a missile left the ship and then disintegrated a safe distance from the Sambali ship.

“Foiled by our own defenses!” the captain growled.

“Captain!” Yesilo’s voice came over the com. “I may have an answer.”

“Let’s here it, Yesilo!”

“There is still a connection between that ship’s field generator and ours.”

“But ours isn’t working, Yesilo.”

“Aye, sir, but they didn’t completely kill it, and the connection is still good, I believe. If I attach a travonic-wave generator to a missile, when the missile engages the force field of their ship, we may be able to send a signal that will disable the field.”

“Do it!” the captain commanded.

Turning to Chuzok, the captain asked, “What is the status of those ships?”

“The Sambali ship is gaining on us, and the other two ships are holding distance.”

“No shots from the other two?”

“Not yet, sir.” A moment later he added, “But the Sambali ship is firing again, sir.”

Another explosion, and the ship jolted again, this time stronger.

Without waiting to be asked, Erogon informed, “Minimal damage again, sir, but I don’t know if we will be able to sustain another hit like that.”

“Yesilo!” the captain shouted into the com.

“Generator installed. We are loading the missile now, sir. And Grengon is ready to send the signal. Just so that you know, sir, the field generator is tied in with their ship’s other defense systems, so if we disable it, we may be disabling all their defenses.”

“Fine! I’m not concerned about their other defenses right now. Fire as soon as you’re ready.”

A moment later the captain saw the missile shoot on the screen. A moment after that the flash of the missile hitting the force field.

“Yesilo?” the captain called into the com.” As he did so, he saw a second flash of energy around the Sambali ship.

After a moment Yesilo called back, “It worked, sir. The force field is disabled.”

“And their other defenses?”

“I don’t know, sir. That remains to be seen.”

“Captain,” Chuzok announced. “The other two ships have changed course and are headed for the Sambali ship.”

The captain watched the screen as the Sambali ship started to turn away from the oncoming ships. The closest of the two ships launched a missile. A moment later the Sambali ship disintegrated on the screen.