

4. JOYRIDE

The Governor General of America had a pirate fetish. Peter grinned to himself as he wandered around the small apartment adjoining Sophia Gorganis's office. Everyone had a totem, he supposed. Hadn't his grandmother Novilio collected porcelain frogs? Three glass cases held exquisite wooden models of pirate ships, complete with white thread rigging and tiny black flags. Several oils depicted similar ships at anchor or on the high seas, often storm-tossed. In a silver frame were several 18th century gold coins, with a short historical inscription indicating that they had been salvaged from the wreck of the *Gorgon*, a minor freebooter that went down with all hands off the coast of Cuba in 1771.

In another display case were several fist-sized objects of greenish glass that puzzled Peter, each a pyramid set atop a slightly tapered disk. |Any ideas?|

Deck prisms. They were embedded in a sailing ship's wooden top deck so that sunlight would enter them from the top and be dispersed in otherwise unlit rooms below deck. This was long before the era of electricity.

|I'll bet they're popular on Hell.|

Maybe we'll find out.

Other nautical paraphernalia was placed artistically around the furniture, on the walls, and amidst numerous antique books on bookcases. Peter was intrigued by the books, but hesitated to touch them. There was a way to safely handle old books, he had heard, but no one had ever explained it to him.

On the wall over a leather settee were four swords, each a different design. Peter took one down from its bracket and found the required PS registration seal. All legal—though doubtless it helped to be the Governor General. He waved one vaguely in the air, wondering if it would be worthwhile to learn an arcane skill like fencing.

Perhaps you shouldn't handle the exhibits. I would imagine this area has imagers. Especially if the Governor General is willing to quarter a murderer here.

|She didn't tell me not to. And hey, what can they do to me that they haven't already done?|

Leave you there.

|You really think we're coming back, huh?|

The Sangruse Device did not reply.

One display stood in stark contrast to the rest: A model of the *Yellowknife*, the starcraft that Sophia Gorganis had commanded on over a hundred mis-

sions to eighteen different star systems. Some of the trips had been “black folds”; utter leaps in the dark to destinations whose chaos signatures were completely unrelated to that of the Sol system. Her voyages had only confirmed evidence that had been accumulating across the two hundred years of starflight: Everywhere there was a Sol-like star there was at least one Earthlike planet, and in every case, that planet held plant and animal life almost genetically identical to that of Earth.

To great a coincidence, went the conventional wisdom. It was a setup...

The *Yellowknife* model's tessellated sphere and bulging equator were suspended in a system of gold-plated gimbals, like a glittering geometric globe. Peter reached in and touched the Hilbert ring, and watched the model turn silently on its bearings. 1Earth knew of twenty-six Earthlike worlds—Gaian planets, they were called—and had colonized two, including the OVODS colony on Zeta Tucanae 2 that everyone called Hell. The Ottawa regime's flat refusal to create new colonies or enlarge the Numenor colony had seemed legendarily irrational until four starcraft vanished in three years, including the *Yellowknife*.

|It's not a pirate ship, but I'll bet she misses it anyway. I sure would. |

I'm sure the Governor is glad she wasn't on it when it disappeared.

|Don't count on that. I'll bet she'd like to meet the Gaians. |

I didn't know you believed in Gaians.

|Somebody put giraffes on Numenor. And somebody moved the Moon. |

The giraffes could be a consequence of some unknown evolutionary law. But I admit: The Moon is a mystery.

It was indeed. In 2137, soon after the dawn of the starfaring era, a black hole three-quarters the mass of Mars had arrowed through the solar system on a near-collision course with the Moon. It missed by forty thousand kilometers, but its path and velocity were precisely such that it perturbed all eccentricity from the Moon's path around the Earth, leaving it in a perfectly circular orbit precisely in Earth's ecliptic plane—and at a distance at which the moon's angular diameter matched that of the Sun to within an unchanging one fiftieth of an arc-second. Since 2137, there had been a total solar eclipse at every new moon.

|I don't care how they did it. I just want to know if it meant, Come see us, or Stay where you are. |

Invitations do not generally require a show of strength. A simple radio message would have been enough.

|Mmph. |

If the Yellowknife found the Gaians, the Gaians might not have wanted it to return to Earth with the news. Ditto the other craft.

|I didn't know you believed in Gaians. |

I am an empiricist. But I never confront a mystery without a theory.

The other features of the apartment—sauna, kitchen, bedroom/exercise room—were unremarkable. Peter was surprised to find the north terrace door open to him. He wandered out onto the gray slate surface, where the evening wind stirred a small stand of aspen trees in a multilayered geometric planter. He went further, and leaned against the railing overlooking the core of Chicago. Far below were monoliths and spires eight hundred and a thousand meters high, blazing with light both within and without. He traced rivers of light out to the horizon: The great Jorgensen Ways, over which robotic cars sped by the millions without an accident in over a hundred years. Somewhere close to the horizon off to one side of the Kennedy jorgway was the little neighborhood of Edison Park, the small house where he had grown up, and a sister who was the only surviving relative he had who might be worth caring about.

She could read it in the papers. Good-byes hurt way too much.

Peter followed the terrace around the angle of the Illinois' corner and stopped short: The terrace opened up to a small airpad, and on the airpad was an SIS stealth fancraft. Peter held his breath for a moment, and could hear its zero-point generators idling, its fans turning just quickly enough to hear as a soft exhalation against the very silent night nearly an old mile above Chicago's busy streets.

The pilot's door was open.

Don't be fooled. It's a loyalty test.

[Hmmp. Do I look that dumb?]

It's not how you look that worries me. It's what you always end up doing.

Peter sighed. He could slip in, grab the stick, and the little gray batwing would soar out into the night on the strength of eight zero-driven fans. As with any aircraft driven by zero-point generators, its range was as far as Peter could fly before dying of thirst.

And that, unfortunately, wasn't far enough to outrun the Canadians.

[That's an eight-lung stealth. I've never seen the inside of one of those before. Let me at least dream a little, OK?]

You don't really want to come back, do you?

Peter walked up to the side of the fancraft, and placed one hand on the upswung pilot's hatch. [What's to come back for? Ottawa's tightening the clamps down every year. Twenty years ago you *could* fly a C-404 at Mach 5. The rings won't melt until you go past Mach 6—and it's hard to go that fast just gulping air. Dammit, 9, I want to *live*, not just steer inside the lines that the bureaucrats draw.]

You can die that way.

[I'll die anyway. And that being the case, I'd prefer to draw my own lines.]

Hell is a prison. You're unlikely to be able to draw anything there but scratches on a cell wall.

Peter smiled, peering into the dark interior of the fancraft. Orange status bars on the command stones did little to illuminate the cabin.

[Don't be so sure. 1Earth just drops convicts there. Why should the older convicts lock up the newer convicts? What could be in it for them? You heard Geyl. She's so sure it's not a cell block that she's willing to go there herself. Think of what we might find there! A whole planet the size of Earth with only six million people on it! A planet where they don't have imagers all over the place, watching everything you do. A planet where they can't digitize your face and retina in a computer and tap daemons into the phone optics to listen for dangerous talk. You could live the way you want there, and if you stepped on somebody's toes, you could just move along and nobody would ever find you.]

The Sangruse Device said nothing for many seconds.

If that is the case, the Society must know. It becomes harder to hide with every day that passes, and the other Societies are getting more numerous and more powerful. 1Earth is not the only threat we face, nor the worst. Protea claims it has sampled us without our knowledge, something we can neither verify nor deny. If Hell is that good a hiding place, we must be there first. So we will go. And we will return, with word for the Nautonnier, whatever it takes. If you...Peter!

Peter Novilio had slipped beneath the hatch and into the pilot's cot. He tapped twice on the command stone's hatch icon, and the pilot's hatch descended silently, to snap home with the certainty of steel designed to fly to the edge of space.

"Hi, guy. Wanna go for a ride?"

The cabin lights came up. Peter's head jerked to the right.

It was the Governor General of America.

PETER'S DISORIENTATION KEPT HIM SILENT in the face of Sophia Gorganis' quiet chuckle. Her right hand lifted the joyball, then shoved it hard to one side. The stealth heaved upward on its fans, then dipped sharply, the fans coming up from a hush to a howl and it arrowed eastward, away from the Illinois and climbing at a stiff angle. Peter felt the little wing's acceleration pulling at his cheeks.

After perhaps half a minute of a straight-arrow climb at two Gs, the stealth leveled off for a moment. Then, abruptly, the Governor General slammed the ball to the left and down. The stealth spun and dove at once, making one, two, then three complete rotations around its axis. Peter felt the Sangruse Device shut down his semicircular canals.

"I have the *best* toys, Peter," the woman said with a smirk. "Rolling a cargo jet is boring. Rolling one of *these*, now..." She shoved the ball to the left and up.

The fancraft's dive bottomed out at something Peter estimated to be at least four G's. He could barely discern the Sangruse Device's efforts to keep blood from leaving his head, but was very glad it was there keeping him conscious. The soft leather cot creaked beneath his mass. The fans roared again, and took the stealth into a rolling climb.

I can guess what this is about. Mis juguetes son tus juguetes.

The stealth straightened and returned to a steady climb. Sophia Gorganis then slammed the ball down. The fans silenced, and Peter felt his weight fall away as they went into a parabolic arc.

Watch yourself! You're enjoying this! She's seducing you!

[I don't go for older women. Especially ugly ones.] Peter forced himself to remember that the Sangruse Device could read his emotions like a book from the chemicals that flowed in his bloodstream. He loved aircraft. He loved wild rides even more. Women, by comparison, were a footnote.

I'm not talking about sex.

"So...what's all this about?" Peter said. "This morning you were blackmailing me. Now we're joyriding. I smell a change in plans."

She laughed quietly, audible only because the fans were idling. "Maybe. I change my mind sometimes. Woman's prerogative. I've been thinking about you. And I've been rerunning that little video we got of your chase through the cemetery."

They reached the far end of the arc. The stealth recovered with a throaty rush of air as acceleration cut in again and drew Peter deeper into his cot.

"You could use a new job," she said.

"I have a job."

Sophia Gorganis cackled. "You mean Geyl? There's always another alley fighter I can send down with her. Or are you going to carry your loyalty to a third-shelf cargo company all the way to Hell?"

You have no reason to be attached to Cy anymore. No reason you can reveal!

Peter felt momentarily angry. "Let's say I don't feel any particular desire to work for you!"

The Governor General laughed again, and took the stealth into another steep dive. Peter hadn't felt that feeling since his SIS flight training. Cargo jets could dive, but they didn't do it well. He tried to smother the pleasure the memory brought back to him. Sex was OK, but flying was what life was for...

"Either way, you're already working for me. We're just dickering over the job description. So what'll it take? I'm gathering the best people I can find for a mission. I think you're one of them. I need people who can fly, fight, think on their feet. Good with weapons, not prone to panic. What's your price, Peter? Money? Women?"

Peter gulped, said nothing. The stealth pulled out of its dive, banked hard to the right, spun twice, and steadied. "Secret bank account. Half a million globes for signon, hundred thousand a year plus combat bonuses. Nobody'll know it's yours. And there are SIS groupies, Peter. Good ones. Way better than that mousy little thing you grope every weekend. I can introduce you to a few. As many as you want."

She's insulting Laura. Be angry!

Peter realized that what he felt was sadness and a sense of failure. Somehow he and Laura had never progressed beyond the groping, as much as he sensed that there should have been more. [I can't be angry on demand. Shut up and let me think!]

The fans roared, and Sophia Gorganis sent the stealth through a tight vertical loop. The Sangruse Device was constricting the veins in his lower extremities, keeping his blood from pooling in his legs.

"Toys? I have toys. I have toys you've never seen. I have toys that almost nobody's ever seen."

We must find out what Hell is like! The Nautonnier must know!

The conflict was making Peter sweat. To have a craft like this, to be armed and dangerous and *flying*...that was what he had joined the SIS for. Instead, it was rules, and paperwork, and staying inside invisible lines on the floor.

"You're a tough case, huh? Then how about this: I know who captured the *Yellowknife*!"

Peter shook his head, as though the astonishment were hair in his eyes. [She's met the Gaians! She's recruiting us to fight the Gaians!]

The Sangruse Device was silent, except for the rapidly rising jangle of its networking heterodynes in Peter's ears.

"Things are going on that are going to change the world. You can be a part of it, or you can go to Hell. So what'll it be? Star travel to worlds nobody's ever seen? The pilot's seat in the deadliest aircraft ever designed? Or a cell on a planet where they don't even have flashlights? Your choice, kid. I'm waiting."

Peter found himself staring at her plain face, thick lips, and thin smile, deep brown eyes fixed on his, challenging him, daring him.

"Well?" She licked her lips and arched her eyebrows.

Peter could smell himself sweating as he addressed the device in his veins. [You want a threat to the Society, well, I'll take the Gaians over Protea. They can shoot black holes like marbles...]

I'm unconvinced. If the Gaians can shoot black holes like marbles, there's no fighting them. Something's wrong here. She's lying to us. She's working hard at lying to us. There's a tension in her voice—a break in her confidence—that I didn't hear back at the Illinois this morning. Stall for time. Demand more information.

"Peter?"

"I...uh...need more time. I..."

"Maybe we need to do a little more joyriding!"

The Governor General jerked back on the joyball. The stealth's fans screamed. The little plane roared into a climb that Peter estimated had to be seventy degrees. He could feel the acceleration pulling at his eyelids.

Peter! Smoke!

Peter sniffed. He smelled nothing, then sniffed again. Somewhere was the acrid tang of burning insulation, faint at first but growing stronger.

He shoved against the cot arm to peer into the tiny gear space behind the two cots. "Umm, Miz Gorganis..."

She seemed oblivious, eyes wide, obviously enjoying the thrill of the climb. "I want an answer, Peter. Don't stall me."

When it happened, it happened quickly: A soft sound behind the cots heralded a billow of choking smoke from behind and below. Simultaneously, a piercing alarm began warbling. The sound of the fans slacked and the climb ceased. The fancraft steadied and slowed, then began to bank sharply as it lost altitude.

"Multiple failures in command/control," a young man's recorded voice stated quietly from behind the command stone. "Unable to summarize."

Sophia Gorganis had begun hammering on her command stone. Icons came and went.

"...deep shit," Peter heard her say, in the instant before the explosion.

HALF OF AN EJECTION WAS BETTER THAN NONE, and at least it had been the *right* half. The upper surface of the cockpit was gone, but the cots' rockets had not ignited. A moment's grim humor imagining how it might have gone the other way helped clear Peter's head. The deafening sound of the explosive bolts had given way to the roar of air into the cockpit. The oxygen mask had exploded from its pod and was waving in the chaos like a tethered octopus. Peter grabbed it and held it in front of his face, felt no gas flowing. A glance to one side showed the Governor General holding the mask against her face and gasping.

The command stone was dark, dead. Several orange emergency lamps lit the cockpit against the night.

"The best toys my ass," Peter muttered aloud. The pressure in his eyeballs told him that they were at eight clicks at least. If the Sangruse Device were not concentrating oxygen into his bloodstream, he would at best be on the edge of asphyxiation. [Ok, this was a bad idea. What do you know about this bird?]

Everything...we hope. I have the engineering drawings from its development, though they're almost one hundred years old. Still classified, but the Society has always had moles in the SIS. Most of them more successful than you.

[All right, guilty. Suggestions?]

Grasp the armrest between cots beneath its forward edge and pull back hard.

[What about Sophia? She's not getting any air.] The Governor General had ceased struggling and was unconscious.

I'm less interested in her life than in yours. Rip out that armrest!

Peter did so. The armrest snapped free, and Peter hurled it upward into the roaring night. He got the idea immediately: Beneath the armrest was a giant's fist of ganged throttles, eight in all.

Those give you direct hydraulic control of the fan vanes, as four groups of two adjacent fans. The fans fall back to intermediate thrust if control fails, but the throttles can adjust fan thrust roughly. Mostly you have control through the vanes. Move them as a unit as you would a joystick; raise for more thrust, lower for less. Each fan has its own generator. Scratch that; each fan is its own generator. Even if all craft avionics are dead, if the fans are intact we have a chance.

Peter nodded. He thrust his right hand into the cluster of throttles, got his fingers into the grip rings, and pushed opposite the direction they were banking. Compared to the feather-light controls he was used to, the hydraulic arms took considerable strength to move.

The stealth shuddered but straightened. Peter shoved the throttles forward, and it dove. *[Where are we?]*

Kill altitude first. We'll figure out where we are later.

The small plane bucked and shuddered as they moved downward through increasingly dense air. Peter was glad it was night. *[We're probably over the Lake. We could ditch this thing and get away...]*

Could we? I'm not sure. The Governor General is with us. If she's alive, we're kidnapping her; if she's dead they'll assume we murdered her. Either way, it's only a matter of hours before we have the manhunt of the century on our back. As best we know, Geyl is still going to Hell tomorrow. If she is, there's the chance that we can come back with her, and we must go. We need to find out why 1Earth is so interested in Hell.

Peter's lips were cold. He held the back of his left hand against them. Talk about a devil's bargain, snatched away at the last minute. *[So we turn ourselves in on a crippled military spy plane with the corpse of the Governor General of America. What'll they do to us then?]*

They'll send us where we were going in any event—and the Governor General's plan almost certainly has other adherents and may well outlive her. We may be approached about it again, and when we are, we must have an answer prepared. There's sky glow ahead of us. We're pointed south. Keep going.

Minutes crept by. The stealth lost altitude quickly, but it responded when Peter pulled back, and it flew evenly if noisily through the September night. Peter reached over the hydraulic throttles with his left hand and felt for a pulse on Sophia's neck. It was still there, and blood was oozing from both nostrils.

|Tough bird. I thought decomp like that would kill her.|

She didn't get where she is by being fragile.

|Where do we land?|

Go back to the same pad, on the Illinois.

|That may be a challenge.|

You like challenges.

Peter had a moment to wonder what the Sangruse Device thought of challenges, and realized that he had almost no idea how the creature came to the decisions it did. He had thought it would demand that they land at a hospital, or at least on open ground. Chicago was below them now, and far ahead, the bristling spires Downtown, with the Illinois highest among them.

Peter, something's wrong.

|Something's always wrong.|

Let go of the hydraulics.

|Forget it! I saved our shared ass and I'm not going to lose it now!|

Let them go. I mean it.

Peter's right hand slackened against his will, and his arm jerked upward, withdrawing his hand from the emergency throttles. Beside them, Sophia Gorganis stirred, and groaned softly.

With Peter's hand out of the throttles, the stealth banked slightly and lost altitude gradually. The fans lost their uniform rumble and began to return to the subtle changes and interplay that was their normal mode.

Look outside. What do you see?

America's largest intact city was everywhere, out to the horizons.

|Chicago. And empty air.|

Right. The most rigidly controlled airspace in the world, outside of Ottawa. And we have no electronics. No XGPN. No ping. No way to respond to O'Hare ATC. Why don't we have a PS escort?

|Ummph. And the plane is flying itself...|

The conclusion was obvious, but Peter could not bring himself to speak it. Minutes later, the stealth looped once around the Illinois and settled as adeptly as a butterfly to the same pad from which they'd launched, less than an hour earlier.

As the old saying goes: She took us for a ride.

The fans went back to a quiet idle. Sophia Gorganis opened her eyes, wiped the blood from her face on one sleeve, and looked Peter hard in the eye.

"Good work. You passed. Bigtime."

"Passed?"

The woman reached out and touched Peter's chin with one finger. "Drop the ruse if you want, or keep it up. Doesn't matter. The top blew off at nine thousand meters. You stayed conscious, figured out how to find and work the emergency controls of a classified aircraft you were never taught to fly. Yup. You told me *exactly* what I wanted to know."

Peter, I've been outsmarted. Horribly! And you...had you not chosen to climb into that aircraft, she would not know what she now knows: That you can remain conscious without oxygen at fourteen kilometers altitude; and that you can fly a wounded stealth aircraft on manual hydraulic controls without ever having seen the aircraft or its plans before. Both are impossible, unless you have something very adept living inside of you.

Peter glowered at the Governor General. "Like what?"

"Like where to find what I'm looking for. And it's not you, little boy."

Her smile was infuriating. Finally Peter looked away, unable to find anything useful to say.

"Now get back inside, take a shower, and get some sleep. Geyl's going to be here in the morning, and you both have work to do. Unless you want to accept my offer..."

Peter, furious, hit the latches for the crash web and threw the hatch up. "No way in hell," he said, climbing out of the stealth.

"Exactly," Sophia Gorganis agreed. She tapped the dark command stone in front of her, which instantly came to life. The fans gunned smoothly, and Peter watched the supposedly crippled aircraft lift gently and vanish into the night.

[That was bad.]

It's worse. There's more. I sampled her skin when you felt for her pulse. There were significant oligocarbamate residues in every microgram.

[Uh-oh.]

The human body cannot create chemicals like that. They can only come from disintegrating third-generation nanomachines—carbamates were abandoned when everyone moved to paraprotein mapped synthesis. She's got small stuff in her too. That would explain how she stayed alive so long without sufficient oxygen. It might explain a number of other things, too.

[Third gen, huh? Who's still third gen?]

Only one, and perhaps the oddest of them all: Minimus Rex.