

PILOT

The five small craft passed from shadow, emerging with the suddenness of coins thrown into sunlight. The disks of their rotary wings shimmered in the air like heat, momentary rainbows flexing across prisms of motion. Master Pilot Jocim Marx noted with pleasure the precision of his squadron's formation. The other pilots' Intelligencer craft perfectly formed a square centered upon his own.

"Don't we look pretty?" Marx said.

"Pretty obvious, sir," Hendrik answered. She was the squadron's second pilot, and it was her job to worry.

"A little light won't hurt us," Marx said flatly. "The Rix haven't had time to build anything with eyes."

He said it not to remind Hendrik, who knew damn well, but to reassure their squadron-mates. The other three pilots were nervous; Marx could hear it in their silence. None of them had ever flown a mission of this importance before.

But then, who had?

Marx's own nerves were beginning to play on him. His squadron of Intelligencers had covered half the distance from dropsite to objective without meeting any resistance. The Rix were obviously ill-equipped, improvising against far greater force, relying on their single advantage: the hostages. But *surely* they had made preparations for small craft.

After a few moments in the sun, the waiting was over.

"I'm getting echolocation from dead ahead, sir," Pilot Oczar announced.

"I can see them," Hendrik added. "Lots of them."

The enemy interceptors resolved before Marx's eyes as his craft responded to the threat, enhancing vision with its other senses, incorporating data from the squadron's other craft into his layers of synesthesia. As Marx had predicted, the interceptors were small, unpiloted drones. Their only weapon was a long, sinuous grappling arm that hung from the rotary lifting surface, which was more screw than blade. The devices looked rather like something da Vinci might have designed four millennia ago, a contraption powered by the toil of tiny men.

The interceptors dangled before Marx. There were a lot of them, and in their host they impelled the same vaguely obscene fascination as creatures from the deepest ocean. One moved toward his craft, arms flailing with a blind and angry abandon.

Master Pilot Marx tilted his Intelligencer's rotary wing forward and increased its power. His ship rose above the interceptor, barely missing collision with the enemy's lifting screw. Marx grimaced at the near miss. Another interceptor came into focus before him, this one a little higher, and he reversed his wing's rotation, pushing the ship down, dropping below its grasp.