Even before he read the computer’s calculation, Jack knew what to expect. His hunt controls confirmed it—the contact was moving at one-tenth the speed of light. There weren’t any natural objects that moved that fast, and very few civilian ones, especially out in this neck of the woods. Jack immediately began comparing the gravimetric signature— allowing for the warping caused by its high speed—to known military contacts. The computer narrowed the search to less than a dozen, and Jack carefully scanned each “spacetime fingerprint.”

“This is Viking-Two. Identify fast-mover as one Terran fast- attack craft, *Blade*-class. Speed point-one-c, distance between two and three million. She’s going somewhere in a big hurry.”

*“Viking-One, affirm—one* Blade *FAC. Longboat and I triangulate to make her distance three million,”* Stripes confirmed. Then he added, *“Not bad, Jack. I’m sure you appreciate us tossing a little bit of reality into today’s exercise.”*

Jack grinned. He watched as the fast-attack craft bent spacetime across his display, marveling at its speed. Normally such a small ship would barely register, and certainly not at three million kilometers, but her speed was high enough to affect her mass so that she exhibited the spacetime cross-section of a Martian mining platform.

A new, female voice came onto the circuit. *“This is Longboat. Based on spacetime signature, that FAC is* Rapier*. EM suggests that* *she stirred up quite a hornet’s nest on Cerberus. Longboat silent.”*

Jack wondered for a moment what kind of mission *Rapier* had been conducting on Cerberus. He’d only seen pictures of the Fleet’s fast-attack craft, but he’d heard that they were wickedly fun to fly. And they snagged some of the coolest missions around, getting into the thick of it while the rest of the Fleet conducted exercises and sovereignty patrols.

He made a mental note to find out how to request a transfer. *“Viking-Two, we still doing ASW here?”*Stripes’ voice shook Jack loose from his thoughts. He did a quick sweep of the visual, of his flight controls, and then focused again on his hunt controls—looking for the faint disturbance he’d marked before *Rapier*’s sudden appearance. It was gone. Then Jack reminded himself that he had changed his own vantage point considerably since his first bearing line, and he shifted his focus.

Sure enough, the disturbance was still visible down a new relative bearing. He typed in a second line. The red bearing popped into view on his display, intersecting the old bearing from his previous position.

“Viking-Two fishing true one-four mark zero-niner.”

He now had two lines on his possible contact, but there was still far too much uncertainty to start drawing conclusions. Despite the claims of the Fleet promotional material, his instruments were only accurate to within fifteen degrees either side of the bearing.

Some contacts, such as attacking gravi-torpedoes—or fast- attack craft on full burn—were easy to pinpoint, but ships in general were too small and too slow to nail down unless they were very close. It would take multiple bearing lines and a whole lot of time to prosecute a stealth contact.

Since he couldn’t expect help from Viking-One or Longboat today, he was on his own.

Loaded aft in the Hawk were fifty devices known as barbells. Like the big dipper, these barbells could reach into the Bulk to search for gravimetric readings while still maintaining a link to the brane. Disposable items, Jack could drop them at intervals behind his Hawk and leave them to listen at whatever depth he programmed into them. They could last for days before their batteries finally died, but he only had a limited number of them, so he had to pick carefully where he dropped them.

“This is Viking-Two, I’m going to sow a barbell line to investigate bearing crossover two.”

*“Roger.”*

He set off on a course perpendicular to the bearing of interest where his two red lines intersected on his display. He dropped a barbell every two thousand kilometers on a dead-straight run. This cautious approach took thirty agonizing minutes, but as the fifth barbell deployed Jack was able to come hard right and increase speed to separate his own sensors from those of the drones. If he’d calculated right, his five barbells would offer a good radial cross-section of the target.

After a short sprint to remove himself from the barbell line, Jack slowed his Hawk to give the big dipper maximum clarity.

At first, the signals were unclear. His hunt controls gave a separate readout for each drone, and it took time for Jack to interpret the slight fluctuations. He lifted his helmet an inch and ran his fingers through short, sweaty hair, breathing deeply. It took about a minute per barbell, and when he finally looked up at his 3-D display, he sighed in frustration.

The “crossfix” was a mass of red lines, all pointing in vaguely the same direction.

He checked his big dipper, focusing the search down a bearing that went through what best approximated the crossfix of barbell bearings. There was something out there, but whether it was natural or man-made, on the brane or in the Bulk, there just wasn’t enough information to tell.

*“Viking-Two, what’s your status?”*

Jack seated his helmet properly again and stared out through his windows at the stars beyond.

“This is Viking-Two...” He struggled to think of a suitable report to give, considering he’d probably just wasted an hour of his time.

Then a star blinked.

Jack froze, any words dying in his throat. Something had passed between him and the star. Something had passed *close* enough to actually eclipse a fiery ball of gas bright enough to be visible thousands of light years away. Every space pilot appreciated the inconceivable distances involved in space travel, and every military space pilot knew this one simple rule.

Stars don’t blink.

Jack kept his eyes frozen in place, dropped his visor, and tapped the visual lock button on the side of his helmet. A red square appeared on the inside of his visor, marking the bearing and relaying the information to the vessel’s computer. He transferred the image to one of the hunt screens, replacing the barbell data.

Then he activated the Hawk’s long-range camera and pointed it down the bearing. The live image just showed the usual starry background. He switched to infrared. The picture became even more confused as the residual heat from thousands of suns mixed together in the cosmic background. He started shifting the viewer through the EM spectrum, looking for something that might stand out.

*“Uhh, Viking-Two... Say again your status?”*

“Viking-One, stand by. I think I’ve got something.”

The view revealed nothing in the ultraviolet. It was only when it reached microwaves that the mystery object emerged. Everywhere in the universe there is a background murmur of microwave radiation—a remnant of the Big Bang visible in all directions. Stars and other celestial objects outshine this backdrop, but only two things actually make the microwaves dim: the coldest of deep space debris, and spaceships trying to hide.

*“Uhh, Viking-Two, roger... Jack, we’re getting a little low on time here. I suggest you start your search again down a bearing from you of one-seven mark zero-eight.”*

Ignoring Stripes, Jack recorded the microwave image.

“This is Viking-Two, tally-ho, one viper bearing three-five mark zero-eight. No duff.”

*“Say again?”*

Jack repeated his report of a visual sighting, and forwarded the image to Stripes and *Kristiansand.*

Several moments of silence followed on the circuit, but Jack was already rushing to gather more information on this mysterious ship he had spotted. He had little doubt that it was a ship. Although the microwave silhouette was fuzzy, there was no mistaking the symmetry of form found in man-made objects.

More than likely this man-made object was up to no good, considering how hard it was trying to hide itself. No EM emissions, no artificial gravity, no speed of note. This ship was moving in the brane, but it might as well have been a stealth ship, for its lack of signature. Civilian ships routinely blared across the full EM spectrum, and those with artificial gravity dug huge wells in spacetime. Even military ships maintained an ID beacon during peacetime.

Jack grinned.

Those Gaians could hunt their asteroids all they wanted. He’d just bagged himself a bad guy.