



The lounge aboard the luxurious space yacht *Gloriana* was furnished tastefully, but not as pretentiously as Nick Gramo expected. Escorted by the ship's robot-steward, he walked over an ordinary crimson carpet and sat down in one of the comfortable upholstered armchairs to wait for the man he was going to interview.

However, he soon stopped paying attention to the interior décor and turned it instead to the gigantic observation port. The lounge was located right in the bows of the ship and a magnificent panorama of stars was visible through the observation port of the ship as it sailed through the Solar System.

It had been a few years since Nick Gramo was last in space, and he thought he remembered what it was like, but he was used to traveling on overbooked scheduled flights. This was his first time in a private yacht and the first time he'd been able to observe the stars with the naked eye.

There was a hiss as the door opened.

"Mr. Gramo. I apologize for keeping you waiting so long," said Mr. Doug Henry, glancing at the untouched tray of refreshments on the side-table between two armchairs. "I see that you've been taken care of."

"Yes, Mr. Henry, thank you."



The two men shook hands and Henry invited him to sit down. Nick Gramo was technically Doug Henry's employee, but only in the sense that one of the regional CEOs of a gigantic corporation could be considered the "boss" of an ordinary employee working at a subsidiary.

Nick was a reporter and he worked for Horizon News, the news station belonging to the Henry Corp. conglomerate that was also the driving force behind the colony expedition to the Bornholm System.

Nick was on this flight on his own initiative. He had coaxed his boss—that is, his immediate superior—into letting him set out for Saturn's orbit, where preparations for the colony expedition were underway. As a bonus, he'd been offered a ride aboard Henry's personal ship, the *Gloriana*, and an interview with Mr. Henry himself.

"I understand that you have a few questions," said Henry with a smile, as if to indicate that his time was precious, and that Nick should finally take the plunge.

"Yes, Mr. Henry, thank you." He switched on his robot-camera. The small sphere rose into the air and its lenses began to record Henry's face.

The microphones activated.

Behind Henry, the panorama of space was visible.



"It's been said that this colony expedition is a new start for humanity. Can you make a statement about that?"

Nick Gramo asked the question as Henry turned to the teatable and poured himself a glass of juice from some fruit that the journalist did not recognize.

"I don't know about all of humanity, but it's definitely a new start for the Central Imperium. That's why the Emperor and the government have supported us so generously. The Imperium has come through a nasty war and this is a step into the future. We're building again, not destroying. What's more, this will also help repair the damage caused by the war. As I'm sure your viewers know," he continued, although they were both sure that the ordinary viewer would not know this, "Henry Corp. financed the colonization of three worlds in the Bornholm Sector. I personally coordinated the entire process from the station *Lonely Star*. Only, before the first colonists could leave, the war started and as you undoubtedly know, *Lonely Star* was destroyed after we attempted to stop the enemy fleet from approaching. Captain Esau Biwott died a hero during the attack. He sacrificed himself so that the rest of us had time to evacuate. That is one of the reasons, but not the only one, why the frigate, the flagship escorting our expedition, bears his name. His son Loran christened it. Loran was only thirteen at the time of the evacuation."



Nick Gramo nodded. At this point, his editor would probably insert some footage from the launch of the *Esau Biwott*, in which the now fourteen-year-old orphaned boy, with tears in his eyes, pressed the button to detonate a bottle of champagne over the hull of the new ship.

“Are you planning to colonize all three planets immediately?” he asked, for the viewers’ sake, although of course he already knew the answer.

“No, the economy is still in the postwar phase and so the entire project will start on planet Palo Alto. Of our three candidates, it’s the best one for colonization. If everything goes well, we will colonize the other two next year.”

“How many vessels are taking part in this expedition?”

“Thirty colony ships are currently in preparation at the stations around Saturn.”

“Is it true that the Imperial Navy will provide the fleet with protection?”

“Yes, to a certain extent. The fleet will be accompanied by several Imperial frigates.”

Nick judged that the time had come for a few more difficult questions.

“Mr. Henry. There are almost ninety inhabited planets

in the Central Imperium. Many of them suffered during the war, the economy isn’t even at fifty percent of where it was a few years ago, infrastructure is collapsing. Many of our readers and viewers may, with justice, ask why the Imperium, and why so influential a corporation as Henry Corp., are investing so much money into settling new planets, when those same funds could be used to improve infrastructure on existing worlds. Half the planets in the Wuwei and Rosalio Sectors are still on a rationing system. So why aren’t we pushing the economy in that direction?”

Henry did not answer immediately. Nick hadn’t expected him to. The magnate must have reckoned with questions like that; he was thinking, he didn’t want to answer by smiling, waving his hands and spouting PR-bullshit.

At least, not too much PR-bullshit.

“The Central Imperium has been through, indeed is going through, difficult times. Henry Corp. is helping on at least eight worlds. We’re renewing infrastructure, assisting the economic relaunch. But the colony expedition is part of that too. The Imperium must look to the future, and indeed at the symbolism. We wanted to settle those new worlds before the war, and this is evidence for all people in the Central Imperium that civilization is continuing. Indeed, that is the motto of the whole Central Imperium: civilization



must continue.” He shrugged. “And for your more practically minded readers and viewers, I may add that all the colony ships we are using were already built, and after the war, there were a great many homeless people on Earth, particularly in the Europe region. They form the core of our new colonists. And that is also the reason why the colony expedition is starting from the Solar System, not from another part of the Imperium. Last but not least, I would also like to add that a freshly settled world will rapidly become a market for other worlds in the Imperium, and again, that will help the economy.”

Here, Nick could not refrain from a follow-up question: “And what do you think the returns will be? Practically all colonies lose money during their first few years. What then?”

“Palo Alto is rich in raw materials, including special plants for which there will be a market even in the old Imperial worlds. I have no concerns there.”

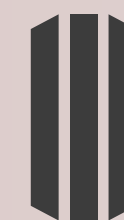
Nick looked at his notes for the next question. “You mentioned the Imperial Navy escort, but what about other security? As far as I know, the Bornholm Sector is still unsafe. The enemy fleet crossed it at the end of the war and some places still have isolated ships supporting themselves by piracy. There is speculation that entire mercenary fleets, paid by our enemies, are operating in the sector. Hacker organizations too.”

“The Central Imperium is providing military assistance as well as the escort, and an Imperial Navy fleet is active in the region. And as you rightly point out, we also have concerns about hacker attacks. Unfortunately, there have been several cyber-attacks in the Central Imperium in recent months. Last month, a cyber-attack disabled the manufacturing line in the Hobart shipyards. Of course, Henry Corp. does not want to risk anything, so we intend to hire a cyber-security firm to protect our colony expedition.”

“Which one?”

Henry smiled. “That remains to be seen. I am currently traveling to inspect the colony fleet anchored at the Henry Corp. stations *Gar K. Nelson* and *Adamcak*. When I have finished my inspection, I will meet the representatives of three organizations aboard the *Nelson*. I’m going to interview the candidates, in fact.”

Nick nodded and glanced at his notes again. “Our viewers would also be interested to know how...”



“Mr. Gramo, may I ask you a favor?” asked Henry, half an hour later, when the interview was over. The station *Gar K. Nelson*, the *Gloriana’s* first stop, was growing closer in the observation port.

“Certainly, Mr. Henry. Of course,” said Nick, as he switched off his robot-camera and put it away in its case.

“You’re transferring to *Nelson* now, is that right?”

He already knew the answer.

“Yes, Mr. Henry. I have some appointments there, and tomorrow some of the colony expedition volunteers are giving me interviews.”

“So you are free today?”

“Well...” Nick paused in surprise, but it made no sense to quibble. He wasn’t a good traveler and he wanted to rest. But Mr. Henry, although not his direct boss, was definitely *a* boss.

“Yes, I am,” he finally managed to say. “What do you need?”

“It’s a somewhat delicate matter. As you already know, the *Gloriana* will only dock for a short while at *Nelson*, then she will continue to Iapetus and the Sol FTL gate, where I must negotiate with some contractors before returning to the station tomorrow. I would be glad if you would interview the three representatives of our cyber-security companies. The ones I will interview, in a different sense, tomorrow. They aren’t managers, they’re hackers. They call themselves *white hats*, which means they’re on the right side of the law.” He chuckled. “In any event, I would be glad if you could talk to them and give me your own observations tomorrow. I have studied the expertise of the three companies, and their histories too,” he laughed again, “indeed, I even

know which of them is the lowest bidder. But I don’t want to entrust the fate of a colony expedition simply to price and some history. I would like to know your observations, your opinion.”

“But Mr. Henry, I’m not a cyber-security expert...”

“No, but you’re good at external perspectives. You know nothing, you’re not biased. And as I discovered over the last half-hour, you’re good at asking the right questions.”

Finally, Nick Gramo nodded.

“Okay then, Mr. Henry. I will certainly interview them and try to give you some impressions tomorrow.”

“That’s all I ask. Show me your comlink. I’ll send you the details of where to meet them.”

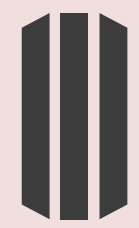
Nick pulled his PDA comlink from his pocket. Henry tapped his own a few times, then Nick’s device beeped to confirm that everything had been received.

“And to motivate you even more, I understand that you asked the management of Horizon News to allow you to travel with the expedition.”

“Yes, Mr. Henry. I wanted to fly with them, but Horizon News already has someone there.”

“Don’t worry about that. If you help me, I think that more journalists will fit onto the expedition ships. I’ll see to it.”

Now it was Nick’s turn to smile.



As soon as the *Gloriana* docked, Nick Gramo set off through the bowels of the station *Gar K. Nelson* to the hotel that Henry had indicated. He'd also booked a room for him in the same hotel, which was handy.

*Nelson* wasn't large, certainly not when compared to *Hub Central* at Hub or *Agra* at New Jaipur, but it was a commodious station belonging to Henry Corp. and, along with its sister installation *Adamcak*, it handled busy traffic while over twenty colony ships were being readied for loading. Nick saw them in their docks as the *Gloriana* approached the station, and the Hotel Amaterasu, which he was approaching on the station's internal transport, provided another view over the main docking arm. The hotel was located on the very edge of the station structure.

Before disembarking, Nick had read the information Henry had sent him.

Henry Corp. had three candidates interested in providing the colony expedition's cyber-security.

Bohemur Inc. was a company focused on finding weaknesses using tailor-made cyber-attacks. At least, that is how Nick understood it. He wondered if it was something like the old military wisdom stating that attack is the best form of defense. Their representative on the station was a man called Oliver Forman.

The other two hackers were both women. The first of them, Carol Laut, worked for Tambor Security, a company mainly engaged in protection against enemy hackers. Given the needs of the colony expedition, this made more sense to Nick.

The third company was Pisces Interstellar, represented by Amira Angami. This firm's focus—at least according to Henry's information—was “intel”—quiet undercover work to obtain information whose owners mostly thought it would never see the light of day.

Just from the company descriptions, Nick felt that the most sensible choice would be the protection company, but Henry probably saw the whole matter in rather more complex terms.

All this was still chasing through Nick's head as he stood at the reception desk of the Hotel Amaterasu.

“Hello. I am Nick Gramo. I work for Horizon News. A room has been reserved for me on behalf of Henry Corp. and I also have an appointment here.”

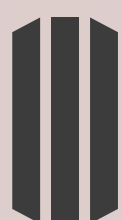
The receptionist was a robot, one of the retro metallic ones with a humanoid figure but no human features, of the sort that had recently come back into fashion. “Aaahh, certainly, Mr. Gramo. Welcome to the Hotel Amaterasu. Do you want to go to your room first, or would you rather go straight to your appointment?”

“Well... maybe the appointment.”



"Your guests are waiting for you in the Silverstone Lounge. That's on the first mezzanine."

"Thank you."



The view from the Silverstone Lounge over the station's docking arm and open space was as beautiful as Nick had imagined. But now he concentrated instead on the trio of people sitting in the attractive easy chairs. They all had tablets in their hands and were communicating with them intensively. Two of them were obviously trying to do something. Were they playing a game against each other?

The first to notice Nick was a woman of around forty. Nick guessed that she was either from New Jaipur or from the Indian subcontinent on Earth, judging by her complexion.

"My name is Nick Gramo, journalist from Horizon..."

"Yeah, we've heard of you," said the woman. "I am Amira Angami, Pisces Interstellar. And those two... well, I suppose they're my competitors, if you want to look at it that way. Oli from Bohemur and Carol from Tambor."

The pair of hackers raised their heads from their tablets. Oliver Forman was tall and maybe a few years younger than Amira.

