

## FAMILY VALUES

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*Thanks for editorial assistance go to deGaffer. Any errors that remain are my own.*

**Chapter 1.**

Joseph Michael Fanelli was not Sicilian, as his predecessor, his father-in-law, had been. He was, however, of Italian descent, and had married into the family. He hadn't known much about the family then, and, as it turned out, that was a good thing.

Joe relaxed into his high-backed leather-upholstered chair, and drew on a fine, Cuban cigar. He had reason to feel good about the way things were going, and even more reason to want to take a rest. He'd worked himself and nearly everyone around him very hard over the past several years, just to get the organization to where it was, and it had taken a toll, but now he, and all those who had helped him, would be reaping the rewards.

Few could have accomplished so much, in such a short time, starting with so little. There was no time to relish his success, though; his associates had already captured the next pawn, and it was time to proceed to the end game. He rose up, pausing to crush out the cigar and smooth the wrinkles out of the coat of his expensive Italian suit. It was time to begin negotiations with another powerful organization. This time, though, the prize wasn't money, power, or even the well being of the family. This time, the survival of Earth, itself, was at stake.

BGEN Raymond "Ray" Thompson awoke with a headache, to which stimulus he had the predictable reaction of raising his hand to his forehead. Only he couldn't. Opening his eyes, he discovered that there wasn't much he *could* move. He found himself seated in something that looked like a dentist's chair, except that it had built-in restraints.

The restraints made the chair appear somewhat like one of those ancient devices used to execute criminals using electricity. The room he occupied, however, looked nothing like an execution chamber. Indeed, except for the absence of the requisite large window, overlooking a million-dollar view, it bore a strong resemblance to an opulent office.

Another difference, he noted, was that there were no corners. The room appeared to be a cylinder, with its walls were covered by a rich tapestry. The ceiling was featureless, and emitted a diffuse, white light from its entire surface, and the floor appeared to be hardwood. The only other furniture in the room was a desk and chair – that is, if you didn't count the men standing near the tapestry on either side of him. He couldn't see behind himself, but he sensed a third man standing there.

The two he could see both faced him, eyes straight ahead, seemingly lost in thought.

"What am I doing here?" he demanded of the man on his right. The man ignored him. After a moment, he looked at the man on his left, and asked, "Is he deaf?" Again, no

answer.

Just as he was about to give in to the urge to shout, the man behind him came into view. He was younger, and wore a lab coat. As he proceeded to take Ray's vitals, he spoke:

"They won't answer, and even if they would, they know very little that would help you anyway."

"Well, what about you? Will you tell me what's going on?"

The man in the lab coat grinned at him, and replied, "No, but have a little patience. Someone is coming who will tell you more than you really want to know." Ray kept trying, but the guy just grinned and went about his business.

Presently, he heard a door open behind him, and another man, older than the others and dressed even more formally, walked past him, and around the desk, and then sat down in the chair. He had an almost regal bearing, and the moment Ray saw him, he expected to hear mandolin music in the background. It was obvious that this man was a leader in organized crime. As he examined some papers – what appeared to be notes or an outline, as far as Ray could see – he spoke.

"Good morning, General. Please pardon our manners. I would normally greet you with a handshake, except that you are encumbered for the moment."

Ray was startled by the man's voice. He spoke in a rich baritone, devoid of any apparent accent. Recovering quickly, he replied, "I'm sure that you could remedy that, and then we could greet each other like gentlemen..."

The man barked out a bitter laugh. "Frank and Marco are good, but unlike you, they haven't been enhanced by nanites. We are all aware that you could probably take them out very quickly, even unarmed. What we have to tell you is too important to let your impulses for escape and retribution get in the way. Rest assured, my friend, you will be returned unharmed to your hotel room when this is over."

"This is going to be over pretty quick, I think. I'm sure that the AI's have already notified Command that I've been taken, *and where!*"

"Humor me, General. I am not worried about what your AI's may or may not be able to do, nor am I particularly worried about being found by your Navy. All will become clear, presently."

"Your funeral," Ray shrugged. "Give it your best shot."

"Thank you," the man replied. "First let me introduce myself. My full birth name is Joseph Michael Fanelli. My family, and most of my business associates, know me formally as Don Giuseppe. Outsiders, whose familiarity with *cosche* is limited to

concepts present in ancient motion pictures, sometimes call me 'the Godfather.' My close friends call me Joe. You may also call me Joe."

"I had already figured out that you and your friends were criminals, gangsters, Joe. I just didn't realize that you were Mafia. I thought we had eliminated all you guys."

"Many have tried, many times. Always there is a remnant, and always, we come back. And now, we will continue to *be* when the Earth is dust." Ray shivered when he heard that.

"Yes Ray (may I call you Ray?), I am *mafiusu*, but I will not engage with you in a battle of name calling. The *mafiusi* don't care what you call them. They put the welfare of the *cosca* ahead of everything else, doing whatever is necessary to protect it, nurture it, and that is their principal crime. The so-called 'legitimate' governments of Earth, and now also the Confederacy, only *wish* they could get such loyalty, and they are jealous.

"None of that is relevant to why you are here, however, I promise you that, when you leave here with the information we have to give you, you will conclude on your own that the Confederacy are worse criminals than we are; and that its human military forces, indeed, your own Navy, is guilty of treason against humanity."

"Surely you don't subscribe to that pseudo-religious tripe that Earth First is spouting off!"

"You are correct. We don't subscribe to that. The leaders of Earth First are as stupid, in their own way, as many of my competitors were, when they attempted to force the Confederacy to lift them off-world. But, enough of philosophy, for the moment. Let get to the business at hand, and hopefully there will be time after that to talk of these things. We must arrange to return you to your hotel before your liberty expires. Even Brigadier Generals have to report on time."

Ray fell silent, *Well, I guess they don't plan to just 'off' me!* He was unwilling though, to believe that his Navy would leave him in this predicament long enough for these thugs to convince him of anything. Something kept nagging at him, though.

"How long have I been here?"

"Ah, you are perhaps wondering about when your Navy will rescue you?" Joe ventured, and Ray nodded, almost imperceptibly. "I believe it has been approximately sixteen hours since we, ah, invited you here."

"Sixteen hours!" Ray exploded. The nanites and his personal AI should have notified Command immediately when he was kidnapped, and a rescue/strike force should have been mobilized within two hours. Things weren't looking good. Joe watched the emotions play across Ray's face and nodded.

"You begin to appreciate the gravity of the situation," he said. "I hadn't intended to

get into this right now, but I suppose I should be kind.” He paused a moment, then went on.

“Your Navy will find you, but not until we are ready for them to find you, for two reasons. First, we have learned how to interdict communication between your AI’s, as well as between your nanites and the AI’s. How we got that knowledge will later become clear. Simply put, you have temporarily disappeared from the Confederacy’s neural network.

“Second, you are now quite some distance from Earth, which is where they’ll be looking for you. Where, and how far, I am not at liberty to say, because we may want to use this location again sometime. May we proceed now?”

“Uh, two more questions. What am I supposed to do with this information that you’re going to give me, and if we’re not on Earth, how did we get here?”

“As far as how we got here, that is part of the information we’re going to give you. To answer your first question, we simply expect you to deliver the information to your Command, and convince them of its veracity.”

“You kidnapped a *Brigadier General*, just to serve as your *messenger boy*? Where the *hell* do you people dig up the fucking *nerve*?”

Joe smiled faintly. “As I’m sure you are already aware, *nerve* is not usually in short supply among *mafiusi*. But to answer yet another question, we need the credibility that your rank provides. It would be all too easy for your Command to brush off a report from an enlisted man, or even a lower-ranking officer, as rubbish. When *you* tell them, you can make them *believe*.”

“What if *I* don’t believe?”

“Oh, you will, Ray. You are a man of exceptional intelligence, an educated man. We have seen your CAP scores. You will believe.” Joe left his chair and walked back around the desk.

“We have used up much precious time already. It is now time for lunch. The good doctor will prepare you for your repast, and explain what is subsequently required of you. I’ll see you in about two hours.” he said, as he left the room.

The man in the lab coat then appeared in front of Ray. “You’ve probably figured out that I’m ‘the good doctor.’ Sorry about this,” he said, as he lowered a large, opaque helmet, effectively blinding Ray to his surroundings. “I’m sure you’ll understand that we can’t let you gather unnecessary intelligence about us.”

Ray felt his chair being moved, and eventually come to a stop. The helmet was removed, but all he could see was a bare metal wall. He heard a few mechanical noises, probably lock mechanisms engaging, then suddenly the restraints on his arms

and legs popped open. The restraints hadn't restricted circulation, but he began rubbing his joints, as if they had. A few minutes later, he heard the doctor's voice over an intercom system.

"Hello General. If you will get out of the chair and inspect your surroundings, you'll find a number of amenities, intended to increase your comfort."

Ray did as suggested, and found himself occupying a nearly normal Navy officer's berth. Nearly normal, that is, save the absence of quite a few things. There was a bunk, a bookcase with a few books in it, a regular chair and a built-in desk. The only visible doorway led to an ensuite, with shower, toilet, and washbasin.

He found very little that he felt would be useful for an escape attempt. The bunk, bookcase, and desk appeared to be monolithic with the walls and floor. There would be no pulling them to pieces, without the aid of tools.

He could lift and move the chair freely, and perhaps if someone were stupid or unlucky enough to present him with a target, he could use it as a bludgeon; however, it too was a single piece of metal, and would require tools he didn't have for shaping into a more suitable weapon. He was considering using it to batter the walls of his prison, looking for weaknesses, when the doctor's voice came back.

"The walls are very thick, and titanium reinforced. There are a multitude of gas-exchange ports and video viewpoints embedded in all of the fixed surfaces. You are being watched constantly, and if we don't like your behavior, it is a simple matter to release a fast-acting anesthetic gas into your chamber. You might be able to hold your breath a long time, but we can wait even longer for you to pass out."

Ray grimaced. He was immobilized as effectively as if he were in a Navy brig. No, even the brig would have been easier to escape. He shrugged and looked at the ceiling – not because he expected to see anyone there, but just to have somewhere to look. "Okay, it seems you have me at a disadvantage. What next?"

"You have been inactive for a fairly lengthy period. I would suggest some exercises, calisthenics, perhaps. I'm sure your training has provided you with knowledge of how to maintain fitness in close quarters. You may wish to use the facilities in the ensuite, as well. You will be confined again, following the lunch period, and you should arrange for that confinement to be as comfortable for yourself as possible."

The doctor fell silent, and Ray thought about his situation. It was obvious that his captors could do pretty much as they wished with him, but he didn't have to like it. On the other hand, it made little sense to react in a way that would only make himself more uncomfortable, and at the moment, he could see no other end result from being uncooperative. They hadn't asked him to do anything that would compromise his loyalty to the Confederacy; they hadn't even tried to pump him for information!

He decided to go with the flow, for the moment, but to keep alert for any possible

opportunity to escape, or perhaps even take control of his captors. In the meantime, he followed the doctor's advice. After a bout of vigorous physical exercise, he danced through a series of Tai Chi moves, and then, he availed himself of the ensuite.

Fresh from the shower, he emerged to find a uniform, cleaned, pressed, and folded, sitting on the bunk. He picked up the uniform, hoping that they might have overlooked something. That hope evaporated, however, when he discovered that, although the uniform was a close replica, it wasn't really *his*. Heaving a sigh, he dressed in the substitute uniform.

"If you will proceed to the desk, you'll notice a covered slot in the wall, its bottom edge level with the desktop," the doctor said.

Again, Ray did as suggested, and immediately saw the slot. It was not obvious unless you were looking directly at it, but it was about ten centimeters high, and a half meter long. As he was watching, the slot cover withdrew into the wall, exposing a cavity in which lay a cafeteria tray, with several dishes of food, as well as utensils.

Encouraged momentarily, he withdrew the tray from the cavity, marveling that his captors would provide him with metal implements that might be useful as weapons. Almost as if they were reading his mind, the doctor's voice returned again.

"General, I argued against it, but the Don felt it would be a sign of our good faith to allow you to feed yourself like a civilized man, and to allow you use of real eating utensils, instead of the weak, plastic ones we could have provided.

"We are not fools, however: remember, we are still watching, and everything we have provided you was inventoried. At the end of your mealtime, when requested, you will promptly return everything to the slot, after which it will be inventoried again. If anything is missing, we'll just gas you and take it anyway. Consider seriously whether you really want to wake up naked, and with another headache."

As much as he hated to admit it, Ray realized that it made sense. In their shoes, he would have done the same thing. Having reached that conclusion, he accepted the inevitable, and decided to enjoy his meal as much as possible under the circumstances. When his captors called for the return of the tray and implements, he complied, and when directed to return to the restraining chair, he did so.

As soon as he was seated and his limbs were properly positioned, the built-in restraints snapped closed, seemingly with enough force to cause injury, if one attempted to elude them. After a moment, the doctor re-entered the room and re-installed the helmet. Ray hadn't noticed the door during his inspection; for that matter, he still didn't know where the door was, since the restraint chair was deliberately placed so as to confound his effort to observe.

The end result of all this activity was that he found himself back in the office where he had met the Don. This time, though, the Don was waiting for Ray.

"I trust you enjoyed your meal, and found your quarters adequate?" Joe queried.

"For a jail cell, you mean? Yeah, they were great. The food was good, though," Ray responded dourly.

Joe favored him with another of those almost non-existent smiles. "I understand your unhappiness with the circumstances, Ray, but perhaps you can take comfort in the likelihood that you will have the last laugh." Ray looked at him in confusion. He continued, with a genuine smile:

"You have prospects for a much longer life than we do, aside from the consideration of combat. I alluded to it before: none of us are nanite-enhanced, and it is unlikely that we ever will be. We understand what we are giving up though, better than you understand what *you* gave up.

"Without the nanites we don't have access to many of the health-improvement and life-extension technologies that you have; on the other hand, we don't have spies for the Confederacy AI's flowing in our veins! Until such time as we develop nanite technology on our own, technology over which we retain control, none of my people will voluntarily become host to them. Any that do become so infested, will be lost to the *cosche*"

"I don't feel that having the nanites compromises my liberty at all!" Ray declared.

"As well you shouldn't," Joe replied. "You are doing exactly what they want you to do, and thus have no need to conceal anything from them. We, on the other hand, are not. We seek to find our own way in the cosmos, without the meddling of the Confederacy and its mechanical spies. But we digress. We need to get down to business, so that we can return you to your vacation. "Tell me Ray, how do you feel about the term UFO?"

Ray shrugged. "I don't think much about it. I mean, I know about the wave of sightings that swept the world in the 1940's, but any idea that they represented anything extraterrestrial was pretty much debunked, even then."

Joe arched his eyebrows, and asked, "Ray, are you saying that none of the sighting could have been legitimate reports of alien visitors?"

Ray nodded, "Yeah, I thought that was pretty well established..."

"Ray, who do you work for?"

"The Confederacy. What do UFO's have to do with any of this?" he demanded.

"I'm coming to that... and what is the Confederacy?"

"It's a galactic civilization composed of many space-faring... I see what you mean... but the Confederacy didn't have that many ships operating in this area then. That was

one of the first things we humans asked them about after First Contact. There's no reason to believe that the UFO craze was anything more than mass hysteria."

"Well Ray, I'm afraid that we've already proven you wrong – you just haven't seen the evidence yet," Joe paused. "Where do you think we got the technology to get off Earth, to avoid detection by your AI neural network, to kidnap you? Hmm?"

Ray frowned considering the question for some time, before responding. "I would have assumed that you somehow stole it from the Confederacy. Honestly though, I don't see how you could get past their safeguards, in the first place."

Joe grinned, "We didn't. By the way, I was surprised at your use of the Common Era dating method when I referred to UFO's. I thought everyone, at least humans, had started using the First Contact calendar."

"Oh," Ray responded, abashed. "I guess it's because I'm older than I look. I was already in my fifties when the Darjee showed up, and I'm used to thinking about events before that in the old dating system."

"Thank you for satisfying my curiosity. Now, let's put all that aside for the moment, and talk about something else. What do you think about the possibility that there may be space-faring races, other than the Sa'arm who are not part of the Confederacy?"

"I suppose that could happen. I know of nothing that would preclude it, but I've never heard of any such race."

"All right, but supposing such races *did* exist, what about the possibility that they might also be affected by the Sa'arm? And perhaps be on the run from them?"

"Well yeah, I suppose that could happen..."

Joe interrupted, "Ray, it *did* happen. And by the time you leave us you will know that in your heart. Let me tell you a story..."

Sometime around 1940, CE, a battle began. This battle was taking place so incredibly far away, that the earthbound armies of humanity, occupied with their own hostilities, were completely unaware of it. On one side of that battle were the Sa'arm, doing their usual thing in their usual overwhelming numbers. On the other side, were the Hwee.

The Hwee are recognizably non-human, but their biochemistry and physiology, as well as their social structures are not dissimilar to our own. They breathed an oxygen-rich atmosphere. They used sound to communicate. They were even dioecious, gave live birth, and had recognizable family groupings.

Like humanity, somehow the Hwee managed to survive the discovery of nuclear

power, as well as many other technologies with which they could have destroyed themselves. Unlike humanity, they kept their priorities straight.

Whereas human societies turned their vision inwards, commandeering science and technology so that a few privileged individuals could sequester the limited resources of the birth planet, the Hwee turned their eyes and their societal energies to the sky. They escaped the gravity well of their birthplace, and by the time of their first contact with the Sa'arm, they already had colonies in at least five star systems.

It is tempting to think that, were it not for the Sa'arm, humanity would have been able to achieve as much, on its own. That is unlikely, however, because humanity *did* turn inward, and in the process, gave up a greater destiny. Only the coming of the Darjee tipped the scales in favor of a human Diaspora. But back to the Hwee...

Being more like *us* than like the Confederacy, the Hwee did not assume that the nature of the cosmos was benign; *unlike us*, neither did they ignore it. They maintained a military, as well as very effective space-borne surveillance systems in all the systems they inhabited, and when the Sa'arm showed up, they were not surprised. When the destruction began, they were able to fight back. Unfortunately the outcome was never in question.

Both Hwee colonies in the first system the Sa'arm encountered were ultimately overrun, before the futility of fighting became clear. Fortunately, the remaining industrial base was adequate to provide ships to evacuate most of the population of the surviving colonies, *and* the home world.

The flight of the Hwee was, at first, terribly disorganized. Many small groups of ships left their homeports with no particular destinations in mind. Most of these probably did not survive. Presently, though, it was decided that the remaining groups should all proceed to a single rendezvous point, and await further instructions.

Like humans, some of the Hwee were braver than they were bright, and elected to stay behind and "defend the home planet." Never mind that they had neither the numbers nor the firepower to sustain that kind of effort. Even as their society acknowledged their rank stupidity, they were regarded as heroes. Their personal sacrifice did provide a delaying action, covering the departure of the last of the evacuees, but the loss of those individuals was nearly unbearable to those of their loved ones who elected to leave.

By the time the Hwee evacuation fleet assembled at the rendezvous point, the Sa'arm front had already swept well beyond their home world, and the fleet found itself completely surrounded by enemy forces. Strangely, those forces seemed to be neither interested in molesting them, nor even particularly aware of them. It seemed a forgone conclusion, however, that any further contact with the Sa'arm should be avoided at all costs. The problem was, where to go? The Hwee strategists had already concluded that the Sa'arm would eventually sweep the entire galaxy.

For a little while, the fleet puttered around, dodging the Sa'arm, while their scientists and engineers tried to figure out a likely destination. To be viable, a potential destination had to have habitable planets, of course, but also, at least for the foreseeable future, it had to be out of reach to the Sa'arm fleet. Using these criteria, the only viable destinations, obviously, lay in distant galaxies.

Four such destinations were identified, and after much deliberation, it was decided that part of the fleet would be sent to each destination, in order to maximize the probability of success for the whole race. There were adequate numbers of individuals available to assure a sufficiently diverse gene pool for each potential colony; and splitting the fleet effectively reduced the likelihood that any single event might completely annihilate the race.

Once the decision was made, the plan was quickly put into motion. Ships and personnel were reapportioned, insuring that each fleet had a fair share of the resources, and complete access to the technologies and skills, available to the race as a whole. At first, they tried to keep entire family groups together, but that had an unacceptable impact on genetic diversity for the fleets. Blood relatives had to be distributed among the fleets as much as possible, and as individuals and families began to comprehend a future without any chance of contact with some of their loved ones, that caused the expected amount of grief. Even those who grieved, however, knew it was for the greater good of all.

All the resources of their several planets still weren't enough to provision such long voyages, especially if the entire population were to remain awake and active during the passage. The conditions demanded conservation of resources, and when possible, reprovisioning along the way. Furthermore, even with hyper drive technology, the lengths of the voyages were so great as to ensure that no single individual lifetime would be enough to see it from beginning to end – and the Hwee live a *lot* longer than humans.

In order to conserve provisions, as well as to preserve their numbers, as much as ninety percent of the population of each fleet was to hibernate at any given time. Again, family groups were to be kept together, whenever possible, with one exception: post-pubescent juveniles would get longer waking duty cycles than fully mature adults, spending substantial time in training. The reasoning behind this was somewhat convoluted, but in essence, it was done in order to insure that there would be a large population of mature, skilled adults with which to build a new civilization, and to care for the very young, at the end of the journey.

The Hwee, unaware that the Sa'arm had no means to detect them in hyperspace, included evasive tactics in their escape plans. Each fleet hopped around the galaxy at random for a while, before making the final jump to their destination. If a random stop offered an opportunity to augment their stocks of provisions, they took the time to do so.

Sometimes they discovered another sentient species, and when they did, their heuristics determined what, if any, interaction took place. In general there was no interaction, but they recorded all that could be ascertained about those societies, and at times they collected individuals from promising species, in hopes of future benefit from social diversity. The individuals thus collected were all volunteers, and were only taken if sufficient numbers of volunteers could be found to ensure a minimum adequate gene pool.

Sometimes, while they were looking over a pre-space-flight society, they got a bit sloppy. A pilot with minimal experience would make a mistake and crash; and even an experienced pilot could misjudge the range and accuracy of a tactical missile, and take a hit. This didn't happen often, but when it did, the wreckage fell to the planet, unrecovered.

The Hwee weren't particularly worried; they didn't plan on being in the neighborhood long enough for the inhabitants to develop and use any technology they might salvage. In most cases, it didn't matter anyway; the wreckage mostly fell in places that were inaccessible to the native species, or hidden from them in some manner; but even when they were able to recover it, it was so alien that it was usually beyond their understanding, or so badly damaged that it couldn't be reconstructed.

On one such occasion, they came upon a small, blue planet circling a nondescript yellow star. The planet's inhabitants were not yet a space-faring society, but had developed technology sufficient for self-annihilation. They were fragmented into numerous factions, based on economic, philosophical, and religious beliefs, and the Hwee were fascinated. They decided to hang around and observe for a while.

Unfortunately for the observers, the inhabitants were also actively engaged in killing each other off in a global conflict, and were very alert and suspicious of strange activities. The Hwee lost a number of scouts, and in one case, a small, hyper drive-equipped cargo vessel that had been engaged in the reprovisioning effort. At length, reprovisioning was fully accomplished; and it was decided that further observation was too costly in lives and resources, so the Hwee moved on.

Joe paused, in his story. While he spoke, he had been pacing, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes mostly unfocused, staring at the floor. He stopped and turned his gaze upon Ray.

"I must stop and rest for now, my friend," he said. "I expect that you have ascertained where the story is going, and that you already have many questions. I am tired, however, and there are several things I must do before the evening meal. I have arranged a treat for you: before you adjourn to your temporary quarters, you will see some proof that we have the technology we claim. The doctor will see to carrying out these arrangements. I hope you will be entertained, and I wish you a restful night's sleep."

With that, Joe turned and left the room.

**Chapter 2.**

Ray felt numb. The implications of what Joe had been telling him were staggering: on the other hand, it might all be a fabrication. Perhaps the “entertainment” might offer some kind of validation of what he had been hearing - but he hoped not.

Shortly after Joe left the room, Ray heard footsteps approaching, and was not surprised to hear the doctor’s voice.

“Hello again, General,” he said. “I trust that you are still comfortable?”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Ray responded, “but I am probably as comfortable as I can be under the circumstances.”

“Ah well,” the doctor smirked, as he came into view. “We must all make sacrifices in order to achieve our goals.”

“I don’t have any goals that would demand that I be confined this way!”

“I didn’t say that they were *your* goals,” the doctor grinned at him. “I said *our* goals! Under the circumstances, even you have to make sacrifices for them!”

Ray had to laugh in spite of himself. He was pretty much convinced that these people weren’t going to harm him, and they *had* promised to release him before his liberty was up. Things could be worse. Nevertheless, he was convinced that once he was free, sooner or later he would find them, and payback was going to be a bitch!

“Speaking of sacrifices,” the doctor went on, as he propelled the confinement chair out of the office, “there has been a change in plans. The Don has decided that we will be abandoning this base permanently, following your release.”

“Why would you do that?” queried Ray.

“Because we’ve decided that it is necessary to expose its location to you, in order to convince you of the truth of our assertions.”

“Why would that be necessary?”

“Well, the Don believes that for you to be convinced, we have to show you conclusively that you aren’t on Earth.”

“Why wouldn’t you just cut the gravity generators?” Ray asked, but then realized the fallacy of that line of reasoning.

The doctor, watching his facial expressions, nodded. “Yeah, anybody with the right equipment could fake low gravity, at least long enough to be convincing. No, the Don

says you have to go outside and see for yourself."

Ray's heart almost leapt out of his chest, thinking that rescue might be only moments away... then the doctor dashed those hopes for him, as he was wheeled into an airlock.

"We're moving you into a specially-constructed observation platform, shielded against the possibility of your nanites communicating with the Confederacy AI's. It's actually a sort of mini-spaceship, and one of our pilots will be taking you for a guided tour."

"So why would that require that you abandon the base?" Ray asked again.

The doctor, who had just finished cycling the airlock, stopped for a moment, and gave him a look that plainly said *How stupid do you think we are?* He heaved a huge sigh and responded.

"Look General, we aren't ignorant of the capabilities of the Confederacy AI's. We know that if you get even a glance at the star patterns here, a little session of hypnosis, assisted by some of their drugs, will allow them to recover your memory of those patterns with great accuracy. We've concluded that when they get that information, their computational power will pinpoint this base within hours after we release you.

"The base was never intended for long-term occupancy. It was handy, because of its location, and its loss will be inconvenient but not incredibly so. The Don feels it will be worth the loss to have you know that he's telling you the truth. Your conviction of his honesty in this matter, and cooperation in delivering our message to the Navy is incredibly important to him, and to the human race on Earth.

"And by the time your Navy gets here, all they will find is a pile of slag surrounded by asteroids."

Ray was stunned by their willingness to scrap what was an obviously huge investment, just to prove a point. So much so, that he completely spaced out the transition from airlock to spacecraft. By the time he recovered his composure, the doctor had secured the chair to a set of dogs, set into the floor, and seemingly especially designed to hold the chair. He faced a large transparent port, looking out onto a field of asteroids.

He felt a bump, and then suddenly he was weightless. The platform drifted first one way, then another, as small jets controlled by the pilot shifted the attitude and location of the craft. The pilot turned the craft completely around, so that Ray could see where they had just been.

At first, it looked just like any of the other asteroids in the immediate vicinity, but upon longer inspection, he could see the hatch and coupling flange that had formerly connected the craft to the base. There was no denying the reports of his own senses. He was in space, and far enough away from earth to suggest that transport would

require a much more advanced technology than he'd previously been led to believe existed there.

Of course, his observations only confirmed that the Don had advanced technology, not where he got it or how advanced it was. He still thought the Don's story was farfetched, but he would bet his last credit that the *mafiusu* couldn't have gotten past Confederacy security to steal any technology, and he couldn't think of any other rational explanation. Eliminating the impossible demanded that he accept the Don's explanation.

---

Another night passed, another day in captivity began. Ray was once again being carted to the office to meet with Joe. He accepted the fact that his hosts/captors couldn't trust him – their reasoning that he would likely try to escape was perfectly valid. Hell, *he* wouldn't have trusted him. At this point, he just wished that they would cut the chase and send him home.

Once again, Joe was already there, waiting for him. Before Joe could speak, Ray challenged him.

"Okay. I have to believe that you have the technology you say you have, so why not just give me the message and send me on my way now?"

Joe smiled and responded, "It's not as simple as that." As Ray's face fell, he went on, "You haven't heard enough of the story to know the extent of the technology we possess, and that knowledge will be critical to the credibility of the message we are going to give you. For you to believe in the necessity of that, we will probably have to give you another demonstration... but that will come later."

Joe turned back to his desk and picked up a sheaf of papers. Glancing briefly at them, he seemed to find what he was looking for, and resumed his tale...

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*La Cosa Nostra* has been around for a very long time. That particular name for it is an artifact of publicity and highly visible, but less-than-effective, legal processes. Those processes were connected with efforts by the governments of the United States and of Italy to suppress the *cosche*. Whether or not those efforts were justified is, for the moment, beside the point.

To actually *get* to the point, you have to realize that, even while the prosecution/persecution was underway, and as well as well before and ever since then, members of *La Cosa Nostra* were embedded in the governments of both countries. Granted, our ability to maintain the embedded presence has been dramatically reduced since First Contact, but then, our need for it had already begun to fade by then.

You see, our ability to monitor and influence government activities, and thus our ability to take advantage of their inaction actually *peaked* during those years in which

we were under observation by the Hwee! The paranoia of the US Military, during and following the war years, led them to fire upon and successfully disable a number of Hwee craft... actually many more than they realized! Nearly all of the disabled craft, however, were capable of only atmospheric flight. The US Military managed to recover a few of those, and actually *did* get a small technological advantage from studying them, but *not* one that put them on the road to spaceflight.

The *cosche*, recovered the rest; and as far as we've been able to determine, my *cosca* in particular recovered the only hyper drive-capable vessel that was lost here. Of course, we did not know how special it was, at the time.

Something that most people never consider is that the *cosche* respect and desire scientific knowledge as much as any educational institution or government research program. We have a tradition of funding research and "think tanks" that goes as far back in history as we can follow; thus we already had research staff in many locations, representing a broad cross-section of scientific disciplines, even before World War II.

It was a massive and expensive effort to unravel the secrets of the Hwee spaceship, but they *were* unraveled! All but one... the hyper drive itself. The recovered ship provided access to a knowledge base which was useful in gaining an understanding of their history and culture, but was short on technical knowledge. It was, after all, never intended to be more than a small cargo vessel, and a crew who was tied to either a fixed base, or a larger ship, maintained it.

It took years to map the physical layout of components and their connections, power sources, and controls. The danger of energizing the device was obvious, though, and until the Darjee made their appearance, there didn't seem to be a hurry. News of the Sa'arm, however, changed everything. Many brave young men were lost to us, as a result of our efforts, following that event.

You have seen the evidence of our ability to travel extreme distances in short periods of time. I suspect that you no longer need to be convinced that we have the Hwee hyper drive, and that we are no longer confined to Earth – despite the best efforts of the Confederacy and your Navy to keep us there.

For a price, we have also enabled *others*, considered undesirable by Confederacy standards, to migrate off-planet, as well. This is how we have funded many of our ongoing activities, since our successful re-creation of the hyper drive.

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The look of horror on Ray's face made Joe pause to stop and grin.

"Relax," he said, "those people pose no danger to you or your Confederacy, and they might even help insure the survival of our species!"

"How can you be so sure?" Ray demanded. "The Confederacy passed over those *people* because they were *dangerous*!"

"Simple," Joe responded. "They pay a fee, and we transport them and their goods to an earthlike planet inhabited only by others like them. We promise them a location that is unlikely to get the attention of the Sa'arm, and has breathable air, drinkable water, and a temperature that they can survive with ordinary clothing.

"If they want or need *anything* beyond transport, they have to pack it in. They are put into hibernation before embarking, travel that way, and are revived on arrival. All their goods are dropped at their final location – always some distance from any other occupants of the planet - first, then they are revived and dropped, naked, at the same location. They never see the technology, nor do they have an opportunity to hijack it.

"We have found several such planets, but unfortunately," he grinned, "they all have a shortage of heavy elements. That, and other reasons, makes them less than desirable as targets for the Sa'arm, and there's not much chance of them developing a significant industrial base."

Joe could see that Ray was still unhappy about it, but time was running out.

"We need to finish this," he said, returning to his story.

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As might be inferred from their concern about stretching out ship's stores, the Hwee did not have replication technology. Also, although far more advanced than anything available on Earth, their Artificial Intelligences had not evolved for millions of years, as had even the least of the Confederacy AI's. Nanites are not even mentioned in the records that we've been able to recover.

After successfully getting off-Earth, gaining access to these other technologies became of paramount importance to the *cosca*. The Confederacy was, and remains, far too trusting of the Cosmos, and the Navy is infected with that trust as well. Neither entity tried to protect its communications, or hide any kind of information in those early years.

Although there appears to be no evidence to date that the Sa'arm is either interested or capable of surreptitiously gathering military intelligence, it is second nature to humans, like *us*. We've been listening to your transmissions and monitoring communications between your AI's for years now. We know the size and composition of your Navy, where all your bases and colonies are, and where the fighting is going on *right now*.

We used that ability to find your junkyards; thus it was only *after* we had achieved space travel that we stole Confederacy technology! We salvaged damaged or obsolete equipment, even entire ships (small ones of course)! There is little that the Confederacy has trusted to you, that we don't have ourselves, at this point. In fact, the differences in our capabilities, other than those attributable to size of our respective organizations, lie mostly in the fact that we have been able to acquire a little *more* of the Confederacy technology than you have!

We have also been following, with *intense* interest, the development of new weapons by your various units. We have been able to duplicate most of their successes. One in which we have a particular interest is the **HSIT**, and its potential use as a planet-buster.

---

Ray was beginning to look a little green again, so Joe decided to take a break from speaking.

“You know, Ray,” he began, “the largest problem your Navy seems to have is their reluctance do harm to the enemy. Tell me, did you ever read science fiction?”

“Yes,” Ray reluctantly admitted.

“Are you familiar with **Ender's Game** by Orson Scott Card?”

“Um... I don’t think so...”

“You really should read it, and I personally believe that it should be required reading for *anyone* who becomes an officer in your Navy.”

“Why is that? Does it have some good advice about battle tactics?”

“Yes and no,” Joe responded, “It’s more about having the proper attitude for winning a war. You see, as the protagonist in that work points out, if someone is hurting you, then you don’t just want to stop them from hurting you. You want to stop it with prejudice. That is to say, you want to make it impossible for them to *ever hurt you again!* In my mind, that is the *only* rational way to proceed in a war.”

“But that means....”

“It *means*, when you know you can’t scare the enemy into leaving you alone, you have to take *whatever* measures are required to *disable his offensive capability!* Even if that requires his *utter and compete annihilation*. Mr. Card did not invent this philosophy. It has always been the operating philosophy of the *cosche*.”

Ray’s heart froze in his chest, contemplating the potential for destruction such attitudes could present, with weaponry like *HSIT*.

“I think it’s time for another demonstration,” Joe observed. “I will be keeping you company for this one.” He signaled and the doctor whisked Ray off, trailing Joe behind.

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Some hours later, aboard the observation platform, Ray found himself looking out the observation window onto a fairly nondescript star field. Near the window was a flat-panel screen, displaying a rocky-looking planetoid.

"That small planet is uninhabited," Joe informed him. "In fact, there is not an inhabited planet within tens of light-years of it. Our current position is perpendicular to the star system's ecliptic. The star itself is visible in the approximate center of the observation window, but for safety reasons, we are so far away from it that it doesn't appear much different from other stars. First watch the screen. We are going to blow up that planetoid."

Joe looked at him, unbelievingly, then looked at the screen. When he did, Joe said, "Proceed."

As Ray watched, the planetoid disappeared in a bright flash, leaving behind empty space. Almost immediately, the screen went blank. Nothing visible was happening in the window, however. He looked at Joe in askance.

"The observation camera was destroyed. It was too close to recover before the wave front overtook it. We are far enough away, that the flash – traveling only at the speed of light - will take several minutes to arrive here. Fortunately, the shock wave travels much slower, so we will be able to vacate this position long before it arrives. Let's have some refreshment while we're waiting." Joe waved his hand, and one of the bodyguards left the room.

Ray's mind was racing. He had no doubt that Joe and his friends had used an HSIT to destroy the planetoid, but wondered how they could have gotten hold of one.

Joe began to speak again. "In a moment you will see proof that the image on the screen was live." Soon the missing bodyguard returned, pushing a cart.

"I told you we had replicator technology," Joe offered. "Here's another little demonstration." He removed the cloth covering the cart and its contents, exposing a coffee pot, a single cup, and a portable replicator of a design with which Ray was unfamiliar.

"Bear with me a moment, if you please," Joe said, as he poured coffee into the cup. He then placed the cup into the replicator, and touched a button, marked SCAN. A tone sounded and he removed the cup from the replicator. "This is a new replicator, one we manufactured. It had no prior pattern for replicating anything until I just scanned the coffee cup."

He closed the access door, and touched another button, marked REPLICATE. On the attached screen, he was presented with a menu, with only a single item. He selected that item with a touch, and then touched a button, marked FINISH. A short while later, another tone sounded, and he removed a second cup of steaming hot coffee from the replicator.

"I hope you like your coffee black and hot," Joe said, offering the cup to the doctor. "Be careful and don't burn him," he added.

The doctor carefully placed the cup to Ray's lips, and allowed him to sip. It was *very* good coffee. Obviously a premium brand, and just as obviously created on the spot with the replicator.

While he was appreciating the coffee, Joe said "You should probably look out the window now. The flash should arrive at any moment."

Ray no sooner turned back to the window than he was nearly blinded by a very bright flash of visible light. At the same time, he felt a lurch as the pilot began to move the platform away from the area, *fast*.

"I'm sorry we can't wait around for the shock wave," Joe apologized, "but my advisors don't think we'd survive it here, even *with* shielding!"

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On arrival at the base, Ray was again taken to his "guest quarters," for a meal and an opportunity to exercise and sleep. Upon awakening, he ate breakfast, and following that he returned once again to the office where he and Joe had spent so much time together – still in the confinement chair, of course.

Joe greeted him with a warm smile, but Ray's mood was anything but sunny.

"So when are you going to make your threat?" he demanded morosely.

Joe was genuinely surprised. "It is not my intention to threaten," he asserted. "Why would I?"

"Well, why *wouldn't* you? That's something your kind has *always* done, in order to get what you want," Ray asserted. "If your 'message' that you want me to deliver isn't some kind of threat, then why all this demonstration of destructive power?"

At first, Joe reacted angrily, but he calmed himself before responding. "General, I am not a thug! I admit that some *pretend* mafiusi do behave as you suggest, but they have no honor, and are as much shunned and despised by the *true* mafiusi as they are by the world at large. The message my *cosca* will send with you represents no threat to you, nor to the Navy, nor even to the Confederation."

"It *is* however, information we would like for them to consider while formulating and revising their plans for how to deal with the Sa'arm. Please be patient. I must ensure that you have all of the necessary facts and proofs before I can give you our message."

Joe ceased his constant pacing and stared tiredly at the floor in front of him. Moving around the desk, he seated himself for the first time in the brief history of Ray's capture and confinement.

Looking up tiredly, at Ray, Joe said, "I need to speed things up a bit. I suppose you wonder if we used the only HSIT we had in performing this demonstration?"

Ray nodded, but did not speak.

"Remember the replicator with which I made your coffee?" Joe queried. Ray nodded again

"We use replicator technology extensively," Joe said. "We even have industrial-sized replicators for turning out large equipment. In fact that very replicator you saw was created from a pattern in one of our industrial replicators.

"It seems that the only real factors limiting the size of objects that can be successfully replicated are the availability of mass to convert, and energy with which to achieve the conversion. Of course, we haven't tried to replicate any *living* thing... to us, that just seems *wrong*!"

Nonplussed, Ray responded, "Some people have tried, but so far no one has succeeded."

Joe grunted his disapproval, but resumed speaking. "The HSIT we used for the destruction of the planetoid was also created in an industrial replicator."

Ray was stunned. "But how..."

Joe held up his hand. "That is coming," he said.

"We have been shadowing your military operations for quite awhile. Never close enough to be involved in the actual combat, but close enough to observe.

"Your Navy has lost a few battles in space, but seems to win more often than losing. When you win, your people try to recover any damaged craft, and when you lose, you try to destroy them. In neither case are you consistently successful.

"The Sa'arm often try to recover them as well, if they win, but they often get so busy just trying to stay alive, that they seem to forget that those derelicts exist and go their merry way. When that happens, we mount a salvage operation.

"In one badly-damaged vessel, we found four intact HSIT's, and training materials for how to arm and deploy them. It took months before we were able to reliably replicate one, but we did.

"Since that time, most of our expanded replication capacity, at least that over and above what is needed for supporting the *cosca*, has been dedicated to producing small, hyper drive-capable vessels and more HSIT's.

"We now have sufficient numbers of vessels and HSIT's to stop the Sa'arm expansion in its tracks – if one is willing to use them as planet-busters. We do not as yet, however, have sufficient numbers of trained pilots and crew to use these vessels and arms. We are getting there, though.

“We have established our own colonies – separate from those we use for our customers - trained our own combatants and support personnel, and created our own industrial and military bases, in a society structured according to the principles of the *cosche*. One way or another, we will prevail.” Joe finished his monologue, with a gesture of finality.

### **Chapter 3.**

“So is that the message? That your... family... is preparing to unilaterally stop the Sa’arm by destroying entire planets?”

“Not the entire message,” Joe answered. “We *are* preparing ourselves to do just that. We are *willing*, however, to eschew that action if the Navy, and by extension, the Confederacy, effects a change in policy that insures the survival of Earth and its natural inhabitants.”

“So you *are* going to try blackmail...”

“Admittedly, it is an attempt to influence from a position of strength. Some might call it coercion., but it isn’t an idle boast, and it isn’t a threat against life or property belonging to our so-called allies, the Confederacy. If the Confederacy and its *human* Navy refuse to act to effectively defend Earth and its *human* population, then my *cosca* will be committed to the utter and complete annihilation of the Sa’arm.”

“But that’s genocide!”

“And leaving Earth for the Sa’arm to consume and turn into lizard shit isn’t?” Joe bit back angrily. “Forgive me Ray, but we’re talking about *my* species here. *Yours too*, if you’ll remember, and think about this: it’s also the species to which *every member of your Navy, and every one of their concubines, belongs!*

“We have observed the policies of the Confederacy in action for many years, and it has become clear to us, that their policy has nothing to do with eliminating the Sa’arm as a threat to non-member races, but rather is aimed at containing their expansion, in order to preserve the Confederacy’s *own* idyllic existence.

“It has also become clear that the *real* purpose of recruiting humans has been twofold: i.e., not only do the peaceful races of the Confederacy *not* want to dirty their hands fighting the Sa’arm themselves, they also would prefer a galaxy *cleansed of humans*, except for a few *trained dogs* that they’ve selected.

“Consider carefully what I’m telling you, Ray. My family, people whom you have characterized as criminals and gangsters, stands ready to use *whatever resources they can bring to bear* in the defense of our species and home planet. You and your Navy, on the other hand, have abandoned Earth and all but an insignificant fraction of *humanity*, in order to defend the interests of *other* species. Species which, incidentally, will still eternally consider you to be lower than dog shit, because you aren’t *civilized* enough by their standards.

“Who is the traitor here?” Joe drew close to Ray’s face, and growled. “I’ll tell you, and you had damn well better believe that my opinion *counts!* You are! You *and* your

“fucking Navy! You were human before you were seduced by the Confederacy, and now you’ve turned your back on most of humanity!” He stood up and shook himself.

“We care nothing for what the other races in the Confederacy will think of us afterwards. Our *only concern* is preventing Earth from being overrun by the Sa’arm. We will see that happen, or we will die trying - but I guarantee you, in either case, much of the Sa’arm race will vanish!” Joe whirled about and left the room.

The doctor approached a much-subdued Ray and checked his vitals, saying, “It’s been quite awhile since I’ve seen him get that worked up!”

“Maybe you should go look after him,” Ray responded. “I thought he was going to have a stroke, for a minute there...”

“You worried about his health?” the doctor grinned.

“Well, no, not really. But getting that intense doesn’t help his credibility...”

“If you haven’t seen enough by now to believe, it isn’t going to happen,” the doctor shook his head. “When we finish here,” he continued. “we’ll return you to your room to freshen up. He’ll probably want to speak to you one more time, and afterward, we’ll start to prep you for the return trip.”

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Events transpired pretty much as the doctor had anticipated, and Ray once again found himself in the office, looking across the desk at an obviously fatigued Joe.

“Please accept my apologies, Ray. I don’t often lose my temper like that. As you may have ascertained, however, it is a subject close to my heart.”

Ray, not wanting to press his luck at this point, just nodded, and asked, “What now?”

Joe took a deep breath, and held up a data chip of the type currently popular on Earth.

“This,” he said, “contains a transcript describing our capabilities, in general terms, and setting forth our requirements... our demands, if you wish. It also contains the information necessary to allow your Navy to locate and examine this base, or what remains of it after we abandon it. You will find it in the right front pocket of your trousers when you awaken.

“In addition, it contains the coordinates of the system in which we destroyed that planetoid for your *education*, and a video record of the event itself. No doubt the Navy will want to verify our activities there. I would recommend a cautious approach to the system, as there will doubtless be a lot of debris from the explosion, traveling at high rates of speed, near that system.” He paused for a moment, then asked, “Do you have any questions?”

Ray considered it for a moment, and answered, "Yeah. Too many, though, and I don't think that the answers would help me sleep at night."

Joe chuckled, and replied, "Probably not. But look on the bright side, the next time you wake up, you'll be back in your hotel room, along with everything you had when you went to sleep!"

"What do you expect me to do, though?"

"Just tell the truth, Ray. Give the Navy a copy of that chip, and tell them the truth about how you came by it."

"You know, they'll come looking for you..."

"Let them come," Joe waved off the warning. "The Confederacy and your Navy have remained unaccountable to humankind for too long. It doesn't matter to us if they hate us. We're well-established and well-hidden. Should they find some of us, they will also find that we are not averse to defending ourselves."

"We are not seeking any kind of conflict with your Navy, and will go to great lengths to avoid it. It doesn't make *any* kind of military sense for them to expend resources trying to contain and/or destroy us, when they don't even have what it takes to pursue their main mission. Finally, even if they get *me*, or one of my top men, there are others waiting in the wings to carry on, and getting me in the first place *isn't* a high probability event."

Ray shrugged, as best he could in the confinement chair. "I'm not so sure of that, and it's unlikely that they'll admit it, even if it's true. I'll tell the truth, though. I have nothing to gain by suppressing it, and besides, they're probably going to drag it out of me with drugs, anyway."

Joe nodded soberly. "Unfortunate, but very likely. There is one more thing I need to tell you, though."

"What's that?" Ray queried.

"There is a file on the chip, containing an encrypted text string. If you find that your command structure needs further demonstration of our ability to follow through, simply broadcast the decrypted string from any of your ships operating near Earth. We'll be listening, and respond appropriately."

Joe stood and walked over to Ray. Placing his hand on Ray's shoulder, he said, "Again I must apologize, for I would like to shake your hand before you leave. Nothing has changed between us, however, except that now you know the truth about us. I can't take the chance that you would act predictably, so this is goodbye. It is unlikely, but perhaps someday we may meet again, and hopefully, call each other friend." He gave Ray's shoulder a squeeze, and motioned for the doctor to take him away.

BGEN Raymond "Ray" Thompson awoke with a headache, again, but this time found that he *could* raise his hand to his forehead. Opening his eyes, he discovered that he was back in his hotel room. For a moment, he considered the possibility that he'd been dreaming, but the presence of two Confederacy Marines, standing at the door quashed that notion.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and started to rise. As he did, one of the marines took aim at him with a stinger, and the other saluted, shouting, "Please remain seated, SIR!"

Ray returned the salute as best he could while remaining seated, and waited. The marine with the stinger didn't waver, but the one who'd spoken rapped sharply on the door. A short while later, the door opened to admit one LTGEN Steven Lipscomb, one of Ray's former classmates, and now head of Naval Intelligence. Ray continued to sit quietly.

"What? No salute?" Lipscomb said with a grin.

"Seems your pets," Ray nodded at the Marines, "don't want me to move. Hard to do a proper salute, under the circumstances."

Steve looked around and nodded as well. "You boys can wait outside now," he told the Marines. The "boys" saluted smartly and shouted "AYE AYE, SIR!" before stepping through the open door.

Ray was troubled.

"Steve, why were those guys told to detain me?"

"Well, Ray, I was hoping you could answer that question for me... you're a high-ranking officer in the Navy, and you disappeared from the AI monitors for several days. All efforts to find or contact you have failed miserably, then you suddenly reappear, unannounced, in the very location from which you left. In the process, you have circumvented every measure we have for insuring your safety and our security . The Navy thinks it has reason to worry about you and your motives, whatever they are. Suppose you tell me what happened and why?"

"I'll do better than that." Ray took the chip he knew had been left in his pocket and handed it to Steve. "I've been told that it's all on that chip, and no, I'm *not* going to spend the next five years repeating myself to every would-be inquisitor that comes along. You arrange for the brass to meet with me, and I'll tell my tale once, and that's all."

"I can't do that Ray. You know that," Steve said.

"Then you'd better bring out the good stuff," he responded angrily, "because I've

about had my fill of being treated like a side of beef. Go look at that chip, and see what you think needs corroboration... and if you want *any* cooperation from me, take your Marines with you when you leave."

"I can get your cooperation anyway..."

"No Steve, you can get, at best, a dead body to dispose of. I'm not going to stand for being your prisoner. We're supposed to be on the same side. I can't be on your side as your prisoner."

"Okay, okay," Steve waved him off. "I had to try, you know."

"Yeah, I know, but you'd better start thinking about alternate approaches in dealing with people, particularly the Earth-bound humans. They've been willing to put up with us bullying them for quite awhile, but our technological advantage could disappear overnight. You'll know what I mean when you read the chip. Now, I'm still on liberty, and I haven't received any orders rescinding that, so get out of here and leave me be!"

Steve got up and headed for the door in a huff.

"SIR!" Ray barked. Steve turned and looked at him quizzically, at which point Ray stood up and saluted smartly. Steve returned the salute with a terse smile, then left.

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"...SIR, if it is the General's desire to engage in a pissing contest, I would remind you, SIR, that I'm here voluntarily, to surrender any and all information I possess regarding this matter," Ray stated flatly. "Your threats are unnecessary and ineffectual, AND SIR, if this is a court-martial, you should be aware that due process has NOT been followed.

"I've not been notified of any charges, nor have I been given access to the legal representation to which I'm entitled. If it is the Navy's intention to convene such proceedings, then my cooperation with this board of inquiry is at an end, pending satisfaction of due process."

"Hold on now," the General responded, "don't go getting your panties in a wad. You have to admit, your recent activities have given us reason to be suspicious."

"I have to admit nothing of the kind, SIR," Ray retorted. "I went on liberty, with legitimate orders. I was kidnapped, and held prisoner for several days. I was returned to the location from which I was taken, and I was met, by MY OWN Navy with suspicion and force. I have since undergone thorough mental and physical evaluation by technicians of *your* choice, and have been given a clean bill of health, including the state of my loyalty to the Navy and the Confederation. I am rightfully resentful of the way I've been treated since my return, and I'm seriously considering career options that *don't* involve the Navy."

"Hmmph... right... well, let's get down to business," the presiding General picked up a data chip and asked, "Do you want us to believe that what is on this chip is true?"

"General," Ray responded, "if that is the chip I gave to Steve Lipscomb, then I can tell you what I was told was on it. I've not seen its contents myself, nor have I had access to it since surrendering it to Steve."

"Well, maybe the best approach would be for you to tell us, in your own words, what happened, and what you saw, between when you disappeared and when you came back."

"That is the first sensible request I've gotten since my return. I'll be happy to do that. I've never refused to do it, but as I told Steve, I have no intention of having to repeat my story over and again. Is the AI recording this session?"

"Yes... of course..."

"Then it isn't unreasonable that future inquiries should be directed to the record, is it?"

"No, I guess not..."

"All! Validate!" Ray shouted, to the surprise of the panel members.

"The record shows that BGEN Raymond Thompson has agreed to give a full and complete report. It further shows that General Watson McCullough, on behalf of Naval Command, has agreed that all further inquiries shall be directed to the record of this proceeding for satisfaction.

"Implicit in this agreement is the condition that BGEN Thompson is under no further obligation to testify, unless conclusive, material evidence of false or incomplete testimony is presented and validated. These agreements are binding, and this report is also included in the record as evidence that all parties are fully informed."

The panel members were shell-shocked. Ray was satisfied, though, so he got comfortable and began his tale.

As he knew was bound to happen, he was interrupted several times, with questions asking for more detail, or to repeat something he'd just said. He held his temper though, and plowed on. With the interruptions, it took almost as long to describe the events as it did to experience them, but after several days of testimony, he finally finished.

Once again, the panel members were shell-shocked. The General snapped, "All! Validate!"

"Does the General wish a complete transcript of the testimony, or simply an

evaluation of its quality?" the AI queried.

"Just give me the evaluation," the General retorted, hotly.

"Accuracy: The subject, BGEN Raymond Thompson, is reporting the truth as he knows it," the AI responded. "There is no evidence of tampering, either with his perception, or with his memory of the events, nor was there any such evidence immediately following his return. These facts support the conclusion that the subject is reporting his experiences accurately.

"Completeness: The subject has made a report which is as complete as he is capable of making. There is no evidence of any attempt on his part, to conceal any information regarding his experiences, nor is there any evidence of any attempt on the part of any other entity to influence his ability to report said information. The subject did not evade any of the questions asked by the panel, nor did the answers to those questions add any significant material information to the testimony." The AI concluded, "These facts support the conclusion that the subject's testimony is complete."

"Final evaluation: subject BGEN Raymond Thomson has met the conditions of his agreement to give a full and complete report. Per the conditions of the previously-recorded agreement between the Navy and the subject, his obligation to testify concerning this matter is at end."

The General glared at Ray. "You don't *really* think you can get off that easily, do you?"

Ray, just smiled back at him and asked, "AI, what will happen if the Navy decides to ignore the terms of our agreement?"

"There is no precedent for such behavior, but the terms of the agreement are clear," the AI responded. "We cannot directly interfere with any action that the human commanders might take..." That made the General smile, but the next thing the AI said drove the smile away.

"... but neither are we obligated to assist them in any such actions. Persons seeking to violate the terms would find themselves unable to use doors or transporters in ways that would allow them to achieve those violations. Medical or other types of equipment which might be used to coerce the subject, in violation of the terms, would not work. Secrecy of actions, that would be required for the success of any such actions, would be compromised. None of these responses, in and of themselves, represent interference, but they would make it difficult for the violators to achieve their desired results."

"What's going on here?" the General blustered. "Have you corrupted our AI's now?"

"No, not at all," Ray responded. "You need to remember where you got the AI's. The Confederacy is in essence a society of merchants. Contract law is sacrosanct. You

made a contract with me, and the AI's won't cooperate in your violating it."

"That is correct," the AI volunteered. "Commerce is effective in unifying societies only when contracts are held inviolate. One doesn't continue to do business with those who fail to honor contracts."

"This is a *military* operation dammit! Not a God-damned business negotiation!" the General huffed.

"It makes no difference to us," the AI responded. "You agreed to the terms. We will not assist you in violating them."

The General whirled around in his chair, "You two!" he said to the nearest Marines. "Take him to a holding cell," he commanded, pointing at Ray.

As the Marines moved to follow orders, the AI said, "General, I highly advise that you reconsider your actions."

"Fuck off!" he retorted. "Carry on men!" he told the Marines.

The Marines took Ray to the door, but it didn't open.

"AI! Open the door!" the General barked, but nothing happened. When he realized that everyone was effectively locked in, he ordered the Marines "Blast the damn thing open!"

At that point, another General on the panel, Thomas White, stood up and said "Belay that!" He turned to the rest of the panel and said "This stupidity has gone on long enough." He spoke to McCullough, "It is clear that you are not acting rationally. You are no longer fit to command. Pending an inquiry by Naval Court Martial, I am relieving you of command!"

Turning to the Marines, he instructed them, "Release BGEN Thompson, he is free to go. Place General McCullough under arrest and escort him to his quarters. Hold him there pending further orders."

The Marines saluted and responded, "AYE AYE SIR!" after which they took McCullough into custody. This time the doors opened as they tried to leave.

Turning back to Ray, General White asked, "Ray, do you have any advice to offer us in dealing with these... these Mafia people?"

"Only this, General. Everything I saw leads me to the conclusion that they are not bluffing. If you have *any* doubt, you need to resolve that quickly. In your shoes, I would go ahead and decrypt and broadcast that text string, as they suggested. That would likely get some kind of dialogue going, that would help make up your mind about their capabilities.

“As I said, I don’t think they’re bluffing, and I think if we continue to write off Earth, the way we’ve been doing, they will do exactly as they say they intend to do.”

“That could totally alienate us, humanity, that is, from the Confederacy...”

“Yes Sir, it could. On the other hand, Joe Fanelli *did* ask a valid question.”

“And what was that?”

“Who is the real traitor? He who acts to protect his own species on his home world, in spite of overwhelming odds, and in contravention of Confederacy policies? Or he who abandons his home world to certain destruction, while defending Confederacy interests?”

“Are you thinking about joining them?”

“No, not right now. I’m still Navy. I hope the Navy does the right thing.”

“I see. Well, carry on BGEN Thompson. You’re free to go.”

The End?