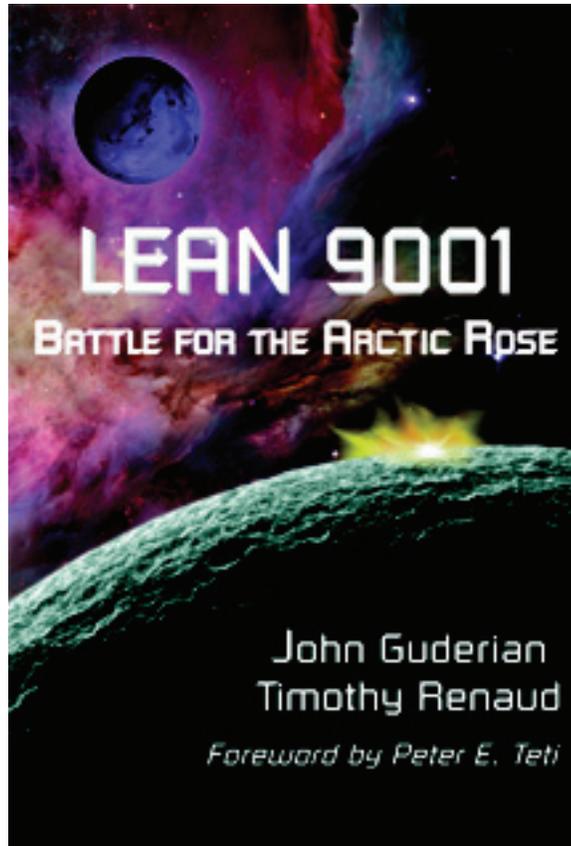


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Chapter 1

WHY ALL THIS FUSS OVER A TREE?

May 19, 7278, 1:13 p.m.

The voice seemed distant, yet he knew it was near. “I found a bottle of acid. Let’s pour some in his eyes. That’ll wake him up.”

All was dark and Captain Joseph Murdock felt like his head was in a vise. *Where am I? What’s happening?*

“Okay, let’s try that,” another voice said.

Murdock felt someone pulling his eyelid open. There was a blinding glare. Slowly things came into focus. A man—in front of him—was taking the cap off a bottle.

No! Murdock struggled to speak, but all he could do was moan.

“I think he’s coming around.”

“Let me do it anyway,” said the man with the bottle.

“Maybe later. Let’s try this first.” Someone poured a bucket of ice water on Murdock’s face. He coughed and sputtered. With each spasm it felt like his head would burst open. He held his head with his hands and felt something sticky . . . blood.

“Hello, Mr. Murdock,” said the man holding the water bucket as he smiled. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jack Gorman. I’m the new captain of this fine space freighter.”

The room erupted in laughter. Murdock looked around. The small bridge was packed with men—15, maybe even 20. *Pirates! How did they—? What happened?* He strained to remember.

We were three days out of Ellesmere, heading to . . . Ronne . . . Andromeda galaxy . . . drinking coffee . . . talking to someone . . . then what?

Gorman read his mind. “It’s called a web Mr. Murdock—just like a giant spider web. We put it in the middle of vector 349 and you were foolish enough to fly into it. The impact is soft enough to prevent structural damage to a ship, but hard enough to paste the crew up against the windshield. Looks to me like you bumped your head and you’re suffering from a bit of short-term memory loss. This is not uncommon sir—not to worry.”

“What have you done with my crew?”

“Oh, they’re fine Mr. Murdock. Resting down in the hold, they are—all except for the big fella. He was a bit rude, so we had to show him the door.” The crowd parted to allow Murdock to look out the starboard window. There was John, his pilot, tethered to the hatch, floating in space. His mouth was open wide, as if he was gasping for air, and his eyes were bulging grotesquely. Murdock turned away. He suddenly felt sick. The pirates laughed.

Gorman grabbed Murdock by the hair and forced him to look again. “Not a pretty sight, is it Mr. Murdock? Not a very pleasant way to die, that.”

“What do you want?”

“We want to be rich, Mr. Murdock. Filthy stinkin’ rich—that’s what we want.”

“What do you want from me and my crew? You have our ship. Let us go.”

“Well that’s the thing, Mr. Murdock. You see, we don’t go to the trouble of stringing up an expensive web for any old freighter that comes along. We’re . . . well, we’re what you might call finicky pirates—isn’t that right boys?”

The pirates chuckled and nodded in agreement.

Gorman turned back to Murdock. “So you can imagine my disappointment, Mr. Murdock, when after stringing up one of

my finest webs, for what our upstream cameras showed to be a top-class, heavily armed, stealth freighter, I find that it has a cargo hold full of nothing but seed.”

“Useless seed,” snarled a pirate with sickly, pale, green skin. He spat on the floor and glared at Murdock.

“That’s right, Thomas. You see Mr. Murdock, at first we were all quite excited about this catch. But Thomas here, he sort of specializes in . . . shall we say . . . pharmacy? Well, Thomas ran some tests and, guess what? If you smoke your seeds, you get sick, if you eat your seeds, you get sicker, and if you snort them, the seeds just get stuck up your nose and nothing much else happens. So, I’m wondering, Mr. Murdock—why not just transport this stuff in a barge? Why use this fancy battle freighter?”

Murdock knew he had to play his cards carefully. At this point, knowledge was his only bargaining chip. “The cargo is not a narcotic, but it’s more valuable than you can possibly imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot, Mr. Murdock. Try me.” Gorman challenged.

“If I tell you, how do I know you won’t kill me and my crew?”

“Oh, we will kill you and your crew, sir. It’s just a matter of how you want to die. Do you want a bullet in the head or do you want Francis here to fill your eye sockets with acid ’til your brain slowly dissolves? You tell me what I want to know, and I promise you and your crew a quick death.”

“You need us alive.”

“Really, why’s that?”

“It’s not just any old seed. It’s Arctic Rose seed.”

“Arctic Rose, eh? I think I’ve heard of it. Why all this fuss over a flower?”

How can this cretin not know about one of the most valuable plants in the universe? “It’s not a flower; it’s a tree—a tree that

starts blooming once it's 20 years old. It looks sort of like a white pine. When it's fully grown, it stands over 30 feet tall."

Gorman had never seen a white pine, so he didn't have a clue what Murdock was talking about. "Okay, so why all this fuss over a tree?"

"It doesn't need any soil. If it has a nitrogen-rich atmosphere, it can grow in snow and ice."

Gorman was unimpressed. "What's one of these trees worth?"

"One-hundred-thousand credits," Murdock smiled.

Gorman punched him in the face and yelled, "Do I look like some kind of idiot? Who would pay 100,000 credits for a tree?"

Murdock's face stung and he felt something gritty in his mouth. He spat out pieces of a broken tooth. Gorman was winding up for another punch.

"No wait! It's rich people. Rich people buy them . . . very rich people. The plants are extremely rare. They only bloom after 20 years and have beautiful blossoms. They look and smell like roses. It's a status symbol for rich people. They like to show off how rich they are."

Gorman was rubbing his knuckles. "Go on."

"Sometimes governments buy them too. On some icy planets, there's no other vegetation. The plants provide shelter and help to control erosion. Mainly it's rich people though, and they want blooming trees. They're worth ten times as much."

"So how much are the seeds worth?"

Murdock knew he had only one chance to make the sales pitch that might save his life. "Virtually nothing . . . the trees are pretty much worthless for the first 20 years—until they bloom. And growing them is difficult. You need highly trained technicians. That's what my crew and I do. We plant and raise Arctic Rose."

“So you’re telling me that the millions of seeds in this freighter are worth nothing now, but will be worth trillions of credits in 20 years?”

“You’re a young guy, Captain,” Murdock smiled, revealing his broken tooth. “Consider it a retirement savings plan. Find an icy planet, somewhere off the beaten track, and let me and my crew set up a plantation for you. We’ll raise the trees. You drop by every year or so to check on your investment and replenish our supplies. In 20 years, you’ll retire as one of the richest men in the universe. What have you got to lose?”

This operation is a bust, Gorman thought. But who knows, maybe I’ll still be alive in 20 years; maybe I’ll want to settle down. It wouldn’t hurt to have a little nest egg.

“Do you think that you and your small crew can handle all of those trees, Mr. Murdock?”

“No problem at all, the trees mostly grow untended. We just do some occasional thinning, pruning, and monitoring for disease . . .”

Gorman had always prided himself on his decisiveness. *Why waste time analyzing pros and cons when there’s an endless supply of booty waiting to be pillaged out there?* “All right then,” he said, as he turned to the pirate at the flight controls. “Cecil, steer us toward the MW3545TG wormhole. We’re gonna visit a little ice ball called Oronteus. We’ll dump the load of seed there and Mr. Murdock and his crew are gonna spend the next 20 years setting up our retirement savings plan for us.”