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The Temporal Void

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Extract

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THE TEMPORAL VOID

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Strangely enough, it was the oak trees which Justine Burnelli always remembered from the day Centurion Station died. She was hurrying towards the safety bunker doors along with everyone else in the garden dome when she glanced back over her shoulder. The thick emerald grass was littered with the debris of the party, mashed canapés stamped into the grass, broken glasses and plates juddering about as the colossal gravity waves washed across the station in fast unrelenting succession. Overhead, the timid light emitted by the nebulas surrounding the galactic core was now smeared into pastel streaks by the dome's misty emergency force fields. Justine felt her weight reducing again. Yells of surprise and near-panic broke out from the staff pressed against her as they all fought for traction on the glowing orange path. Then a *crack* like a thunderbolt echoed across the dome. One of the huge lower boughs on a two-hundred-year-old oak tree split open close to the thick trunk, and the bough crashed down. Leaves swirled upwards like a flock of startled butterflies. The whole majestic tree sagged, with further fissures opening along the length of the trunk. It twisted as it started to fall into its neighbour. The elegant little tree house platform which the band had been playing on barely a minute ago splintered and snapped apart. The last glimpse Justine had of the trees was a couple of red squirrels scampering out of the toppled giants.

The malmetal safety bunker doors contracted behind her, and

for a moment she was enveloped within an oasis of calm. It was a bizarre image, everyone still dressed in their best party clothes, breathing heavily with dishevelled hair and anxious faces. Director Trachtenberg was standing beside her, looking round wild-eyed.

'You okay?' he asked.

She nodded, not quite trusting her voice.

Another of the gravity waves swept through the station. Once again Justine felt her weight lessen. Her u-shadow accessed the station's net, and she pulled out the sensor images of the sky above. The Raiel's DF spheres were still accelerating across the star system to their new positions. She checked that the *Silverbird* was unaffected by the weird gravity waves which the DF spheres were throwing off. The starship's smartcore told her it was maintaining position just above the dusty lava field which served as the station's landing area.

'I've just conferred with our alien colleges,' Director Trachtenberg announced. He smiled wryly. 'Those that talk to us, anyway. And we all agree the gravity shifts are beyond anything the safety systems were designed for. With regret I am ordering an immediate evacuation.'

Several people groaned in dismay.

'You can't,' Graffal Ehasz complained. 'This is what we're here for. Dear Ozzie, man, the data this event is spewing out. What we can learn is unprecedented! We can't just crawl away because of some safety restriction imposed by a committee back in the Commonwealth.'

'I understand your concern,' Trachtenberg said calmly. 'If the situation alters we will return. But, for now, please embark your designated ship.'

Justine could see most of the staff were relieved; while Ehasz and a small hard-core science clique radiated resentment. When she opened her mind to the local gaiafield the clash of emotion was pronounced. But Ehasz was definitely in the minority.

Trachtenberg leaned in close to Justine and quietly asked, 'Can your ship cope with this?'

'Oh yes,' she assured him.

'Very well, if you would please depart with the rest of us.'

'Of course.'

Through her link with the smartcore she saw the safety bunkers break surface, titanium-black spheres bubbling up out of the dusty lava plain. They started to glide smoothly towards the waiting starships.

With the evacuation procedures obviously working, Justine's nerves calmed considerably. She asked the *Silverbird*'s smartcore to open a link along the tenuous Navy communication relay all the way back to the Commonwealth, thirty thousand lightyears away. 'Dad?'

'You're okay, then,' Gore Burnelli said. 'Thank Christ for that.'

Leaking along the minuscule bandwidth was the faintest sensation of a smile. Warm Caribbean sunlight was shining on his lips. It was a comfort that delivered a completely unexpected emotional jolt to Justine. She felt her throat muscles tensing up as her eyes filled with tears and her cheeks flushed. *Goddamn this stupid body*, she raged at its weakness. But she smiled back weakly, ignoring the way people in the shelter were looking at her. 'Yeah, I'm okay.'

'Good, then get a load of this. I've been monitoring the Navy relay link to Centurion Station. Your new friend Trachtenberg just called the Cleric Conservator to tell him about the expansion phase. He did that before he even bothered to warn the Navy what was happening.'

Justine was proud of the way she managed to avoid glancing in Trachtenberg's direction. *Okay, maybe this old body's not quite so useless after all.* 'Really. How interesting.'

'It gets better. About five hours ago the Second Dreamer told his Skylord pal that he wasn't going to lead anyone into the Void. Next thing we know, this expansion begins. I don't know what your take is, but nobody back here thinks it's a coincidence.'

'The Second Dreamer caused this?'

'It wasn't deliberate. At least I seriously hope it wasn't. Cause and effect, I guess. The Skylords exist to ferry souls into the Heart of the Void, and someone tells them that their new supply is going to be cut off. Junkies tend to get irritated and irrational about such things.'

'The Skylords aren't junkies.'

'Don't take everything so literally. I'm doing metaphors, or allegories, some shit like that. Point is, now they know we're out here waiting to be guided, if we don't come to them . . .'

'They come to us,' she whispered.

'Looks like it.'

'But nothing can survive the boundary.'

'The original ship did. Somehow.'

'Has the Second Dreamer said anything?'

'Not a goddamn word, not even "ooops, sorry". Conceited little turd. I thought I was arrogant, but Jeezus!'

'Well, he's going to have to do something.'

'That's the consensus back here, too. The thing is, Living Dream is closing in on him. That's going to make serious trouble if they get their hands on him; our friend Ilanthe will make sure of that.'

Justine accessed the data coming from the station, watching with concern as their life support equipment was stressed close to its limit by the gravity waves. 'It doesn't get much worse than this, Dad.'

'Shit, I'm sorry, angel. Are you going to get out all right?'

'You know you don't have to worry about me. Hang on for a moment, we've reached the starships.'

People were activating their personal force fields as the air-lock's outer door parted. Some of them were also taking pressure suits from the bunker's lockers, making doubly sure they were safe. Justine knew she could depend on her biononics to protect her from anything the unnamed planet could throw at her. Her integral force field strengthened round her. She slipped her heeled pumps off and followed the others out through the triple pressure curtain. Ten aluminium steps and she was standing on

the lava in bare feet and a completely incongruous little black cocktail dress. Tremors managed to shake the soles of her feet through the protective cushion of the force field. A gentle argon breeze fluttered round her, raising short-lived twisters of dust that never came above her knees.

The bunker had come to rest a hundred metres beyond the squat building holding the base's main airlock. Two of the five Navy ships were poised on either side of her, hanging a few metres above the ground on ingrav, rocking slightly as they compensated for the treacherous gravity. Justine hastened round the nose of one to see the *Silverbird* waiting a further twenty metres beyond it. A welcome sight, its simple purple ovoid shape floating casually over the lava, holding a lot steadier than the Navy ships. She grinned in relief and scuttled underneath. The airlock at the base of the fuselage bulged inwards, opening into a dark funnel leading to the heart of the ship. The smartcore was already countering gravity to pull her inside when she saw something moving on the horizon. An impossible sight.

'Stop,' she commanded.

Her feet paused ten centimetres above the lava. Retinal inserts zoomed in. It was a mounted Silfen. The elf-like hominoid was clad in a thick cobalt-blue coat embroidered with the most fabulous stipple of jewels that sparkled in the wavering pastels of starlight. His black hat was tall and pointed, with a simple gold ribbon fluttering from the tip. A gloved hand gripped a long phosphorescent spear which he held aloft, as if in salute. It might have been such a gesture, for he was leaning forward in his saddle, half standing on the stirrups. As if his appearance wasn't astonishing enough, she was dumbfounded by his mount. The creature most closely resembled a terrestrial rhinoceros, except it was almost the size of an elephant, and had two flat tails that swept from side to side. Its long shaggy fur was bright scarlet, and the four horns curving from the side of its long head were devilishly sharp. Justine, who had once ridden on the Charlemagnes which the old Barsoomians had produced on Far Away, knew that this fearsome beast was a true warrior-animal. Her

ancient body instinctively produced a flood of worry hormones just at the sight of it.

The Silfen simply shouldn't have been here. She'd never known one of their paths had led to this remote, desolate planet. And he was an oxygen breather; so, she suspected, was his lethally regal mount. This tenuous, radiation-saturated argon atmosphere was deathly to living things. Then she grinned at herself and her silly affront. Who was she to make such a claim, standing exposed to the eerie energy emissions of the Wall stars in nothing more than a disgracefully short cocktail dress?

So it wasn't an absolute impossibility to find a Silfen here. Nor that he was using some technological protection from the environment.

But . . . 'Why?' she whispered.

'The Silfen live to experience,' Gore told her, equally absorbed by the alien's presence. 'Face it, my girl, you don't get a much bigger experience than watching the end of the galaxy crashing down around you.'

She'd forgotten she'd left the link open. 'A very short experience,' she retorted sourly. 'And what is that thing he's riding?'

'Who knows? I remember Ozzie saying the Silfen he encountered on a winter planet rode to the hunt on odd creatures.'

'Odd, not terrifying.'

'Does it matter? I imagine he's here on the toughest steed he can find in honour of the event. After all, you've got the butchest starship in that section of the galaxy.'

'A *butch* starship?' But it broke her enchantment with the strange alien. She bowed her head formally at him. He dipped the spear in return, and sat back on his small saddle.

The *Silverbird* drew her up into the small luxurious cabin. Once inside, she relaxed into a deep curving chair that the deck extended. Within the ANA-designed craft she was now as safe as it was possible for any human to be. The starship's sensors showed her the last of the station staff hurrying into the airlocks of the Navy ships. Another two Silfen had joined the first watcher. Her father was right, she acknowledged, they would

only come here for something momentous. For her, their presence served only to amplify the whole deadly panorama unfolding outside.

'Let's go,' she told the smartcore.

The *Silverbird* rose from Centurion Station ahead of all the other starships. As the rest of them began to surge up after her they made for a strangely varied flock: Commonwealth Navy ships sleek beside the cumbersome Ticoth vessels, while the glittering purple spheres of the Ethox danced nimbly round the big tankers containing the Suline. In another time she would have enjoyed travelling in the elegant avian-like artificial-life constructs that soared and swooped to carry the Forleene away from danger. Despite the devastation raging all around them, few of the departing species could resist a quick scan in the direction of the metal cube housing the Kandra. None, therefore, were wholly surprised when the whole mass simply lifted cleanly from the dusty ground and accelerated smoothly away from the collapsing structures of the observation project.

Justine was ridiculously proud of the way that none of them seemed able to match the *Silverbird*'s acceleration. It had taken the ultradrive ship just a few seconds to reach an altitude of five hundred kilometres, where it stopped to scrutinize the last minutes of Centurion Station. Another gravity wave shook the hull so violently the onboard gravity generator could barely counter it. Justine felt a distinct shiver run through the cabin. The unnamed planet curved away below the fuselage, its ancient geology stubbornly resistant to the worst effects of the awesome gravity waves washing invisibly through its mantle. Underneath her, the hot Ethox tower was the first to succumb; rocking from side to side until the undulations became too great for the safety systems to compensate for. It toppled with slow grace to shatter against the unyielding lava. Big waves of water cascaded out from splits in the Suline tanks, pushing a spume of debris ahead of them. Flying spray quickly solidified into sharp needles of hail, to be re-absorbed by the dark water. Inevitably, the cold won, producing a rumpled ice lake three kilometres across. Thin grey

clouds streamed out of cracks in domes of both the human and the Forleene, quickly dissipating in the weak gusts of argon.

In an astonishingly short time the structures were flattened, joining the greater enclave of ruins which marked the site where hundreds of alien species had spent millennia observing the terrible, enigmatic Void at the centre of the galaxy. Justine switched her attention to the wounded sky above. As if they could feel what was happening beyond the Wall stars, the massive ion storms were seething with a rare angry sheen, brighter than she'd seen in her brief time at the station.

The *Silverbird* was tracking the Raiel's gas giant-sized DF spheres as they continued their flight across the star system. Gravity waves spilled out from them with astonishing force, distorting the orbits within the main asteroid rings. A couple of small moons caught in the backwash had also changed inclination. All nine of the DFs were heading in towards the small orange star which Centurion Station's never-named planet was in orbit around. As the ship watched, the photosphere started to dim.

'Holy crap,' Justine yelped. The DFs must be drawing power directly from the star. She wondered how they would manifest it. The effect was fascinating, almost countering the anxiety she felt. There had been a few minutes after the emergency began that she'd seriously thought Centurion Station was where her body would finally die.

As if sharing her thought, Lehr Trachtenberg opened a channel to all the human starships. 'Status report please, is everyone all right?'

'I'm fine,' she reported back to the *CNE Dalfrod*, where he was embarked, along with the senior staff.

Once he'd established all his own staff were safe, the director exchanged messages with the alien craft ascending out of the atmosphere. They all confirmed that everyone had escaped intact; though they had to assume the Kandra were safe as the enigmatic cube didn't respond to any communication.

'We'll return to the Commonwealth immediately,' Trachtenberg announced. 'From what the observation systems can ascertain, we should manage to stay ahead of the boundary. It's expanding at about three or four lightyears an hour. That gives us a huge safety margin.'

'Is the data still coming in?' Justine asked.

'Some of it. It's patchy now, there's a lot going on in the Wall we don't understand. I expect most of the disturbances we're registering are coming from the Raiel defence systems, but even so we can keep a reduced watch until the sensors are overcome. We're relaying as much as we can to the Navy Exploration Division centre back home.'

'I see.'

Justine watched the other starships reach her altitude, feeling strangely annoyed with them and herself. Surely there was something else to be done other than simply flee? It smacked of not a little cowardice, ignorant peasants cowering from the lightning storm, howling that the gods were angry, looking for a sacrifice to appease them. *And we stopped that nonsense millennia ago. Yet for all our enlightenment we're right back there sheltering from the onslaught in our nice dry cave.* Then the ships were accelerating past her, starting to disperse as they headed back towards their own home stars. The Forleene were the first to go ftl, slipping down into wormholes which closed immediately, a last farewell hanging in the ether from their pack leader.

The *Silverbird*'s cabin rocked again. Eighty million miles away the DFs were streaking into a low orbit against the darkening star. The motion hardened her determination. *This is not the way it should be.*

'Dad?'

'Still here.'

'What have the Raiel said about the expansion?'

'Sweet fuck all. The *High Angel* is a lifeboat, remember. Their defence systems are all concentrated round your part of the galaxy. Anyway, we can hardly blame them for not telling

us anything. Right now every sentient species in the galaxy is pissed at us over the Pilgrimage, and who can blame them. I'm pissed at us.'

'I know. That's why I'm going in,' she said, surprising herself at the speed of the thought.

'You're doing *what*?'

'Heading in to the Void.' Even as she told him she was instructing the smartcore, laying down the course. Fast. *Before I chicken out.*

'You're doing no such thing, my girl.'

The *Silverbird* dropped smoothly into hyperspace, heading in towards the Wall stars at fifty lightyears an hour. 'Tell him,' she said to her father. 'Tell the Second Dreamer. Get him to ask the Skylord to let me in. Once I'm in, once I'm talking to the Skylord direct, I'll try to explain the situation, the damage their boundary is causing.'

'Get your ass back here right fucking now!'

'Dad. No. This is our chance at a diplomatic solution. The Raiel have tried force for a million years. It doesn't work.'

'Come back. You can't get in. This thing is killing the whole fucking galaxy. Your ship . . .'

'Humans can get in, we already know that. Somehow we can do it. And if the Second Dreamer helps me, I'll stand a really good chance.'

'This is insane.'

'I have to do this, Dad. Somebody has to make the effort. We have to try a human method. We're part of this galaxy now, a big part. It's our turn to attempt our way. We have the right.' The blood was pounding in her ears as she hyped herself up. 'I'm going to carry the torch for all of us. If I fail, then . . . we try something else. That's being human, too.'

'Justine.'

Over thirty thousand lightyears she could feel his anguish. For a split second, she shared it. 'Dad, if anyone can get to the Second Dreamer, if anyone can make them see reason, it's you, it's *the* Gore Burnelli. All he has to do is tell the Skylord I'm out

here. Ask him. Beg him. Offer him riches. Whatever it takes. You can do it. Please, Dad.'

'God-*damn*, why are you always so fucking difficult?'

'I'm your daughter.'

Bitter laughter echoed across the stars. 'Of course I'll ask. I'll do a damn sight more than that. If he doesn't get down on his knees and beg that Skylord he'll wish all he faces is oblivion in the expansion.'

'Now don't start threatening people,' she rebuked immediately.

'Yeah, yeah.'

'I'll try to keep a channel open to Centurion Station's relay as long as I can. The Navy systems are tough, they should hold out a while yet.'

'Okay, I'll go find me the little tit responsible for this almighty screw-up.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'Godspeed.'

*

At three o'clock in the morning Chris Turner left the staff canteen on the east side of Colwyn City's docks and grimaced at the rain splattering on to his face. He'd hoped the unseasonal weather front would blow over while he was taking his break. But no, the thick clouds showed no sign of relenting. His semi-organic jacket rolled a collar up round his neck, and he hurried back to the maintenance depot.

Chris couldn't see anything moving in the docks tonight. Not that other nights were much different. Night-time staffing levels were low. Bots were off line for maintenance, which was why he'd pulled this grotty shift – it wasn't popular but it paid well. Trans-ocean barges stayed moored to the quay while their crews slept or clubbed the night away in town. Warehouses were shut.

There wasn't any activity in the city, either. The rain had put a halt to the usual nightlife. Capsules and ground vehicles had hauled the last optimistic revellers back to their homes a long

time ago. He could just make out the huge single-span arch bridge over the Cairns, its lights a hazy smear through the rain. Normally there would be something driving over it, or a few taxis sliding along its metro rail. But not tonight. He shivered. The city like this was actually kind of spooky. To counter the feeling of isolation he reached down into the gaiafield to gain some emotional comfort from the eternal thoughts whirling within. The usual busy background babble slithered round him like noisy spectres; thoughts that called, mournfully and eagerly, feelings which intrigued, though he shied away from the sadder ones.

A little more comfortable now he knew there were other humans still alive and awake, Chris quickened his pace. There were another eight general purpose bots that needed an overhaul before morning. Even with the company smartcore interfaced with the engineering bays back in the maintenance depot, he'd be hard pressed to finish on time. Yet again he wondered if the pay for late shift was truly worth the cost. His friends only ever got to see him at the weekends, and then his sleep pattern made him lousy company.

He walked along the long line of landing pads, boots splashing in the puddles that were expanding over the vast apron of concrete. Gentle green-tinged ripples reflected the luminescence given off by the lighting globes on their high posts overhead. Thick droplets splattered down noisily from the dark hulls of parked starships.

Up in front and ten metres above the slick concrete a small star flared blue-violet. Chris's mouth dropped open in astonishment. You couldn't work in the starship business, even in a peripheral position like his, without knowing the signature spectrum of Cherenkov radiation. 'That's wrong,' he said dumbly.

The star vanished, and the air where it had been rippled. Chris was suddenly staring at a perfect black circle whose base touched the ground. The blackness changed again, lightening to blue-grey, then *receding* at a speed which made him giddy. Instinct brought his arms up for balance, he was certain he was

falling forwards. When he steadied himself he was looking along an infinite tunnel. Its soft-glowing fabric brightened intolerably as dazzling sunlight streamed out. Not Viotia's sun, he knew. This was another star altogether.

The light dimmed for a moment as a big capsule slipped out of the opening. Chris scurried away to one side. He could see the wormhole had lowered itself so the bottom quarter was now below ground level, giving the long line of armour-clad figures a broad flat path to march through from their world. Above them, capsules slid through nose to tail. Boots were hitting the wet concrete in a steady rhythm, echoing round the high walls of the dock buildings. It was an eerily brutal sound, Chris thought. Over a hundred of the soldiers were on the Viotia side already. *Soldiers?* But what else could he call them?

Finally, the impossibility he was witnessing started to register. His u-shadow was throwing out frantic emergency calls to his family, friends, work-colleagues, company offices, the police, the mayor, government . . . His mind let loose a powerful wail of shock into the gaiafield, which drew some instant reactions of surprise from local sharers, who immediately became curious indeed as his vision opened to them.

'You there!' an amplified voice boomed from the first rank of the marching figures. There must have been thirty capsules in the air now, starting to accelerate out across the city, and still more were rushing through. From his angle, the wormhole provided Chris with a narrow window out across the vast field on the other side. Warm afternoon sunlight shone down cosily on row after row of armoured figures, thousands of them – tens of thousands. Most of them were in shadow from the armada of regrav capsules suspended in the air above.

Chris Turner turned and started to run.

'Halt,' the harsh voice commanded. 'We are the legitimate police of Viotia, accredited by your Prime Minister. Halt now or face the consequences.'

Chris kept on running. This couldn't be happening. This was the Commonwealth. It was safe and it was comfortable. People

with guns didn't invade from other planets, not even in troubled times like these. *Not happening!*

'Last warning. Halt.'

His family was starting to respond to his frantic calls. Those he shared himself with through the gaiafield were producing the same dismayed reaction as his own. Then the jangle pulse struck, and Chris was unconscious before he hit the wet concrete.

*

Elvin's Payback was only an hour out from Viotia when the shit hit the fan. Everyone on board went quiet at more or less the same time as their u-shadows reported the news that was breaking into the unisphere. They accessed in astonishment as images of armoured paramilitary police and their support capsules poured out of the wormhole in Colwyn City's docks. In a carefully choreographed political sequence the Cleric Conservator's office on Ellezelin formally issued a public invitation to Viotia to join the Free Trade Zone. It was swiftly followed by Viotia's Prime Minister accepting on behalf of her planet. One minute later the wormhole had opened.

So Oscar Monroe wasn't the least surprised when Paula called him on a secure link a couple of minutes later. 'We knew they were planning annexation,' Paula said. 'The trigger factor has to be the Second Dreamer.'

'That figures,' Oscar said. 'Everyone's scared crapless over the devourment phase. If we do manage to get hold of him, I'd like to shake some sense into the stupid bastard myself.'

'I think the devourment has taken Living Dream by surprise as much as everyone else. The dream simply confirmed his location for them. They're acting on that.'

Oscar reviewed some of the images relayed by reporters who'd gathered around the edge of the docks. 'So we can safely assume he's in Colwyn City.'

'Yes, but they don't know exactly where. If they had an accurate fix, their embedded agents would have simply run a covert snatch operation. This is an indicator of Ethan's desper-

ation. Our sources on the ground indicate they're shutting down all traffic in and out of the city – ground, air and space.'

'Closing the noose.'

'Exactly.'

'That doesn't make our mission any easier. We'll have to infiltrate through the perimeter.'

'Don't complicate things. I'd suggest you simply fly straight down into the docks.'

'You're kidding me, right?'

'Not at all. Get the smartcore to display the ship's stealth function to you. I don't believe that Living Dream has anything on Viotia which can detect you at night in the rain.'

'Oh, crap. All right.'

The link ended, and he turned to his shipmates to explain.

'I can insert some software that will help cover our approach,' Liatris McPeierl said. 'Their network is already growing out from the docks, I'm monitoring its development through the unisphere, but I can crack the junction nodes. That'll let me into their sensors and command links.'

'The docks will be a good position,' Tomansio said. 'It puts us in right at the heart of their operation. I don't care how dense their network is, or how powerful their smartcores are, it will be chaotic down there to start with. That provides us with a golden opportunity.'

'All right,' Oscar said, 'you guys are the experts. Tell me what approach route you want.'

Forty minutes later *Elvin's Payback* emerged into real space a thousand kilometres above Colwyn City. It was already fully stealthed, capable of avoiding the most advanced military-grade sensors. A huge case of overkill. Viotia's civil space detectors could barely locate a starship out at geosynchronous orbit when its beacon was signalling. As yet, the Ellezelin forces pouring into the docks hadn't established any kind of sensor coverage above the atmosphere. They were concentrating on tracking capsule traffic in the city, and apprehending anyone who tried to leave.

Nobody was looking for craft coming into the area. The commercial starships which had arrived after the annexation began were staying in orbit, awaiting developments and clear orders from their owners.

Following Tomansio's directions, Oscar brought the starship straight down above the estuary a couple of miles outside the city. It was still raining, the swollen river covered by rolling cloud. With a high intensity optical distortion shimmering round its fuselage, the ovoid starship looked like a particularly dense patch of drizzle in the few wisps of sombre starlight that defused through the cloud. Electronic sensors simply lost focus, mass scanners were unable to find anything heavier than air in the space it occupied. Even Higher field functions, had there been any operating, would have been hard pressed to find anything. If it had been broad daylight on a clear morning, then maybe someone might have spotted something. But not this dreary shadowed night.

Oscar took them down to three metres above the muddy water, and steered upriver using passive sensors alone. Several of the large Ellezelin forces' support capsules streaked across the sky above them, on their way to intercept fleeing citizens. *Elvin's Payback* remained invisible, though that didn't stop Oscar holding his breath and foolishly staring up at the cabin ceiling as the capsules passed overhead. He remembered the war films he used to watch in his first life, already ancient then, which depicted silent running in submarines. The principles here were comparable. He was even tempted to take the starship underwater to make their approach, completing the similarity. Tomansio had talked him out of it, pointing out that the noise and displacement they'd make breaking surface would probably give them away.

So they drifted in over the deserted quays like a ghost through mist. According to the information Liatris had hacked from the invaders' network, several paramilitary squads had been deployed round the perimeter of the docks, supported by ten armed capsules, to secure their immediate footprint. Nobody was watching the dock's long river frontage.