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A Forest of Stars

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JESS TAMBLYN

Across the Spiral Arm, the gas-giant planets held secrets, dangers, and treasure. For a century and a half, harvesting vital stardrive fuel from the cloud worlds had been a lucrative business for the Roamers.

Five years ago, though, that had all changed.

Like vicious guard dogs, the destructive hydrogues had forbidden all skymines from approaching the gas giants they claimed as their territory. The embargo had crippled the Roamer economy, the Terran Hanseatic League, and the Ildiran Empire. Many brave or foolish entrepreneurs had defied the hydrogues' ultimatum. They had paid with their lives. Dozens of skymines were destroyed. The deep-core aliens were unstoppable and ruthless.

But when facing desperate situations, Roamers refused to give up. Instead, they changed tactics, surviving -- and thriving -- through innovation.

"The old Speaker always told us that challenges redefine the parameters of success," Jess Tamblyn said over the open comm, taking his lookout ship into position above the deceptively peaceful-looking gas giant Welyr.

"By damn, Jess," Del Kellum transmitted with just a touch of annoyance, "if I wanted to be pampered, I'd live on Earth."

Kellum, an older clan leader and hands-on industrialist, signaled to the converging fast-dive scoop ships. The cluster of modified "blitzkrieg" skymines and a hodge-podge of small lookout craft gathered at what they hoped was a safe distance above the coppery planet. No one knew how far away the hydrogues could detect trespassing cloud thieves, but they had long since given up playing it safe. In the end, all life was a gamble, and human civilization could not survive without stardrive fuel.

The ekti-scavenging crew powered up their huge scoops and containers, ready for a concerted plunge into the thick cloud decks. Hit and run. Their supercharged engines glowed warm. Their pilots sweated. Ready.

Alone in his lookout ship, Jess flexed his hands on the cockpit controls. "Prepare to come from all sides. Move in fast, gulp a bellyful, and head for safety. We don't know how long the drogue bastards will give us."

After the big harvesting ships acknowledged, they dropped like hawks after prey. What once had been a routine industrial process had become a commando operation in a war zone.

When presented with the hydrogue ultimatum, daring Roamer engineers had redesigned traditional skymining facilities. They had accomplished a lot in five years. The new blitzkrieg scoops had giant engines, super-efficient ekti reactors, and detachable cargo tanks like a cluster of grapes. Once each tank was filled, it could be launched up to a retrieval point, passing off the harvested ekti a bit at a time without losing a full cargo load if -- when -- the hydrogues came after them.

Kellum transmitted, "The Big Goose thinks we're shiftless bandits. By damn, let's give the drogues the same impression."

The Hansa -- the "Big Goose" -- as well as the Ildiran Empire paid dearly for every drop stardrive fuel. As ekti supplies dwindled year after year, prices skyrocketed to a point that Roamers considered the risk acceptable.

Five of the modified scoops now dispersed across the atmosphere, then plunged into Welyr's clouds, storm upwellings, and vanishingly thin winds. With giant funnel-maws open, the blitzkrieg scoops roared through storm systems at top speed. They gobbled resources, compressing the excess into hydrogen holding tanks while secondary ekti reactors processed the gas.

As he flew his lookout mission, like a man in the crows' nest of an ancient pirate ship, Jess deployed floating sensors into Welyr's soupy clouds. The buoys would detect any large ships rising from the depths. The sensors might give only a few minutes' warning, but the daredevils could retreat quickly enough.

Jess knew that it did no good to fight. The Ildiran Solar Navy and the Hansa EDF had demonstrated that lesson often enough. At the first sign of the enemy's arrival, his renegade harvesters would turn and run with whatever ekti they'd managed to grab.

The first blitzkrieg scoop filled one cargo tank and rose high enough to jettison it, leaving a smoke trail in the thin air. A resounding cheer echoed across the comm, and the competitive Roamers challenged each other to do better. The unmanned fuel tank soared away from Welyr toward its rendezvous point. Safe.

In times past, leisurely skymines had drifted over the clouds like whales feeding on plankton. Jess's brother Ross had been the chief of Blue Sky Mine on Golgen; he'd

had dreams, an excellent business sense, and all the hopes in the world. Without warning, though, hydrogues had obliterated the facility, killed every member of the crew. . . .

Jess monitored his scans. Though the sinking sensor buoys detected no turbulence that might signal the approach of the enemy, he didn't let his attention waver. Welyr seemed much too quiet and peaceful. Deceptive.

Every crewman aboard the blitzkrieg scoops was tense, knowing they had only one chance here, and that some of them would likely die as soon as the hydrogues arrived.

"Here's a second one, highest quality ekti!" Del Kellum's harvester launched a full cargo tank. Within moments, each of the five blitzkrieg scoops had ejected a load of ekti. The scavengers had been at Welyr for less than three hours, and already it was a valuable haul.

"Good way to thumb our noses at the drogues," Kellum continued, his anxiety manifesting as chattiness over the comm band, "though I'd prefer to slam them with a few comets. Just like you did at Golgen, Jess."

Jess smiled grimly. His cometary bombardment had made him a hero among the Roamers, and he hoped that the planet was now uninhabitable, all the enemy aliens destroyed. A strike back. "I was just following my Guiding Star."

Now many clans looked to Jess for suggestions on how they might continue their retaliation against the aliens' nonsensical prohibition.

"You and I have a lot in common," Kellum said, his voice more conspiratorial now that he had switched to a private frequency. "And if you ever do another bombardment, might I suggest this place as a target?"

"What have you got against Welyr? Ah, you had planned to marry Shareen of the Pasternak clan."

"Yes, by damn!" Shareen Pasternak had been the chief of a skymine on Welyr. Jess recalled that the woman had an acidly sarcastic sense of humor and a sharp tongue, but Kellum had been delighted with her. It would have been the second marriage for both of them. But Shareen's skymine had also been destroyed in the early hydrogue depredations.

Now, three more ekti cargo tanks launched away from the racing blitzkrieg scoops.

Trish Ng, the pilot of a second lookout ship, frantically radioed Jess, cutting off the conversation. "The sensor buoys! Check the readings, Jess."

He saw a standard carrier wave with a tiny blip in the background. "It's just a lightning strike. Don't get jumpy, Ng."

"That same lightning strike repeats every twenty-one seconds. Like clockwork." She waited a beat. "Jess, it's an artificial signal, copied, looped, and reflected back at us. The drogues must've already destroyed the sensor buoys. It's a ruse."

Jess watched, and the pattern became apparent. "That's all the warning we're going to get. Everybody, pack up and head out!"

As if realizing they had been discovered, seven immense warglobes rose like murderous leviathans from Welyr's deep clouds. The Roamer scavengers did not hesitate, retreating pell mell up through the gas giant's skies.

A deep-throated subsonic hum came from the alien spheres, and pyramidal protrusions on their crystalline skins crackled with blue lightning. The Roamer daredevils had all seen the enemy fire their destructive weapons before.

Kellum ejected four empty ekti cargo tanks, throwing them like grapeshot at the nearest warglobes. "Choke on these!"

Jess shouted into the comm. "Don't wait. Just leave."

Kellum's diversion worked. The aliens targeted their blue lightning on the empty projectiles, giving the blitzkrieg scoops a few more seconds to escape. The Roamers fired their enormous engines, and four of the five harvester scoops lifted on an escape trajectory.

But one of the new vessels hung behind just a moment too long, and the enemy lightning bolts ripped the facility to molten shreds. The crew's screams echoed across the comm channel, then cut off instantly.

"Go! Go!" Jess yelled. "Disperse and get out of here."

The remaining commando harvesters scattered like flies. The automated cargo tanks would go to their pickup coordinates, where the commandos could retrieve the haul at their leisure.

The warglobes rose up, shooting blue lightning into space. They struck and destroyed a lagging lookout ship, but the others escaped. The enemy spheres remained above the atmosphere for some time, like growling wolves, before they slowly descended back into the coppery storms of Welyr, without pursuing. Though dismayed at the loss of one blitzkrieg scoop and a lookout ship, the raiders were already tallying the ekti they had harvested and projecting how much it would bring on the open market.

Alone in the cockpit of his scout ship, Jess shook his head. "What has happened to us, if we can cheer because our losses were 'not too bad?' "