

**PLANETARY
ATTACK FORCES**

By E. R. Dee

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E-Book Edition for Kindle ASIN: B01MU2T0C0

E-book for Nook, iBooks, Kobo ISBN: 9781370454945

Trade Paperback ISBN: 9781544774961

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2017906202

Order online at virtually any bookstore for paperback.

E-books available at Amazon, Nook, Kobo, iTunes

Distribution: Create Space, Amazon, Ingram, Baker and Taylor

Made in U.S.A.



Greed, hubris and selfish desires short-sheet
the outposts of the solar system, who then
send forces out to take what they need without
trade nor barter. Eventually, all the planets
send forth attack forces to deal with
those who they think have wronged them!

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Chapter One

“Jon!” a voice shot through the speaker of the administrator’s terminal. “This is Pierre on the flight deck. I’m getting some confusing chatter from the outside saying that they are under attack and someone is making off with something.”

“Who is under attack?” Jon snapped back at the man monitoring the flight deck of the Orbiting Space Laboratory and Observatory locked in synchronous orbit around Jupiter’s furthest moon Callisto. “And what are they making off with?”

“Unknown. I was monitoring routine conversations between the ice crew, the gas collectors, and the warehousing crew when suddenly someone is yelling about transports circling and firing shots at them. Then someone said they were making off with it. I’m assuming it was the transports they were talking about.”

“Did you see anything on radar?”

“Yes. I had the gas collection transport, the missile they were working with, the refinery, along with some other blips near the outer perimeter. I thought these might be some of our collecting missiles, but as I heard the chatter these started making course changes and moving around stationary blips off in the distance by the racks and refinery. Then one of the stationary blips began to move with two of the smaller blips leading it. Like they were towing it.”

“What were they towing and who are *they?*!” Jon shouted back at him.

“I don’t know, Jon.” Pierre sounded exasperated.

“Well, someone needs to find out and get back to me. Do what you have to do.”

“Yes sir,” Pierre said signing off, then issuing Jon’s orders to the crew.

* * *

One by one the department heads and managers arrived at the conference room. Jon was already seated at the head of the table nursing a cup of KawFee.

“That’s a fresh pot,” Jon told them as they all looked at the three thermos bottles on the other side of the room.

“Do we know what happened yet?” one of the managers inquired.

“We got attacked, that’s what!” one of the younger hot-heads from the engineering section replied. “And several of our people were wounded.”

“How are the wounded doing?” Jon asked

“Fine. Their suit layers absorbed most of the impact from the bullets, leaving bruise marks on their skin,” one of the department heads told him.

“Glad to hear that! Everyone get your cups and take your seats. Then we’ll start,” Jon told them.

After a few minutes, everyone sat and stared at him.

“All right. One of the gassers had his vid unit on like he was supposed to in case of accidents. He got a look at them and here it is,” Jon pressed an app on his screen and the images appeared on

everyone's tablets. "The resolution's too low and the ships move too fast to see any identifying markings."

"But we all know who *they* are, and only *they* have fighters like that," the young man said.

"The Martians," Jon acknowledged, "but our crew was fast and ready for anything. The launch crew had probes on standby. They positioned them and our radio-radar-navigator gave them the heading and launched two probes. Both probes relayed back a big radar blip that matches a Deep Space Ship. No transponder was running, and we didn't get a visual. But the radar on board the probes gave us a good location and we could see the blip of what was taken on route to that DSS."

"And what was taken?" one of the women asked.

"A storage rack. One we were filling with refined gasses, ices, and cryogenics. I have an inventory list but basically, it was tanks of UDMH, hydrazine, MON three, liquid hydrogen, liquid nitrogen, liquid oxygen, and containers of processed frozen water. This wiped out what we were accumulating for our next trip to the 'Roiders, however on the bright side our ship won't be back for another ten months and we should have a stock of goods to trade within the deadline. The rack was only one-third completed. There were more tanks, but those were on a rack at the refinery that wasn't touched. Neither was the refinery."

"Did the Martians get enough to share? I mean are they going to go out and find we've been trading directly behind their backs?" another woman asked.

"I doubt it. Based on what the 'Roiders tell us the Martians haven't been sharing in quite a while. That's why we've kept the last DSS that arrived on remote and started servicing Earth and the belt directly. At this point, I couldn't care less if Mars finds out we're dealing directly! What are they going to do, come here and start a war? Take over and work the system? I doubt it! What I do care about is the loss of fuel, air, and water, not to mention the storage tanks," Jon said. "What's our situation on storage tanks?"

"We have quite a number left and the DSS will be bringing empty tanks and containers back to us," the controller told him.

"And then *they'll* return to take more again since we're no longer just giving it to them!" The young hot-head correctly observed.

"Yes, and we'll need to be ready for them. We also need to advise the Orion, who is coming back from Earth with coffee, sugar, bottled liquor, canned goods . . . You know the drill. They will be dropping off some of that to Vesta and Pallas on this run, then deadhead to us. We, in turn, owe some of that to Ceres and Juno, along with fuel, air, and water. It looks like we'll come a little short because of this occurrence. They'll be plenty, they tell me, for the outposts but only some for the miners. We can't delay the shipment longer than sixteen months from today or the delivery ship won't catch up to Ceres and Ceres is the most important outpost. They're our oldest and best ally in this new era of 'maybe we don't need the Martians' for anything. The Orion tells us they are bringing electronics out, along with tubing and sheet metal."

"That's fine and dandy but we're not used to repairing things." The hot-head was now more subdued and reflective. "We're used to swapping out boards and sending the old ones back to them for servicing. Now we're looking at swapping out chips and discrete components and hope we get it right. To top that off, we have no schematics or repair manuals because Mars never provided them."

"That brings us to the real meat of this meeting. Do we say something to Mars or do we keep quiet?" Jon asked, looking at each of the men and women around the table.

“Why are they stingy with electronics? I mean I can see the sugar, liquors, and dried fruit,” one of the men added.

“I guess they either needed it for themselves or they just want to sell them to Earth. I don’t know. I would have gladly traded the rack of tanks for a shipment of boards, gears, screws and other things that strip, break and burn out. But instead, they swooped in like locusts and just took from us,” Jon told them. “So, what say you?”

“Complain.”

“Complain.”

“Yell at them!”

“Bitch to high holy heaven.”

“Express our displeasure.”

One by one the vote became unanimous.

* * *

“They handed me this just before I came here this morning,” President Everett of Mars said. “It came in late last night. It’s from Jon Yost of Jupiter’s ruling council. A strongly worded complaint about fighters coming into their orbital zone and firing upon workers. Two of these fighters apparently took a rack of heavily refined cryogenics to a Deep Space Ship parked way off in space. They allege that it was us doing these things.” He looked at his ministers around the Monday morning meeting for a reaction.

“Gee . . .” the Foreign Minister said. “How dare these Jupiter people accuse us of such a dastardly deed. I mean, we were all here at the Abbott Government Center all weekend long!”

“No,” the Minister of Security added. “I was at Norris most of yesterday.”

There was some laughter around the table.

“I went to the Eastern Estates for dinner. At least a half dozen people saw me there, so I have an alibi!” the Minister of the Interior added to a table that was now spouting bouts of laughter from the various men.

“Now, fellows, don’t rush to rash conclusions,” Everett said. “They didn’t come out and accuse. It’s more like they intimated we did this thing.”

Everyone at the table started to laugh.

“They didn’t happen to give a detailed inventory, did they?” the Interior Minister inquired. “So in case I run into an unexpected surplus, I can let security know!”

“Then I will gladly impound it,” the Minister of Security said, “and hold it until they come with positive proof that it might be theirs!”

More laughter.

“Speaking of supplies, I got a list this morning from the DSS Cernan. They are coming back to us with hydrogen, hydrazine, MON three, air components, and ice water. Enough to keep us going for a couple of years.” The Space Minister copied the communication text to the Interior Minister via his com unit. “Anyone else want a copy?”

The president shook his head. "That's all right. I'll take your word for it. But just a couple of years, you say? Weren't we expecting more?"

"Yes, we were," the Space Minister muttered. "But this is all they reported."

"Slackers. We're dealing with a bunch of slackers out there on Jupiter!" Everett said.

"Maybe they're only refining enough for their own needs," the Foreign Minister speculated.

"Someone out there on Jupiter is obviously not working their hardest for the Mars for Martians program!" the Interior Minister said with a grin.

"If people don't pay their taxes when due, then one just has to send the collection agency out to snag it!" the Minister of Security said as the whole table enjoyed a good laugh.

* * *

"Hey!" the man just coming off flight deck duty on the DSS Cassini said as he made his way into the birthing area. "This is a copy of something that came in from Jove on our data stream." He held out his slate. "Turn on your share functions," he added.

Everyone in the room pulled out either their slates or handsets and quickly received the text message.

"Whoa! Someone attacked our people and made off with a rack of tanks. The Martians are the prime suspect although they denied any knowledge of such action and claim they can account for all their ships!"

"Does that include *this* ship? The one we picked up at Earth?" one of the crewmen asked, knowing full well it didn't.

"And they were running without transponders. Just like we and the Orion are. What's this please forward mean?"

"The Orion is further out than we are. They may not be in com range and neither might Pallas, which is where they are heading," the man who just came off duty said. "We, on the other hand, are heading straight for home."

"Although we're passing near Mars, aren't we? Maybe we should invade them and give them a taste of their own medicine!"

"We're a long way off from Mars, a good five million down range. Besides, what can we invade them for!?"

"The fun of it. Hit and run. We have a couple of their fighters. We can shoot a few rounds off at them to make them think twice about taking anything from us again!"

"Maybe we'll find the rig they stole?"

"Hardly. They only took it last week. It'll take months to make it through the belt back to Mars."

"They must have something we want, or want to destroy."

"Don't they have space telescopes everyone likes to use? Knock one of them out or take it. We can use a better one up at Jupiter."

"You guys are nuts!" the man who just arrived told them. "Besides, we're going to be millions of miles down range."

“Unless we do an orientation change and run the main engines. We have plenty of fuel!”

“That’s loony and if the captain of the Orion or any of the managers back home heard you, they’d be reading you the riot act!”

“Really, didn’t they send the Orion out to service the ’Roiders and Earthers? Isn’t that cutting into Martian territory? I don’t think they really care back home.”

“And what happens if we get caught or killed? We only have a few of their fighters on this ship, and they can certainly use them back home.”

“We swoop in with just one fighter, ruffle their feathers and swoop out. We keep the Cassini on a course to Jove, but just get closer to Mars. Flight range. Several hundred thousand miles. That’s still out of range of their radar systems. It’s just like what they did to us, according to this text you brought us!”

“You want us to go through a major course change just to swoop in on the Martians. You guys are nuts!”

Chapter Two

“Hello to the transport heading our way. Please tell me that you’re our replacement. We’re awfully tired of babysitting this baby! Over.”

“You’re babysitting an OSLO? Over,” came the reply.

“No, we’re not an OSLO we’re an FSF. An orbital foundry and we were the ones that got stuck keeping it in a stable orbit. Over.”

“Oh, my god. You *are* just what we are looking for! Thanks for calling or we would have passed you. How many on board? Over.”

“Just the three of us caretakers. Over.”

“Very good, we’re on our way to hook up with you and we’ll send you up a replacement crew. Over and out.”

“What are you doing Rich?” his co-pilot and port gunner asked.

“Bobby, that’s a foundry-smelter-fabricator. One of the Martian FSFs. Do you know what we can make with that?”

“A big mess, that’s what!”

“Bobby, just be cool!”

“Pete,” Bobby said to the starboard gunner, “talk some sense into him before he gets us in a peck of trouble!”

“Well, I thought we were here to get some payback. There’s three of them, there’s four of us. Sounds like good odds!” Pete said with a smile, looking back to the rear man, Grigori.

“I’m up for it. We get in and disable it, leave them with a radio so they can call for help,” Gregori said.

“I was thinking more about taking it back home,” Rich said.

“Well now, there’s a lot of factors involved. How much fuel and the type of drive, how flexible are the controls and what do we do with the crew?” Greg asked.

“That’s a fabrication ship. They must have some pure transports on board. We pile them into one of those and send them off!” Rich said.

“Oh, jeez! This is nutso,” Bobby moaned.

“Let’s just go in and see,” Rich said, turning the ship around

Rich did a fly-by of the foundry which did look like a small OSLO. “Look what’s attached to the bottom!” he said to the others who gathered around the front view pane.

“Two shuttles,” Grigori said, with a big smile forming.

“My, my, this is looking more opportune by the moment,” Peter added. “Up there is a docking collar.”

“I see it,” Rich said homing in on the collar that had the docking lights flashing.

“Nice of them to show us the way in!” Greg muttered.

It took a few minutes for Rich to match speed and rotation. Then he guided their docking collar over the one on the outer hull. With a scrape and shudder their ship made contact with the foundry and they were connected as the clamps engaged.

“Let’s go say hello!” Rich said bringing his helmet face plate down and hooking up to the airline to puff his suit up. He then started climbing the ladder up to their top airlock. He opened the inner door and climbed into the lock. Grigori was down below nodding as he shut the inner door. Rich then opened the outer door and climbed up to the outer door of the foundry. He withdrew his forty-five and tapped on the door. The lock handle began to spin, and the door opened as Rich put his sidearm back into the holster. He looked up at the man inside who wasn’t wearing a suit. Rich lifted his faceplate. “Hi, there! Let me go get the others!” he told the man above him who was scrambling back up the ladder.

Rich went down, opened the transport inner hatch and gave them a thumb up. By then Greg and Pete had their assault rifles draped over their shoulders as they followed Rich up the ladder.

“Hey!” Rich said topside once he walked off the ladder and saw the man who met him standing there in the reception area. “Take me to your leader!” he said with a big smile.

“This way!” the young man said pointing out the door. “I’m Tim, by the way, and our leader is Leon.” He turned to see the others who were following behind. “You’re all guys? Didn’t they send a surrogate with you? That’s most of the incentive for taking this horrid year-long job. Nooky every day since there’s just Leon and myself.”

“Our surrogate stayed behind in the transport,” Grigori said.

“That’s Tom and Harry and I’m ah . . .” Rich blanked out and thought of the last movie he saw for a name. “Hal.”

“The flight deck is up this way.” Tim pointed as they headed up ramp after ramp to the fifth level.

Rich pointed to Pete and had him search the lower levels while he and Greg followed Tim’s lead as he took them up the ramps, then down a corridor and into a room just up from the ramps.

“Leon!” Tim said, all excited. “This is Hal.”

Rich extended a hand to the older man who was giving them a good look.

“And I’m Tom,” Grigori added, lifting his right hand to say hello.

“I thought you were Harry,” Tim said.

“No, I’m Tom, Harry is right behind us,” Greg said as he took note of the young, lovely girl in the room. “And she is . . .”

“Nadia,” Leon said, introducing the blonde who looked to be in her late teens or early twenties. “She’s our medic.”

“So I hear,” Greg said, smiling at the girl who was already having a positive effect on his general well-being.

“So, we’ve never done this duty before,” Rich told him. “We’d appreciate a briefing.”

“You’re not a pilot?”

“All of us are pilots,” Greg told him, “but we’ve never babysat this particular type of vessel. We’ve done OSLOs, DSS, transports, fighters, but never one of these.”

Greg looked around at the controls.

“It’s basically the same as an OSLO. Radio, radar, navigation and fire controls.”

“There are shuttles attached. Do they run?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Tim chimed in. “They’re fully fueled and locked into the controls, but you rarely use them to change orbit. We mostly use the OMS and Ion engines.”

“That’s what we’re used to using,” Greg said.

“We don’t want to accidentally touch them, so where are the shuttle controls?” Rich asked, looking over the control section.

“These are the shuttle controls. The pressurizing system, the intermix releases, throttle, the shuttle OMS controls for yaw, pitch, and roll,” Leon showed them.

“Looks easy to work.”

“It is, but you’ll never have to work it,” Leon told them. “The OMS and Ion drive keep it trimmed.”

“Operation manuals,” Grigori said pulling out loose-leaf binders. “How to work the shuttle section. How to work the Ion drive. How to start the foundry smelter . . .” Greg opened the book. “Looks like this place was designed for anyone to operate. Either of you ever work the foundry or fabricator?”

“No,” Leon said. “We’re not steel workers. We’re pilots, like yourselves. Except we’re not used to seeing weapons. Especially a machine gun.”

“It’s an assault rifle, not a machine gun,” Grigori corrected while lifting it safely for them to see. “And we’re with the militia,” he said as he pointed to Rich and himself. “We are a part of the space corps. We’re airborne fighters. It was felt this place needed to be more secure.”

“Found ’em!” Pete came around the corner holding his assault rifle down towards the floor.

“*That’s Harry!*” Rich told them.

“Half-dozen of them. All fueled. All working,” Peter added.

“All right, let’s get going. I’m sure the three of you want to get out of here and back to a real OSLO, then back down to Mars!” Rich said pointing them to the door.

“Come along,” Pete motioned with his gun barrel.

“Let’s go!” Grigori said, pulling his assault rifle around and putting it across his chest with the barrel pointing upwards.

“Out the door!” Rich put his hand on the small of Nadia’s back and started her moving to the door.

“But we need to get our things . . .” Tim said looking about at the three men now leading them out into the corridor.

“Don’t worry about your things,” Grigori told them.

“I’m sure they’ll give you new things on the OSLO,” Rich said as he drew his sidearm and walked with his left hand around her waist as they followed behind the rest of them down the ramps to the outside level. Then into a warehouse bay.

“Commander’s choice,” Rich said as Leon headed for the first transport.

“Why are we taking one of these?” Tim was a little slow.

“We came in an attack fighter and we’re not going to let you take that one!” Rich told him.

Rich escorted Nadia to the transport side door then turned her to him. “It would have been wonderful to bring you along, but that’s just wrong.” He pulled her closer to him. “Don’t bite,” he said looking into her eyes before giving her a nice, wet, open mouth kiss with tongue while running his hand down the small of her back to her rear.

He let her go and Pete grabbed her by the hand, then kissed her before turning her over to Grigori who cocked his head and got a kiss before sending her off inside the transport.

“Turn it on, make sure you’re happy with it,” Rich told him. “Because we’re going to evacuate the place and open the bay door!”

Leon started the engine turbines as Nadia closed and locked the side door.

Rich, Pete, and Greg headed for the warehouse doors, Rich going for the controls. He looked back to see Leon giving him a thumb up signal.

“I’ll do that, you go show us you can work this thing before their fighters start coming after us,” Grigori said pushing Rich away from the controls while putting down his faceplate and hooking up his umbilical to the wall pressure unit while Rich and Pete left the room.

“As soon as you finish go have Bobby break the seal and ride shotgun for us,” Rich said just before he closed the airlock doors.

Greg started to depressurize the warehouse bay, which took a few minutes. Once the pressure was down to nil, he opened the bay door, lifted the transport with the crane and moved it over the open floor bay. He released the moorings and centrifity thrust the transport outward. Off in the distance, Greg saw the engines turn on with a yellow flame that quickly turned blue with flakes of yellow as the transport moved off. He closed the bay doors and brought the crane back to the loading position before opening the inner airlock, going inside, pressurizing the little room and opening the outer door into the corridor. He headed to where their transport was docked, then he and Bobby broke seal and headed off into space.

Up on the flight deck, it took a bit for Pete to work up a vector for them to slingshot around Mars and break off into deep space on a heading that would put them close to the Cassini. Their ship had previously turned and slowed to twenty-five thousand to accomplish this assault on Mars. Now it was catch-up time!

“Let her rip!” Pete said to Rich.

Rich turned on the main shuttle engines after the OMS engines positioned them at the angle Pete had programmed into the computer. Soon they were moving off and upwards from a three-hundred-mile orbit to a long arc around the planet.

Chatter on the radio called for transports to go out and investigate the departure of the foundry from its fixed orbit.

Bobby and Greg sent off a few missiles to the perimeter of Bartonville. “That oughta shake them up and make them worry so much they’ll forget about us!”

They took their transport up towards the now distant foundry that was already beyond missile range and accelerating.

“Hey!” Bobby shouted in his com unit. “Don’t forget about us!”

“Keep your shorts on!” Pete said. “I’m heading back to the bay to get you guys. Meet me there.”

“It’s still depressurized, Harry!” Grigori said with a laugh.

“Gotcha, I’ll put my face plate down!”

“Harry?” Bobby asked. “Who’s Harry?”

“It’s a long story!” Gregori told him as they adjusted their heading and tried to catch up to the foundry vessel that was above them and pulling away faster and faster.

* * *

“This emergency session of the Jovian Council is now in order. Ladies and gentlemen on your tables is a text we got from the president of Mars, I’d like us to read it together. I’ll lead:

“To the Jovian council. If it’s war you want, then it’s war you shall get. Your unprovoked attack on our planet has left destruction and we demand immediate compensation in the form of four times the fuel, air, and water we have been promised, plus four times those supplies damaged by your air strike. We also demand the return of our property which was stolen from orbit. We remind you that you are still bound by Martian laws, rules, and judiciary. You are answerable to the Martian Senate and people. Everett, President of Mars.”

“Most of this comes as a shock to me as I’m sure it does to all of you. We do have a ship out there doing barter with Pallas, but they are on the far side of the sun from us, so we don’t know what’s going on,” he looked from one to another and then continued: “Mars is expecting a reply and my feeling is that we tell the truth. We haven’t got the slightest idea what they are talking about. What do all of you think?”

“What was the commander of the Orion told and what is their official status?”

“They were basically told to get in quietly, make contact, check the goods, exchange the goods, talk business with the General Manager.”

“When we discussed this, we all seem to understand that we were going behind the backs of the Martian government on this deal.”

The youngest representative slammed his fist and spoke: “I don’t think I like this guy’s tone. Who died and made him god? Are we answerable to the people of Mars? Says who? I guess that confirms my suspicion. We aren’t part of Mars. We aren’t people of Mars. Did we get to vote for this man or the senate? Did any of you that were from Mars get to vote on the day you left Mars? Do you get an absentee ballot?”

“That is a valid point,” Jon said. “In the past, we dealt on an official basis with Karen, Eric, and Jerry. Later we had good relations with President Van Vliet and there was never any senate involvement. If we needed something we asked for it and if it was available, it came on the next shipment. We aren’t getting that kind of treatment anymore. We get nothing at all and they want a full allotment of gasses!”

“And because of this theft, they now expect four times the previous amount!”

“I wonder what got stolen!?” The younger man grinned over the matter that now bothered Mars.

“And who stole it!” someone else shouted.

“Maybe it was that medical scanner we were promised by President Van Vliet that we never got!” the young man continued.

“This has gotten us into trouble. What are we going to do about it?” someone else asked.

“We’ll know more about that when we get back into radio contact,” Jon said. “Are we going to plead innocent? We do need to draft a reply.”

“Yes, and maybe we should even inquire about what was taken!” one of the other council members said with a glint in his eyes.

The council worked for hours and came up with a draft:

To the President of Mars, we have no idea what your message is all about. We did not steal anything. We did not start a war or authorize fighting. We respectfully point out that we are still due items that were promised to us long ago, including a medical scanner, Marswud, replacement panels for the outer hull, electronic parts, and circuit boards. If anyone is due something, sir, it should be us! If you’d care to make a detailed accounting with ship markings, numbers, crew member names, transponder frequencies, specific items taken and back it up with data from your control center we will research the matter and get back to you as your complaint to us was rather vague and undocumented.

Yours,

Jonathan M. Yost, Chairman of the Jovian Council.

A reply came later that night:

To Jonathan M. Yost, Chairman of the Jovian Council.

From Everett, President of Mars

Sir. A fighter came into our space without notice or permission, a boarding party consisting of Hal, Tom, and Harry entered one of our orbiting foundries, molested a female crew member, and then made off with the foundry. We view this as an infringement of Mars space and rights, in our Sphere of Influence. We hold you legally and morally responsible for these events and demand you return our property to us.

“Well, they did provide us with some details,” Jon said as another early morning meeting was called. “And it was a foundry. A metal processing station!”

“We sure could use one of those. Then we could start trading gas, water, and fuel for metal and start making our own ships and fighters!” another said.

“No one here authorized this action, did they?” someone asked.

“Not I, nor anyone I know of!” Jon said. “It may not even be our people, I mean we don’t even have a Hal, Tom or Harry listed in our rolls! They could be ’Roiders!”

“Well, whoever it was may have started a war and right now Mars thinks it was us!” another said.

“I’d say it was more like Mars started it and whoever took their foundry just upped the ante!” the younger man said.

“Hey,” the woman to Jon’s left said. “You should text them back and express our shock and dismay. Also, inquire about the crew on that foundry. They said a woman was molested, didn’t they? Ask if she

and the others are all right. Also, mention to them we have no fighters! Only *they* have fighters or have they been selling them to someone out there.”

Jon nodded. “Good idea. I’ll do that.”

“Do we know when we’ll hear from the Orion?”

“They are somewhere between the orbit of Mars and the belt. We’re moving towards them and they will, in turn, move towards us once they finish at Pallas. It’ll probably take months before we can reach them. Our data message to Vesta asked them to relay the information. Vesta also expressed anger and sympathy over the theft of our rack.” Jon told them.

“What are we going to do now?” someone else asked. “What does the law say about us and what we can do?”

“Our charter and by-laws also state we are a Mars protectorate and that Mars is responsible for our health safety and well-being. This may give us an out. Mars also has agreements with the miners and they are short-sheeting them as well. We might be able to twist words, events, and legalities around to get things back on track. Also, Mars failed to make good on the scanner, as was pointed out. They broke the contract. That means they either comply, we renegotiate or we break off relations. Without fuel, air, and water Mars can’t do deep space flights forever. It costs them resources they need at home to go up and down. It takes years to get a shipment from Saturn, Uranus, or Neptune. I mean years. They can’t go after us all the time. We can drive them fuel dry. We can also tell Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune how Mars is hurting us and using their monopoly to extract materials with nothing in return. Mars will eventually do it to them if things continue, so we need to see about getting them allied with us in this matter, not against us and for Mars!”

“I don’t know about Neptune. They are the newest outpost and still very, very Martian. And all the little tykes they have are toddlers or teens,” the young man said. “They can be a problem, you know. If they are loyal to them or in the dark, they can send supplies to Mars. It will take years, but they can still do it. They may even have a DSS loaded that’s already on its way.”

“Why is Mars doing this to everyone?” one of the women asked. “Do we know?”

“From the news reports and internet feeds, we understand that this is part of a Mars for Martians populist movement. In the past, he always got clobbered by Van Vliet and others, but the old school is no more. Originally he and the movement was considered too right wing and only with a small base of support, but now moderates have joined with him. They want to expand things on Mars instead of out in space. The Outback and other outposts. They have installed a reactor for the Outback and are putting in power cables to some of the Outposts.”

“So,” the young man said. “They are a lot like me. I’m a Jovian for Jove. I don’t consider myself a Martian. I was born out here.”

“Agreed,” Jon said. “And because of this rise of Nationalism, the Martians have also moved away from a fifty-fifty split between homeland issues and space issues. Karen, Eric, Jerry, and Pru all treated us like we were a part of them and spread resources equally. Now they are putting most of their resources into the homeland and none to the rest of us, but they still want their share of the fuel, air, and water.”

“Everyone does realize that the Martian monopoly puts us between a rock and a hard place,” the younger man said. “I’d love to say screw you to the Martians, but realistically we can’t until we build some type of metal and electronics industry and Mars has been doing everything it can to keep that

from happening. If we try to continue to sneak ships past Mars and to Earth, into the 'Roids and back again, we risk getting caught by a Mars patrol or they might try to embargo us!"

"Valid point of view," Yost said. "So, it seems like we are taking the way of diplomacy?"

"I think we also need to clear the air and open a dialog about the Mars for Martians thing. We are Martians too!" the woman council member said. "And maybe we should have senate seats and get to vote for the president if the president is to run our lives as well!"

"I totally agree with her," the young man said. "It makes for a good bargaining chip!"

To President Everett of Mars

From Jovian Council Chairman Yost

Dear Mr. President. We were shocked to hear of that assault and theft of property. We sincerely hope that the crew on that vessel are alive and well! But, sir, we also respectfully point out that per the Martian Constitution and our charter all Martians are to have access to minimal health, education, welfare, food, technology, shelter and personal security on an equal basis. Our charter says we are your protectorate and that it is your job to see to our needs, yet on three past occasions you have not seen to our needs in the form of parts and materials to repair our facilities and the new medical scanner we were promised by President Van Vliet. And you have not said much about what you will do about the theft of our property! Perhaps both of these attacks came from one and the same! If you check your records, you'll see that we have no one named Hal, Tom or Harry stationed on Jupiter. Perhaps this was another party with a grudge against all of us. Maybe someone else with fighters, since we have no fighters as you very well know because you never sent us any! Did you give or sell fighters to someone else? Since we have no representation in the senate nor did we get to vote for the president, we have no idea what you are doing and who you are dealing with. Perhaps it's time for us to start taking part in the Martian political arena!

Yours,

Jonathan M. Yost, Jovian Administrative Manager.

Another response from the president followed:

Jupiter owes its entire existence to Mars. We built your OSLO, your refineries . . . your whole existence and purpose in life. You owe us, we don't owe you. You will tow the line or we will replace you! And if we discover anything about your missing items we will let you know!

The next day the council decided to break communications with Mars until they could contact their ship and find out exactly what was going on. In the meantime, security was increased and all incoming and outgoing communications were first passed to security.

While a Martian ship on a suicide mission could still reach Jupiter, they'd be stuck there for two and a half years. Because of this, no one anticipated another strike this time around from Mars.

Little by little Mars and Jupiter were heading to the closest point known as opposition on Mars and inferior conjunction on Jupiter. With Mars in front of the sun, noise would make communications hard until Mars pulled away and shot back into the skies.

* * *

The Jovian managers began talks to beef up security to keep things like this attack from happening again.

“You know, some people are talking about having us anchor the rack on some of the smaller moons, adding hundreds of thousands of metric tons of rock to make it impossible for someone to just hook up a line and pull it away,” Jon told one of his friends at lunch one day.

“Not a bad idea,” his friend said with a wrinkle of his brow.

“Not a practical one. It would be orbiting. We’d have to wait for it to get into position and move along with it while we set in the containers. We might try another idea. Building a central shaft and mounting hydrazine or hot plasma engines on both ends. It would add mass and we could fire the engines remotely against the pull of someone towing it.”

“You can also put charges on the lox tanks and blow the damn thing up by remote control!”

“Yeah, that was another idea we deemed as a little extreme,” Jon said, looking at his watch. “I have to get going. I’ll catch you later.”

“Hmm,” his friend said as Jon got up from the table and took his tray to the busing bins. He then headed out the doorway, walked down the main concourse and up the ramp to the next level.

“I had lunch with someone who echoed the sentiments of blowing up the lox tanks.”

“Smart missiles are the best idea,” one of the men at the table said. “I’ve been thinking about that and it’s the most practical. We can do it immediately and it’ll make them think twice about doing it again.”

“Yes!” someone else said. “I agree.”

“Me too,” a woman added.

“Hands in favor?” Jon looked around the table at a unanimous vote. “All right. Hook up an infra-red source, a radio beacon and a transponder to the racks. Arm a few smart missiles on both the gassing launcher and the drone centers. What about the idea of radar installations on the outlying moons?”

“That’s not instant gratification, but it’s a good idea.”

“Yes. But what about the random blind spots we talked about?” a woman asked.

“We have to live with them,” a man across from her said. “They’re random and only last for a matter of hours. We’re at the synchronous point here. It’s unstable further out, and we’d need a probe with active correction jets. And we still have the polar blind spot to contend with.”

“What about that, too!?” she asked, looking to Jon for assurances.

“The orbital radar is better than polar,” Jon told her. “We already have the mechanisms and as long as our electronic components hold out we can fabricate them. We just need to weld on shafts and bolt them into the moons. They tell me they can have them up and ready by next week. Remember, we are also limited by what materials we have on hand and Mars won’t be sending us any more center shafts.”

“Don’t get me wrong, people,” one of the men at the far side of the table spoke up for the first time. “But we seem to be sounding more and more paranoid.”

“One can call it paranoid,” another man told him. “I call it practical and protective. We work our asses off to harvest the things that humans need to survive out here in space. We can’t let someone just come along and take it from us.”

“If you and I were alone out in space and your air ran out but mine didn’t are you telling me, you’ll willingly suffocate before you attempt to take some of my air away from me, leaving us to both suffocate at the same time.”

“Or by doing in your good buddy so you can last even longer. Dead men tell no tales,” another man further up the table said. “Survival instincts. We’re looking to survive. Air, fuel, and water buy things we need or would like to have. When someone takes what you produce without giving you back anything that cuts into your survival.”

“Didn’t the Martian Foreign Minister say that things would balance out in due time?” another man asked of them.

“As far as I’m concerned the bill from Mars is now long overdue and payable. It’s been years since we’ve gotten anything tangible from Mars. And it’s not just us, it’s the ’Roiders and Titans as well,” someone else added. “All we get is excuses as they blame things on someone other than themselves!”

“Since we stopped sending ships to them, they now just come and take from us,” the woman added.

“We don’t know that it was they who came,” Jon, the voice of reason, said.

“We know!” the young man said. “Let’s not pretend just because we don’t have an image of ship markings or a transponder code that we don’t know who did this thing.”