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Opening Extract from...

Nemesis

Written by Alex Lamb

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NEMESIS

ALEX LAMB

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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www.alexlamb.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk
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For Louis the Inappropriate,
who made it all happen.

0: PROLOGUE

0.1: TOM

The end of civilisation looked like two angry red points. Captain Tom Okano-Lark scowled at them as they sat there in the centre of his retinal display, unwelcome and persistent. From the warning tags clustered around them, he knew what they represented – a pair of small gunships racing towards him at about a tenth of the speed of light. Both vessels bristled with cheap tactical weapons showing fire-ready signatures.

It wasn't the response to his friendly hail he'd hoped for, but after forty-six hours surveying the Tiwanaku System, Tom had all but given up on civilized dialog. Since their arrival and the initial unpleasant surprise, his expectations for the outcome of the mission had darkened steadily, along with his mood.

The settlement on the planet in front of him shouldn't have existed. The fact that it did was going to make a lot of people very upset for one simple reason: it represented the end of thirty years of interstellar peace.

Wendy Kim, the IPS *Reynard*'s first officer, broke the silence.

'Four minutes to engagement radius, sir. Do you want to deploy gravity shields?'

Wendy ran the *Reynard*'s blunt-sensor ops. Nobody had a more detailed or more disconcerting view of the approaching ships than she did. She lay prone on the crash couch opposite Tom's on the other side of the *Reynard*'s tiny central cabin while the other four crew members lay in the bunks stacked below them. None of them dared speak a word.

'Not yet,' said Tom. 'We have to play this *exactly* by the book otherwise they'll string us up the moment we get home.'

He hated risking his crew but the face-off had to be done right, which meant waiting and pretending the approach wasn't threatening until after a legally unambiguous dialogue had taken place. The moment news of what they'd found got back to Mars, the finger-pointing would start. Shooting would follow.

Until Tiwanaku, unregistered squatter settlements – otherwise known as *Flag Drops* – had always sprung up near well-established colonies, so they could leech off the existing infrastructure and avoid the legal hassles that came with registering a new planet. IPSO law was remarkably forgiving when it came to protecting the inhabitants of an established world, no matter how they had got there. Frontier-jumping, on the other hand, was *verboten*. The fact that one of Earth's sects had now established a colony on an independent world without telling anyone implied they were finally ready to forgo the law altogether.

Tom hated how unfair that felt. He'd spent his career in the service of the Fleet, struggling to uphold the delicate balance of power between Earth and the Old Colonies. He'd spent far more of that time protecting Earthers than he had Colonials. Now Earth had gone and ruined it all. And for what? Money, as usual.

Had it been a simple scouting run, Tom would have turned back immediately and headed straight for New Panama, home to the Fleet's Far Frontier HQ. But the *Reynard* was escorting families. A modified nestship ark, the IPS *Horton*, trailed behind them crammed with a thousand coma-stored colonists. And it had just dropped warp about 20 AU out, which meant his time for lying low had ended. Fecund nestships, even human-modified ones, did not arrive quietly. They left a gravity signature like a brick thrown at a pond.

'Sorry to put you all through this,' Tom told the others. 'Stay glued to your displays and wait for my word.' He knew his crew considered him a stubborn perfectionist. This time, though, they'd just have to humour him. The stakes were simply too high.

As the gunships raced towards them, he tried to get himself into a calm and diplomatic frame of mind. After all, who could blame the Flags for wanting to move here? Tiwanaku Four was a superb planet sitting square in the habitable zone, swathed in salmon-coloured dunes,

with a decent level of atmospheric nitrogen and fat, healthy ice caps: a classic Mars Plus. It loomed in his display like a ripe peach. Not to mention the masses of Fecund artefacts drifting in the outer system, the signs of surface ruins on the planet itself, or the traces of non-terrestrial organic activity in the atmosphere.

Fecund ruins meant money. For decades now, mining the remains of that long-dead race for technological marvels had driven humanity's economy. Treated properly, Tiwanaku could become a thriving research centre and home for millions of Earth's struggling poor. But onto this gem of a world the Flags had dumped a clump of rickety habitat modules and a couple of thousand people, along with a cheap off-the-shelf industrial base that looked barely usable. Three orbital habitats hovered in geostationary orbit housing at least as many more settlers.

Given how much Earthers hated orbitals, that really said something. Whatever sect ran this place had clearly been shuttling people out here faster than they could put homes on the surface. And all this in the nine months since the last survey pass, when the planet had been registered as 'colony pending'. The *Horton*'s passengers were going to be seriously peeved. Presuming they didn't all die first, of course.

'Their orbital suntap stations are targeting,' said Wendy. He could hear the strain in her voice. 'Even at this distance they might be able to nail us.'

Just the fact that they had suntap weapons here was insane. As far as Tom knew, nobody had been stupid enough to actually fire up a suntap weapon since the Interstellar War. Maintaining half a dozen suntap platforms and two orbital drone-stations for such a tiny colony was like protecting a family-size hab-tent with a squad of titan mechs. The settlers had obviously expected trouble. They'd practically courted it.

Thank Gal they hadn't noticed the *Reynard*'s arrival until now, otherwise Tom knew he'd already have a disaster on his hands. Most of the time, he cursed the fact that scouts were little bigger than soft-combat ships. This time, it had probably saved his life.

'Sir,' said Faisal Koi from the bunk beneath him. Faisal ran the fine sensors – the *Reynard*'s most delicate and specialised scanning equipment. 'We've got audio from the incoming.'

'Let's hear it,' said Tom. Close enough to talk meant close enough to kill. He couldn't stall any longer.

'IPSO vessel, this is the captain of the war-shuttle *Sacred Truth*,' said the voice over the comm. 'You are in violation of our territory.'

The speaker sounded about fifteen. He had a heavy Earth accent, though Tom couldn't have guessed from which part. It didn't make much difference these days.

'You are instructed to leave this system immediately,' said the Flag. 'Failure to comply will be interpreted as threatening action.' It sounded like he was reading from a prompt screen.

Tom replied on the same channel. 'Whose territory is that, may I ask?'

'That not your business,' snapped the Flag.

'This is the IPS *Reynard*,' said Tom carefully. 'We are representatives of the Interstellar Pact Security Organisation here in a peaceful escort capacity for the colony ark IPS *Horton*. We intend no violence. We are, however, legally obliged to give you notice that your settlement is unregistered and therefore illegal. We also note that: A, you are occupying an unexplored alien ruin site in contravention of Social Safety Ordinances; B, you are inhabiting a foreign biome without a licence; and C, you are using suntap technology at an unlisted star. All this will have to be reported. We strongly recommend that you power down your weapons and declare your funding body immediately. If you comply, you will not be held responsible for this settlement's existence.'

He didn't expect a reasonable answer but had to try. Flags seldom understood the game they were caught up in. They were suckers a long way from home who believed they'd won a future among the stars. Meanwhile, the real bad guys made a fortune off them. A peaceful outcome would help everybody. Even so, Tom's finger hovered over the button for the gravity shields.

The reply came fast. The optical lag on comms had dropped to a matter of seconds.

'This an independent human settlement!' the Flag shouted. 'We don't recognise your IPSO and don't want your colony ark. If you don't charge engines in two minute, we open fire.'

Tom glanced at Wendy. Two days of stress had drawn lines on her usually serene oval face. Her dark eyebrows sat knitted together into a single, intense line.

He muted the channel. 'Can you believe this?' he said.

'I think they'll do it, sir. These Flags are set up for a fight – they've been waiting for this.'

'Send a warning to the *Horton*,' said Tom. 'Tell Sundeep to keep his engines warm and plot a course back to sanity.'

He flicked the channel back open. '*Sacred Truth*, please be reasonable. Consider the consequences of this course of action. We're not here to make trouble. If you force us to leave at gunpoint, we'll have to return with a frigate and evacuate all of you.'

Not to mention that the breakdown of IPSO authority would likely kick off a bloody scramble for control of the remaining Fecund stars and the alien riches they sheltered. They weren't supposed to acknowledge that fact in negotiations, even if everyone knew it.

'Your words mean nothing, Fleetie!' yelled the voice over the comm. It trembled with rage. The video remained blank. 'We know you here to kill us but we defend our home to the last man. Go now and spare yourself a fight. No more talk. I mean it!'

Tom couldn't remember hearing a man sound so scared. Yet they were the ones pointing all the guns. He'd been told that Flags received a lot of political conditioning but someone had wound this guy up to breaking point.

'*Sacred Truth*, we acknowledge your request. As a sign of peaceful intentions, we will remove to a safe distance.'

'You will leave!' the Flag screamed.

'Okay, *Sacred Truth*, we're heading out. Please do not open fire. I am legally required to give you the opportunity to make a statement of claim before disciplinary action becomes unavoidable. If you want to keep any rights over the world you've settled…'

He let the sentence hang as he fired up the engines.

'Jawid, buffers to full strength. And quickly, please – we're leaving.'

'On it,' said his roboteer. 'Casimir-buffers sizzling in five.'

'Brace for thrust, everyone.'

Throughout the four-kilometre-wide sphere of the *Reynard*'s meso-hull, robots raced to their action stations. Around the tiny central refuge of the ship's habitat core, a dozen huge rad-shielding machines hummed into life, swaddling the cabin with a protective foam of pseudo-vacuum bubbles.

Their timing made all the difference. Two seconds after the *Reynard*'s shields saturated, a radiation wave slammed into the buffers just beyond

the cabin walls. Red warning icons splattered across Tom's display like blood spots as warning clangs filled the air.

Tom blinked in confusion. 'Jawid, what was that?'

'Buffers at forty per cent, sir! Compensating.'

'We've lost fine sensor function,' said Faisal. 'Looks like g-rays. They fried the primary bank. Compensating with secondaries.'

Tom flicked the comms-link back on and set it to broadcast. 'Unregistered colony, I said *do not open fire*! We are prepping to depart.'

Silence filled the channel.

'I don't think it was them, sir,' said Wendy nervously. 'I'm picking up damage signs from their ships, too – that blast fried them worse than it did us.'

Tom selected one of the cameras that still worked and zoomed in for a closer look. Sure enough, both gunships had started drifting. One showed a rebooting engine. The other showed no activity at all.

His brow furrowed. 'Then who nuked us?'

'Scanning now,' said Wendy. 'Pinpointing the origin of the blast.' She paused, holding her breath.

Tom glanced across and saw her frowning into her data.

'Sir, I think you should take a look at this.' She posted a view to his display.

On the other side of the system, about ten AU from Tiwanaku's star, a cloud of *something* twinkled. Whatever it was, at that range it must have fired its blast more than an hour earlier, and with prescient accuracy. Either that or the wave had been broadcast to scour the entire system.

'Those bursts look a lot like tiny warp flashes,' said Wendy. 'And I'm seeing visible growth in the cloud radius.'

In other words, it was headed their way. They could have company any minute.

Tom checked the *Horton*'s position. Compensating for light-lag, it was still more than half an hour from the blast-wave.

'Jawid, prep a message drone,' he said quickly. 'Overcook its engines and send it to the *Horton*. If we can give Sundeep even a minute's warning on that radiation, it'll be worth it.'

'On it.'

'Wendy, Faisal – I want to know what that cloud is.'

'Whoever they are, they're sending video on tight-beam,' said Faisal. 'We're getting it and so is the colony.'

'Patch it through.'

In the video window that opened before him, Tom saw a grainy picture of a young man lying on a concrete floor. As he squirmed backwards away from the camera with panic in his eyes, he raised a desperate hand as if to ward off a blow, then nothing. The video reset and started again. Played over the top of it was a track of warbling, poor-quality audio – the sort you might hear from a broken vending machine.

'Trespass detected,' the audio cheerfully informed them. 'Punishment cycle initiated. Damage imminent.'

The message looped over and over in the same flat, chirpy tones.

Tom's skin prickled. Their situation suddenly felt sinister. First a colony that wasn't supposed to exist, and now this? It almost smacked of some kind of prank. But pranks didn't usually start with a near-fatal radiation blast.

'Hold on, everybody. I'm putting some distance between us and whatever *that* is.'

Tom pointed his ship back towards the *Horton* and fired the engines. The thud of warp kicked them into their crash couches. The slow, steady rhythm of gravity bursts picked up tempo, but not nearly fast enough. While the illegal colony shrank, the twinkling cloud kept growing. Whatever it was, it had to be closing on the star incredibly fast.

Tom stared at the cloud anxiously. 'Any guesses, people? What are we looking at?'

'It looks like a munitions burst,' said Wendy. 'SAP analysis suggests a classic drone swarm, but it's way too big for that. I'm seeing warp flashes from more than ten thousand sources and no ship signature behind them. Just empty space.'

'So this is a local phenomenon?' said Tom.

'Unclear,' said Wendy. 'We saw no signs of anything like this from our early system scan. There'd have to be some kind of base for these things to hide in, and we didn't find one. No moon, no engine signature, no comms, nothing. They just sort of… appeared.'

'Could they have launched from the Fecund ruins?'

Wendy shook her head. 'Very unlikely. That cloud came in way above the ecliptic. There's nothing up there – we looked.'

'I'm matching the flashes to known drone profiles,' said Faisal.

‘They’re weird. They don’t look like anything in the book – the radiation spikes are too short and bright. Whatever they are, we didn’t build them. Sir, do you think this is what made the Flags so paranoid?’

‘No idea,’ said Tom. ‘Wendy, are those things following us? Are we clear?’

‘Hard to say. They appear to be focused on the planet. I’m taking a closer look… They’re closing on T-Four now, sir. Orbital insertion in five, four, three…’ Wendy gripped the edge of her bunk. ‘Whoa!’ she shouted.

‘Share it with us, Ms Kim,’ said Tom sharply. ‘Don’t make us guess.’

She posted a view to Tom’s display. It was a drone cloud all right. A huge one. The space around the planet had been filled with some kind of warp-enabled munitions and both colony gunships were already balls of slowly blossoming flame. Beams lanced out from the suntap stations, frantically trying to lock on to the blur of targets. Drones exploded everywhere but there were far too many to fight. Tom watched one station after another detonate, bathing the planet below in scorching light.

‘There are over two thousand people down there,’ he said. ‘Jawid, I want a full record of this event on a secure message drone. Immediate release. Destination: New Panama System, Frontier Fleet HQ.’

‘On it.’

‘Keep a channel open to the drone – I want them to see and hear everything. Faisal, do these profiles match any speculated Fecund drive signatures?’

‘Sir?’ said Faisal. He sounded confused.

‘I want to know who the Flags pissed off. Is it possible that someone was living here already? Someone the original survey flights missed?’

‘Sir, the Fecund went extinct ten million years ago.’

‘I know that,’ Tom snapped. ‘Check anyway. And look back over those scans you did on our approach – is it possible that the out-system ruins actually belonged to someone else?’

‘N-no, sir. The match was very tight. And no, Fecund warp wasn’t that different from ours, sir. If anything, it was messier. Though if they’d somehow survived for ten million years, who knows what they’d have by now?’

Tom knew he was clutching at straws. ‘Maybe another human colony that was here before us, then? One with its own weapons tech?’

Even as he said it, he knew that answer wasn't right, either. For a start, colonies with weapons this advanced wouldn't have any trouble with Flags. But still, the threat had to be human, didn't it? Otherwise how had they sent a message in English, no matter how cryptic?

'Give me a matching tight-beam,' said Tom. 'I'm going to talk to them.'

'Sir!' said Wendy. 'I have to point out that we don't even know if there's a pilot guiding that swarm. It could be autonomous. If it is, you may trigger target awareness.'

'They might not spot us without help, Lieutenant, but they're sure as shit going to notice the *Horton*. That ark lights up like a Christmas tree every time it warps. Which means we either assess the threat now or get ready to defend the *Horton* against whatever those things are.'

He thumbed the comm. 'Unidentified drone swarm, this is Captain Tom Okano-Lark of the Interstellar Pact Ship *Reynard*. We are unaware of the political situation in this system but know that there are civilians on that planet. Please end your assault. If there has been an injustice here, rest assured that the full weight of IPSO law will be applied. We will assist in making whatever amends are necessary. I repeat: please end your assault.'

He waited for the message to creep at light-speed towards the swarm, his heart in his mouth. Next to him, Wendy shifted uneasily on her bunk. Meanwhile, the message kept repeating.

'Trespass detected. Punishment cycle initiated. Damage imminent.'

'Sir!' said Wendy. 'Some of the drones have changed course. They're headed this way. I recommend immediate retreat.' Her tone said what she didn't need to: *told you so*.

Tom spat curses. 'Hold on, everybody – we're repositioning to defend the *Horton*. Wendy, let Sundeep know we're coming. Engaging combat mode.'

The *Reynard* was a small ship, but a tough one. It had been designed for two things: environmental scanning and punching well above its weight when necessary. Changes rippled through the vessel from the tiny cabin kernel right out to the exohull surface kilometres above them.

Tom's arms went numb as his simulated replacements came online and his skeletal reinforcements kicked in with a jolt. He felt a sudden flush on his cheeks as the micromesh around his augmented heart

started pumping. Elsewhere in the cabin, his crew sank back into their couches as similar machinery buried in their bodies woke up and flexed.

Tom boosted the engines, throwing as much power at the drive as he could without giving someone a concussion. It was like piloting a road-driller.

'Deploy countermeasures,' he ordered. 'Disrupters at maximum spread.'

'Already on it,' said Jawid.

'We have company,' Wendy said grimly. 'Sending you the bearing.'

The Casimir-buffers snapped like the jaws of dragons.

'Shields at twenty per cent, sir,' said Jawid.

'Engaging evasives.' Tom picked a program at random and fired it. Better to live with broken limbs than not at all.

The cabin filled with the clamour of alarms.

'Faisal, I want g-ray scatter. Lots of it. Don't spare the juice.'

'On it.'

Tom grimaced as he watched the horrid blur of action outside his ship. The drones jumped around like crickets and were nearly impossible to hit.

'Drones headed for the *Horton*, sir,' said Wendy. 'No sign they've been able to manoeuvre and they're not responding to hails. The radiation wave might have hit them.'

'Shit,' said Tom. 'Diving to intercept.'

His virtual hands flashed over the keyboard, modifying their tumbling flight onto a course that would head off the threat. He struggled to breathe as gravity pulses hurled him from side to side. Outside, the drones from nowhere flashed ever closer. The growl of the drive became a deafening roar as the ship's autopilot SAP struggled to compensate.

'Deploy everything,' said Tom, his artificial breath labouring. 'Jawid, recondition gravity-shield buoys for self-destruct. Release them all. We're going to buy the *Horton* as much time as we can.'

Tom watched the buoys tear away from his hull in dizzying arcs.

'Fuck you,' he told the drone swarm. 'Leave my colonists alone.'

Space lit up with a cascade of eye-searing nuclear blasts.

The closest drones popped and died like soap bubbles but hundreds more raced up to replace them, apparently undeterred. They winked and flashed like a cloud of fairy dust closing around the *Reynard*.

It was the last thing Captain Tom Okono-Lark ever saw.

1: BEGINNINGS

1.1: MARK

In a grubby rec room smelling of cabbage and bad coffee, at the top of a New York supertower, Mark Ruiz sprawled in a beanbag chair. A beaker of lukewarm stimmo hung in his limp right hand. His glazed eyes stared emptily into the middle distance. An idle passer-by might have mistaken him for a drug addict or a student taking an unscheduled nap; it had happened before. Mark, however, was a roboteer. He was working late and hating it.

He barely perceived the rec room. The body his mind currently inhabited hung in the air eighty kilometres away in the form of a struggling Wheeler Systems aerolifter about thirty seconds from being dashed to pieces against the ground. He wrestled with the New Jersey weather, edging the lifter back towards the tower while the air around him screamed and threw itself at the vehicle like an army of crazed angels. The jagged peak of the Princeton Environmental Sampling Station jutted dangerously below, visible as a streak of smeared yellow light in the storm studded with flashing warning beacons. The ground beneath lay black as pitch. A greasy charcoal-grey sky glowered overhead.

The lifter was, at the end of the day, a blimp. And the weather outside was, whatever they liked to call them these days, still a hurricane. No matter that the blimp in question had nuclear engines with more thrust capacity than the average orbital shuttle, or that its dynamically flexing frame was studded from end to end with near-indestructible air-sculpting microfins. Dealing with two-hundred-kilometre-per-hour winds in a glorified balloon required attention.

Unfortunately, the people trapped in the sampling station weren't

going to rescue themselves – either from the storm or the approaching rebels. It would all have been a lot easier, and a lot less frustrating, if Mark hadn't been doing it to a deadline.

The NoreCorr regional government, under the auspices of the FiveClan Cooperative, had finally given in and sold the rights to the now-defunct Philadelphia District. With the city's remaining housing modules air-shuttled to New York at last, control had been scheduled to turn over at midnight. The buyer: the Barrio Eighteen Corporation – the only eco-speculator crazy enough to bother.

FiveClan, predictably, wanted to get as much high-end equipment out of the area as possible before the site changed hands. In true NoreCorr style, they'd ignored the meteorological reports and sent a team of engineers into the tower to remove the quantum processing cores: by far the most valuable items inside.

Equally predictably, Barrio Eighteen wanted them to fail but couldn't be publicly seen to object. So when rebels from the Shamokin Justice Movement had arrived unannounced to try to prevent the removal of staff and equipment on cultural grounds, nobody had been particularly surprised. The Shamokin had a very elastic sense of cultural priorities and a history of taking on dodgy contracts. Less than an hour after the engineers entered the tower, the Shamokin shut down all ground transportation, forcing evacuation by air.

FiveClan had sent Mark in to resolve the problem and now the Shamokin were taking potshots at him from the ground to try to prevent him from docking. He could see them in the infrared, stomping over the remains of the abandoned kudzu plantations in exosuits, angling against the weather, bolt rifles cradled in their ceramic arms.

Mark hated exosuits. Nothing smacked of the abuse of human labour like an exosuit. Why put a person in a dangerous situation when they could just teleoperate a robot? Only people who cared more about money than human lives.

In his mind, Barrio Eighteen and Shamokin Justice were as ridiculous as each other. What was the point of a land-grab on Earth in this day and age? Particularly in NoreCorr. This was the third supercyclone this month and by far the worst. Most of Earth's sects had enough sense to focus their energy on planets that weren't dying.

A sudden shift in the storm threw the lifter sideways just as Mark closed on the tower for the fourth time. He twitched in his beanbag

chair and diverted a little more of his focus to the SAP running the struggling engines. The SAP doing aerosurface sculpting complained wildly at the sudden neglect. Fortunately, Mark was an Omega, genetically engineered to handle as many Self-Aware Programs as it took to run a full starship. Splitting his mental focus to guide multiple pieces of equipment came naturally to him, so long as he didn't push it too far.

Ricky B called him from the tower. 'It's no use, Mark. I think those Shamokin bastards have cracked door security. Don't worry about us. Just get out of here.'

'I'm not leaving you.'

'Don't be a fool, Mark. It's not worth it.'

'I'm going to get you out,' Mark insisted.

'Why?' Ricky snapped. 'What's the fucking point? It's just a couple of weeks in a Shamokin shelter and a ransom demand. We both know FiveClan's good for it.'

Mark snarled to himself. For a team of trapped engineers about to be kidnapped at gunpoint by armed rebels, Ricky and his people sounded surprisingly blasé. But then, that was Earth for you these days. Life was cheap, loyalty expensive.

'Can you get the dockbot back online?' said Mark. 'If I had some help from your end on the tethering arm, we could nail this.'

'I've told you,' said Ricky tersely. 'The dockbot refuses to work under these conditions and there's nobody down here who can persuade it to accept an override. If you can't make the join to a static arm, you might as well call it a night.'

'Fine,' said Mark. 'Just send me an address, then. I'll talk to it myself.'

'Why? You can't run the fucking arm and the lifter at the same time, so what's the point?'

Mark gritted his teeth. It had been enough of a pain in the ass to come out here tonight. No way was he going home empty-handed.

'If you don't think I can do it then you won't mind sending me the address.'

Ricky muttered curses at him. 'Don't be stupid. Nobody can do shit like that.'

Ricky was right, of course. Nobody with normal modifications could. But Mark seldom had to worry about the limits of his handling skills.

Thanks to Will Kuno-Monet, his genetic editor and erstwhile mentor, all he had to worry about was being discovered.

'The address, please,' said Mark, 'or I'm putting this in the report.'

'Whatever!' said Ricky. 'It's your funeral, buddy.'

The tribunal-mandated nanny-SAP running in the back of Mark's head sent him a warning jab. [*Exposing the extent of your abilities jeopardises Fleet security,*] it reminded him. [*Remember that your interface is the exclusive, classified property of the IPSO organisation.*]

How could he ever forget?

'Fuck you, and fuck Will Monet,' he told it. The SAP had heard it before.

The secure link appeared in Mark's sensorium. With significant effort, he calved off a share of his attention and pointed it at the dockbot. Immediately, his mind flooded with a wave of terror. For a moment, it looked like he'd get leak-back to the other SAPs under his command, but Mark brought the dockbot's mood under control just in time. Giving the lifter a panic attack would undoubtedly send it crashing into the tower or the ground or both: not an ideal outcome.

He reached out mentally to understand the dockbot's problem. Three of its sensor plates had been left exposed after the last storm and it could no longer feel its second elbow. Consequently, the weather was freaking it out. It was convinced it was going to break. The tiny software minds installed in equipment like the dockbot seldom had enough sentience to think rationally in situations like these. They responded reflexively, like all simple machines. It took a human handler to instil enough logic to overcome their basic programming.

Mark pressed cool reason into the dockbot's tiny mind, reassuring it that everything would be okay. He ignored the plaintive warnings from the aerosurface SAP and coaxed the tethering arm out of the lock position. At the same time, he nudged the lifter closer to the ground, while stray bolts fired from below bounced off its armoured hull. He brought the tethering arm up to kiss and bind.

'We have a link,' he told Ricky with satisfaction. 'Get everyone into that transit pod. We probably have a minute, tops.'

'You're fucking crazy, you know that?' said Ricky. 'Fucking moddie roboteer. You're not normal. Fine. We'll all get in the transit pod in a *hurricane* and crawl up a docking arm into your blimp while they shoot at us from the ground. Sounds great. No problem at all.'