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## Just Across Town

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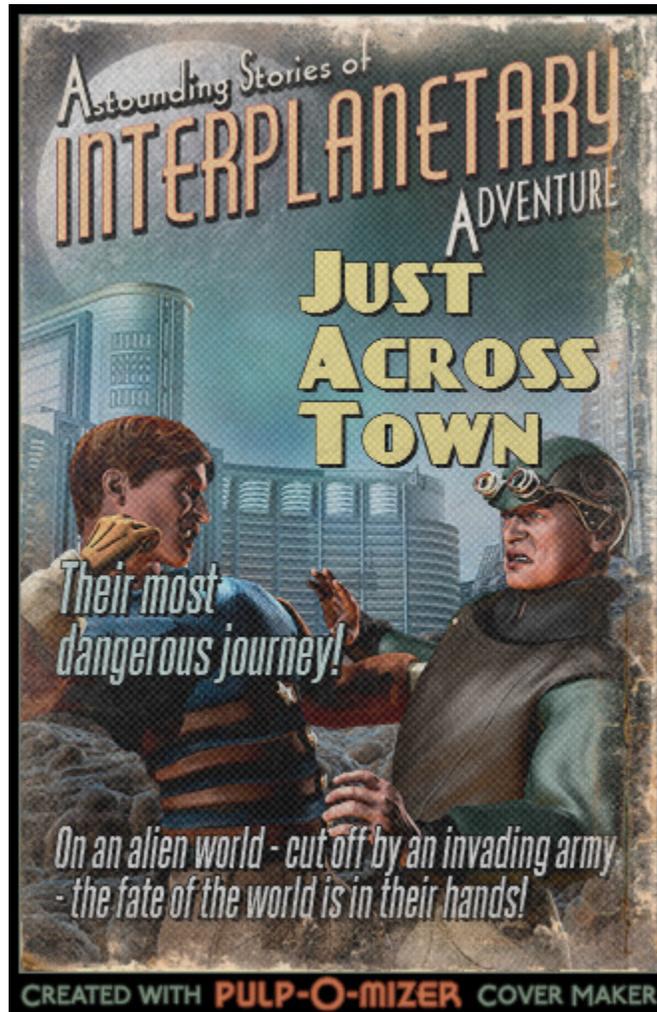
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## **Just Across Town**

*They've traveled light-years across the galaxy, and millions of kilometers around planetary systems, but their longest journey was the night they tried to just get across town.*

The mottled green and blue surface of the small planet Jorab rose up to fill the view screen at Alex Kingsway's navigation station on the bridge of the small starship *Not Yet*. Next to him sat his friend and captain, Eddie Howard. Eddie kept his eyes on the piloting display as he deftly controlled the ship's descent. "Adjust your trim a bit to starboard, Eddie. We should be able to see the city in the next minute or so," Alex said casually. "Should we invite the Consul up here to watch?" Eddie shook his

head, “No, he can watch from his stateroom. Besides, where would he sit?” He gestured around the cramped cockpit. “If we hit turbulence, he'd have nothing to hold on to.” Alex nodded agreement; the small ship, which Eddie had purchased at a government auction after a career in the Space Patrol of the Kingdom of Glauden, was built for efficiency, not comfort. The close quarters did not bother them after years in space, but Alex suspected the Consul, as a landsman, might not like it.

Alex keyed the ship's communication circuit, “Consul Tellis, we're about twenty minutes from final approach. If you'd like to turn on your viewing screen, you can watch our descent to Jorab.” The Consul's smooth voice flowed rhythmically out of the speaker, “Thank you, Mister Kingsway. I have been watching with interest for some time now.” The Consul, Alex thought, always seemed to be paying attention to everything. He was particularly interested in the *Not Yet* and how it operated. He had spent a great deal of time in the engineering compartment after he discovered that Jake Radley, the engineer, was willing to let him wander around and explore the cramped drive compartment.

Scott Heath, the medic and the last member of the crew, had tried engaging the Consul in conversation but found him very sparse in his answers. Consul Tellis expressed a lack of interest in discussing bars and bar fights, two of Scott's favorite subjects. “I assumed that they have bars on Jorab,” Scott confided to Alex later. “But now I'm not sure. I thought diplomats pretty much lived for cocktail parties. Do you think that Jorab has some kind of cultural bias against alcohol or something? That'll suck if we end up sticking around for very long.” “Well, Scott, if there's no booze, you ask Eddie if we can leave right away,” Alex replied with a grin. “Good luck with that.”

Several days earlier, the crew had been relaxing and touring Kingport, the capital city of the planet Dravida when they were approached by the Dravidian government on behalf of the Jorabite consulate. The Consul had been unable to find a shipping liner willing to make a run to Jorab, which was far from established trade routes. Eddie quickly accepted the charter, as it fit in with their plan of touring the worlds around the Kingdom of Glauden. Jorab was on the list, even though they had

intended to remain on Dravida a while longer. The charter was just the Consul and a consignment of goods he had purchased for the Jorabite government. Eddie sent Alex and Jake to do some research before they departed. They reported that Jorab was a small and sparsely populated world with a thin but breathable atmosphere. The Jorabites had no starships of their own, as their technology was not even to early industrialization levels. They had to rely on chartered ships for all of their interstellar transportation.

Alex was surprised when they first met the Consul, as he was the shortest man Alex had ever seen. Only one and a half meters in height, the Consul looked like he massed at most 55 kilograms. He spoke Galactic Standard, but with a rolling accent Alex had never encountered before. “Our people have their own language, naturally,” Consul Tellis explained, “but I and some of the landowning class have traveled to other star systems to explore markets for interstellar trade. We hope to gradually bring our world into full participation with the interstellar community.

“When we arrive, Captain Howard, I hope that you and your crew will accompany me to the palace. My cousin, the Premier, is hosting a banquet for my return. On Jorab we are very fond of banquets. The Premier is expecting me to report to him as soon as we arrive and I'm sure he will want to meet you. We enjoy having visitors, and you and your crew are doing us a great service as well.”

“We'd be honored, Consul Tellis. We'll take real food over reconstituted rations any time we can get it. Scott's a good medic but a lousy cook. Do you export food?”

“Yes, primarily we sell foodstuffs right now, both bulk grains and some very popular liquors but we are developing markets for furniture and decorative hardwood items. Of course, we're not trying to export those *en masse*. Most of those have been custom orders to planetary governments. Dravida has recently re-furnished one of their government offices with our pieces.”

Although the Consul had seemed willing enough to talk about his people and his effort to develop trade, Alex thought it odd that he was very secretive about the

cargo he was bringing back from Dravida. Even after a week of friendly conversation, Alex had no idea what they were transporting. He had mentioned his curiosity to Eddie, who said, "I know, right? I spoke to the Dravidan port authorities about it. All they would tell me is that Tellis had bought the stuff legit from the Dravidan government so there was no problem with it clearing customs. 'You're just shipping it,' they told me, 'so you don't need to know.' It's not radioactive, corrosive or alive, that's all they'd tell me. We're getting paid a fair rate and we wanted to visit Jorab anyway, right? So don't worry about it."

The interstellar trip went smoothly, apart from the *Not Yet's* sub-par performance on interstellar drives, which made a seven days' trip in ten and a half. Eddie had told Alex that he suspected the Space Patrol had decommissioned the ship because of this defect, and that was why the price was one Eddie could afford. Once Jake, who was a former Space Patrol man himself, had heard about this problem, he had been eager to join the crew, convinced that he could get the ship up to standard speed.

Now the ship was on its final approach to landing on Jorab. Alex noted that the sun was going to be low to the horizon when they landed. He touched the comm panel and asked the Consul if they were going to be late for the banquet. "Certainly not. They are waiting for us, so we cannot be late. But all the same, we should not keep them waiting long."

Using a frequency setting the Consul gave him Alex made radio contact with the "spaceport" to announce their arrival and the return of the Consul. He noted down on his console then passed to Eddie a set of coordinates for him to steer towards, adding that "the landing field's on the west side of town. There's a radio beacon but that's all you'll get to guide in on. Oh, and the field's too short for a glide landing, you'll have to drop it in straight down." Eddie snorted in displeasure. "Back in the Patrol, we had to practice landing on primitive fields, but I haven't had to do it in over five years."

"Hey, Eddie, I'll take over and do the landing if you think you can't handle it anymore," Alex joked good-naturedly. "Vertical landings aren't that hard if you know

what you're doing.” Alex knew his friend could do it, but he enjoyed heckling him. The two liked to trade good-natured jabs; they had begun years ago when they were competing for the affections of a young lady.

“I'll do it, right?” Eddie retorted. “I don't mind the vertical part, and with contra-gravity we don't have to deal with rocket down-blast.”

Consul Tellis spoke again, “My apologies, Captain Howard. I am aware that our landing facility is rudimentary at present. Currently we do not have the funds for more extensive development. It is my hope that we will be able to finance more construction with some more sales in the near future.”

Turning to the communication panel Eddie said to Consul Tellis, “The small target area isn't that big of a problem, but we will burn extra fuel running the contra-gravity full on. Normally what we do is glide in like an old-fashioned airplane - you know about airplanes, right? - using the CG thrusters for lift until the drag slows the ship down. What you want to do with your landing area is make it long and wide so a ship can just float down and coast to a stop. Now, early spaceships had chemical rocket engines and had to come straight down. The rocket down-blast would sometimes go right through concrete or rock and leave a big crater on the landing pad. It's hard to clean up, right? Trust me though, I'll put the *Not Yet* down right where you want it, give or take a meter.”

“Yes, we know about airplanes,” the Consul replied, “but you'll not find any on Jorab. Our atmosphere is a bit too thin to sustain lift.”

Eddie was as good as his word. Alex felt only a small and expected wobble when the contra-gravity halted their forward motion and began the vertical descent. Display panels that normally showed a radar map of the ship's surroundings switched to visuals from cameras mounted on the ship's underside. As the ship neared touchdown, Alex increased the magnification on his repeater screen. Upon closer inspection, he discovered that the landing field, bright white even in the gathering darkness of an approaching sunset, was not a solid smooth surface, but was actually very evenly spread crushed stone. Alex wondered how long it had taken

them to lay the field, which was easily fifty meters square, given that the Jorabites did not have the industrial base to build robots or even powered equipment. A few stone structures were clustered at one end of the field, including a large building from which a radio tower extended from the roof. The surrounding plains were bare of trees except for one cluster a kilometer distant.

“May I have access to the radio please?” the Consul asked. Alex transferred the comm circuit to him, but left the channel open in the cockpit. The Consul spoke unhurriedly in his own language, and received a brief deferential reply. “There will be a crew standing by to unload the crate once we have landed, and my carriage will be waiting to take us to the palace, gentlemen,” he explained. “So should we change clothes or anything?” Eddie inquired. “You can if you wish, but it will not offend anyone for you to go as you are,” the Consul assured him.

“Let's wear our uniform jackets; it will make us look more professional,” Eddie decided. Alex nodded his agreement, then keyed Scott and Jake into the comm circuit, and relayed the instruction.

Alex went through the post-landing and engine shutdown sequence automatically. His eyes were still on his visual display, getting a first look at the city standing among the rolling grasslands. The first thing he noticed was that everything seemed to be built of stone. Given the apparent scarcity of trees, this made sense.

As soon as the ship touched down, a crowd of people approached from the small cluster of buildings at one end of the square. All of them were short, like Consul Tellis. Several were leading a large flat cart drawn by four animals. Eddie escorted the Consul out the passenger airlock, and Alex joined Jake at the cargo doors to assist with unloading the crate. When the vacuum seal broke and the ship's air rushed out, Alex and Jake breathed in deeply, relishing the change from recycled air and catching the different scent of a new planet. A Jorabite man in clean brown overalls led a team of workers up the ramp and welcomed the two. He assured them that they needed no assistance, and seemed concerned that Alex and Jake not touch the cargo container.

Alex exited down the ramp and jumped the last half, just for the fun of it. “Low-G ballet,” he muttered to himself. With a carefree step he made his way around to the front of the ship and joined Eddie and the Consul who were talking. Eddie, smiling broadly, leaped into the air, rising higher than the Consul’s head. “Very good, Captain Howard.” Tellis congratulated him. “Perhaps later you will see some of our people dance the *faeknal*, a dance of our harvest feast. The best dancers leap even higher than that.” Eddie fell slowly to the ground, smiling all the way. “Dang, Alex, I could get used to this. Lower gravity isn't any fun when you're shut up inside a ship. Out here you can really move around,” Scott came up to join them and took Eddie by the arm before he could leap again. “Knock it off, Eddie. Remember, weight depends on gravity but mass is constant. You can still fall and hurt yourself, even at point three-four G. Try to remember the atmosphere here is much thinner than on Glauden, it's like we're high up in the Adalandrian Mountains, so the oxygen content is lower than we're used to. Even with stepping down the ship’s air pressure and the metabolic meds I've been putting in the food, it will take us all some time to get acclimatized.” Eddie gave one more hop, grinning broadly as Scott glared at him.

An open topped carriage was brought onto the field for the Consul and his guests. It was drawn by two tan, furry quadrupeds the size of ponies. Tellis climbed into the carriage and invited the crew to join him. “The landing field is on the other side of the city from the palace, which is where the banquet is being held. We will ride together.” Alex and the others climbed aboard. Looking to his left as he sat down, Alex saw that the cargo pallet was already some distance away, heading in a different direction.

Eddie politely inquired about the town and the people, and Consul Tellis talked at length about them. For a time, Alex tuned out the conversation in the carriage, as he was concentrating on getting his bearings. It was habit, after years of working in navigation, to always study the lay of the land, and know where he was. As they entered the town, Alex especially noted the large and impressive stone church, with the distinctive three-bar cross atop it. As the largest building he could

see it made an excellent landmark. At least on the main street, the houses were all constructed of light-colored stone. The streets were brightly lit by torches or oil lamps, so they could all see the rows of neat houses with the ornamental carvings in their stone exteriors.

Alex thought it was a decent ride despite the slow speed; the streets were all stone-paved and the carriage was equipped with soft cushioned seats and designs carved into the wood. Jake leaned way out over the side to look at the suspension and nearly fell out when the carriage hit a bump. Despite this, Jake remarked several times on how smooth the ride was. Townsfolk were not exactly lining the streets parade-fashion, but many were out about their business, and stopped to show their respect to Consul Tellis, and to get a glimpse of the tall foreigners. Before long Alex figured some people were running ahead to spread the news, as the crowds got larger as they went along. Alex noticed particularly a word that he heard repeated by many of the people, and asked the Consul what it meant. "The word 'plaoth', Mister Kingsway, means 'tall ones'," he explained. "Very few of our people have ever seen anyone of your stature before."

They passed more well-kept and decorated houses, a smaller chapel and drove through a market square. In the square they saw a tall monument, showing a statue of a Jorabite man in armor. "That is Tuvenik, one of our kings of old," Tellis told them. "He was a warrior, but also a great lover of art. He had the original palace constructed. It has been re-designed several times since his days, but many of its decorations are original, and some carved by Tuvenik's own hand."

The city, Alex observed, sort of sprawled across a couple of low hills, flowing with the slopes instead of keeping to straight lines and corners. The winding main road led towards a river. A wide stone bridge spanned the river, arching high over the water so boats could pass beneath. As Alex looked across the river, he saw that the opposite side was a wide hill that formed a ridge, running far upstream. Along the river's edge on the near side he could see warehouses and boat docks, and on the far side there was a small landing with several boats beached. Alone atop that hill sat the Palace, a large multi-story stone structure ablaze with light from the

many windows. The Consul noted his guests' looks of admiration. "At some point you must step out onto the Grand Terrace on the east side. It offers a wonderful view of the sea, which is just on the other side of the hill. The Palace is also the only building on the planet with what you would call modern conveniences. Last year we purchased and installed a fusion generator to provide lights and heating."

Alex studied the architecture as the carriage drew up in front of the palace. The building was not large by Glaudenese standards, only three stories high, but the exterior was all richly decorated and ornamented stone, even more so than what they had seen in town. Light and dark stone blocks formed a bold pattern across the face of the palace. He got absently out of the carriage, still admiring the artistry.

At the large main doors, standing in the glow of electric lights were a group of courtiers and several soldiers, who snapped to attention as the Consul stepped down. Alex listened absently to Scott, who was admiringly talking about the guards' weapons, which Scott identified as repeating crossbows. "So how come you don't have firearms?" Scott asked the Consul. "Ah," he replied "we find these to be very reliable and effective. Our people have a long history of warfare with these. Besides our soil lacks the mineral sulfur which as you know is an ingredient in gunpowder."

At this point the Consul signaled that it was time to go inside. "I must deliver my report to the Premier before I can join you at the banquet," Tellis informed them. "Go on through to the Great Hall, and I will see you there later."

A large crowd of people were mingling around the Palace, all of them, as advertised, short as the Consul. There was a lot of applause and cheering when the off-world visitors were announced. Alex was abashed at suddenly being the center of attention, and he could see Eddie and Jake were uncomfortable as well. Scott, who was always ready to carouse, strode confidently into the crowd and started mingling right away. Alex instead headed for the buffet tables first. Taking anything that was offered him, he quickly filled a plate with helpings of local fruits and pastries. "Anything's better than galley food," he told the server who smiled but seemed to not understand him. Another server was pouring drinks of a light yellow color, so he took one to wash down the snacks. Jake bypassed the food and started examining

the decorated columns holding up the roof. Eddie filled a plate and then looked around for a place to sit down. He settled on a bench by some leafy plants and a fountain. All of them soon had local folk coming around talking to them.

The Jorabites were excited to meet the newcomers. The difference in height was apparently very amusing; people kept reaching up to touch the tops of the crew's heads. Several of the ladies smiled at Alex, who smiled right back. "Plaoth," he said, grinning and pointing to himself. This was greeted with more laughter and cheerful talk, much of which Alex didn't understand. He continued to smile and nod.

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After an hour or so, Alex went out onto a balcony to get a look at the sea. By now the sun was completely down, but the beach was still visible. The sound of the gentle surf was still audible above the sounds of the party inside. Alex leaned on the railing to steady himself while breathing deeply, trying to clear his head. The thinner air didn't help matters, and the drink he had tried was making his head hurt. After sipping some, he had asked a server what was in it, but didn't really understand the answer. It was stronger stuff than Alex enjoyed; so he set the half full glass down somewhere the server couldn't see it. He grinned as he recalled seeing Scott drink several glasses of it in a row. He wondered where Scott had gotten off to.

Alex stared out into the darkness over the sea even after his head stopped throbbing, as the night was warm and the smell of the sea was pleasant. More of the Jorabites came out to visit the newcomer, and Alex made light conversation for nearly an hour with one person after another. Eventually, Eddie appeared on the terrace and leaned up against the railing. Grinning happily, he said "These folks are all right, Alex. One of the officials inside was telling me the history of the city. They've been here for almost four hundred years, and put their energy into art and architecture instead of mechanization. I mean, look at this railing we're leaning on. Hand carved, every bit of it. This is the kind of stuff that made me want to go out and explore the worlds. And the food's great too. Did you try that yellowish wine they were serving downstairs?" Alex put up his hands, "Yeah, I tried it but it didn't

sit well. Scott seemed to like it, though.” “That's because Scott will drink anything once,” Eddie laughed. “But that stuff was actually good.” They both laughed.

Looking out again towards the sea, Alex thought he saw something moving over the water. He strained his eyes but the light from the palace behind him made it hard to see anything, so he pulled a mini-telescope out of a jacket pocket and scanned around. After a few moments, he spotted it. There was a motor boat of some kind headed towards the shore from the north east. Alex continued to watch as the craft got bigger in his scope until it was close enough to see it without the telescope, dimly reflecting the light from the windows.

“What are you looking at, Alex?” Eddie inquired.

“Something out on the water,” Alex replied. He handed over the telescope and pointed towards the sea.

“It looks like a boat. No, wait, there's definitely more than one of them,” Eddie said. “From what the Consul explained, I got the idea that the Jorabites didn't have any powered vehicles. So where are these coming from?” he remarked to Alex, concern creeping into his voice.

By now, the two men could see the boats approaching the shore even without the telescope. The ships drove straight on, running right up to the beach, lurching to a halt on the sand. Then one by one the front ends of the ships began folding down into ramps, and men began rushing down them onto the beach. By this time, others on the balcony had seen the boats too. Many rushed back inside shouting the news. The noise from within increased dramatically and Alex guessed that there would soon be a panic. He ducked below the railing, sat down and switched on his earpiece communicator. Eddie squatted beside him. “Hey Scott, Jake, are you guys on the beam?” Alex whispered. Then realizing that this was silly, he said it again louder. “We've got a problem here guys, please respond. Jake, Scott, where are you?”

Jake was the first to respond. “Hey Alex, I'll be up in a few minutes. Have you seen the stonework down in the main audience chamber? The chamberlain's been

explaining to me how they got the big columns set up in here without any power lifters. He just got called away about something.”

“Yeah, that's great Jake. Now would you get up here?” Alex replied.

Scott beeped in, “Alex, this had better be important. I'm right in the middle of something.” Alex thought he heard female giggling in the background. “I think we can call an invasion important,” Alex retorted. “Where are you?”

“Did you say invasion? Are you serious?” Scott replied, astonished.

Jake beeped in again. “Alex, everybody down here started shouting. They sound worried, but I'm still not getting the local lingo. I'm coming to find you. What's going on?”

Alex glanced over the railing. “Eddie and I are on the grand balcony, third level, sea side. There's a fleet of boats that just beached below the palace, and a small company of soldiers are heading up this way. I have no idea who they are but they look to be our size. Plus, they're carrying guns of some type.”

As he was speaking, Consul Tellis dashed out onto the balcony and crouched next to Alex and Eddie. “Captain Howard, I am going to need you and your crew to help me. I'm sure by now you've observed that we are under attack. I need you to . . . .” Several flashes of light played on the palace walls, followed a fraction later by a stutter of booms, mixed with cries of pain from below and frightened screams from the guests on the balcony, who fled in panic. Alex peered through the balcony railing to see squads of Jorabite guardsmen forming up on the hilltop to face the invaders. They were terribly outnumbered, but stood their ground firing volleys of bolts into the mass of men marching slowly up the slope. A few of the attackers fell, but the rest stepped over the bodies and pressed forward. At thirty meters the invading force halted and the front ranks leveled their weapons at the Jorabite guards. As Alex watched, most of them fell before the flash-and-boom of the strange guns. The survivors retreated back to the palace through a side door, behind the cover of the cloud of gray smoke the guns produced. Somewhere above them, a bell rang out.

Consul Tellis tried again, "I need you to get me to the military headquarters building. If we are to stop this invasion, I have to get there." Alex looked at Eddie, who was looking out at the soldiers advancing towards the palace. The first of them had reached the doors, and had forced them open. As they began to file inside, Alex counted heads, and wished he had brought even his sidearm with him.

"Are any of us armed?" He whispered to Eddie. "I'm not, and I'm sure Jake isn't. I don't think he owns a handgun. Scott might be, but he came prepared for a party, not a bar brawl."

At that moment, Scott beeped in on the comm again, "Alex? Where the devil are you? A gang of these soldiers are running around waving *swords* if you can believe it. It looks like they're trying to herd people downstairs. I decked one of them and my friends have him tied up. I've got a gun, but it's not like any I've ever used before. What the devil is going on?"

Alex looked at Tellis. "Scott says he's captured one of the soldiers and has his gun. We need him up here before we try breaking out of the palace."

Consul Tellis shook his head. "Tell him to make his way to the library on the second level." Alex nodded, and then relayed the directions to Scott, adding, "We'll meet you there."

Eddie looked over the railing again. "I counted a couple dozen men at the least. Who are these people and what's going on, Consul?"

"There's no time to explain now, but I will, I promise," the Consul replied. "The Palace guards will be busy protecting the Premier, so I need your help to get me across town to the military headquarters. I'm an officer in our armed forces, as are all landowners. That bell is a signal for our defense forces to rally at the headquarters building. If they are attacking here, we must assume they are attacking the town as well."

Eddie pondered for a few moments then glanced at Alex, "Remember the Patrol creed?" "Just what I was thinking," Alex replied. "So we know what to do."

Eddie turned back to the Consul. “Consul Tellis, you have our help. What do you think is the best route to your HQ?”

“We might be able to cross the bridge again and if not, there are a number of boat docks along the river. Once we are across the river, we should head straight towards the military headquarters. There's a map of the city in the library. It's just down this way. Follow me.”

Jake arrived at the balcony doorway as they were leaving. “Come on,” Alex said, turning Jake around and pointing him towards the stairs.

“Where are we going now? And who are these people?” Jake demanded as he hurried after them.

They rushed along the corridor and down a flight of steps. As they neared the next level down, they saw Scott pounding up the stairs from below, hefting a primitive looking gun. The Consul directed him to one hallway and Scott fell in beside Jake. “Any idea what's going on?” Scott puffed.

“Not a clue. Ask Eddie,” Jake responded.

The Consul cautiously pushed the library door open and peered in. Seeing that the room was empty, he slipped through the doorway. As soon as they were all inside, the four spacers all began talking at once. Eddie waved for quiet, and turned to the Consul, “All right, Consul Tellis, would you explain what's going on?”

Tellis sighed and nodded. “A few months ago, one of our fishing boats was blown far off the coast by a windstorm. We had thought it lost, but several days later, it reappeared, but with only two of the five crewmen, and only one of them was alive. The survivor told us that they had found themselves beaching on an island far over the horizon to the east,” Tellis gestured towards the window overlooking the sea. “We knew of this island, but have never explored it. They had all gone ashore in search of water and food, when they came upon an armed camp, with scores of men of similar stature to you. Before they could even ask for help, they were attacked, and three of our men were slain by what we now know to be guns of some kind. The other two fled back to the boat and were chased. The fourth was killed as the boat

pulled away from the island. We sent out another boat to investigate, but this one was turned away from the island with gunfire even before it had a chance to land. They saw hundreds of these men. Last month, we found a spy, one of the tall ones, in the city. He fought like a madman when we cornered him, and killed four of our soldiers and wounded several more before he was subdued. He has not talked, but has twice now tried to kill his guards. Since the spy was discovered, we have been preparing for the possibility of an attack, but we misjudged how quickly these men would seek to move against us. Now we are faced with an attack, and the time for diplomacy has passed. I must get to the headquarters building, where my household guards are mustering. Also, that which you brought here will be of use, but I have the only key to open the crate. We can plan our route using this.” He gestured to the large, low table by the window.

Soon they were standing around it, admiring a scale model of the city with each building finely carved out of the local hard wood. The streets were lined with real stone, and the river had water in it.

“Here is the palace,” Consul Tellis said, pointing at the large model atop a hill. “Crossing the river by the bridge will be the fastest, but that way is likely to be covered by the invaders. The military building is this one here,” he said, pointing to a large structure far west of the river.

“Wait, let me copy this down,” Jake said, pulling his data pad from a pocket and beginning to sketch the map with his stylus. “Scott, put the palace down.” Scott quickly replaced the building, which he had picked up to examine its carving more closely.

“Once we are outside, we should probably make for the boat landing at the bottom of the hill. If we keep away from the lights, we may make it down to the landing without being spotted. Once we’re across the river, this road here,” Consul Tellis pointed, “leads directly up the hill into the city, and towards the headquarters building. It is to our advantage that there are few lights along the river, except near the bridge.”

Scott raised his hand. “Guys, don't forget the air here is a lot thinner than on Glauden. Even with the reduced pressure on our trip here, we haven't had enough time to really handle running or fighting. So we're going to have to stop for breath every so often.”

“Before we go, there is one question I must ask you,” Consul Tellis said, looking at Eddie. “On the balcony you and Mister Kingsway were deciding whether to help me or not. The decision was yours; I had no right to compel you to help. What brought you to a decision so quickly?”

“Well, sir,” Eddie explained, “It was pretty simple. First of all, we're a crew, we stick together. More than that, the three of us,” Eddie pointed to Alex, Jake and himself, “all served in the Space Patrol. The Patrol's got a motto, a sort of creed. It's *Preserve that which is good*. You and yours are good people, sir, and it's a good city, and we mean to preserve as much of it as we can.”

There was a noise from across the room, and suddenly the door at the other end burst open, and several of the invaders, wearing shabby gray uniforms, rushed in with their guns at the ready. “Run!” Eddie yelled. Scott fired his musket, and then dropped it in surprise at the loud boom and cloud of grayish-white smoke. Under cover of the smoke, he followed the others as they dashed for the exit by which they had come. Bullets crashed into the walls around them as fled.

Jake was out the door first and came close to running into another gray-clad soldier at the top of the staircase. Without breaking stride Jake struck the man a blow to the chin and sent him sprawling. Jake stopped short in surprise at the force of his own strike, as he was not the bar brawler that Scott was. Alex snatched up the sword that fell from the invader's limp hand as they rushed down the steps. Scott stripped the soldier of his musket and ran on.

“We can probably still get out the kitchen entrance,” the Consul panted. “It's not visible from the sea side, and is not lit up like the main entrances. The kitchen staff has probably fled, and it may be unguarded.” He hurried down the staircase.

At the next landing, two of the tall soldiers came thumping up the stairs in their hard boots, and stopped for a moment, staring not at Tellis but at Eddie's crew. A hateful look on their faces, they charged upward, shouting "It's the spacemen! Get them!"

"Split up!" Eddie yelled, grabbing the Consul and shoving him towards the northbound hallway. Alex dashed after them, while Jake and Scott headed south. The soldiers split up as well, following hard after both groups.

Alex wondered briefly if he should turn and try fighting the soldier, but the blade in his hand felt light, almost too light to be of any use. He ran on. Then it occurred to him that the soldiers said they were after them, not Consul Tellis.

Eddie spotted an open door and steered the Consul inside, with Alex hard on his heels. The soldier caught up with them just as they were pushing the door shut and threw his weight against it. Alex's and Eddie's breath came in gasps, and even the brief dash seemed to have stolen the air from their lungs and the strength from their arms. The door had stopped just short of closing and the soldier was beginning to force the door open. Then to Alex's surprise, Eddie stopped pushing, grabbed the door handle and pulled. The door swung open wider and the soldier, caught off balance, tumbled into the room. Eddie grabbed him by the collar as he toppled and pulled down as his knee came up. There was a loud thunk and the soldier sprawled on the floor. Eddie, cursing in pain, grabbed at the wall with one hand while holding his knee with the other. "Get his boots off. We can tie him up with the laces," he hissed through clenched teeth. It took some doing but Alex got him tied up well enough. Eddie broke the soldier's blade with his boot while Alex peered cautiously back out into the hall. Seeing nothing, he motioned for the others to follow him. "The servant's staircase is this way," the Consul said, pointing down the hall. Eddie, still limping, hurried down the hallway towards the stairs and the kitchen exit.

They stole quietly into the kitchen, which by now was deserted. Alex hurried across the room to the exterior door and peered through the window. The outside was dark and seemed deserted. Eddie wobbled over to a larger decanter and poured himself a drink. He leaned against the counter breathing heavily. Still panting, Alex

said, "I think I'll join you," and helped himself to some. It tasted no better to him than it had on the patio, but he ignored that.

Footsteps sounded outside the kitchen. Eddie and Alex dived for cover under a counter, and Consul Tellis secreted himself in a pantry. Jake and Scott tumbled through the door. Jake grabbed a cooking implement and wedged the door closed with it, while Scott headed straight to the decanter Eddie had left on the counter. Ignoring the glasses, Scott upended the decanter into his mouth. As Eddie stood up, Scott started at the noise and made as if to hurl the decanter at him. "Oh, it's you, Eddie," he panted in relief.

"So what kept you guys?" Eddie asked; glad to see his friends were okay. Scott smiled as Alex and the Consul appeared. "Well, you know, we stopped for snacks, chatted up a few ladies, then one of those soldiers tried chopping Jake in half," he related. "While Jake was busy distracting him, I grabbed a flower pot and creamed him."

"The jacket's puncture resistant lining was intended to stop fragments in the event of a drive explosion, not sword blades, but it seems to have worked. It had a lot of momentum for such a light blade though, it feels like he knocked a rib loose," Jake winced. He held his side and leaned against a counter. "Any of that left, Scott?" Scott shrugged, but Eddie found Jake a jug of something else, while Scott opened the jacket to examine Jake's ribs. He was already bruising badly, but was not cut. Jake gritted his teeth, but held still as Scott probed. "You may be right, but I can't tell until we get back to my medical suite," Scott declared. "I think you'll just have to live with it for now." He turned to Consul Tellis. "While we were running, we crossed that walkway above the main hall. It looked like whatever these guys are, they were herding all the party guests in there."

"Well, let's get out of here before they herd us in with them," Eddie said. "Wait a second, Eddie," Scott replied. He cast his eyes around the kitchen and soon found what he was looking for: a carving knife with a wide, heavy blade which he handed to Eddie. Jake, catching the idea, snatched up a rolling pin and slapped it into his hand. Now that they were all armed they turned towards the door.

Eddie cautiously opened the outside door, and seeing no one, he motioned for the others to follow him. They move cautiously towards the front of the palace and had gone all of ten meters when three soldiers came marching around the corner. The two groups stared at each other for a second. Before Alex could decide what to do, Eddie charged, plowing into two of them and they went tumbling to the ground. The third, distracted by Eddie's charge, never saw Alex swinging the sword, and went down like a stalk of grain. Jake rushed in to employ his rolling pin against one of the soldiers who was trying to get up, sending him crashing down again. Scott helped Eddie to his feet. Eddie had gotten the best of the last soldier, but the other man had gotten good blows in. Eddie winced as he touched his eye, which was already turning purple. "Remind me to stop doing stuff like that, right?" he puffed as Scott dusted him off. "Right," Scott replied. "Grab their guns and let's go."

Peering more cautiously around the front corner of the palace building, they saw that the front entrance to the palace was deserted. The front doors were shut but there was no one in sight. "That can't be right," Scott murmured in Eddie's ear. "What kind of army attacks a stronghold and doesn't cut off the escape routes? They've got to be out there in the dark beyond the lamplight." As Eddie was starting to wave them out of the darkness in the direction of the boat docks, the further of the double doors began to swing open. A Jorabite man peered out, looked quickly around and began creeping out into the courtyard. Two more Jorabites, a man and a woman, followed him out. "They must have eluded capture," Consul Tellis whispered. "If there are more soldiers out here, they are sure to be taken. Can we get their attention without exposing ourselves?"

When all three Jorabites were well out into the courtyard, shadows rose up from the edge of the light, and a harsh voice commanded them to halt. The first man stopped and raised his hands, but the other man and the woman tried to dash away, running in Alex's direction. The harsh voice shouted out "Fire!" and a wall of flame lit up the darkness as a raucous stutter of booms filled the air. All three Jorabites shook, jerked and collapsed onto the gravel.

Alex stared in horror, a mixture of fear and anger flooding him. Jake gasped in surprise, and Scott barely managed to keep himself from shouting out. The Consul began to run towards his fallen people, arms outstretched. Alex clutched at his arm and pulled him back into the relative safety of the shadows. Eddie grabbed Jake and shrank back around the building's corner, where they crouched against the wall. Scott, in a strangled whisper, unleashed a flood of outraged vulgarities, almost crying from anger. Alex noted that Scott in short order questioned the soldier's hygiene, parentage and their exact species. He released Consul Tellis, who with tears in his eyes stood muttering fiercely in his own tongue, several times repeating “*ngoesk*” through clenched teeth. They all waited in silence for a few moments, trying to calm down and wondering what to do. From the front of the palace they could hear the voices of the soldiers moving about, mixed with short bursts of harsh laughter.

Alex placed a hand on Tellis' shoulder. “Consul, I'm sorry I had to do grab you like that,” he breathed, his voice hard with anger. “If you'd shouted out or gone into the lamplight, they would've known we're here and then they'd have us too. It's too late for those folk, I know. The best we can do for them is to get you where you need to be. Then we can fight back.”

The Consul nodded his head rigidly. “You were right to do so, Mister Kingsway. Thank you for stopping me.” His fists clenched tightly as he struggled to master himself.

“The *devils*,” Scott panted angrily. “You just don't shoot civilians, especially not when they're fleeing. Now these bastards have made me mad.” He pounded a fist against the wall in helpless frustration.

After a few deep breaths to steady himself, Alex took a quick peek around the corner. About half a dozen soldiers were engaged in moving the bodies of the slain Jorabites towards the far side of the courtyard. None of them were looking in Alex's direction. Alex saw no one else, so he turned back and gestured to the others to move out. Moving at a careful trot, they moved away from the palace at an angle, to avoid the pools of lamplight. Beyond them all was dark, and after the musket flashes

and lamps they were nearly blind in the gloom. Only Alex's well developed sense of direction turned them back in the direction of the docks. Still, they each stumbled several times until they came upon broad stone steps leading to the water. Halfway down the hill, a tall shape loomed up from the side of the stairs, right in front of Alex, blocking their way. Everyone staggered to a halt.

The soldier held up a hand and demanded, "Where do you think you're going?" In response, Alex plowed an angry right jab into the soldier's jaw. As the soldier fell back down the stairs, the musket flew from his grip and clattered on the stone steps. To Alex's dismay, it discharged, lighting the steps for an instant, sending a boom rolling back up the hill. Instantly there was a clamor from above of harsh voices and running feet, heading in their direction.

Eddie's voice rasped out, "They're on to us. Run!" Blinded once again, the five stumbled down the stairs as fast as they dared. In another minute, they could dimly see the river and the docks stretched out before them. They stopped, searching for a boat.

"Man, I wish we had some proper weapons," Eddie whispered. "I tell you, Alex, it burns me up we had to run from those murdering creeps."

"There," the Consul pointed towards a long open boat bobbing quietly next to a jetty. Panting, the five quickly but unsteadily piled in. Alex glanced around the back end of the boat. "OK, where's the motor? Jake, get this thing moving. They might be after us any second."

Eddie looked around, puzzled. "It doesn't seem to have one." Alex blinked in surprise, and groaned, "You mean we have to *row*? Oh, you gotta be kidding me!"

Jake settled himself into one of the rower's seats. "Alex, you sit up front with the Consul. Eddie and Scott in the middle, and I'll be at the back."

"Huh? Why?" Alex asked, confused. Jake rarely took charge like this.

"Simple. I'm the engineer, I make the thing go. You're the navigator; you tell the thing where to go."

Too out of breath to argue further, Alex conceded to Jake's logic, dropped into a seat in the bow and slumped against the boat's side.

"Toss those muskets into the boat," Eddie ordered. "Although it seems they're single-shot. Maybe we can use 'em for a bluff." They dropped the muskets as quietly as they could, and took up the oars.

The boat moved awkwardly out into the channel and with a great deal of splashing and lurching, made its way toward the opposite bank. Looking back at the jetty, Alex saw one of the invader's boats with a lamp at the bow arrive where they had just left. More soldiers from the bank climbed in and the craft slowly turned out into the current. "*Gehenna*," Alex muttered. "Pull harder!"

As they approached the city side of the river, Alex could make out some long buildings near the water, and a few more docks, taller than on the palace bank, thrusting out into the river. He steered the gasping, sweating crew towards one of them far away from any of the oil lamps. An idea struck him. "Go past the ladder there, Jake. Let's put the boat under the dock and hide in the darkness and maybe the soldiers will miss us. I'll bet they can't see us at this distance."

In the shadows beneath the dock, Alex could see no more than the outline of Consul Tellis, slumped despondently next to him. He whispered to him, "Consul, I'm very sorry about what happened, you know, back at the courtyard."

Scott leaned towards them. "So am I, but we had no way to stop them shooting, and we couldn't have helped your people without getting you captured or killed."

Tellis was listening and seemed more composed than before, but when he spoke the grief in his voice was unmistakable. "I give you my thanks, gentlemen, for helping me to escape, and for your sympathy. You are right; we would not have been able to prevent what happened. I am outraged at this brutal and cowardly attack on my people, but at the same time I am ashamed of my own behavior. A noble should not give way to emotion as I have done."

“There’s something weird here, though,” Alex stated. “Has anyone else noticed that these guys seem to be speaking Galactic Standard? I mean, they called us ‘spacemen’. The one on the stairs asked where we were going. How would they have learned that if they’re local, but haven’t had contact with the Jorabites? And for another thing, why are they interested in us?”

“That is a mystery to me as well,” Tellis admitted. “The spy we captured also spoke Galactic Standard, although he was unwilling to say much. He would not explain where he learned your tongue.”

“Wait another minute and we can ask them. The boat’s approaching, everybody duck and be quiet,” Scott whispered hoarsely, and pointed towards the river. They all sank into silence once again.

The five men hunched over and waited in anxious silence. The sounds of rowing grew nearer and nearer until it was clear that the boat was pulling up to the same dock under which they were hidden. Not daring to look up for fear of being seen, Alex listened intently as the boat drew up and bumped against the pilings. A man’s voice broke the quiet, brusquely issuing orders. The hard-edged tone reminded Alex of an instructor he had as a Patrol recruit, who seemed perpetually angry and yelled every word he spoke. The man spoke Galactic Standard, as the others had, but Alex had never heard this accent before.

Some of his words were lost in the thumping of boots and gear, but he was able to catch “spread out,” “search the wharf,” and “bring them to me.” Boots clumped up the ladder just yards away from Alex and his friends then rumbled across the planks above them. After a few more minutes of tense listening, Alex relaxed and sat up. “All right, let’s go,” Eddie whispered, and they eased their boat towards the ladder.

Alex went first, climbing cautiously up. As he topped the ladder he saw one of the soldiers, who had stayed behind to guard the boat. Fortunately, the soldier was looking towards the buildings on the bank. Alex tried to step quietly onto the dock, but the plank creaked beneath his foot. The soldier whirled around, saw him and

opened his mouth to shout out the alarm. Alex threw himself forward, and brought the soldier down with a flying tackle. Jake and Eddie clambered up and rushed to help. The soldier broke loose and started to rise, but Eddie got him in a choke hold and forced him down to the planks, while Jake hurriedly took his weapons from him. "Go ahead, pal," Eddie whispered savagely in the soldier's ear. "Give me a reason to squeeze harder." The soldier thrashed about defiantly but could not throw Eddie off of him. Alex rolled over on the planks and lay groaning, panting for breath. "I don't know what made me think that was a good idea," he gasped. Scott helped him to sit up and pulled a good size splinter from Alex's arm. He had skidded over a meter on the rough boards after tackling the soldier. "Still, that was a nice dive, Alex," Scott chuckled.

"Hold him down!" Consul Tellis insisted. Scott and Eddie pinned the soldier's arms behind him and forced him to his knees. He glared up at Alex with a look of fanatical hatred, but Alex was not impressed.

"All right, now it's time we got some answers," Alex growled. He grabbed the sword Jake had taken from their captive. "I know you can understand me, so understand *this*. You *will* answer my questions, and if you even try to raise an alarm, *this* is going in you, then *you're* going in the river," Alex leveled the sword at the soldier's face. Sullenly, the soldier nodded. "That's better," Alex growled. "Now, who are you? Who are your people, and why are you attacking the Jorabites?"

The captive barked, "We are Kondrakans, we are warriors, and we are conquerors!" He spat defiantly. "This is our world! We are the masters! These puny ones will serve us, or they will die!" Alex glanced up at Eddie, "Yeah, I think we worked out that part for ourselves. Next question, why are you after us? We've only been on this world a few hours."

The soldier's eyes blazed. "You are spacemen! You are the enemy of the Kondrakans! We will take this city, and kill all the spacemen who come here!" The soldier struggled furiously in Eddie and Scott's grip.

“Right, I've heard enough," Eddie muttered. “Scott, let go.” Scott looked questioningly at Eddie but complied. Eddie closed an iron grip on the Kondrakan's arm as Scott let go, swung the soldier around and crashed his fist into the man's jaw. His head snapped back and he collapsed to the planks. “That's for the folks back at the courtyard, you *bastard*,” Eddie snarled. He looked up. “Same crazy junk we got with that gang back on Stoushire, right Alex?”

“Exactly the same,” Alex nodded. “We're superior, and we'll kill you to prove it'. I was going to ask him some more about the whole 'enemies' business, but I think we were done.”

Jake spoke up with a puzzled look on his face. “Hey, I just thought of something. Consul, you said that you couldn't make gunpowder because you don't have any sulfur. How'd these guys make it, then?”

“It would seem that they have a source we don't,” Tellis replied. “We can figure that out later. Quickly, get his spare ammunition.” Tellis took up the soldier's musket, but it must have seemed too heavy, as he turned and dropped it into the river.

Scott hastily took the soldier's ammunition and stuffed it into various pockets. Then Jake and Eddie dragged the limp Kondrakan behind a bale near the warehouse wall to hide him. “I can hear someone coming. If I were a betting man, I'd say that they won't be glad to see us,” Eddie said quietly.

“Quickly, let's get into this building. We can get to the street on the far side,” Consul Tellis directed, opening the door to the nearby warehouse and waving them inside. They moved cautiously through the darkened building and found a door on the far wall.

Alex surveyed the street, and glanced at the sketch drawing Jake had made. “OK, if you got your map right, Jake, we need to go this way,” he said, pointing towards an intersection to their left. Scott advised, “Remember there's going to be more of these Kondrakans in the city by now. Plus, we can't be sure that the

Jorabites won't assume that we're on their side. Do a lot of your people have weapons, Mister Consul?"

"Only the Guardsmen will be armed, and most of them should be rallying at the headquarters building," The Consul admitted. Alex spotted the church steeple in the distance and guided the group that way. They had not gone far when the sound of the Kondrakan's muskets rolled through the air.

They made their way carefully from street to street, avoiding the street lamps as best they could. After passing only a few houses, they saw the first signs of what had been going on in the city. Three Jorabites lay motionless in the street, all very clearly dead. The Kondrakan's bullets had left terrible marks on them. Beside the bodies were three crossbows, which had been smashed. Consul Tellis's face was pale with sorrow as he looked at his countrymen. "They died bravely, defending their people," he said simply, keeping emotion from his voice with difficulty. Then he looked towards the church in the distance. "Come, we must keep on."

Alex could soon tell that the gunfire they were hearing was coming from the vicinity of the church. Mixed with the booms of the invader's weapons he could now hear shouts and cries. Some were Jorabite voices, but the louder ones were the Kondrakans, in their harshly accented Standard. Alex led the group aside, between two houses a distance down the street from the church. Both houses were dark within, and there were no lamps nearby to illuminate the yard.

Eddie cautiously poked his head around the edge of the house and looked toward the church, surveying the scene. A quick glance was enough to tell him the situation. A gang of Kondrakans were arrayed in the street before the church, covering behind barrels and carts. The doors to the church were knocked off their hinges, lying across the threshold. From the doorway and windows crossbow bolts came sizzling out, thumping into the barriers, and occasionally finding a mark. There were bodies of both Jorabites and Kondrakans on the steps up to the church.

Tellis glanced out quickly. "It is as I feared," he whispered to Eddie. "The church is the center of our life. Many of our people, especially the old and young,

would have gone there to seek sanctuary when the invasion began. Are these Kondrakans such barbarians that they will not respect the right of sanctuary, for our women and children? There are Guardsmen who are assigned to protect the church, but they are surely outnumbered by now.”

“Eddie, we’ve got to do something to help them,” Jake insisted, after he too had looked out and scanned the battle scene. “You heard Tellis, there are women and kids in there. The creep on the docks said they’d kill them all. And those guys over there,” Jake pointed to a group of Kondrakans working behind an overturned cart, “look like they’re getting ready to set the church on fire.” The gang of soldiers had pulled down a street lamp and was pulling straw from one of the wagons.

“We can’t risk it. Our job is first and foremost to get Consul Tellis to his HQ building,” Eddie countered sternly. “There are only five of us. We’ve only got a handful of reloads, and one sword. We are not in a position to sustain a firefight.”

“But,” Jake sputtered, his voice tight with concern. Eddie raised a hand to stop him. “Alex, how can we get around this fight without taking too long?” he asked.

Alex scanned the sketch map and looked around. “If we go across the street a few houses down without being seen, we can cross one more street and then turn back towards the HQ building,” Alex pointed in the direction of his proposed course.

“All right, let’s keep moving,” Eddie said, turning to move out. Scott took Jake and Eddie by the arm for a moment. They looked at him in surprise. “Eddie, you and Alex get the Consul to that next corner. Jake and I will join you in a minute,” Scott announced. To Alex’s surprise, Eddie did not contradict him. He looked from Scott to Jake, then down at the musket Scott carried. Then he nodded, and waved Alex and the Consul out into the dark street.

Keeping close to the houses on the near side of the street, Scott and Jake crept towards the Kondrakans. At the corner of the house nearest to the church, Scott knelt and readied the musket.

“Jake, can you see who the leader is?” he whispered, checking over the musket, wondering if his idea would even work.

Jake scanned the scene for a moment. He tapped Scott’s shoulder and pointed. “There he is, the one standing behind the three others, by the near wagon. He’s wearing a hat. See if you can knock it off for him,” Jake suggested.

Scott lined up his shot. “Right, get behind me and cover your ears. Get ready to run as soon as I fire. And hope this works.” He breathed deeply a few times then squeezed off the shot.

They didn’t wait to see if the shot was true; they expected at any second to have several large, ugly guys with guns chasing them down. At the rear of this house was a tall fence with a gate. The gate was open, and the fence taller than either Jake or Scott. “I’ve got an idea, Scott,” Jake whispered. “Give me the gun.” Jake took the weapon by the barrel, and pointed Scott to a spot on one side of the gate. He stepped through the gate and stood on the other side, holding the musket club-fashion. Guessing Jake’s intent, Scott peered cautiously through a hole in the fence. He pulled back and mouthed to Jake, “Two coming. Close together. Aim high.”

As soon as the first soldier appeared in the gateway, Jake swung with all his might. The musket stock broke on impact, and both Kondrakans were thrown backwards, crashing to the ground. Scott was startled by the dramatic results of Jake’s cheap shot, and the look of grim satisfaction on Jake’s face. He looked out again, and seeing no more soldiers, checked to make sure the two on the ground weren’t moving. The one on top, at least, he concluded, would never move again. He quickly broke the other muskets against a wall, and then together they panted and jogged down the row of houses.

Meanwhile, Eddie, Alex and the Consul had made a dash across the street to the shadow of another house. Eddie leaned against the wall, gasping for air. “*Gehenna*, I wish I could breathe,” He panted. “Yeah, that would be nice,” Alex nodded agreement and sank to the ground. Eddie managed a wry smile. “You know, I always said I wanted to see the universe, but this wasn’t what I had in mind.”

Consul Tellis gave a short laugh, “So why did you buy your ship, then, Captain Howard?” Eddie puffed a few more times and then answered. “I spent twenty years in the Space Patrol, right? Never once in that whole time did we ever leave the Kingdom. We just patrolled the same places over and over again. I wanted to get out and explore. That was what I thought I'd be doing when I joined the Patrol. I saved up all the money I could and got out and bought the *Not Yet*. I like the name, right? It reminds me there's still more to see. 'Have we seen everything?' 'Not Yet.'”

“Well,” Alex remarked, “if we want to do any more exploring, we've got to get this business finished first. Let's get moving again as soon as Jake and Scott catch up.” He looked around the corner of the building towards the church. Gun flashes lit up the street, including one that came from a spot closer to where Alex was. A few seconds later, several more booms and flashes rolled down the street. The Kondrakans, he figured, were shooting at Scott and Jake. He thought he saw a few men run down the street towards Scott and Jake's location, but then he noticed that the gunfire had stopped. He pulled back into the shadows.

After a few minutes of nervous waiting, Alex saw two figures emerge from the darkness between the two houses from where they had come. A whispered shout of “Alex?” floated across the street. Relieved, Alex stepped out and waved them across, and as they dashed up, he clasped their hands in greeting. “So, how'd it go, Scott? Did you hit what you wanted?”

“I don't know if I got their leader, but we had to do something,” Scott panted. He and Jake leaned against the wall, hands on their knees. “Jake popped a few of them that came looking for us, so I guess that'll have to be good enough.” He described briefly the results of Jake's surprise attack. Eddie whistled. Alex gave Jake a slap on the shoulder, and Jake smiled grimly.

“Sorry, guys, but we'd better get moving again,” Alex said. He stepped carefully out into the street, leading the way. “Right behind you, Alex,” he heard Eddie whisper. They crossed the next street in silence, noting with sadness that there were bodies in this street, too. Tellis stopped for a moment, muttering something Alex

couldn't hear. Then he continued on, shaking his head in frustration. They crossed through a park to the street beyond.

"The headquarters building is just a few blocks from here, down this street," the Consul said, pointing down the dark lane. In a single file, they plodded as quickly as they could down the street past more darkened buildings, and past a few more bodies. They had made it only one block when harsh voices rang out and they found themselves surrounded by a squad of Kondrakans, emerging from hiding along the street edge. They formed a circle around the group, with muskets raised.

The soldier with the fanciest uniform stepped forward and started shouting at them that they were enemies of the Kondrakans and that all spacemen would "pay," while brandishing his musket threateningly. Scott, still huffing, stepped towards him with hands raised, smiling broadly and talking very quickly, moving with an easy manner.

He's trying to brazen his way out of this, Alex thought. I bet he's used this trick to get out of bar fights. But he can't really think these guys will let us go? The leader poked his musket into Scott's chest, and suddenly Scott grabbed it with both hands, jerking it up and away. The musket fired, and came out of the officer's hands as Scott swung it wildly, hitting the man next to him. Alex, Jake and Eddie all jumped at the opportunity and struck out at the soldiers surrounding them, ducking under the weapon barrels to avoid getting shot. The soldiers hesitated just a second between brawling and shooting, which gave Alex time to land a haymaker on one soldier's jaw. The soldier crumpled to the ground, but even with even one punch Alex felt at the end of his strength. Another grabbed him from behind and got him in a choke hold. Off balance, Alex swung his arms wildly, gasping for air. One flailing fist must have struck something important, as the soldier cried out in pain and released him, falling to the ground. Alex, gagging, swung around to look at his attacker just in time to see another soldier aiming his musket at Scott who was grappling with the officer. "Scott look out!" Alex wanted to shout, but there was no air in his lungs. Scott turned his head to look just as the soldier fired at point-blank range. Scott cried out and pitched headlong into the street.

Alex was too shocked to move but heard Jake's voice over his shoulder, bellowing. With an incoherent scream of rage, Jake bounded past Alex, knocking another soldier over without pausing. Jake grabbed the soldier who had fired at Scott and lifted him bodily off the ground. He spun around and slammed the soldier to the pavement, falling atop of him, pounding wildly with both fists. Alex ran to Scott, while Eddie ran to Jake and struggled to pull him off the now motionless body. The Consul was at Alex's side, and they gently turned Scott over onto his back. Fearfully, Alex scanned Scott's body looking for the bullet hole, but couldn't find one. He looked up at Consul Tellis, but Tellis was looking around the street. All the soldiers were down, or had fled, and three Jorabites were approaching from a nearby house. All three had crossbows in their hands.

Scott stirred feebly. He coughed, gagged, and tried to open his eyes. "Scott, are you OK?" Alex asked hoarsely.

"Don't be . . . stupid," his friend gasped. "Of course I'm . . . not OK . . . I've . . . been shot."

Consul Tellis spoke quickly to his people in their own tongue. Two took up watching the street in both directions, while Tellis and the third knelt to aid Scott. Alex let them work, and crawled over to where Jake, now shaking instead of screaming, was sitting next to Eddie. Both were panting hard.

"Jake, good news. Scott's not dead. You hear me? He's still alive. It turns out our jackets are bullet-proof after all. I'm sure he's got several cracked ribs but he's breathing." Jake nodded but did not speak.

"But I'm pretty sure you killed that guy," Eddie said flatly. "*Gehenna*, Jake, I've never seen you go crazy like that before!"

"Yeah," Jake admitted, shivering, "I thought he'd killed Scott. You sure he's alive?"

Consul Tellis approached Jake quietly. "Mister Heath is hurt, but amazingly, he lives. We have to get him, no, all of you to the headquarters building. It is risky, I understand, to move someone in his condition but to remain here will be fatal."

“OK,” Scott's voice was weak. “But I think I’m all out of fight for one day. Concentrate on getting Tellis to the HQ.” He struggled to rise for a moment and then sank back down. “And one more thing; shoot some of these *ngoesk* for me,” he grimaced.

“We will get you to safety, Mister Heath. The headquarters building is the safest place for any of us right now,” Tellis replied reassuringly. “Now we have some help at last. These men are guardsmen. They saw the Kondrakans coming and struck from behind while they were focused on you. Tuvarik has said, *He who prepares himself to take the enemy unprepared will triumph.*” Now with us and a few of their guns, we have an even better chance,” Tellis gestured towards the street. Alex looked at the guns and the bodies of the dead soldiers, and saw that several had crossbow bolts in them. One was the soldier who had been choking him. “Good shooting,” Alex murmured, and stooped to gather up some of the muskets that were still primed to fire.

Eddie stood up. “Come on, Jake, we've got to get Scott out of here.” He hauled Jake to his feet and pointed him towards his friend. Together, they gently lifted Scott to a standing position, and supported him as he tried to take a step. He grimaced and clutched his side, but doggedly kept moving. Alex gave one of the muskets to Eddie and to Jake, leaving himself to carry two. At an order from Tellis, one of the guardsmen ran down the street ahead of them, while the other two fell in behind the Consul and his companions. After they had travelled another block, the scouting guardsman met them again, and spoke rapidly to Tellis. “He says that there is a battle going on outside the military building. Can you hear it?” Tellis pointed in the direction the guardsman had come. “The Kondrakans have two sides covered, including the side we are on. We will have to divert up a side street to get past them and go in the back entrance. Can you make it, Mister Heath?”

“I've got my buddies to lean on, Consul. They'll see I get there,” Scott answered in a husky voice. Eddie and Jake grinned. All three were barely shuffling along and panting hard, but they kept moving.

They did not encounter any more Kondrakans as they made their way down the side street to the headquarters building. “I bet they're all trying to bust into the HQ,” Alex said to himself. “That helps us, at least until we get there.”

Finally the HQ building came into sight. It was illuminated not only by oil lamps but by several fires on the broad lawn in the front and on the street. Overturned carts blazed, lighting up the opposing lines of troops. As they made one last dash to the HQ back door, Alex got a quick glimpse of a number of barriers behind which Jorabite guardsmen were taking cover, looking out quickly to fire crossbow bolts. The Kondrakans were firing back from building windows across the street, and behind furniture thrown into piles. There were also plenty of bodies large and small laid out on the grass and the street.

The scout ran first to the door to make sure it would open for them. The guardsmen who opened the door raised his crossbow towards the tall strangers until Consul Tellis called out to him. The guardsman snapped to attention and waved them inside.

Inside the HQ, Tellis led the four men and a squad of guardsmen into a ready room. Standing under guard in the middle of the floor was the crate that the *Not Yet* has brought to Jorab. The Consul spoke to the guardsmen, then produced a set of keys and unlocked the large crate. Everyone stared with great interest as the doors swung back.

“Well, that explains why you wanted to keep this cargo secret,” Alex remarked wryly.

“I am sorry to have been so secretive,” Consul Tellis admitted, “but the Premier himself instructed me not to speak of this to anyone in case there were other spies among us.”

The crate doors swung wide open, and the lights shone on the racks of short-barreled and very modern rifles held within. There was an excited murmuring from the Jorabites, and Scott gave a short laugh that ended in a wince of pain. Then he stepped in for a closer look. “I've seen these before; they're Tomkyn R-5's, right?”

These are just the thing for your people to use. Here, Jake, check this out,” Scott said. He gingerly took a rifle down and tossed it to Jake, who clumsily caught it. Scott winced again, but took another rifle and held it up. “Light weight high-strength materials, configured to minimize length without sacrificing barrel length which affects accuracy. Start passing these things out, Consul Tellis, it's time we *ended* this.” As the Jorabite soldiers came up to get the weapons, Scott eagerly demonstrated how to load the ammunition. It did not take long before a dozen Jorabite soldiers were formed up and ready to march out to relieve their comrades outside.

“I thought you were a medic, Mister Heath,” Consul Tellis observed with genuine surprise. “I was,” Scott explained. “But I carried a weapon much like this one. You don't think I'd go into a war zone unarmed, do you? Besides, we did a few joint exercises with the Dravidans, so I got to see these being used.” Scott's speech began to slur on the last sentence, and he started swaying unsteadily. But he waved away several Jorabites who offered to help him to sit down. Jake stepped up and put a supporting arm around his friend. “We're not out of the fight yet, Mister Consul,” Jake said, and Scott wearily nodded agreement. “We owe these guys a little payback,” Eddie declared grimly.

“Then, Captain Howard, if you would, please lead your men to the barricades at the front and deliver your payback. Once you have gotten their attention, I and my troops will come at them from the side and attempt to force them out of their positions.”

The scout who had led them to the HQ went with them, to explain their presence to the other guardsmen. Keeping low, they ran one more time to join the guardsmen at the barricades on the lawn of the HQ building. The guardsmen were surprised by their new allies' arrival, but word spread quickly that the 'tall ones' with their new rifles were there to help.

What followed was a little unclear, from Alex's point of view. This much he understood, though: the appearance of the *Not Yet* crew and the Jorabites with automatic weapons quickly turned the tide of the battle. The new rifles easily

punched through the furniture that the Kondrakans were using for cover. As the soldiers began to pull back, the rearmed Jorabites hit the Kondrakans line from the side and force the invaders to abandon their covered positions. The staccato hammering of the rifle fire frightened the Jorabite guardsmen at first, but Alex saw and heard the Consul and other officers rallying their troops, leading them on. As the Kondrakans began to retreat, the troops on the lawn joined the push, advancing across the lawn under covering fire from Alex and his friends. The Kondrakan's force collapsed under the assault, and in total disarray they broke and went running down the broad street in the direction of the river. At the sight of the enemy routing, there was a great deal of shouting among the Jorabites, who charged after their fleeing foes. Alex jumped out from cover and tried to join in the pursuit, but he made it only a block before the exertions of the night finally overtook him. The Jorabites quickly left him behind, as his run slowed to a trot, then to a walk. He saw a bench beneath a street lamp and sat down. 'Maybe I'd better just rest for a moment,' he thought as his eyes closed.

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Alex awoke in a quiet, cool room with sunlight streaming in the windows. He sat up and looked around. Eddie, Scott and Jake were all sitting up in beds like his, taking their ease. Scott looked up from his book reader and said, "Good morning. About time you came around. You snore." They all chuckled, and Alex took a drink from a decanter by his bed. Then he asked, "How long was I out? Last thing I remember was stopping to catch my breath on a bench."

"With the help of some healing accelerants to reverse your hypoxia, you've been sleeping for two days," Scott said in his most professional tones. "We all slept a long time. But I think we may finally be adjusted to the oxygen levels here."

A Jorabite nurse entered and announced that Consul Tellis was there to see them, if they were well enough to have visitors. Alex looked at Eddie, who looked at Scott. Scott nodded. "Sure, send him in," Eddie told the nurse.

Consul Tellis entered, smiling broadly. He greeted them each in turn, starting with Eddie. "I am glad to see you are all doing so well," Tellis said in his usual calm tone. "Your health has been a subject of much interest and concern. Also, I expected that you would be interested to know more about what was behind the invasion. You may not have known that we captured several of the Kondrakan leaders as they retreated. Some made it to the boats, and we were too occupied with relieving the Palace to pursue them at sea. Still, we have learned much of them from questioning the ones we captured. They told us how they came to be on Jorab." All four men sat up and leaned forward with interest.

"It seems that some generations back, their ancestors were a private army that fought for pay; a very strange custom to our way of thinking." Tellis gave a disapproving look. "The crew of the starship they had paid to transport them to Patria for some reason betrayed them, and marooned here on Jorab. They barely survived, and have nurtured a great hatred for all who travel in space. Our arrival in your starship gave them an opportunity to take revenge for their ancestors' betrayal. From now on, we will have to vigilantly guard their island. Their attack caught us partly by surprise, but that will not happen again. I regret that I was partly responsible for concluding that they would not attack so quickly. Our defenses were not prepared, and of course we had not had time for our guardsmen to train with the new rifles. We were fortunate that you were with us and that you, Mister Heath, were familiar with the rifles' design."

"Well," Alex said with a smile, "I'm glad we were able to help."

Consul Tellis nodded appreciatively. "We are all grateful to the four of you. Most of the town has asked to come and see you, but Mister Heath and our doctors agreed it was better if you were not disturbed. I am pleased to see your wounds are healing remarkably fast. Mister Heath, do you think that you will be able to get up and move normally?"

"I think so," Scott replied. "I'm going to be sore for some time, what with three cracked ribs, but that's mending well. Just don't ask me to fight anyone, and I, well, we, should be fine."

As Consul Tellis was about to take his leave, Scott spoke again. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask you something," he said. "What was that word you were saying when we were hiding outside the kitchen door?"

"Oh, that." For once Consul Tellis sounded abashed. "*Ngoesk* is not a word I use often, for it is one of the worst insults among my people, but those butchers deserved it." He explained in succinct terms the meaning of the word, and all four men chuckled. "And I thought they taught me rude words in the Patrol," Eddie commented.

As Tellis left, the nurse returned, accompanied by orderlies bearing trays of food. The four friends ate heartily as the nurse examined bandages. After the meal was cleared away, the nurse advised them to take some rest and withdrew.

A few days later, the crew was once again in the large and crowded banquet hall of the palace, being formally presented to the Premier. He greeted them all warmly, and amid a riot of applause proclaimed them to be Heroes of Jorab, and gave each of them a golden medallion on a silver chain. Further, he announced "It is my purpose, and with the support of the Council, to grant these Heroes of Jorab each a parcel of land and make them formal members of the landowner class. Consul Tellis, you will as soon as possible lead a consular mission to Glauden and open diplomatic relations, and in particular to inform their King that Captain Howard and Mistery Radley, Kingsway and Heath have been granted Jorabite citizenship."

Once the applause again died down, Eddie stepped forward, flushing with surprise.

"Your excellency, that's very generous of you. Land is very hard to acquire on Glauden," Eddie said thankfully. "Will we have to oversee them personally? We'd had plans to travel for a few years, visit a lot of the other planets in this region."

"I understand, Captain Howard, and your concern was anticipated. Stewards have been appointed to run the estates in your names. We ask only that you visit us a few times a year to attend to matters that cannot be left to the stewards. Your

estate for one has excellent timber, from which we make a lot of our furnishings. Mister Heath, as you are reportedly fond of our wine, your estate is in the vineyard district.”

A few days later, Eddie and his crew were finally ready to depart. They were now formal landowners on Jorab with the prospect of regular income. Eddie promised they would make regular visits and arranged with local merchants to take a cargo of wood furniture off-planet with them to sell.

A crowd was gathered at the landing field to wish them well as they departed. Alex observed that at the far end of the field, workers had already begun extending the field’s length. Consul Tellis spoke to them as they prepared to seal up the ship for takeoff. “You may be interested to know that this morning the court balladeer has finished composing an ode commemorating your bravery. I am afraid you will miss the first public performance, but it will be sung for many years. In your language, the ode is entitled “*Just Across Town.*”