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MCCAFFREY

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LYON'S PRIDE

ANNE McCAFFREY



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to

MATTHEW HARGREAVES

for all the hard work, effort and time that he expended in nailing down an excellent bibliography of all the works by this grateful author

(except this one which wasn't written yet!)

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PROLOGUE

THE first incursion against the Nine Star League by the Hive entities occurs at Deneb, where Jeff Raven and the undeveloped Talents of his planet stave off a vicious attack by three alien scout ships orbiting Deneb IV. Calling for assistance from the Earth Federated Teleport and Telepath Prime, Peter Reidinger, Jeff Raven encounters the Rowan, Callisto's Prime. In a mind merge, two of the three invaders are destroyed and the third sent back, as a warning, to whence it had come.

Three years later the Mother Hive ship, a spherical leviathan, appears at Deneb heliopause. The Talents once again merge to defend the planet: the Rowan, pregnant with her second child, Cera, is the focus for the feminine minds which then immobilize the female Many Mind that governs the Hive ship. The male merge, with Jeff Raven as focus, then teleports the Hive ship into Deneb's primary.

Nineteen years later, while recuperating on Deneb, Damia Gwyn-Raven, another T-1 Talent, and Afra Lyon, a Capellan T-2, have "dreams" which they realize are being implanted by the alien figures which appear in these dreams. Contact is made with these visitors, who call themselves the Mrdini. Through dreams the Mrdini explain that they have been defending themselves and their colony worlds against the incursions of the Hive for centuries. They had followed the Hive ship to Deneb and been fascinated by its destruction without loss of life on the part of the defenders. They offer an alliance.

In order to establish meaningful relationships, young 'Dinis are placed with Human children, in the sound belief that early exposure to another species facilitates understanding. Among those selected for this experiment are the children of Afra and Damia, now Tower Prime for Iota Aurigae, a mining world. Their eight children all have 'Dini pairs.

At sixteen, the eldest daughter, Laria, is sent to the 'Dini homeworld of Clarf to teach 'Dini Human language and to expand her own understanding of the adult vocabulary. At about this time, Mrdini scouts observe three Hive ships which separate before the 'Dini can catch up. But the ion trails left by the three are strong and can be followed on their disparate ways.

The Alliance of Mrdinis and Nine Star Leaguers decide on a four-pronged expedition. The first element of six ships is to backtrack to see if it cannot locate the elusive homeworld of the Hivers. The other three elements are to follow the Hive ships to their destinations, preferably to destroy them if at all possible before they can colonize another world by first sterilizing it of all existing life forms.

Isthian Lyon, Laria's brother, is seconded by FT&T to the AS *Vadim* to act as Prime with the tracking mission of six ships, four Human, two Mrdini. It is his job to improve communications and relations between the Allies, and to receive supplies to

keep the ships moving toward their objective. Thian has always been interested in naval matters so he is well suited by the assignment. Thian is accompanied by his 'Dini pair, Mrg and Dpl (Mur and Dip).

When the *Vadim* encounters a lifeless stationary derelict, it is identified as a Hive ship, though larger by another third than any previously encountered. It appears to have been destroyed by the heat of an expanding nova. Three escape pods seem to have been used, though others were destroyed *in situ*. An exploration detail of both 'Dini and Human is to examine the wreck. Encountering hostility from a crewman, Thian is nearly killed on the Hive ship, where he discovers undamaged Hiver eggs. These are sent to be studied by the Alliance xenobiologists. Recovering from his injury, Thian elects to continue with the Mrdini ship, the *KLTL*, as the Mrdinis insist on being certain that a nova has destroyed the Hive homeworld.

Two of the ships in Thian's element are required to start the derelict on its way to a point at which both Mrdini and Human specialists can examine it thoroughly. The remaining three ships decide to track down the three escape pods. It is essential to capture the pods, for just one queen is sufficient to establish a new colony.

While Thian continues with the *KLTL* on toward the site of the nova, the search for the three large ships, as well as the escape pods, continues. Attempts are also being made to reassemble from its shattered parts as much of the big Hive Sphere as is possible to reconstruct, in an effort to learn more about the enemy.

One of the escape pods, bearing a live queen, is discovered by the *Beijing* and captured, and is safely in tow behind the ship. Afra and his son Rojer are sent out to 'port the pod to the Heinlein Moon Station where it can be safely examined in great detail. There is considerable debate and many factions: some wishing to summarily execute the queen, others wishing to approach her in an effort to establish communications with and knowledge of a species never before captured. The Mrdini are particularly against keeping the queen alive. Rojer, with his father acting as focus, easily transfers queen and pod.

Back on Earth, the captured queen pod is secured and placed under twenty-four hour surveillance. When she finally emerges, she is seen as a mantis-type creature, tenlimbed, and egg-heavy. Since no one has had much luck in incubating the eggs discovered on the derelict ship, it is decided to deposit these with her.

There is considerable objection to keeping the creature alive, but those who insist that knowing more about the enemy may be a deciding factor in a final victory over its incursions manage to win the argument. She is kept alive. Food of all varieties is supplied and she is seen to prefer vegetables or fruits. Her actions, when there are any, are monitored and shown to all interested.

Zara, the fourteen-year-old sister of Laria, Thian and Rojer, becomes emotionally involved with what she sees as the queen's dreadful plight and imprisonment. In a remarkable adventure, Zara arrives at the Observation Station and, distraught by the queen's condition, 'ports herself into the facility and realizes that the queen is freezing, being accustomed to a much hotter temperature in her parturitional stage. Zara's intercession saves the queen's life although, despite a hope that there has been some empathy between Human and Hiver, this bizarre incident is not repeated, nor can Zara explain why she acted as she did. Her parents realize with some regret that Zara is not Tower material, even though a Prime. Elizara, the T-1 medic for whom she was

named, and her great-grandmother Isthia decide she may have healing Talents.

Meanwhile, one of the escaping Hive ships has been tracked to a star system where it is obviously slowing down. Rojer is sent to the *Genesee* to expedite messages for Squadron B—two Human ships and one Mrdini ship—which is hovering, undetectable, within an asteroid belt of the system.

The crew watch as the arriving Hiver ship is attacked from moon bases and planetary surfaces. When the ship's ammunition is exhausted, the queens flee in escape pods which are disintegrated. This shocks those on the *Genesee*. As much as the 'Dini have observed of their enemy over the centuries, they are as surprised and stunned as their Human allies. It is new territory for them, too.

Instead of being allowed to go in blasting, Squadron B and the *Genesee* are ordered to hold a watching brief, utilizing as many probes as possible, with Rojer's help, to gather information. It is thought that Thian, on his way back to "civilization" on the *KLTL*, which has now definitely established that the Hiver homeworld was destroyed in the nova, will join or replace his brother on the *Genesee*.

Two squadrons are still in pursuit of the remaining two Hive spheres while Squadron A, Thian's original group, is searching for the other two pods which evacuated from the Great Sphere before it was hit by the nova shock wave. A waiting game is played on several levels and ethical problems of great magnitude must be addressed by both Human and Mrdini civilizations.

CHAPTER ONE

DURING the course of the next few weeks, while Rojer waited for his older brother, Thian, to replace him on board the *Genesee*, he spent a great deal more time on the bridge than he had originally thought he would. Not only was Rojer Lyon the FT&T T-1 which linked Squadron B with its homeworlds and was the means by which the three ships were kept supplied by twice-weekly importations of supplies, he was also able to provide other services to the Squadron not in his original brief. If he was referred to as “the boy” or “the civilian,” he couldn’t deny “boy” as he was not quite sixteen, although tall and well-muscled from an active life on his home planet. He also had inherited the family lock of silver hair which made it difficult for some to believe he hadn’t yet reached his majority. Most times these references to his age or status were jocular. Sometimes envy or disparagement tinged these epithets—until he ’ported in the next supply drones, when he was again in favor with all. Sometimes it appeared to him that his ’Dinis, Grl and Ktg, were more acceptable to the *Genesee* officers and crew than he was, but he encouraged them to continue teaching their language to any on board who wished it. At night, in his cabin, he could enjoy the consolation of his friends and they were very good at diverting him with amusing shipboard incidents and their own special companionship. When he was particularly upset, they would “dream” the tension away.

Since the Squadron was on orders to hold a watching brief and to take no direct action against the ancient enemy which occupied the system, tedium became a problem. Even escape pod drills became a welcome variation of daily routine. So, when Captain Osullivan asked Rojer if he could ’port the newly developed and undetectable probes to discover what they could about the moons’ defenses and the three spherical ships in docking orbit around the planet, he was quite willing to oblige.

The activity was one he was well able for: in fact, it gave him no little satisfaction to know that “the boy/civilian” had an ability no one else in the B Squadron had. He was also just as curious as anyone else in the Squadron to learn as much as possible about the Hivers’ world. He had discreet knowledge from Gil and Kat that Captain Prtglm of the *KTTS* would have preferred direct action to surveillance and had been extremely upset by the “surveillance” order from the High Council which had originated from the Human Supreme Commander, Admiral Tohl Mekturian, and the Mrdini High Councillor, Gktmglnt.

The Squadron had been given a stunning display of the planet’s defenses when they had observed the attack on the refugee Hive ship which they had followed to this system. Their three ships would have been totally outgunned and unable to inflict telling damage on planetary installations.

It was a different matter entirely to survey as much as possible of this enemy planet. Rojer enthusiastically entered into dispersing disguised monitors to the material clustering about the three sphere ships which were in a construction-level orbit about the planet. Certainly any ground-based sensors wouldn't notice him tucking a few more "pieces" amid the clutter that spun in disarray round the world. Frankly, Rojer thought tossing such garbage into space was an appalling way to discard rubbish.

Neither Captain Quacho of the sister ship, the *Arapahoe*, or Captain Osullivan of the *Genesee* had expected that the refugee Hiver ship would be attacked by its own species, its queens driven to escape in the pods which had then been summarily disintegrated by the planetary batteries. Captain Prtglm had announced that it was no more than could be expected of Hivers.

Since Rojer's first assignment was to inspect the three sphere ships in their docking orbit, tensions were defused further when the monitors proved that only one looked to be spaceworthy. Quite possibly it had been the ship which had transported the original colonizing group. One of the other two was near completion, though it had significant gaps, probably left open to receive equipment, while the other was only partly hulled. That gave rise to further speculation as to why the planet's defenders had "holed" the refugee ship, rendering it unusable.

Somewhat reassured by that investigation, which he had Rojer relay in his daily message to Earth Prime, Captain Osullivan requested Rojer to make a geographical survey of the eight land masses, the biggest one spreading from pole to pole. An opportunity like this, to gain firsthand knowledge of a Hiver world, should be utilized to the fullest extent possible. It also provided occupation during the tedium of a watching brief.

The Hive culture appeared to be totally land-based and every centimeter of land was cultivated. Rojer's guided sensors showed that mountainsides were terraced up to the snow-line with what Commander Metrios, the engineering officer, considered amazing techniques and, although some fields were fallow, the majority sprouted with vigorous, if unrecognizable, flora. Narrow tracks bordering the fields provided access for the scurrying life forms involved in agricultural occupations. Their constant presence made it dangerous to attempt to 'port in a sample-collecting probe. Another variety of beetle-like creatures specialized in irrigation, trundling water, held in body sacs, which was carefully dribbled along neat rows. What surprised Lieutenant Istvan Mrkovic, the science officer, who had made due note of the teeming marine life, was that the Hivers had not made any attempt to harvest nutritious seaweed and plankton so abundant and easily obtained.

"So they're vegetarians? Seaweed's a vegetable," he exclaimed.

"They seem to be single-minded in many respects," said Anis Langio, the astrogation officer whom Rojer admired at a distance. She was the prettiest of the female bridge officers and he was old enough to appreciate her presence. "A stagnant culture determined to replicate itself ad infinitum."

"That may alter," was the captain's crisp remark.

"I'd give anything to see a weed among all that perfection," remarked Anis Langio in a tone bordering on disgust. "Talk about purpose bio-engineering. A purpose for every critter and a critter for every purpose. Appalling. Specialization ad absurdum!"

“Look at these,” Rojer said, focusing his sensor at its finest magnification where gatherers were stripping rows of a globular green vegetable form. Finishing the collection, the gatherers turned from the rows into neat triple ranks and trundled toward a central installation into which they disappeared.

Thousands of these installations had been scanned. They varied in size, evidently depending on the volume of crops, but not in shape, all being square buildings covering three to four acres, four or five stories in height with interior access at ground level along each side. Rojer had whizzed a sensor close enough to see that the entrance sloped downward. Activity continued night and day, for the creatures apparently did not require illumination for their tasks.

“And we thought this duty was boring,” one yeoman was heard to mumble, eliciting widespread grins and a mild reproof.

“Those buildings have to be the access to tremendous subterranean networks,” Istvan Mrkovic said thoughtfully. “There isn’t enough space inside any of them to store the amounts brought in on a daily basis. Do they pick for daily use, since I noticed they do leave immature vegetables on the vines and bushes, or just to process for storage? Yet I can’t pick up any trace of smoke or heat to account for cooking.”

“Vegetarians eat a lot of raw foods,” Anis remarked. “Or maybe they have a critter with heat-resistant paddles to stir the stew.”

Istvan shot her a reproving look for such levity, though even the captain smiled. “Certainly we haven’t seen anything coming back *out* for distribution so that has to be taken care of underground. Wow! What an organization! You gotta give ’em that.”

“The workers *have* to be fed something at some point to continue at the pace they go,” Anis Langio said, no longer bantering. She had her head propped on one hand and, as she watched the screen, was idly twirling a dark, springy curl around one finger. It seemed oddly out of character for someone of her rank and expertise. “You don’t see any of them lying down on the job or expiring from lack of care.”

“All mining must be done subterreaneously, too,” Mrkovic decided. “I haven’t seen anything remotely resembling an adit but those ships required a variety of metals. I’ve noted the presence of all the ores that we use but only that one finished ship in the construction orbit has been covered with their special coating. And if they have every centimeter producing food, the planet must be full up.”

“The last harvest before blast-off,” Anis quipped.

“Not if they’ve only one spaceworthy ship.”

“Maybe the agricultural workers are multi-tasked and once the harvest’s in they turn on their construction mode,” was Anis’s rejoinder. Istvan gave her another of his disgusted looks.

“She could be right,” Metrios said. “The palp that pulls the pepper could also manipulate delicate equipment.”

“And the trundlers shift struts and panels...” Anis went on.

“While the irrigators fill the fuel tanks,” Doplas said, joining in the fun.

“That is when we must be most cautious,” the captain said, and turned to Rojer. “You can withdraw the monitors quickly?”

Rojer nodded.

“Commander Yngocelen and I are still trying to include a small self-destruct unit, sir, just in case,” Metrios said. “Small enough not to create much flare but enough to

fuse the innards to an unrecognizable slag.”

The captain nodded approval. “Our relief ships are not that far away.”

Rojer held his breath in surprise. Would he actually be in on the first invasion of a Hive world? He had heard the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Commander Yngocelen, and some of his staff discussing what would be needed to “take out” the moon batteries but no one had sounded very optimistic about success in that direction. Despite all they had seen of this Hive world, there were many unknowns.

From their Mrdini allies and once firsthand on Deneb, Humans did know something about Hive colonization practices. The creatures preferred G-type stars, M-5-type planets, worlds similar to Earth, or Clarf, the Mrdini homeworld, which meant that the three species were in competition with each other. The Hive method was to send one of their Sphere ships, managed by the Many Mind of ten to sixteen queens with specialized workers doing whatever crewing was needed. Each Mother ship was equipped with scout vessels which it sent on ahead to investigate appropriate systems. The Hiver then “cleared” the planet of all life forms, using as a fumigator first one, then other, viral infections, until the world had been cleared of its indigenous life forms. Then the Mother ship landed its queens and propagated its species until the new world, too, was overpopulated, when the process of exploration and colonization was repeated.

“But we’ve seen no activity at the ships at all,” Anis said. “Or has the arrival of the refugee caused panic...”

“Hivers wouldn’t know panic if it bit them...” Metrios interjected drolly.

“...Well, then a rethink? I don’t understand why they haven’t done anything to repair the refugees’ ship for use if they’re about to send off a colonial expedition!”

“They also haven’t restocked their moon installations,” Yngocelen remarked. “They pumped out a bodacious amount of ordnance in that attack...even if most of it fell short. Surely they’d have to replenish it unless they have almighty storage facilities up there.” He glanced hopefully at Rojer, who laughed.

“Sir, there’s no way I can get a probe in those moon emplacements. Not a niche or a crack and I’ve no idea of what space is available inside. I can’t ’port blind.”

“No, no, of course you couldn’t, Rojer,” the gunnery officer replied, but his expression remained wistful.

“Been no messages sent there. No communication on any frequency,” Doplas said, glancing down at his control console as if it had capriciously malfunctioned.

“Told ya the refugees didn’t have the right password,” quipped Metrios, a grin on his narrow sardonic face. Then he suddenly sat up alert. “Lookee here. Activity in the shipyard.” All attention was instantly focused on that screen. “Can you hold that monitor stationary for a bit, Rojer?”

“Sure thing,” and he complied, trying to see what had attracted Metrios’s attention. A wide hatch had swung open at the end of the one uncultivated area on the whole planet—its space facility.

“Doplas, magnify,” Captain Osullivan said and paused a beat before he added, “Pods! The units they’re carrying look the right size and shape to be made into escape pods.”

“To replace the ones they blew up!” Anis added unnecessarily and glanced anxiously at the captain.

His strong-featured face showed only keen interest in the surface activity as hundreds of low-slung many-legged creatures, loaded with sections, trundled slowly across the flat surface and deposited their burdens at sixteen separate places before they scuttled back to the aperture, which sank back into the ground.

“Are the *Arapahoe* and the *KTTS* receiving these transmissions, Doplas?”

“Aye, sir, on automatic relay.”

Before the captain could ask Doplas to open a channel, both Captains Quacho of the *Arapahoe* and Prtglm of the *KTTS* called in.

“They begin to refit,” Prtglm said. “Time takes. Talent informs Alliance.”

“They don’t seem to be doing any work to complete the other two ships,” Quacho remarked dubiously, his heavy brows nearly bridging over his roman nose.

“Those are already fitted with escape pods,” Osullivan reminded him.

“Always queens are first,” Prtglm said. “Time takes.”

Roger dutifully made contact with Jeff Raven to report the activity and was told to relay further developments as they occurred. Once the ground entrance closed, no further activity was seen. Excitement waned and Roger was allowed to retire from the bridge at the end of his watch. Rather than have to evade questions on this new development, he spent the evening quietly in his cabin with Gil and Kat, watching more of the *Genesee*’s huge library of old tri-Ds until the red alert had him ’porting himself and his friends to the escape pod assigned him. He and the others who occupied his pod were nearly asleep again when the “all-clear” hooted.

* * *

The next morning he overslept and had to ’port himself to the bridge to be on time. Looking somewhat as grumpy as Roger felt, Commander Metrios duly noted his hurried arrival but issued no reprimand. Casually Metrios told Roger that no further activity on the space field had been noted.

“Maybe they have to *hatch out* the assemblers?” Anis Langio suggested and then yawned, wiggling her fingers in welcome as Roger stepped up to his couch. He grinned back at her.

“Any corrections needed, Commander?” Roger asked Metrios, gesturing to the screens and the roving sensors.

“No, Roj,” Metrios said, with a wry grin. “They’re where we need ’em right now. We’re just lucky there’s so much space flotsam that our sensors seem just like one of the boys out there.”

“You know, for a planet that’s spotless,” said Eri Gander, the morale officer who often dropped by Roger’s station, “they’ve made a right mess of space.”

“Haven’t developed a form to gobble up their garbage, that’s all,” Metrios replied.

“Vegetarians get their iron and minerals from their food,” Anis remarked with an overly innocent expression on her face. “Which reminds me, Eri, we could use some new tri-D’s. There’s nothing I haven’t seen a zillion times.”

Eri and Anis both looked queryingly at Roger who held his arms wide, mimicking Anis’s expression. “Look, I’m just transport. I have nothing to do with loading.”

“Which reminds me why I’m here,” Eri said, turning to Roger. “I’ve four to ship back this week.” He raised his eyebrows queryingly.

“No problem. My 'Dinis told me that there're two 'Dini pairs to go as well.”

Anis heaved an exaggerated sigh. “I'm always glad to know they are not as po-faced and stiff-upper-lipped as Prtglm pretends they are.”

“The 'Dinis're going to hibernate,” Rojer said and grinned to defuse any criticism as he added, “That's not considered a weakness in 'Dinis.”

“At least you save them from going on the line,” Metrios said, nodding his head approvingly.

Anis gave a convulsive shudder. “I don't care what euphemism they apply to the process, it's still cannibalism.”

“Term it exigency during long space hauls and accept that interpretation,” Mrkovic said, but his expression indicated he was in complete agreement with the astrogator.

“At least we have Rojer here. Man and Mrdini's best friend is the local FT&T Talent.”

Rojer grinned back, relieved that the subject of 'Dini traditions was not pursued. On the bridge, at least, he wasn't quizzed to the point of aggravation by pruriently curious crewmen and women. He had had to make the point that he might have lived closely with “immature” 'Dini, but he didn't know much about the adults.

“So what's to be done today, Commander?” he asked Metrios.

“Close watch on the shipyard and those pod elements. We've got a little self-destruct package in the new probes I ordered up in case we need to put more in action.”

“Don't I just wish we did have some action,” said Yngocelen as he stared glumly at the static scene on the screen. “Aren't they putting the cart before the horse? I mean, assembling escape pods when they haven't repaired the hole they put in the refugee ship? Never did understand why they plugged it. Especially after they had already conned the queens into leaving in their escape pods.”

“Puzzling indeed,” Metrios admitted, “since it damaged a perfectly spaceworthy craft which would have nicely increased their existing fleet.”

Because he now knew these officers well enough, Rojer decided to voice his thoughts.

“Commander, I don't think that torpedo hit a cargo or docking area,” he said.

“You don't?” Metrios's expression encouraged him.

“No, sir, I think they holed the life support systems. Because it was a hole, not a shattering blast.”

“Show me.” Metrios was not the only one who perked up with interest.

Rojer 'ported one of the monitors into the appropriate position. Unfortunately the entrance point was in deep shadow. What was visible were the clean edges of the torpedo's entrance. The damage would be easily repaired. At least it would on any of the Alliance ships.

“Maybe there was something in that torpedo they sent up,” Rojer added quietly, steeling himself for dispute.

“Yeah, but what and why?” Yngocelen asked in a caustic tone. “We know from even the partial reconstruction of the Great Sphere which A Squadron discovered that they can seal off decks and areas just as we can.”

“Yes, but the queens were evacuating and there'd be no one to issue orders to the workers to close anything. I think,” and Rojer paused so as not to sound as sure as he

was of his theory, “this lot wouldn’t want the workers spawned by other queens. They’d want to get rid of them before they filled the ship with their personal workers.”

“So the torpedo delivered a gas or something noxious to fumigate it, huh?” Yngocelen asked, mulling over that theory.

“Boy’s got a good point,” Metrios said, over Rojer’s head, but his tone was approving.

“I could send a probe inside the ship to find out,” Rojer volunteered, since no one had discredited his theory. Although Captain Osullivan had not taken part in the conversation, he had been listening.

“Then do so, Mr. Lyon,” Captain Osullivan said, nodding to Yngocelen. “And program it for a full scan, Mr. Yngocelen. It’s about time we learned what’s going on in there, since Mr. Lyon’s Talents allow us to be discreet.”

Although Rojer sent the tiny probe through ventilation ducts and up and down dark and empty corridors, nothing was going on inside the hulk. Nothing apart from a haze which still hung like a miasma in the interior, and especially heavy in the center of the vessel.

“Could be a combination of gases,” the science officer said, “because there sure aren’t any workers of any description left and there are signs of corrosion on the few organic substances the monitor identifies. The Hivers seem to specialize in lethal doses. I wouldn’t want to send anyone in to investigate. Despite the hole in the hull letting vacuum in, the stuff’s lingering. It’s going to take time to flush all that out.”

“Sections weren’t closed off either,” Yngocelen said, tapping Rojer approvingly on the shoulder. “Yup, and that junk even cleared out the tubes where larvae are stored. Clean sweep!”

Rojer could not entirely suppress his delight that his theory had been verified, but everyone was smiling so he felt it wasn’t inappropriate for him to do so, too.

“Good thinking, Rojer,” Osullivan said to cap his moment of triumph.

Nonetheless Rojer heard—not from the direction of the officers—less grateful sentiments from one or two of the ratings on duty.

“It *was* only a theory, sir,” Rojer said, altering his grin to modest self-deprecation. It was awful hard to please everyone all the time no matter how carefully he conducted himself.

“How long will it take for that gas to clear, Mr. Mrkovic?” Osullivan asked.

“Can’t say for sure, sir, it’s heavy stuff. All systems are dead on the ship. If they were activated...” and he shrugged. “With respect, sir, the *Genesee* doesn’t have eva suits on board that would protect us Humans against a corrosive gas atmosphere.”

Nor did the Mrdini when the options were discussed at a captains’ conference. Although the derelict Great Sphere was being subjected to the most exhaustive scrutiny by both Humans and Mrdini, the emphasis had been on establishing what powered Hive ships and what fuel was used, and analyzing the peculiar composition of the hull material. Ventilation and life support systems were a low priority.

“Captain Prtglm would like us to figure out a way to get in that ship,” Captain Osullivan reported to his staff officers. Rojer was also sitting in, as he had attended the captains’ meeting as translator. “It has an idea,” and Osullivan’s smile was amused, “of boarding and bringing a relatively undamaged Hive ship back to Clarf. I gather Prtglm is to be retired at the end of this mission and it would like to do so in glory, as it were.”

There were murmurs of understanding for such ambition.

“I didn’t think Mrdini did things like retire,” Anis Langio remarked.

Osullivan cleared his throat and smoothed back his hair. “I believe it’s a question of size.”

“Yeah, it is the biggest ’Dini I’ve ever seen,” Yngocelen said thoughtfully. “If it gets much bigger, it won’t fit in its own ship. It has to bend over to walk our companionways and this ship’s built for tall.” As the gunnery officer was just under the two-meter mark, he was sympathetic. “But you know,” he went on off-handedly, “maybe Rojer could ’port a small boarding party directly into the torpedo hole. *They’re* obviously waiting until the gas disperses. Of course, we’d have to figure a way of doing *that* first.”

“What *do* we know about the Hiver ventilation systems?” Osullivan asked rhetorically.

“No more than what the probe could see, sir,” Metrios replied.

“Any idea of where or what the controls would be?”

Everyone turned in Rojer’s direction.

“Me? I know as much as you do but...”

“But what, Mr. Lyon?” the captain prompted in an encouraging tone.

“Well, sir, when I first came on board, I believe I mentioned that groups back on the homeworlds are trying to reassemble the innards of the Great Sphere? We know what the main investigative team is working on—the fuel and engines—but maybe somebody else might have a clue to the life support area. I could make a discreet inquiry.”

“Of whom?”

“The T-8 engineer at the Aurigae Tower.”

Metrios looked considerably more receptive the moment Rojer mentioned “engineer.”

“Please contact him then. Discreetly, of course,” Osullivan asked Rojer.

“Certainly, sir,” Rojer replied. He had determinedly not fallen into the habit of naval parlance of responding with the usual “Aye, sir.” That was his subtle reaction to “boy” and “civilian.”

Metrios grinned. “Would you need much power?”

“Not for a query,” Rojer said, grinning back. Xexo would be as up-to-date as possible on what was being assembled, either by the naval or the “civilian” piece jiggers. “And he might even have some informed guesses. Thing worries me, though, is that that explosion might also have taken out the ventilation control system.”

“That’s a distinct possibility. Sure wrecked the area,” Metrios said.

Rojer held up one hand, indicating he was initiating his query, but he sensed a definite eagerness in the atmosphere of the bridge. Clearly Captain Prtglm was not the only one who wanted to secure a trophy out of this encounter. Of course, the *Genesee* and the *Arapahoe* would share any honors with the *KTTS*. Everyone in the Alliance would rejoice to have purloined a nearly operational ship from a Hive colony. He suppressed the chuckle that threatened to upset his composure and sternly focused his mind on the gestalt to send the message.

Familiarity with Xexo’s mind made the ’pathing easier. Rojer elected to make it an informal query because nothing might come of it and there was no point in getting

hopes up only to dash them down.

Xexo was surprised to hear Rojer.

Coming through loud and clear, lad. But shouldn't you...

No, this is between you and me, Xexo, about our piecing. They don't have a set on board here and I need your help on one aspect of the reconstruction.

Oh, well, in that case... Xexo had always been more interested in the mechanical aspects of Tower than protocol so he made no further objections. *Whaddya need to know?*

What Xexo knew about the ventilation and life support systems was incomplete. In fact, Rojer realized that his probe had accumulated more cogent information, which he then shared with the T-8. Xexo could then confirm that the main environmental control systems had probably been demolished by the torpedo.

Queens seem to have had an independent emergency supply. Get that started and you might flush a lot of the gas out, 'specially with a hole already in the hull. Hey, you guys bring that ship back and you will be real heroes! Xexo added, excitement coloring his usual imperturbable manner. *Too much of the ship Squadron A salvaged has been damaged beyond guess or gosh.* Then Xexo “showed” Rojer what diagrams existed, incomplete as they were.

“Since the queens abandoned ship,” Metrios said when he had a chance to study what Rojer transferred to the screen, “that area would not have been secured. But it appears,” and his finger wandered off the diagram, “that one could flush the system of the gas quite efficiently from the main circulation point.”

“If we knew how to work such controls,” Rojer said. “’Dinis keep telling us that the queens developed specific workers for various ship operations. What would a life-support worker look like?”

Metrios shrugged. “That’d be a problem. They seem to produce all kinds of workers.”

The other officers on duty on the bridge had been following the conversations.

“The ’Dini records have reconstructions of some definite types, from corpses that were found after space battles,” Anis Langio said and keyed in a program. They all watched as the sketches were accessed. Langio gave a snort. “Take your pick.”

“That queen they’ve got at Heinlein Moon Base? Have her eggs hatched yet?” Metrios asked.

“They’re growing and she’s eating,” Rojer replied with a shrug. He was still of two minds about his sister Zara’s interference even if it had saved the queen’s life from hypothermia.

One of the three pods to escape the Great Sphere had contained a live and egg-heavy queen. Conveying the pod to the Heinlein Moon Base had been Rojer Lyon’s first official duty as a Prime, though his father had been the focus of the kinetic energy of that teleportation. An Observation Module had kept close track of her activities since she had emerged. She was, in fact, the first living specimen of the Hive race that either Human or Mrdini had seen. Her continued existence had elicited controversy, and sometimes strain, among the Allies. Fortunately some of the more liberal Mrdini leaders also felt that the need to know more about their enemy was of greater importance than a very public and summary execution, no matter how psychologically satisfying. Others found some beauty in her mantislike appearance: the maudlin were