

The Solar Wind II :

The Assassin

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Prologue

There was always damp down here.

It peered out under hooded eyes, noting the solitary man with his small round spectacles, focusing intently on his work. He glanced up, his eyes looking straight through it. It faded into the background and slunk up the steep stepladder.

Passages it knew so well; it moved through them half consciously. A white lab. Crew cabins. All quiet. Orange bioluminescence lining the passageways. The place had a name, it knew; if it could think in words it would remember. Instead it remembered impressions. Blood. Death. Silence.

It moved up silently to the upper deck. Voices ahead. It opened a door and peered into a blue room with a beige table and chairs, and half-familiar faces. People. One of them lifted his head, looked straight at it, nodded. He had a name, but it didn't think in names. There was no point. What it saw was life energy fizzing through bodies, living blood coursing through veins, scrawny necks. Whoever had designed the human body had designed it for disaster. Necks were a stupid invention. They were fragile. And skin – what was skin supposed to do? Be a loose bag to contain all the insides? Because it stopped nothing! Not like scales, or metal armour plating...

It left the doorway, turned and continued up. Avoiding the cabin across the way. Because if it opened that door, it would get sucked into a vacuum where they were waiting to tear it apart...

“...details the plans for total eradication... pest control... nuclear missiles... species...”

Federi peered out under hooded eyelids, listening intently. His Stiletto had found its own way into his hand. His body had retreated by itself into the crevice.

It was dark except for single orange glowing points in the heavy haze. The crevice was the space between two boxes in his storage bay, at the prow of the ship. The awful flapping noise of vampire wings was the night wind in the sails. The churning of the abyss was the prow wave against the Solar Wind's hull. The earthquake was just a bout of choppy waves. And the faces, staring at him from the dark, those accusing, half-familiar faces – they were gone. Only a dream. He sat up, breaking out of the paralysed trance, trading it with vivid memories of too many lives snuffed out on that Rebellion Schooner. Of course they'd come and haunt him tonight!

But they – who? The data capsules?

What was *in* those forsaken capsules? He needed to know, *now*. He hadn't looted the one from Anya Miller and nearly lost his life and his friend and the Solar Wind securing the second one, just so that he could lie around in the storage deck entertaining nightmares! Vampire wings? Did the capsules contain a genetic formula for a new species?

He cast a glance across the deck. Captain on the bridge. Alone. The deck, empty. It was late. His feet started towards the bridge.

*

8 August 2116

Katya

Don't complain, I'm trying to write legibly! Captain carps on about my "illegitimate" handwriting.

It's been crazy, and all is not over yet.

It started the night we acquitted Ailyss. On the 15th of May. Well actually it started when I stole the first Unicate capsule off Anya Miller's ship, but until that night I had no idea what was hiding in those two capsules.

I tried to write to you that night, my sister, and I couldn't. Sat there in the storage deck, staring at my hands, the right one with a bandage - they were quivering, they didn't look like my own hands. I got as far as "Hey Katya, I'll see you any day now", about five times. I can only tell you now.

The Solar Wind had come through a storm straight from hell, without radar, and most of the crew on deck. I wasn't even there for the second half because I was organizing my own hell on that Rebel Schooner. That night Ailyss was tried for treason and acquitted, and the crew committed one of those parties they call Ceilidhs. After all, none of them were Federi, none of them could know what I could sense so clearly...

Part I

The Plan

1

Land Wind

Jon Marsden looked up from the novel he was idly reading, that he had borrowed from Ailyss Quinlan. Interesting stuff. It drew you in. It took him a second's orientation to come back to his cabin and realize that the phantom hanging in his doorway, that rag-tag apparition with the tattered bandana and shirt still full of drying blood, was Federi.

"Come in, my friend."

The phantom let itself into his cabin and closed the door.

"Done with your round?" asked Jon Marsden, closing the novel and putting it down. The gypsy nodded.

"Spoke to Captain, I see?" asked Marsden amiably. Federi nodded again. He drew his semiautomatic handgun and handed it over.

"What's this now?" asked Jon Marsden, nonplussed.

"Want you to do me a favour, Jon," said the Tzigan. "I'd like to catch some shut eye. There are people I need to talk to. But if anyone comes alive in this body while I'm not in..."

Marsden frowned. "You want me to guard?"

"If you're not too tired, my friend."

"I'm never too tired for emergencies," said Marsden. "But..."

"If anyone takes me over, shoot me down," said Federi. "I mean it. He's on the loose."

Jonathan Marsden stared at his friend. Federi looked drained. It stood to reason. The Tzigan had launched himself into the sea, in the middle of that hurricane-in-the-making, staging a one-man ambush on the Rebellion. He had refused to wear a life vest in that rapidly cooling sea and pelting rain; he had boarded the ship from the water and killed the whole enemy crew, one by one, in order to save the lives

of Sherman Dougherty, Paeon Donegal and Keenan Quinlan. It wasn't the first time, but terminations took their toll on Federi.

The man needed sleep. Jon Marsden got up off his bunk. "I have a better idea!" He led the way to the infirmary, dug in the Doc's inventory and located a vial of something. "Would you like that in rum, or in a dart?"

Federi smiled. Jon Marsden drew a relieved breath. His friend's state of mind struck him as not quite stable tonight.

"You'll guard anyway?" asked the gypsy.

"I'll guard anyway. Where are you going to be?"

"The storage bay."

"Aw no, Tzigan! Making it difficult for me! Then I can't even read!"

"Bring a light," suggested Federi.

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The sea coming awake was one of Paeon's favourite rewards for being a sailor. She clung to the rail with her back to the mermaid figurehead and gazed at the lightening sky astern, past the sleek white sails and the command deck. Old Sherman Dougherty was taking the early shift on the bridge; Captain hadn't yet arrived to take over from him. The ship was close-hauled, heading nearly into the wind, the sails at an acute angle with the keel. The huge kite that was used for flying, was stashed away in its chute under the deck; a taut jib stretched from the foremast to the bowsprit. The breeze was fresh, nippy in fact; spray from the prow wave showered Paeon at intervals. It was fine. She'd change and warm up in a while. Right now the pearly sea was just too pretty to leave.

A short, wiry man with a black tangle of a mane tied up with a pirate scarf, emerged from the hatch, stretching. He moved along the deck,

checking the tensioning on the sheets, and worked his way towards the prow where she stood. She watched him idly.

“All as it should be?” she asked as he moved up the few steps to the elevated prow and joined her at the rail.

“You’re up early,” commented Federi.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said, and gestured at the sky and the sea. “Waste to sleep while all this is going on!”

The gypsy smiled and said nothing. She peered uncertainly at him.

“Feeling better today?”

Federi rolled his eyes. “If you’re asking whether anyone took me over and made me kill the crew last night, then no, he didn’t,” he replied. “’s a matter of time.” He shook his head. “I’m fine, Paean, I’m alive, and so are the rest of us. That’s as fine as it gets by Federi’s standards.”

She scowled. The sea had suddenly lost its glow.

“Got to get on with my studies,” she said and headed towards the hatch, aware of the Tzigan’s black stare on her neck.

*

Captain Radomir Lascek peered out over the deck where things were being cleaned, things were being adjusted and people were gazing at the cobalt-blue sea. The sun was shining this morning; there wasn’t much left of yesterday’s huge waves. The sea was a little choppy and the breeze fresh, but nicely so.

“That can’t go well!” His First Mate Jonathan Marsden pointed to the prow of the ship. Paean Donegal was busily washing down the storage deck.

Radomir Lascek peered at the small figure with an illegally green bandana around her red curls. “What was that time-out Federi made you take down there, last night?”

“The usual undead stuff,” said Marsden with a shrug.

“I’ve put her in charge of observing his mental health,” said Lascek.

***The pages between these two sections
are not included in the book preview.***

mission. And he was going to take Federi with him, and run the course of his demonic life through, and take Federi to hell with him too. And Federi had no choice either way. Federi was just along for the ride.

He stared at the walls of water they were heading into and bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. Twelve years at sea wasn't enough to prepare him for this. They smashed against the volcaniplex porthole, scaring him bloodless. It didn't help knowing that the force behind a wave was squarely proportional to its height. Almost, he preferred it in the rigging at such times...

Captain's summons from the bridge was more than welcome! Federi headed up the passage and ascended the steps into the control room.

"What do you make of that out there?" asked Lascek, pointing to a disturbance on the turbulences screen.

"Shoals," said Federi. "Quite a few. Some quite shallow."

"No, that there," countered Jon Marsden.

"Ah," said the Tzigan. "No idea. Enemy submarine? Unicate experiment?"

"Jokes aside, Federi," said Radomir Lascek. "What could it be?"

"It's so big," replied the gypsy. "Should be able to see it!" He glanced out through the volcaniplex windshield. "Bleeding pea soup out there!"

"Should send the minicam," suggested Marsden. Radomir Lascek punched a sequence.

"It's not responding."

"Hah! Probably needs new anti-freeze on that hatch!" speculated Federi, reached for a life-vest and put it on, already on his way outside. "Give me half a minute, Captain."

Rain was pelting down in nearly solid sheets. Federi peered in the direction of that disturbance and saw nothing. He climbed into the rigging, and past the Crow's Nest to the very top of the mast. What a stupid time for the thing to go out of action! He fished the tube of hydro-polyglossimer anti-freeze lubri-squatch out of his pocket and

applied a liberal glob of it all around the rim of the tiny hatch. The mini-hold sprung open. He followed the tiny camera with its miniature helicopter blades with his gaze as it whirled out of its hold and into the storm like a mad bumblebee.

And then his eyes wandered beyond it, as the rainsquall passed and visibility was suddenly restored as if by magic. The Solar Wind lifted onto a high crest, and he swallowed and blinked. And activated his com.

“Captain, it’s a freak wave. A huge one.” He fished his binoculars out of his pocket and peered through them. “At least a mile long, I’d say, and coming at an angle to the normal waves.” With frantic haste he activated the binoculars’ distance- and size-measurement features. “Bout two miles away, and a height of over twenty metres. With the sort of trough it must have, that would make it thirty-five to forty metres high! That means it’s something like a twenty... no, twelve-storey building coming at us!”

Lascek swore. “Federi, get below, *now!* We need to do a crash-dive to get under this thing!”

Federi grabbed a ratline and padded his hands with his parka before sliding down. The Solar Wind turned, presenting her stern to the threat and hardening sail to a close reach to do an angled dash across wave after wave as she overtook them, pitching and tossing wildly in the process.

Then Lascek came back on the intercom. “Belay that! We’ll try to outrun her!”

Federi stopped his descent briefly to gaze back at the wave. Freezing hells, that thing was moving fast! There was no way they could outrun it!

“Captain, I’d say it’s safer to submerge.”

“Can’t, Federi! It shoals to less than 20 fathoms under us – we can’t get deep enough to escape the underwater effects of a wave like that. We’ll be smashed to pieces. Come inside the bridge, blast you, Tzigan!”

Federi measured up the fast-approaching wall of water as the Solar Wind lifted over another crest. Shoals? And trying to get over it, to the other side, was a death-wish. For a mad moment he had a vision of the Solar Wind actually surfing the wave, like one of those madmen from the previous century.

Eww. But he'd also seen too many of those madmen take a nasty dive. Wiping out, they called it. Some had actually died that way. His hyperactive imagination wanted to show him the Solar Wind, wiping out... Captain was right, they'd have to try and outrun it. The nuclear drives had been engaged along with the fuel drives. The sails had turned and set themselves on a close reach, harnessing the wind to flow across the sails faster than the actual gale. And yet that monster was gaining on them.

He glanced at the Captain through the bridge window, and slithered down the rest of the ratline to the deck. And made his way towards the foredeck, loosening the jibsheets.

"Tzigan! What are you up to? Are you suicidal?" the Captain's voice boomed over the com.

"Send me Jon," said Federi and fished two speedbar sheets out of the foredeck.

"Genius," came the growled reply, and Jon Marsden came down to the deck. Federi handed him two brakesheets – one for port and one for starboard. The jibs furled away.

"Captain's doubling up the console," said Jon.

"Was hoping he would," replied Federi as the huge kite sail shot upwards and cracked open with an explosive sound.

The Solar Wind lifted onto her hydrofoils. She skimmed along the sides of some large breakers, which ran at an angle with the freak. That monster was still gaining on them, but more slowly by now. The kite dipped out to windward, to fly in its position of greatest efficiency.

Radomir Lascek watched his two heroes from the bridge. His psyche itched to be out there with them; but it was crucial that he

stayed inside and worked both consoles, the temporary flying one that had been relayed electronically over his ship console upon his command; as well as the conventional console that controlled everything else, the normal sails, the drives, the helm...

“Rushka!”

She appeared behind her father, as silent as a ghost.

“You take the helm,” Radomir Lascek instructed.

“What are we doing?” she asked, complying with his order.

“Dodging a freak wave,” Lascek informed her. “There is no room for mistakes.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Dr Jake! Full throttle! All drives you’ve got!”

“Captain, the fuel...”

“Doc, you wish to live?” The cold edge in Captain’s voice was enough to freak the nuclear engineer into electrified action. Dr Jake engaged every drive he could.

Only the four of them, flying the Solar Wind, and Wolf and Dr Jake bringing the reliable backup from the machine room. This was not an arena for newbies like Ronan. The team, in this case, was critical – for survival.

The Solar Wind raced along the crests, with the monstrosity on her heels.

“How long do those things live?” Federi shouted at Marsden over the wind.

“It varies,” the First Mate shouted back. “Could go on for a very long time!”

“We don’t have enough fuel for that,” commented Federi, glancing back. “Yoy!”

Marsden glanced too. The damned rogue wave was right behind them; cresting, foaming; an enormous hole in the ocean for a trough. His breath went missing. It was like gazing into the gaping maws of Death. Then there was the constant turmoil from the waves it was

crossing at an angle, to make the perfect seaman's nightmare.

"Radar registers we're back in deep water in another thirty seconds," Captain's shouted command came over their wrist-coms. "Drop the lines, men. We're submerging. No option. We'll have to risk the turbulence."

"No ways, Captain!" shouted Federi. "We need more distance!" He glanced at Jon and adjusted the speedbar sheets.

Lascek swore and cast about for more wind. Maybe if they harnessed the draught from the wave itself... he hauled in the rising cables, shouting the variables through the com to his two mavericks out there.

It did the trick. They got that tiny extra edge to their speed. Slowly they inched their way away from the wave and got a thrust from the one they were on, and then the one ahead of that as they overtook it, skimming down across the face of each much as the surfers Federi had thought of earlier would have done..

This couldn't last. It was based on a momentary blast and on insufficient fuel. Radomir Lascek sheeted the kite out again, allowing it to rise well into the high winds on a hunch, little by little. It worked; once again, Earth had relayed the correct information to him. There was better wind up there now, even if it was fleeting. But fleeting was all they needed. They shot forward across several waves, the hydrofoils buffering the wild rocking a bit. They gained a bit of distance from the freak.

"In!" he bellowed. "Get in now! We're diving right now!"

Federi and Marsden dropped their lines and legged it to the bridge. The kite crashed and was hauled into its chute behind them; the rigging folded down on the deck before Federi even closed the door behind him. The Solar Wind dived, engines still full speed to keep in front of the wave.

Federi grabbed onto Rushka's chair, staring at the display of the

~ End of Book Preview ~